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Supersessionism: Admit and Address Rather than Debate or Deny

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Abstract: Supersessionism, in the sense of advancing upon and thereby replacing an anterior tradition, is intrinsic to both Jewish and Christian identity. The move forward is to acknowledge it rather than debate or deny it, and then to determine how its presence does not preclude positive roles for the superseded group. Because Christian supersessionism is today a primary interest in inter-religious dialogue, this article focuses on how it has been and might be approached. Attempts to deny supersessionism in the New Testament must be based in hermeneutics since historical-critical exegesis cannot secure this conclusion. Today, interest in Christian supersessionism is driven not only by theological concerns but also factors concerning identity, including the role of messianic Judaism in Church communities; approaches to Zionism, the "scandal of particularity," ethnic identity, and debates over cultural appropriation.

Keywords: supersessionism; replacement theology; identity politics; New Testament; Jesus; new Israel

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1. Introduction

Despite the good will grounding many attempts to deny supersessionist aspects of the New Testament and subsequent Christian theology, intention does not always lead to either convincing exegesis or acceptable politics. After describing the definitions of the term "supersessionism" and various ways scholars have used to exculpate the New Testament from the charge, I turn to the imbrication of supersessionism with identity politics. The essay concludes with a test case suggesting the inevitability of supersessionism and a plea to move beyond finding and/or denying the problem.

2. Definitions and Exculpations

Terrence Donaldson defines supersessionism as "denoting traditional Christian claims that the church has replaced Israel in the divine purposes and has inherited all that was positive in Israel's tradition" (Donaldson 2016, p. 2). Jesper Svartvik, contributing the entry "Supersessionism" on the Society of Biblical Literature's Bible Odyssey website, offers "the influential idea that Christians (the people of 'the new covenant') have replaced Jews (the people of the 'old covenant') as the people of God" (Svartvik 2011). In his 2020 essay, "Supersessionism", in de Gruyter's *Encyclopedia of Jewish–Christian Relations*, R. Kendall Soulen notes, "Since the early 1970s, the term supersessionism has gained steadily in currency among anglophone scholars as a quasi-technical term that identifies what they regard as an inadequate or problematic account of the church's relationship to the Jewish people, according to which the church has taken the place of the Jewish people as the people of God, and God's former covenant with the Jews is now discarded or discontinued" (Soulen 2019).

The definitions, although each differently nuanced, conjoin in the point that supersessionism involves Christians as replacing Jews as the covenant community. We get closer to a workable definition with "replacement theology", a term sometimes used as synonymous with supersessionism. Replacement theology claims that the followers of Jesus have

replaced "Israel according to the flesh" as those who are in a right relationship with God because they have correctly followed the divine plan by following the Christ.

This replacement takes different forms. For example, Soulen defines "punitive supersessionism" as the claim that God punishes Israel for its various sins, including rejecting Jesus, by revoking its covenantal status and transferring it to the Church (Soulen 1996).[1] "Economic supersessionism" claims that the practices of the church replace as well as improve upon Jewish rituals: baptism replaces circumcision, the Eucharist replaces Temple sacrifice, the universal focus of the church replaces the ethno-national identity of the Jews, and so on. While the ideas of "replace" and "improve upon" sound better than "revocation", both forms of supersessionism relegate the Jewish tradition, seen as anterior, to a fossil.

Whether these forms of supersessionism are located in the New Testament itself and not in its reception remains debated. Terrence Donaldson claims that the term supersessionism "is most immediately applicable in a situation where 'Christianity' and 'Judaism' are—or are perceived to be—more or less separate entities and the church is recognizably non-Jewish" (Donaldson 2016, p. 7). His example is Justin's Dialogue with Trypho the Jew. This approach neatly mitigates if not exculpates supersessionist tendencies in the New Testament. Promoting a similar perspective is a 1987 document on Jewish–Christian relations produced by the Presbyterian Church USA. The PC (USA) proposes, "Sometime during the second century of the Common Era, a view called 'supersessionism', based on the reading of some biblical texts and nurtured in controversy, began to take shape. By the beginning of the third century, this teaching that the Christian church had superseded the Jews as God's chosen people became the orthodox understanding of God's relationship to the church. Such a view influenced the church's understanding of God's relationship with the Jews and allowed the church to regard Jews in an inferior light" (PC [USA]—Presbyterian Church (PC) USA 1987). "Based on a reading of some biblical texts" evades the question of whether the text itself is culpable.

The New Testament text, in some places, can be seen as participating in punitive and economic supersessionist moves. While there is a theoretical concern that all meaning comes from the interpreter, to avoid determining whether a text is antisemitic, racist, sexist, etc., strikes me as the erasure of the author and so a colonizing move on the part of the reader. Texts are not innocent. Matthew depicts Jesus as not only a (re-)newed Moses but also as a New Israel. As Nicholas Schaser argues, "The Gospel of Matthew, in particular, presents Jesus' life as the biblical story of Israel in review, so that by the end of Matthew's narrative, that which happened to Israel also happens to Jesus". (Schaser 2017, p. 1). Jesus, the new Israel, descends to Egypt on the initiative of Joseph son of Jacob, returns from Egypt, and experiences an Exodus of sorts with the Jordan River standing in for the Re[e]d Sea. Jesus, the new Israel, enters the wilderness to face temptation, but where Israel fails by worshiping the golden calf, the new Israel, Jesus, insists "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (Matthew 4.10, quoting Deuteronomy 6:13). As the embodiment of Israel, Jesus then threatens to make redundant his fellow Jews, fleshly Israel. The "light to the nations" (Isaiah 46:2; 49:6) for Matthew is not Israel, but the disciples of Jesus, who are "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). The light they receive comes from Jesus. As for the "Jews", for Matthew, the "Jews" (*oi Ioudaioi*) are those who claim Jesus's disciples stole his body (Matthew 28:15, a verse strategically placed before the great commission of 28:19 to "make disciples of all the gentiles", *panta ta ethne*). They can also be seen as "all the people" (*pas ho laos*) who demand the crucifixion of Jesus (27:25). Finally, the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (21:33–44) depicts the tenants as killing the "son" and "heir" and, as a result, Jesus proclaims, "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a people (*ethnos*) that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (21:43). Because the parable is addressed to the (oddly combined) "chief priests and the Pharisees" (21:45), some commentators have argued that the covenant with Israel (Jews) remains, and the critique is only of the leaders. The problem with this reading is that Israel (Jews) chose to follow these leaders, and in particular the Pharisees.

For Matthew, whatever covenantal benefits accorded the Jews can be seen as having been transferred to the followers of Jesus, Jewish and gentile, but now seen as part of the *ekklesia*, the assembly gathered in Jesus's name, and not part of the *synagoga*, which, for Matthew, are alienated from the covenant community around Jesus; the synagogues are "their synagogues" (Levine 2011). *Ekklesia* is the Septuagint's translation of *yachad* and thus can be seen as still within a Judaic context. However, the literary import of the Gospel distinguishes synagogues (where Jews gather) and the *ekklesia* of the new community formed around Jesus.

In John's Gospel (8:12), Jesus proclaims himself "the light of the world". For John, Jesus is also the New Temple as well as the new locus of what had been Temple sacrifice. He is the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29 cf. 1:36), and the role of the temple is transferred to "the temple of his body" (2:21). Regarding the covenant community, John uses the term "Israelite" only once, in relation to Nathanael, "truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (1:47), and this Israelite is destined to be a follower of Jesus. As for "the Jews" (*oi Ioudaioi*), they are "children of the devil" (John 8:44). The title of Adele Reinhartz's study of John epitomizes the Fourth Gospel's view of Jews: *Cast Out of the Covenant: Jews and Anti-Judaism in the Gospel of John* (Reinhartz 2018).

The Epistle to the Hebrews, despite its attention not to the Jerusalem Temple but to the wilderness shrine, moves into supersessionism. Claims that New Testament texts celebrating the value of what came to be known as the Old Testament preclude supersessionism fail: endorsing an antecedent Scripture as valuable is not the equivalent of endorsing the ongoing covenant of Jews who, while holding the same texts sacred, do not follow Jesus (Levine and Brettler 2020). For Hebrews, Jesus is better than and thus replaces the priesthood, the sacrificial cultus, and various other covenants. The author even applies Jeremiah 31's eschatological image of the new covenant to Jesus and concludes, "In speaking of "a new covenant", he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear" (Hebrews 8:13). Granted, this obsolescence has not happened yet, and granted as well that Jewish eschatology, following Jeremiah 31, can accommodate similar obsolescence of earlier Torah. However, there is a difference between recognizing that in the messianic age some practices are no longer needed and affirming in the messianic age that Jesus is the replacement for such practices.

The moving of Israel's covenantal role away from Jews (i.e., Israel according to the flesh) can also be found in the Deutero-Pauline letters. For example, when the Jewish body of Jesus is seen as the locus of Jewish/gentile reconciliation—as in Ephesians 2:16, Colossians 1:20, and especially Colossians 1:22: "He has now reconciled in the body of his flesh through death"—then there is no longer a need for Israel according to the flesh. In this new body, the component part of Judaism is no longer recognizable (Buell 2005).

Finally, the New Testament also engages in superseding pagan views. The author of the Book of Acts, after insulting the residents of Athens by describing them as doing "nothing but telling or hearing something new", presents Paul's speech on the Areopagus (Mars Hill). The apostle commends (whether facetiously or not depends on the performance) his Athenian audience for being "extremely religious" and then remarks on their altar inscribed "to an unknown god" (Acts 17:23). Paul explains that he can identify this deity, the "Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17.24). The talk is supersessionist: the altar to the unknown god points to the God of Israel.

Ironically, whereas for centuries readers have understood Paul to be engaging in supersessionism, at least in terms of its economic and punitive variations, he does neither, at least in his Epistle to the Romans, and several early commentators noted this (Gager 2015). Paul insists in Romans 11:29 that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" and assures his readers in Romans 11:26a that "all Israel will be saved" with Israel here meaning "ethnic Jews". Paul secures that meaning by the following prooftext in 11:26b, "as it is written, 'Out of Zion will come the deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'" (paraphrasing Isaiah 59:20).

On the other hand, we do have that pesky earlier text, 1 Thessalonians 2:14b−16, which does look like it is moving into replacement theology. Paul describes the Jews (*Ioudaoi*)—or, if one must, Judeans—as those who "killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them completely (*eis telos*)". The passage can be an interpolation, but I doubt it.

These and other examples are well known to readers who study the questions of anti-Judaism and supersessionism in the New Testament. I cite them here to show why Christians for centuries believed that "the Jews" lost their covenantal status, whether for rejecting Jesus's message, for killing him, or for being children of the devil and thus never having the covenant in the first place. Thus, it will be theologians, concerned that God not be seen as unfaithful to ancient promises, rather than exegetes who will need to make the case against supersessionism.

Mitigating the supersessionist import of such passages are various historical-critical arguments, which all remain speculative. For example, claims that John and Matthew reflect intra-Jewish debates and therefore cannot be supersessionist fail, since, first, we do not know if either evangelist was speaking to people who saw themselves as "Jews" (I doubt it) and, second, intra-Jewish debates does not preclude supersessionism.

Another mitigation, and one that I have put forward (Levine 2021, p. 150), is that in the New Testament, there is "no clear revocation of the promise of the Land, or of the covenant with the Jewish people". None of these texts make the revocation of the covenant explicit. We choose how to read.

A possible mitigation can be found in Soulen's correct observation that scholars have extended the term supersessionism to refer to "any claim that one religious community is superior to another" and thus the term "risks losing its diagnostic usefulness" given that "many if not most religious truth claims would seem to imply supersessionism" (Soulen 2019). Thus, rabbinic Judaism can be seen as superseding and replacing priestly Judaism. Pirke Avot begins, "Moses received Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to elders, and elders to prophets, the prophets handed it on to the men of the great assembly" (Avot 1.1). The list continues to include the Hasmonean Simon ben Shetah (Avot 1.8–9), the famous Hillel and Shammai (1.12–15), Rabban Gamliel (1.16), and, in Avot 2, into the third century C.E. with Rabban (Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi) and his son. Written out of this tradition are the priests, and so rabbinic Judaism supersedes the priestly tradition.

All religions, I suspect, have supersessionist tendencies. All propose, albeit in various ways, that they have improved upon an anterior or rival tradition, and most argue that if they are right, then rival groups must be wrong or at least lacking. Rather than see this extended definition as a problem, I prefer to flip the argument and see this extended definition as a good entry into acknowledging Christianity's own supersessionist tendencies. Christians do it, Jews do it, we all do it. However, we can determine ways of doing it that are less harmful and perhaps even helpful.

For example, David Novak finds that supersessionism as "inner" Jewish and "inner" Christian views help in self-definition; they explain to insiders why their tradition matters, indeed, why it matters more than other traditions. Benevolently, a supersessionist movement can claim that other movements have teachings that are true or worthy of reading. They can claim that other movements are to be honored for climbing up the same mountain (whether those other movements think they are climbing the same mountain is another question). Minoritized groups, as the followers of Jesus were, in both pagan and Jewish first and second century contexts, can find supersessionist views helpful in the process of self-definition and maintaining their identity despite majority critique.

Complementing "inner" supersessionism, Novak offers two additional classifications. First, he speaks of "the 'eschatological horizon' of soft supersessionism", or, in my rephrasing, simply "eschatological supersessionism". This form appears in the classical Christian view that, at the Parousia, when Jesus returns, the Jews will acknowledge him. Intima-

tions of this idea appear in Romans 9–11, where Paul describes a temporary hardening placed by God upon the Jews, so that the full complement of the gentiles can hear and accept the good news of Jesus. Then, says Paul, "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26). Paul is not speaking of a two-track system (Gaston 1987; Gager 1983; for critique see Donaldson 2006; Novenson 2022), where Jews are "saved" under the Sinaitic or Abrahamic covenant and gentiles are "saved" by the faith of Christ; for Paul, the Christ has universal import. Additionally, for Paul, "Israel" here means his fellow Jews.

Luke participates in such eschatological supersessionism in anticipating that the Jews will welcome Jesus at the Parousia. For Luke, there is no "triumphal entry" in that Jerusalem does not welcome Jesus as the son of David claiming his throne. In Luke's account, it is not the "people" who welcome Jesus, but only his "disciples" who praise God for the deeds of power they had seen (Kinman 1999). Jerusalem is represented by the Pharisees, in their last Gospel appearance, who advise Jesus, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop" (Luke 19:39). While Matthew (21:9) and Mark (11:9) have the crowds quote Psalm 118:26, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord", at Jesus's entry into the city, Luke places the quote on Jesus's lips and well before he arrives at Jerusalem. Jesus tells the crowds, following his lament over the city, "See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until [the time comes when] you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:35; Oliver 2021).

Second, Novak distinguishes between "soft" or "minimal" supersessionism and "hard" supersessionism. For Novak, soft supersessionism "refers to a community's belief that it is superior in some essential respect to other religious communities, but does not deny them all salvific value" (Novak 2019; cf. Novak 1992). In his view, such an approach is "an acceptable and indeed necessary belief for both Judaism and Christianity". Conversely, he finds hard supersessionism, which does deny soteriological worth to any other group, unacceptable. Novak finds such unacceptable views in Christian circles, such as among Catholics who reject Nostra Aetate, but also in Jewish circles that "identify Christianity with the pagan or idolatrous practices that Judaism overcame" (Novak 2019; see also Ben-Johanan 2022).

The answer to the question as to why hard supersessionism is "unacceptable" needs to be argued rather than presupposed. It may not sound nice, in a culture that prizes inter-faith conversation over isolationism or even parochialism, but whether it is theologically unacceptable is another matter. Novak notes, "For hard supersessionists, the only option for Jews is conversion to Christianity. This means an abandonment of Judaism". I see why for Jews this option is (obviously) unacceptable. It is less clear to me why it would be unacceptable to Christians. A Christian might conclude that Judaism finds its purpose in Christianity.

It appears that for Novak, at least one of the problems with hard supersessionism is that it precludes Jewish–Christian dialogue. However, why have such dialogue, which hard supersessionists on both Jewish and Christian sides reject, is yet another question. For Novak, one rationale of dialogue is to confront a pernicious third group: "For the past fifty years or so, both Jews and Christians have had to confront a common enemy, militant secularism, whose anti-Christian stance involves a public rejection of the most Jewish aspect of Christianity". The problem, as I see it, is with the "militant" rather than with the "secularist".

For those on the more liberal side of the religious and political spectrums, I think there is another answer to the question of why hard supersessionism is to be rejected. Hard supersessionism fails the present-day test of multiculturalism, which values the other's self-identified otherness. This is why it is only after the Shoah that questions of supersessionism have gained traction in theological and ecclesiological studies. The discussion is made necessary not only by the theological question of how the church is to assess the divine promises to the Jews, and not only by the ecclesiological question of whether Jews who affiliate with Christian communities can continue to engage in Jewish practices such as ritual circumcision, kashrut, and observance of the Sabbath on Saturday (along with the

Lord's Day on Sunday). The discussion is made necessarily for ethical reasons: how are Christians to assess the contributions of both church teachings and the actions of individual church members to Nazi ideas, and Nazi actions.

While several New Testament passages can be read as contravening supersessionism by insisting that the covenant with the Jewish people is still valid, others move into replacement theology. The same point holds, mutatis mutandis, for rabbinic and post-rabbinic commentary regarding Christians. It might be better for Jewish–Christian relations were each group to admit that their texts are in many places supersessionist rather than engage in exegetical gymnastics to have the texts say otherwise. Theology and ethics, rather than historical-critical exegesis, is the best way of addressing supersessionist teachings.

3. Supersessionism and Identity Politics

Christians on the whole believed that the covenant had passed from Israel according to the flesh to the Church; Jews believed that it had not. Supersessionism was more presumed than debated. The debates and the persecutions were not over the status of the covenant as much as they were over Incarnation, the Eucharist, the Talmud, whether Jesus fulfilled prophecy, and so on. Nor was supersessionism the primary prompt for attacks on Jewish communities, from Constantine through the inquisition and the blood libels in the ghettos, and so on. Persecutions of Jews were not based primarily on the view that the church had replaced Jews. They were based on Christian views on the Jews' failure/refusal to make Christian confession, the view that Jews were children of the devil, that they sought to undermine Christian teaching, that they had alternative understandings of biblical books, that the Talmud blasphemed Jesus, rumors that Jews were killing Christians for their blood, by the sheer fact of Jewish persistence, and so on. However, supersessionism certainly made it easier for Christians to promote such teaching. Thus, we have the question as to why today supersessionism and not these other concerns, is receiving so much attention.

Each group took a supersessionist stance—sometimes soft; more often hard—over and against the other. Today, supersessionism is of interest, not only, and I think not primarily, because of either exegesis or theology. Supersessionism is of interest because of ethics and, now, identity politics. Here are seven (a good biblical number) reasons why supersessionism is of interest today.

First, many Christians have come to realize that various forms of supersessionism underlie Jew-hatred, and Jew-hatred can turn and, far too often, has turned to Jew-murder. While arguments against New Testament supersessionism may not pass exegetical muster—to read the text as against supersessionism is an exegetical choice, e.g., by promoting Romans 9–11 over John 8—Christian theologians have felt the need to address how Christian claims have diminished if not dismissed Jewish viability. Soulen quotes Franklin Littell: "To teach that a people's mission in God's providence is finished, that they have been relegated to the limbo of history, has murderous implications, which murderers will in time spell out" (Littell 1975, p. 2). Technically, this is not quite what happened in all places. Augustine did not think that the people's mission was finished; the mission included bearing witness and suffering. Supersessionism contributed to the horrors, but it was not the primary prompt

Second, discussion of the ongoing covenant with Israel necessarily raises questions of ethnocentrism and, by extension, racism. For example, Jews generally self-define as a people (Hebrew: *am*) with a common language (Hebrew), ancestry (patriarchs and matriarchs; membership primarily, but not exclusively, based on descent), land (the land of Israel), and ethos (Tanakh/Talmud, variously interpreted) and not just as a community held together by faith (see Batnitzky 2011; Gottlieb 2011).[2] Christians who affirm that the Jewish people have some special standing as a covenant community will need to determine how Jews, who insist on retaining a Jewish identity (variously defined), fit into an organization that has for centuries seen itself as proclaiming not only "there is no Jew or Greek" (Galatians 3:28), but also that "in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished

the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body [or reconcile both of us in one body for God] through the cross" (Ephesians 2:14b−16a).

This question of the Jewish presence not only outside the church but also within the "body of Christ" has become more pressing given the increasing exegetical and theological sophistication of arguments offered by branches of messianic Judaism that are seeking recognition not as "Christians" but as Jewish Christ-followers. Churches that were content with an eschatological supersessionism, and even congregations that had eschewed a mission to the Jews now have to address Jews who accept the Lordship of Jesus not at the eschaton, but today, and who also insist on retaining Jewish practice (Kinzer 2015).

Third, Christian supersessionism or replacement theology presumes, in various forms, that whatever privileges and responsibilities Israel/Jews had have been transferred to the followers of Jesus. In this revision, the church becomes the new "chosen people" or, as 1 Peter 2:9 tells its Jesus-following audience, "But you are a chosen race (*genos eklekton*), a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light". This view of a "chosen race" also moves necessarily into categories of ethnocentrism and, anachronistically, racism. Christians will need to determine if this language of "chosenness" retains any value whether for their view of Jews or for their self-identification.

Fourth, churches with a focus on membership based on faith, an entry point with baptism, and a complementary lack of focus on a homeland may question why any ethnic group should be "chosen" or seen as possessing special covenantal promises (Nelson 2021). The questioning is particularly acute when the promises include that of the land of Israel. While some Christians adopt various kinds of "Christian Zionism", others see Jews, defined whether implicitly or explicitly, as a religion rather than an ethnic group or people, as inappropriately claiming a homeland. Evangelicals, who hold that the promises to the Jews include the land of Israel, and that the promises are being fulfilled with the Jewish state, disagree with liberal Protestants who see Israelis as settler-colonialists (an odd definition, since they are not sent by any state to settle and since they are returning to their homeland) and by others who, in support of Palestinian self-determination and against sectarian rule, argue there should be no Israeli qua Jewish state at all (discussion in Nelson and Gizzi 2021).

Fifth, Christian communions that find the need to address supersessionism are, I suspect, primarily comprised of majority-culture individuals. Minoritized church bodies in the West as well as churches in areas where there are few to no Jews, where there is little if no distinction made between Jews as a people and the state of Israel, where there is no cultural memory of the Shoah, and where Jews code as "white", may be more likely both to appropriate ancient Israel's identity and to be less concerned about what most Jews and many non-Jews identify as antisemitism. Thus, it may be that the addressing of Christian supersessionism will be considered by some Christians to be a matter of "white privilege" (see Badiel 2021).

Sixth, discussion of supersessionism holds implications for how Christians are to understand Jesus's Jewish identity. If Christians determine Jesus's own Jewish identity as accidental, irrelevant, or a stand-in for other minoritized identities (Jesus as Black, queer, etc.), then by extension, the Jews qua Jews become irrelevant as well. This argument takes two forms: one concerning the actual body of Jesus and the other concerning its Jewish particularity.

Jesus's body is, for the New Testament canon, malleable, whether related to the "church" (Ephesians 5.23; Colossians 1.18, 24), or slain lamb, or warrior (Revelation). The malleable body can become a hybrid or something other than a body marked by boundaries: it is no longer just male but also female, in that it gives birth to the church by blood and water (John 19); it is no longer flesh but also a type of spirit, in that it walks through walls (John 20). It is a body, but it is not bound by any markers. Whether the circumcision Luke

2:21 reports somewhat obliquely (Luke says, "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child"; Luke does not actually report the circumcision) was visible on the body of the resurrected Jesus remains a matter of debate (Jacobs 2012), and the Roman Catholic Church abolished the "feast of the circumcision" in 1960. If Christian feminists want to claim that the male body of Jesus is irrelevant, then for theologians to claim that the Jewish body has meaning qua its Jewishness, then the arguments are at best inconsistent.

Seventh, the related topic: the question of Jesus's Jewish body extends beyond categories of gender to categories of contextual identification, as R.S. Sugirtharajah's *Jesus in Asia* exemplifies (Sugirtharajah 2018).[3] Jesus becomes, in the Christian imagination, what particular Christians, embedded in their own time and place, need him to be. In such cases, his Jewish identity is usually ignored. Sometimes, it is instrumentalized in a way that Jews, then and now, might not recognize. For example, Brian Bantum sees the Christ as a "mulatto", a hybrid of divine and human, but also a mulatto in terms of having gentile ancestors (e.g., the "impure" Ruth (Bantum 2010)) as noted in Matthew's genealogy. The problem here, aside from the idea of hybridity as not allowing both fully human and fully divine, is that Jews were, at the time of Jesus, not simply (self-)defined as people only born into the tradition. People could convert to Judaism, and for the majority of Jews, they were then accorded all the rights as those born into the system. Thus, gentiles in Matthew's list of Jesus's ancestors do not make the descendants non-Jewish. Jews recognized the figures listed—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—as members of the community. Ruth epitomizes the convert. Otherwise put, Jews at the time of Jesus would not have seen Jesus as somehow 'less of' a Jew because of his gentile ancestry.[4] The argument, part of the myth of the gentile Galilee (Chancey 2002), has post-colonial traction, as it allows various groups to identify with Jesus. The identification comes at the expense of his Jewish identity. By extension, if his Jewish identity is irrelevant, the follower of Jesus has no reason to see anyone's Jewish identity as having any covenantal implications. A helpful counter to this view is now found in Barbara Meyer's study of Jesus the Jew in Christian memory (Meyer 2020).

The idea of a "chosen people" today has baggage. Christian claims to have universalized the category presume that the universal is always better than the particular. However, that is an argument that the majority makes at the expense of the minoritized. Moreover, that claim is an example of privilege.

4. Can We Tell Supersessionism When We See It? The United Methodist Test Case

Christians can and have claimed that the church is the "new Israel" and "true Israel". It is even been argued that Matthew makes the same claim (Trilling 1964). When a Christian today identifies with ancient Israel's escape from slavery, is that a matter of the Christian as part of a "new" or "true" Israel? Is it cultural cooptation, or respectful borrowing? Given that the Church decided to keep rather than jettison Israel's Scriptures, how is supersessionism to be avoided when Christians read themselves back into Jewish history? One step is to acknowledge that this earlier material is Jewish history. Jews, in turn, do well to acknowledge that the "Old Testament" (which is not the same thing as the Tanakh) is part of the Christian canon (Levine and Brettler 2020).

The following examples, modeling what I think is soft supersessionism, show how hard-wired the idea of the church as the New Israel is in the Christian imagination. Yet whether these examples are forms of supersessionism remains an open question, and that very question shows how difficult the subject is.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church offers the following well-meaning but vague and possibly theologically incoherent claims:

"As Christians, we stand firm in our belief that Jesus was sent by God as the Christ to redeem all people and that in Christ the biblical covenant has been made radically new. While church tradition has taught that Christianity superseded Judaism as the 'new Israel', we do not believe that earlier covenantal relationships have been invalidated or that God has abandoned Jewish partners in covenant.

We believe that just as God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant in Jesus Christ, likewise God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant with the Jewish people, and no covenantal relationship is invalidated by the other. Further, we are mysteriously bound to one another through our covenantal relationships with the one God and Creator of us all. The covenant God established with the Jewish people through Abraham, Moses, and others continues because it is an eternal covenant. Paul proclaims that the gift and call of God to the Jews is irrevocable (Romans 11:29). Thus, we believe that the Jewish people continue in covenantal relationship with God. (United Methodist Church (UMC) 2016)".

The statement does not describe which "biblical covenant" (with Noah, Abraham, Moses, or/and David) has become "radically new" or what the "radically new" elements are. Further, the statement does not actually abandon the view of the Church as the "new Israel" or the claim that "Christianity superseded Israel". The statement acknowledges earlier uses of "new Israel" but does not make clear whether Methodists today can, or should, claim the title.

Were the text speaking against the idea of a "new Israel", the message was not received by church authorities. On the "Resource UMC" page, Bishop Christian Alsted explains Acts 15–16 as indicating how "the rebuilt house of Israel was the Church, the new Israel, and the church encompassed all people" (Alsted 2019). The promotion of universalism over particularism as well as the eliding of the particularism of Christian soteriological exclusivity underlies the citation. Similarly, on his faculty page at the Saint Paul School of Theology, Dr. Israel Kamudzandu, Associate Professor of New Testament Studies and Biblical Interpretation, Linsey P. Pherigo Chair and UMC elder, explains how "Paul's letter to the Romans has been a source of interest and motivation for me with its call for a 'New Israel', or a Godly nation" (Kamudzandu 2021). These examples are only two of many easily found with a google search of "United Methodist" and "New Israel". The same exercise works for a variety of other denominations, and my comments here about what United Methodist clergy say, despite position papers, can be extended to other denominations as well. The idea of the church as the "new Israel" is sufficiently hard-wired into the language of the Church, exemplified by a bishop and a seminary professor, that it prevails regardless of formal statements.

Next, the UMC text does not make clear if Jews have any special standing; apparently, since it indicates salvation is through Jesus, who makes everything "radically new", and since it does not prohibit evangelizing Jews (it prohibits coercion), the status of the Jew is covenant in name only. Jews for Methodists are not children of the devil, but the local Methodist, having read this statement, may well, and should, given Christian teaching, find baptism and Eucharist of greater import than, and as replacing, circumcision and the Seder.

For Christians and other groups that claim some attachment to ancient Israel's story, replacement theology is simply part of the culture; it is not meant malevolently, and in most cases, it is not recognized. Members of minoritized churches that read themselves into the Exodus story are not, as far as I can tell, working out an epistemology by which they replace Jews. They may not know any Jews, or care about Jewish history. For example, various and diverse Black-defined communions as early as the nineteenth century saw themselves as the "true Jews" who escape slavery to freedom, find themselves in Diaspora, and will be the new light to the nations (Chireau and Deutch 2000; Chireau 2000). Whether they knew any actual Jews is a separate question.

On the other hand, for Christians to claim themselves the "New Israel" or the "new people of God" need not invalidate an ongoing role for Jews, qua Jews, the old Israel. Even the famous Nostra Aetate of Vatican II, the document that created a sea change in Roman Catholic views of Jews and Judaism by denying that all Jews bear responsibility for the death of Jesus and by affirming that all religions have appropriate responses to the search for the divine in the human heart, uses this new and old language. Nostra Aetate #4 includes the claim, "Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures . . . . Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful

of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone". Patrimony is shared by the old and new people. It is a nice start.

5. Reflection

Supersessionism, hard and soft, is here to stay; it is a marker of both Jewish and Christian thought. While for Christians, the matter of how Jews stand in relation to the covenants with Abraham, Moses and the Jewish people, and David are matters of theological discussion, for Jews, answers to those same questions have been matters, literally, of life and death. Supersessionism is of interest today because Christians are reacting to the complicity of their co-religionists in the Shoah. As matters of white privilege and racism, cultural appropriation and Christian universalism become more important, my suspicion is that Christian interest in supersessionism of the Jews will be of increasingly less concern.

I suspect that Jewish concerns with Christian supersessionism will be increasingly regarded as special pleading. More likely will be claims, such as since "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:4), then the Jews should not be seen as having special covenantal status. Increasing attention to Israeli settlement expansion will result in increasing denial of the covenantal promise of the land. We can already see this move in the tendency of journalists and novelists to identify Jesus as a "Palestinian" (Levine 2007; Sternthal 2020). Use of Exodus imagery by Christian churches coupled with the depiction of Mary, Jesus, and other New Testament figures as in the image of the artist will increasingly ignore whatever Jewish identity Jesus had. While the world abhors cultural appropriation, and while the woke among us would be horrified today were, for example, the Sharks in West Side Story not played by Latinx individuals, few would care that Jewish characters are played by white non-Jews (Ivry 2021). We have seen how the easy employ of "new Israel" in Christian discourse will suggest a supersessionist move, even when none is intended.

Today, knowledge of the Shoah as a, if not the, human tragedy, is fading even as the popularity of Nazi imagery and ideology is on the rise. In previous decades, Christians felt the need to explain how other Christians, as individuals and as ecclesial bodies, committed sins of both commission and omission against Jews and other groups targeted by the Nazis and their allies. Today, the concern is less with the past than with the present, and our presentist society attends not to the sins of the past (and for non-Europeans, what *Europe* did), but with sins of the present, as attention to sexual abuse, racist oppression, privilege, voices previously not part of national conversation, and so on occupy our attention. The Jews—and their sufferings caused in part by the teachings of the church—are less of an issue. Hence, again, the ethical imperative: to ignore what ecclesial teaching has said about Jews is to ignore one of the causes of what has been called the "longest hatred".

Supersessionism is a problem with multiple tentacles. The problem will remain. Theologians will talk and articles will be written. Little if anything will change. A more historically precise reading of Paul or at least a promotion of Romans 11 over Galatians and 1 Thessalonians would be of enormous help, but I doubt those who hold to the conservative Protestant readings, which need to find some fault with Judaism in order to understand Paul and so their own theology, will make such corrections. When Christians denied Jewish covenantal status in the past, it was much easier to affirm multiple negative charges. The result was forced conversions, crusades, ghettoization, pogroms, and death camps. For theological and exegetical reasons, but especially for practical ones, Christians cannot afford to ignore the problem of supersessionism.

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Notes

[1] Subsequent quotes in this section are from Soulen's *EJCR* article unless otherwise noted. Soulen cites additional forms of supersessionism including theological supersessionism (A. Roy Eckardt), hard/harsh and soft/mild supersessionism (David Novak), punitive and economic supersessionism (Soulen, Vlach, cf. Karl Barth). Donaldson (2016, p. 8) argues for the "need for a typology of supersessionism" which includes *Israel* in toto *as the Binary Opposite of the True People of God* (so Marcion); *Israel as Containing Binary Opposites within Itself from the Beginning* (Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Epistle of Barnabas); *Israel as a Failed Entity, Rejected by God and Replaced with a Church Drawn Primarily from the Gentiles* (Cyprian, possibly Matthew, possibly Luke, possibly John); *Israel as an Entity of the Past, Having Had a Certain Preparatory Role to Play but Now Superseded by a Church in which Ethnic Distinctions Have No Fundamental Significance* (Matthew, Hebrews, Melito of Sardis); *Israel as Succeeded by Christ, Who Provides the Sole Point of Continuity between Israel of the Past and the Church of the Present* (possibly Galatians, Matthew); *Israel as Succeeded by a Jewish Remnant, Supplanted by Gentiles Who Come in to Replace Unbelieving Jews*, and variations on these themes, to the more positive *Israel Apart from the Church as Having Some Theological Validity, in that 'All Israel Will be Saved' through Christ* and *Israel and the Gentile Church as Co-existing Peoples, Relating to God through Parallel Covenants* (Pseudo-Clementines).

[2] Identification of Jews as a "religion" according to Enlightenment categories enters primarily with Moses Mendelsohn (1729–1786). See Batnitzky (2011); for sources, see Gottlieb (2011).

[3] For examples of contextual theological approaches that take Jewish identity seriously, see, for example, the 2021 annual meeting of the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology, where the speakers, Willie Jennings, Daniel Lee, and Gerald McDermott offered papers on and then discussed the theme of "Supersessionism, Nations, and Race".

[4] For summary and critiques of contextualized Jesuses, see, e.g., Hesslein (2015), especially Chapter 3, "Jesus as Human Citizen", pp. 39–74.

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