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“the church is the New Israel...Jews have already had their day”ⁱ

I. WHO OR WHAT IS ISRAEL?

A. A People of Debate

There is a tremendous amount of debate about this question, both secular and Protestant. The Protestant debate centers on the land of Israel and the people of Israel. Last week we tackled the land of Israel and concluded several things:

1. God promised the land to Abram and his descendants (Gen 12:7)
2. God entered a unilateral land covenant with Abram and his descendants (Gen 15:7-21)
3. God gave Abram and his descendants this land as an everlasting possession (Gen 17:8)
4. God gave Isaac and his descendants this land (Gen 26:3)
5. God gave Jacob and his descendants this land (Gen 35:12)
6. God gave the sons of Israel this land (Exod 6:5-8)

In spite of this, a rising voice of Protestants called Replacement Theologians (aka Supersessionists), are claiming the following:ⁱⁱ

1. The Bible does not teach that God’s promises concerning the land are fulfilled in a “Holy Land” perpetually set apart by God for one ethnic group alone.
2. The land promises to Israel were fulfilled under Joshua (Josh 21:43-45).
3. The promises of the Abrahamic Covenant do not apply to any particular ethnic group, but to the church of Jesus Christ, the true Israel.
4. The people of God, whether the church of Israel in the wilderness in the Old Testament or the Israel of God among the Gentile Galatians in the New Testament, are one body who through Jesus will receive the promise of the heavenly city, the everlasting Zion.

5. A day should not be anticipated in which Christ's kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives, whether by its location in “the land,” by its constituency, or by its ceremonial institutions and practices.

Instead they claim that the Church is the true Israel and that the promise is strictly for a heavenly city. As such, these voices heatedly deny that God has a future for Israel in an earthly Promised Land with Christ as King of that Kingdom. Of course, this has tremendous ramifications for how one views the modern state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. These theologians and pastors are making their voice heard because they are concerned about the influence of pro-Israel Protestants upon United States foreign policy, claiming that it is based on “a serious misreading of Holy Scripture”. It’s true that the United States has played a large role in the establishment of the modern State of Israel, in particular the influence of President Truman (1945-53) and later President Johnson (1963-69) after the 6-day war in 1967.

Because of these confusions and divisions within Protestantism it is essential to get a handle on the question “Who or what is Israel?”

B. Israel in the Old Testament

Last week we explored the land of Israel, the fourth most common noun in the Hebrew OT used 1,869 times. This week we will explore the second most common word in the Bible, “Israel”, used 2,569 times, second only to the various names used of God. So, if we thought the land of Israel was central then the people of Israel are certainly central as well. In the OT, the term “Israel” is used six basic ways which we want to briefly explore.

1. A Land

“Israel” is the name give to a land (1 Sam 13:19; Matt 2:21). It is not just any land but the land that God chose out of all the billions of galaxies to be His land, saying, “The land is Mine” (Lev 25:23). The land is holy because God is holy. The land is good (Dt 8:7-10) flowing with milk and honey (Exod 13:5), and life in the land is good. This is one way the word “Israel” is used.

2. A Man

“Israel” is also the name of a man (Gen 32:28) who was once named Jacob. Turn to Gen 32 to find this story.

Genesis 32:24-30 Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob's thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking." But he said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ He said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. ³⁰ So Jacob named the place Peniel, for *he said*, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved."

So, technically speaking, the first Israelite was Jacob who was renamed Israel by God. And the meaning of the name Israel is “he who strives with God”. Israel and his descendants have continually strived with God. This is another way the word “Israel” is used in the Bible.

3. The Sons of Israel/12 Tribes (Gen 32:32; 46:8)

“Israel” is also used of the “sons of Israel” or the “twelve tribes” of Israel. Since Israel had twelve sons and all twelve were sons of promise then they are referred to as the twelve tribes of Israel or the sons of Israel.

Genesis 32:31-32 Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Peniel, and he was limping on his thigh. ³² Therefore, to this day the sons of Israel do not eat the sinew of the hip which is on the socket of the thigh, because he touched the socket of Jacob's thigh in the sinew of the hip.

4. The Congregation of Israel

“Israel” is used of the “congregation” that departed from Egypt at the Exodus. Just 70 from the loins of Jacob had gone down to Egypt but they had grown to more than 2 million. So, what was once a small caravan had become a congregation and God instituted a new calendar and new celebrations to commemorate the birth of this new congregation.

Exodus 12:2-3 "This month shall be the beginning of months for you; it is to be the first month of the year to you. ³ "Speak to all the congregation of Israel,

5. The United Kingdom Under Saul, David, and Solomon

“Israel” was also used of the united kingdom when it came under the rule of Kings such as Saul, David and Solomon.

1 Samuel 13:13-14 Samuel said to Saul, "You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment *of* the LORD your God, which He commanded you, for now the LORD would have established your *kingdom* over *Israel* forever. ¹⁴ "But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart,

2 Samuel 5:12 And David realized that the LORD had established him as king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for the sake of His people Israel.

6. The Northern Kingdom of 10 Tribes

After Israel’s civil war the nation was divided into northern and southern kingdoms; known respectively as Israel and Judah. So, in some texts, “Israel” refers exclusively to the ten northern tribes.

Hosea 1:4 And the LORD said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.

7. The Offspring of a Male Descendant of Jacob

Of utmost importance is how the OT defines an Israelite. “Who is an Israelite?” The OT answers the following:

1. Jacob was the first Israelite
2. The twelve sons of Jacob were Israelites
3. All their descendants were (and still are) Israelites

One more piece of information is crucial and that is, “How is Jewishness transmitted?” “Do both mother and father have to be Israelites?” “Does only the mother have to be an

Israelite?” or “Does only the father have to be an Israelite?” The answer is quite clear from the biblical record. Jesus Christ was a Jew (John 4:9). Jesus had Gentile women as ancestors (e.g. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite, Matt 1:5). Thus, Jewishness is passed on through the father. So, the biblical definition of an Israelite is one who is the offspring of a male descendant of Jacob. There is no other way to become an Israelite. Simply being the descendant of Abraham or Isaac does not make one an Israelite. Not even faith in the Jewish Messiah makes one an Israelite. That only makes one Abraham’s spiritual descendant (Gal 3:29) and we are called that because we exercised the same faith as Abraham did. So, the children’s song “Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had father Abraham, and I am one of them, and so are you, so let’s just praise the Lord...” is accurate. Notice that the song does not say “Father Jacob had many sons, many sons had father Jacob, and I am one of them, and so are you...” If it said that it would be completely incorrect because the Bible never says that you and I are descendants of Jacob, and that is significant. So, we come to the NT with that OT background of the word “Israel”.

C. Israel in the New Testament

In the NT, the word “Israel” is used 68 times and in the same ways it was used in the OT. For example it is used of a land (Matt 2:20-21) as well as the twelve tribes of Israel or as the sons of Israel (Matt 27:9; Luke 1:16; 22:30; Acts 9:15; Phil 3:15), even into the Revelation chapter 7:4 the twelve tribes of Israel are mentioned and 12,000 from each tribe are sealed. Even when we get into the New Jerusalem and look at the tower gates of that city the names of the twelve tribes of Israel are written on them and stand distinct from the twelve apostles whose names are written on the twelve foundation stones (Rev 21:12, 14). So, the Bible seems to be saying that there are two groups of people, those represented by the twelve tribes of Israel and those represented by the twelve apostles, and we normally just say this is Israel and the Church and that they are distinct, and I think that’s accurate and what I want to show now is that there are some verses of Scripture that are used by Replacement Theologians to say that the church is the true Israel or spiritual Israel, and I want to show you that this is completely untenable. The NT never identifies the church as Israel. There are really only a few verses that are claimed to teach this replacement. Does anyone know any of the verses used by replacement theologians to say the Church is Israel? See, most people don’t think this is important when choosing a church, yet this issue is number one on my list. Now, it’s important to realize that of all 68 references to Israel less than a handful are used to make this replacement.

1. The Israel of God/True Israel

a. Romans 2:17, 28-29

Romans 2:28-29 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Now, this verse seems, at first glance, to be saying that anyone who is circumcised in heart is a Jew. Now, that interpretation would change everything about our OT definition which said one had to be the offspring of a male descendant of Jacob because it would sever the definition from physical descent and make Jewishness completely dependent on a spiritual relationship. But, let's back up in the context because we have to interpret within context; *a text taken out of context is a pre-text not a proof-text*. So, back up to the beginning of this paragraph in verse 17.

Romans 2:17 But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God,

So, the entire section is written to those who bear the name "Jew", that is, they are the offspring of a male descendant of Jacob. This section is not written to those who bear the name "Gentile". Paul already dealt with the Gentiles before this verse. He concluded that all pagan Gentiles were under sin in chapter 1 verses 18-32. He concluded that all cultured Gentiles were under sin in chapter 2:1-16. And finally, he turns to those who bear the name "Jew" and concludes that they too were under sin. This all leads to Paul's grand conclusion in Rom 3:9 "What then? Are we [Jews] better than they [Gentiles]? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;". That's Paul's point; it doesn't matter whether you are Jew or Gentile you are under sin. And in order to get in a relationship with God one has to have faith. It can't simply be by physical descent or circumcision. Now, let's return to our verses 2:28-29.

Romans 2:28-29 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

What Paul is teaching is that for one who bears the name “Jew” to become a “true Jew” requires more than physical circumcision. It requires spiritual circumcision of the heart. So, Paul is making a distinction between believing Jews and non-believing Jews. In other words, the true Israel both bears the name Jew and believes in the Jewish Messiah. So, within the nation of Israel there was a remnant of believing Jews and these were the true Israel or as Gal 6:16 calls them, the Israel of God.



b. Romans 9:6

Romans 9:6-8 For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel;

Now, this seems, once again, to contradict our OT definition. However, once again, we have to look at the context! *This is a pre-text, not a proof-text.* So, back up to verse 1.

Romans 9:1-4 I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, ⁴ who are Israelites,

Here Paul identifies his kinsmen according to the flesh as “Israelites”. He’s very clear here that physically they are Israelites. Now, when we come to verse 6 are we going to say that Paul flatly contradicts himself saying they are not physical Israelites? No, Paul was not stupid. What Paul is teaching is that there are those who are physical descendants of Israel but this alone does not make them spiritual descendants of Israel. His example in verse 7 makes that clear.

Romans 9:7 nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."

If physical descent was enough to make one a part of the true Israel Paul's argument is that all the Arabs would be Israelites. But they weren't because God said it would be "through Isaac" that Abraham's descendants would be named and not through Ishmael. And it would be through Jacob and not through Esau. Both those guys are fathers of the Arab peoples, not the Israelites. So, once again, Paul's teaching the same thing he taught in 2:28-29, that there is a "true Israel" and that to be a part of this true Israel one must first be a physical descendant of Jacob but also he must have faith in the Messiah.



He's saying that within the nation of Israel there is a subset who have responded to the divine call by faith and as such they are a remnant within the nation of Israel. Paul is placing the emphasis on being a spiritual descendant but he is not excluding the truth that there are physical Israelites. He's certainly not saying the Church is the new Israel.

c. Galatians 6:16

Galatians 6:16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Now, this comes in the benediction of the letter, not a very good place to build a doctrine from. But nevertheless, this is the key verse for replacement theologians. The bottom line is this verse. Replacement theologians argue that Paul identifies "them" as "the Israel of God" so that the Church of Galatia (i.e. "them") is "the Israel of God." To understand this requires some work with the Greek so the replacement theologians really like the NIV on this one.

Galatians 6:16 Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.

You can see that they like to translate the word *kai* as "even" and claim this is an ascensive *kai* which means that what follows is a further clarification of who he's talking about. Since he's talking to the Galatian church then here Paul clarifies that all in the Galatian church who are following this rule are "the Israel of God", the "true Israel". And

it is from this verse that they try to destroy the Israel/Church distinction. There are several reasons this is an absurd rendering of the verse. *First*, of the 68 uses of Israel in the NT none of them clearly call the Church, Israel. The abundant use of this word is in total opposition to this interpretation. *Second*, ascensive *kai*'s are extremely rare. The normal translation of *kai* is "and" which would distinguish the two groups rather than identify them!



With the rarity of ascensive *kai*'s there must be strong contextual evidence for translating this "even". *Third*, there is a better interpretation of this verse which makes contextual sense as to why Paul would distinguish two groups in this verse; the Galatian church at large and the believing Israel within the church. That reason is basically because Paul has been very harsh on the Judaizers in this letter and as such he is here comforting the Israel of God within the Galatian church who might have felt ostracized or dismayed by Paul's harsh statements. In other words, the rule is that those who have believed in Christ are new creations (Gal 6:15), therefore circumcision or uncircumcision takes a back seat to this crucial issue. Thus, all who follow this rule and consider the issue of whether an individual is a new creation or not of utmost importance, to these, be peace and mercy, whether they be Gentile believers or the Jewish believers. And so, Paul recognizes that believing Jews have been incorporated in the Church. These are the true Israelites or spiritual Israelites who have circumcised hearts, here called "the Israel of God". This verse certainly does not mean the church is the "true Israel".

Whether you realize it or not, this is a crucial doctrine. If you say that any verse teaches that the church has replaced Israel then there is a tremendous impact on the Doctrine of God. What about God's faithfulness? What about God's veracity? To preserve the Doctrine of God Replacement Theologians have come up with two solutions:

First, they claim that the land promises to Israel were fulfilled under Joshua.

Joshua 21:43-45 So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. ⁴⁴ And the LORD gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand.

⁴⁵ Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.

At first glance they seem to be right. However, this interpretation has several objections. *First*, Israel was exiled from this land and did not possess it forever as God promised (Gen 17:8). *Second*, hundreds of years after Joshua's day God promised Israel that they would dwell in the land and not be uprooted.

Amos 9:15 "I will also plant them on their land, And they will not again be rooted out from their land Which I have given them," Says the LORD your God.

So, even if they did possess all the land promised to them in Joshua's day, God nevertheless promised them afterward that they would again be planted on their land and never be uprooted. *Third*, it is a fact that Joshua did not conquer all the land promised by God in Gen 15:18-21. In fact, he did not conquer any of the land east of the Jordan River which is a part of the original land covenant in Gen 15. *Fourth*, this passage therefore fulfills the borders outlined in Numbers 34 but not the extended borders of Gen 15. Therefore, the land promises to Israel in Gen 15 were not fulfilled under Joshua.

Second, they claim that the land promises to Israel were conditioned on her obedience. Since she was disobedient the promises are null and void. This is a more difficult argument to deal with since certain passages do seem to place conditions on Israel's possession of the land.

Leviticus 20:22 'You are therefore to keep all My statutes and all My ordinances and do them, so that the land to which I am bringing you to live will not spew you out.

The solution to this difficulty is quite simple. The land *promise* is unconditional; *participation in the promise* is conditioned upon faith. In other words, nothing will stop the Almighty from doing what He has promised but only those Israelites who have faith will participate in the promise. Or as one author wrote, "Each descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would need to understand God's covenant relationship with their people and consider their own participation within that plan."ⁱⁱⁱ Or, as the same author wrote, "Two parallel lines are evident in the relationship between God and the people of Israel. One line was a biological community from Abraham. This produced the people, who were set apart by God according to His elective purpose and through which salvation blessing would come to the nations of the earth. In the other line, individual members of

the community could participate in the promised blessing by their obedient response of faith in the God of the covenant. The promises were sure. Participation in the promises was conditioned upon the obedient response of each individual Israelite.”^{iv} This led to the concept of the remnant of Israel. Only the remnant will receive the blessings promised in the covenants. Those who refused to have a faith like Abram would not finally enjoy covenant blessings. This fits with the fact that God did not enter covenant with Abram until Abram had already believed (Gen 15:6). This is also why Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Jesus was saying, “It is not enough to simply be a physical descendant of Israel, you must also be a spiritual descendant, you must be ‘born again’”.

ⁱ Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's best Friend*.

ⁱⁱ The document from which all this information was drawn can be read at the following website. http://www.knoxseminary.org/Prospective/Faculty/WittenbergDoor/#_ftnref34

ⁱⁱⁱ H. Wayne House, *Israel the Land and the People*, 45.

^{iv} H. Wayne House, *Israel the Land and the People*, 45.

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