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The Relevance of the Jewish Issue to Catholic – Evangelical Relations

This time I am switching to the issue of the place of the Jewish people in God's plan. I wish to show through this that the only way Catholic – Evangelical oppositions, tensions and contrasts can be overcome and reconciled is through our common return to the Jewish root. This means in particular a return to the Jewish Scriptures of Old and New Testaments understood in the light of the covenant “never revoked” and of Jesus/ Yeshua as the Messiah who embodies and fulfils the calling of Israel.

The first key issue is the “covenant never revoked”, the truth that the covenant of the Lord with the Jewish people made by the Lord with father Abraham is still in force. To summarise what I believe to be the correct teaching from the New Testament:

- 1 The majority of the Jews did not accept Jesus as their Messiah. Something unimaginable to the Jews. This has had serious consequences (Matt. 21: 43; Matt. 23: 36; Rom. 11: 26), but rejection as covenant people is not one of them (Rom. 11: 1; 11: 11; 11: 25 – 26).
2. The Church did not require Gentile converts to observe the Law and Jewish legal requirements (Acts 15), but the apostles and elders in Jerusalem did not change the obligations of Jewish believers.
3. The Church was seen as the union of Jew and Gentile in “one new man” through the cross. The image of ingrafting from Romans 11: 17 – 24 teaches the same in different terms.
4. There is a second exile of the Jews lasting until the “fullness of the Gentiles” when they no longer trample Jerusalem under foot (Luke 21: 24).

The Effects of Replacement Teaching

To see the effects of the so-called replacement or substitution teaching, I am going to use in particular a book by an American Methodist theologian, R. Kendall Soulen, entitled *The God of Israel and Christian*

*Theology.* Kendall's is a penetrating analysis of the problems for all Christian theology produced by what he calls supersessionism. Soulen identifies three types of supersessionism or replacement thinking, which we need to look at in turn; it is important to recognise that people can hold all three of these positions at the same time:

Economic Supersessionism: This means that Israel has completed its role in the history of salvation. In this view, Israel's role is wholly preparatory, prefiguring the definitive salvation brought by Jesus. Israel is carnal, and the Church is spiritual. "Hence Christ's advent brings about the obsolescence of carnal Israel and inaugurates the age of the spiritual church. Everything that characterized the economy of salvation in its Israelite form becomes obsolete and is replaced by its ecclesial equivalent. The written law of Moses is replaced by the spiritual law of Christ, circumcision by baptism, natural descent by faith as criterion of membership in the people of God, and so forth. As a result, carnal Israel becomes obsolete. .... According to economic supersessionism, Israel is transient not because it happens to be sinful but because Israel's essential role in the economy of redemption is to prepare for salvation in its spiritual and universal form."  
" (p. 29).

Thus economic supersessionism goes like this: (1) Because the whole purpose of Israel's election is to prepare the way for Jesus, the Jewish people, the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem have no more theological significance after the coming of Jesus. (2) The Church takes the place of the Jews as the covenant people. (3) All the Old Testament promises are fulfilled in Jesus, so the only promises for the Christian are those given by Jesus or realised through our incorporation into Christ.

Punitive Supersessionism: This means that God has rejected the Jews as his covenant people because of their infidelity. So this version of replacement teaching goes like this: (1) Because the Jews rejected Jesus, God has rejected them as his covenant people. (2) The Church has taken the place of the Jews as the covenant people. (3) Any unfulfilled promises given by God to the Jews do not belong to them any more, but to the Church. Point 1 may add to the rejection of Jesus at his crucifixion the rejection of the apostolic preaching of the Resurrection, evidenced at the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7).

The wrongness of punitive supersessionism is not to believe in divine punishment for unbelief, but to make the **judgment** that God has definitively rejected the people he chose to be his own. This judgment

seems to have been made by the Gentile believers, who understood the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24: 2 (“Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.”) as a sign of rejection.

### Consequences of Economic and Punitive Supersessionism

However, there are some things in the Old Testament that are superseded because of the fulfilment in Jesus:

1. The priesthood and the sacrifices. In effect, these were discontinued with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in the year 70.
2. The Temple: see Jesus’ teaching on his body becoming the Temple (John 2: 19 – 21). See also Eph. 2: 21 – 22; Rev. 21: 22.

But is it right also to put Sunday replacing the Sabbath here? The Seventh Day Adventists and a few other Christians have protested against this, arguing that the Sabbath commandment still holds. Messianic Jews often say that Sunday observance by Christians is a consequence of replacement teaching. I think this needs nuancing: a de facto replacement of the Sabbath by Sunday did take place, but the Christian observance of Sunday was not just the result of replacement thinking. It happened first of all because the Lord Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week. This was an important day for Christian gathering: see Acts 21: 7. See also Rev. 1: 10. “Jesus rose from the dead ‘on the first day of the week.’ Because it is the ‘first day,’ the day of Christ’s Resurrection recalls the first creation. Because it is the “eighth day” following the Sabbath, it symbolizes the new creation ushered in by Christ’s Resurrection.” (CCC, para. 2174). See also CCC, para. 1166<sup>1</sup>.

Often Messianic Jews will say the Church was wrong to calculate the date of Easter differently from the Jewish calendar. In the year when Jesus died, Sabbath followed the day after Passover. The body of Jesus lay in the tomb on the Sabbath, and he rose on the first day of the week (Matt. 28: 1; Mark 16: 2; Luke 24: 1; John 20: 1). The Jewish Quartodeciman calculation makes the celebration of the Resurrection the third day from Passover, the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan, on whatever day of the week that comes. The Nicene calculation keeps the celebration of the Resurrection on the first day of the week, even when that is not the third day from the Passover. There is a danger of not understanding

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<sup>1</sup> “the mystery of Holy Saturday, when Christ, lying in the tomb, reveals God’s great Sabbath rest after the fulfilment of man’s salvation” (CCC, para. 624).

sufficiently the radical newness and transformation of the Resurrection of Jesus.

However, these forms of supersessionism have caused serious distortion in our understanding of the Scriptures. An obvious example concerns the promises given to the people of Israel. Israel is the people of hope, who carry the Messianic promises. Replacement thinking leads to the following kinds of misunderstanding and loss:

1. Regarding the OT as “carnal” and the NT as “spiritual” can lead to a “spiritualization” of the OT promises: e.g. the promised land means heaven, Sion means the Church.
2. Saying everything was fulfilled when Jesus came means that there is no corporate Messianic hope left for the Church, only the individual’s hope to go to heaven after death. This collapses the biblical picture of first covenant, new covenant and kingdom of God into an Israel-Church contrast that lacks all eschatological dynamism.
3. It can also result simply in a neglect of whole sections of the Old Testament, either because no longer relevant or because the promises cannot easily be spiritualised (e.g. return to the land).
4. We read the Old Testament and apply it directly to the Church and ourselves without any consideration of Israel/Jewish people. A classic example is Ezekiel 37, the prophecy of resurrection in the valley of dry bones. Here the Lord gives the prophet the application: “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” (v. 11).

### A Third Form of Supersessionism

A key part in the originality and importance of Soulen’s analysis is his identification of a third form of supersessionism, that he calls *structural supersessionism*. This is how he describes it: “The standard model is structurally supersessionist because it unifies the Christian canon in a manner that renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive” (p. 31). “Whereas economic and punitive supersessionism designate discrete problems within the standard model, ss designates a problem that pervades the standard model as a whole.” (p. 31). In other words, the whole way we have organised and presented the Christian faith is supersessionist.

The standard canonical narrative turns on four key episodes: ( 1) creation; (2) the fall; (3) Incarnation, Redemption, Founding of Church; (4) second

coming and final consummation. They “determine the dramatic context of the rest of the canonical text.” (p. 31). This way of understanding Christian faith jumps from Genesis 3 to the New Testament, and thus “outflank the greater part of the Hebrew Scriptures and, above all, their witness to God’s history with the people Israel.” (p. 32). Soulen is not saying that Christians have never been interested in the Old Testament or the history of Israel. But he is saying that “it recedes into ... the background of the standard canonical narrative.” (p. 32). “The term background points to the fact that God’s history with Israel plays a role that is ultimately indecisive for shaping the canonical narrative’s overarching plot. God’s history with Israel does not form an indispensable narrative element of either God’s initial work as Consummator or God’s Work as Redeemer in its definitive form.” (p. 32). Thus there is no reference to the call of Abraham, Moses or David or to the role of Israel in any of the historic Christian Creeds.

Soulen attributes this development especially to Justin Martyr and to Irenaeus of Lyon, thus as early as the second century. “The church was then an overwhelmingly gentile community engaged in a protracted struggle to define its theological identity against three sets of opponents: Jews, pagans, and Gnostics.” (p. 33).

“Justin clearly tends to divide the content of Christian belief into two parts of unequal significance. One part (creation-for-consummation, fall, redemption in Christ, and final judgment) is of interest to all because it directly determines the being and destiny of all persons as rational creatures. The other part (God’s history with the Jews construed as prophecy of Christ) is also of interest to all, not however because of its direct spiritual significance but because of its probative power.” (p. 37).

“Irenaeus underscores the continuity of divine purpose that links God’s initial purpose for Adam with God’s redemptive work in Christ. And Irenaeus casts Israel’s role in salvation history in a more positive light by portraying it as integral to God’s education of the human race unto Christ and the church. Ironically, Irenaeus’ modifications underscore the logic of economic supersessionism at the same time that they anchor Israel more securely into the Christian story as the prehistory of the church.” (p. 41).

What is lost in this form of supersessionist summary of Christian faith? Firstly, the theme of **covenant** is marginalized. Covenant goes with a covenant people. This opens the door to an individualistic vision of

Christianity and of salvation. Secondly, the central biblical theme of Israel and the nations disappears from sight.