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Book Review: Has the Church Replaced Israel: A Theological Evaluation (Michael J. Vlach)

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Michael J. Vlach: *Has the Church Replaced Israel: A Theological Evaluation*. Nashville: B&H, 2010. 224. \$19.99, paper.

Michael J. Vlach, professor of Theology at The Master's Seminary, seeks to demonstrate through careful exegesis why the church will not replace Israel and how the future salvation and restoration of Israel will be accomplished.

The book is divided into four parts (total of sixteen chapters). Part 1: Introduction to Supersessionism (chs. 1-2) offers an excellent succinct explanation on supersessionism. In two brief chapters (pp 9-23), the author explains supersessionism, its variations as adopted by supersessionists, and the idea of moderate supersessionism. Punitive supersessionism understands that Israel is punished by God and replaced by the church, because she was disobedient and thus lost the privilege to be the people of God (pp. 13-14). Economic supersessionism is the view that the replacement of Israel by the church has been God's plan from the beginning (pp. 14-16). Structural supersessionism is the third form of replacement theology (pp. 16-17). This hermeneutic adopts a NT priority and ignores the OT. Moreover, some supersessionists, whom Vlach identifies as moderate supersessionists, subscribe to the idea of a future significance and salvation for Israel but not a restoration (p. 20).

In Part 2: Supersessionism in Church History, Vlach concisely reviews the issues during the early church period which led to the development of supersessionism (chs. 3-7). Vlach offers three factors which led to the acceptance of supersessionism in the early church (pp. 28-29): (1) the increasing Gentile composition of the early church, (2) the church's perception of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and 135, and (3) a hermeneutical approach that allowed the church to appropriate Israel's promises to itself. During the patristic era the church adopted a moderate view of supersessionism (pp. 35-50). "The church believed that the nation Israel had been rejected by God because of its disobedience and rejection of Christ" (p. 49).

During the reformation era supersessionistic ideas seemed to be in a state of flux. Luther's understanding about Jews and Judaism changed dramatically. At first, he affirmed Israel's positive future in God's plan (p. 55), yet in his later years, Luther offered anti-Semitic expressions (pp. 56-57). He said true Israel was composed of Gentiles who were Christians. Calvin appears to have adopted a moderate form of supersessionism (pp. 57-59). He believed that the church was the new Israel but that there would be a future conversion of the Jews.

The author offers an excellent survey of the supersessionist's view in the modern era (from the eighteenth century through the present time) and how it evolved into variegated forms. A type of structural supersessionism was advanced by Kant and Schleiermacher. Kant deemphasized the Jewishness of Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures (p. 63), and Schleiermacher emphasized a Christocentric approach to Christian doctrine while removing Israelite elements (p. 65). Contrariwise, Barth viewed the role of Israel in redemption history as significant. He rejected punitive supersessionism, but adopt the economic supersessionist view that Israel's distinctive function ended with Christ (pp. 66-67). In the US dispensational theology has promoted nonsupersessionist views in favor of a future restoration of national Israel (pp. 72-73).

In Part 3: Supersessionism and Hermeneutics (chapters 8-10), the author succeeds in explaining the principles of interpretation which lie at the basis of supersessionistic and nonsupersessionistic understandings. Supersessionism is based upon three main tenets (p. 79): (1) belief in the interpretive priority of the NT over the OT, (2) belief in nonliteral fulfillments of OT texts regarding Israel, and (3) belief that national Israel is a type of the NT church. The supersessionist sees the NT as the lens through which the OT is understood. Thus, OT texts which speak of the restoration of Israel are not viewed literally (p. 81). Another common interpretative approach of supersessionists is typological interpretation. Here “the OT is viewed as being a Testament of types, pictures, and shadows that gives way to the NT with its superior antitypes” (p. 87). This approach often results in perceiving Israel as a type of the NT church which is “superseded by the greater reality and antitype—the church” (p. 89).

In Part 4: Supersessionism and Theological Arguments (chs. 11-16), Vlach discusses the five primary arguments used to support supersessionism (pp. 123-36). These are: (1) national Israel has been permanently rejected as the people of God (Matt. 21:43); (2) application of OT language to the church shows that the church is now identified as the new Israel (Gal. 6:16; Rom. 9:6; 2:28-29; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Gal. 3:7, 29); (3) unity of Jews and Gentiles rules out a future role or function for national Israel (Eph. 2:11-22; Rom. 11:17-24); (4) the church’s relationship to the new covenant indicates that the church alone inherits the OT covenants originally promised to national Israel (Heb. 8:8-13); (5) New Testament silence on the restoration of Israel is proof that Israel will not be restored as a nation. Vlach examines the hermeneutic of national Israel’s permanent rejection, the supersessionist’s interpretation that unity between Jews and Gentiles means the church is new Israel, the claim that the new covenant is fulfilled with the church, and the assertion that the New Testament’s silence about a national restoration of Israel is proof for supersessionism. Then, a consideration for God’s plan for all nations is given in ch. 14 (pp. 165-76). In the final chapters (chs. 15-16), seven positive declarations are offered as support for a future salvation and restoration of national Israel: (1) the Bible explicitly teaches the restoration of the national Israel; (2) the Bible explicitly promises the perpetuity of the nation Israel; (3) the NT reaffirms a future restoration for the nation Israel; (4) the NT reaffirms that the OT promises and covenants to Israel are still the possession of Israel; (5) New Testament prophecy affirms a future for Israel; (6) the NT maintains a distinction between Israel and the church; (7) the doctrine of election is proof that God has a future for Israel.

The book argues that supersessionism is not a biblical doctrine. The author believes this view is supported by careful exegesis which affirms the salvation and restoration of national Israel. The book fills a void in the discussion of replacement theology. It offers a good general introduction to this important topic.

However, while the brevity of the book is advantageous as an introductory volume, it also allows for certain deficiencies. Whereas the later section of the book (Part 4) is reserved for theological arguments, the limited space often does not allow for a thorough analysis of the pertinent biblical passages.

Overall, this is a valuable introduction to the subject of supersessionism. The book is well written and organized. The value of the book lies in helping the reader understand the issue and showing the historical contexts which led to the development of supersessionism. This is an excellent book for students and all those who want a concise and well structured presentation of the topic.

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