

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REMNANT OF ISRAEL

Introduction

The promise of a righteous remnant is crucially important. Although its significance often is not recognized, it is central to a proper theology of God, salvation, the church, eschatology, and a theology of missions, at least. In order to properly assess the theological significance of the remnant of Israel, a description of the nature of a remnant and a review of the concept throughout Scripture will be helpful.¹ Of course, such a survey must of necessity be brief in an article of this breadth.

The Nature of a Remnant

The remnant concept usually implies the deliverance of a minority from a calamity that has befallen the majority. Harold Hoehner says, “In both Testaments, the idea of the remnant is ‘those being left’ or ‘having escaped,’ especially a portion of a community which has escaped a devastating calamity.”² The calamity may vary in different contexts in which the concept is found, so it is important to understand the context in which it is found, for it is the calamity or

¹The primary words that are used of a remnant are: פליטה, יתר, שאר, שארית, ὑπόλειμμα, and λείμμα. This article, however, will not give attention to a lexical study of these words, but rather to the concept of a remnant, regardless of the specific words used.

²Harold W. Hoehner, “Remnant,” in *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard F. Vos, and John Rea (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 1451. See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Opening the Sealed Book: Interpretations of the Book of Isaiah in Late Antiquity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 222–30.

disaster that defines the remnant. This is similar to our use of the word “survivor.”³ Someone may be a survivor in one context, but not another. For example, there may be a survivor from a school shooting, or a Holocaust survivor, or a survivor from a head-on collision. When you speak of a survivor, you need to be sure that the context is understood. In the same way, whenever we speak of a remnant, we need to understand what the context is. To mis-identify the context is to confuse the identity of the remnant.

The Remnant before Isaiah

The Remnant from the Flood

In the account of Noah and the Flood, the concept of a remnant is present, though the word is not used. Noah and his family were saved from the Flood by God's grace as a means of perpetuating humanity. That is to say, mankind was not totally annihilated by the judgment of the waters; Noah and his family constituted the remnant that was saved, even as the animals on the ark constituted a remnant of the animal kingdom. Gerhard Hasel, who has written the classic book on the remnant concept, says, “The unique event of the total annihilation of the existence of man in the Flood actualized the possibility of a continuation of human existence through the salvation of a remnant.”⁴ Though the Flood brought unimaginable destruction, the remnant brought hope and a new beginning. So from the beginning, the concept of a remnant suggests both shocking judgment and boundless hope.

The Remnant from the Destruction of Sodom

³In fact, “survivor,” *sarid* [שריד] is used in Isa 1:9 to express this very concept (see Rom 9:29).

⁴Gerhard F. Hasel, *The Remnant: The History and Theology of the Remnant Idea from Genesis to Isaiah* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), 140.

The same concept is found in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. When the destruction of the cities was announced, Abraham pled for God to spare the cities, if a righteous remnant could be found of a certain size. However, the only ones who ultimately survived were Lot and his two daughters. Although Lot's wife was spared from the initial destruction, through disobedience (or a lack of faith), she too was destroyed. So, in the end, only a remnant of a remnant was spared.

The Patriarchal Remnant from Famine

The first explicit reference to a remnant⁵ is found in Genesis 45:7 as Joseph tells his brothers, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance." Stephen Westerholm writes, "When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, they were clearly giving vent to their own hatred; but God channeled that hatred into an action that served his own intention to preserve his people through an imminent famine."⁶ In this incident, the famine was the context from which a remnant was preserved.

Elijah and the Remnant from Spiritual Defection

1 Kings 18 and 19 tell of a remnant of Israel that had avoided the calamity, not of supernatural destruction or of famine, but of rebellion and defection from the Lord. Although Elijah felt alone in his devotion to the LORD (1 Kngs 18:22; 19:10, 14), he is answered in two ways: First, he is told that the faithful remnant was actually as large as seven thousand (1 Kngs 19:18). "Secondly . . . the destructive judgment, despite its terrible nature and despite Israel's

⁵Hebrew, שְׁעָרִית, *she'arith*.

⁶Stephen Westerholm, *Understanding Paul: The Early Christian Worldview of the Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 139.

apostasy, will not lead to complete annihilation of Israel.”⁷ The existence of a remnant speaks not only of God’s sovereignty, but of His faithfulness to His people and to His purposes. Though the majority may face judgment, God demonstrates His faithfulness in the preservation of the remnant.

The Size of a Remnant

In connection with Elijah, it is important to note that though the small size of the remnant may render it insignificant in the eyes of some, the *size* of the remnant is irrelevant. In the days of Elijah, the population of Israel is estimated to have been approximately seven million. Of that number, as far as most people were concerned, the only person in the country who did not worship Ba’al was Elijah. Some could have concluded, “Whereas Israel used to worship God, now Ba’al worship has completely replaced the worship of God.” This conclusion, however, would have overlooked not only Elijah and the one hundred prophets of God who had been hidden by Obadiah (1 Kngs 18:4), but also the “resistance movement” in Israel that numbered about 7,000 (1 Kngs 19:18).

Even so, some would argue, “You are only speaking of one tenth of one percent of the population in Elijah’s day, or one person out of every 1,000!” True, but they constituted the remnant of Israel, and as such, they provided proof that God had not abandoned, rejected, or replaced Israel. This is exactly the point Paul makes in Romans 11:4.

To illustrate the irrelevance of the size of the remnant consider this: If I were to write a check for the smallest amount more than the balance I have in the bank, my check would be worthless. I would receive a notice from the bank that I had insufficient funds. How big does the

⁷Hasel, *The Remnant*, 169.

discrepancy need to be to receive such a notice? If you lack even the smallest amount, the bank will not honor your check. The significance of the remnant is incalculable, though irrespective of its size.

Amos and the Remnant from a Devastating Invasion

The prophet Amos also spoke of a remnant of the nation to be saved from a foreign invasion. Significantly, it was to be a tenth of the people who were to be spared initially, but there was no guarantee of ultimate salvation for all of these. Amos says, “Perhaps the LORD God of hosts may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:15b). The implication is that there only would be a “remnant of the remnant” that finally would be saved, just as was the case with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the entire remnant (including Lot’s wife) was not ultimately delivered. In each of these examples, it should be clear that the size of the remnant is relatively unimportant. God will use the remnant to accomplish His purposes.

Amos and the Believing Remnant

A brief word needs to be added concerning Amos 9:11–12. This passage became crucially important at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. On this occasion, James chose this passage, because it “delineated with exquisite precision the fact that the restored kingdom will admit both Jew (the believing remnant) and Gentile (elect from every nation).”⁸ The text has become corrupted, but probably originally read, “After these things, I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that the remnant of man will seek God and all the Gentiles who are called by My name.”⁹

⁸Michael A. Braun, “James’ Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council: Steps Toward a Possible Solution of the Textual and Theological Problems,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (1977), 113.

⁹For justification, see the article by Braun (above).

In this reading, “the tabernacle of David” is the House of David (i.e., the Messianic hope), and “the remnant of man” is the believing remnant of Israel.¹⁰ Michael A. Braun, in his classic essay on the topic, says, “Amos 9:11–12 was decisive at the council because it spoke of both Jews *as Jews* and Gentiles *as Gentiles* seeking the Lord.”¹¹ Notice that the remnant of Israel and the ingathering of the Gentiles are mentioned together. According to Paul, in Romans 11:11–15, the ingathering of the Gentiles has interrupted Israel’s restoration. This restoration began with the salvation of the remnant at Pentecost. The remnant of Jewish believers in Yeshua which has continued since then guarantees the ultimate salvation of the nation in the future (Rom 11:26). At the present, this restoration has been interrupted by the influx of Gentiles from the nations. Amos’ point is that both Jews as Jews and Gentiles as Gentiles will be included in the Messianic Kingdom. At the present, the remnant of Israel is being brought to faith in Messiah along with believing Gentiles.

The Remnant from Spiritual Blindness in Isaiah

With Isaiah, the concept of a remnant that had been developed since the Flood is used of those to be delivered from a different calamity—the judgment of spiritual blindness. The blindness of Israel, which began with the ministry of Isaiah and continued throughout the remainder of the Old Testament period, gave rise to the remnant of Israel, as we are speaking of it now. In the book of Isaiah, every time the blindness of Israel is mentioned, there is also the mention of a remnant. The remnant was to live by faith in God and in His Messiah, while waiting for the deliverance and restoration He would bring.

¹⁰Ibid., 119–20.

¹¹Ibid., 118. Emphasis is in the original.

In Isaiah, although the Babylonian Captivity receives a great deal of attention, the major judgment of God on Israel is the judgment of spiritual blindness. This judgment is shocking, yet it is not entirely without hope. The spiritual blindness of Israel provides the context for speaking of the redeemed remnant. In fact, the spiritual future of the nation is guaranteed by the existence of a remnant.¹² That is to say, Isaiah's concern is not primarily with the remnant that would return from Babylon (though, of course, chapters 40–66 are addressed to them), but his concern is with the spiritual remnant, that is, with those who would return to the Lord. For example, in Isaiah 44:18, the prophet says, "They do not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend." Since the theme of spiritual blindness is a major theme, featuring as prominently as it does, both in Isaiah's commission as well as in the earliest verses of the first chapter, it should come as no surprise that the remnant preserved from this judgment is also emphasized throughout the book. Indeed, this is the argument Hasel makes, I believe very convincingly, that the theme of the remnant runs throughout the book.¹³

Hasel incorporates a quotation from Herbert Dittmann to say: "Isaiah used the remnant motif right from the beginning of his prophetic activity and at that always in the sense of a remnant from Judah. The remnant motif is not only a part but actually a 'foundation pillar of the

¹²Failure to understand the blindness of Israel as the context for the concept of the remnant, and Isa 6:9–10 as the primary passage, has led Ronald Clements to conclude that Isa 7:3 is the origin of the concept, and that the concept developed from a military context. In his view, the concept of a remnant developed over an extended period of time, so that the "doctrine" of a remnant only developed after the time of Isaiah. See Ronald E. Clements, "'A Remnant Chosen by Grace' (Rom 11:5): The Old Testament Background and Origin of the Remnant Concept" in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday*, ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Exeter, England: The Paternoster Press, 1980), 106–121.

¹³Hasel claims that Isa 11:10–16 is an exception, that "the usage of the remnant is here unique insofar as it is not employed in connection with judgment or with the purged remnant of Zion." *Ibid.*, 347 (see 339–48). In light of the scene of judgment earlier in the chapter, however, it is difficult to understand this as an exception, for it is out of this judgment that the remnant has been preserved. It is true, however, that it is not speaking of the judgment of spiritual blindness.

whole of Israelite eschatology.’”¹⁴ In the very first chapter of Isaiah, verses 2 and 3 may speak of the rebellion, alienation, and consequent spiritual blindness from God, but verse 9 speaks of a remnant. The remnant is revealed against the background of this judgment. In fact, the promise of a remnant stands out against the darkness of impending doom like diamonds on black velvet. So the themes of “blindness” and “remnant” are like conjoined twins in the book.

Isaiah’s Dual Commission

Likewise, God gave Isaiah a dual commission; he was to pronounce God’s judgment, but he was also to call out the remnant. At his commissioning, when the judgment of the blindness of Israel is announced, so also is the assurance of the preservation of a remnant. This leads to the inevitable conclusion that Isaiah’s commission is for the purpose both of confirming the judgment of God on the people and also for the calling forth of the righteous remnant. It would not be misguided to understand the intended recipients of the book of Isaiah to have been the spiritual remnant of Israel.¹⁵ It is as though Isaiah, even as he is announcing doom, is crying out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

The Remnant as a Tenth

No study of the remnant can fail to note the frequency with which a tenth portion is associated with a remnant. For instance, Hasel says, “The idea of the tenth appeared already in connection with the remnant motif in the Sodom story of the earliest [records] of Genesis.”¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., 9.

¹⁵This observation also has tremendous implications for the study of Messianic prophecy. The majority of the Jewish people was incapable of grasping Isaiah’s prophecies concerning the coming Messiah, not because that meaning was not present in the text, and not because it was not clear, but because the majority was spiritually blinded and prevented from understanding.

¹⁶Hasel, *The Remnant*, 239.

Amos 5:3 says, “For thus says the Lord GOD, ‘The city which goes forth a thousand strong will have a hundred left, and the one which goes forth a hundred strong will have ten left to the house of Israel.’” So here too, the remnant is a tenth of the people.

It is possible that this “tithe” is that which is “holy to the LORD” (Lev 27:32). The tithe signifies God’s ownership of the entire 100%, not merely the 10%. The judgment of God on Israel is righteous (Isa 10:22), and God’s righteousness is further demonstrated in the preservation of a remnant (Ezra 9:15). Therefore, the nature of the remnant’s righteousness is neither intrinsic, nor the result of human effort—it is not that it represents “the cream of the crop.” Rather, as Hasel says, “The holy remnant will not be spared because of their qualifications, but because of God’s determination to work out his purpose in history.”¹⁷ The righteousness of the remnant will be like the righteousness of Abraham—an imputed righteousness on the basis of faith (Gen 15:6).

The Remnant of a Remnant

There is also a two-fold judgment, however, that results in a “remnant-within-a-remnant.” Hasel translates Isaiah 6:13, “And though a tenth remain in it, it will be consumed again, like a terebinth or an oak, of which, at felling, a stock remains.”¹⁸ Just as in Amos, Isaiah 6:13 presents a remnant-within-a-remnant—firstly, a remnant of ten percent, which is preserved from supernaturally imposed blindness and, secondly, only a remnant of that ten percent that finds atonement for sin through repentance and faith.

¹⁷Ibid., 268.

¹⁸Ibid., 235–36.

Isaiah continues by referring to this “second” remnant (i.e., what is left of the “stump,” following both the felling of the tree and the destruction of the fire), as “the holy seed” (Isa 6:13).¹⁹ Hasel comments, “The prophet himself may be considered the . . . representative of the future remnant, because he was confronted by Yahweh’s ‘holiness’ and emerged as a cleansed and purified individual.”²⁰ J. Alec Motyer asks rhetorically:

Do the preceding verses, then, represent the final fall of the curtain on the Lord’s valiant efforts to save a people for himself? Ask another question: Was Isaiah’s deadly sin the end for him? The “burning one” approached with fire but when the fire touched, the voice said, “Forgiven”. So here too. The tree is felled, but the voice says, “The holy seed”. Typically of Isaiah, hope is the unexpected fringe attached to the garment of doom.²¹

As with the initial tenth, so also God’s sovereignty and grace are seen in His preservation of this “second” remnant. He says, “O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me. I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud, and your sins like a heavy mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you” (Isa 44:21d–22). He brings salvation to the “Israel” within Israel—the righteous remnant. It is impossible to conclude that these words were intended for those who were worshipping idols and whose eyes had been blinded. Instead, they were an appeal to the remnant that had not been affected by spiritual blindness. The LORD is here calling forth the righteous remnant from this larger remnant. For the remainder, there is only the lament found in Isaiah 63:15–64:7. Near the end of his prophecy, in the midst of this lament (63:17), Isaiah, speaking in reference to his people, says, “Why, O LORD, do You cause us to stray from

¹⁹See Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on Isaiah with Emphasis on the Messianic Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 78–79.

²⁰Hasel, *The Remnant*, 243.

²¹J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 79.

Your ways, and harden our heart from fearing You?” Even so, in God’s own time, these appeals by the LORD to the remnant will be heard also by the nation as a whole.

This righteous remnant is not only a remnant-of-a-remnant, but it functions as a spiritual government-in-exile, or as a nation-within-a-nation. Even so, it does not replace the larger people of Israel, as though God were finished with the nation. That is to say, the righteous remnant functions as the guardian of the promises for Israel, the recipients of God’s favor from among the Chosen People of Israel, the channel of His blessing, and the guarantee that God will ultimately bring the entire people to salvation by His grace. Otherwise, instead of a lament for the remainder, there would be nothing but the destruction that was threatened at Sinai (see Exod 32:10), which was actually visited on the generation that died in the wilderness (see Numb 32:13). Along this line, even though the wilderness generation was judged with spiritual blindness, just as Israel would be again in Isaiah’s day, God’s provision for them while under judgment provided evidence that He had not rejected the nation as a whole (see Deut 29:2–8). Furthermore, God is still using the nation, even while it is under His judgment, among the other nations of the world. His preservation of the Jewish people, for example, is a testimony to His faithfulness, as is their return to the Land of Israel.

The Certainty of a Remnant

If spiritual blindness is enacted, and a remnant is announced in chapter 6, that blindness is illustrated in Ahaz’ lack of faith in chapter 7. King Ahaz, through his lack of faith, is a good illustration of the spiritual blindness Isaiah had pronounced in the previous chapter.

The remnant would have perpetual existence in Israel until the nation would be restored to the kingdom of God.²² The name of Isaiah's son, She'ar Jashub (Isa 7:3),²³ is an enduring witness to Isaiah's faith that "a remnant shall remain." Hasel says, "Virtually all scholars agree that the name of Isaiah's son . . . is a key element of the remnant [theme] of Isaiah of Jerusalem."²⁴ This name testifies to the certainty of a remnant. The hope of that remnant would be centered in the coming of "God with us," Immanuel (7:14), who would be born of a pregnant virgin.²⁵ He would satisfy the requirements of the One who embodied the Messianic hope and would rule on the throne of David in the millennial kingdom.²⁶

The Remnant in the Remaining Prophets

There are many additional references to the remnant in the subsequent prophets, and many of these passages refer to the remnant that is to survive conquest and exile that came as a judgment on Judah. Nevertheless, there are also references to the righteous remnant that is faithful to the Lord. There are also passages which speak of the restoration of the remnant of the nation that survive the great judgments in end times, known as the time of Jacob's trouble (Jer 30:7).

²²As in Zech 12:10; Rom 11:26.

²³See Gerhard F. Hasel, "Linguistic Considerations Regarding the Translation of Isaiah's *Shear-Jashub*: A Reassessment," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 9 (1971): 36–46.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 36.

²⁵Isa 7:14. הַעֲלֵמָה הַרְרָה is better translated "the pregnant virgin" than "a virgin shall conceive." See Rydelnik, *The Messianic Hope*, 146–63. Some previous scholars who reached similar conclusions on the interpretation of this passage are: John Gill, *The Prophecies of the Old Testament Respecting the Messiah Consider'd and Prov'd to be Literally Fulfill'd in Jesus: Containing an Answer to the Objections of the Author of the Scheme of Literal Prophecy* (London: n.p., 1728; reprint, La Vergne, TN: Gale ECCO Print Editions [Print on demand], 2010) and David L. Cooper, *Messiah: His Nature and Person* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1933), 132–69.

²⁶Isa 9:6–7; see also Rev 20:4–6.

In Jeremiah 31, God tells the reader of His Word, “Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chiefs of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘O Lord, save Thy people, the remnant of Israel’” (Jer 31:7). Actually, a better translation renders it this way, “Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and shout for the chief of the nations [i.e., Israel]; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘O Lord, save Thy people, the remnant of Israel.’”²⁷ Here, just as in Psalm 67, the people are told to pray for the remnant of Israel, that the nations may be blessed. Notice that, significantly, the remnant is addressed as “Israel.” Here, just as in Isaiah, the righteous remnant is viewed as a nation-within-a-nation—an Israel within Israel. And that brings us to the Scriptures of the New Covenant.

The Remnant in the Scriptures of the New Covenant

Some maintain that there was a remnant in the period of the Hebrew Scriptures, and there will be a remnant in the End Times, but that at the present, there is no remnant, for Jewish believers are simply members of the church. But Paul says, in Romans 11:5, “There has also come to be *at the present time* a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (emphasis supplied).

As we have seen, there was a remnant in the period of the Hebrew Scriptures, and there is a remnant at present. One day, the entire nation will be restored to God, but we need to understand that the existence of the remnant indicates that God will eventually restore the entire nation. The size of the remnant is not important; the remnant, just like the entire nation, are to be weighed, not counted, for their significance is far greater than their number.

²⁷The word translated, “chief” (רֹאשׁ) in Hebrew is literally, “head,” and it is singular. See the revised NASB (1995).

The remnant of Israel cannot be understood in the same way as the “remnant” of the nations who have become Christians. The “remnant” of the nations has been saved from a calamity, namely, the wrath of God, but this remnant does not carry the same significance as the remnant of Israel, for the covenants of salvation have been made with Israel, not with the nations. As Braun concludes, “Doctrinally, the word ‘remnant’ applies strictly to Israel.”²⁸ In fact, the hope for the nations is bound up with the existence of the believing remnant of Israel.

It was from this remnant of faithful Israelites that John the Baptist drew his disciples, and some later became disciples of the Lord. Whether previously devout, like Nathanael, or suddenly transformed, as Levi the publican, Zaccheus, and others, in responding to the call to discipleship, they were incorporated into "the remnant of Israel" and identified themselves with Yeshua²⁹ as His disciples. Joseph and Mary, Zacharias and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, and many others who are unnamed, comprised the remnant at the time of Yeshua’s birth. Of Simeon, Luke says that he was “righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Luke 2:25). Having recorded the birth of Yeshua and His presentation in the Temple, Luke says of the aged Anna, that “she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). It seems that some of them, at least, knew one another and enjoyed speaking to one another of their common hope.

²⁸Braun, 119. It goes without saying that a distinction must be made between “the elect” and “the remnant.” These terms are not synonymous.

²⁹Instead of the more familiar Anglicized, “Jesus,” the Hebrew form of His name, “Yeshua,” will be used throughout.

When an evil king was on the throne, when the chief priests and scribes were corrupt and greedy, when the news of one “born King of the Jews” troubled the king, and “all Jerusalem was troubled with him” (Matt 2:2–3), there was still a remnant. In the midst of political oppression and depressing greed and dishonesty, the believing remnant was true to the faith and confident in the promises of the Lord. These were the ones of whom Malachi had long before been inspired to write: “‘They will be Mine,’ says the LORD of Hosts, ‘on the day that I prepare My own possession’” (Mal 3:17). Now, as we turn attention to the apostles, as the leadership of the remnant, there are several key points that need to be made.

The Twelve Apostles: The Leadership of the Remnant

They are Jews. There is a tendency to make Yeshua and the apostles as much like ourselves as possible, so that their correspondence to us is emphasized. Just as some Americans or Europeans may tend to think of Yeshua as a European with blue eyes and wavy blond hair, some may think of the apostles only in relationship to the church; they are Christians. However, in the New Testament they are primarily portrayed in relationship to a restored, eschatological Israel; they are Jews. Certainly it is true, as Paul says, that they function as the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20), but they are also the spiritual leadership of Israel.

They are the Twelve. Yeshua appointed twelve men to be His disciples.³⁰ One author claimed that the reason Yeshua chose twelve was because He wanted “to keep the group small

³⁰See the outstanding and provocative essay by Jacob Jervell, “The Twelve on Israel’s Thrones: Luke’s Understanding of the Apostolate,” in *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 75–112. See also, Daniel J. Pfeifer, “Which Came First, the Symbol or the Referent? A Study of the Historical Twelve” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 172 (2015): 433–49.

enough to be able to work effectively with them”!³¹ Such a conclusion appears to completely miss the point. They stood as representatives of the tribes of Israel.

Following the betrayal and death of Judas, the remaining apostles quoted Psalm 109:8, which says, “Let his days be few; let another take his office.”³² They then filled the position that had been occupied by Judas with Matthias (Acts 1:26). Yet less than fifteen years later, when James, the son of Zebedee was martyred (Acts 12:1–2), there did not seem to be a need to choose anyone to succeed him. The same was true as other apostles would face martyrdom.

Many contemporary scholars agree that the number of the apostles is significant. For example, Craig Evans says, “It is probable that Jesus’ appointment of the Twelve was intended to symbolize the reconstitution of the twelve tribes of Israel.”³³ Joachim Jeremias agrees: “Thus,” he says, “the twelve disciples are the representatives of the people of God in the ultimate restoration.”³⁴ Eckhard Schnabel concurs: “Seen in the context of Jesus’ proclamation of the dawn of God’s kingdom, the number ‘twelve’ speaks of the [end times] gathering of Israel.”³⁵ There is a consensus of scholarship that “the choice of twelve embodied Jesus’s intention and awareness for his ministry of restoring Israel.”³⁶

³¹Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 30th anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993), 30.

³²The reason Judas was chosen in the first place was because “the Scripture had to be fulfilled” (Acts 1:15–20) and particularly reference is to Ps 109:1–20. Yeshua suffered betrayal, even as many of His followers have.

³³Craig A. Evans, “Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel,” in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 92.

³⁴Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations*, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 24, trans., S. H. Hooke, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1967), 21.

³⁵Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1:224. See also George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 107.

³⁶Pfeifer, “Which Came First, the Symbol or the Referent? 447.

They have a unique role. Yeshua told them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28, see also Luke 22:30). Evans adds, “That is, the disciples are to protect and provide the nation with new and just leadership. Israel’s current leadership will itself be judged and removed from its stewardship” (see Mark 12:1–12).³⁷ Regarding the death of the apostles, Oskar Skarsaune comments: “They did not leave their thrones empty by dying; they now occupied their heavenly thrones. Therefore the ministry of leadership for the Twelve was unique and singular.”³⁸ Even so, does this mean that they will be given authority only in end times, and that with their deaths their roles are assigned solely to the future? No, we must understand that the transfer of authority has already taken place.

The transfer of authority has already taken place. In the context of increasing confrontation with the religious leadership in Jerusalem, Yeshua says, “The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matt 21:43). With this, spiritual authority for the nation was transferred from the High Priest and the Sanhedrin to the apostles. However, for many people, “taken away” suggests Israel

³⁷Evans, “Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel,” 92–93. Note also that Isaiah speaks of Jerusalem as having been known as “the faithful city,” that it had been “full of justice,” and that “righteousness once lodged in her” (Isa 1:21). In his day, however, it had become a “harlot” that was full of iniquity. Yet he prophesies that God will “restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning” so that it would once again “be called the city of righteousness, a faithful city” (1:26). It is also interesting that at one time the ruler of the city was named, Melchizedek (“King of Righteousness”) and in the future, its ruler will be One who “is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war” (Rev 19:11).

³⁸Oskar Skarsaune, *We Have Found the Messiah! Jewish Believers in Jesus in Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Caspari Center for Biblical and Jewish Studies, 2005), 14. This book is published as *Mishkan*, no. 45.

rejected; “given to” suggests Israel replaced. R. T. France claims that Matthew 21:43 is “the most explicit statement in Matthew of the view that there is to be a new people of God in place of Old Testament Israel.”³⁹ Loraine Boettner concludes:

It may seem harsh to say that “God is done with the Jews.” But the fact of the matter is that He is through with them as a unified national group having anything more to do with the evangelization of the world. That mission has been taken from them and given to the Christian Church (Matt. 21:43).⁴⁰

He seems to base his opinion on Matthew 21:43, but is this justified? So many others do the same thing. For example, George Gay says Israel “is to be judged in a most severe manner since they have rejected the Messiah; their house is left desolate and forsaken—all that remains for them is judgment. They are cast out, and a people producing the fruits of the Kingdom replaces them (21:43).”⁴¹ Are these men right? Is God still dealing with Israel at present or not? What does this verse really mean?

We must understand that authority is a central concern for Matthew. Yeshua is presented as the King. For example, an announcement is made in Matthew, both at Yeshua’s birth and at His death, that He is “the King of the Jews” (Matt 2:2 and 27:37). In the last chapter of Matthew, Yeshua says, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18).⁴² Not only is Yeshua presented as the King of the Jews in Matthew’s Gospel, but the

³⁹As cited by David L. Turner, “Matthew 21:43 and the Future of Israel,” *BibSac* 159 (2002): 46. See also Bell, *The Irrevocable Call of God*, 158–59.

⁴⁰As cited by Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2010), 12. See also Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 50.

⁴¹George Gay, “The Judgment of the Gentiles in Matthew’s Theology,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-fifth Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 211.

⁴²“Authority” is found in 7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8; 10:1; 20:25; 21:43 (2x), 24, 27; and 28:18. The verb, “to exercise authority” is found (twice) in 20:25.

authority delegated to His disciples is also a major concern. To Peter, He said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:19). This authority was not given to Peter alone, however, for in Matthew 18:18, He told the Twelve, “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then, as we have seen, He promised to seat them on twelve thrones in His coming kingdom (Matt 19:28).

Yeshua had authority, because He was under the authority of His Father (Matt 8:9). This authority was not only in His teaching (Matt 7:29), but it was an authority to forgive sins (Matt 9:6, 8). He also exercised authority over unclean spirits (Matt 10:1). He taught His disciples to exercise the authority that He would give them with humility (Matt 20:25). This authority was challenged, not so much by the nation (e.g., see Matt 9:8), but by the leaders (Matt 21:23–27).

Matthew 21 begins with the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Yeshua’s purification of the Temple, and the cursing of the fig tree. All of these acts were acts of authority. In Matthew 21:23–27, this authority is challenged by “the chief priests and the elders of the people” (v. 23). The way Matthew has constructed this narrative, we find the same phrase in verse 23 and in verse 27: “by what authority.” This challenge to Yeshua’s authority provides the context for all that follows in the rest of the chapter; authority is the central issue.

In response to this challenge to His authority, Yeshua tells the parable of the wicked tenants. In the parable, the authority that had been given to these wicked tenants over the vineyard would be taken from them and be given to others who would recognize the authority of the Owner. When the vine-growers abuse the landowner’s servants and kill his son, it is because

they wanted to “seize his inheritance” (v. 38). A distinction is made between the “vine-growers” and the vineyard itself. The contest is between the landowner and those who were to exercise stewardship over the vineyard; in the end, the landowner entrusts it to others (v. 41).

The first question that must be answered in interpreting Matthew 21:43 is the meaning of “the kingdom of God” in this passage, for it is this which is being transferred from one entity to the other. Once we know what He means by “the kingdom of God,” then we can determine the identities of those from whom the kingdom of God was to have been taken and those to whom it would be given. It is important to understand the relationship between the kingdom of God and the authority of Yeshua.

Since authority is a central theme in Matthew’s Gospel, and since Matthew 21:43 occurs in an immediate context dealing specifically with the authority of Yeshua (which was challenged in Matt 21:23ff), we are justified in understanding “the kingdom of God” in this passage as a spiritual authority related to the kingdom of God. In other words, it refers to a delegated authority to extend God’s offer of citizenship in His coming kingdom. In this regard, it should be seen as “the keys of the kingdom” (Matt 16:19). It well may have involved apostolic authority in the first century, but it will culminate in judicial authority in the future, earthly kingdom. This is exactly in keeping with the parable He has just told. “The kingdom of God” is the delegated authority to extend God’s offer of citizenship in His coming kingdom.

The second major issue in this text is to understand from whom this authority is taken. Three options have been proposed: authority is being taken from Israel and is given to the church,⁴³ authority is being taken from that generation of Israel (“you”) and is to be given to a

⁴³W. D. Davies and Dale Allison claim that this has been “the dominant interpretation in Christian history.” See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew 19–28*, ICC, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 189.

future generation of Israel (the “nation”),⁴⁴ or, authority is being taken away from the religious leadership of Israel and given to His apostles, as the leadership of the remnant of Israel.⁴⁵

Although most people assume here that spiritual authority is taken from Israel as a nation, the position does not have much support. If Israel is being rejected, then why does Yeshua say, in Matthew 23:39, “For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Matt 23:39)?⁴⁶ Yeshua still seems to have a place for Israel in the future. There are others who recognize that Israel has not *ultimately* been rejected or replaced, but they believe Israel has been *temporarily* rejected and replaced. They say that in this verse, kingdom authority is taken from “those who heard Him,” that is, from “the nation Israel at that time.”⁴⁷ They claim this spiritual authority is being taken from that generation of Israel and is to be given to a future (and restored) Israel.

On the positive side, this interpretation understands “nation” to refer to the nation of Israel. On the negative side, it inserts a gap of time in the verse that does not appear to be indicated in the text.⁴⁸ This understanding of an insertion or “parenthesis” of the church age

⁴⁴See, e.g., Louis A. Barbieri, Jr. *Matthew*, in vol. 2, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 70–71. See also Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 60; and Arno Clemens Gaebele, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (New York: Publication Office, Our Hope, 1910), 2:138. Even though these authors say kingdom authority was taken from that first century generation, the Jewish people are disenfranchised until end times according to this view. Therefore, with respect to Israel during this economy, there are commonalities between these dispensationalist views and those who hold to a more comprehensive Replacement Theology.

⁴⁵David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 519.

⁴⁶Horner, *Future Israel*, 57, n.49; 59; and 73.

⁴⁷Barbieri, *Matthew*, 70.

⁴⁸Many will point to passages such as Daniel 9:26–27, in which prophetic events are telescoped—that is, they present events that are separated by lengthy periods of time as if they were concurrent. This phenomenon in the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures, however, is irrelevant to the present discussion. They are speaking of the distant future, but Matthew 21:23 is speaking of present realities.

seems to be an attempt to avoid saying that the church has replaced Israel entirely, yet according to this view, during this parenthetical time the church *has* replaced Israel. One is left with a “temporary replacement theology.” The proponents of this view contend that kingdom authority will be returned to Israel in the last days, when Yeshua returns and the nation is restored.⁴⁹

In response, we simply need to ask the question: “What group is represented by the rebellious tenants, from whom authority over the vineyard is to be taken?”⁵⁰ Turner answers: “In the parable the vineyard represents Israel and the tenants stand for the leaders of Israel.”⁵¹ M. Eugene Boring agrees: “In the context the addressees are clearly the chief priests and Pharisees . . . i.e., the Jewish leadership, not the people as a whole.”⁵² Furthermore, the action expressed by the phrase “will be taken away from you” seems to happen concurrently with the following phrase, “and be given to a nation.” Yeshua takes from one and gives to the other at one and the same time.

It has been the religious leaders who have challenged His authority from the beginning. In Matthew 23:13, Yeshua would later condemn these very religious leaders, “because [they] shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for [they] do not enter in [themselves], nor do [they] allow those who are entering to go in.” Furthermore, verse 45 clinches the argument: “And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that *He was speaking about them*” (emphasis supplied).

⁴⁹For more on this “temporary replacement” view, see Jim R. Sibley, “Has the Church Put Israel on the Shelf? The Evidence from Romans 11:15,” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58 (2015): 571–81.

⁵⁰Turner, *Matthew*, 517.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, The New Interpreters Bible, vol. 8 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 415.

There are some, however, who agree that the ones from whom the kingdom is taken are the religious leaders, but they still believe it applies to the entire nation, as well. The reason authority is viewed as having been taken from the nation (even in spite of the evidence) is because they believe the recipient of the kingdom is the church. This leads us to the next point.

The third issue with this text is the meaning of “and be given to a nation.” If kingdom authority was to be taken from the religious leaders, to whom was it to have been given? The most common assumption is that the “nation” refers to the church, but this interpretation, in my opinion, should be challenged.

Certainly a case can be made that the church is never called a “nation,”⁵³ but the more important point is that Matthew 21:43 is not referring to the replacement of Israel with the church, but to the transfer of spiritual authority for the nation from the “chief priests and the Pharisees” (Matt 21:45) to someone or something else.

Matthew 21:43 should be understood as a transfer of spiritual authority from the spiritually moribund religious establishment in Jerusalem to the spiritually alive disciples of Yeshua, led by the Twelve. This remnant of Israel continues its mission and responsibilities to Israel, even as it will soon expand its witness to the nations. This Jewish remnant will become the nucleus around which the church will be built. Yet while the church cannot be called a “nation,” the remnant can be, for, as we see in Isaiah, it functions as the nation-within-the-nation.

In spite of the nation’s rebellion and the resulting judgment of spiritual blindness, God brings salvation to the “Israel” within Israel—the righteous remnant. To them He says, “O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me. I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud, and

⁵³Gaebelein says, “The Church is called the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Habitation of God by the Spirit, the Lamb’s Wife, but never a nation.” See Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2:138. For the use of nation in 1 Peter 2:9, see note 60 below.

your sins like a heavy mist. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you” (Isa 44:21d–22). It would be the remnant that would carry forward the covenants and promises of God and demonstrate the faithfulness of God to Israel and the promise of future restoration for the nation. Just like the wilderness generation of Israel, the current leadership of the nation will perish, but the apostles, as the leaders of the remnant, will lead the Israel of the future just as Joshua and Caleb did in their day. Because of the remnant, there has never been a disruption between God’s promises and the nation of Israel. God’s faithfulness to His promises has never wavered.

This band of apostles—the recipient of this spiritual authority—is not only the foundation of the church (Eph 2:19–20), but is also the guarantee that God will restore the nation of Israel, physically and spiritually, when the King establishes His kingdom on earth. Perhaps Charles Talbert offers the best summary when he says, “The parable and Jesus’s interpretation of it are not about Israel being replaced by the church (as they are usually read). Rather, they are about the Jewish leadership being replaced by the Twelve.”⁵⁴ In fact, not only is the vineyard (i.e., Israel) not rejected, nor is it left neglected, but instead, it is under new management—better results are to be expected!

Paul and the Remnant of Israel

When we consider the Apostle Paul, we find that he understood the importance of being a part of the remnant of Israel. In Romans 11, he offers himself as “Exhibit A” that God has not rejected His people. He is a part of the remnant of Israel, and as such, he is a guarantor that all of God’s promises will come to fruition.

⁵⁴Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 252.

How important was this to Paul? 2 Corinthians 11:24 says that five times Paul received “forty lashes minus one.” These were severe beatings that were delivered, not by Roman authorities, but by the synagogue authorities. E. P. Sanders says, “Punishment implies inclusion.”⁵⁵ In other words, Paul endured these beatings voluntarily in order to maintain his identity and relationship with the synagogue and with the Jewish people. He was a member of the remnant of Israel, many of whom laid down their lives for the sake of the gospel.

In Ephesians 2:20, Paul says that the church has been built on “the foundation of the apostles and prophets.” This refers not only to the witness and work of the apostles and prophets in the first century, but it also refers to their writing of the New Testament Scriptures by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In this, their leadership and ministry continue without a break.

The Theological Significance of the Remnant

Following a consideration of the nature of a remnant, the context in which the concept is found, and its theological development in Scripture, we are now prepared to assess the theological significance of the believing remnant. It is to this significance we now turn.

Bibliology

The books of our Bible were written by representatives of the remnant of Israel. Most would certainly agree that all of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures were penned by Jewish farmers, prophets, kings, and priests who were part of the believing remnant of Israel throughout its history. Many believe that all of the books of the New Testament were likewise written by Jewish believers in Yeshua.⁵⁶ This helps to explain what Paul means in Ephesians 2:20, when he

⁵⁵E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1983), 192.

⁵⁶For the identification of Luke as Jewish, see David L. Allen, “The Lukan Authorship of Hebrews: A Proposal,” *Journal of Translation and Text Linguistics* 8 (1996): 1–22; idem, *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews*, NAC

says that God's household is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." Through them, God gave us the New Testament Scriptures, the foundation of New Covenant faith.

God

God is the God of Israel; He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is not indifferent to Israel. The preservation of the remnant bears eloquent testimony to this central fact. R. Kendall Soulen remarks, "While it may be possible to imagine a god who is indifferent to the existence of the Jewish people, it is impossible so to imagine the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the God of Israel."⁵⁷ God's interest in the Jewish people is bound up with His very identity, and the remnant is a witness to God's grace and His care for Israel.

God is able to overcome man's sin and rebellion. So, the remnant speaks to God's sovereign ability to overcome sin and rebellion and to bring salvation to His "beloved enemies" (see Rom 11:28). Since He has brought the remnant to salvation, we can be confident of His ability to overcome the sin and rebellion of the nation. Indeed, the remnant is the guarantee that He will accomplish Israel's restoration (Rom 11:2–5, 25–27).

The remnant testifies to God as faithful, gracious, and wise (see Romans 11:33–36). He is faithful in that He has not rejected Israel (Rom 11:1–5), for He has faithfully preserved a remnant throughout the centuries. Since God has been faithful to Israel, those who have placed

Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2010); Rebecca I. Denova, "The Things Accomplished Among Us": Prophetic Tradition in the Structural Pattern of Luke-Acts, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series [JSNTSS]* 141 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 230–31; E. Earl Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 51–53; and Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

⁵⁷R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 4.

their trust in Yeshua can trust Him to keep His commitments to them. For example, He has promised, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you” (Heb 13:5, see also Deut 31:6).

He is wise in His plan to use the remnant to ensure that salvation goes to all the families of the earth, and that following “the fullness of the Gentiles” (Rom 11:25), one wonderful day, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). This is the point of Paul’s doxology (see Rom 11:30–36), which concludes his discussion of Israel in Romans 9–11. In this chapter, Paul not only insists that God has not rejected Israel, but that “there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (Rom 11:5). God is faithfully preserving a remnant of the Jewish people who are coming to believe in Yeshua, and He is also extending the blessings of salvation and the presence of the Holy Spirit to people from “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3). This supports Paul’s contention that “God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all” (Rom 11:32).

Soteriology

Some claim that, on the one hand, people are saved on the basis of God’s grace alone and are kept by grace alone, but on the other hand, that God has revoked His promises to Israel due to their sin and disobedience. Barry Horner has effectively called attention to the inconsistency in this position and has refuted it with Scripture.⁵⁸ The remnant is prime evidence that God does not revoke His commitments on the basis of works, but instead keeps them on the basis of grace. This is true, for as Paul says, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”⁵⁹ Before salvation, Gentile believers were “separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without

⁵⁸Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must be Challenged*, NAC Studies in Bible and Theology (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007).

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, see esp. 349–54.

God in the world” (Eph 2:12). Gentiles believers are from a “wild olive branch,” and are now partaking of the spiritual blessings of a Jewish covenant, “contrary to nature” (Rom 11:17). Both Jewish and Gentile believers owe everything to God’s grace.

Ecclesiology

The New Covenant. In Jeremiah 31, the New Covenant is prophesied, but it was to be made “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31). At the Last Supper, Yeshua took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood” (1 Cor 11:25). By this, He was announcing that the New Covenant would be inaugurated with His death. The New Covenant was clearly not made with the church, since the church was not constituted until Pentecost (i.e., *Shavu’oth*). Instead, we must understand that Yeshua’s disciples, led by the apostles, constituted the remnant of Israel and stood on behalf of Israel and Judah as those with whom the New Covenant would be inaugurated.

The original church. This remnant of Jewish disciples of Yeshua would later form the nucleus of the church, following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. With the inauguration of the New Covenant, the program of the Abrahamic Covenant was advanced to a new stage. What this means is that the church is rooted in Israel by virtue of its Jewish core—the remnant of Israel—Jewish believers in Yeshua. Our faith is a Jewish faith, our Redeemer is the Messiah of Israel, and our salvation is based on a Jewish covenant—the church is Jewish to its core!

Supersessionism. Obviously, the believing remnant stands as irrefutable proof that the church has not superseded or replaced Israel. Not all agree. For example, Herman Ridderbos says:

The church, then, as the people of the New Covenant has taken the place of Israel, and national Israel is nothing other than the empty shell from which the pearl has been removed and which has lost its function in the history of redemption.⁶⁰

The existence of the remnant immediately refutes such a position, as Paul demonstrates in Romans 11:1–5. An extensive biblical and theological case can be made against Replacement Theology, but, as helpful as such an exercise may be for some, the ultimate proof is the existence of a believing remnant of Jewish people. This remnant has always existed and is growing in number and in strength in our day.

The Great Commission. This leads inexorably to the observation that the “Great Commission” was also given to the remnant of Israel. This commission was given when Yeshua met with His disciples in Galilee prior to the birth of the church (Matt 26:16–20). Of course, for the first ten to fifteen years of its existence, the church was composed entirely of the believing remnant of Israel. Later, as Gentile believers were added, this remnant still formed the initial core of the church.

God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that in them and in their seed, “all the families of the earth will be blessed.”⁶¹ With the coming of Messiah and with the inauguration of the New Covenant through His substitutionary death, the time for God’s program of salvation through Israel to the nations had come. Finally, the remnant of Israel could join their Messiah in being “a light to the nations” (Isa 49:6). Finally, the promise of Exodus 19:6 could be fulfilled with the remnant of Israel. It was to the remnant that God said, “But you are a chosen race, a

⁶⁰ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 354–55.

⁶¹ Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; and 28:14.

royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).⁶²

The priority of Israel in missions and evangelism. Because it is God’s purpose and intention to preserve a believing remnant of Jewish people, it makes sense that the Jewish people should hold a special position in the outreach of the “one new man” (Eph 2:15) Paul said that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16).⁶³ Even though the majority of Israel has been spiritually blinded, they are in need of a gospel witness. God is still calling out a faithful remnant, and He calls us to have His heart for Israel. Paul was, in this respect, an exemplar, even willing to exchange his own salvation for theirs (Rom 9:3).

“Torah”

The doctrine of the remnant also has a bearing on practical theology. The biblical teaching regarding the remnant speaks to the attitude of the believer to rabbinic traditions.⁶⁴ By its very nature, the remnant was to be counter-cultural. If the majority of the people of Israel has been judged with spiritual blindness, the believing remnant, while comprising the very core of the Jewish people, must nevertheless stand in opposition to the majority. Following Isaiah’s

⁶²For a defense of the view that the recipients of 1 Peter were Jewish believers in Yeshua, see Jim R. Sibley, “You Talkin’ to Me? 1 Peter 2:4–10 and a Theology of Israel,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology*, forthcoming.

⁶³For more on the priority of the Jewish people in missions and evangelism and the relationship of this priority to the gospel itself, see Jim R. Sibley, “Israel and the Gospel of Peter, Paul, and Abraham,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (2016):18–31.

⁶⁴This is not to say that the believer’s view of the Torah of Moses is to be negative. For a fuller discussion of the role of the Law, see the outstanding little ebook: Seth D. Postell, Eitan Bar, and Erez Soref, *The Torah’s Goal?* (Netanya, Israel: One For Israel Ministry, 2015).

commission to pronounce the severe judgment of spiritual blindness on the majority of Israel (Isa 6:9–10), and following the first example of this blindness exhibited by King Ahaz (Isa 7:9b–12), Isaiah and the remnant of which he is representative are told “not to walk in the way of this people” (Isa 8:11). They are not to say what the majority says, nor are they to fear what they fear (Isa 8:12). Instead, they are to rally to the Word of God. The prophet issues a call similar to an earlier call to secede: “To your tents, O house of Israel” (1 Kngs 12:16; 2 Chron 10:16). He says in Isaiah 8:20, “To the law and testimony!” Even as the Northern Kingdom separated itself from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, so the believing remnant is to be distinct from the majority traditions and opinions of the nation. Such a position will certainly bring condemnation and possibly persecution. In this, the remnant stands in the same tradition as the prophets and ultimately, of Messiah. They are by no means to be separate from their Jewishness, but rather from the majority culture that has departed from the Messiah and His Word.

Eschatology

A biblical understanding of the remnant of Israel should underscore the biblical hope of Israel’s restoration. John K. Goodrich, in a study in which he compares a passage from Tobit with Romans 9–11, concludes:

*The complete and total fulfilment of God’s promises concerning the future of Israel are, from the perspective of both authors [i.e., Tobit and Paul] vouchsafed by the partial fulfilment of God’s promises in the present. Hence, both Tobit and Paul can confidently assert that “God’s word has not failed,” and, “All Israel will be saved.”*⁶⁵

The “partial fulfilment of God’s promises in the present,” to which he refers, is nothing other than the preservation of the remnant. Because the God of Israel is neither indifferent nor

⁶⁵John K. Goodrich, “The Word of God Has Not Failed: God’s Faithfulness and Israel’s Salvation in Tobit 14:3–7 and Romans 9–11,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 67 (2016), 44. Emphasis is in the original.

unfaithful, His Word is true and inerrant. His promises to Israel cannot fail, and the remnant guarantees that He is not finished with Israel. The prophet Micah says:

Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. You will give truth to Jacob and unchanging love to Abraham, which You swore to our forefathers from the days of old. (Micah 7:18–20)