GENESIS'S DEFINITION OF ISRAEL AND THE PRESUPPOSITIONAL ERROR OF SUPERSESSIONISM

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Supersessionism has been the mainstream Christian answer to the question, "What happens to Israel with Christ building his church?" Supersessionism, often called—with a hint of derision—"replacement theology," asserts that the church has now taken the place of Israel.[1] Supersessionism had been the dominant Christian doctrine about Israel and the church, challenged only relatively recently, within the last century, by dispensationalism and other cultural trends. Today, however, the long-held Christian belief that the church has superseded Israel has so faded that a 2018 book, *Three Views on Israel and the Church,* featured four evangelical scholars who eschewed supersessionism, insisting, each in their own way, that the church has not replaced Israel.[2] Yet, supersessionism is still the majority report among nonevangelical Christian theologians—Catholic, Protestant, and other—throughout church history.[3] Justin Martyr (c. 100 to 165) wrote, "For the true spiritual Israel … are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ."[4] Augustine (354–430) wrote,

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[1]"Supersessionism describes the theological conviction that the Christian Church has superseded the Jewish people, assuming their role as God's covenanted people, Israel" (David Novak, "Supersessionism, Hard and Soft," *First Things* [February 2019], https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/02/supersessionism-hard-and-soft).

Michael Vlach, a critic of supersessionism, notes, "The term "supersessionism" is preferable [to "replacement theology"] since it is a broader term that can encompass the ideas of replacement and fulfillment" ("Rejection Then Hope: The Church's Doctrine of Israel in the Patristic Era," *MSJ* 19.1 (Spring 2008): 53n6). However, two years later Vlach seems to have changed his mind: "I have no trouble with the designation replacement theology" (*Has the Church Replaced Israel?: A Theological Evaluation* [Nashville: B&H, 2010], 10.) In his book on supersessionism, Vlach argues that there is essentially no difference between "replacement theology" and "fulfillment theology" and that both can be called "supersessionism." "I have found that those who teach the church is the complete replacement or fulfillment of Israel use the same basic arguments." I believe he is correct.

[2]Jared Compton and Andrew David Naselli, eds., *Three Views on Israel and the Church: Perspectives on Romans 9–11* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018).

[3]Catholic supersessionism is summarized as, "The Church, the new Israel, is therefore the fulfillment of the old Israel" (Pierre Grelot, "Israel," *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Leon-Dufour [New York: Seabury, 1962], 259).

[4]Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 11, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:200.

> For if we hold with a firm heart the grace of God which has been given us, we are Israel.… Let therefore no Christian consider himself alien to the name of Israel.… The Christian people then is rather Israel.[5]

Alister McGrath notes that this view that the church has replaced Israel as the people of God had a "wide consensus" in the early church.[6]

While now scorned by some as inherently anti-Semitic, supersessionism depends on the assumption that the term "Israel" in the OT referred to the ethnic group now understood as Jewish.[7] The debate now, to the degree there still is one, is whether the literal OT ethnicity ("Israel") is a type—or what Augustine called a "figure"—of the church that is replaced by the anti-type (the church), or is the literal OT ethnicity neither a type nor replaced.[8] Notice that all sides of the debate accept the presupposition that Israel in the OT was primarily or exclusively a literal ethnicity. What is missing is a third option, one that rejects the apparently unexamined presupposition of supersessionism and recent answers to it. That is, simply, that Israel was, from its inception, primarily envisioned to be an assembly—a church—of believers from all kinds of ethnicities. This view, which I name "Continuumism"—from Daniel Fuller's *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum*—asserts that the church did not replace Israel because Israel always was the church.[9]

To come at that definition of Israel in the confines of an article, I will examine the theological definition of Israel in Genesis. The scope of this article, then, is confined to that definition provided by Genesis, a brief survey of the remainder of the OT to see if that definition is consistent with it, and some concluding remarks about the application of this definition to supersessionism and its theological offspring, dispensationalism. In an article, I cannot resolve every question one might have about this definition, especially as the implications of the definition may seem radical to some. However, I believe that those implications are less

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[5]Augustine, "Exposition on Psalm 114" (v. 3), New Advent, https://www.new advent.org/fathers/1801114.htm.

[6]Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 461–62. For more documentation of the church fathers' teaching supersessionism, see Vlach, "Rejection Then Hope," 57–60.

[7]"Replacement theology, the theory that the church so fulfills the promises to Israel that the promises to ethnic Israel are rendered obsolete, is much disputed by Christian theologians today" (Scot McKnight, "Israel," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 345).

[8]"For in the Jewish people was figured the Christian people" (Augustine, *The Homilies on John*, Tractate 11.8, p. 74).

[9]Daniel Fuller, *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1980). I'm not suggesting that Dan Fuller, my professor, taught the proposition in this essay, only that he taught a continuum between the Testaments that I'm applying to Israel and the church.

troublesome than some of alternative implications about Israel that we have grown accustomed to.

By definition of Israel, I do not mean the etymology of the word "Israel." I mean what the word represents. What is Israel? The answer seems obvious: an ethnic group that traces its origins back to Jacob, grandson of Abraham, renamed "Israel," and a nation-state made up by his descendants. Defining "Israel" seems too obvious for the trouble. We are so sure we can assume its meaning, many of our theological dictionaries do not bother to define it.[10] Many others define it, matter-of-factly, as the literal ethnicity. Mark R. Lindsay, in *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology's* entry for "Israel," defines it as "the entire OT community of God's people, descending from the patriarch Jacob," presuming that Israel is the ethnicity.[11] Similarly, Donald McKim, defines "Israel," "The nation of Israel as descended from Jacob (Gen 32:28), after whose twelve sons the twelve tribes of Israel were named (Gen 49)."[12] Even those who define Israel theologically first note that literally or "technically [it is] the progeny of Jacob."[13] The *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible,* does that while eventually concluding with the supersessional definition of Israel as "the ethnic nation that becomes the spiritual body of Christ."[14] The object of this essay is to show that the first, "technical" definition, from the OT, is incorrect; that Genesis, in its narrative style, defines Israel theologically.

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[10]For example, the following theological dictionaries have no entry for "Israel": *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999); Peter A. Angeles, *Dictionary of Christian Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); *A Dictionary of Christian Theology,* ed. Alan Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); *Dictionary of Dogmatic Theology,* ed. Pietro Parente, Antionio Piolanti, Salvatore Garofalo (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1951); *The New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology,* ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowdon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms,* ed. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999). Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) offers a helpful discussion of the issue (see "The Church and Israel," 859–63), but assumes that Israel is primarily the ethnic group.

[11]Mark R. Lindsay, "Israel," *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland, David A. S. Fergusson, and Karen Kilby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Millard J. Erickson's definition of Israel is similar but adds, "It also refers to spiritual Israel, believers who have the faith Abraham had" and adds a separate entry for "Israel, New" defined as "the church" (*Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986], 87).

[12]Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms,* Vol. 1, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 148.

[13]McKnight, "Israel," 345. *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* comes closest to a theological definition of Israel: "The name 'Israel,' however, referred to Jacob's descendants' spiritual, covenantal, and religious heritage. The name Israel spoke of the ethnic or national Hebrews' or Jews' unique relationship with God" (Walter A. Elwell, ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 379).

[14]McKnight, "Israel," 344.

At three pivotal points in the history of Israel in Genesis, Israel is defined. In each of those points—at the beginning and end of the Jacob narrative and at the conclusion of Genesis—the divine name *El Shaddai* is invoked. Each time a nearly identical phrase occurs. Repetition serves to emphasize the most important incidents of the narrative. For example, Jacob is twice renamed "Israel" (32:28; 35:10); twice we are told that Luz was renamed "Bethel" (28:19; 35:15). In this case, the importance of the promise is highlighted by three repetitions, along with its placement at critical junctures in the narrative. Key to defining Israel is that phrase ascribed to it in Gen 28:3; 35:11; and 48:4: קְהַל עַמִּים (*kahal 'amim*, an assembly of peoples) or קְהַל גּוֹיִם (*kahal goyim*, an assembly of nations).

What is Israel? The answer is not self-evident. But it is not an unanswered mystery either. Genesis, the book of beginnings, reveals the answer. It does so, not by entries in theological dictionaries or logically systematic treatises but in the form of narrative, in the stories of Genesis. These three pivotal passages are definitional for Israel, each harkening back to the covenant with Abraham, each invoking the special divine name in Genesis, *El Shaddai* (God Almighty), and each strategically placed. The first of which (28:3) occurs as Isaac sends Jacob to return to their people in Padan-Aram to obtain a wife, the last recorded words of Isaac in the Bible; the second (35:11), at Bethel, repeating and confirming the change of Jacob's name to Israel, ending the Jacob narrative in Genesis; and the last of which (48:4) among Jacob's last words and nearing the conclusion of the entire book of Genesis, recalling to Joseph the promise that Israel would be a "community of peoples." Repeating this promise thrice, at critical points, underlines its importance.

I. GEN 28:3

God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may become a company of peoples. (ESV)

Isaac blesses Jacob, immediately before Jacob encounters God at Bethel. Isaac is sending him to Aram where he will meet his wives and begin his large family. Genesis 28:1–4 contain Isaac's last recorded words, beginning the exclusively Jacob narrative. In so doing, Isaac offers a vision of what Jacob and the people who come from him should be. *El Shaddai* is invoked, who "was specifically associated with the covenant with Abraham."[15] The blessing, to be fruitful and multiply by becoming a "company of peoples," is more than an aspiration.

There are four verbs in this verse: bless, make fruitful, multiply, and be. Isaac calls on *El Shaddai* to bless. It is essentially a prayer. "Make fruitful" (פָּרָה, *parah*) is in Hiphil, imperfect "to cause to bear

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[15]Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Vol. 1, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1967), 169.

fruit" and is the same word used by God about his promise to Abraham in 17:6a, "I will make you exceedingly fruitful.…" "Multiply" (רָבָה, *rabah*) is in the same form and is used likewise in 48:4. "Be" or "become" is from the root הָיָה (*haya*), meaning "fall out, come to pass, become, be."[16] It is a different form than the other verbs and is a conjunctive (or sequential) perfect rather than the imperfects earlier. It indicates the result or goal of the previous verbs. Hence, it is by being blessed, made fruitful, and being multiplied that Israel shall become an assembly of peoples.

Isaac says that Jacob should be a "company" (קָהָל, *kahal*). A קָהָל (*kahal*) is a "community" (NIV), a congregation, an "assembly" (NKJV, CSB/HCSB); a gathering, a "company" (RSV/NRSV, NASB 1995/1997, ESV). (The KJV's, Douay-Rheims', and NASB's translation of *kahal* as "multitude" is incorrect.) It is the Hebrew equivalent of *ekklesia*.[17] "In the word *company*, from the root 'to assemble,' the Old Testament term for the church or congregation makes its first appearance, bringing with it the idea of coherence as well as multiplicity."[18] "The noun קָהָל (*kahal*) implies a multitude being assembled."[19] To the suggestion that it refers to the assembling of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel, Lee Chee-Chiew notes, "Two nations can hardly be regarded as 'a multitude of nations.'"[20] The English translation of "company" may obscure the implication of the Hebrew of an assembly; assembly suggests that they are taken from various peoples, not simply descended from one man, as in the descendants of Jacob becoming numerous.

To be assembled are "peoples" (עַמִּים, *'amim*). Note that they are plural, not merely the gathering (or regathering) of a single ethnicity that has now become numerous but, implicitly, the gathering of multiple different peoples. Is this simply a blessing that Jacob, like Abraham before, would have a multitude of literal, physical descendants or that what comes from Jacob would consist of multitudes of ethnicities assembled together? The plural of *'am* (peoples) clarifies. The word עַם (*'am*) occurs 27 times in Genesis (including in two of our passages).[21] Examining each of these

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[16]F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979, 1961), 224a.

[17]The LXX renders it as εἰς συναγωγὰς ἐθνῶν (a synagogue of nations); Jas 2:2 calls the early Christian assembly a "synagogue," translated as "assembly" in the ESV.

[18]Kidner, *Genesis*, 169.

[19]Lee Chee-Chiew, "גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11 and the Abrahamic Promise of Blessings for The Nations," *JETS* 52.3 (September 2009): 474.

[20]Ibid.

[21]It is used of people in general, singular as of all humanity being one people (Gen 11:6); of Lot and the other people, singular, of Sodom (14:16); of being "cut off" from the circumcised people, plural with a feminine singular pronominal suffix (17:14); of Sarah's descendants (plural), with kings (17:16); the people of Sodom, singular (19:4); Canaanites (4x), singular (23:7–11); Abraham's people in the afterlife, singular (25:8); Ishmael's people in the afterlife, singular (25:17); Abimelech's people, singular (26:10–11); "let peoples (עַמִּים) serve you," Isaac's (unaware) blessing of Jacob, paired with "nations," in reference to gentile peoples bowing before Jacob,

passages reveals that the plural is always used for various gentile peoples (once including Israel, in 17:16). Its use in 17:16 refers to the multiple ethnicities that will derive from Sarah; in 27:29 Isaac unknowingly blesses Jacob to "let peoples serve you," coupled with "nations"; in 49:10 the Davidic king from Judah will obtain "the obedience of peoples" (i.e., gentile ethnicities). In every instance of "peoples" (עַמִּים, 'amim) in Genesis, the reference is to multiple gentile ethnicities, not to the tribes of Israel. "Peoples" (עַמִּים, 'amim) is never used in Genesis or elsewhere, that I have found, to indicate a large assembly of literal, ethnic Israel.[22] Thus the plural in 28:3—peoples—suggests that the "peoples" are different ethnicities being gathered together to make up Jacob. Isaac's parting blessing is that Jacob be an assembly of ethnically diverse people.

II. GEN 35:11

And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body." (ESV)

In Gen 35, Jacob is again in Bethel. The Jacob narrative is framed by theophanies in Bethel ("house of God"). In Gen 35:9–15 God appears to him, repeats the renaming of Jacob as "Israel," and repeats it again for emphasis in 35:10 to signal its importance. Then God declares his own name as *El Shaddai* (God Almighty), just as Isaac called him in 28:3, and commands Israel (the man) to "be fruitful and increase in number" just as Isaac blessed him in 28:3. The "make fruitful" and "multiply you" prayer of 28:3 are here imperatives, reminiscent of God's first command to humanity, in Gen 1:28. Jacob, now Israel, is the father of a new humanity. Like the first, he is commissioned to multiply.

Then *El Shaddai* gives a similar, though not identical, promise in Isaac's final blessing: "A nation and a company of nations shall come from you." Isaac's final blessing had been "that you may become a

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plural (27:29); Jacob's people divided into two camps, singular (32:7); Esau's people, singular (33:15); the Shechemites offer to become "one people" with Jacob's family, singular (34:16, 22); Jacob's people, singular (35:6); Isaac's people in the afterlife, singular (35:29); people of Egypt, singular (41:40, 55; 42:6; 47:21, 23); Manasseh "also shall become a people," singular (48:19); of the ruler from Judah "to him shall be the obedience of the peoples," plural (49:10); "Dan shall judge his people," singular (49:16); Jacob's people in the afterlife, singular (49:29, 33); "many people should be kept alive," singular (50:20).

[22]Lee ("גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11") notes that the phrase *kahal 'am* occurs in Judg 20:2 where it is used exclusively of Israel, a gathering of all the tribes of Israel. But there, *'am* (עַם) is singular. Similarly, Ps 107:32 uses the term as a call to worship for the singular people of God. The phrase occurs with the plural "peoples" in Ezek 23:24 and 32:3 (וּבִקְהַל עַמִּים) of a collection of gentile nations attacking Israel. John Calvin takes "company of peoples" (28:3) to refer to "many tribes who shall constitute one people." While Calvin comments on the plural of sojournings (in 28:4), he does not seem to notice the plural of "peoples" or its significance (*Genesis: The Geneva Series of Commentaries* [Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992], 107).

company of peoples." The context, citing *El Shaddai* and similarities of content and words (except for עַמִּים, *'amim*) shows that this is the same promise. We find the same blessing repeated, at another crucial, definitive juncture in the life of Jacob, at the end of the Jacob narrative, thus bookending the story of Jacob with first a blessing and then a command and promise that defines Israel.[23] From beginning to end, this is what Israel is to be and will be.

In 35:9–15, Isaac's blessing has now become *El Shaddai's* command and promise. The similarities are too pronounced to separate this promise from Isaac's blessing. The differences, help focus the meaning of this blessing-cum-promise. We have already seen that the plural in Isaac's blessing (28:3) hints that Jacob was meant to be more than a man with a large family tree issuing from him but, somehow, a gathering of people from various ethnicities. What is hinted at in 28:3 is now made more overt in 35:11 by changing the word עַמִּים (*'amim*, peoples) to גּוֹיִם (*goyim*, nations).

One striking aspect of this phrase, besides its three-fold repetition and placement at pivotal junctures of the narrative, is how little attention it has received from scholars.[24] Thankfully, for the purpose of this essay, one scholar has studied 35:11: Lee Chee-Chiew in a 2009 essay "גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11 and the Abrahamic Promise of Blessings for the Nations."[25] Her excellent study allows me to build on her work here.

In her article, Lee argues that while "company of peoples" (קְהַל עַמִּים, *kahal 'amim*) may have a broader semantic range, "a company of nations" (קְהַל גּוֹיִם, *kahal goyim*) has a narrower focus.[26] "*Goy*" (גּוֹי, nation) "is distinctly political in nature."[27] That is, a *goy* has a nuance associated with kings and kingdoms, similar to the modern nation-state. *Goyim* (plural) "is consistently used in the Pentateuch to refer to nations of various ethnicity as political entities."[28] According to Lee, "company of nations" (קְהַל גּוֹיִם, *kahal goyim*) in 35:11 does not refer to the "tribes of Israel," but to "the multitude of nations" that would become Israel. In an e-mail interview, she clarified, "The wording of 35:11 is interesting: גוי וקהל גוים יהיה ממך specifically "a nation" and "a company of nations" shall be from you, i.e., a nation from his physical

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[23]Immediately after this command-blessing, Rachel dies, then there is a summary of Jacob's family and an interlude about Esau in ch. 36, then the Joseph narrative begins.

[24]Lee, "גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11," 467.

[25]Note that in the *JETS* article, her name is written as "Chee-Chiew Lee," putting her surname last, in Western style, a distortion that she, as a Singaporean, patiently bore. Properly, in Chinese culture, the surname comes first. Also, in the course of researching this article, I found that Dr. Lee attended the same church I did in Singapore in the early 1990s.

[26]Lee, "גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11," 469.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

descendants and a company of nations from his broader (nonphysical) descendants."[29]

A word study bears Lee out. Of the 16 uses of גּוֹיִם (*goyim*) in Genesis, some include Israel along with the gentile nations, but only one could possibly be used exclusively of ethnic Israelites.[30] That one, in 48:19, is Jacob declaring that Ephraim, will "become a multitude [fullness, מְלֹא] of nations." Interpreting it simply as a way of expressing Ephraim's eventual large population does not seem sufficient to explain why "nations" (גּוֹיִם, *goyim*) is used, with its political connotations. Ephraim becoming a "fullness of nations" may be foreseeing, not only Ephraim's dominance of the Northern Kingdom, but that kingdom's eventual dispersion and merger with gentile ethnicities, including the Samaritans. Victor Hamilton suggests it refers to the mixture of non-Israelites with the tribe of Ephraim; hence meaning that Ephraim will become part of and mixed with various nations (which is what eventually happened). Lee believes that the plural of *goyim* here is an intensification, meaning that Ephraim will be "thoroughly characterized" by the nations; citing E. A. Speiser, "full of the qualities that nations would entail."[31] For our purposes, the question is whether there is one use of *goyim* exclusively for Israel, such as for its tribes. The answer is no. Therefore, *goyim* is not used in Genesis for Israel as a large, multitribe nation. The changing of the "peoples" (עַמִּים, *'amim*) to "nations" (גּוֹיִם, *goyim*) narrows the meaning of who is to be assembled, further clarifying that these are not mere physical descendants being gathered together to make up Israel.

Further, the promise is that Israel was to be both "a nation and a company of nations." There are two distinct promises here. This does not appear to be a hendiadys although it is translated that way by the Christian Standard Bible (also HCSB)—"A nation, indeed an assembly of nations"—alone among major English translations. Rather it appears to be two distinct (though over-lapping) entities issuing from Israel; in lexical terms, a primary and secondary definition of Israel. First, in 28:3, Israel was to be a "gathering of peoples," here a "gathering of nations." Then, here, the secondary definition of a "nation" (גּוֹי, *goy*), is singular. Israel is promised that a nation will issue from him. The promise to be a nation is what is new in 35:11. It, along with "a company of nations shall come" from Israel the man. The verb יִהְיֶה (*yih-yeh*) means "fall out, come to pass, become, be," here meaning "shall proceed."[32] The distinction between the two promises—the nation and the company of nations—is manifest by the likewise new promise of kings descending from Israel (the man).

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[29]Lee Chee-Chiew, personal correspondence, April 14, 2020.

[30]Gen 10:5, 20, 31, 32; 17:4, 5, 6, 16; 18:18; 22:18; 25:23; 26:4; 27:29; 35:11; 48:19; 49:10.

[31]Lee, "גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11," 470.

[32]Brown, Driver, Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs,* 3570.

The second promise specifies that Israel, the man, will have kings "come from your own body" (ESV), literally מֵחֲלָצֶיךָ ("from your loins"), emphasizing the physical descent of the kings. The verb here, at the end of the sentence, is יֵצֵאוּ (*yê-ṣê-'ū*) means "go or come out."[33]

The promise of kings explicitly states that the kings will be physical descendants. Hence, the text can specifically state physical descent when that is the intent. The lack of such specificity about the company of peoples/nations then could imply that that company can be fulfilled nonphysically. The particular promise of kings, only here in 35:11, will, indeed, be fulfilled physically. The literal, ethnic nation of Israel with its monarchy is here foretold. Kidner notes that the mention of "kings" connects this promise to Abraham's in 17:6f., "while the company of nations is a prospect held out particularly to Jacob."[34] Waltke adds, "The community of Israel will consist of many nations not from the body of the patriarchs, but the king(s) over this nation will come from the patriarchs."[35] But that Israel, the man, is promised to have a nation physically derived from him is not under question. No one doubts that Genesis establishes that the nation Israel comes from the man Israel. What has been overlooked is that primarily, Israel is an assembly of nations.[36]

Lee notes that this promise, in 35:11, is, in the overall narrative of Genesis, a step in the development of the promise to Abraham in 17:4–5. There, the Lord (Yahweh) also announces his name as *El Shaddai* and promises Abraham that he will be "the father of many nations." "Many" is הֲמוֹן (*hă-mō-wn),* not the קְהַל (*kahal,* assembly) of 28:3; 35:11; and 48:4. That promise to Abraham of a vast number of descendants could conceivably be fulfilled through physical descendants of Abraham. But here Jacob's becoming a "company of nations" can only be fulfilled beyond his physical descendants.[37] The new promise to become a nation, singular, may, indeed, be fulfilled by the literal ethnicity of Israel. But the now focused and amplified promise to also be a "company of nations," is beyond mere ethnicity. Thus, even if peoples (עַמִּים, *'amim*), plural, by itself could refer to a populous Israel, "nations" (גּוֹיִם, *goyim*) cannot. Genesis 35:11, parallel with 28:3 and 48:4, shows that the blessing is not simply to be a large group of people but a gathering of different nations. Israel,

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[33]Ibid., 1068. It is translated in the ESV as if it were the same word as the previous verb, but it is not.

[34]Kidner, *Genesis,* 186.

[35]Bruce Waltke and Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2001), 474.

[36]Calvin, commenting on "a company of nations": "The language is not improperly extended to the Gentiles who, having been before dispersed, are collected into one congregation by the bond of faith; and although they were not born of Jacob according to the flesh, yet because faith was to them the commencement of a new birth, and the covenant of salvation, which is the seed of spiritual birth, his sons, according to the declaration, 'I have constituted thee a father of many nations'" (*Genesis,* 241).

[37]Lee, "גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11," 474.

the people of God, will be this assembly.[38] So, Israel is, here in Gen 35:11, "defined," Lee says, as a two-fold "nation and a company of nations."[39]

III. GEN 48:4

Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.

The third reiteration of the definition of Israel in Genesis, appears at the outset of a series of sayings, effectively prophecies, from Israel, the man, that serve as the conclusion to Genesis. The first two definitions framed the Jacob narrative; the last appears as a reminder, before the conclusion of Genesis, of this important promise. It is, as such, "a structural marker," signaling, as before, a critical juncture in the narrative; in this case, the climax.[40] That this particular phrase, the blessing-promise to Israel, the man, is chosen as the marker, is a testament to how important this is in Genesis. Genesis is not to be ended before we are reminded of it once more.

Jacob is on his deathbed. He has been, since ch. 35, a background character, an indulgent and then pathetic and grief-stricken father to Joseph, who is now reunited with his most beloved son. He is called "Israel" (48:2). He summons his last ounce of strength to bless and describe his sons and grandsons. First, he describes himself by recounting that blessing that became a promise. As before, God is identified as *El Shaddai*. Then he says that this revelation occurred at "Luz," what became Bethel. Hence, he is referencing the 35:11 promise from God, not the 28:3 blessing from his father. Nevertheless, now the command in 35:11 to "be fruitful and multiply" is turned into a divine promise, with *El Shaddai* declaring, according to Israel, that God himself will make Israel fruitful and multiplied. The definition of Israel has evolved from a blessing to, now, a divine promise.

As in 28:3, the verbs are "make fruitful" and "multiply," echoing the Abrahamic promise. But unlike in the previous two versions, this time God says that he will "make" (ESV, NIV, etc.), rather than "to be" (הָיָה, *haya*) of 28:3 or "come from" (יִהְיֶה, *yih-yeh*) of 35:11. The root Hebrew verb is "*nathan*" (נָתַן), meaning "give, put, set," but with the accusative, as here, it is translated as "to make you into," or "make of you."[41] It appears twice in this sentence: the second time as "I will give." As with הָיָה (*haya*) in 28:3, it is a conjunctive (or sequential) perfect, meaning that the "community of peoples" that

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[38]Ibid., 482.

[39]Ibid., 480.

[40]Sam Bray, "Translating Genesis: Repetition," *The Washington Post*, 17/07/2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/07/17/ translating /translating-genesis-repetition/.

[41]Brown, Driver, Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs,* 5414, p. 681a.

he is to be made into is a result of being made fruitful and multiplied.

Then, interweaving his father's blessing of 28:3 with the divine promise of 35:11, he says the promise is that God will make him a "company of peoples" (עַמִּים קְהַל, *kahal 'amim*).[42] To show the unified identity of the 28:3 blessing and the 35:11 promise, Israel ascribes the wording of 28:3 ("peoples") to the promise of 35:11 ("nations"). These are a single promise. The two previous blessings-promises (28:3 and 35:11) have been intentionally conflated. That conflation serves the purpose of concluding Genesis with a recapitulation of that defining phrase.

Lee notes, "In terms of the overlap of meaning, 28:3 and 48:4 leans towards a collection of peoples of different ethnicities. In terms of their slightly different nuance, עמים ['*amim*, peoples] more likely connotes people groups, and גוים [*gouim*, nations] political entities."[43] By ascribing the עַמִּים ['*amim*, peoples] of 28:3 to the context of 35:11, the phrase in 48:8 shows that the exact meaning is in the overlap of the two terms, different ethnicities from different nation-states. Hence Israel was to be, primarily, an assembly of ethnicities from all kinds of other nations, not a single ethnicity.[44] So we end Genesis knowing that the "community of peoples/nations" that will make up Israel is not simply "the progeny of Jacob."

Finally, Israel adds, here, only in 48:4, the promise of the land, first given to Abraham in 15:18–21 and given to Jacob at his first encounter with God at Luz, in 28:13. Whether this is an old man's conflating of two different incidents, both at Luz—one on his flight to Padan-Aram, when he sees the famous staircase to heaven (28:10–19), and the other in ch. 35—is beside the point. At the first vision in Luz, he was promised land. In the second, in 35:11, he was promised kings, along with being both a nation and a gathering of nations. Together, that means Israel will have a king and a realm. Hence the literal (singular) nation promised in 35:11 will receive the literal land, a promise fulfilled in the OT.[45] Since the land will be "an everlasting possession," those who argue that ethnic Israel still gets a special, divine right to the land of Israel can legitimately appeal to this promise.[46] The land can also be a type of the place where God

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[42]The letter prefixed to *kahal*, לְ, is a preposition meaning to; for; of (indicating possession).

[43]Lee Chee-Chiew, personal correspondence, April 14, 2020.

[44]Calvin noted, for "company of peoples," in 48:4, that it is first literal, in reference to "thirteen tribes" which "were, in a sense" so many nations," but functions as a type of the church, "a prelude to that greatness which should afterwards follow" (*Genesis*, 423).

[45]These passages state that Israel was given the land promised in Genesis: Josh 21:43–45; 23:14–15; 1 Kgs 4:21; 8:56; 2 Chron 9:26; Jer 11:4–5; and Neh 9:8.

[46]For example, Bruce Ware, argues that the promise that "God will *yet* restore Israel to its land" proves that Israel is "distinguishable" from the church, even if united by faith, thus making for "people(s) of God" ("The New Covenant and the People(s) of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 97; emphasis original).

dwells, as in Graeme Goldsworthy's hermeneutic, the realm of God's rule, now fulfilled by the church.[47] Finally, these two interpretations of the land promise are not mutually exclusive. A nation can receive the land and a "community of nations" can receive what the land signifies.

IV. ISRAEL AS A COMMUNITY OF NATIONS PLAYED OUT IN THE OT

Is this interpretation of the definition of Israel in Genesis borne out in the remainder of the OT? The other defining moment for the identity of Israel is at the Exodus. There we find that "a mixed multitude also went up with" Israel (Exod 12:38a).

"Mixed multitude" (עֵרֶב רַב, *'ê-reb rab*) refers to "a great mixture of nationalities."[48] Shaul Bar notes that some, like Martin Noth, believe that they were other slaves in Egypt who took the opportunity to ally with Israel as they were freed.[49] Because the verb "went up" (עָלָה, *'ā-lāh*) is singular, some infer that it refers to one kind of people, like Egyptian slaves or mercenaries who chose to throw in their lot with Israel at the Exodus. Or "the mixed multitude" may refer to mixed marriages and their offspring such as found in Lev 24:10. There we find an "Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian." Philo (c. 20 BC–c. 50 AD) claims that the mixed multitude contained "those who had been born to Hebrew fathers by Egyptian women, and who were enrolled as members of their father's race."[50] For evidence of widespread intermarriage of ethnic Israelites with others we need look no further than Moses himself who first married a "Midianite," bringing his Midianite father-in-law, Jethro (also known as Reuel and Hobab) to be a key advisor for the organization of Israel (Exod 2:18; 3:1; 18:13–27; Num 10:29); later he married a "Cushite" (Num 12). Bar concludes that the "mixed multitude" were specifically mercenaries who had married Israelite women.[51] Most likely, however, the "mixed multitude" is, as "mixed" (עֵרֶב, *'ê-reb*) implies, all of the above.[52] "The mixed multitude" could simply be a composite of all kinds of different peoples seen singularly, a collective noun encompassing a wide variety of people. Philo describes them as, "a mixed multitude of

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[47]Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom, A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981).

[48]Shaul Bar, "Who Were The "'Mixed Multitude?,'" *HS* 49 (2008): 28.

[49]Ibid., 27.

[50]Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, 1.147.

[51]Bar, "Who Were The 'Mixed Multitude?,'" 38.

[52]Brown, Driver, Briggs (*The New Brown-Driver-Briggs*): עֵרֶב noun, masculine, mixture, mixed company; heterogeneous body attached to a people; to Israel, Exod 12:38 (E), Neh 13:3; to Egyptians, Jer 25:20; to Chaldeans, Jer 50:37; in Jer 25:24 strike out הָעֵרֶב וְאֵת as doublet; in 1 Kgs 10:15 read עֵרֶב (2 Chron 9:14, so Benz Kit and others); Ezek 30:5.

promiscuous persons collected from all quarters."[53] That is, they were a mixed blend of people resident in Egypt who chose to join Israel at the Exodus. Midrash Rabbah, commenting on Exod 18:10, reports,

> God made a joyous occasion for Israel, since He redeemed them—God said, "Anyone who loves My son should come and rejoice with My son." The proper ones of Egypt came and made a Pesach sacrifice with the Jews and went out with them, as it is stated (Exodus 12:38), "And also a mixed multitude went out with them."[54]

The word "multitude" (רַב, *rab*) tells us that they were many so that the group who left Egypt were a composite of ethnic Israelites and others out of all kinds of ethnicities, *e pluribus unum*.

The ethnically heterogenous composite group fleeing Egypt under the name "Israel." is then the nation called, in Exod 19:5–6. a "special treasure above all peoples" (עַמִּים, *'amim*), a holy nation (גּוֹי, *goy*). Here we encounter two of our key words again, recalling the defining promises to Israel in Genesis at the heart of the Exodus. Israel is to be distinct among the peoples (the ethnicities of earth) and a holy nation, even though it is made up of people from all kinds of other nations. This description of Israel is repeated in Deut 7:6, without the "kingdom of priests" in Exod 19:6, and is ascribed, in full, to the church in 1 Pet 2:9. The supersessionist would say that the church, superseding the old, ethnic people of God, took over the defining characteristics of Israel; the continuumist says that Israel from its inception was the church.

When Israel passes into the Promised Land, the first person met is Rahab (Josh 2:1), a Canaanite native of Jericho. Despite all the strenuous insistence on the utter extermination of all Canaanites in Deuteronomy's instructions for the holy war (חרם, *herem*) against Canaan, Rahab is accepted with implicit divine affirmation.[55] She becomes an Israelite, apparently marrying Salmon and becoming the mother (or ancestor) of Boaz (Matt 1:5).

Boaz, of course, marries Ruth, the Moabite, who thus likewise joins Israel. Both Ruth and Rahab become Israelites because of their faith in the Lord. Both are ancestors of David and Christ. Meanwhile, during the conquest, this composite people, already consisting of a "mixed multitude" and Rahab are forced to accept the Gibeonites. At first the Gibeonites were mere "hewers of wood and drawers of water" (Josh 9:21) but they were eventually assimilated as fully part of Israel. One of David's elite thirty troops was "Ishmaiah from Gibeon" (1 Chron 12:4).

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[53]Philo, *On the Life of Moses*, 1.147.
[54]Shemot Rabbah 18, https://www.sefaria.org/Shemot_Rabbah.18.10?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.
[55]Deut 7:1–4; 20:16–18.

Chronicles, the last book of the Hebrew canon, is the final defining book on the identity of Israel. Its opening nine chapters of genealogies exists to define who is in Israel. There Gibeon is matter-of-factly listed in the census of returning exiles as a town from the tribe of Benjamin (1 Chron 6:60.) Further, in Chronicles the ideal Israel is that which is headed by the Davidic king and worships at the temple in Zion. That the Northern Kingdom's history is not told in Chronicles suggests that although it can be called "Israel," it lacks the defining characteristics of the Israel of God. Certainly, a nation that goes by the name "Israel" rebels against the house of David (2 Chron 10:19) but even while the Northern Kingdom still stands, "Israel" can be used of Judah. For example, after juxtaposing King Jehoshaphat of Judah with Ahab "king of Israel" in 2 Chron 18, 2 Chron 21:2, speaks of "Jehoshaphat king of Israel."[56] Ahaz, technically a king of Judah, is also called "king of Israel," even while the Northern Kingdom stands (2 Chron 28:19). "Israel," in Chronicles, has various nuances, standing simultaneously for the faithful Israel headed by the Davidic King, the rebellious one in the north, and the collection of the faithful remnant from all tribes.[57] H. G. M. Williamson has shown that the issue is more complex than simply that Judah is the true Israel and the Northern Kingdom is the false one. He concludes that the word "Israel" is "used in a wide variety of ways."[58] In Ezra-Nehemiah,

> True Israel is made up alone by those of Judah and Benjamin who had returned from the exile in Babylon, together with "every one who had joined them and separated himself from the pollutions of the peoples of the land."[59]

Not even in the OT can we insist that "Israel means Israel," that it has only one definition, contrary to the claim that "[t]here are over 2,000 references to Israel in Scripture, not one of them means anything but Israel."[60]

Finally, in the prophets comes the idea of the "remnant." With it,

> a distinction begins to be drawn between physical Israel and the true Israel…. One day, there will emerge a true Israel, disciplined to obedience to God's will, fit to be the instrument of His purpose. It is

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[56]Jehoshaphat's annals are recorded in the "Book of the Kings of Israel" (2 Chron 20:34) as are Manasseh's (33:18), though both were only kings of Judah.

[57]In 2 Chron 15:1–9, a prophet named Azariah addresses "Judah and Benjamin" and calls them "Israel" (15:2); then 15:9 says that "great numbers of people from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon—'from Israel'—had joined them. Chronicles uses "Israel," sometimes, to refer to the faithful from the North and Judah: 2 Chron 24:5; 31:1 ("all Israel" used of the faithful remnant); 31:8.

[58]H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 88n3.

[59]Ibid., 87.

[60]John MacArthur, "Why Every Self-Respecting Calvinist Is a Premillennialist," Shepherd's Conference at Grace Community Church, March 7, 2007.

an Israel, not of birth, but of individual choice for the calling of God. Over this true Israel, and over it alone, will God rule—for these are the people of His kingdom."[61]

For example, in Isa 56:3–7, foreigners who join the Lord are commanded not to regard themselves as separated from the Lord's people and are invited to join equally in prayer and worship at his temple. Similarly, Zech 2:15 says, "many nations [גוים, *goyim*] shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people." His people will be an assembly of nations.

Meanwhile, as for the literal ethnic group of Israelites who followed other gods, particularly the northern ten tribes, Hos 1:9f. says that they are "Not My People" (לֹא עַמִּי, *Lo-ammi*)—the negation of the people promised in Genesis. Hence, most of the northern ten tribes were taken into exile where they were eventually assimilated into gentile nations. Of course, in the same context, Hosea speaks of those who will be God's people, on whom God will have mercy. In Hos 1:9ff., one Israel is not God's people and another is. Paul, in Rom 9:24, referring to Hos 1, says God has prepared those "vessels of mercy" who are God's people and called them not only from the Jews, "but also from the Gentiles." These composite people fulfill God's promise that "Those who were not my people"—not the "progeny of Jacob"—"I will call my people," according to Paul's exegesis of Hosea. In other words, Paul is saying that Hosea shows that believing gentiles joined to believing Jews form God's "my people." Peter similarly understands Hos 1. In 1 Pet 2:10, having addressed the church as the "holy nation," echoing Exod 19:5–6, Peter takes the Hosea promise, "you were not a people, but now you are God's people" and ascribes it to the ethnically mixed church. Both Paul and Peter argue from Hos 1:10 that the church is God's "my people" which has "received mercy." The supersessionist way of reading Hos 1:10 is to see it as foretelling the day when the church replaces Israel. But that assumes that the Israel called "Not My People" was originally God's people. That assumption is the issue.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPERSESSIONISM AND DISPENSATIONALISM

The thrice-repeated description of Israel as a gathering of peoples and nations has, so far, been an undervalued and rarely studied definition of Israel. I came upon it in the course of my pastoral duties of preaching through Genesis. Anecdotally, I have no recollection of this "company of peoples/nations" definition of Israel in my research, including in my own teaching an OT Survey on the college level. Lee notes seven prominent commentaries that fail to elaborate on the promise that Israel will be "a company of nations":

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[61]John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 94. For example, Isa 10:20–22; 37:30–32.
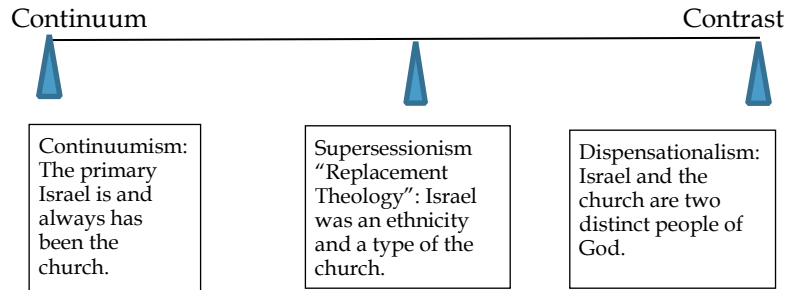
Brueggemann, Gunkel, Sarna, Skinner, Speiser, von Rad, and Westermann.[62] The commentaries I have read had little to say on it.[63] But it appears that the theological definition of Israel grounded in Genesis and affirmed in the remainder of the OT shows us that the fundamental assumption of supersessionism is wrong. Israel was not, primarily, an ethnic people. Sure, there is an ethnic "nation" that goes by that name. But the Israel that is the overwhelming concern of Scripture is the one assembled from all kinds of peoples and nations.

We see then that there is a continuum from the inception of Israel in Genesis to the church. The church did not replace Israel because Israel was always, already, the church. Our language obscures this reality. If we all spoke Hebrew and attended First Baptist or Presbyterian or Grace Community *Kahal;* or, alternatively, if the OT was originally written in English and three times Jacob was told he was to be "a church of ethnicities," then suddenly the debate whether there is more contrast or more continuum between the *kahal* (or church) in the OT and the *kahal* (church) of the Lord today, would be tilted toward continuum. Supersessionism, then, might have been the contrasting position. Instead, supersessionism has been the position most emphasizing a continuum between Israel and the church, challenged over the last century by the stark contrast of Israel versus the church presented by dispensationalism.[64] The debate is now so skewed toward this contrast that a book on views of Israel and the church does not offer even one consistently supersessionist approach. But the neglected definition of Israel from those three pivotal passages in Genesis balances that. We see then that a case can be made for a thoroughgoing continuum between the "company of peoples" begun in Genesis and the one that Jesus said he is building.

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[62]Lee, "גּוֹיִם in Genesis 35:11," 467.

[63]For example, I consulted Joyce G. Baldwin, *The Message of Genesis: The Bible Speaks Today* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986) and found no comment on it. While Derek Kidner (*Genesis*) makes the comments noted above, he skips 48:4. Calvin (*Genesis*) had the most to say, interpreting the Genesis passages supersessionally.

[64]For example, Craig Blaising essentially affirms Charles Ryrie's insistence that "the essence of dispensationalism … is the distinction between Israel and the Church," even if he suggests that this is "too narrow" to define dispensationalism with ("Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 23, 33).

Continuum   Contrast

Continuumism: The primary Israel is and always has been the church.	Supersessionism "Replacement Theology": Israel was an ethnicity and a type of the church.	Dispensationalism: Israel and the church are two distinct people of God.

Supersessionists will need to rework some of their interpretation of the OT. But, in truth, the impact of this on supersessionism is academic. If convinced that the argument here is right, supersessionists will only need to admit to being wrong about the church replacing (or fulfilling) Israel and still hold that the church now inherits the promises to Israel. The church continues to be "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16) now because it always was. It did not replace Israel. It always was Israel. This explains why supersessionists can mount relatively strong arguments for the NT applying OT terms for Israel, like "holy nation," to the church but can only muster relatively weak arguments showing that those terms have been transferred (mainly the parable of the tenants in Matt 21:33–43). But if Israel was always the church, nothing need be transferred. Hence, the supersessionist no longer needs to read Israel as a type of the church in the OT but simply as the church. So, what we find in the OT is a history of the church and like that history after Christ, it sometimes is the story of a visible church soiled with hypocrites, apostates, false prophets, and exiles. Since supersessionists have already been using OT Israel as a type of the church, the practical change to their exegesis is slight.

However, the implications for dispensationalism are profound. Dispensationalism accepts the supersessionist premise that ethnic Israel was the prima facie "literal" definition of Israel.[65] From that premise, supersessionism then says the church supersedes Israel. Dispensationalism refuses to follow, insisting on a "literal" hermeneutic and citing a lack of a clear statement in the NT about the position of Israel being superseded by the church. Dispensationalism is the logical product of supersessionism as it takes supersessionism's basic assumptions about the OT Israel and then asserts that that has never changed. It claims that there has been no replacement and at most, depending on the dispensationalist, only a cofulfillment of only some of the OT promises to Israel by the church. Thus, in dispensationalism the church is something new and

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[65]For example, the supersessionist definition of Israel in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, could just as well be dispensational when it says, "It is no longer enough to belong to the 'Israel according to the flesh,' thus implying that previously it was enough" (Grelot, "Israel," 259).

distinct from ethnic Israel. This dispensational challenge puts supersessionism in the weak position of, first, granting an ethnic definition of Israel and then having to prove that that definition was changed and spiritualized with the new covenant. But if Israel was always the church, then the dispensational charge that "there is a taking away or transferring of what national Israel was promised to another group" is over-turned.[66] Believers in Christ are now "children of Abraham" (Gal 3:7) and Israel's titles of "chosen people" and "holy nation" are ascribed to the church (1 Pet 2:9), not because it has superseded ethnic Israel who forfeited those titles but because those were always its titles. The one tree into which believing gentiles are grafted in (Rom 11:27–24) is the true Israel ("the assembly of peoples") into which ethnic Israel ("a nation") may be grafted in again if they believe.

Admittedly my proposition here has profound implications for the way many NT themes have been understood, like Jesus's promise to build "my church" and his role as the cornerstone of the church. I do not think those problems are insurmountable or even more intractable than the problems with the alternatives—especially with dispensationalism—that we have grown inured to. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore them all. Here, we have just done the exegetical work from Genesis and checked it briefly against the rest of the OT. We have seen here that, beginning with the inception of Israel, supersessionism's presupposition of the ethnic identity of Israel, presupposed by dispensationalism, never should have passed unexamined; that a strong case can be made, exegetically, for the other end of the spectrum from dispensationalism, that first Israel is, and always was, the church.

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[66]Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 10.