

Christianity & Culture

Evangelical Theology in Post-Christian Britain Conference,
Alfreton, Derbyshire, Saturday September 25–26, 2015

Anti-Semitism, Modern Israel and the Evangelical Church

Thomas Fretwell

KEY WORDS

| Anti-Semitism | Israel | Theology | Evangelical | Romans | Gentiles |

ABSTRACT

Anti-Semitic sentiment has been increasing in Europe at an alarming rate. The continued crisis in the Middle East has produced a huge spike in anti-Semitic incidents across the globe. Often these incidents are justified under the guise of anti-Zionism. A segment of the evangelical Church has unfortunately been caught up in this movement. The Church needs to speak with a clear voice when it enters into the conversation. The Church must take into consideration not only the political and ethical aspects but chiefly the theological aspect of the controversy. The subject of Israel must be treated as a larger theme of Biblical Theology. This paper will endeavour to construct a brief theology of Israel based upon Romans 11:25-29.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion that often surrounds such emotionally charged topics can be both passionate and complex. The debate has at many times taken on an unfortunate and overly pejorative tone as those from different viewpoints argue for their respective positions. Both in the political and theological arenas there exists a multitude of polarising opinions and theologies that make it difficult to gain a clear perspective. The debate draws its content from many different sources; history, theology, ethics and politics. This serves to render it immune to quick simple answers and dogmatic pronouncements. In reality, any attempt to simplify the topic runs the risk of mischaracterising viewpoints and offering reductionist narratives. From within the evangelical tradition the relationship between Israel and the Church and the subject of anti-Semitism is still one of huge importance and

interest. These concerns have been exacerbated by the litany of news reports that document the ever prevalent existence of anti-Semitism. In 2014 the level of anti-Semitic attacks in the UK was at the highest level ever recorded. The Community Security Trust, a Jewish Charity which runs an incident hotline reported 1168 anti-Semitic incidents against Britain's Jews.¹ British Jews have expressed that they sense an increasing atmosphere of foreboding and many fear they no longer have a future in Britain. Following the latest outbreak of the conflict in Israel-Gaza anti-Semitic sentiment has increased and resulted in the highest number of anti-Semitic attacks on UK soil since records began. Sadly for many this response is seen as a legitimate form of "justice" for the Jews as they have supposedly inflicted much suffering on

¹ *Anti-Semitic Incidents Report 2014*, The Community Security Trust, p. 11. Last accessed 02/11/16
<https://cst.org.uk/docs/Incidents%20Report%202014.pdf>.

the innocent Palestinians. For most, the zealous anti-Israel sentiment is not associated with anti-Semitism; however it is now becoming obvious that the Israeli-Jewish conflation is the most popular form of anti-Semitism. Reporter Emma Barnett, writing for the Telegraph comments that:

A new working definition of anti-Semitism, by the European Union Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), now includes “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis”, and “holding Jews collectively responsible for actions of the state of Israel”. (It does, incidentally also state that “criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic.”²

In addition to this we witnessed the spectacle of an elected Member of Parliament declaring his constituency to be an “Israel-free Zone”, he further commented that:

We don't want any Israeli goods; we don't want any Israeli services; we don't want any Israeli academics coming to the university or the college. We don't even want any Israeli tourists to come to Bradford even if any of them had thought of doing so. We reject this illegal, barbarous, savage state that calls itself Israel - and you have to do the same.

Such inflammatory language should have no place in British politics but unfortunately it is fast becoming normative. In spite of all this the UK branch of the human rights organization Amnesty International still voted not to support a campaign against anti-Semitism in the UK. On April 19, AIUK held its 2015

2 Emma Barnett, 'Somewhere Between the Holocaust and 2015 it Became OK to Blame Jews Again,' *Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 2015. Last accessed 13/02/16. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11345643/Paris-shootings-anti-Semitism-Its-OK-to-blame-Jews-again.html>.

Annual General Meeting, and adopted 16 of 17 motions. The only proposed resolution that was rejected called on AIUK to “Campaign against anti-Semitism in the UK,” as well as to “Lobby the UK Government to tackle the rise in anti-Semitic attacks in Britain” and “monitor anti-Semitism closely.”³

Unfortunately the global scene fairs no better – In France we witnessed the shooting of four Jewish shoppers at a Jewish Kosher supermarket in Paris which led to a national manhunt and increased security being deployed at Jewish schools and Synagogues around the country. In Israel the population are currently witnessing “a new kind of terrorism” as young Palestinians with kitchen knives embark on a ruthless campaign of murder which Israel attributes to recent Palestinian Authority incitement. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has reported that since September 2015 there have been 174 stabbings, 70 shootings, and 38 vehicular attacks.⁴ These events are coupled with the growing presence of Islamic anti-Semitism across the Middle East as it is shaken by the atrocities of ISIS who continue to militantly expand their territory across the region.

This list could really go on ad infinitum, but even as it is it is enough to understand the increasing sense of unrest felt by Jews around the world. Those within the church are wondering what to make of all this. Historically the evangelical tradition has been very supportive of Israel and stood firmly against anti-Semitism,

3 ‘NGO Monitor. Statement on Amnesty International UK's Rejection of a Resolution to Campaign against Anti-Semitism, April 21 2015.’ Last accessed 02/01/16: http://www.ngo-monitor.org/article/statement_on_amnesty_international_uk_s_rejection_of_a_resolution_to_campaign_against_antisemitism

4 IMFA. *Wave of Terror* 2015/2016, 10 Feb 2016. Last Accessed 13/02/16: <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Terrorism/Palestinian/Pages/Wave-of-terror-October-2015.aspx>

although in recent years the resurgence of supersessionism and pro-Palestinian liberation theology has eroded much of this support. Many now lack the proper tools to correctly navigate the situation with confidence seeing it simply through the lens of the modern Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However this is a single facet approach to a multi-faceted problem. Such blatant outward expressions of anti-Semitism have really meant that lines of demarcation are being drawn, not only among opposing political ideologies, but also and most importantly for us, among the church as well.

The Year 2015 witnessed the passing of the world's foremost authority on anti-Semitism, Professor Robert Wistrich. He served as head of the Vidal Sassoon International Centre for Anti-Semitism at the Hebrew University. He was a hugely sought-after speaker and author, effective in countering the ever increasing scourge of anti-Semitism.

The cover synopsis for his seminal 1992 publication: *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred* reads as follows:

No other prejudice has displayed such intensity and historic continuity, nor resulted in such devastating consequences, as anti-Semitism.⁵

Professor Wistrich's death comes at a time when his message is most needed. He knew and warned that global anti-Semitism was on the rise inflamed in the West by a leftist Pro-Palestinian ideology and in the East by an ever increasing radical Islamic anti-Semitism.

The question is where is the voice of the Church in all this? Admittedly, the topic is complex and requires examination from both political and ethical vantages. However, the concern for Christians is to ensure that the

5 Robert S. Wistrich, *Anti-Semitism: The Longest Hatred*. Methuen Publishing Ltd, 1992.

issue is given adequate theological treatment before engaging with the subject on other levels. In order to achieve this, the church needs to ensure that biblically, the subject of Israel is not used only as a way to adjudicate between the different viewpoints concerning the Modern State of Israel – but rather that the entire subject of the house of Israel is seen for what it is in the biblical corpus – perhaps the largest meta-narrative in all of scripture. The subject of Israel needs to be treated as a Biblical Theology theme.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF ISRAEL FROM ROMANS 11:25-29.

This text is the final portion of a much larger corpus in Romans 9-11 that expounds upon the subject of God's dealings with Israel in light of God's larger salvation-historical drama. While time does not allow for a complete contextual survey of this passage we will draw a number of observations from the text that relate to the title of this paper.

1. The Gentile Church is Prone Towards Ignorance and Arrogance regarding the Issue of Israel.

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation

—ROMANS 11:25 (A)

Paul cautions the Roman church to ensure that they are not “uninformed” of the biblical teaching concerning Israel in order that they are not “wise in their own estimation”. In other words the Church must be careful not to display an attitude of ignorance concerning Israel's current position of blindness and not to allow this position to produce in them an attitude of superiority or arrogance. Unfortunately the

ugly mixture of ignorance and arrogance is an apt description of the church's attitude for much of its history, indicating that Paul's warning has gone largely unheeded. The doctrine of supersessionism, more commonly known as replacement theology, has been the majority view throughout the history of the church. This is the term given to the view that the Church has replaced Israel in the future plan of God. In this view the covenantal promises regarding Israel's future have now been transferred to the Church, which has become the new 'spiritual Israel'. Walter Kaiser Jr., defines it this way;

[R]eplacement theology declared that the Church, Abraham's spiritual seed, had replaced national Israel in that it had transcended and fulfilled the terms of the covenant given to Israel, which covenant Israel has lost because of disobedience.⁶

Supersessionism quickly became the dominant viewpoint in the Post-Apostolic Church. As the influence of supersessionism grew, it brought with it a shameful legacy of Christian anti-Semitism that persisted, and some would say culminated, in the terrible events of the twentieth century. It has been said that one can trace the abuses of anti-Semitism from Augustine to Auschwitz. Indeed, as Prager and Telushkin note, "Christianity did not create the Holocaust...but it made it possible. Without Christian anti-Semitism, the Holocaust would have been inconceivable."⁷ They continue that for, "nearly two thousand years...the Christian world dehumanized the Jew, ultimately helping lay the groundwork for the Holocaust."

Much of the external imagery that is

associated with traditional anti-Semitic calumnies tragically owe their origin not to the Third Reich or the Mufti's, but to the church. The ghetto, yellow stars and identification badges, pointy hats, segregation, banishments, job restrictions and synagogue burnings were mainly European Christian initiatives. It was the German church that opened up the genealogical records to the Nazis. Of course not everyone who holds to a supersessionist viewpoint will be anti-Semitic, yet at the same time, as Vlach concludes, "it is undeniable that anti-Jewish bias has often gone hand in hand with the supersessionist view."⁸ Although Post-Holocaust theology made efforts to redress this imbalance, recently there has been a resurgence of supersessionism in the evangelical church. This resurgence has been inflamed by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the support of left-leaning progressives who advocate imposing a social justice narrative onto the scriptures. This type of narrative portrays the Palestinians as helpless underdogs trying to resist the indomitable might of their imperialist overlords – Israel! This movement is known as "The New Supersessionism" and it fuses together traditional supersessionist doctrines with Palestinian nationalism and quasi-Marxist liberation theology. This movement is unapologetically anti-Zionist in its politics. However it is here that the problem arises as the line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism has been pushed to the limits in contemporary discourse, to the point that in many cases the two are one and the same. Israel is now seen as the collective Jew and can be hated all the same. Listen to the words of Robert Wistrich again:

You have the denial, for instance, that there is any relationship between so-called

6 Kaiser, W.C. Jr. "An assessment of Replacement Theology: The Relationship between the Israel of the Abrahamic covenant and the Christian Church". *Mishkan* 21 (1994)

7 Prager, Dennis; Telushkin, Joseph. *Why the Jews: The Reason for Anti-Semitism*. New York: Touchstone. 2003

8 Vlach, Michael J. *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* Nashville: B&H Publishing. 2010.

criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism, but, in fact, most of what goes by the name of criticism of Israel is feeding on a daily basis the growing demonization of the Jewish state, which in turn spills over, I would say, almost with mathematical inevitability into some form of dislike, hostility, or even loathing of Jews.⁹

Such sentiments are often greeted with immediate aversion by those involved with the anti-Zionist cause. Yet the realities of Wistrich's words can be visually illustrated by events this past year in the UK. After the recent conflict in Gaza thousands took to the streets of London to protest against Israel and in support of the Palestinians. The level of emotion was intense and the hatred against Israel was palpable. Yet the question remained: were the crowds there because they hate Israel or because they care for the welfare of the Palestinians? The evidence leans toward the former. For if this outburst was motivated solely by concern for the Palestinians these people would also be protesting against the continually corrupt leadership of the Palestinians who have stolen aid money from the people, or the government sponsored media that indoctrinates children to hate and kill! One surely would have expected a small crowd to gather when thousands of Palestinians were slaughtered by the Islamic State in Syria, especially as ISIS was besieging official UNWRA maintained Palestinian refugee camps such as the one in Yarmouk on the outskirts of Damascus.¹⁰ Strangely the silence was deafening! No protest, no marches

9 Sam Sokol, 'Robert Wistrich, Leading Scholar of Anti-Semitism Dies of Heart Attack,' *Jerusalem Post*, 21/05/15 accessed on 22/09/15.

<http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Robert-Wistrich-leading-scholar-of-anti-Semitism-dies-of-heart-attack-403590>.

10 Ara News Agency, 'At Least 3000 Palestinians Killed in Syria Conflict,' October 20th 2015. Last accessed 02/13/2016:

<http://aranews.net/2015/10/at-least-3000-palestinians-killed-in-syria-conflict/>.

in front of Parliament, nothing! Would this have been the case if Israel stormed a refugee camp? Unless Israel is able to be portrayed as the aggressor the international outcry seems to dissipate. Yet can genuine concern be displayed only when the "correct" perpetrator is indicted?

The line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism is dangerously blurred. Evangelical theology should make sure that it is able to stand against any form of anti-Semitism whether it is directed at individual Jews or collectively against Israel. This does not mean that we have to support the nation Israel in a nationalistic sense or even agree with Israeli policy, but it does mean that our theology is not guilty of predisposing us towards a political ideology that practically crosses the line into anti-Semitism.

2. The Hardening of Israel is Partial and Temporary.

That a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

—ROMANS 11:25 (B)

This next clause is a theologically rich and important statement by the apostle Paul. The annals of church history will show that gentile Christendom has often reacted against charges of anti-Jewish bias by pointing out that the Jewish people rejected Christ and are presently unbelievers. Paul here seems to pre-empt this arrogant response by explaining the reason for Israel's present obduracy. These final verses of Romans 11 stand as a book end to the whole argument crafted throughout Romans 9-11. Here we see the explanation for the juxtaposition of Israel's present hostility towards God (9:1-3) and the expression of God's irrevocable promises to Israel (11:28). The resolution of this conflict is to be found in properly understanding the "mystery" which Paul writes

about. Moo comments that the term mystery is derived from Jewish apocalyptic writings and “usually refers to an event of the end times that has already been determined by God-and so, in that sense, exists already in heaven, - but which is first revealed to the apocalyptic seer for the comfort and encouragement of the people of Israel.”¹¹

Paul had previously explained the reason for God allowing Israel to stumble (11:1-15) and here reaffirms his interpretation of Israel’s current position as the result of divine hardening. He emphasises that the current hardening is only “partial” and there remains a faithful remnant of believers within the nation, Paul himself being one of them. This remnant is evidence of God’s continued faithfulness to Israel which proves the nation has not been rejected (11:5). However the real content of the mystery is not just that a believing remnant in the nation would remain as this concept is found in the Old Testament. Neither is the mystery the fact that Israel would one day experience a national revival beyond the locus of a small remnant, as this too is clearly taught in the Old Testament. Moo comments regarding the mystery by noting that the novel aspect was:

[T]he idea that the inauguration of the eschatological age would involve setting aside the majority of Jews while Gentiles streamed in to enjoy the blessings of salvation and that only when the stream, had been exhausted would Israel as a whole experience these blessings.”¹²

This period within the larger context of salvation history is set to continue “*until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in*”. The word “until” in this context definitely indicates a temporal cessation

11 Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids. Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1996, p. 715.

12 *Ibid* p. 717.

of one situation and the commencement of another. The term is reminiscent of the words of Jesus to the people of Israel when He said:

For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!’”
—MATT 23:39

Paul is saying that this present position of hardening will exist until the full number of gentiles has been reached. The “fullness of the gentiles” is this present age when God is “taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name (Acts 15:14)”. The phrase is closely related to the expression “times of the Gentiles” which is used in Luke 21:24. The former seems to have a numerical focus whilst the latter is chronologically focused. The termination of the times of the gentiles would seem to be when Jesus returns (cf. Acts 15:14-16, Luke 21:24-27) thus indicating that the “fullness” of the gentiles in a quantitative sense will coincide with the end of the “times of the gentiles” when Jesus returns. Paul’s brief sketch of salvation history then includes unbelieving Israel in the present age and this must factor into any biblical theology concerning Israel.

3. Israel will experience National Regeneration.

²⁶ and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written,

“The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.”

²⁷ This is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.
—ROMANS 11:26-27

This clause is the “eye of the storm” for understanding Romans 9-11 and the hermeneutical challenges it presents should not be underestimated. For the sake of brevity the identification of “all Israel” shall be our

primary focus. There are a number of possible interpretations that have been offered by theologians throughout church history. Some see "Israel" here as pertaining to the elect, the one people of God comprising both believing Jews and Gentiles. This position seems doubtful given that Paul has used the term consistently ten times throughout Romans 9-11 to refer to ethnic Israel. Others have claimed that "all Israel" is to be understood as a reference to all Jews throughout history. This position however raises a myriad of soteriological problems and does not fit the context of the discussion without raising too many additional questions. Still others simply see this as a reference to the elect within Israel who are now part of the church. The multitude of interpretations only shows how disparate the Church's theology of Israel has become. In this paper I will not engage with all of these viewpoints but argue for the view that seems to be the most straight forward reading of the text. If we read it without any preconceived presuppositions inherited from our particular theological systems then some of the confusion evaporates. To interpret "all Israel" as a reference to the ethnic nation of Israel seems to fit the context best. Moreover to understand the words "will be saved" as a reference to the national salvation of Israel should not be seen as somehow unfair to those outside of Israel, or as God giving a certain group of people a second chance he is unwilling to give anyone else. The national regeneration and eschatological salvation of Israel is one of the most frequently recorded hopes of the prophets (cf. Eze 37:25-28, Jer 31:31-34, Mic 4:1-4).

Paul seems to emphasise this point by his selection of Old Testament quotations. He first quotes a verse from Isaiah 59:20. The context is crucial; Isaiah 59 is an eschatological chapter

dealing with the second coming of Christ in judgement at the end of the age to repay those whose deeds are wicked. This same chapter describes Jesus as a "redeemer" who will come to Zion (location) and remove the sins of Israel (ethnicity). The next verse Isaiah 59:21 links these events, the salvation of ethnic Israel to the New Covenant. This is supported by the second Old Testament quote that Paul selects from Jeremiah 31:33-34 where he explicitly ties the salvation of Israel to the New Covenant. Most theologians today would not deny that the New Covenant awaits its final consummation with the coming of Christ. Paul has now explained that part of this consummation involves the national salvation of the nation of Israel. Paul utilised covenantal promises from the Old Testament to demonstrate that this is a theme that runs through the scriptures and these same scriptures have provided a chronological sequence for their fulfilment. The "mystery" then pertains to the order of these events in relation to Israel's present unbelief and the blessings of Gentile salvation. Having provided such a broad sweeping overview of these truths Paul now seeks to sum up his argument in the next two verses.

4. Unbelieving Jews are our Beloved Enemies.

From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers.

—ROMANS 11:28

Paul here gives a clear summary of Israel's dual status and how it relates to the main thrust of the argument that he is addressing in chapters 9-11. Israel who even now is hardened towards the gospel and in a state of enmity towards God is not completely rejected. The Gentile

church is to understand that this present state of hardening was necessary for salvation to come to the Gentiles. Given this situation the Gentiles must be careful not to become arrogant towards the “natural branches”. Understanding and accepting this fact should provoke a response from unbelieving Israel – to make them jealous;

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

—ROMANS 11:11

With this response in mind it is important to understand how a church that has become arrogant against the natural branches because of their unbelief, or a church which actively promotes theology that is anti-Semitic, stands little chance of provoking Israel into a state of jealousy.

Israel then remains the elect nation, beloved by God for the sake of the fathers on account of the enduring efficacy of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This dual status of Israel is the key to understanding the “mystery” and her place in the larger history of Gods redemptive plan.

5. The Promises given to Israel are Irrevocable.

²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Romans 11:29

Paul now finishes by grounding his argument theologically. He has argued that Israel remains important in God’s plan based upon the promises given to the patriarchs. As long as those promises stand true then so does his argument concerning the future of national Israel. He confirms this simply by announcing that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. It is best to see the phrase “calling” here as

referring to the election of Israel as a nation and “gifts” is best identified as encompassing all the privileges and blessings that accompany this. The term irrevocable carries with it the idea that something cannot be undone or changed. The promises of God concerning Israel are certain, for the word of God cannot be broken, his promises are sure. Paul has been building his argument towards this climatic theological crescendo throughout chapters 9-11 and now having beautifully explicated the redemptive purposes of God for the nation Israel and the blessings that came to the gentiles, the apostle breaks out into doxological praise to end chapter 11.

These four verses in Romans chapter 11 provide for us at least a basic outline of a biblical theology of Israel. Any attempt to address the topic theologically must provide a response to the areas outlined in these verses, i.e. that Israel was elected in the past, that the majority of the nation repudiated the claims of the gospel at the first coming of Messiah, but even in this unbelieving state they still remain an elect nation who one day will receive the promised covenantal blessing of national salvation when the Messiah comes again. Such a narrative of Israel simply will not allow for any triumphalist supersessionism or anti-Semitic theology whether it manifests explicitly as such or whether it hides behind the veneer of political anti-Zionism.

Thomas Fretwell

Holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in Theology and works as an Associate Tutor for Kings Evangelical Divinity School. He serves as an Elder and Youth Minister at Calvary Chapel Hastings in the UK.