

## THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE CHURCH FATHERS AND ISRAEL (A.D. 100 to 253)

The leaders of the Christian church who lived immediately after the death of the apostles were faced with tough theological questions: 1) The person of Christ; how can he be both God & man? 2) The complex nature of God; how can he be one and yet three?

There were other questions that were not as foundational *but would (and did) nonetheless impacted the church down thru the centuries*. Two of those questions were closely related: **1)** How should we understand the future of Israel now that she has rejected her Messiah? **2)** What should we do with the O.T.?

Our study of the early church fathers concentrates on the first 150 years after the completion of the NT and the death of the apostles (A.D. 100 to 253 [the death of Origen]).

1. Did the early church fathers believe in a future kingdom that would be established on earth by Christ after His return? In other words, were the early church father's premillennialists? The answer is \_\_\_\_\_, most of the early church fathers were indeed premillennialists.

*Charles A. Hauser, Jr. "The Eschatology of the Early Church Fathers" (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, May, 1961), page 251.*

2. If the early church fathers were premillennialists, did they teach that the kingdom of Christ would focus on the nation of Israel (**dispensational premillennialism**) or on the church (**historic premillennialism**)?

*Though the early church fathers were premillennialists, they were historic premillennialists, not dispensational premillennialists. They did **not** believe that a redeemed Israel led by her Messiah would one day be the political and religious center of the world. They believed **that** the church had permanently replaced Israel, **that** the church would be in the Tribulation, **that** the rapture of the church would occur after the Tribulation (i.e., post-tribulationism), and **that** the church would be the focus of the millennial kingdom.*

3. If the early church fathers did not believe that Israel would be the center of God's plan for the future, why not? In other words, why did they decide that the \_\_\_\_\_ to Israel had been \_\_\_\_\_ to a mostly Gentile church? Why did the church fathers, especially the early fathers who believed in premillennialism, conclude that the church had permanently superseded Israel?

### A. The \_\_\_\_\_ background to the Jew/Gentile problem.

The Fathers were also influenced by social issues. Israel had three military disasters in the first & second century. **(1)** The first was the **Jewish revolt in A.D. 70** where the Roman legions destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and killed thousands of Jews. **(2)** The second Jewish rebellion, **the Kitos War (115-117)** was a disorganized revolt that spread throughout the empire to Egypt, Cyprus, Mesopotamia, & Judea itself. The Jewish rebels were able at first to defeat the depleted Roman forces in some of these territories, but eventually the Roman armies overran them. **(3)** The third rebellion was **the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135)**. Simon Bar Kokhba, the commander of the revolt, was a messianic figure. By the end of the revolt, almost 600,000 Jews had been killed in battle and thousands more had died of hunger and disease. The emperor (Hadrian) made plans to build a new Roman city, **Aelia Capitolina**, on the site of the rubble of Jerusalem and forbade any Jews to enter it.

### B. The \_\_\_\_\_ of the Jew/Gentile problem.

It is easy to forget that the mission of Jesus the Messiah was restricted in his early ministry to Jews. Jesus was a Jew, his followers were Jews, and the earliest mission of the Apostles after the death & resurrection of Christ focused on the Jews (**from Matt. 1:1 to Acts 8:3**). But the Jewish-Gentile problem is emphasized

in the following chapters of Acts when 2 other ethnic people groups were added into the church (in Acts 8 the Samaritans; and in Acts 10 the Gentiles). **At first, the Jew-Gentile problem was . . .**

1) A Gentile Problem (Acts 8, 10 and 11, 15).

2) The Jewish Problem

- At first, **Jews against Jews**. (1) Jesus (Mt. 12; 23; 21:43); and (2) Paul (Romans; Galatians)
- Eventually, as time went on, **Gentiles against Jews**.

a) The Church Fathers were \_\_\_\_\_.

b) The Church Fathers were teaching that God had \_\_\_\_\_ Israel.

What the Fathers were teaching about God's permanent replacement of Israel with the Gentile church ran counter to what the NT teaches. In the theology of the NT writers, the Jews have not entirely forfeited their election. But a future conversion of the nation of Israel was not the message of the Fathers. In their opinion, Israel had been removed from God's covenant program permanently. Quotes from The Epistle of Barnabas (A.D. 120); Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho (written A.D. 160). Justin's claim ... "yes, the church is Israel" ... is the first time in church history that a father argues specifically that the Church is the new Israel. It is obviously a symptom of the developing take-over by Christians of the prerogatives and privileges of the Jews.

C. The \_\_\_\_\_ of the Old Testament

Their commitment to supersessionism resulted in a distinct way of interpreting the OT prophets. The real problem was, how should Christians make use of the OT now that God has disowned Israel?

1) An \_\_\_\_\_ Solution

The antiquity of the church was a common apologetic employed by the church fathers. For them, the OT relates the history of the preexistent church, and Israel was only a "coarse outer shell for the spiritual reality within." The OT was not a Jewish document, but it was a Christian document.

2) A \_\_\_\_\_ Solution

It would take some hermeneutical gymnastics to show that the OT was in reality a Christian document. But this did not seem to deter the fathers. They employed extensive typological interpretation to find the church in the OT. Melito of Sardis explains how typological interpretation was supposed to work. Typology begins with a "first draft" or a "preliminary sketch" (meaning Israel). But when the finished copy of the thing that was sketched comes into existence, "then the type is destroyed." In other words, Israel was just a type or "preliminary sketch" of the real—the church; the type has been permanently eliminated. In the prophetic sections of the OT, the church fathers regularly interpreted the great blessing sections for a future Israel as referring to the church.

3) A \_\_\_\_\_ Solution

Another cause for the use of "spiritual interpretation" of the OT was Platonism. [Plato (428 B.C. to 348 B.C.) was a Greek philosopher born in Athens during the classical period in ancient Greece]. Platonism in one form or another elevated the spiritual realm to a point where a physical material kingdom on this earth was unbelievable. Platonism was based on metaphysical dualism; there are two worlds or levels of reality—there is the imperfect, changing world of material/physical things; but there is another realm, a non-physical or spiritual reality, and things in this spiritual realm are perfect, immutable/unchanging, and eternal. The metaphysical dualism of Plato was used by the Church Fathers. This meant that the church, the spiritual reality, had replaced Israel, the physical entity. Eventually this hermeneutical method based on Platonic metaphysical dualism led the later Fathers to teach that the kingdom promised in Scripture was not a real, material (though spiritual) kingdom, but a spiritual kingdom without a material dimension.