

The story goes, that the Prussian monarch, King Frederick II, once asked his personal physician, “Could you give me at least one single evidence of the existence of God?” The physician replied, “Your Majesty, the Jews.” So begins “The Mystery of Israel” by Dr Jacques B. Doukhan, recently retired from the Adventist Seminary at Andrews University. This is a brief summary of his main points in this book.

As Doukhan writes, “All great ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Rome, and Greece have disappeared. Only the Jews have survived as a cultural identity in spite of pogroms, persecutions, and all other attempts to exterminate them, including the Holocaust. From biblical times with Moses, Isaiah, Jesus and Paul to modern times with Marx, Freud and Einstein, Jews have always been prominent in history” (p. 7).

Why is this book necessary? It is true that anti-semitism has not gone away. We see evidence for it around our world today, sometimes overt, and sometimes implicit. Why should we read this book? We live in a polarized world, where we must be aware of the implicit assumptions and unforeseen consequences of how we proclaim the Everlasting Gospel, and given the worldwide phenomenon of anti-semitism, we are to be responsible and truthful in what and how we preach and teach.

Much has been written about Israel by scholars for time immemorial, but relatively few have attempted a theology of Israel as such. Doukhan’s work was an eye-opener for me, and provides a careful, nuanced and utterly biblical outline of what “Israel” means.

Doukhan evaluates the two main theological perspectives that have driven much of western Christianity in its response to the Jews.

First, Doukhan addresses what he calls the “Rejection – Supersessionist Theory.” This is the oldest approach to the Jews among Christians, and numbers among its adherents the Church Fathers, Justin Martyr, Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Rudolf Bultmann. Thus, this approach spans the centuries from the end of the Apostolic era to the modern era. This approach argues that “Israel has failed.” The disobedience of the OT Jews, and their rejection of the Messiah, has led God to reject the OT Israel, and to make a new covenant with a new people. The Israel of the OT has been replaced by the Christian Church, which has inherited all of the privileges and blessings given to Abraham and the Hebrew prophets, leaving only the curses and judgements to the Jews.

An implicit danger in this approach is a sneering approach to the Jews, an attitude that can be traced to the horrors of the pogroms throughout the centuries, culminating in the Holocaust.

This approach is based on certain key texts: 1 Sam. 8.7; Hosea 1.9; Matt. 21.33-46; and the crime of deicide (John 11.48-51 et al); the “curse” of Matt. 27.25; the turning to the Gentiles of 1 Peter 2.9 and Acts 13.46; the “Israel of God” in Gal. 6.16; the “olive tree” of Romans 11; the 70 week prophecy of Daniel 9 (implying a limited period of grace before which the divine offer of mercy closes to the Jews as God’s people). Doukhan provides a detailed, thorough and careful analysis of each of these “gotcha” texts to show that the assumption that God rejected the Jews due to their disobedience and alleged rejection of the Messiah and replaced the Jews with spiritual Israel does not reflect what each of these “gotcha” texts is really saying.

Doukhan then switches to the second major theological perspective on the Jews and Israel: dispensationalist theory. Dispensationalism originated among the Plymouth Brethren in the UK in the early 1830, most notably through the teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Dispensationalist theology argues that salvation history, from Creation to the Kingdom of Glory, divides into several “economies” of salvation, or “dispensations.” These imply different revelations and conditions by which God will test humanity. The number of dispensations differs with each theologian. This theology has entered popular thinking via the teachings of televangelists such as Pat Robertson and Hal Lindsey, and the *Left Behind* series of books and films.

Dispensationalists argue that since the Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah, the fulfillment of the earthly kingdom that God had initially promised them is now postponed to the end of time. Instead, God established the mystery of the Church as a “parenthesis” that will last until the end of time. Christ will come invisibly to take the Christians to heaven (the rapture), where they will celebrate the marriage supper of the Lamb for 7 years. During these 7 years, while the Church remains in heaven, God’s program will resume on earth for the Jews. The antichrist will reign and will sign a covenant with Israel, but will then turn around and oppress them for the last 3.5 years of tribulation. At the end of those 7 years, Christ will return visibly and in glory, and all the Jews then alive will recognize Him as Messiah. Christ will save them from the antichrist, destroy His enemies at Armageddon, set up His Davidic kingdom in Jerusalem, the Temple will be rebuilt, sacrifices for sins will once again be offered, and reign over the Jews (the natural citizens) and the believing Gentiles (the adopted citizens) for 1,000 years. After the millennium, Christ will destroy Satan and his followers, establish the new heavens and new earth, where Israel and the redeemed Gentiles will live forever in peace and harmony.

Aside from the significant and profound exegetical difficulties such an understanding is based upon (e.g. Doukhan clearly articulates how the borders between dispensations are unclear and arbitrary, not outlined as such in Scripture, and how the strong delineation between how God works in the OT and the NT leads to a Marcionite view of God), such a perspective leads to the idea that the NT functions as Plan B, necessary because of the failure of the Jews in Plan A, i.e. the OT. As a result, dispensationalists veer towards an understanding of two peoples: the Jews – natural and earthly; and the Church – spiritual and heavenly. Within such a theological worldview, we once again find the seeds of antisemitism, even if the establishment of the State of Israel is viewed as being a necessary preparation for the end of time scenario outlined above. Hence, we have strong evangelical support for the State of Israel, but precious little love for the Jewish citizens of Israel per se.

For a dispensationalist to preach to a Jewish audience there is the necessity to preach that suffering and the persecution of the Jews must rise to an eschatological climax, both a reflection of satanic agency and divine will, and that such suffering is necessary before the final return of Jesus as Messiah in His glory. If the Jews are to suffer till after the rapture and through the final tribulation until the 2nd Coming, it is no large jump of logic for those who hold to this theology to turn a blind eye to antisemitism and persecution of the Jews today. Doukhan then turns to what he calls the “Two Witness Theory.” Essentially, he argues that the alleged dichotomy between the Jews and the Church in reality is a reflection of what both are for and what both are missing. “Israel had the law but without Jesus, and the church had Jesus but increasingly downplayed the law, thus making their separate presence on the scene of salvation history necessary” (p. 76). Traditional, historical Israel (from the OT) and the traditional, historical Church (from the NT) function as two witnesses to the aggregate truth about God and His salvation.

Into this discussion, Doukhan raises the question of God’s end-time movement. The SDA movement is described as those who “Keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14.12). He cogently argues that Adventists should not go along with any of the main approaches described above, but that we are called to be the end-time Elijah figure (Mal. 4.6). We are called to affirm both Torah and Messiah – Messiah to the Jews who emphasize Torah, and Torah to the Christians who emphasize Messiah.

This is a ministry of reconciliation we are called to that is between both Jews and Christians, and this is not merely a process of ecumenical dialogue and photo-ops. It is not sufficient to merely proclaim that “we have the doctrinal truth of reconciliation because we have the Torah and the Messiah. We should also do the reconciliation and make it alive in our life and in our historical identity” (p. 90). This calls us to move beyond being comfortable in our “Christian” identity (effectively, Messiah without the Torah) and to ask how we can be comfortable in our eschatological identity (Torah plus Messiah)?

Before concluding with an extensive discussion in the appendices of EGW and our relationship with the Jewish people, Doukhan then outlines four overlapping understandings of Israel that we must always bear in mind:

- 1) Biblical Israel, born of the patriarchs of the OT, but joined by marriage or conversion by peoples of other backgrounds, e.g. Moabites, Cushites, Canaanites, Midianites, Persians and Arameans. Clearly, Biblical Israel was not a people of “pure, or unmixed lineage” (p. 109). That is a later invention of racist theories in the 19th – 20th centuries and was exploited by the Nazis. Biblical Israel testified to God and to the history of salvation, and was called “Israel” by the prophets and God, who loved His people with an “everlasting love” (Jer. 31.2-3).
- 2) Jewish Israel, consisting of the community of Jews who survived the Babylonian exile and settled around Eastern and Western Europe (often referred to as “Askhenazi Jews”) and those who settled around the Mediterranean (often referred to as “Sephardic Jews”). These peoples are not any purer than the biblical version of Israel mentioned above. This “Israel” survived in order to witness in the flesh and in teaching the Torah of God, the expression of God’s will and character for humanity. This “Israel” preserved the language and traditions of Biblical Israel, and was profoundly shaped by centuries of persecution, oppression and suffering, climaxing in the Holocaust.
- 3) “Christian Israel” is the NT Church and onwards, initially comprised of those in Biblical Israel, but then overwhelmingly comprised of Gentile converts. This form of Israel testifies to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and emphasizes the NT. Yet, Christian Israel is nurtured by the same heroes of faith, stories and teachings as Biblical Israel. “For this reason, Christian Israel can also claim a place in the house of Israel, an idea taught by Jewish tradition” (p. 111). Yet, this grafting in of Christian Israel is not complete due to Christian Israel’s rejection of the Torah and the binding nature of the 10 Commandments.
- 4) Eschatological Israel, which represents a movement of return toward the ideal represented by Biblical Israel, and thus separates itself from Christian Israel, in that it is reclaiming the testimony about the Torah as well as the testimony about Jesus. “Therefore, this Israel is open not only to Christians, but also to Jews and transcends both cultural communities. It is a movement summoned at the end of time to bring the “light of present truth” and prepare the world for the kingdom of God” (p. 112).

I would strongly recommend that everyone reads this piercing and deeply thought-provoking discussion of the concept of “Israel.” Doukhan will gently but unremittingly pull back many assumptions that Adventists carry, and will invite us to a deeper understanding and higher calling as God’s end-time Elijah movement.

Too many Adventists are, by default, “Casual Supercissors” in their thinking, and such a default position opens the door to anti-semitism in a variety of forms. Maybe it is time for us to rethink what it means to understand and preach an eschatological remnant that “keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus” in a missiological framework that looks to the salvation of others rather than as an ecclesiastical perspective that defines who is “in” and who is “out.”