

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM: AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

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“Zion’s Christian Soldiers”

On October 6, 2002, the popular American investigative TV program, *60 Minutes*, introduced its viewers to *Christian Zionism* in a segment they entitled: “Zion’s Christian Soldiers.” Outspoken former Moral Majority founder, The Rev. Jerry Falwell, was the primary guest. Correspondent Bob Simon interviewed Falwell, asking his opinion on a variety of subjects related to Middle Eastern affairs. How he replied astonished many, infuriated many more. By week’s end his words would be published and republished in every major news venue around the world, most notably in those countries where Islam is the dominant faith: “I think that Muhammad was a terrorist,” he said. “I’ve read enough of the history of his life, written by Muslims and non Muslims, to say that he was a violent man of war.”¹

Those who looked beyond the controversy caused by Falwell’s words to the theme of the show itself learned that millions of American Christians – 70 million was the figure Falwell used ² – give unqualified support to the modern state of Israel based largely on a belief that it came into existence as the fulfillment of biblical promises which set the stage for the now imminent second coming of Christ.³

They learned, too, that Christian Zionists represent a powerful political force in America. Simon noted, as just one example, a letter-writing campaign organized by Falwell and others in April of 2002 which took President Bush to task for asking the Israeli government to withdraw their tanks from the West Bank city of Jenin following one of the most violent weeks of the *intifada*. Over 100,000 letters and emails flooded the White House. While it can’t be determined for sure whether this is what made the difference, what *is* sure is that soon after the letters arrived President Bush backed down.⁴ “There’s nothing that brings the wrath of the Christian public in this country down on this government like abandoning or opposing Israel in a critical matter,” noted Falwell.⁵

This program highlighted something that Israel watchers have long known: the political clout of those who call themselves Christian Zionists – even though the numbers aren’t as large as Falwell maintains. A recent poll taken by “Stand for Israel,” (an organization headed by former Christian Coalition director, Ralph Reed) noted that only two thirds of the American evangelical community (those who would claim to be “born again” - the

¹ Bob Simon, June 8, 2003, *Zion’s Christian Soldiers*, Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/10/03/60minutes/printable524268.shtml> (12/13/2003)

² Simon, 1

³ Simon, 2

⁴ Simon, 1 and Gary Burge, *Christian Zionism, Evangelicals and Israel* Available at: <http://www.hcef.org/hcef/index.cfm/ID/159> (12/13/2003) (See also Donald Wagner, October 2003, *A Heavenly Match: Bush and the Christian Zionists*. Available at: <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article4960.htm> for a more detailed description of the campaign)

⁵ Burge, 1

whole of which constitutes the 70 million claimed by Falwell) say that they support measures being taken by the Israeli government against what the poll takers defined as “Palestinian terrorism.” (A question that skewed the results simply by the way it was asked).⁶ And not all of these two thirds would necessarily be comfortable with the label “Christian Zionist.” 56% of those who voiced support for Israel put down political reasons for their perspective, while 28% list “end times” (which is often noted as a foundational teaching of Christian Zionists) as a primary motivating factor,⁷ The picture is cloudier than “Zion’s Christian Soldiers ”would like us to believe.

Whatever the numbers there is no doubt that this is an influential movement whose impact reaches beyond the boundaries of its core constituency. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the majority of American Christians who give uncritical support to Israel today have been influenced in one way or another by the tenets of Christian Zionism, whether they buy the package or not.

A Matter for Concern

This is a concern for us as a denomination for several reasons:

Christian Zionists have consistently used their considerable political clout to attempt to block any negotiated settlement between Palestinians and Israelis that could lead to a just peace.

Statements made by previous General Synods show that we have done what we could to encourage a reconciled peace, affirming both the deep yearning of Jewish people for a “safe haven” in their historic homeland after centuries of anti-Semitic persecution and Palestinian longings for a homeland of their own, noting in particular the tragic displacement which they endured (and are still enduring) as the result of the establishment of the Jewish state and subsequent wars.⁸ Circumstances and the information available to us regarding the nature of the conflict have changed since General Synod last spoke directly to this issue (1989), but our commitment to supporting a solution that reflects Biblical standards of justice with reconciliation as the ideal outcome remains unchanged.

As people who live under the divine authority of Holy Scripture, faithful disciples of our Lord, Jesus Christ, we believe that it is important that we carefully examine and, when necessary, critique, the teaching of any

⁶ Jim Lobe, October 2002, *Conservative Christians in US Biggest Bakers of War on Iraq*, Available at: <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title/2414.htm> (12/20/2003)

⁷ Lobe, 1

⁸ Note particularly MGS, 1980, p. 64, R-5/MGS, 1981, pp. 101-119, R-1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 MGS 1989, pp. 68-72, R-12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21.

movement that claims to speak on Christ's behalf when there is evidence that such teaching is negatively impacting the lives of our neighbors.

We are called to honor Christ in all we say and do. When fellow members of the one Body of Christ act in such a way that Christ's name is dishonored, we cannot remain silent. The Church waited too long to speak out against those who twisted scripture to justify slavery or anti-Semitic pogroms against Jewish neighbors. Too much is at stake in the current conflict in Israel/Palestine for us to make the same mistake here.

Our primary mission partner in the Middle East, the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), which represents 90% of the indigenous Christian population of the Middle East, including nearly all Palestinian Christians, has noted on numerous occasions the harm they believe American Christian Zionists are causing them.

Noting that this is primarily an American phenomenon, the MECC has asked us to help them counter the threat this teaching poses to the existence and witness of the Palestinian Christian community. A fidelity to scripture demands that we respond positively to their request:

"If one part [of Christ's Church] suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." (I Corinthians 12:26⁹)

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

The development of the Christian Zionist movement can best be understood as a drama unfolding in three acts:

- **Act 1** begins in Great Britain with the marriage of premillennial eschatology (a way of interpreting the Bible which posits a thousand year [millennial] reign of Christ on earth preceding the final day of Judgment) with 19th – early 20th century British imperialism.
- **Act 2** moves to America when dispensationalist teaching becomes widely disseminated and assimilated primarily through conferences on prophesy, the ministry of Moody Bible Institute and other institutions modeled on it, and the widespread distribution of the Scofield Reference Bible which would become the study Bible of choice among a whole generation of conservative American Christians. In this act, Christian Zionism becomes less a political movement than a spiritual reference point.

⁹ All scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version

- **Act 3** picks up the earlier political orientation of Christian Zionism, shifting to America as its primary base of operation. It coincides with the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the expansion of its borders after the 1967 War, the two historical touch points for the Christian Zionist movement.

It is important to note as we look at these three “acts” that the actors are not necessarily in full agreement on all points. Dispensational premillennialism provides the foundational theological grounding, but not all who call themselves Christian Zionists accept or even know the classic dispensationalist doctrines. Wheaton college professor, Gary Burge, notes that today’s Christian Zionists “...have shed much of Dispensationalism’s theological program... even though they have largely...kept its eschatology”.¹⁰ Dr. Burge summarizes their foundational beliefs as follows:

1. **The Covenant:** *God’s covenant with Israel is eternal and unconditional. Therefore the promises of land given to Abraham will never be overturned. This means that the church has not replaced Israel and that Israel’s privileges have never been revoked despite unfaithfulness.*

2. **The Church:** *God’s plan has always been for the redemption of Israel. Yet when Israel failed to follow Jesus, the church was born as an afterthought, or “parenthesis.” Thus, at the Second Coming, the church will be removed and Israel will once again become God’s primary agent in the world. We now live in the “time of the Gentiles” which will conclude soon. This means that there are two covenants now at work: one given through Moses and the other covenant of Christ. But the new covenant in no way makes the older covenant obsolete.*

3. **Blessing Modern Israel:** *We must take Genesis 12:3 literally and apply it to modern Israel: “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.” Therefore Christians have a spiritual obligation to bless Israel and “pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” To fail to bless Israel, defined as failure to support Israel’s political survival today), will incur divine judgment.*

4. **Prophecy:** *The prophetic books of the Bible are describing events of today and do not principally refer to events in Biblical times. Therefore when we look at, say, Daniel 7, if we possess the right interpretive skills, we can see how modern history is unfolding.*

5. **Modern Israel and Eschatology:** *The modern state of Israel is a catalyst for the prophetic countdown. If these are the last days, then we should expect an unraveling of civilization, the rise of evil, the loss of international peace and equilibrium, a coming antichrist, and tests of faithfulness to Israel. Above all, political alignments today will determine our position on the fateful day of Armageddon.¹¹*

This summarizes the current belief system of those who would identify themselves as “Christian Zionists”. How they got to this point can best be understood when we take a brief look at the development of the “three acts.”

¹⁰ Gary Burge, *Christian Zionism, Evangelicals and Israel* Available at: <http://www.hcef.org/hcef/index.cfm/ID/159> (12/13/2003)

¹¹ Burge, 1.

Act 1: Early Developments in Britain

Medieval Christian attitudes towards Jews were largely defined by “replacement theology” which relied on a heavily allegorical reading of the Old Testament to give credence to a belief that the Church had “replaced” Israel in God’s salvation plans. In the usual medieval take on this teaching, Jews were considered to be under God’s curse for their failure to accept Christ as their Messiah, and therefore were forever condemned to exile or worse.¹² Christian Zionists (and Jews) are quick to point out the disastrous consequences of this teaching for Jews: there is no doubt that it was at least partly responsible for the long, tragic history of anti-Semitism in Europe.¹³

Dissenting voices appeared, particularly among Calvinists in the 17th century, who rejected allegorical interpretation in favor of a more literal reading of scripture. This made it easier for Protestant Christians, particularly Calvinists, to look at Jews in a more favorable light. Rosemary and Herman Ruether attribute this shift at least partly to the democratization of biblical scholarship during the Reformation:

Bible reading in the vernacular, among Protestants, created a new identification with the people of Hebrew Scripture. The prophets and heroes of Hebrew Scripture replaced the Catholic saints as the figures of Christian story and self-identification. The Promised Land of the Hebrew Bible was understood as the actual historical land of Palestine, not as an allegory for a transcendent realm. Jews came to be seen less as a rival religion and more as another nation vis-à-vis the European nations.¹⁴

This shift occurred during a time of great anxiety, caused by political upheavals related to the religiously motivated wars of the era. With this anxiety came a new openness to speculative premillennial schemes, which popular religious figures were happy to provide. Numerous “end times” pamphlets and books were produced in Great Britain during the English Civil War by popular Puritan preachers and “prophets”. They were also found to a lesser extent among the writings of Dutch Calvinists, French Huguenots and pietists in Germany and Denmark.¹⁵ One Danish thinker, Holder Paulli, suggested that European Christian nations “should undertake a new crusade to free the biblical land from the Muslims so that it could be given to its rightful owners, the Jews”.¹⁶ He shared his scheme with the Dutch king, William III, who was at the time sitting on the English throne. Paulli indicated that undertaking such a campaign would make King William equal to the Old Testament Persian King Cyrus, whom God anointed to return his people to the Promised Land. William did not take Paulli’s advice.

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether, 2002. *The Wrath of Jonah*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 69-70.

¹³ Clarence H. Wagner, *The Error of Replacement Theology* Available at: <http://www.bridgesforpeace.com/publications/teaching/Article-18.html> (12/21/2003)

¹⁴ Ruether, 70

¹⁵ Ruether, 73-74

¹⁶ Ruether, 74

Despite the proliferation of this kind of predictive premillennial material in the 16th and 17th centuries, no organized movement developed around it.¹⁷ That didn't happen until the mid 19th century, when an Irish pastor named John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) developed a unique variation (some would say "deviation") of premillennial teaching that would come to be known as "dispensationalism."

John Darby's Dispensationalism

Steven Sizer describes John Darby as "... the most influential figure in the development of... Christian Zionism.¹⁸ This is so not only because of what he taught but the missionary zeal with which he propagated it. Over a long 60 year period of ministry he would take his dispensationalist message to audiences in Great Britain and continental Europe as well as America doing so in such a convincing way that he would convert many key evangelical leaders to his unique twist on biblical interpretation.

Darby was one of a number of conservative evangelical leaders in Britain at the beginning of the 19th century who were challenging what they saw as a liberal drift in biblical scholarship, a leaning away from a more literalist interpretation of scripture. They also rejected the optimism of postmillennialism¹⁹ that had supplanted premillennialism as the preferred outlook of the evangelical community in Britain during the 18th century.²⁰

The American and French revolutions combined with the Napoleonic Wars of 1809-15 had caused people to question postmillennial optimism. Darby and his fellow premillennialists picked up the spirit of the times:

After the troublous times of the American Revolution and its aftermath, and especially after the devastating effects of the infidelic French philosophy, men turned again to the Bible for light, especially the propheties of Daniel and Revelation. They were seeking a satisfying explanation of the prevailing irreligion of the time and to find God's way out of the situation.²¹

Darby's contribution to premillennial thought was controversial – then and now. His teaching, says Don Wagner, was an "*adaptation of earlier forms of historic premillennial theology with various novel doctrines, including the assertion that:*

- *the prophetic texts and most of the Bible must be interpreted within a literalist and predictive hermeneutic;*

¹⁷ Donald E. Wagner, "The Alliance between Fundamentalist Christians and the Pro-Israel Lobby: Christian Zionism in US Middle East Policy", *Holy Land Studies* 2.2 (March 2004), pp. 169.

¹⁸ Steven Sizer, August 31, 1998, *Christian Zionism: Its History, Theology, and Politics*, Chapter 4: John Nelson Darby. Available at: <http://virginiawater.org.uk/christchurch/> (12/13/03)

¹⁹ Post millennialism is a way of reading what the Bible says about the millennium symbolically as the era inaugurated by the first coming of Jesus Christ: the one in which we are currently living. Post millennialists of that era believed that the Kingdom of God would be realized on earth by the spread of the Gospel message and the blessings of Christian civilization.

²⁰ Wagner, 2004. 169.

²¹ From 1954: 137 – quoted in Wagner, 2004. 169.

- *while there are two separate covenants between God and the “chosen people” (Israel and the Church), the covenant with Israel (and all of its components such as land, nation, etc.) should be interpreted as being eternal and exclusively for Jews;*
- *“the true Church” (those born again in Jesus Christ) will be raptured (“translated”) out of history when Jesus will return to meet it in the clouds (I Thessalonians 5:1-11). At that point the nation of Israel will become the primary covenantal body in history, but only Jews who accept Christ as Savior will be spared the final battle;*
- *There will be seven “dispensations” or historical epochs that mark the entirety of history from Creation to Christ’s millennial reign on earth.”²²*

Political Ramifications

If Darby’s teaching and that of others who shared his perspective had remained simply a topic of debate among Christians over how to interpret the difficult apocalyptic passages of scripture, it would have had little impact on world affairs. As it was, it had great influence: Darby’s teaching came to influence key 19th century British political figures at a time when the British Empire was still in full sail.

The most important of these figures was Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, seventh Earl of Shaftesbury.²³ Lord Shaftesbury was an influential figure among evangelicals of his day. He also had the ear of powerful British politicians including the British foreign minister, Lord Palmerton. Shaftesbury became a tireless advocate for the dispensationalist take on Biblical teaching both in his work with the church and on the political scene. He was, says Donald Wagner, the most influential figure of his age in terms of what he did to advance the Christian Zionist cause:

Through his writings, public speaking, and lobbying efforts, Lord Shaftesbury did more than anyone before him to translate Christian Zionist themes into a political initiative. In addition to influencing British colonial perceptions of the Near East, Shaftesbury also predisposed the next generation of British conservative politicians favorably toward the World Zionist movement, which led eventually to British support of the Jewish state.²⁴

Ironically, British Jews met the effort that Shaftesbury made to encourage the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine with a cool reception. Having suffered in the past from forced deportation from other European countries, they suspected this to be yet another attempt to get rid of them. The American Jewish community had a similar reaction to a later attempt on the part of Christian Zionists to convince the then president, Benjamin Harrison, to support Jewish immigration to Palestine. Meeting in Pittsburg in 1885, the conference of Reform Rabbis (who were the dominant voice of American Judaism at that time) said this:

²² Wagner, 2004. 171.

²³ Ruether, 77

²⁴ Don Wagner, 1995. *Anxious for Armageddon*, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 92

*We consider ourselves no longer a nation but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.*²⁵

This sentiment would gradually change, at least for some, under the influence of a Jewish writer and journalist from Hungary named Theodor Herzl. His book, *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*), and the movement it spawned would convince a growing number of Jews in the later part of the 19th and early part of the 20th century that the establishment of a Jewish state was in their best interests.

Herzl was a secularized Jew. His zeal to establish a Jewish nation had nothing to do with the millennial schemes of Christian Zionists or the messianic hopes of religious Jews. It was for him a practical solution to the degradations, humiliations and violence of anti-Semitism that had, in his view, become so endemic in European society that there was no other way to deal with it.

Herzl's original plans did not necessarily call for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. He was willing to consider other options. A Jewish colony in Uganda was an option to which he gave serious consideration. But the sentiment of the larger Jewish community convinced him that Palestine was the only viable option, even though he recognized the difficulties this would pose with regard to the Arab population currently occupying the land. In a diary entry for January 12, 1895, he would make note of this difficulty and advance a possible "solution" which would anticipate the conflict that continues to bedevil Israeli-Palestinian relations today:

*We must expropriate gently the private property on the estates assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the borders by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it any employment in our own country. . . Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly.*²⁶

Herzl was not the first Jewish thinker to propose the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. There were others such as Moses Hess and Leo Pinsker who discussed the issue, as Herzl did, from a secular perspective. And there were those such as Yehudah Alkalai and Zvi Hirsch Kalisher, who made the case from an Orthodox perspective. All had made similar proposals in the early 1880s.²⁷ But Herzl was the organizing genius who put the idea into motion. In 1897 he brought together over 200 Jewish delegates from primarily Eastern European countries for a meeting in Basel, Switzerland. There they established the *World Zionist Organization*, which would serve as the foundational body for the realization of Herzl's dream. The stage was now set for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

It is not within the scope of this paper to examine developments within Jewish Zionism that would culminate in the establishment of the modern state of Israel. What is

²⁵ Ruether, 83.

²⁶ Rafael Patai, 1960. *The Complete Diaries of Theodore Herzl Vol I*, Herzl Press.

²⁷ Ruether, 46-47

important is to note is how Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism came together to set things in motion. Both were necessary ingredients in advancing the cause.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the formulation of a document that would afford Zionists the political justification they needed to make a Jewish state possible.

In 1905-6, Chaim Weitzman, who had assumed leadership over the World Zionist Organization after Herzl's death, met in several meetings in with a man who was at the time the leading member of Britain's Conservative Party, Lord Arthur James Balfour. Weitzman's aim was to try and persuade Balfour, as he had tried to persuade other British politicians, to throw the weight of the empire behind the Zionist cause.²⁸ It wasn't hard in Balfour's case. He had been raised in an evangelical home where dispensationalism was a defining motif. "He subscribed," says Wagner, "to a simple, layperson's version of the premillennial dispensational theology."²⁹

Weitzman had chosen to use his persuasive gifts on the right man. Eleven years later, Lord Balfour, now the British Foreign Secretary, would write the words that would serve as the political green light for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, the Balfour Declaration:

*His Majesty's government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.*³⁰

It is important not to overstate the case here. Balfour's declaration had as much to do with British imperialistic designs on the Middle East as it did with Christian Zionist sympathies. The language he uses is that of political diplomacy rather than dispensationalist theology, which is far more absolutist in its claims for Jewish rights to the land. But there is no doubt that a Christian Zionist perspective shaped his, as well as the sympathies of other British politicians, in favor of the Zionist claim.

Act 2: Christian Zionism Comes to America

Darby and his disciples made a number of "missionary journeys" to America in the mid to late 19th century where they were frequent guests at prophesy conferences and evangelical meetings. A key convert to Darby's dispensationalism during this time was the influential Presbyterian preacher and writer James Brookes, the man whom John Gestner identifies as "the Father of American Dispensationalism."³¹ Brookes met Darby during five visits Darby made to St. Louis in 1864-65. There Brookes also introduced Darby to a young Bible student named C.I. Scofield, who would in turn go on to author the notes for the popular dispensationalist Bible which bears his name.

²⁸ Wagner, 1995. 93.

²⁹ Wagner, 1995. 93.

³⁰ Wagner, 1995. 94.

³¹ John Gestner, 1991. *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 38.

One of Darby's disciples, the British evangelist Henry Moorehouse, introduced Darby's teaching to Dwight Moody, who became a devotee as well. Through his Bible Institute and others modeled on it, dispensationalism became a normative interpretive approach to Bible study in many evangelical circles:

Although not the first of such schools, Moody's Institute in Chicago became the prototype. Since Moody had imbibed a fair dose of dispensationalism in a rather typical unstructured form, and his colleague and successor R.A. Torrey in a more systematic way, naturally the burgeoning Bible school movement, with a few exceptions, should follow this line of thought. Because many of the theological schools opted for divergent views, the Bible Schools unintentionally became training centers for evangelical ministers and Darby's prophetic teaching became more widely accepted than ever.³²

Darby's influence on a whole body of fundamentalist/evangelical teaching in America during this era and stretching into the 20th century was impressive. Gary Burge notes that "throughout the 20s and for the next 40 years, Dispensationalism tied to Israel and prophecy became the litmus test for evangelical orthodoxy".³³

The difference between dispensationalism in America and Britain during this period was the absence of an overtly political agenda. This was due to a number of factors, not least of which was the largely apolitical nature of American fundamentalism. One notable exception was the political advocacy undertaken by a Darby disciple, William Blackstone. Blackstone was the author of the first Dispensationalist best-seller, *Jesus is Coming!* (1887).³⁴ Blackstone was also politically well-connected and, like Lord Shaftsbury in Britain, felt he should use those connections to advocate for a Jewish state. In March of 1891, Blackstone collected the signatures of 413 business, church and political leaders, among them the mayor of New York City, several congressmen, a chief justice of the Supreme Court and John D. Rockefeller, on a petition calling for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine which he presented to President Benjamin Harrison and his Secretary of State, James G. Blaine. Among other things, the petition stated:

Why not give Palestine back to them [the Jews] again? According to God's distribution of nations it is their home, an inalienable possession from which they were expelled by force. Under their cultivation it was a remarkably fruitful land, sustaining millions of Israelites, who industriously tilled its hillsides and valleys. They were agriculturalists and producers as well as a nation of great commercial importance – the centre of civilization and religion. Why shall not the power which under the treaty of Berlin, in 1878, gave Bulgaria to the Bulgarians and Serbia to the Serbians now give Palestine back to the Jews?"³⁵

³² Ian S. Rennie, 1977. *Nineteenth Century Roots in Handbook of Biblical Prophecy*, ed. Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque, Grand Rapids: Baker, 57.

³³ Burge, 1.

³⁴ Sizer, 1

³⁵ *The complete text plus signatories can be found at www.amfi.org/blackmem.html*

There is no evidence that Harrison paid much attention to this petition. But it set the stage for Act 3 where, in the early 20th century, Christian Zionists in America would find their political voice, much as the Christian Zionists in Britain had at the end of the 19th century.

Act 3: Christian Zionism Revisited

It is interesting and instructive to note that the most vocal and politically active American Christian supporters of a Jewish state in Palestine in the period around the implementation of the 1947 UN Partition Plan were not Christian Zionists, but liberal Protestant theologians and church leaders who had no sympathy for dispensationalist eschatology: *The Christian Council on Palestine* was established in 1942 by mainstream theological heavy weights Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Daniel Polling and William Albright, who used it as a vehicle to promote Jewish immigration to Palestine.³⁶ Their support was primarily based on humanitarian concerns. Given what was being revealed to the world about the horrors of the holocaust and a determined campaign on the part of the *World Zionist Organization* to promote a Jewish state in Palestine as the only legitimate answer to the anti-Semitism which produced it, their response is no surprise. What *is* surprising is a statement Niebuhr made in behalf of this Council to the *Anglo American Committee of Inquiry* in 1946, betraying a lack of similar humanitarian concern for Palestinian Arabs. What he said would later become a standard Christian Zionist assertion:

*The fact that the Arabs have a vast hinterland in the Middle East, and the fact that the Jews have nowhere else to go (due largely to the fact that western countries including the United States restricted Jewish immigration during and after WW II – author’s note) establishes the relative justice of their claims and of their cause . . . Arab sovereignty over a portion of the debated territory must undoubtedly be sacrificed for the sake of establishing a world Jewish homeland.*³⁷

The Dispensationalist camp in America was amazingly quiet about Israel during the years building up to the partition,³⁸ despite the fact that the Balfour Declaration and subsequent British mandate had put in place the means necessary to create a Jewish state. Sizer attributes this in part to the fact that conservative Christians in America were preoccupied with the great fundamentalist-liberal theological battles of the early 20th century with heated debates swirling around the nature of biblical inspiration.³⁹ Whatever the case, this would soon change partly due to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, but even more to what Christian Zionists would call the “miracle” of the Israeli victory over her Arab enemies in the 1967 War, which gave the Jewish people sovereignty over Jerusalem for the first time in over 2,000 years.

It is noteworthy in this respect that a revision of the Scofield Bible was produced in 1967, by a team of American dispensationalists that included a man who would become

³⁶ Ruether, 84.

³⁷ Sizer, 1.

³⁸ Sizer, 1. (*Citing the detailed work of Erling Jorstad*)

³⁹ Sizer, 1.

one of the most prominent voices in “renewed Christian *Zionism*,”⁴⁰ Dallas Seminary’s John F. Walvoord. The revised Scofield Bible drew peoples’ attention back to the Dispensationalist agenda at a time when dispensationalists believed world events were validating one of the key tenets of their belief system.

Billy Graham’s father in law, Nelson Bell, who was at that time editor of *Christianity Today*, summed up how many dispensationally inclined evangelicals felt at the time:

*...that, for the first time in more than 2,000 years Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews gives a student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible.*⁴¹

Hal Lindsey and a “Renewed” Christian Zionism

In 1969 an otherwise unknown Dallas Theological Seminary graduate named Hal Lindsey published *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which spelled out the dispensationalist agenda in a sensational way. His timing couldn’t have been better, not only because of the recent Israeli victory, but also because of what was happening at the time in America.

Social and political unrest in 19th century Britain had created fertile soil for Darby’s teaching. A similar climate prevailed in America when Lindsey’s book appeared. Daily news, with televised images, provided a disturbingly bloody picture of America being brought to her knees by a ragtag guerilla army at the cost of thousands of young American lives. There were urban riots and a cultural revolution on American campuses. Young people were questioning traditional morality and religious faith. All of this produced an unease among Americans that made Lindsey’s end times speculations appear plausible. In particular, Bible-believing Christians found his reasoning hard to resist, though most knew nothing about the dispensationalist theology that informed his thought. All of this helped make *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the best selling non-fiction book of the decade.⁴²

Lindsey’s book was a popular presentation of classic dispensationalist themes, beginning with what it said about Israel:

*The same prophets who predicted the worldwide exile and persecution of the Jews also predicted their restoration as a nation. It is surprising that many could not see the obvious: Since the first part of these prophecies came true we should have anticipated that the second part would come true, also.*⁴³

Now that there was a Jewish state in place, reasoned Lindsey, we should expect to see a whole string of other biblically predicted events falling into place: The Temple would be rebuilt in Jerusalem. There would be widespread apostasy in the institutional church. Earthquakes and famine and social disintegration would accompany the appearance of

⁴⁰ Paul Charles Merkley, 1973. *Christian Attitudes Towards the State of Israel* Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 163.

⁴¹ Sizer, 1.

⁴² Sizer, 1.

⁴³ Hal Lindsey, 1970. *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 48.

the Antichrist, who would be cleverly disguised as an apparently benign ruler of a ten-nation coalition that would act as an instrument of Satan. All this would lead up to the day when born again Christians would be raptured to heaven to pave the way for the Second Coming of Christ. The Messiah would return as a warrior king who would lead those Jews who would turn to Him in faith to total victory in the mother of all battles: Armageddon. With victory assured, the millennium would begin. Jesus would rule over a Messianic Jewish kingdom of peace and prosperity like none the world has ever seen before.

What was unique in Lindsey's presentation of the dispensationalist case was the way he confidently tied biblical references together with current events and political alignments, a tendency which has become a hallmark of today's Christian Zionism. One can see this in the numerous "end times" books which fill the shelves of Christian bookstores, not to mention the series of novels which have become the latest dispensationalist blockbusters, the *Left Behind* series. And it all hinges on one objective reality that is there for everyone to see: God's chosen people, Israel, once again established after years of exile in the land which God gave them as an eternal inheritance.

The Late Great Planet Earth and the "miracle" of the 1967 War would signal the re-entry of Christian Zionists into the political arena, as an inevitable by-product of their confident assertions about Israel's central purpose in God's salvation plans. Jerry Falwell would become politically active around this issue at this time and he was soon joined by many others.⁴⁴ Within the next 10 years American based Christian Zionist organizations would become an important source of financial and political support for the Israeli government, a situation that prevails in an even more pronounced way today.⁴⁵

WHAT ABOUT THE PALESTINIANS?

What is striking in the large body of writing and activity related to the development of Christian Zionism is how little is said about those who were most effected by the establishment of the Jewish state – the Arabs who lived on the land which would become Israel, many of whom were forced to leave their homes and give up their property during the wars that Christian Zionists celebrate as the miraculous outworking of God's purposes. Although precise numbers are difficult to ascertain, as this, like everything else connected to this conflict has political significance, most reliable sources would agree that 6-700,000 people were forced into refugee status in the 1948 War.⁴⁶ 413 of the villages they had called home were razed to the ground by the Israeli army to

⁴⁴ Sizer, 1.

⁴⁵ See Wagner, 2004. 178- 187. For an excellent summary and analysis of the post '67 links between Christian Zionists and the pro Israel lobby in America.

⁴⁶ See <http://www.freemiddleeast.com/refugeezone/factsandfigures.asp>

make sure Palestinians could never return. Homes owned by Palestinian Arabs in urban neighborhoods were confiscated and turned over to Jewish families. This tragedy was compounded when several hundred thousand more Palestinians became refugees after the 1967 War. The Palestinians who remained are now living under the burden of a heavy-handed occupation in cantonized territories that afford them little opportunity for any kind of normal existence.⁴⁷

Given this upheaval and the human tragedy it represents, one would expect followers of Christ who are actively engaged in the area to address the Palestinian plight at some length. Yet relatively little is said about the human cost of this nation building exercise in Christian Zionist literature. When Palestinians are mentioned at all it is primarily to dismiss their claims to the land. By Christian Zionist reckoning God's decision to return the land to the Jewish people trumps any Palestinian desire to live in the land of their birth.

In a Bible study guide to the book of Daniel, prepared for the Radio Bible Class Worldwide Gospel Broadcast audience in 1947, the RBC founder, Dr. M.R. DeHaan goes so far as to suggest that Palestinian Arabs, many of whose families had been resident in the land for centuries, had no right to be there at all:

*“ . . . the Balfour declaration gave Britain the mandate over the entire land of Palestine, the Holy Land. Here we believe was the golden opportunity. She had it in her power and her right to clear the land of its **unlawful possessors** and make it exclusively the homeland for God's scattered people.”⁴⁸ [my emphasis]*

Not all Christian Zionists would go this far. But most in one way or another disregard Palestinian land claims as they shift blame for whatever conflict has ensued to stubborn and unwarranted Arab refusal to relinquish their unjustified claims to the land.

The most common Christian Zionist perspective on this reflects the sentiment of Reinhold Niebuhr: “the Arabs have a vast hinterland in the Middle East” where Palestinians can easily resettle, thus making it simply a matter of transporting the population from one part of the Arab world to another. In other words, it is a small matter for Palestinian Arabs to relinquish their hold on the land. There are plenty of other places they can go. Christian Zionists are quick to point out in this regard that there was no unique Palestinian identity or nation before Israel came into existence. Herzl's oft quoted statement: “A land without a people for a people without a land,” underscores the fact that this has also been a longstanding Israeli contention.

The following statement by Dr. James Hutchens, president of *Christians for Israel*, one of several hundred Christian Zionist organizations propagating their perspectives on the web, is typical of this point of view. What is notable here is not only his denial of any valid Palestinian identity, but the contempt he shows for Palestinians and Arabs in general, which is a disturbing trait of Christian Zionist literature. Note too his apparent ignorance of a small yet significant Christian presence within the Palestinian community:

⁴⁷ Alan Epp Weaver, *Constantinianism, Zionism, Diaspora: Toward a Political Theology of Exile and Return* Available at: <http://www.mcc.org/respub/occasional/28.html> (12/21/03)

⁴⁸ Sizer, 1.

First let us clarify who the “Palestinians” really are. The notion of a distinct “Palestinian people” with a language, culture and religion of its own, is a creation of Yasser Arafat and nurtured by the surrounding Arab nations after their ignominious defeat in the 1967 war with Israel. The so called “Palestinian” people are, in reality, Arabs whose mother tongue is Arabic, whose religion is Islam, and whose culture is shared by most of the 22 surrounding Arab countries. There simply is no distinct Palestinian entity.⁴⁹

There is a small kernel of truth here. The land that became Israel/Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire prior to World War I. After the war the victorious European states dismantled the empire, carving out of it the nation states of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan/ Palestine.

Literally speaking, it is true to say that there was no Palestinian state before the British mandate in the same sense that there was a German, or French state. What isn't true is the assertion that Palestinian identity is an artificially created phenomenon forged in a devious way to make a political point. People who live, as the Palestinians have, in one location for centuries or even decades develop an identity which is integrally attached to the land. Ask any Iowa farmer whose family has tilled the same ground for three or four generations how important that land is to his or her sense of identity and you will soon see the fallacy of the Christian Zionist argument. Whether or not there was a nation called Palestine is less important than the fact that this was the place they had called “home” for hundreds, in some cases thousands of years.

There have always been those within the Jewish community who have challenged this cavalier dismissal of Palestinian claims to the land. It remains an open topic of debate within Israeli society today. One of the founders of the World Jewish Congress and long time president of the World Zionist Organization, Dr. Nahum Goldman, puts the dissenting opinion this way:

One of the great oversights of Zionism is that when the Jewish homeland in Palestine was founded, sufficient attention was not paid to relations with the Arabs. Of course, there were always a few Zionist speakers and thinkers who stressed them . . . Unfortunately these convictions remained in the realm of theory and were not carried over, in any great extent, into actual Zionist practice. Even Theodore Herzl's brilliantly simple formulation of the Jewish question as basically a transportation problem of “moving people without a home into a land without a people” is tinged with disquieting blindness to the Arab claim to Palestine. Palestine was not a land without a people even in Herzl's time; it was inhabited by hundreds of thousands of Arabs who, in the course of events, would sooner or later have achieved independent statehood, either alone or as a unit with a larger Arab context.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Dr. James M. Hutchens, *What About the Palestinians?* Available at: <http://christiansforisrael.org/articles/whatabout.htm> (12/21/2003)

⁵⁰ Nahum Goldmann quoted in Wolterstorff, 1983. *Until Justice & Peace Embrace*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 117.

Jews themselves have recognized the moral dilemma created by two peoples laying claim to one land. Unfortunately this dilemma is rarely acknowledged by Christian Zionists, who continue to use Herzl's "simple formulation" or its derivations to deny the legitimacy of Palestinian identity and claims.

A "Maximalist" Perspective

What makes this even more problematic and hurtful from a Palestinian perspective, particularly to Christian Palestinians who expect a more sympathetic response from fellow Christians, is that Christian Zionists for the most part project a "maximalist" stance on the issue of land ownership. Maximalists insist that the boundaries of the Jewish state should conform to a biblical map which includes not only the present state of Israel, but the whole of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip as well, territories they call "Judea and Samaria". As Moral Majority co-founder and director of the Christian Zionist *Religious Roundtable*, the Rev. Ed McAteer, said on *60 Minutes*: "Every grain of sand, between the Dead Sea, the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea belongs to the Jews"⁵¹

In this, Christian Zionists have adopted what is considered even by many Israelis to be the most extreme and problematical position *vis-à-vis* the occupation – that of the militant settler movement.⁵²

The militant settler movement draws its membership largely from fundamentalist Orthodox Jews who link the coming of the Messiah (not Jesus, a messiah yet to be revealed) to the establishment and expansion of the Jewish state. They, like Christian Zionists, believe that God gave all of the land to the Jews as an eternal possession, which means that they have the right to settle anywhere they choose, no matter what the UN or the United States or even their own government says. If it means forcibly removing Palestinians from lands they and their families have cultivated for generations, so be it. It's all theirs. To say otherwise is to argue with God.

"The Jews are authorized by the living God and creator of the universe as a legitimate, eternal people with unalienable rights to the entire Land of Israel," says Ian Lustick characterizing their views." The Palestinians have absolutely no legitimate claim to nationhood or to any part of the country."⁵³

That this is also the viewpoint of Christian Zionists is apparent in a statement issued as the official proclamation of the "Fourth International Christian Congress on Biblical Zionism," held in Jerusalem in February, 2001, which brought together a wide representation of Christian Zionist spokespersons. Here are some excerpts:

"Biblical Zionism is the firm belief that God chose the Jewish people and bequeathed to them as an everlasting possession the Land of Canaan. Christians must take

⁵¹ Simon, 1.

⁵² *Radical Messianic Zionism* Available at: http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/363_Transp/Orthodoxy/Gush.html (12/21/03)

⁵³ Ian Lustick, May 1998. *For the Land and the Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* Available at: http://www.ssc.upenn.edu/polisci/faculty/data/lustick/for_the_land/lustick14.html (12/13/03)

*courageous action to support the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel in **all its parts** . . . “[my emphasis]*

“The Bible puts its full weight behind the Return of the Jewish exiles to Eretz Israel. Therefore Christians have no biblical grounds upon which to base support for Palestinian nationalism.”⁵⁴

At least one Christian Zionist organization unabashedly supports the settler movement. *Christian Friends of Israeli Communities* recruit American churches to “adopt” a settlement as a way of expressing support for settler Jews whom they describe as brave pioneers claiming land that is theirs by divine decree:

*“Judea and Samaria is the Biblical name for the center of the Holy Land also called the Mountains of Israel. The media refers to this area as the “West Bank.” The residents of these areas, otherwise known as settlers, are fulfilling prophecy and pointing the way for the rest of the Jewish people back to their roots. . . The Biblical region of Judea and Samaria was given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendents, **forever**, 4000 years ago.”⁵⁵ [my emphasis]*

This hard-core position has put Christian Zionists on a collision course not only with “liberals,” but also more recently with fellow political conservatives in Israel and America. The “Roadmap to Peace,” proposed by the so-called Quartet of nations with strong endorsement by the Bush administration, is opposed by Christian Zionists. So are the tentative and as yet untested moves currently being made by the Israeli government towards territorial compromise that Christian Zionists fear may lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In an astonishing meeting which was recently held in Jerusalem, one time Republican presidential hopeful and Christian TV talk show host, Pat Robertson, showed how extreme Christian Zionists can be in asserting their convictions on this issue. Robertson used the occasion to urge a Jewish audience to put pressure on their government not make any territorial compromises with the Palestinians, as to do so would be to set themselves in opposition to God’s will for their country:⁵⁶

“Ladies and gentlemen, make no mistake – the entire world is being convulsed by a religious struggle. The fight is not about money or territory; it is not about poverty versus wealth; it is not about ancient customs versus modernity. No – the struggle is whether Hubal, the Moon God of Mecca, known as Allah, is supreme, or whether the Judeo-Christian Jehovah God of the Bible is Supreme.

If God’s chosen people turn over to Allah control of their most sacred sites – if they surrender to Muslim vandals the tombs of Rachel, of Joseph, of the Patriarchs, of the

⁵⁴ February 22, 2001. *Proclamation of the Fourth International Christian Congress on Biblical Zionism* Available at: http://christianactionforisrael.org/4thcongress3_pf.html (12/13/03)

⁵⁵ Christian Friends of Israeli Communities. *What Are Israeli Communities?* Available at: www.cfoic.com/index.asp?mainpage=settlement (12/21/03)

⁵⁶ For a complete text see *Why Evangelical Christians Support Israel* on Robertson’s webpage at: www.patrobertson.com/Speeches/IsraelLauder.asp

ancient prophets – if they believe their claim to the Holy Land only comes from Lord Balfour of England and the ever fickle United Nations rather than the promises of Almighty God – then in that event Islam will have won the battle. Throughout the Muslim world the message will go forth: “Allah is greater than Jehovah. The promises of Jehovah to the Jews are meaningless. We can now, in the name of Allah, move to crush the Jews and drive them out of the land that belongs to Allah.”

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

Christian Zionists take the authority of scripture seriously. With this we are in agreement, as the ultimate authority for what we believe and how we live as Reformed Christians is God-breathed biblical Truth. If, indeed, the Bible is as unequivocal as Christian Zionists wish us to believe it is, in terms of what it teaches about the place of the modern state of Israel in God’s salvation purposes, then we would have no choice but to join them, never mind the consequences for our Palestinian Arab neighbors. But we don’t believe it is. Our critique of the Christian Zionist position is first and foremost a biblical critique.

What we particularly question is whether what we know about the purposes of God, as they are revealed to us through the light of God’s fullest expression of His will in and through His Son, Jesus Christ, confirms Christian Zionist teaching. What Christian Zionists say is that Herzl’s vision for a Jewish state in Palestine, though tragically realized through a succession of wars which led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Arab Christians and Muslims: that *this* state, created in *this* way, with *these* consequences, was and is at the center of God’s redemptive purposes. Does Jesus confirm this or even envision it at all? How about Paul or the other New Testament writers whose inspired teaching is an extension of the revelation of God’s purpose in Christ?

This is the primary question we must ask, as Bible- believing Christians. This is where we start, as scripture itself insists we do:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the world. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful Word.”

Hebrews 1:1-3

Two Redemptive Streams

Christian Zionists, following the dispensationalist lead, posit two redemptive streams in God’s economy of salvation: 1) that which God purposes in, through and for the Jewish people, which finds its fullest expression in their restoration to the land which God gave them as an “eternal inheritance;” and 2) that which God purposes in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. The second stream has always been the predominant theme of

Christian teaching and preaching, the central motif of a unique Christian witness. Yet in Christian Zionist literature and teaching, what predominates is the first stream:

Yes, in bringing physical Israel back home, God has been raising up an announcement, a banner to the nations - one they are unable to ignore no matter how unpopular it is - confronting the world with the reality of God's eternal existence; His undiminished sovereignty; and His unlimited might and power.⁵⁷

If, as Christian Zionists claim, this is not only “a,” but “the” predominant teaching of scripture - that God has two purposes which he works out in two different ways - then we would expect to find this as a dominant theme in Jesus’ teaching. But we don’t. What we find instead is a message that contradicts this - a message of reconciliation.

The Witness of Christ

Jesus ministered in a time much like our own time, when that which divides people is more pronounced than that which brings them together. There were at that time divisions within the Jewish community between Pharisees and Sadducees, between Zealots and those who lived a monastic existence in the desert. There were even stronger divisions between Jews and everyone else: They had nothing to do with Samaritans. Gentiles were “unclean.” And most among them hated the Romans.

What Jesus did, in this divisive atmosphere, was bring people together. He deliberately chose as his disciples those within the Jewish community who would otherwise have had nothing to do with each other. He embraced “untouchables” and in other ways challenged the exclusivism which raised religious and social barriers between Jew and Gentile, Jew and Samaritan, Jew and Roman. Nowhere do we hear him speaking about one purpose of God for Jews and another for what would become a largely Gentile church. He included all in one ministry of grace and reconciliation.

The apostle Paul, speaking as a Jew who had himself once exhibited a fierce exclusivism but had now found peace with God and his neighbors through Christ, wrote this about this central purpose of Christ:

“He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups (Jews and Gentiles) into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Eph. 2: 14)

So then you (Gentiles) are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord... “ (Eph. 3:19-21)

Jesus defined his ministry and purpose in terms of reconciliation. In him we learn that God’s highest purpose is to bring together what we in our sinful divisiveness make separate. In light of this it is inconceivable that a religiously exclusive nation-state,

⁵⁷ Alan Lazerte, *Christian Zionism* Available at: <http://christianactionforisrael.org/judeochr/radio.html> (12/21/03)

which has come to be characterized by the building of a literal “dividing wall of hostility,” can be at the centerpiece of God’s redemptive plan.

That Israel is a viable nation-state, which like any other nation-state can be the source of either bane or blessing to its citizens, its neighbors and the world, is not in question here. What *is* in question is the place given to Israel by those who wish to put it at the center of God’s redemptive purposes. For this there is no biblical justification, certainly not in light of the revelation we have received in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ, reconciliation; bringing enemies together as friends; is seen to be God’s overriding concern:

*“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased **to reconcile to himself all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross . . . (Colossians 1:19-20 [my emphasis])*

What About the Promises?

What, then, does this mean in terms of the Old Testament prophecies of restoration that the Christian Zionists quote to make their case? Taken at face value, there is little doubt that these prophecies speak of a physical restoration of God’s people to the land that God gave them as a gift. It is hard to read a passage like Jeremiah 16:14-15, where God says: “I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors,” and not at least consider the possibility that Christian Zionists are correct to interpret it as they have. And this is just one of many passages which affirm this promise. How *do* we interpret these passages?

Again we turn to Jesus as the lens through whom we read all the promises of scripture. What we note is his silence:

As a Jew growing up in Palestine under a foreign occupation, Jesus would have been well aware of the powerfully formative nature of these verses for Jewish identity. It would have been a part of his own identity. The descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were and are, as Paul points out in Romans 9-11, a people of promise, held close to God’s heart as those through whom He chose to make known His will to the world. “To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.” (Romans 9: 4) Certainly one of the promises to which Paul refers is the promise of restoration.

Jesus knew all this. Yet, as we noted earlier, at no time in his ministry did he hark back to these promises as having any bearing on the purposes of God being realized in his ministry and life. As Messiah, we would expect that he would have. But he didn’t. What he spoke about instead was the *Kingdom of God*, which was *both* present in Him as the embodiment of its demands: “The kingdom of God is among you.” (Luke 17:20); *and* something to which he urged his disciples to dedicate their lives, praying and working towards the extension of God’s gracious rule throughout the world: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on **earth** as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9 [my emphasis]).

A literal fulfillment of the restoration promises did not figure into Jesus’ ministry because he recognized that their fulfillment required larger borders. The whole earth becomes the arena for God’s grace through the expansive ministry of Christ. What was

once confined to one particular people in one particular place is now available to all. God's Kingdom comes wherever God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

It should be clear from this that we are talking about something that can only ever be realized in a partial, fleeting way. No community of faith, in any country, can ever be said to perfectly realize the vision of *shalom*, which is a core element of the prophetic vision of restoration. This is a second reason why we must reject the notion that the current state of Israel is the fulfillment of restoration promises:

The modern state of Israel, like any other nation, relies on coercion and compromise to achieve its ends. Whatever good it may accomplish in terms of its national achievements can never be as good as what the biblical promise envisions - neither this nation-state nor any other.

Jesus asks us to pray that God's Kingdom will come here and now. But he also understood what the writer of Hebrews affirms: that the fulfillment of the biblical promises of restoration can only be fully realized in the "new heaven and new earth" which will come at the end of time.

"All of these [Abraham and those of his descendents who remained faithful to God's calling] died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them." (Hebrews 11: 13-16, NRSV)

Concluding Observations

Christian Zionism is marked by confident assertions that leave little room for debate. You are either with them or against God. "The Bible says" or "God says" often mark statements that are speculative in nature, based on an interpretative apocalyptic scheme that, even when John Darby conceived it in the 19th century, was challenged as a questionable deviation from traditional Christian teaching. This has led many sincere Christians, who are eager to do what God says, to follow the lead of Christian Zionists in giving **uncritical** support to the state of Israel, though they may not understand or accept the theology which under girds Christian Zionist teaching.

This is *not* to say that Christians should not support the state of Israel. Indeed we should. Israel is a legitimate nation-state, whose citizens have the right to live in peace with their neighbors within recognized and agreed-upon boundaries. In no way should what is written here be taken as an attempt to de-legitimize the Israeli state. Rather, it is to question the reason *why* Christian Zionists say we should give the Israeli government **unqualified** support even in its most expansionist mode. Christian Zionists insist that unqualified support for the modern state of Israel is a sacred duty enjoined by divine decree. We challenge this on several grounds, beginning with what we have noted about the Christian Zionist misreading of God's purpose in Christ.

We also challenge Christian Zionist teaching because of what it means in terms of denying justice to the Palestinian people. Thoughtful Israelis and Palestinians are working hard to find some way out of the conflict, searching for a compromise Peace Plan that will allow both sides to live with dignity and peace in their own land. Christian Zionists in their zeal to promote an “all or nothing” vision of the “Promised Land” have done their best to block these negotiations.

This, in the end, is where Christian Zionist teaching deviates most noticeably from the core message of the Gospel. Jesus, picking up seminal themes from the Hebrew scriptures, preached and lived a message of reconciliation: reconciliation between God and his rebellious human family and reconciliation between the diverse members within that family. In situations of great conflict, such as we are witnessing in Israel/Palestine, we, as God’s people, must put ourselves in a position to do our best to encourage reconciliation. We must pray, teach and work for a peace that reflects God’s overriding concern for justice. This is the most important prophetic word for Israel and the Palestinians, just as it is for anyone in any land: God desires justice. To do the work of God in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories today is to stand with those who are seeking justice and working for reconciliation. The Bible in its entirety leaves no room for doubt on this matter.

For thus says the Lord: maintain justice and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. (Isaiah 56: 1)