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Fresh Theological Arguments for Zionism

by [Gerald R. McDermott](#)

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Two new proposals, one by a leading Jewish theologian and the other by a group of Christian thinkers, provide fresh arguments for theological understandings of Israel.

Jews and Christians have been making political and pragmatic arguments to support the State of Israel for a long time. Even Palestinians are now arguing that Hamas and the Palestinian Authority are hopelessly corrupt, and that reconciliation with Israel is the best bet for Palestinians. But Jews and Christians have been less confident making theological arguments for Zionism. Jewish Zionists have had to explain why they disagree with anti-Zionist Jews and radical ultra-Orthodox separatists in their midst, while many Christian Zionists have needed to distance themselves from dispensationalists who claim to know when and how the end-times will arrive.

Two new proposals, one by a leading Jewish theologian and the other by a group of Christian thinkers of which I am a part, provide fresh arguments for theological understanding of Israel.

God's Three Options

The first is a new book by David Novak, *Zionism and Judaism: A New Theory*. Novak starts by reasoning from the Torah that God wanted a human community that would live under Him and for His sake:

God's special concern seems to be God's purpose in creating humans in His image to be like Him, that is, God's concern intends an object *with whom* to be in a relationship. . . . companions to whom God could speak and who could respond accordingly.

Novak suggests God had three options, as it were. The first was for Him to relate only to individuals. But this would entail the privatization of religion, which “makes living a religious life ultimately untenable politically, as religion, like language, is an essentially public matter.” The second option would have been to redeem all of humanity at once, but apparently “God did not think humankind is ready yet for the end of history this ultimate universality entails.”

The third option was the one God chose—to choose a particular people to show the world what it would be like to be God's servants. But why this people? It was not because of what Jews had been in the past but because of what they would be in the future, which only God knows. We humans cannot say what God's reasons were. But we can say what they were *not*. Jews had no unique or superior nature that qualified them for their election. There was no cultural or biological factor that made Jews peculiarly fit for God's choosing.

But even if God does not give his reasons for choosing the Jews, Novak observes, we *are* told why God did not choose Israel's neighbors. They did not consent to God's minimal moral requirements—to refrain from murder, incest, and robbery—which were at the core of what the rabbis called the Noahic commandments. Jews were not perfect in their obedience to these commandments, but as a people they had shown that they had accepted their responsibility to live by them.

The Torah also makes clear that God gave the land of Israel to His people Israel. But why this land? Novak says it was not because of any natural right. The reasons for God's choosing this land, just like the reasons for His choosing this people, are unknowable. Yet God is not capricious. He has His

reasons for both of these elections, but as long as we are in this world the reasons will remain mysterious. Yet the connection of this people to this land is “a fact of divine election.” Further, it is only in the land that the covenant God made with His people can be fully lived out: “By limiting the full national existence of the people Israel to the land of Israel, Jews are best able to live their specific covenantal relationship with God. In the land of Israel, that relationship is truly centered.”

Israel in the New Testament?

Christians have a more difficult time arguing for Zionism. In the Hebrew Bible, it is abundantly clear that God gave the land of Israel to the people of Israel. Yet for most of Christian history, churches have assumed that the people and land of Israel have little or no significance in the New Testament. Now, however, a growing number of Christian scholars are arguing that this concern for the land of Israel is present in the New Testament as well. Their arguments will soon be released by InterVarsity Academic Press: *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*. I am the editor of this book and author of three of its essays.

We maintain that just as the Hebrew Bible envisioned blessings going to the whole world through the people of this land, so too the New Testament proclaims a blessing for the whole world coming through the Jewish Messiah, whose kingdom started in Israel and would eventually be centered once again in Israel. The New Testament writers held on to the prophets' promises that the Jews of the Diaspora would one day return to the land from all over the world, and establish there a *politeia* (a political entity), that would one day be transformed into a center of blessing for the world.

Expecting a Future Return: Israel in the New Testament

Anti-Zionists concede that the Old Testament prophets, usually writing from exile, predicted a return to the land. But many assert that these prophecies of return were fulfilled when the Babylonian exiles returned to rebuild Jerusalem toward the end of the sixth century BC. Yet according to the “New Christian Zionists,” the New Testament demonstrates that Jesus and the apostles were still expecting a future return.

For example, when Jesus quoted Isaiah's prediction that the temple would become “a house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11.17; Isaiah 56.1), he

seemed to concur, as Richard Hays suggests, with Isaiah's vision of "an eschatologically restored Jerusalem." Hays adds that John's figural reading of Jesus' body as the new temple (John 2.21) "should be read neither as flatly supersessionist [the Church supersedes Israel] nor as hostile to continuity with Israel." It does not deny the literal sense of Israel's Scriptures—that the temple was God's house—"but completes it by linking it typologically with the narrative of Jesus and disclosing a deeper prefigurative truth within the literal historical sense." The fact that the apostles saw the temple as both God's continuing house and also a figure for Jesus' body is shown by their participation in temple liturgies even after the Temple's leaders had helped put their messiah to death (Acts 2.46). Both Matthew and Luke believed it important to show that Jesus was connected to the history of Israel, including detailed genealogies proving that Jesus is descended from Abraham, the first Jew, through forty-two generations of Jews. Luke goes back as far as Adam.

In her Magnificat, Mary suggests that the birth of the Messiah will be significant not only for all future "generations" but particularly for the history of Israel. Christ's coming will show that God "has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (Luke 1: 54-55). If the Incarnation was supposed to turn the focus away from Israel, as the supersessionist story has suggested, Mary did not get the memo.

Was Paul a Supersessionist?

Paul has long been cast as the apostle to the Gentiles, who supposedly took the focus off of Judaism and showed that the Gospel was a universal message for all. No longer would God be concerned with the Jews. They had forfeited their covenant because they had rejected the Messiah, Jesus.

This is what Christian theologian Kendall Soulen has termed the "punitive" version of supersessionism, the idea that God made a new covenant with the Church that supersedes his old covenant with Israel in order to punish the Jews for not accepting Christ. Soulen's two other kinds of supersessionism are "economic" (in the economy of salvation, Israel's only purpose was to

prepare for the messiah) and “structural” (in salvation history, Israel only serves as a negative example).

Although Paul has been read this way for centuries, his letters tell a different story. In Romans 9 and 11, he laments his fellow Jews who have not accepted Jesus as Messiah. He says that they cause him “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (9: 2). Yet he says “the covenants” still “belong” to them (9: 4), and even though they have become “enemies of the gospel,” they still “*are* beloved” because of their “election” which is “irrevocable” (11: 28-29). Galatians is the letter that is most often used to prove that Paul has dispensed with Jewish law in favor of a Church that has left Israel behind. Yet even here he says the Gospel is all about “the blessing of Abraham . . . com[ing] to the Gentiles” (3: 14) because “the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring” (3: 16). To Paul, being saved means becoming part of Abraham’s family: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3: 29). In other words, receiving the good news of gospel connects a person to Israel’s history. While supersessionism suggests that Israel has been left behind, Galatians says otherwise.

Recent Christian Zionists

In addition to making biblical arguments, the New Christian Zionists point to other prominent theologians who are Christian Zionists, such as Karl Barth and Gary Anderson. Barth (1886-1968) rejected nearly every distinctive teaching of dispensationalism. For example, he repudiated the notion that the End of Days was yet to come, insisting that it started with the coming of Jesus in the first century. He also refused the interpretation of biblical prophecies of apocalypse as straightforward, literal predictions.

Yet Barth thought that these eschatological errors were, as Carys Mosely puts it, “errors in the right direction.” He respected millenarian attempts to take seriously God’s sovereignty over world events, including the appearance of Israel as a nation-state in 1948. This was a “secular parable,” as was the rise of socialism in modern history. The sudden reappearance of Israel was a “little light” that bore witness to the Light of the World in Jesus Christ. The modern history of Israel “even now hurries relentlessly” toward

the future of God's redemptive purposes. According to Barth, biblical revelation points to a threefold *parousia* of Jesus—the Incarnation, Pentecost, and Christ's eschatological coming in Israel and the church. This last coming is the meaning of a long string of Old Testament prophecies that speak of the return of Jews to the land, a time when Gentiles shall come to Israel to learn Torah.

Gary A. Anderson is a distinguished Old Testament scholar who teaches at Notre Dame. He is a Catholic and a Christian Zionist. His argument for this position starts with "the biblical claim that the land of Canaan was given by God to the people Israel." The promise "is both irrevocable and unfulfilled." It is irrevocable because it is a promise made by God. As Paul says, even Israel's apostasy cannot erase the promises: "Let God be true though every man be false!" (Rom 3.4).

But at the same time, says Anderson, the promise is unfulfilled. According to scripture, the land vomits out whoever is not worthy of it (Lev 18.24-30). Only in the messianic age, according to Tanach, will Israel's settlement in the land be secure. Anderson warns that we should avoid "a false messianism" by remembering that the land is always "given conditionally." Yet we should also remind ourselves that "the miraculous appearance of the Israeli state just after the darkest moment in Jewish history is hard to interpret outside of a theological framework."

Theological vs. Historical and Political Arguments for Israel

These theological arguments for the significance of the return of the people of Israel to the land of Israel is not the same thing as a case for the present state of Israel. The latter case can and should be made on historical and political grounds, with attention to the legitimate concerns of Palestinians. It should not assume that the state of Israel is a perfect country, that it should not be criticized for its failures, or that it is necessarily the last Jewish state before the end of days.

But the two kinds of arguments cannot be separated. If God's covenant with his people continues, and the return of Jews to the Land is providential, then Jews and Christians must recognize that the present state is what shelters the covenanted people. At a time when support for this people is eroding all

over the world, and this state lies in a region of movements and governments bent on its destruction, it makes sense for Jews and Christians to come to its aid. They can help by continuing to make prudential arguments for Israel's support. Now they have several fresh theological arguments as well.

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