

Lewis, Donald M. *A Short History of Christian Zionism: From the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021. 374 p. ISBN 978-0-8308-4697-9.

When I was a child, our family attended a Presbyterian congregation in a southern city with a popular minister who was an excellent pastor. Each year he would gather a group of Christians for a trip to “the Holy Land” (Israel/Palestine) that occurred during the season of Lent close to Holy Week. This minister’s theology was deeply steeped in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) except for his doctrine of “the last things” or eschatology. He had come under the influence of dispensationalism, a form of theology that emerged in the 1800s among Anglo-American Christians focused on promises in the Bible to God’s people that seemed unfulfilled in history. Some members of our congregation who went on these “Holy Land” trips with our pastor said that his hope was that the Second Coming of Christ would occur one year while they were in Israel. This sounded very speculative to my parents (they never went on any of these trips). But in a city like ours where every imaginable form of Christianity thrived, it wasn’t difficult to find other Christians who wanted to “walk where Jesus walked.” Unfortunately, this pastor died before his pious dreams were realized. But his annual excursions were my first point of contact with what I later learned was the movement of Christian Zionism.

Many mainline Protestants don’t grow up learning about “end-times” theology and Christian support for the modern state of Israel. In this carefully researched and well written book, the late historian Donald M. Lewis (Regent College) first introduces readers to the history of Christian anti-Judaism in the early church and middle ages. The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century in only its second generation saw the emergence of new ways of reading the Bible that focused on God’s promises to the ancient Israelites that appear in the form of covenants (cf. contracts) between God and the people and prophecies about the near (or distant future). Among the Reformed Protestants (Calvinists and Puritans) who pioneered this new way of reading the Bible, God had not betrayed or forgotten the covenants and prophecies, some of which included the gift of land in the region we know as Israel/Palestine to the Jews. This Protestant movement became known as the “restorationists” and it morphed into what we know as “Christian Zionism” in England in the 1800s. In fact, the phrase “Christian Zionism” wasn’t coined until the 1890s.

Over the course of about five centuries, Christian Zionism’s teachings and practices have taken diverse forms. Lewis’ vast set of examples disabuse the reader of the notion that there is some kind of “essential Christian Zionism” that can be extracted from this rich history. In fact, as a reader I needed an appendix to gather the definitions of the variety of forms of prophetic schemes of the near and distant future generated by this movement. These include (and the following list is not exhaustive of the literature):

amillennial eschatology,
historicist premillennialism,
postmillennialism,

post-tribulation rapture,
 historic premillennialism,
 historical or covenantal premillennialism,
 historicist premillennialism.

What some of these forms of teaching had in common was the notion that study of the Bible revealed keys for understanding the past, present, and future course of world history and the part to be played by the Jewish people when they would be restored from diaspora to live in the ancient land of their ancestors. Of course, from the 1500s to the 1900s, the notion that Jews would once again live in the land known as Palestine in the Ottoman empire would have sounded extraordinary, not only to Muslims and most Christians, but also to most Jews. One theme that Lewis traces is the number of historical occasions when it was Protestant Christians who were hoping and taking steps for the restoration of Jews to their ancient homeland before such a notion was popular among Jews themselves. In fact, not until the pogroms in Russia that began in the 1880s and the Holocaust of the 1930s and '40s, did the Jewish Zionist quest to secure a homeland take off among parts of world Jewry. Yet the idea of a return of the Jews to the land had become part of some Protestant preaching from the 1500s and had become popular in the 1800s.

Our popular image of the end-times theology of Christian Zionism is that it focuses on prophecy as detailed prediction of the future, and that these predictions often fail. The best-selling books by Hal Lindsey, especially *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the popular *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (1995-2007) and the films based on these novels introduced their audience to dispensational premillennial eschatology. This theology looks forward to a near-future event when faithful Christians will be bodily taken up to heaven ('raptured') by Christ before a period of apocalyptic tribulation for those "left behind." After some period, Christ will return to vanquish the anti-Christ who rules the world and will set up God's kingdom on earth for a thousand years. This approach to history and the future is often dismissed because at various points in time a date or year has been named when the rapture would occur or Christ would return in an undeniable public way. What Lewis shows is that Christian Zionists have always been flexible and adaptable to the changing course of history. When one set of prophetic expectations fail, a new set will be proposed triggering new hopes for the future. This Protestant (and now Pentecostal and charismatic) movement has built-in ways of overcoming disconfirmation by history, based on their assumption of the veracity of Scripture. If the Bible is God's Word (and not merely pious human words about God), then there must be keys of interpretation to unlock the mystery of its promises. Christian Zionism is a kind of on-going quest to find those keys through biblical study and interaction with current events in a worldview where God has miraculous power to intervene.

Lewis also makes a strong case that Christian Zionism functions as a social identity-maker for its followers by contrasting their lives with those of persecuted Jews struggling to survive against antisemitism in the west and against their enemies in the Middle East. In other words, it gives meaning, purpose, and a role for Christian agency

in history to hasten the coming of Christ's direct reign and God's kingdom. And it also began to redefine the relationship of Christians and Jews centuries before Christian – Jewish dialogue and partnership began in the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century. In the writings of the Puritans of the 1600s, Lewis identifies five words that begin to be associated with Jews: "*esteem, gratitude, love, longing, and realism*" (67). This emergence among some Calvinist Protestants of respect and concern for the welfare of Jews in the early modern world is striking given the long centuries of Christian anti-Jewish teaching and hostility, even persecution (that continued in Roman Catholicism until the mid-1960s and among many Lutherans until after WWII).

Paradoxically, many Christian Zionists have been concerned to communicate the good news about Christ to Jews and to welcome them by conversion to Christianity. This is the double-edged sword of popular forms of Christian Zionism. On the one hand, Christian replacement theology or "supercessionism" (the notion that the Church is the one 'true Israel' and has replaced Jews in God's covenant dealing with humanity) is rejected by Christian Zionists. God hasn't abandoned God's promises to the Jewish people made through their prophets. On the other hand, as evangelical Protestants, many historic Christian Zionists also affirmed that Christ was God's sole provision for human redemption. Therefore, they worked to find culturally appropriate ways to communicate the gospel to Jews even when the rate of conversion was disappointing amid the much greater need for evangelistic work among many non-Jews in the modern world.

Thus Christian Zionists worked to maintain both the continuity of God's relationship with the Jewish people and the radical challenge of Christ's life, death, and resurrection for both Jews and Gentiles. You might say out of centuries of Christian anti-Judaism, in the early restoration movement among Calvinist Protestants and German Pietists new notions of Christian – Jewish relations began to emerge. This newfound esteem for Jews included the hope for Jewish restoration to the land of Israel promised to their ancestors.

These Protestant efforts came to political fruition in the late 1800s in England and America when Christian Zionists began to influence the British empire and the US government to welcome the aspirations of the Jewish Zionist movement to establish a homeland for their people in Palestine. Lewis narrates both the concern of Christian Zionists to liberate Jews from the dangers of antisemitism at work in the west at the turn of the century, and their almost universal blindness to the existence and aspirations of the Palestinians, and the holiness of Jerusalem for Muslims. Another negative side of Christian Zionism is its zeal for Jews that erases Arab Christians from the Near East, and that generally views Islam and Muslims as inherently negative forces in the world, even as the anti-Christ. In fact, by the late twentieth century some Christian Zionists put away evangelistic work among Israeli Jews, which Lewis finds contrary to mainstream evangelical notions of the universal significance of the Person and Work of Christ.

For a mainline Presbyterian reader of Lewis' fine book like me, one of the most important oversights of Christian Zionism's approach to the Bible is its tendency to read

prophetic and apocalyptic texts as if they were addressed primarily to readers who would live centuries much later than the original audience. In fact, some Christian Zionists claimed to find in the books of Isaiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation predictions about the future history of the Christian Church. This tendency to try to absorb later history into ancient prophecy overlooks the question, what did prophetic oracles and apocalyptic visions mean for the original audiences in ancient Israel and the early Jesus movement? Historical-, literary-, and social critical readers of the Bible since the nineteenth century have labored to recover those original 'situations in life' (*Sitzen im Leben*) of the biblical texts that made these writings relevant to people of their own day. Critical scholars have read prophetic and apocalyptic writings as forth-telling to their own original audiences rather than fore-telling the future. Thus, the book of Revelation is about the crisis of Roman persecution of the early Christian church, and not about events in the Middle East today.

On the other hand, the functions of Christian Zionism both in terms of Christian identity formation, creation of respect and empathy for Jews, and its political impact in the origins and history of the state of Israel causes me to wonder. Doesn't contemporary Christianity need something like a theology of history to interpret the 'signs of the times,' to locate Christians, Jews, and others within the drama of God's redemptive work and dealings with nations, communities, and individuals? What might mainline Christians learn from Christian Zionists' profound sense that God makes and keeps promises with peoples and nations, has a plan for the totality of history, and is coming to meet us in the future of creation? That the history of one particular people, the Jews, can have cosmic significance? That God is not only one who meets us in sacred stories of the past but one who is coming to meet us out of the future, the mode of time in which God in some sense resides? Isn't one of the profound limitations of progressive Protestant Christianity its lack of a widely informative eschatology that expresses God's aims and purposes for creation and humankind?

For critics of the policies and practices of the modern state of Israel, these theological questions will be dwarfed by the troubling blindness of most Christian Zionists to the plight of the Palestinian people and to Arab Christians in the Near East. But a proper theological response to Christian Zionism isn't merely to react with an anti-Christian Zionism that mirrors the good guys vs. bad guys mentality of the *Left Behind* novels.

And then there are the dialogues we can imagine but never have in the flesh with all the significant restorationists and Christian Zionists who have gone before us, persons like:

Theodore Beza
 Martin Bucer
 Thomas Brightman
 Sir Isaac Newton
 Jonathan Edwards
 Lord Shaftesbury (Anthony Ashley Cooper)

George Elliot (Mary Evans)
John Nelson Darby
Cyrus I. Scofield
William E. Blackstone
William Hechler
Dwight L. Moody
James Arthur Balfour
Reinhold Niebuhr
Paul Tillich
Karl Barth
Billy Graham
Derek Prince

The sheer diversity of end-time views and institutional relations of this communion of the saints defies simple definitions and hasty dismissal.

One other image from my childhood growing up in a Presbyterian congregation was a suburban home across the street from our church. The owners conducted a house church that met on Sundays, and their driveway, yard, and the streets around the home would be filled with parked cars when we went to Sunday school. One of the leaders of this house church was said to have received a revelation about the exact date when Christ would return (sometime in the early 1970s). The members of the house church quit their jobs, sold their homes, and moved into the home to await the Second Coming.

The expected date came and passed. Slowly one by one, the cars began to depart with what few belongings the expectant believers had packed with them until no one came to this home on Sundays. When the owners moved away and the house was sold, I wondered what visions, what ecstatic speech, what systems of Bible reading and communal property, what fervid prayers had held them together? In the Cold War world haunted by the specter of nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, the Six Day War (1967), and the charismatic and Jesus Movements, what “blessed assurance” did these believers receive that challenged them to risk all and move in together to await the Rapture (1 Thessalonians) or the disclosure of the anti-Christ and the return of their Savior?

And how many of them found ways to forgive or dismiss the house church visionary, reopen their Bibles, and dream new millenarian dreams in new house churches or independent congregations? Did any of them move to Israel/Palestine to await the Rapture or the Second Coming there? How many times has this story been repeated in ancient and modern times? The hope for divine intervention in the slaughterhouse of history may be a witness to our deep sense that the world is not as it should be, and better times are promised or possible beyond our imagining. Perhaps that undefeatable kind of hope helps to keep us human although “It is not for you to know times or hours...” (Acts 1:7).

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