A NEW CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

GERALD R. MCDERMOTT

Die Vision des Propheten Ezechiels von der Auferstehung der Toten, Quentin Metsys the Younger (ca. 1589)
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Most of us are familiar with the standard narrative about Christian Zionism. It is allegedly a result of bad exegesis and zany theology. While many scholars concede that the Hebrew Bible is clearly Zionist (that is, its primary focus is on a covenant with a particular people and land, both called Israel, and the land sometimes called Zion), they typically insist that the New Testament drops this focus on a particular land and people, and replaces it with a universal vision for all peoples across the globe. *Eretz Yisrael* (Hebrew for "the land of Israel") is said to be replaced by *ge* (Greek for "land" or "earth")—which is usually understood to mean the whole "earth." Concern with Jews as Jews is thought to be absent from the New Testament—except to insist that there is no longer any significant difference between Jew and Greek (Gal. 3:28). Hence neither the people nor the land of Israel have any special significance after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

According to this narrative, the only ones who have advocated for the idea that the New Testament maintains concern for the particular land and people of Israel are premillennial dispensationalists. Most dispensationalist theology has put Israel and the church on two different tracks, neither of which runs at the same time; it often holds to elaborate schedules of End Times events including a rapture, where Christians are "caught up into the air" (1 Thess. 4:17) and out of the increasingly grim events of history. This approach, which was developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is thought to be the origin and essence of all Christian Zionism.

Yet Christian Zionism is at least eighteen centuries older than dispensationalism. Its vision is rooted in the Hebrew Bible, where God's covenant with Israel is the central story, and at the heart of the covenant is the promise of a land. God takes the initiative to take a particular people to himself and to then promise and eventually deliver a land to this people. Over time, God would drive this people off their land twice but, even in exile, his prophets declared that the land was still theirs.

The Jews who wrote the New Testament kept this vision in the background, with the inauguration of the church coming to the foreground. Just as the Hebrew Bible envisioned blessings going to the whole world through the people of this land, so too the New Testament proclaimed 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. These 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), which one day would be transformed into a center of blessing for the world.

Anti-Zionists concede that the Old Testament prophets, usually writing from exile, predicted a

return to the land. But some of them say these prophecies of return were fulfilled when the Babylonian exiles returned to rebuild Jerusalem toward the end of the sixth century BC.

Yet there is remarkable evidence that Jesus looked to a *future* return and a restored Jerusalem. In Matthew 24 he says that when the Son of Man returns, "all the tribes of the land will mourn," quoting Zechariah's prophecy about the inhabitants of Jerusalem mourning when "the LORD will give salvation to the tents of Judah" (Zech. 12:7, 10). Then in Matthew 19:28, Jesus tells his disciples that "in the new world…you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the *twelve tribes* of Israel." James Sanders observed in *Jesus and Judaism* that these repeated references to the twelve tribes imply restoration of Israel, particularly in Jerusalem.[1] Luke records Anna speaking of the baby Jesus "to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38), and Jesus' expectation that when he returns, Israel will welcome him: "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:34-35). Luke suggests that the return will be in Jerusalem (Luke 21:24-28).

When Jesus' disciples asked Jesus just before his ascension, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), Jesus did not challenge their assumption that one day the kingdom would be restored to physical Israel. He simply said the Father had set the date, and they did not need to know it yet. It was these sorts of indications in the gospels and Acts that caused Oxford historian Markus Bockmuehl to write that "the early Jesus movement evidently continued to focus upon the restoration of Israel's twelve tribes in a new messianic kingdom."[2]

Paul, Peter, and the writer of the book of Revelation had similar expectations. Paul used Isaiah's prophecy of restoration in Is. 59 to declare that "all Israel will be saved" at the end of history, when "the deliverer will come from *Zion*, [and] he will banish ungodliness from *Jacob*" (Rom. 11:26). In Acts 3, Peter looked forward to "the times of restoration of all things which God spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient time" (Acts 3:21). The word Peter uses for "restoration" is the same word (*apokatastasis*) used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament which the early church used as its Bible) for God's future return of Jews from all over the world to Israel. In Revelation the Lamb stands "on Mount Zion" in the final stage of history (14:1), and the new earth is centered on Jerusalem, which has twelve gates named after "the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel" (Rev. 21:2, 12). In chapter 11, the nations "trample" upon "the holy city for forty-two months." What city is this? It is the one "where their Lord was crucified" (11:2, 8). This will take place before or during the time when "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ" (v. 15). So in the time of the new heavens and the new earth, that new earth is to be centered in Jerusalem and filled with markers of Jewish presence in the land of Israel.

Paul has long been cast as the apostle to the Gentiles, who supposedly took the focus off Judaism and showed that the gospel was really a universal message for all. It has often been claimed that Paul believed the days of Jewish particularity were over, and the days of non-Jewish universalism had begun. God's covenant with the Jews was done, according to this view of Paul's theology, and he has transferred that covenant to the Church. No longer was God 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 because God was punishing Israel for not accepting her messiah. Soulen's two other kinds of supersessionism are "economic" (in God's economy or administration of the history of salvation, Israel's purpose was to prepare for the messiah and so, once he came, Israel had no more purpose) and "structural" (the history of salvation is structured so as not to need Israel in any integral way, except to serve 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 [of blessing] were made to Abraham and to his offspring" (3:16) so that getting saved means being in Abraham's family: "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:29). In other words, the gospel means getting connected to Israel's history, not getting away from it. In other words, while supersessionism suggests that Israel has been left behind, Galatians says otherwise.

We find the same pattern in Revelation, which is usually dated near the end of the first century. As we have just seen, John writes that the new earth is centered on Jerusalem, with her twelve gates named for the twelve tribes (21:12). It appears, then, that a Zionist vision continued in the New Testament church through at least the end of the first century.

These are only a few of the many signs of Zionism in the New Testament, which is why early Christians continued to expect a future for Israel as a people and land.

Justin Martyr (100-165), one of the best-known second-century Christian writers, expected that the millennium would be centered in Jerusalem. Although he was one of the first replacement theologians (thinking that the church replaced Israel in some sense), his vision of the Church's future included a particular city in the particular land of Israel:

> But I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned and enlarged, [as] the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and others declare. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chaps. LXXX & LXXXI*)*

Tertullian (160-c.225) also saw a future for the people and land of Israel. Although he decried "Jews" for their ignorance in putting Jesus to death, and thought that God punished them by tearing "from [their] throat[s]…the very land of promise", he believed that they would one day be returned to their land:

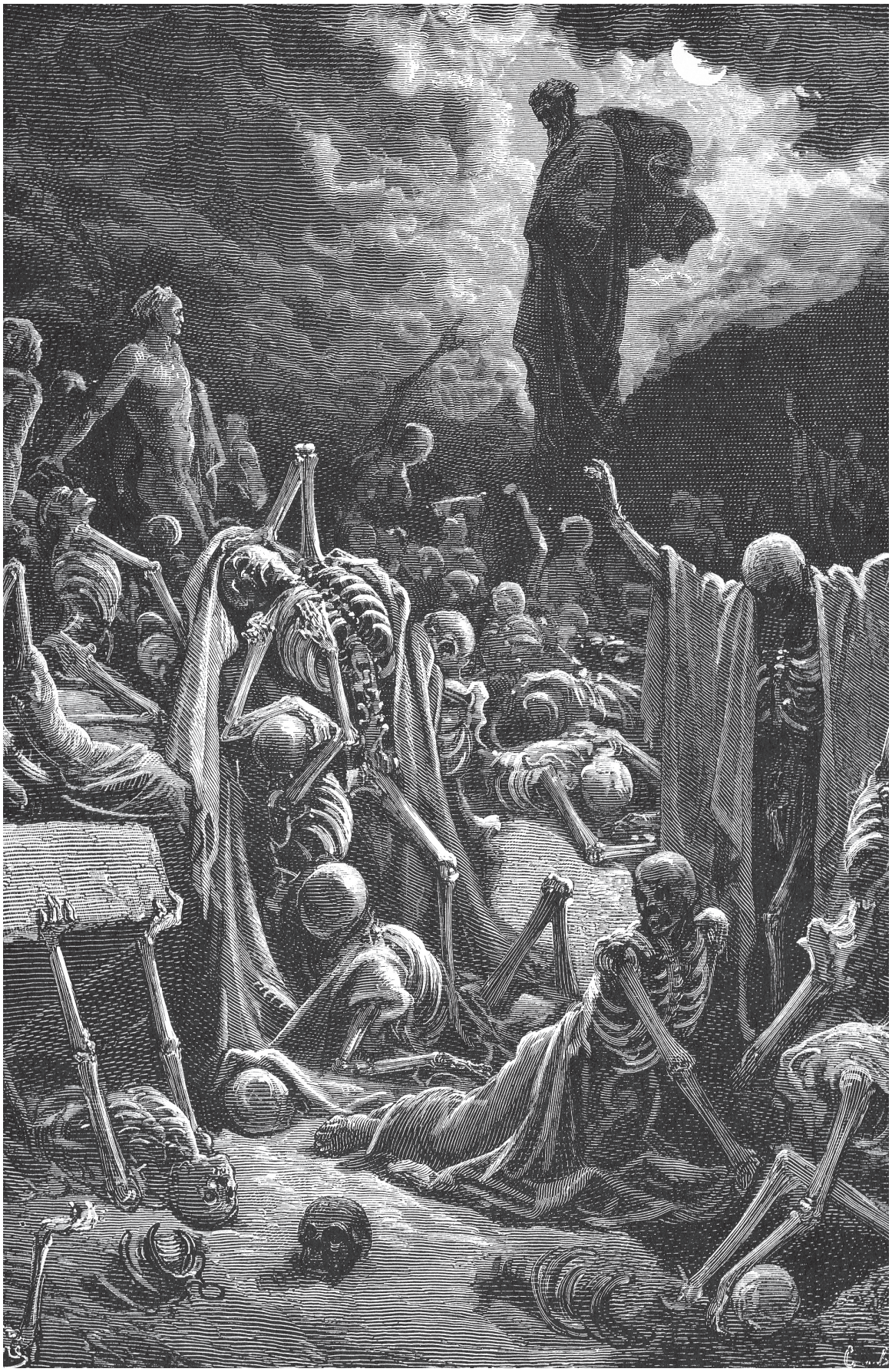
> It will be fitting for the Christian to rejoice, and not to grieve, at the restoration of Israel, if it be true, (as it is), that the whole of our hope is intimately united with the remaining expectation of Israel. (*On Modesty,* chap. 8)

A bit later in the third century, the Egyptian bishop Nepos, who according to Robert Wilken "was a respected and admired Christian leader," foresaw a restoration of Jerusalem and rebuilding of the temple. Millennial teaching was prevalent in that area of third-century Egypt, and had been so for a long time, along with, presumably, faith in a restored Israel.[3]

This early church Zionism came screeching to a halt with Origen (184-254), who regarded the relationship between the Jewish messiah and the future promise of the land as a zero-sum game. Either one or the other could be fulfilled, not both. In Wilken's words, "If Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the prophecies about the messianic age had already been fulfilled, and it was the task of biblical interpreters to discover what the spiritual promises meant in light of this new 'fact.'" So Jerusalem did "not designate a future political center but a spiritual vision of heavenly bliss." When the psalmist said "the meek shall possess the land," Origen thought he meant the "pure land in the pure heaven"—not a location on planet earth.[4]

Augustine was willing to call soil taken from Israel "holy land," but he spiritualized the promises of land in a way similar to Origen's. Once Augustine's amillennial eschatology became accepted in the medieval church, with its assertion that the millennium is simply the rule of Christ through the Church, few medieval thinkers saw a future for the people or land of Israel. All Old Testament prophecies of the future Israel were interpreted to be predictions of the Christian Church that came after the resurrection of Christ.

It took the Reformation's return to the plain sense of the biblical text to restore confidence that there could be a future role for a particular Israel, both as a people and a land, even while Christian salvation was offered to the whole world. Pietists and Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became convinced from Old Testament prophecies and Paul's writings that Jews would return to their land, and would eventually be converted to Christian faith. Long before the rise of dispensationalism in the nineteenth century, Protestants in a variety of churches foresaw a role for a particular Zion in times before the End. Then after the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel in 1948, many Catholic and Protestant theologians recognized from Romans 11 that the rise of the Church did not end God's continuing



Ezekiel's Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, Gustave Doré (1866). Credit: Wikimedia Commons

covenant with Israel. As theologians brought new focus on that covenant, many came to understand that the land was integral to it.

Karl Barth (1886-1968) was among those who were convinced of God's continuing covenant with Israel and affirmed the significance of the land. Barth 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 as straightforward predictions in a literalistic sense, such as the idea that a literal Great Tribulation was to be expected, or that a military battle between particular nations and Israel would take place.

But at the same time Barth thought that these eschatological errors were "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 type of resurrection and the Kingdom of God. It 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 pointed to by 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.[5]

Lev Gillet (1893-1980) was another mid-twentieth-century Christian Zionist. Gillet was a French Catholic who became a Russian Orthodox priest after spending three years with Russians held by Germans during World War I as a prisoner of war. He urged all Christians to realize that Israel has a "special claim" on their goodwill and that the people of Israel have a "privilege" and "priority" to the "birthright" since they are the "elder sons" in God's family. They are the *corpus mysticum* into which Gentile Christians are grafted. Therefore the earthly problems of Israel are "not outside" for Gentiles. They ought to make Israel's problems their own. Hence to help a Jew is to help Israel fulfill the "mysterious identity" to which it is called. Zionism is therefore a theological question which no Christian can ignore.[6]

What is this mysterious identity? Gillet said Israel was called to the "sufferings of the servant" in Isaiah and to somehow reveal the divine power through those sufferings. Because of the "sacramental" quality of the land, it is only there that a Jew can "feel himself entirely Hebrew." Martin Buber said the land "is the visible and efficacious sign of a spiritual reality." This, Gillet wrote, is true for Christians also: "For the Christian, the whole of Palestine is not only the shrine of Jesus' life, death and resurrection; it is also the land of the Presence, the meeting-place of Yahweh and Israel, and the Shekinah may still be felt there." In other words, the true meaning of the land is spiritual, not political.[7]

If Barth and Gillet were right, then we might see that previous assumptions about Israel's Land—that its importance was temporary, like that of the sacrificial system or what Christians have called the "ceremonial law"—were wrong. On closer examination of the biblical text however, we realize that the Mosaic law–with its "ceremonial" commands about worship–was a *sign* of the covenant, but the Land was part of the covenant *itself*. In God's very first statement to Abraham, the Land was central: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house *to the land* that I will show you" (Gen. 12:3).

The Land continued to be at the heart of the biblical story: "Of all the promises made to the patriarchs it was that of the land that was the most prominent and decisive."[8] Elmer Martens estimated that *eretz* (land) is the fourth most frequent noun or substantive in the Hebrew Bible, and is more dominant statistically than the covenant.[9] By my own counting, the *eretz* of Israel is either directly referred to or implied more than one thousand times in Tanakh, the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Of the 250 times that covenant (*b'rit*) is mentioned, in 70% of those instances, 177 times, covenant is either directly or indirectly connected to the land of Israel. Of the 74 times that *b'rit* appears in Torah, 73% of those times, or 54, include the gift of the land, either explicitly or implicitly. According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Next to God himself, the longing for land dominates all others [in the Hebrew Bible]."[10] In other words, when the biblical God calls out a people for himself, he does so in an earthy way, by making the gift of a particular land an integral aspect of that calling.

But didn't the author of Hebrews make all this moot when he asserted that the first covenant had been rendered "obsolete" (8:13)? Not really. He was probably referring to the sacrificial system revealed through Moses, which Rome's destruction of the Temple in 70 AD brought to an end. The letter then moves directly from this initial statement on the obsolescence of sacrifice to a discussion of the tabernacle in the wilderness where "sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper" (Heb. 9:1-2, 9). It is clear from this that by "covenant," the text means the Mosaic covenant, not the master covenant cut with Abraham.

It is helpful to recall that the Land was God's principal gift in the master covenant with Abraham in Genesis, and that its promise was never revoked. Jesus spoke of "the blood of *the* covenant" (Matt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24 emphasis added), suggesting there was only one fundamental (Abrahamic) covenant, and that the Mosaic law was an aspect *of*, but not the same *as*, that fundamental covenant.

Scripture never puts the Land on the same level as Mosaic law. If the latter is binding on Jews but not Gentiles in precisely the same way (simply teaching spiritual principles of holiness to Gentiles), and the Church is overwhelmingly Gentile, in one sense Gentiles can say that it has become obsolete (but not irrelevant) for them. But they can never say that about the people of Israel or the Land of Israel. The Gentiles of faith have been grafted into the olive tree of the people of Israel. And the Land of Israel is God's "holy abode" (Ex. 15.13). Scholars as diverse as (Catholic) Gary Anderson, (Lutheran) Robert Jenson, and (Reformed) Karl Barth have argued that the New Testament authors believed the Land *continued* to be God's holy abode.

Scholars have long pointed out that Israel's *enjoyment* of the Land was conditional: her people were exiled when they disobeyed the terms of the Mosaic covenant. But just as the original gift of the Land was *un*conditional and forever, so too the return to the Land was an unconditional gift of grace. Repentance did not precede it. The scriptures suggest instead that repentance and full spiritual renewal will take place *after* return and restoration. In Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the dry bones, first God says he will take the people of Israel and "bring them to their own land," and then later "will make them one nation in the land." Then even later, he "will cleanse them" (Ezek. 37:21, 22, 23). So the relationship between Israel and the Land is governed by both conditional law and unconditioned promise. And fulfillment of that promise proceeds by stages.

Such "New Christian Zionists" as I have touched upon here do not agree on every aspect of their Zionist commitments. Nor do they believe that the state of Israel is a perfect country. Nor that it should not be criticized for its failures. Nor that it is necessarily the last Jewish state we will see before the end of days. Nor that we know the particular timetable or political schema that will come *before* or *in* those final days.

But they *are* convinced that the *state* of Israel, which includes more than two million non-Jews, is, by God's grace, what protects the *people* of Israel today. That support for *this* state and its people is eroding all over the world. Israel lies in a region of movements and governments bent on its destruction. Mainline Protestants have withdrawn their support. Many evangelicals are now starting to withdraw theirs, using the same faulty arguments of the Protestant mainline.

There are good prudential reasons for supporting Israel today. Israel is an island of democracy and freedom in a sea of authoritarian and despotic regimes. It needs friends as anti-semitism rises precipitously around the world. But Christians also need to know that there are strong *theological* reasons to believe that the people of Israel continue to be significant for the history of redemption, and that the land of Israel continues to be important to God's providential purposes. P

Gerald R. McDermott is editor of *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (InterVarsity Academic, forthcoming).

(Endnotes)

1 James Sanders, Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 98.

2 Markus Bockmuehl, Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), xi.

3 Robert L. Wilken, The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 76-77, drawing on Eusebius, The History of the Church 7.24 and other sources.

4 Ibid. 70, 72, 77-78.

5 Carys Moseley, Nationhood, Providence, and Witness: Israel in Protestant Theology and Social Theory (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 234, xxxii, 221-22.

6 Lev Gillet, Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 158, 161.

7 Ibid., 160, 161-62, 167.

8 Gerhard von Rad, The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays (London: Oliver and Boys, 1966), 79.

9 Elmer A. Martens, God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 97-98.

10 Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, eds. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 487-88.