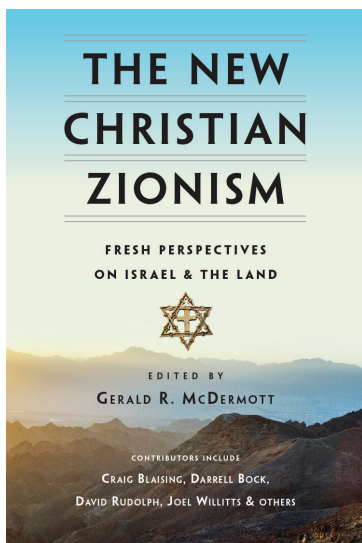


OUT WITH THE OLD & IN WITH THE NEW

Review by Micah Meadowcroft

THE NEW CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

by GERALD McDERMOTT (Editor) IVP Academic, 352 Pages



The contributors to *The New Christian Zionism* do not lack for ambition. The book, a collection of essays touching on a surprising diversity of subjects, reaches forcefully for a longed for future: a transformed Christian theology and politics in relation to Israel, the nation, the people, and the land.

As a whole work, the primer looks to be revolutionary, by beginning the overturn of supersessionism—the view that the church has inherited all the promises of Israel, replacing it in God’s providential plans—as a legitimate theological stance and the monopoly on Protestant Zionism held by dispensationalism—specifically the premillennialist end-times focus typified by the popular *Left Behind* novels, that sees history as a set of prophetic check marks marching to the end of days. It seeks to say, “Here are better

grounds, bigger grounds, for the support of Israel in the present and hope in an Israel of the future.” In parts, that means a rapid survey and judgment of the history of Christian Zionism, the presentation of a distinctive exegetical hermeneutic for future study, and a conventional but highly developed apologetic for modern Israel’s existence and current political behaviors.

Such an enormous object can hardly be accomplished in some 350 pages, but the writers know this, and editor Gerald R. McDermott makes clear that these essays are, even together, but an essay into what they all hope will become an extended and tide-turning dialogue among all Christians. Of course, like the un-proved prophet of peace in Jeremiah 28, only time will tell. But, on their own terms as works of scholarship and proclamation, the essays that make up *The New Christian Zionism* should be judged happy breaks with the too-often simplistic polarization of Protestant discussions of Israel and its theological and political significance.

McDermott makes clear in the introduction that no progress can be made in this conversation without an immediate rejection of the ahistorical assumption that Christian Zionism has predominantly been rooted in dispensationalist theology and that dispensationalist eschatology is its key theological foundation.

The survey portions of the work demonstrate why this is true—Christians were Zionists prior to the rise of Evangelical dispensationalism. They have been so without it. Dispensationalism’s general dismissal outside certain Evangelical circles then does not necessitate a dismissal of Zionism as well, and if Christians should bring theology to bear in considering Israel today, new work is possible and required.

The thesis of this New Christian Zionism, its distinctive *raison d’être* as an alternative to the fulfillment of apocalyptic timetables, is, as McDermott summarizes:

We believe that the Bible claims that God saves the world *through* Israel and the perfect Israelite; thus the Bible is incoherent and salvation impossible without Israel. We propose that the history of salvation is ongoing; the people of Israel and their land continue to have theological significance.

The conclusion of this, McDermott says, is that the modern state of Israel is a partial fulfillment of prophecy, and that Christians ought to support it, in that the Jews as the nation of Israel need and deserve a homeland in Israel. In fact, more than dispensationalism, the real target of much of the argumentation is supersessionism. It is easy enough to work

with the dispensationalist; in practical political application the difference is presently immaterial. The harder and more important work being done here is the argument that Israel does in fact matter theologically, not just in theory but in fact, with material consequences—which supersessionism does not easily allow.

Following a rapid run through by McDermott of history's greatest hits in both the supersessionist and Zionist records, the collection turns to the heart of its original work, a new hermeneutic for framing the theological discussion of Israel. The section focuses on exegesis, specifically as regards the land and the ethnic nation, but the principles presented have expansive implications beyond the range of the book.

Craig Blaising, in his chapter titled "Biblical Hermeneutics," introduces this program and the seriousness with which it hopes to be, and I believe should be, taken. Blaising is playing for keeps; this is not a "reading" or a "project," rather, "the claim is that the view being presented here is a right reading of the text and that the alternative view is wrong." That view, rejecting any supersessionist reading of the New Testament, says that it is best read "as the continuance and advancement of the plan and purpose of God presented in the Tanak for *Israel and the nations, Jews and Gentiles*. The New Testament affirms the expectation of the Tanak of an ethnic, national, territorial Israel in the consummation of the divine plan."

The principles undergirding this view can be basically delineated as: the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, the ethnic and national contingency that the

incarnation and Christ's work of salvation causes for the individual is not an annihilation of those corporate identities, the New Testament is a Jewish document—and there is plenty of room for, and interpretations of, prophecy and promise. It is not an especially complicated hermeneutic, but rather a reminder that the oft invoked "plain reading of scripture" is hardly a plain reading if not read within its original Jewish context. Even beyond Blaising's chapter, most of the exegetical work done is basically the reminder that these are Jewish writers predominately writing to a still-very-Jewish audience, even as Gentiles joined that body.

Blaising attributes supersessionism—and the inability of many to read the New Testament outside the lens of a mostly non-Jewish church history—to a failure to understand three specific elements that make up the second principle I have listed: first, a failure "to appreciate the continuity in the Tanak and the New Testament of a new creation eschatology that features the renewal of creation"; second, "to appreciate the corporate dimensions of biblical anthropology"; and third, "a failure to comprehend that the future kingdom predicted in the Tanak and preached and predicted in turn in the New Testament is consistently a multinational kingdom."

The key New Testament passage for Blaising and for this *New Christian Zionism* is Romans 11. Not only does Romans 11 provide us with the image of the grafting in of the Gentiles into the olive tree of Israel, but it also makes abundantly clear that "all Israel will be saved," that is, the corporate body of Israel, the nation, its fullness; there will be

an Israel of saved Jews. Blaising writes of Romans 11, "There is no change in Israel's identity in this passage. The 'all Israel' that is fully saved in Romans 11:26 is the same kind of 'Israel' as that which is partially hardened in Romans 11:25. He is speaking of a present versus a future ethnic, national Israel." Paul writes when but a remnant are saved—Jews, yes, but saved as individual Jews, a promise of but not yet the fullness of Israel.

So, in this light, when Paul writes in 11:29 "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable," the calling there referenced is the salvation of the nation of Israel, a future consummation of the elect nation, not simply the salvation of the elect remnant. What of the gifts of God? The gift of the land, Blaising reminds us, is the primary gift of the Tanak, and it is the gift of the land, Blaising argues, that remains irrevocable. How can a fullness of Israel be saved, apart from the gathering of a nation of Israel to a land of Israel? Because of this, the modern state of Israel should be seen as a "preconsummate act of God." It is not necessarily the very nation of Israel that will be saved as constituted, or even necessarily a permanent return from exile, as the covenant is irrevocable but not unconditional; rather, it is a sign of God's faithfulness and a reminder of His promise.

After Blaising's introduction of this hermeneutic, we are presented with readings of Matthew, Luke, Acts, and passages of Paul's other epistles. The explicit question at hand is whether the land and the nation of Israel are still a concern in these works? The underlying question is why wouldn't we read these texts as Jewish literature? To read the Old Testament as the Tanak,

as Hebrew literature, (everyone should do themselves the enormous blessing of reading Robert Alter's magnificent translations) is to read over and over again of exile and return, of bondage and deliverance, of faithfulness and unfaithfulness in covenant.

Joel Willitts draws out the tactile geography of Matthew's gospel, and the turfed Davidic kingdom, with a real Jerusalem as its capital, that it promises in its life of Christ as a distinctly Jewish messiah. Mark S. Kinzer, writing about Luke and Acts, not only reminds us of the way in which Luke is framed in, around, and by Jerusalem, but also argues that Acts' opening commission to go to Jerusalem and to Judea and to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, to Rome, should be read not as an abandonment of Jerusalem, but as an incomplete story, an exile with a hoped-for return. David Rudolph suggests that Paul's epistles present the good news of salvation for Gentiles oriented around the eventual salvation of Israel, affirming the particularity of each.

The book's third part considers the practical elements of a Christian Zionism. If our reading of scripture is oriented around the nation of Israel, and a hoped-for salvation of that nation frames our eschatology—in opposition to Israel as plot device in a dispensationalist tribulation—and consequently shapes our understanding of history, then the at-least-partial fulfillment of promise in the existence of the state of Israel demands our attention. A hermeneutical emphasis on corporate identities lends itself to a political emphasis on

the nation state, which Robert Benne defends through a reading of Reinhold Niebuhr. Robert Nicholson's exploration of Israel and international law is a good reminder that international law is literally law among nations, with all the ambiguities that implies, and recalls Israel's covenantal call to be a nation among the nations. Moreover, it is very easy to make certain criticisms when living in a country spanning a continent, resting between oceans, and sandwiched between allies. Shadi Khalloul, an Aramean Christian, defends Israel's treatment of minorities, and provides an illustration of the relationship between Christians and Jews for which *The New Christian Zionism* may call.

Which leads me to ask, what could this all mean going forward? I find the hermeneutic presented highly compelling. I look forward to a growing practice of reading not just the Tanak but the New Testament too as Jewish literature. The arguments for the support of Israel are convincing, whatever degree of fulfillment of promise the 1948 founding represents.

But *The New Christian Zionism* is advancing something much larger than just this, too large to fit within its pages, and the conversation that its writers intend to start has enormous implications. The most glaring absence in this collection is any substantive mention of the book of *Revelation*, providing, as it does, fodder for both dispensationalism and supersessionism. But the contributors to this program insist, rightly, that if they are right then other views must be wrong. What this

conversation may turn into is potentially magisterial in scope; ecclesiology, our very understanding of what the church is, must change to reflect this hermeneutic's confirmation of Israel in salvation history.

Which prompts me to point out, there is little to no mention of the Roman Catholic Church in this collection, and no discussion of *Nostra Aetate* or other relevant Roman documents. If Rome and the empire are the ends of the earth, and if the ends of the earth are reached only to return to Jerusalem, then a conversation about Rome and Jerusalem needs to be had.

Finally, the understanding presented of Israel's future reconciliation with Christ seems to necessitate or promise a revival in the land. That is not, however, the main nature of the support for Israel to which Christians are being called to in this work. Is this a call for evangelization, or do we look for an extra, supernatural proclamation of the gospel as we support Israel as a nation among nations?

I for one hope that *The New Christian Zionism* will prompt the conversations it seems to demand. I doubt that conclusions finally arrived at will be quite as expected, but I am glad to see the beginning of what should become a transformative dialogue regardless. P

Micah Meadowcroft is a writer in Washington, D.C. He has also written for *The American Conservative*, *The American Spectator*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Acculturated*. He is a native of the Pacific Northwest, and a graduate of Hillsdale College.