



# Christian Zionism and Peace in the Holy Land

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Thanks to Alain Epp Weaver for compiling this issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter*.

## Introduction

by Alain Epp Weaver

Christian Zionism of the premillennial dispensationalist variety tells a dramatic tale: the rapture of believers, the rise of the Antichrist, and Jesus' violent, triumphant Second Coming. Within this dramatic narrative the return of the Jews to the Holy Land plays a pivotal role, and the modern State of Israel thus becomes a fact of great theological significance to Christian Zionists.

While Christian Zionism has become a global phenomenon, thanks to the influence of fundamentalist missions, it is in the United States that the political impact of Christian Zionism is felt most acutely. Congregations "adopt" illegal Israeli settlements, sending funds to bolster the defense of these armed colonies. Christian Zionists organize prayer vigils and letter writing campaigns in support of Israeli military offensives (such as the so-called Operation Defensive Shield in the spring of 2002) and against any Israeli territorial concessions, even the minor "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip and four northern West Bank settlements set to take place this summer. Benny Elon, an outspoken Israeli proponent of "transfer" (a euphemism for the expulsion of Palestinians) is a popular speaker at Christian Zionist gatherings. A rancher in Texas tries to produce the red heifer whose ashes would be required for the purification rituals necessary for the Third Temple, which Jewish and Christian extremists hope to have re-established in place of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, to become functional. As the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, with the completion of the sep-

aration barrier and the unilateral withdrawal from isolated settlements, solidifies its occupation over Jerusalem and the West Bank, with the blessing of the United States, Christian Zionists actively support even more extreme positions on the Israeli political spectrum.

This issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter* offers a critical analysis of Christian Zionism theology and readings of Scripture. Loren Johns, academic dean at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, presents an outline of Christian Zionist hermeneutics, and describes Christian Zionist readings of apocalyptic material within Scripture (such as Daniel and Revelation) while also offering more life-giving approaches to such texts. Patricia Shelly, professor of Bible and religion at Bethel College (Kansas), and Dorothy Jean Weaver of Eastern Mennonite Seminary, outline Christian Zionist readings of Old Testament land promises and Paul's tortured reflections in Romans 9–11, respectively, and then suggest alternative, more orthodox, interpretations of these texts. Meanwhile, Cedar Duaybis and Alex Awad, two Palestinian Christian leaders, describe the adverse impact of Christian Zionism on the Palestinian Christian community, appealing to the worldwide church to support a future of justice and peace for Palestinians and Israelis alike rather than to be captive to unorthodox theologies that provide theological rationales for dispossession and violence. Will Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches heed their call?

*Alain Epp Weaver is MCC co-representative for Palestine, Jordan and Iraq.*

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# Christian Zionism: Their Theology, Our Nightmare!

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by Rev. Alex Awad

**O**n a pleasant Sunday afternoon in July 2000, members and pastors belonging to local Palestinian Evangelical congregations from the Palestinian territories gathered at the Bethlehem Hotel to celebrate the formation of their council. An American woman who was present at the meeting approached one of the pastors and asked him if she could say a few words to the assembly. The pastor, desiring to show courtesy to the guest, asked the emcee (also a Palestinian pastor) if the lady could say her few words. The emcee, unaware of what was coming, agreed to let her talk. When the lady took the microphone, I couldn't believe the words that came out of her mouth. She professed to the Palestinian Evangelical Christians assembled there that she had a word from the Lord for them. "God," she said, "wanted them all to leave Israel and go to other Arab countries." She added that they must leave to make room for God's chosen people, the Jews. She warned the pastors and the audience that if they did not listen to the instructions which God had given her, God would pour his wrath on them. When her agenda was recognized, one of the pastors came and whisked her away from the pulpit, but not before she served the whole assembly a mouthful of what is known today as Christian Zionism.

This is not an isolated example by an overzealous Christian Zionist; every one of those pastors gathered in that assembly could tell similar stories. Campus Crusade for Christ, for example, invited an Israeli official and me for a live TV debate on the Arab/Israeli conflict in Kansas City, Missouri. When the time came for questions from the public, a man, after learning that I was a Palestinian Christian pastor, called to tell me that if I was truly a Bible-believing Christian and a true follower of Jesus, I would know that God has given the Holy Land to the Jews and that I and other Palestinians Christians should peacefully leave the country. I am certain that most Christian Zionists are not as radical and confrontational as the woman and the man in my examples. However, many Christians in the United States and around the world cling to these ideas without critically examining them. Some of those who hold these ideas may not have heard the term Christian Zionism.

Influential TV evangelists such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, both staunch advocates of Christian Zionism, have warned and threatened US presidents against carrying out policies that would pressure Israel into making concessions to Palestinians on the pathway to concluding a peace agreement. They and other influential Christian Zionists have cautioned and manipulated presidents against forcing Israel to abandon Jewish settlements in the West Bank as part of a 'land for peace' deal.

## What are the theological and eschatological (end time) beliefs of Christian Zionism?

- Jews have special favor with God and neither time, history nor the religious conditions of Jews can affect or alter God's special favor towards the Jewish people.
- The Holy Land belongs to the Jews. It always has and it always will. Neither history, nor the passing of centuries, nor the religious or moral condition of Jews today can alter this fact.
- Jews today are an extension of the Israelites in Biblical times. Therefore, just as the nations during the Old Testament era were judged as to how they treated ancient Israel, the same is true today. God will bless nations and individuals who bless the modern Jewish state and he will curse countries and individuals who curse it.
- Old Testament prophecies, although uttered thousands of years ago, are being fulfilled in Israel today and have been since 1948 when the state was born.
- God's 'end time' plan is directly connected with modern Israel. Christians can speed up the coming of Christ, as they help bring about the fulfillment of prophecies that pertain to Israel.

## Dangers of the Teachings of Christian Zionism

Most adherents of Christian Zionism are not aware of the destructive theological, religious and political implications of these ideas.

## Theological Implications

Theologically, Christian Zionism is a contradiction in terms. Zionism is a secular political movement that has clear political

goals and has been nonreligious from its inception. Because of the political positions of Zionism, millions of people around the world equate it with racism. Therefore it is not to the advantage of Christianity to be in union with Zionism. Zionism deviates from the heart of the New Testament. New Testament Christianity proclaims "For God so loved the world", while Christian Zionism proclaims "for God so loved modern Israel." According to the book of Acts, Jesus made clear to Peter in a vision that God no longer favors one nation over others:

Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. Acts 10:34-35

In the epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul confronted a group in the churches of Asia Minor that wanted to drag the new believers back to Judaism. Paul stood firmly against this group teaching the churches that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile but that both have equal access to God through Christ.

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. Galatians 3:26-29

Christian Zionism influences its followers to be indifferent to the Biblical mandates on peace and justice. Hard-line Christian Zionists teach that peace between Israel and her neighbors could only be established by the anti-Christ, the archenemy of Christ. Consequently, religious or political leaders or organizations that endeavor to make peace between Israelis and Palestinians could be seen as a tool of the anti-Christ. Thus the more turmoil and suffering that the nations of the Middle East undergo the greater the evidence that God is carrying out his eschatological program. Eschatology for many Christian Zionists is far more important than Biblical teachings on peace and justice. Jesus told some religious teachers who derided the importance of justice:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. Matthew 23:23

## Religious Implications

Christian Zionism is adding fuel to the tension between Christians and Muslims. Many Christian Zionists, especially after September 11, 2001, began to see Muslims as enemies of God. TV evangelists went on the air publicly denouncing Muslims and Islam. Christian Zionists continue to talk about reaching the world for Christ. How can they do so when they are alienating and building walls of mistrust between them and over a billion Muslims?

Palestinian Christians have existed in the Holy Land since the day of Pentecost and have kept the torch of Christianity burning faithfully for the past two thousand years. If the Christian Zionists' agenda is carried out, it will mean the death of Christianity in the Holy Land. The erosion of Christianity in her birthplace is a loss for the body of Christ everywhere. Can we imagine the Holy Land devoid of the Christian presence and a church which has been a faithful witness for Christ since the day the church was born?

## Political Implications

Zionism is militarizing the church. The influence of Zionism on US Christians has helped alter Christians' perceptions of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq. Christian Zionists overwhelmingly supported the war in Iraq and continue to support oppressive Israeli measures in the West Bank. For example, the slaughter of tens of thousands of Iraqi men, women and children in Iraq goes unnoticed and unprotested because of their belief that George W. Bush is a dedicated Christian president who is carrying out the will of God. Likewise, Israel's disproportionate use of force against Palestinian civilians in refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank is usually accepted by Christian Zionists. If condemned at all, it is equal to a slap on the wrist, while a disproportionate amount of blame is placed on the Palestinians who are, in every aspect of their lives, under Israeli control.

Unlike the prophets of the Old Testament, Christian Zionists have no prophetic words of rebuke for the state of Israel when the Jewish state indulges in oppression. Christian Zionists do not call for the state of Israel to do justice. Israel confiscates Palestinian land, demolishes the homes of the poor, destroys their agricultural land and siphons off their water resources, while many Christian Zionists continue to bless Israel and sing her praises. There are Israelis today, however, like the brave prophets of ancient Israel

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Bassem Thabet is the Director of Administration for MCC Palestine, and lives in Jerusalem. When speaking to an MCC group in Akron, Pa., in April 2005, he was asked where or how does he, as a Palestinian, find hope. He answered "I find hope in people like you who believe in peace."

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who do not hesitate to call their compatriots to pursue justice. Jeremiah reflected that courage when he said:

O house of David, this is what the LORD says:  
Administer justice every morning;  
rescue from the hand of his oppressor  
the one who has been robbed,  
or my wrath will break out and burn like fire  
because of the evil you have done—  
burn with no one to quench it.

Jeremiah 21:12

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ calls all his followers to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). His teachings are often referred to as The Good News. They are God's good news for the entire human race. Can we intentionally proclaim his teachings as good news for some but bad news for others? When the Bible is used to endorse the theft of countries and the suppression of nations, then the good news becomes bad news and the Bible is twisted into a manual for occupation.

*Alex Awad is pastor of the East Jerusalem Baptist Church and professor at the Bethlehem Bible College.*

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## Christian Zionism and Genesis' Promise of Land

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by Patricia Shelly

*Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:1-3)

I have talked with many North American Christians who, when faced with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, will ask in puzzlement, "But didn't God promise this land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their descendants? Didn't God give this land to the Jews?"

Christian Zionists assume that the answer to these questions is an unqualified yes and that the implications for foreign policy are obvious. Christian Zionists are usually evangelicals who begin with a literal reading of the biblical text and a conviction that the Genesis promises are prophecies being fulfilled in the modern state of Israel. Jerry Falwell, Ralph Reed, and Pat Robertson are some of the most visible spokesmen for this point of view that, they claim, reflects the thinking of millions of evangelical Christians.

The text quoted above doesn't specifically mention land, but is generally linked to other Genesis passages that do promise land to Abraham's descendants (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:4-8). Especially influential is Genesis 17:8, where God promises the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants "for an everlasting possession."

Since Abraham's name means "the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:5), one

might assume that both Jews (as the descendants of Isaac) and Arabs (as the descendants of Ishmael) have a claim to the land. But when Christian Zionists read the Bible, they find a biblical mandate to endorse the politics of the state of Israel, established by the rightful descendants of Abraham. Such an interpretation frequently leads to a dismissal of Palestinian land rights and an inability to see injustice when Palestinian property is seized and ownership restricted, because "God's will" privileges any Jewish possession of the land.

But the "land traditions from the ancient texts are open to a variety of readings and responses, some which make for war and not for peaceable habitation" (Brueggemann 159). What are the readings of these Genesis texts that present more life-giving options for both Israelis and Palestinians? The resources listed alongside this article explore this question in considerable depth, but here I would sketch five recurrent themes:

1. *God is the rightful owner of the land.* Psalm 24:1 declares, "The earth is the Lord's." In commanding the Jubilee, God says, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev. 25:23). The "monotonous regularity" with which the Bible repeats the Torah phrase "the land which the Lord God will give you" makes it clear that God finally owns the land and it is a gift, not an entitlement (Chapman 121). God will pronounce judgment on those who have defiled "my land" and "my inheritance" (Jer. 2:7, 16:18). God's ownership of the land relativizes all other land claims, and gives primacy to God's directions about how to live on the land.



2. *God's gift of land is always linked to covenant responsibility.* "Those who want to live on the land, therefore must obey the owner of the land" (Ateek 106). Leviticus and Deuteronomy make clear that those who ignore God's commandments will not enjoy the land, but will "perish" or be "vomited out" (Lev. 18:24–30; Deut. 8:17–19). The prophets warn that judgment comes to those who practice abusive land policies (Isa. 5:8, Micah 2:1–3, Amos 7:17, Hos. 9: 2–3). The promise of land is not unconditional, but depends on justice for all its inhabitants (Ezek. 47:21–23).

3. *God promises land to the landless and warns those who control territory to practice justice.* The promise of land occurs in a specific context. "Most of the promises of land in the Bible come from the time of the patriarchs or from the time of the exile . . . [and] were meant to be promises and words of hope to a people who were weak and stateless" (Raheb 76). When Israel and Judah are kingdoms and control territory, the biblical mandate is justice, not the promise of more territory.

4. *Interpreting the promise of land is linked to our concept of God.* Through the ministry of the prophets and the experience of exile, the people of the Old Testament come to see that God is not narrowly confined to a specific geography or land, but reigns over all

nations and loves every land and its peoples. "The land that God has chosen at one particular time in history for one particular people is now perceived as a paradigm, a model for God's concern for every people and every land" (Ateek 108). The God who promises land has the well-being of the world in mind.

5. *God's purpose in giving the land to Abraham's descendants is to bless all nations.* The promise of land is not designed to "satisfy Israel's self-interest" but is "God's strategy to bring his goodness and righteousness to the rest of humanity" (Burge 72). The land is not an end in itself but should lead to a blessing of all the nations.

These perspectives on the promise of land in Genesis present challenges to a Christian Zionist interpretation of the texts. Rather than an unqualified endorsement of one side's claim to the land, these themes suggest another conclusion:

"The land happens to be the homeland of two peoples. Each of them should understand this land to be a gift of God to be shared with the other. Peace and the blessing on the land and on the two peoples will depend on this sharing. Only then will the biblical promises be fulfilled." (Raheb 80)

*Patricia Shelly is professor of Bible and Religion at Bethel College, Newton, Kansas. She served as MCC Palestine Country Representative from 1996–2000.*

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# And So All Israel Will Be Saved: Reflections on a Christian Zionist Reading of Romans

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by Dorothy Jean Weaver

Romans Chapters 9 through 11 is undoubtedly one of the most challenging texts of the New Testament. Here Paul wrestles passionately with questions that shake him to the core. These questions lead Paul to ponder the imponderable, as he struggles to understand the purposes of God in the world. How does Israel figure within God's redemptive purposes, since Israel does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah whom God has sent for their salvation? What becomes of God's covenant with Israel? "Has God rejected his people?" (11:1). "Have they stumbled so as to fall?" (11:11).

Paul's anguish is great. But his trust in God's faithfulness is even greater. Paul answers his own questions with utmost confidence: "By no means!" (11:1, 11). God has not rejected

God's people. Nor have they stumbled so as to fall out of God's redemptive purposes. A sudden, happy insight tells Paul that the "stumbling" of Israel is in fact an integral piece of God's cosmic plan for the salvation of all humankind, Jews and Gentiles alike. In God's "inscrutable ways" (11:33) the "stumbling" of Israel means that "salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous" (11:1). And this "jealousy" will ultimately lead to Israel's "full inclusion" (11:13) and the salvation of "all Israel" (11:25).

This insight stretches Paul's understandings; and Paul pours out praise to God, whose "judgments" are "unsearchable" and whose "ways" are "inscrutable" (11:33). For Paul

this matter is a theological conundrum that he simply entrusts to the infinite wisdom of God. But in the post-1948 world Paul's words are as politically controversial as they are theologically challenging. Who is the "Israel" to whom Paul points? What relation does this "Israel" have to the modern State of Israel, founded in 1948? And what is meant by the "salvation" of "all Israel"?

The International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ), a prominent Christian Zionist organization, sees itself called "to declare the truth of God's word *that bequeaths to the people of Israel the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession*" (emphasis mine). Accordingly, the ICEJ views the modern State of Israel as the prophetically grounded restoration of biblical Israel: "The 20th century saw the Zionist dream come true as a direct fulfillment of God's prophetic word. . . . Out of the ashes of six million Jews rose *the restored Jewish State*" (emphasis mine.) And it is within this theopolitical framework that the ICEJ appeals to Romans 9 through 11:

" . . . Christian Zionists wish to re-emphasize the teaching of Paul in Romans 9–11. Neglect of these crucial passages has led to the unbiblical teaching of replacement theology. This teaching removes from the Jewish nation any national future and stresses that the Church has replaced Israel and has inherited all the blessings promised to her. . . . In Romans 11 particularly, Paul refutes this error and says just the opposite (Romans 11:17–28)."

["ICEJ Doctrines", [http://www.icej.org/about/about\\_doctrines.html](http://www.icej.org/about/about_doctrines.html)]

Christian Zionists thus connect Paul's words in Romans and the national aspirations of the Jewish people. But is the picture this simple? Careful attention to Paul's message would suggest otherwise. This much is historically indisputable. In 1948 a new state came into being in the Middle East. This new state, intended as a homeland for Jews from around the world, was named "Israel." But serious questions must be raised about the relationship of this new state to biblical "Israel," in specific, to the "Israel" of which Paul speaks in Romans 9 through 11. Here four observations come into focus.

1. The socio-political "Israel" of Paul's day is not an autonomous nation, but a people living under military occupation. Paul in his lifetime has never known "Israel" as a freestanding state. Nor is there any indication within these chapters of Romans that Paul conceives of "Israel" as such a state, whether in his present or in his future. Paul

is not concerned here with the rise and fall of nation states.

2. The "Israel" of which Paul speaks is rather a *people group*, Paul's own "kindred according to the flesh" (9:3). More to the point, it is a *faith community*. These are the people to whom "belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah" (9:4–5). It is this people group and this faith community over which Paul anguishes as he considers the purposes of God. Thus for Paul the "salvation" of "Israel" has to do not with the successful emergence of a *nation state* but with the place of a *faith community* within God's redemptive plans for humankind.

3. Paul views the purposes of God in messianic fashion. And for Paul there is no question that Jesus is God's Messiah.

Throughout Romans Paul is focused on the *messianic faith community* originally Jewish but now including Gentiles as well (11:13, 25) that acknowledges Jesus as God's Messiah (cf. 9:5) and confesses that "Jesus is Lord" (10:9; emphasis mine). Accordingly, Paul's anguish in these chapters stems from Israel's failure to recognize *Jesus Christ* as the central actor in God's redemptive purposes. And Paul's words about the "salvation of Israel" point not to the *national aspirations* of an occupied people but to their membership ("*their full inclusion*" [11:12]) *in the messianic faith community* through which God's salvation purposes are being worked out.

4. Paul's vision here includes both Jews and Gentiles as mutually essential actors in the drama of God's redemptive purposes. Israel's present "hardening" (11:25) opens the door to salvation for the Gentiles (11:11, 12, 15, 25). And the incoming of the Gentiles into the messianic faith community creates a "jealousy" among the Jews that will ultimately lead them to "full inclusion" (11:12), "life from the dead" (11:15), and the salvation of "all Israel" (11:26).

God's redemptive purposes, in Paul's view, have nothing to do with a "restored Jewish state." As Paul sees it, God's redemptive purposes seek to draw all humankind, Jews and Gentiles alike, into the inclusive and reconciling fellowship of the messianic community of Jesus Christ. "To [God] be the glory forever" (11:36).

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# Christian Zionism and Biblical Interpretation

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by Loren L. Johns

**H**ow and why do Christian Zionists read the Bible as they do? The Bible is never read in a political, historical, or theological vacuum. A complete response to this question would need to do several things:

1. Show what precedents, historically and theologically, there were to the Christian Zionist movement.
2. Show how “biblical prophecy” came to be understood primarily as prediction about the end times, rather than as declaring God’s word for a particular time and place.
3. Show how the idea of “dispensations” within history became a major paradigm for understanding how God works within history.
4. Demonstrate the principles and methods with which Christian Zionists interpret Scripture.

## Precedents

The story of the historical and theological context for the biblical interpretations of Zionists is quite important for understanding how and why they read Scripture as they do. Christian Zionism is largely the wedding of Jewish Zionism and premillennial dispensationalism. At one level, Christian Zionism is older than Jewish Zionism. Thomas Brightman (16th c.), Louis Way (early 19th c.), Lord Shaftesbury (early 19th c.) and John Nelson Darby (mid-19th c.) were all proto-Zionists. Darby in particular articulated a system of thought that held that God’s consummation of history *required* the return of the Jews to the land of Israel.

Theodor Herzl was the father of (Jewish) Zionism. He had been part of the Haskala (Enlightenment) Movement within European Jewry, which called for the assimilation of Jews within society on the basis of freedom of religion in a pluralist society. Nevertheless, his experience of anti-Semitism in Budapest, Vienna, and Paris eventually convinced him that the only solution to the “Jewish problem” was to create a Jewish state. Originally it was not at all obvious that Israel needed to be the place for this state; Arizona was one option. He died in 1904 before realizing more than a groundswell of support for his ideas.

Ironically, British Christian Zionism, represented by such forceful personalities as Lord Balfour, joined forces with Jewish Zionism, essentially a secular movement. In the wake of the guilt about the Holocaust experienced by the “Christian” nations of the Allies, the joint Fundamentalist Christian and secular Jewish Zionist forces exerted sufficient political pressure to see the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

## “Biblical Prophecy”

The enthusiastic support of Protestant Fundamentalists for this project would not have been possible without the widespread tendency to read the biblical prophets and the two biblical apocalypses (Daniel and Revelation) primarily as predictions about the end times. The irony here is that such readings historicize the biblical prophets in terms of “our” future, the “end times,” but they radically *de*-historicize those same prophets in terms of the life situations out of which they wrote and for which they were writing. They cut the historical connection that made those writings God’s word for a particular time and place. The approach is most pronounced in the reading of Revelation, where the chapters specifically addressed to the seven churches of first-century Asia (Rev. 2–3) are de-historicized, interpreted symbolically as referring to various periods in the two millennia since Revelation was written. Ironically, the chapters that are most symbolic (Rev. 4–20) are then historicized, treated as prophetic prediction about the end of time.

A widespread but erroneous belief is that Christian Zionists tend to read Daniel and Revelation literally. They do not. No Christian Zionist applies a consistently literal interpretation to Revelation. No one has suggested that Jesus really was a lamb. On the contrary, a literal interpretation of Jesus’ command to John to write “to the seven churches that are in Asia” (Rev. 1:4), even mentioning each of them by name—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev. 1:11)—would suggest that we take seriously the historical context in which Revelation was originally written. As a matter of fact, all interpreters of Daniel and Revelation treat some things literally and some things symbolically.

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## Resources for Further Learning

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## WEBSITES

Challenging Christian Zionism: [www.christianzionism.org](http://www.christianzionism.org)

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center: [www.sabeel.org](http://www.sabeel.org)

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Much can happen when the historical context out of which and for which a biblical prophet wrote is ignored. Passages can be ripped from their historical or literary moorings and pieced together with other Scriptures intended for a different time and place into a patchwork quilt of predictions about the future. Such a quilt will seem on the surface quite biblical: look at all the Scripture citations! But the result is a human construct that no longer represents the word of God—whether for 2000 years ago or for today.

Some premillennial dispensationalists reject the claim that their biblical interpretation is a patchwork quilt. Yet some of those same interpreters would be surprised to find that neither Daniel nor Ezekiel nor Revelation says anything about the Antichrist. The word appears only in the Epistles of John, where “many antichrists have [already] come” (1 John 2:18). Nor does the Rapture appear anywhere in the Bible, though the *idea* derives from 1 Thess. 4:17. Even there, the Greek word normally refers to citizens going out of their city to greet an important dignitary and to accompany that dignitary back into the city. So the idea of a secret rapture of the church, which was unknown in Christian biblical interpretation before the 19th century, is foreign even to 1 Thessalonians.

Another significant result of such de-historicizing readings of biblical prophecy is that the message originally intended for God’s people is lost. If Daniel and Revelation are predictions about the future, what possible relevance could they have had for their original audiences? Revelation begins with a blessing on those who “keep what is written in it” (Rev. 1:3). Was that blessing intended for the seven churches in Asia in the first century?

### Daniel 9 and the Dispensational Framework

One of the more significant passages for a Zionist interpretation of Scripture is Daniel 9:20–27. Apocalypses were typically pseudonymous. That is, they were typically written in the name of an important hero of the faith from long ago. Examples include the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Apocalypse of Adam, and the Apocalypse of Moses. Revelation is the only known Jewish or Christian apocalypse that is not pseudonymous.

Much of Daniel (esp. Daniel 2, 7–12) was written in response to a series of events that changed Judaism forever in the second century before Christ. Antiochus IV Epiphanes had launched an aggressive attack on Judaism. He outlawed circumcision and forced the suspension of sacrifices and feasts

in the Temple. This attack cut to the core of Jewish identity and generated much anguish about what a faithful Jew should do in response. One answer was to compromise. Another was to resist. Eventually several opposing ideas about how to resist were offered. 1 Maccabees advocates resistance through armed rebellion. Daniel advocates a resistance through faithfulness and trust in God, repudiating armed rebellion. Interestingly, the two apocalypses that were canonized by the church both advocate a *nonviolent resistance* to the idolatries of Empire (whether the Greek post-Alexandrian Empire of the Seleucids, in Daniel’s case, or the Roman Empire in Revelation’s case). Other writings, not canonized, offered other visions of compromise or armed resistance.

The author of Daniel saw himself living in the crucial end times. He applied Jeremiah’s 70 years of captivity (Jer. 25:11–14) to his own time. Multiplying by 7, he produced a 490-year period made up of 70 “weeks” of years. The first seven “weeks” of seven years represented the 49 years of the Babylonian captivity. The next 62 weeks represent the 434 years to the cutting off of the “anointed one” (Dan. 9:26), Onias III, who was the last legitimate high priest before being murdered in 171 BCE, then replaced by Jason in a political struggle for the influential post. The “prince who is to come” was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who destroyed the city and the sanctuary by desolating the Temple (KJV calls this act the “abomination of desolation”) and by outlawing Judaism. This “prince” would “make a strong covenant with many” (Dan. 9:27). 1 and 2 Maccabees describe how this was fulfilled when many members of the Judean upper classes joined cause with Antiochus IV and advocated compromise on the basis of expedience. “For half of the week [3½ years] he shall make sacrifice and offering cease” (Dan. 9:27). From 167 to 164 BCE, the Temple lay desolate, unavailable to the Jewish people for worship and sacrifice.

Daniel spoke a powerful word of encouragement to the Jewish people, who quickly saw behind the symbolism the terrifying historical circumstances they were currently experiencing. In the midst of their suffering, they heard the comforting promise of God.

### The Dispensational Paradigm

But that is not how Darby read it. Darby thought the “anointed one” must be Jesus. And because the time from the Exile to Jesus was too long for the requisite 434 years, he decided the chronology must start not when Cyrus gave the decree to return to



Jerusalem, but when Nehemiah was given permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem nearly 100 years later. (In no readings, dispensational or otherwise, does the chronology work out neatly.)

Darby saw the 69 weeks extending to the appearance of the messiah, Jesus Christ, the “anointed one.” The cosmic clock stopped, however, when God’s chosen people rejected the messiah meant for them. The “church age” was thus a “Plan B” made necessary because of the Jews’ rejection of their messiah, a parenthetical stoppage in the cosmic chronology. When Israel makes a “covenant with many” (perhaps the United Nations?), the clock will start ticking again. At that point, all that will remain is the final week, the final seven years of history before the millennial reign of Christ, which corresponds to the Tribulation spoken of in Revelation. Actually, the Bible nowhere speaks of a seven-year Tribulation, but if Daniel and Revelation are pieced together, a seven-year Tribulation seems required.

#### Classic Dispensationalism and Progressive Dispensationalism

Darby’s views were taught and studied at Bible conferences at Niagara-on-the-Lake in the 1890s. Numerous young Mennonite men, including A.D. Wenger and C.F. Derstine, were deeply influenced by these conferences. In 1909 C.I. Scofield explained Darby’s views in the Scofield Reference Bible. Dispensationalism played a central role in the conflict between Fundamentalism and Modernism, and dispensationalism and Fundamentalism were often seen as two sides of the same coin.

Many institutions, including Dallas Theological Seminary and Grace Bible Institute (now Grace University) in Omaha, Neb., were founded on the tenets of dispensational teaching. This relatively modern theological system, developed by Darby less than 200 years ago, found a ready ally with British Christian Zionists and an arms-length, somewhat suspicious ally with Jewish Zionists. Darby had concluded that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount applied to the kingdom age, that the church need not take it seriously today.

Classic dispensationalism, as articulated by Darby and Scofield, represents the theological framework behind the books of Hal Lindsey, whose book *The Late Great Planet Earth* sold millions in the 1970s, and the *Left Behind Series*, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, whose sales in the last ten years have reached 60,000,000.

Interestingly, classic dispensationalism has largely been left behind by most scholars in the conservative Evangelical tradition in the U.S. Mark Hitchcock, Tim LaHaye, and Thomas Ice would still defend the system, but leading scholars at Dallas Theological Seminary would no longer subscribe to the theological framework represented in the *Left Behind Series*.

And for good reason. Defenders of Darby had long had difficulty with passages that apply the promises originally made to Israel to the church (cf. Rom. 9:6–13). And the exalted view of the church in Ephesians, which is portrayed as the ultimate fulfillment of God’s plan from the foundation of the world, has also been problematic to an understanding of the church age as “parenthetical” (cf. Eph. 1:3–23). Passages in the New Testament that allegorize the promises made to Israel (cf. Gal. 4:21–31) or loosen attachments to “place” once considered sacrosanct (cf. John 4:20–24) have also been problematic to Zionist thought.

Today “progressive dispensationalism” has largely replaced classic dispensationalism, with which it shares little. A “dispensational” understanding of the work of God in history remains, but gone is the absolute rejection that the promises to Israel can apply to the church. Gone is the parenthetical church age in the 490-year eschatological clock. Gone is the suggestion that the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to today’s church.

#### Dispensationalism’s Hermeneutical Principles

Four principles of biblical interpretation employed by dispensationalists are most significant for explaining their support of Zionism.

First, they interpret God’s acts in history on a theological/historical framework characterized by seven different covenants of God with humanity in seven different eras or dispensations. These seven eras represent seven different acts in the history of humanity’s consistent unfaithfulness. The biblical warrant for this reading is thin.

Second, they view “biblical prophecy” primarily as predictive in force, thus ignoring or underplaying its historical context.

Third, they string passages of Scripture from different biblical books and centuries together like clothes on a dispensational clothesline, without attention to the historical or literary contexts of which they are a part.

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“The Lord and his first community of followers broke down all barriers of separation.”

“The 9-meter high walls, partially constructed or projected around all the West Bank, are not a means of protection against the suicide attacks, but are rather ghettos of social control and advances of colonization of the little that is left for the Palestinians.”

Mario Higueros is a Guatemalan Mennonite pastor and theologian. He attended the April 2004 Sabeel Conference on Christian Zionism in Jerusalem and visited Palestine at that time.

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Fourth, they tend to reject any Christology that holds Jesus as normative for Christian ethics. In classic dispensationalism, Jesus' teachings on nonviolence are not taken seriously—certainly not as related to God's victory over evil in the world.

More troubling, however, is the confidence of Christian Zionists that war is God's will. Based in part on Daniel 9:26, "to the end there shall be war; desolations are decreed," dispensationalists declare that the attempt to avert warfare is misguided, for it represents opposition to the will of God. Even Jesus said in Mark 13:7 that wars and rumors of wars "must take place, but the end is still to come." Thus, any effort to support peace in the Middle East is an expression of opposition to biblical prophecy, and thus to God's will. That is why the Antichrist in the Left Behind Series is portrayed as a pacifist. Only someone opposed to the warring and violent judgments of Christ in the end time could be a pacifist.

## Conclusion

To reject the dispensational view that the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 represented a fulfillment of biblical prophecy is not to claim that God has rejected Israel or that God no longer loves Jewish people. God's will is for all of humanity to recognize Jesus as messiah the Jew first, but also the Gentile. To reject Christian Zionism is to reject the idea that the Temple must be rebuilt in Jerusalem because Jesus' perfect sacrifice guaranteed a better covenant that brought to an end the need for sacrifice not just temporarily, but forever (Heb. 7:22–28).

Christians today should reject the temptation to Zionism. Our hope is based not on some human theological system developed 200 years ago, but on Jesus Christ himself, "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb. 1:3). As Paul emphasized in Romans 9, the very choosing of Israel to be God's people is a lesson about God's grace and God's sovereignty, not about the rights and status of Israel.

*Loren L. Johns is Academic Dean at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.*

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## A View From the Palestinian Church

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by Cedar Duaybis

**B**ut Israel is *Christian!*" exclaimed Bill, after I had spoken to a church group during an adult Bible study session in the USA. I paused, never having heard it stated that way before, but Bill in those four words, had summarized Western Christianity's unconditional support of the state of Israel against the rightful claims of the Palestinian people.

It is widely believed in Western Churches and taught in theological seminaries that the Bible provides the title-deed for the establishment of the state of Israel. The displacement of the indigenous people, which from the beginning was the intention of Zionism, is not only overlooked, but also justified.

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 is often interpreted by western Christians as fulfillment of prophecy. This view clashed painfully with the reality of our experience as Palestinian Christians and fell upon us like a thunderbolt. We were totally disoriented by our physical dispossession and displacement, by the loss of home and property, of homeland and identity, and by the nega-

tion of our history and memory. Our spiritual grounding, which we groped to hold onto, was pulled from under our feet. We were left orphaned, physically and spiritually. We felt forsaken by heaven and earth.

Many people abandoned their faith when they most needed it. Many wanted to throw away the Old Testament because it was being used as an instrument of oppression against them. Bishop Kenneth Cragg, in his book "The Arab Christian" (page 241) has expressed it perfectly: "Christians in the west can have the exploits of Samson, Samuel, Saul, David, and Jahu and the rest, in lectionary and psalm, as ancient sagas happening to strange 'heathen' far away. Arab Christians have to accommodate them—if at all—in the immediacy of their own dispossession and exile. The biblical victims are their own people, their predecessors in the land."

Luckily, some brave people labored to discern what God intended for both Israel and the Palestinian people. A Palestinian theology of liberation was born which helped

Palestinian Christians to hold onto their faith, to resist oppression non-violently, and to work for justice and peace. Sadly, many others left the land of their ancestors to find peace in other countries but could not escape Christian Zionism that denied the authenticity of their narrative.

### Palestinian Church Roots

The Palestinian Arab Church has roots that go back to the times of the Apostles and to Pentecost. Our Church derives its features from the land and its culture. Arab Christianity has been shaped and conditioned by Arab civilization since the seventh century AD, but it is worth noting that Arab Christians have existed in the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East for six centuries before that. They are an integral part of the Arab nation. However, Western Christianity has since had a great influence on the identity of Palestinian Christians and their relationship with Arab Muslims.

While Palestinian Christians yearn for a peaceful solution to the conflict and bravely stand up for the human and national rights of the Palestinian people, resisting oppression non-violently, Christian Zionists work hard to thwart every peace effort because it stands in the way of their theology of a violent end-time vision. Human rights that they would fight for in their own countries are allowed to be dismissed and trampled in Israel/ Palestine because the “chosen people” have divine rights that allow, or even mandate, them to have no mercy for the people of the land.

By demonizing Islam and idolizing the State of Israel, Christian Zionist leaders are

putting Palestinian Christians, who are an integral part of the Arab nation and of the Christian world, on the defensive instead of using their ideal placement to further peace and understanding.

While the international community works to end the Israeli occupation and reconcile the two sides of the conflict, Christian Zionists encourage Israel not to give back any part of occupied Palestinian land and encourage the building and expansion of illegal Israeli settlements.

In brief, Christian Zionists are changing the course of history in the direction of injustice and oppression. Human and national rights for the Palestinians are totally disregarded in favor of so-called divine rights.

In conclusion, Bishop Kenneth Cragg asks (“The Arab Christian”, page 236) “How should Christians respond to this situation? What are the final criteria by which to judge?” He answers “surely the paramount Christian fact that must govern all else is the principle of undifferentiating grace. Whatever the mystery of Israel, biblically and since, whatever the warrant of Zion, they do not and cannot constitute for the Christian mind any deviation from equal divine justice and inclusive divine compassion. Specialness in Jewry has been historically, and gratefully, justified for us in the Jewish apostolic discovery from within it of an open New Testament peoplehood under God in which there are ‘no more strangers’ (Eph.2:19). The category of ‘mere Gentiles’ is at an end.”

*Cedar Duaybis is a Palestinian Christian laywoman and serves on the board of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center.*

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## Disturbing the peace: Christian Zionism shapes U.S. policy

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by J. Daryl Byler

In his 2005 State of the Union speech, President Bush promised: “The goal of two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace, is within reach, and America will help them achieve this goal.”

President Bush first offered his vision for a two-state solution in June 2002. But nearly three years later, he has done little to nudge this dream toward reality. One reason is the powerful sway of Christian Zionism on the Bush administration and the U.S. Congress.

Influential neoconservative policymakers in the Bush administration—including Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Elliot Abrams, and the departing Douglas Feith—have strongly “pro-Israeli” political positions that, in many ways, are compatible with the ideology of Christian Zionism. Prominent members of Congress and the business community share similar views.

Christian Zionism also has broad grassroots support among key segments of evangelical



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Christianity. Writing in *The Christian Century* (June 28, 2003), Donald Wagner, a Middle East expert who teaches at North Park University in Chicago, asserts: "The National Religious Broadcasters, which controls almost 90 percent of religious radio and television in the U.S., is dominated by a Christian Zionist orientation."

It is precisely this coalescing of political, business, religious and media viewpoints that makes Christian Zionism such a formidable force today.

Christian Zionists believe that the modern state of Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and that all of historic Palestine must be controlled by the Jewish people. Their hermeneutic trumps the broader biblical themes of justice and peace with a narrow slice of scriptural verses about the "end times."

In practice, Christian Zionism leaves little room for negotiations that could lead to a just and viable peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. This viewpoint

would appear to oppose both one- and two-state solutions to the conflict.

While U.S. policymakers have been quick to confront Palestinian actions that undermine Israel's security, they have been reticent—due in part to the influence of Christian Zionism on the U.S. political process—to challenge Israeli government policies and practices. U.S. officials gingerly acknowledge that occupation, settlement expansion, security barriers, and military strikes are problematic, but they do not insist on any consequences for these clear Israeli violations of international law.

If President Bush is serious about achieving the goal of two democratic states living side by side in peace, then he must find the courage to oppose illegal Israeli practices. And he must also stand up to Christian Zionists who are disturbing any prospects for peace and security. Indeed, any position that is not rooted in the biblical practice of justice is ultimately neither pro-Israeli, nor pro-peace.

*Daryl Byler is director of the MCC Washington Office.*