

Christian Zionism: The Antidote for the World's Oldest Hatred

by Tricia Miller (June 2015)

In what was an historic, precedent-setting event, the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) sponsored a conference titled "People of the Land: A Twenty-First Century Case for Christian Zionism" in Washington D.C on April 17, 2015. This meeting was reportedly the first of its kind in that scholars presented academic arguments in support of a Christian Zionism that is rooted in two thousand years of ecumenical theological traditions.

This symposium was significant in that the content presented in eleven papers represents an essential, and long over-due, scholarly contribution to the dialogue about Zionism in the Christian world. The combined presentations made a theological and historical case for a Christian Zionism that is substantively different than the Zionist movement supported by dispensationalists and proponents of an End Times eschatology. As IRD President Mark Tooley pointed out, "Contrary to common critique, *Christian Zionism is not a modern political movement, popularized by Left Behind fiction – it dates to the early Church Fathers.*"

In other words, Christian Zionism did not begin with the belief in premillennial dispensationalism first introduced in the nineteenth century through the work of John Nelson Darby and made popular in the United States through the Scofield Reference Bible. Rather, Christian Zionism is rooted in theological traditions as old as the Church itself.

Through a revealing survey of Scripture and the writings of Church leaders from the second through the twentieth centuries, Dr. Gerald McDermott of Roanoke College demonstrated that an emphasis on the Land of Israel and the relationship of that land to the promise made to Abraham and Sarah is consistent throughout the Hebrew Bible (Tanach), the New Testament (NT), and historical Christian Zionism. As McDermott pointed out, "land is the fourth most frequent noun in all of Tanach. It is more dominant statistically than the idea of covenant. Of the 208 times that covenant is mentioned, in two thirds of those instances that covenant is directly or indirectly connected to the land."

The predominate longing for the Land found throughout the Hebrew Bible is also "all over the NT, but we have missed it because we have been trained not to see it. To give just one of

many, many examples, Jesus and the apostles give evidence that they were still expecting a future for the land of Israel—distinct from the rest of the world. When Jesus quotes Isaiah’s prediction that the temple would become ‘a house of prayer for all nations’ (Mark 11.17; Is. 56.1), he seems to concur, as Richard Hays has observed, with Isaiah’s vision of ‘an eschatologically restored Jerusalem’ where foreigners would come to God’s holy mountain to join the ‘outcasts of Israel’ whom God has ‘gathered’ (Is 56.7-8).”

Leaders throughout Church history have echoed the belief in a future for the Land of Israel as manifested in the New Testament. According to McDermott, “such an expectation was fairly common in the early church.” But it was in sixteenth century Britain that a “renewed vision for a future Israel gained momentum” through the publication of three books that “helped focus this cultural memory and sense of privilege in ways that would resemble Zionism.” John Bale’s (1495-1563) 1570 edition of *The Image of Both Churches*, the Geneva Bible (1560), and John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1563) all “helped prepare the English mind for Christian Zionism.”

It is important to note that these three books were published almost three hundred years before the introduction of premillennial dispensationalism, which far too many scholars erroneously consider to be the beginning of Christian Zionism.

Through in-depth analyses of Christian Testament writings, subsequent conference speakers revealed how the people and land of Israel are significant concerns in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the book of Acts, and the epistles of the Apostle Paul. In contrast to what is often believed, Paul’s writings do not eliminate the particularity and irrevocability of the covenant promises made to Israel – promises that include a particular land. To the contrary, as Romans 11:29 declares, “...the gifts and the calling of God [to Israel] are irrevocable.”

An awareness of the emphasis the Christian Scriptures place on the people and land of Israel is of paramount importance for two reasons. First, recognition of the eternal nature of the covenant promises made to Israel is essential in order for a Christian to have a full appreciation of the trustworthiness of the promises made through Jesus. If God cannot be depended upon to remain faithful to what the Hebrew Bible calls an *everlasting covenant*, how can Christians have any confidence in what the New Testament refers to as a *new covenant*?

Second, comprehension of the never-ending relationship between God, the Jewish people, and the Land of Israel is critical for the purpose of exposing the errors in Christian supercessionism and replacement theology. A biblical understanding of the significance of the people and land of Israel throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures refutes erroneous teaching promoted by prominent Palestinian Christian leaders and their allies in the US.

Following the theological and historical arguments in favor of a twenty-first century case for Christian Zionism, later presenters advanced sound legal and moral arguments in support of the legitimacy of the Jewish State. The executive director of the Philos Project, Robert Nicholson, J.D, presented a legal analysis of Israel for the purpose of addressing the question, "Does the modern state of Israel violate the call to justice in the covenant by its relation to international law?"

As Nicholson stated, this is a question that "arises from accusations made by several Christian thinkers and scholars, noted ones, who in trying to largely deconstruct Christian Zionism, aver that Israel, by reason of its breach of international law, has violated the terms of justice in the covenant, and thereby forfeited its right, or is about to forfeit its right, to live in the land of promise."

Nicholson addressed accusations in relation to international law and Israel's acquisition of land in the wars of 1948 and 1967, as well as Israel's ongoing behavior in the land. He revealed that international law is "an ambiguous thing," "a mostly voluntary system comprised of...mostly unenforceable rules," that it is "entered into by fallible and self-interested states," and its rules "are subject to change." Therefore, it is quite difficult to substantiate accusations that Israel has committed breaches of international law.

He concluded that "Israel has not committed substantive, material, gross violations of positive international law, that is treaty and custom, in its relation to either the people or the land, certainly not enough to bring in an existential inquiry of Israel's right to exist." In fact, "The establishment of Israel was one of the most legally regulated establishments of any country in history, certainly until that time."

In response to a question concerning the morality of Israel in relation to its treatment of minorities, Shadi Khalloul, chairman of the Aramaic Christian Association in Israel and a captain in the IDF, presented an impassioned defense of Israel's morality and its protection of the rights of minorities.

Speaking as a member of a minority that was recognized by Israel as a distinct people group in September 2014, Khalloul provided multiple examples to demonstrate how all Israelis, regardless of race or religion, enjoy freedom of speech, equal access to services and education, and the right to serve in the Knesset and the IDF. He also pointed out that as a non-Jewish officer in the IDF, he was trusted with the responsibility for Jewish soldiers under his command.

Khalloul said, "The State of Israel recognized us last year as Arameans as a distinct ethnic

and religious group. This means that Israel allows the existence of Christian people within its borders, something no Muslim nation from the Middle East has ever done or would ever do. Israel supports us and legally gives us the right to exist and to develop ourselves as a Christian minority. This alone proves how fair and just Israel treats us as a minority. Israel is a democratic country and grants full rights to all its citizens, no matter whether they are Jews or non-Jews."

In spite of the fact that, as Khalloul stated, "Israel is consistent with its moral and democratic policies," Western Christian support for Israel has been increasingly targeted in recent years by a virulent propaganda campaign based on a distortion of this reality, a rewriting of history, and gross theological error. As a result, we are witnessing an erosion of Christian recognition and understanding of the significance of the return of the Jewish people to their Land.

This reality highlights the pressing need to present the case for a Christian Zionism that is rooted in two thousand years of church history and supported by solid theological, historical, legal and moral arguments. In light of the urgency of the times in which we live, the importance of the IRD's groundbreaking conference cannot be overstated.

One can only hope that the academic papers from this event to be published in a book by InterVarsity Press, and subsequent conferences on this subject, will reach an increasingly wider audience with the evidence that validates Christian support of Israel.

One can also hope that as a wider Christian audience becomes better informed concerning the two thousand year old historical and theological foundation of Christian Zionism, that this knowledge will lead to a greater appreciation for, in the words of Gerald McDermott, "the miraculous appearance of the Israeli state just after the darkest moment in Jewish history."

And finally, one *must* hope that this clear presentation of the theological, historical, legal and moral case in support of Israel's right to exist will counter the very real danger that is created for the Jewish State through Christian accusations that Israel has forfeited its right to live in the land due to its alleged violation of the covenantal call to justice in relation to international law.

As Robert Nicholson concluded, "Accusing Israel of violating this very important moral vision of the biblical covenant is dangerous. There is a great danger in applying biblical law to real world affairs...theologians should avoid this kind of presumptuous conclusion making...its irresponsible, its incoherent, its inconclusive...and provides justification for Israel's opponents to act on their dark desires."

As Nicholson warned, "Where this will go is certainly very worrisome."

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