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Introduction

Like most Americans, I grew up as a loyal supporter of the state of Israel, our closest ally in the Middle East. While serving as an officer in the Air Force, I was assigned to an aircraft modification project for the Israeli Air Force. I recall feeling a sense of awe when I met an Israeli fighter pilot, as I recalled the Israeli Air Force's devastating success during the Six-Day War. After completing my military service, I obtained a degree from Dallas Theological Seminary which teaches dispensational theology. In dispensationalism, Israel figures positively and prominently in God's prophetic program in the end times.

Later, while living in the Arab world, I was repeatedly shocked by the bias of the Arab media against Israel; yet, I was smart enough to try to avoid any discussion of politics and the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Years later I joined the faculty of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, and the first course I was asked to teach was the Old Testament Prophets. It was there that I came face to face with a significant problem. God's promises to Israel fill the prophetic books; yet, since two-thirds of Jordanians are Palestinian in background, most of the Arab Christian students in my class had family members who had suffered at the hands of the Israeli government policies and had to flee from their homes in Israel/Palestine. In America we Christians expect Palestinians to just accept that God gave Israel the land; but, the land that "God gave" included the ancestral lands of my students.

On one occasion, I took a taxi across Amman. The thirty-year-old taxi driver had come from the West Bank a year before. Upon learning that I was from America, his face strained with pain as he asked why Americans were so biased in favor of Israel. He shared the story of his being detained for months without charges by Israeli authorities. He described how eight of his family and friends were killed and his home destroyed by

an Israeli missile. He exclaimed, "We don't hate the Israelis, but we have to defend ourselves and our land."[1]

For many years I was a zealous supporter of Israel and unaware of and unsympathetic to Palestinian perspectives. However, living in the Middle East opened my eyes in new ways. I came to see how our American Christian bias in favor of Israel and against Palestinians was detrimental for everyone. When we arrived at my destination, I asked if I could pray for him. He eagerly accepted and so I began to pray for peace for him, as well as for all Israelis and Palestinians. While praying I was overcome with emotion and began to weep. As I cried, I asked God to bring peace to him and to the land. I paused, regained control of my emotions, and concluded my prayer. As I handed the driver his fare and bid him farewell, he responded, "I know that some Christians are good people."

That brief moment surprised me as I am not an overtly emotional person. I came to realize that I experienced a small degree of Christ's compassion for the suffering Palestinians who are caught in an unceasing cycle of violence, injustice, oppression and despair. Jesus' compassion was not limited to the sufferings of God's chosen people; Jesus does not take sides. He died for and cares for all.

This experience exposed me to how the unmitigated Christian support for Israel is a significant obstacle for Muslims in accepting the gospel. This is because they associate the message of Christ with the West's unreflective support of Israel and its hostility toward Muslims. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not just a political problem. The detrimental impact of this unreflective support and its extension, namely Christian Zionism, has contributed to a missiological emergency.[2] Colin Chapman assesses the dire situation with these words:

> What does this issue mean for the mission of the Church living and proclaiming the message of Christ to people of all faiths and races in the countries of the Middle East? My time in Egypt and Lebanon and my study of Islam have forced me to recognize the enormous stumbling block created in the minds of Muslims all over the world by Christian support of Zionism and the policies of Israel . . . My questions have to do with human rights, with Judaism and Islam, with the survival of Christianity in the

[1] Palestinians have occupied the land for centuries; Jewish people view themselves as returning to the land from exile after nearly two millennia. See 1-2, for claims to the land by both sides (2002).
[2] Missiology is the science of mission. Here I refer to the dire situation facing the church in fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8), and the Great Commandment (Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12: 28-31; John 13:34-35).

> Middle East, and with the mission of the churches in and around the Land" (2000, 149–50).

George Sabra, dean of the Near East School of Theology, criticized Christian Zionists for inciting Muslims to persecute Arab Christians, resulting in a vanishing Christian presence in the Muslim world through emigration. He was particularly troubled by dispensationalism because it creates a theological justification for Christian Zionism. Sabra sarcastically wondered whether, at the present rate of emigration, any Arab Christians would be left in the Holy Land to experience the Rapture (2006). Sabra may not be exaggerating given that the Palestinian Christian population has declined from 20% to less than two percent.

Sadly, Christian Zionism has harmed the church in the Middle East and the church's mission in the Muslim world. Having lived in that context for many years, I have seen the adverse consequences Christian Zionism has had on Arab Christians and Muslims. Listening to the experiences of my Arab Christian and Muslim colleagues and friends forced me to reflect on my own understanding of the Scriptures as well as the theological positions of the Christian Zionists. I came to see how the Christian Zionist understanding of dispensational eschatology was flawed and I would like to propose a corrective; one that is 1) true to Scripture, 2) truly dispensational, and 3) compassionate and just toward the Palestinian Christian and Muslim communities as well as the Israeli people. My purpose is to provide a theological corrective that can help advance the mission of God among Muslims in the Middle East.

Time-Out for Terminology

To facilitate understanding, three key terms need proper definitions: Zionism, Christian Zionism, and dispensationalism.

Zionism

Zionism refers to Jewish nationalism. It originally referred to the international movement to establish a Jewish homeland, Palestine[3] being the logical place. For most Jews, Zionism has been primarily a secular, nationalist political movement, not a religious one, to protect them from persecution for being Jews.

[3] I am aware of both Jewish and Arab sensitivities to the geographical terms "Israel" and "Palestine." Historically, Palestine was the common Western historical-political term to refer to the land from the 2nd century when the Jews were expelled until 1948. For the subsequent period, Israel/Palestine or Israel and the Occupied Territories are appropriate terms.

At its outset the majority of Jewish Zionists were not religiously motivated. David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir were well known for their atheism. As for Theodore Herzl, he was at least a secular Jew that had assimilated in Vienna. Max Gross (retired dean at the National Defense Intelligence College) observed this about Herzl:

> Only in the context of monitoring the Dreyfus (yet another assimilated Jew) affair in Paris [he] came to realize that even in France where the law assured Jews perfect equality as French citizens, traditional European anti-Semitism could not be eliminated. Therefore, there had to be a "Judenstadt." Obviously, this idea struck a spark in the Jewish community worldwide, and momentum among Jewry for such a state developed very rapidly—a place where Jews could practice or not practice Judaism freely without fear of persecution, not because of their religion, but simply because they were Jews (2006).

In fact, Orthodox Judaism has traditionally opposed Zionism:

> From the standpoint of religion, a national movement might even be considered a 'sinful' movement, a move away from religion, forcing Jews to preoccupy themselves with activities that rightly do not belong to religion and lead Jews down a false path. That is approximately the view of the ultra-Orthodox who have always opposed Israel on these grounds—but these are obviously a minority among Jews in general (Gross 2006).

> Some Orthodox Jews regard Zionism as a blasphemous human attempt to gain the land that can only be given by the Messiah when he comes.

Pawson defines Zionism as the "return of the Jews to the land of their ancestors and the re-establishment of the nation-state of Israel, with Jerusalem (Zion) as their capital" (2014). While most people would be sympathetic or supportive of this idea, what we Christians have been slow to realize is that making a state religious—in this case, Israel with Zionism—marginalizes and discriminates against all those in the country that are not of that religion. This happens in every country that has a specific religious identity (e.g., Pakistan and Saudi Arabia). To preserve the ethnic character of the Jewish state of Israel, the Christians and Muslims in Israel have been marginalized. What many of us do not realize is that creating the State of Israel "required the ethnic cleansing of 700,000 Arab Palestinians (now over 5 million refugees registered with the UNHCR), exiled to neighbouring countries, the seizure of their land, demolition of their

homes, the continued denial of their right to return and their basic human rights. Zionism has only been able to maintain its control of Palestine through the brutal military occupation in the West Bank" (Sizer 2008b). The question we all face as Christians is: What should be our proper response to this?

Christian Zionists

I use this term to refer to the Christian proponents of Zionism who for theological reasons are zealous, uncritical supporters of the state of Israel—particularly in regard to its political policies and territorial expansion. By so doing they either knowingly or unknowingly justify or overlook the injustices and oppression suffered by the non-Jewish population. In this Christian Zionists sharply contrast with earlier Restorationists who share their literalist hermeneutic and eschatological expectation of a return of the Jews to the land, but who were largely passive in their political support for this cause (Hornstra 2008, 131).[4]

Due to the Holocaust and centuries of anti-Semitic treatment by Christians in Europe and Jewish displacement from many lands, Christian compassion naturally sympathizes with the desire of Jewish people for a secure homeland. Christian Zionist support was instrumental in helping the state of Israel come into being and continues to advance the Zionist cause without consideration of how Arab Christians or Arab Muslims in Israel have been denied their basic human rights. David Dolan exemplifies the thinking of the Christian Zionists when he claimed that the natural and terrorist "disasters affecting America over the past decade are divine retribution for her role in pushing the land for peace" process (2005). Similarly, Pat Robertson declared that Ariel Sharon's stroke was God's judgment upon him for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip (Pipes 2007).[5] Such sentiments should trouble all of us who follow Jesus.

[4] Hornstra sees the move from Restorationism to Christian Zionism as occurring in the 1970s as a result of: (1) a literalist hermeneutic (though not necessarily dispensational as with many Puritans and Pietists); (2) a closer emotional bond between Christians to their Jewish past and reaction against "replacement theology" and (3) the "sacralization" of the modern state into salvation history .
Given the diversity that exists under group labels, another modifier may be needed to differentiate the small minority who consider themselves Christian Zionist, but who are not uncritical supporters of Israel or unconcerned with human rights of Palestinians.

[5] I am aware of both Jewish and Arab sensitivities to the geographical terms "Israel" and "Palestine." Historically, Palestine was the common Western historical-political term to refer to the land from the 2nd century when the Jews were expelled until 1948. For the subsequent period, Israel/Palestine or Israel and the Occupied Territories are appropriate terms.

Dispensationalism

The distinctive in the eschatology of Christian Zionists is their "literal" (non-allegorical) interpretation[6] of biblical prophecy that envisions a future fulfillment of Old Testament promises to Israel as a nation, including the land promises.[7]

Their dispensational views have raised the ire of those who are sympathetic with the Palestinians' plight. These sympathizers have become ardent critics of dispensationalism (see further Ateek 1989, Sizer, 2004, Wagner, 1995, 2001, and Crump 2021). Many of these critics see the promises of the Abrahamic covenant as already fulfilled in the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated. In this vein, Chapman goes so far to say that the land promises to Israel are now "irrelevant" (2000, 154–59).

Reading the critiques of Christian Zionist interpretations of Scripture made me realize that their version of dispensationalism needs to be rectified if there is to be any justice and peace in Israel/Palestine.[8] Their views have cast a dark cloud over dispensationalism, which in my view is a case of guilt by association. Although Christian Zionists apply a literal hermeneutic to prophetic scriptures, there is no necessary linkage between literal hermeneutics and Christian Zionism—the problem is the unwarranted scriptural interpretations and mistaken political implications. Moreover, I would advise Christians sympathetic to the plight of Palestinians (who are generally non-dispensational or follow non-literal hermeneutics) that attempts to eradicate the ills of Christian Zionism by trying to convert its adherents to a different hermeneutic of prophecy or theological system are unnecessary and highly unlikely to succeed.[9] I will address what I see as the major faults in Christian Zionist theology while preserving a literal hermeneutic that sees a role for a nation of Israel in biblical prophecy.

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[6] The principle of literal interpretation argues for the natural, normal or plain interpretation, while allowing for literary hermeneutical devices such as symbolism, figures of speech, and imagery. But as applied to prophecy, it stands in contrast to subjective spiritualizing and allegorical approaches.

[7] Dispensational theological thinking has had powerful impact on Bible readers. Many criticisms of classical dispensationalism have been addressed by "progressive dispensationalists" who are refining how the New Testament relates to, fulfills, and/or complements the Old. Dispensationalists hold that the church does not replace Israel or absorb it (although it does participate in the blessing aspect of the Abrahamic and New covenants). explanation this relationship thus:

> Israel and the church should be seen as different dimensions of redeemed humanity. Israel and the Gentiles refer to the national and ethnic dimensions of humanity. Consequently, there is no contradiction between the idea of a redeemed remnant and the inheritance of a nation in its Land of Promise. It is crucial to understand that promises made to Israel are to be fulfilled by Israel and not in something reconstituted to take its place. To include others in the promise of redemption does not mean that the national promises of Israel have been excluded.

[8] Many criticisms are of "classical" dispensationalism theological developments reflected in "progressive dispensationalism," the form that dominates the current generation of dispensational scholars (see further ; .

[9] Intelligent and godly dispensational and covenant theologians have critiqued each other for decades with relatively few changing sides.

As stated earlier, this is so important because the one-sided support of Christian Zionists for Israeli interests, territorial expansion and security, to the exclusion of pursuing peace-making, justice, and human rights for Palestinians, presents a grave danger to the church in the Middle East in fulfilling its mission, including the Great Commission (Matt 28: 19-20) and the Great Commandment (Matt 22:36-40). Thus, Sizer has called Christian Zionism an oxymoron (2008b).

Correcting Christian Zionism

Correcting Christian Zionism and developing more balanced theological, political, and missional positions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue is necessary if followers of Christ are to undertake any role in peace-making that seeks security, justice, and human rights for all parties in the conflict. I must limit myself here to the theological dimension. I will demonstrate that adhering to a literal prophetic hermeneutic does not oblige Christians to promote the Zionist cause, or Israel's current political policies at the expense of Palestinians and other Arabs. Rather, the Scriptures direct us to pursue peace, justice and security for all peoples involved. I proffer the following theological points in support of my position.[10]

1. **The nature of the Abrahamic Covenant that promised the land to his descendants is both conditional and unconditional.**

Elsewhere I have written:

> The promise of land, seed and blessing to Abraham's descendants is an irrevocable covenant from God; however, experience of the reality of these blessings was conditioned by the faith-obedience of each generation of Israel . . . Adherence to the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant would qualify them to experience the blessings promised by the Abrahamic covenant, while covenant unfaithfulness would result in application of covenant curses (Harlan 2004, 69).

Ronald Allen describes this theological paradox:

> Was there a conditionality to the divine promise? We would like to answer yes and no . . . faith and obedience were requisites for the people to enjoy . . . the land. Therefore, at each point, in each generation, and for each

[10] A number of these points appear in Harlan 2004 but with many differences in content.

> individual, there was the obligation to be in a personal relationship with God through faith and in an ongoing response to God in gratitude, worship, and obedience. So even the "unconditional covenants" had conditions to them . . . these conditions pertain to enjoyment of or participation in the promises and covenants by particular individuals or generations; the unconditional covenants are unconditional in terms of their final fulfillment (1998, 27).

Hence, participation in this covenant blessing is dependent on faith. Since this is not evidenced by the present state of Israel, it cannot lay claim to possession of the land through Abraham. However, the promise remains valid as it awaits fulfillment in the future by some believing generation of Israel.

2. **An appeal to biblical rights to the land requires observance of the biblical principles of righteousness.**

Receiving the land is a gift from God, as he fulfills his promise. Retaining the land requires a faith-inspired obedience to the Mosaic Law. The injunctions against theft, murder, covetousness, especially in regard to land (e.g., Ahab and Naboth's vineyard) are particularly applicable in today's environment. In addition, abuse or oppression of foreign aliens and sojourners is condemned (Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:34). Non-Jewish people in the land are to be given the same rights and benefits as the Jewish (Num 9:14; 15:16,29; 35:15; Lev 19:10; 23:27; 25:46-50; Deut 24:14, 19-22; 14:29; 26:12; Josh 24:17) (see further Harlan 2004, 69–73; Burge 1993, 55–124). But if inheriting the land demands righteousness and justice, then as Katanacho asserts:

> Any credible argument for the prophetic place of modern Israel should provide theological justification for the moral state of Israel and for the displacement of thousands of Palestinian refugees who lost their homes in 1948 . . . Fifty thousand of them were Christians . . . Why would God take the Palestinian church into exile in order to bring a group of people who don't accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord? (2013, 31).

We can affirm the extraordinary accomplishments of the Jewish Israelis, their need for a homeland, and their claim of international legitimacy. However, we must admit the State of Israel has not and is not fulfilling the obligations she has under the covenant that would validate a *biblical* claim to her present occupation of the land. As dispensationalist Stanley Ellisen observes, "she falls far short of her covenant

obligations. To put it bluntly, she has no biblical right to the covenant land . . . The promise of the land is directly tied to the nation's response to Messiah" (1991, 174).

3. **The modern state of Israel is not the fulfillment of the promise of Israel's restoration to the land.**

This point is a painful one for many Christians. Many view the modern State of Israel as a miracle. Allen declares, "No people group has ever been removed from its land, dispersed among the nations, survived with a sense of self-awareness and identity, and—many hundreds of years later—been regathered to one place, their old place—and has become a nation and state once again. Now, the Christian believer, observing this isolated phenomenon, finds it exceedingly difficult to say this is not of God" (1998, 26). Many Christians interpret this modern miracle as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy regarding Israel's return to the land and conclude that we must support Israel to be on God's side.

I disagree. The specific prophecy that Christian Zionists believe to have been fulfilled is Ezekiel 36:24-27 (NASB):

> For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the lands; and I will bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and bring it about that you walk in My statutes, and are careful and follow My ordinances.

Reading this passage, Christian Zionists assert that God promises to first return Israel to the land in a state of unbelief and their spiritual restoration will follow. However, such an interpretation imposes a chronological order that violates the larger context. All of these divine actions on behalf of Israel occur in concert. The regathering of the people to the land accompanies, and in fact is contingent upon, the national cleansing of 36:24-25: "At the same time as I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause your cities to be inhabited and the ruined places to be rebuilt.'" Ezekiel 36:16-21 reminds Israel that the reason for the exile was their defiling the land by their wicked deeds and idolatry. Tanner explains: "The result of this was the profaning of God's holy name among the nations. Thus, God will need to act to counter what Israel has done to His name. He will do this by ultimately regathering the nation and cleansing them as a

Spirit-filled people" (2001, 25.4). The cleansing of Israel depicted in Ezekiel 36 describes the time when she experiences the New Covenant which is the precondition for her regathering and restoration to the Land (36:24, 37:21), for "it is because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that God's people can walk in His ways and obey the Lord" (36:27) (Tanner 2001, 25.5). Otherwise, Israel will be unable to fulfill the biblical requirements of righteousness to qualify them for permanent possession of the Land. Since this did not occur during Israel's return to the Land after the Babylonian exile (or in the establishment of the modern state), the regathering of 36:22-38 must take place in the future—after Israel's repentance for rejecting Jesus as Messiah—when she "mourns over the one she has pierced" (Zech 12:10). Upon this repentance and the consequent second coming of Christ, the believing remnant of the nation will experience the New Covenant—in contrast to the earlier partial fulfillment of New Covenant blessings with individual Jews and Gentiles as members of the Church (Tanner 2001, 25.5). The vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37), which depicts the resurrection of Israel as a nation, is also linked to the context of Ezekiel 36, and takes place at the Second Coming (not in 1948). This spiritual resurrection of the nation will be accompanied by a literal physical resurrection of Jewish believers throughout the ages, so that they may participate in Christ's millennial kingdom on earth (Ezek. 37; Dan 12:1-3; Heb 11:39-40) (Tanner 2001, 25.7).

Hence, the establishment of the modern state of Israel is not the fulfillment of Ezekiel's "regathering" promises, for the Torah consistently ties return from exile to repentance (Deut 30:1-6; Lev 26:40-45). Consequently, it does not require Christians to render political support to the Zionist state over and against Palestinians and Arabs. In fact, Israel appears to be under Christ's pronouncement of judgment: "Your house is being left to you desolate . . . until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matt 23:38-39)?[11] Until her partial hardening is ended (Rom 11:25-26) and Israel repents, she has not entered her privileged position with its covenant promises regarding land possession.

Nevertheless, we can say the Zionist state "is of God" as an affirmation his sovereignty over the events of the world since the late 19th century. In God's sovereignty these events implicitly fit with the dispensational understanding of prophetic events depicted in the books of Daniel and Revelation—whereby a "form of Israel" (the modern secular state or the Jewish people) is present in the land as

[11] Carson states that "house" can refer to Jerusalem, the temple, or Israel and that here "all three are closely allied and rise and fall together" . This would argue against Bjoraker's applying to modern Israel the Deuteronomic principle that made the extent of land possession contingent upon "the faith/obedience level of the people" .

eschatological events unfold (the rise of anti-Christ, the judgments of the Tribulation, Israel's national repentance and Messiah's delivering her from destruction, etc.) (Tanner 2001, 25.7). Nonetheless, this does not give divine sanction to the authority of the Israeli state to trod upon the human rights of the Palestinians in achieving their aims (nor do we rationalize or approve of unjust acts by Palestinians). This same principle is evident in Acts 2:23 where Christ was "delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God," but Israel is condemned for nailing him to the cross "by the hands of godless men."

4. **The blessings and curses of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3) do not prohibit condemnation of Israel's sin.**

Many Christians are Zionists because they desire God's blessing and do not want to risk coming under the curse of those who curse Abraham (Gen 12:3). Therefore, they think it appropriate to overlook the misdeeds of the State of Israel. However, that curse did not stop Jesus from rebuking the Jewish leaders. In fact, in John 8:33-58 Jesus asserted that the Jewish leaders who were physical descendants (*σπερμα*) of Abraham, were not children (*τεκνα*) of Abraham—because their lives did not replicate Abraham's faith and works, but rather those of their real spiritual father, the devil. The curse did not stop the Apostle Paul either. Paul reiterated Jesus' theme, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel, neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants (Rom 9:6b-7a).

The apostle insisted that the ultimate recipient of the promises spoken to Abraham is Jesus the Messiah. "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say, 'and to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'and to your seed,' that is, Christ" (Gal 3:16).[12] Therefore, the promised blessings cannot be experienced apart from Christ and his gift of the Spirit: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Sprit, not by the letter" (Rom 2:28-29). Jewish people who reject Jesus as the Christ are not truly Abraham's heirs. It is those from his physical offspring who are in Christ who are heirs of the promises; it is to them that the blessing and cursing promise applies—and there have been numbers of Jewish people through the centuries who have believed in Jesus as Messiah.

[12] As a clarification, all Christian believers are the spiritual seed of Abraham and beneficiaries of God's promise that all the families of the earth shall be blessed in Abraham (Gen 12:3).

The national aspects of the covenant are directed to a believing national remnant of Abraham's physical offspring. It seems logical that if the national leadership's rejection of Jesus as Messiah led to national judgment, then the future fulfillment of promises to national Israel will entail the leadership's acceptance of the Messiahship of Jesus.

Moreover, the Old Testament prophets loudly and continually condemned Israel whenever she departed from biblical standards of righteousness and religion without fear of invoking this divine curse upon themselves. In fact, the prophets feared God's punishment if they kept silent and did not condemn Israel and warn her of God's judgment if she did not repent. Furthermore, if we define criticism as cursing, as many pro-Israeli Christians appear to do, then Jesus Christ was Himself guilty for his many criticisms and for this particular "sin"—his cursing of the fig tree (Matt 21:19). This has been understood by dispensational interpreters as symbolic of his curse upon the nation of Israel for its spiritual unfruitfulness. It is clear from our Lord's repeated castigation of the Jewish leadership's unrighteous behavior that he was not constrained by a fear of falling under the curse of those who curse Abraham's seed. We too, as children of the light, are to expose deeds of darkness (Eph 5:11) regardless from whom they arise.

5. Joshua's conquest of Canaan gives no warrant for ethnic cleansing or confiscating land.

Utterly unlike the current nation of Israel, Joshua's mandate applied to a specific period of history when Israel had re-covenanted with God to keep all of His commandments and statutes; for otherwise God warned, "You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it" (Deut 30:18). Moreover, the pagan Canaanite civilization had reached the nadir of decadence, including child sacrifice and sorcery (Deut 18:9-15). God commissioned Israel to execute his judgment on the Canaanites whose sin had come to "its full measure" (Gen 15:16) (Harlan 2004, 70–71). David Stern, a Messianic Jew, asserts:

> Joshua had a clear and direct commandment from God both to conquer and to kill the inhabitants of the seven Canaanite nations. It was a very specific *ad hoc* commandment, and it did not extend to all living in the Land, only to certain nations that had had 400 years in which to repent of their evil ways (Gen 15). It cannot be stated rationally that the Palestinian Arabs today are in the category of the Canaanites . . . Such an ethnic comparison expresses an unbiblical attitude of racism, nationalism and hate which cannot be disguised by calling it "faithfulness to God's

promises." Moreover, the prophetic vision of resettlement of the Land after the exile is not based on violent takeover but on divine intervention (Isaiah 60-61, Ezekiel 36-37) (2000, 47).

6. **To assert that "God gave the land to Israel" as scriptural support for Zionism is simplistic and problematic.**

What is the precise amount of territory that comprises "The Land"? Genesis 15:18 describes the land as extending from "the river of Egypt" to the Euphrates (which runs from Turkey to Syria to Iraq). But in Deuteronomy 11:24 it runs from the Negev desert to Lebanon and from the Euphrates to the Western (Mediterranean) Sea. This differs from the allotment of land to the tribes in Joshua. The eastern and northern borders in Numbers 34:3-12 differ sharply from those in Genesis and Deuteronomy (Katanacho 2013, 11).

The borders of Israel have always been much less than the varied biblical depictions. Even at Israel's apex under David and Solomon, much of the land in their kingdom was not possessed or occupied, but only put under tribute (1 Kgs 4:21). According to Genesis 15:18 the promised land would include not only present-day Israel and the Occupied territories, but also modern-day Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, most of Syria and part of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, this territory has been perpetually possessed by Abraham's descendants associated with Ishmael. But putting that aside, the current state of Israel occupies far less than it did under Solomon and the biblical promises. So, do Christian Zionists want Israel to conquer its neighboring Arab countries until it possesses all of that land? Do Christian Zionists truly wish to foster more wars over this territory? Instead, we should leave the fulfillment of land promises to God. As Allen Ross observes, "Israel has never possessed this land in its entirety, but she will when Christ returns to reign as Messiah" (1985, 56).

Is it possible that these differing descriptions of the promised land were indicating something beyond physical boundaries of the land? The Palestinian evangelical scholar, Hanna Katanacho, faults various scholarly attempts to account for these differences because they overlook God's intent to redeem the world (2013, 11–15). God promised Abraham that his seed will possess the territory of their enemies, will be as numerous as the stars and the sand and through them all peoples of earth will be blessed (Gen 22:17). Katanacho concludes: "It seems that the land of Abraham is not going to have fixed borders. It will continue to expand as it conquers the gates of the enemies, thus increasing in size both territorially and demographically . . . until it is equal to the whole earth . . . For God's intention was not to set fixed borders, but to unite the ends of the

earth under the Abrahamic banner" (2013, 37). The Psalms express this vision through God's Anointed whose inheritance will be the nations, the "ends of the earth." Other nations become citizens of Zion (Ps 87) in keeping with the ancient Near East's view of empires where identity was not ethnic, but cultural, political and multiethnic and related to the king's attachment to a deity:

The identity of these empires is not controlled by ethnicity, but by a linkage to a deity. Their main organizing principle is not consanguinity but a socio-religious identity. If this vision is also God's vision for the world, then it follows that Israel's identity is not fixed, but should be continually expanding. This conclusion is congruent with the study of Wanza who proposes that some descriptions of the promised land in the Bible are "literary descriptions" . . . a spatial merism that refers to the whole world (Katanacho 2013, 38).

Dispensationalists should consider the possibility that a broader theological meaning may be the intent of these descriptions of the borders of the promised land.

7. To "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Ps 122:6) is not a call to Christian Zionism.

While the English word "peace" can connote the mere absence of hostilities, social disturbance, war or violence, the Hebrew word *shalom* is holistic, encompassing physical health, relational harmony, material prosperity and spiritual blessing. While false prophets promised peace apart from demands for righteousness, true prophets insisted that peace without justice was impossible. "There is no peace for the wicked" (Isa. 48:22). Glenn Schaefer observes, "Judgment on sin, historically and eschatologically, must come prior to peace (1996, 598)."

The injunction to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" has often been co-opted by Christian Zionists to support Israeli military, political dominance, or whatever favors Israel. However, Ellisen notes that this Psalm's emphasis is on the "house of the Lord" and the peace that comes through a right relationship with God (1991, 185). Furthermore, we must recognize dispensational differences in redemptive history. In David's day, the prayer for the peace of Jerusalem was based on her being the center of God's redemptive activity. However, in the present age, it is the church, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22-24), that occupies this position, until Jerusalem becomes the seat of Messiah's government in the millennium (Maalouf 1998).

Hence, Christians should focus their efforts on proclaiming the gospel of peace and manifesting its power to reconcile Jews and Palestinians rather than promoting political policies of a secular state fixed on territorial expansion, social and ethnic oppression, and deprivation of human rights that feed Palestinian militant extremism and terrorism. The long-term results of continuing on the present course will not be security for Israel, but an unending cycle of violence and despair. Reconciliation—to God and to enemies—not Christian Zionism, is the best strategy for peace and security for all parties.

Conclusion

Christian Zionist support for Israeli interests, territorial expansion, and security has severely damaged efforts at peace-making, justice, and human rights for Palestinians, closing the hearts of Muslims to messengers of the gospel. This presents a crisis to the body of Christ in fulfilling its mission.

Critics of Christian Zionism have laid the blame for this crisis at the feet of dispensational theology. While most Christian Zionists have dispensational theological understandings, what is characteristic of Christian Zionists is their literal interpretation of prophecy in regard to national Israel, a hermeneutic that is shared by non-dispensational Christian Zionists. However, I have argued that this hermeneutical principle does not logically lend support for Christian Zionism. Specifically, this article challenged seven biblical/theological supports for Christian Zionism.

1. The Abrahamic Covenant that promised the land to his descendants is both conditional and unconditional. But the conditional aspect of the promise requires a future believing generation of Israel before it can be fulfilled.

2. An appeal to biblical rights to the land requires observance of the biblical principles of righteousness. Since modern Israel does not meet this demand, she has no basis to for making a biblical claim to the land.

3. The modern state of Israel is not the prophetic fulfillment of the promise of Israel's restoration to the land. Old Testament regathering promises are contingent upon national repentance—a condition the modern Israel has not fulfilled. However, Jewish presence in the land does fit with a dispensational expectation that a form of Israel be present in the land prior to the Great Tribulation leading to its repentance.

4. The blessings and curses of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3) do not prohibit condemnation of Israel's sin.

5. Joshua's conquest of Canaan gives no warrant for ethnic cleansing or confiscating land. Scripture does not justify Christian Zionist support for Israel's expansionist policies and oppression of the Palestinians.

6. To assert that "God gave the land to Israel" as scriptural support for Zionism is simplistic and problematic.

7. To "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" is not a call to Christian Zionism. Israel's present existence in the land does not have the same biblical authority and status as it did under the old covenant.

Nevertheless, adherents to a literal hermeneutic may affirm their hope that God is not finished with His chosen people—he will, in his own time, fulfill his promises and prophetic program to bless all peoples of the earth.

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