

CONVERSATION WITH THE EDITOR

IVP Academic editor Drew Blankman talks with Gerald McDermott, editor and contributor for *The New Christian Zionism*.



EDITOR
GERALD R.
MCDERMOTT



IVP EDITOR
DREW
BLANKMAN

Zionism is kind of a hot-button issue. What drew you to this topic?

McDERMOTT: After twenty-four years and fourteen trips to Israel, and becoming friends with both Palestinians and Jews in Israel, I was becoming increasingly disturbed by the discordance between what I saw there and read in Scripture on the one hand, and today's narratives about Jesus and modern Israel on the other. I also became convinced that the best way to approach this was academically, since many of what I consider to be false narratives have started in the academic world.

How would you describe the current widely accepted narrative regarding Christian Zionism?

McDERMOTT: Christian Zionism is usually thought to be a result of bad exegesis and zany theology. While most scholars concede that the Hebrew Bible is clearly Zionist (that is, that its primary focus is on a covenant with a particular people and land, both called Israel, and the land sometimes called Zion), they typically insist that the New Testament drops this focus on a particular land and people, and replaces it with a universal vision for all peoples. Concern with Jews as Jews is thought to be absent from the New Testament—except to insist that there is no longer any significant difference between Jew and Greek (Gal 3:28). Hence neither the people nor the land of Israel have any special significance after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

According to this narrative, the only ones who have advocated for the idea that the New Testament maintains concern

for the particular land and people of Israel are old-style premillennial dispensationalists. Their theology puts Israel and the church on two different tracks, neither of which runs at the same time, and they often hold to elaborate and detailed schedules of end-time events, including a rapture, through which the true church is protected from great tribulations.

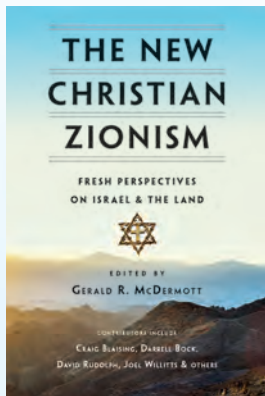
How does the new Christian Zionism embraced by the contributors of this book differ from the prevailing narrative?

McDERMOTT: First, this new approach has nothing to do with dispensationalism. Second, unlike some Zionisms, we do not treat the Israeli government as beyond criticism. Nor do we think it is necessarily the last incarnation of the Jewish people and polity before the eschaton. Third, we reject end-times speculation and prefer to be agnostic on what will happen when.

Maybe defining a few key terms used in the book would help. Could you tell us what you mean by *Zionism*, *Christian Zionism* and *supersessionism*?

McDERMOTT: *Zionism* is the movement that supports the return of Jews to the land of Israel to establish a homeland. There have been secular and religious Zionisms, and among the latter both Christian and Jewish Zionisms. *Christian Zionism* refers to one of several movements of Christians who believe that the recent gathering of Jews in the land of Israel, and their establishment of a polity there, are fulfillments of biblical prophecy.

Supersessionism is the view that the Christian church has superseded Israel. According to this view, God revoked his covenant with biblical Israel after most of Israel rejected Jesus' claim to be the Messiah and transferred the covenant to those who believed in Jesus. The church thus became the new Israel. Supersessionism is also called "replacement theology." The church replaced Israel as the apple of God's eye.



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Does this book suggest that theologies that oppose Christian Zionism are by definition supersessionist?

McDERMOTT: Not necessarily. One could believe that God's covenant with Israel, his Jewish people, is ongoing, as Paul suggests in Romans 11:28-29, and at the same time be opposed to Christian Zionism for a number of reasons. Among those reasons could be (1) that you are not dispensationalist and think of all Christian Zionisms as dispensationalist, (2) that

you think the Israeli government is oppressing Palestinians and associate support for the government with Christian Zionism, or (3) you believe in two paths to salvation, one for Jews and one for Christians, and do not think the current state of Israel has anything to do with biblical prophecy. We do not hold to (3), but it is a view that is not supersessionist.

Many readers may be surprised that up to the 1960s, mainline churches in the United States were largely Zionist. What contributed to the change?

McDERMOTT: Probably the biggest reason for the change has been the perception that Israel is violating international law by its continued occupation of the West Bank after the Six-Day War (1967), and the feeling that Israel oppresses Palestinians. We address these perceptions and explain why we think that many of them are based on misconceptions.

If it is true, as you and the contributors argue, that the New Testament sees a future for both the people and the land of Israel (that is, that the New Testament is Zionist), why has this been missed by so many Christians, academics and laypeople alike, for so many years?

McDERMOTT: We see what we have been taught to see. Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* showed that scientists were often so indoctrinated in existing paradigms that they were unable to see what was staring them in the face. So too for the Zionism in the New Testament. We have not seen it because we have been taught not to see it.

Whenever Israel or Jerusalem are mentioned, especially their future, our supersessionist training kicks in. So it fails to register that Paul uses the present tense when he says in Romans 11:28 that Jews who were rejecting Jesus as Messiah *are* beloved for the sake of their forefathers, or that Revelation proclaims that the new Jerusalem will have the names of the twelve tribes of Israel inscribed on its gates (Rev 21:12). This mention of Israel in the *future* does not fit our preconception that Israel as a distinct entity will no longer exist. So we reinterpret it as a non-Jewish feature of the church.

Do the contributors make an argument that present-day Israel, a secular state, has significance for theological Zionism? And if so, does the book discuss how one can support Christian Zionism without being a partisan for the present state of Israel?

McDERMOTT: The contributors are agreed that the present regathering of Jews in their ancient homeland is theologically significant. And so is their (necessary) organization as a people under a self-chosen government.

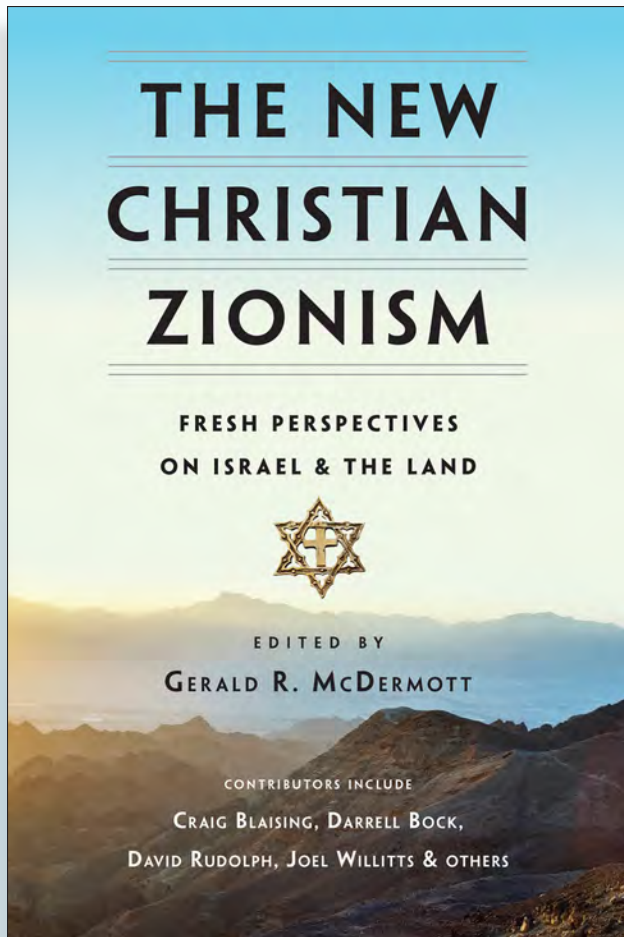
But we also point out that the assembly of the dry bones into a fully functioning body in Ezekiel's vision proceeds in stages. So the road to the eschaton is a gradual one. One need not support every aspect of each stage along the way to believe that the road is leading toward a divinely ordained goal.

There is always tension between promise and fulfillment of any prophecy, and we need to live with that tension. We already live with that tension in the church, believing it is the body of Christ despite its many spots and wrinkles and blemishes (Eph 5:27). So if we grieve the imperfections we see in present Israel, let us remember that we grieve much imperfection in the church.

The final coming, which we await, is not a perfect Israeli people or state but that of the Son of Man.

What is your vision for this book? What do you hope it will accomplish among those who give it a fair reading?

McDERMOTT: My hope is that readers will see that there is a serious theological argument to be made for Christian Zionism that is not dispensationalist but responsible, both exegetically and theologically.



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Can a theological case be made from Scripture that Israel still has a claim to the Promised Land?

Christian Zionism is often seen as the offspring of premillennial dispensationalism. But the historical roots of Christian Zionism came long before the rise of the Plymouth Brethren and John Nelson Darby. In fact, the authors of *The New Christian Zionism* contend that the biblical and theological connections between covenant and land are nearly as close in the New Testament as in the Old.

Written with academic rigor by experts in the field, this book proposes that Zionism can be defended historically, theologically, politically and morally. While this does not sanctify every policy and practice of the current Israeli government, the authors include recommendations for how twenty-first-century Christian theology should rethink its understanding of both ancient and contemporary Israel, the Bible and Christian theology more broadly.

Contributors include:

- Robert Benne
- Craig Blaising
- Darrell Bock
- Shadi Khalloul
- Mark Kinzer
- Gerald McDermott
- Robert Nicholson
- David Rudolph
- Mark Tooley
- Joel Willitts

This provocative volume proposes a place for Christian Zionism in an integrated biblical vision.



"The essays here offer a fresh perspective on Christian Zionism, one based on careful biblical exegesis and in dialogue with the historic traditions of the church. A paradigm-challenging volume."

—TIMOTHY GEORGE

founding dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University



GERALD R. McDERMOTT (PhD, University of Iowa) is Anglican Chair of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. He is also associate pastor at Christ the King Anglican Church. His books include *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (with Michael McClymond), *God's Rivals* and *The Great Theologians*.