

The Land of Israel

A Christian Zionist View

by Halvor Ronning

A long spiritual pilgrimage would be required of most Christians today before they would consider calling themselves “Christian Zionists.” So it was with this writer, who was trained at a seminary where “replacement theology” was predominant — the teaching that the Church has replaced the People of Israel and that therefore the Land of Israel is no longer theologically significant. In contrast, a Christian Zionist is a Christian who looks with favor on the Jewish return to Zion precisely because of the biblical significance of this return.

Problem of the Term “Christian Zionism”

The term “Zionism” originated in the late nineteenth century in Leo Pinsker’s pamphlet, “Auto-Emancipation.”¹ Pinsker rejected the Enlightenment conception of Jewish emancipation, according to which the Jews would assimilate to the surrounding non-Jewish societies if only they were made full citizens in them. He argued that the Jewish People should instead emancipate itself by creating its own state and thereby preserving its own unique identity. Traditionally, neither Jews nor Christians believed in Jewish auto-emancipation, holding that only God Himself had the power to emancipate the Jewish People fully and end its exilic status.

There have been many serious discussions within Judaism about this issue. Opposition initially was so strong that Theodor Herzl, founding figure of the modern Jewish Zionist movement, was not able to hold the first World Zionist Congress in Germany as he desired, but was forced to look to Switzerland.

There are many within Christendom who look favorably on the existence of the State of Israel, but do not call themselves “Zionists” because of their rejection of the perceived exclusively political origin of the term. Whatever that origin and however we disassociate ourselves from it, the time has come to re-

1. April 1, 1890. See “Zionism” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), vol. 16, p. 1032.

deem the term itself, since the return of the Jewish People to Zion is a biblical concept. This concept originated thousands of years before the modern term, "Zionism," with its "ism" ending suggesting a political connotation.²

We redeem the term when we support the Jewish return to Zion, not because we think Jews are heroes capable of auto-emancipation, but because we look upon them as refugees whom God is capable of rescuing from annihilation and whom He is returning to Zion. God is responsible for returning Jerusalem to the world stage, and He is doing so for His own purposes — beyond all human efforts to hinder or help. Accordingly, Christian Zionist support for Israel goes beyond any weak altruism that could evaporate under difficult circumstances. It is grounded in our understanding of our Christian identity and is therefore not subject to fluctuation depending on circumstances.

Biblical Principles

The Christian Zionist view of the Land of Israel can be expressed by listing a number of biblical teachings to which such a Christian adheres. By following this list from the more general teachings to the more specific, a reader can determine how much he or she can agree with such an understanding of Scripture. Hopefully the reader can at least part company with a clearer understanding of the scriptural logic that supports the Christian Zionist position.

1. Belief in revelation. According to the Bible, contact between God and humankind is established by God. He takes the initiative as He is the one who desires the contact most of all. He has created us in His image; we are not the ones who create Him in our image. His image instills in us a longing for the fulfillment of contact with Him, yet He is the one who reveals to us how we can make that contact.

This separates us, as it should separate all Christians, from humanist philosophers. For the humanist the universe is silent and all that matters is how we interpret the silence. The humanist does not need the Land of Israel, because neither any land nor any nation has any special significance whatsoever. There is no God to confer such significance upon them.

2. Is. 35:10: "And the redeemed of the LORD shall return and come with singing unto Zion and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Until now this has not been fulfilled because the joy of returning has never lasted. The people have been driven out.

Jer. 16:14: "Therefore, behold, the days come, says the LORD, that it shall no more be said, 'The LORD liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt'; but, 'The LORD liveth that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them, ' and I will bring them again into their land that I gave to their fathers.'" Surely this word already applied to the return from Babylon as originally intended, but the phrase "from all the lands" and the present dramatic return from the north fit even more precisely.

Amos 9:14–15: "'And I will return my people Israel out of captivity, and they will rebuild the waste cities and inhabit them ... and I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of their land which I have given them, ' says the LORD your God.'" This prophecy has never yet been fulfilled because until now the people have always been driven out.

2. Revelation via particular choices. The Bible presents God as making specific, particular, concrete, historical choices through which He reveals His plans for the lifestyle He requires of us. This separates us from the general theists who do not need the Land of Israel. For such theists, or New Age pantheists, all that matters is the divine spark within every individual, irrespective of whether the source of that divinity is outside or exclusively within. The physical location of anyone is totally irrelevant.

This also separates us from mythologizing Christians. They do not need land because history is only the accidental clothing of eternal truths. From their perspective any land or any time can be the setting of mythological Bible stories that reveal eternal truths about God and humankind. No specific land nor specific time has any necessary bonds to these timeless truths. As one such mythologically oriented theology student put it, "It does not matter whether Jesus ever lived or not. It is the timeless ethical teachings collected in the 'Sermon on the Mount' which are important."

To call these Christians "demythologizers," as they frequently term themselves, is a misnomer. Their activity is rightly called "re-mythologizing," which amounts to "dehistoricizing." It was precisely the ancient pagan non-biblical world that consisted of meaningless repetitions of nature cycles in which individual human beings were but historical accidents. In contrast, it was precisely the biblical message that demythologized the ancient world by introducing the concept of an ongoing development overseen by one Almighty Lord.

It is a gross injustice to biblical faith, whether Jewish or Christian, to attempt to reverse this process by pretending that it is the Bible stories which are mythological. Such reasoning must be exposed for what it is: the attempt to reduce the Bible to the level of ancient mythology which is merely to be analyzed and critiqued. Though the Bible can indeed be analyzed and critiqued, it is above all God's Word to be revered and obeyed.

3. Record of revealed choices. Scriptures present us with a written record of God's successive revelations. They include God's choice of an individual who was told to leave his home and who was guided to go to another land promised to his descendants. By choosing Abraham and promising to him the Land of Canaan, God Himself created a new identity: a dual national-religious identity. As the basis of the national aspect of the identity, it involved a specific land. It also involved being bound in a relationship to God, the Giver, as the basis of the religious aspect of the identity.

The written record of these choices establishes forever an ongoing, unchangeable reminder of how God did in fact create this new identity. It has fixed forever the fact that God's style is to choose: to choose specific humans in a specific location through whom to reveal Himself to other humans who are likewise concrete, specific, historical individuals in specific locations.

This separates us from Muslims, who claim to have a revelation that makes the chosenness of the Jews obsolete. It also separates us from those Christians who think that the New Covenant was made with them to the exclusion of the

Jewish People — instead of realizing that it was made with the Jews first and only later was it expanded to include us non-Jews.³

4. Required response to revelation. The importance of utter trust in God is reflected in the very name of the land today. The name, Israel, originated in the Jabbok River incident in which God changed Jacob's name to Israel. Jacob is depicted as feeling totally powerless to face the dangers of the next day without God. Accordingly, in response to Jacob's desperate plea for God's blessing, God gives him a new name including "El," the generic Semitic name of God. The name reflects rejection of independence from God. Israel is not really Isra-El apart from a sense of dependence on God.

This separates us Christian Zionists, as it ought to separate all Christians, from anyone who glorifies human military might, because God wants us to feel dependent on Him above all. Since "He can save whether by many or by few," the Bible demonstrates that seeming powerlessness coupled with prayer is stronger than military coercion.

It must also be remembered that the mere existence of might is not a biblical evil, but the **abuse** of might is evil. The Bible is not concerned with exalting the underdog as such, but with responsibility in serving God's justice. God vindicates the underdog Israel against the overdog Pharaoh, but He also calls King Cyrus of Persia, the mightiest overdog of the time, "My servant." To be responsible in serving God's justice is the challenge to be faced by Jewish and Arab rulers alike in dealing with the minorities under their control.

This separates us Christian Zionists from Muslims who believe that military coercion is an appropriate vehicle for spreading religion. It also separates us from the overzealous fringe elements in the Israeli military, who are often charged and punished by the Israeli military courts themselves. It most surely separates us from those Christians who get romantic and starry-eyed over Israeli military accomplishments, but without applying to Israel the biblical standards about how to treat minorities and conquered enemies.⁴

It is surely significant that Israel is the only nation in the United Nations which mentions God in its very name. It is more important, for example, than the "In God We Trust" on United States coins. The difference is that Americans chose to label their coins, but God chose to label Israel. Consequently the message on those coins is significant only to the extent, if at all, that the people of that land take that message seriously. By contrast, even if Israel would like to forget its God-given identity and its destiny to be a dependent people, God Himself does not allow it.

5. God's faithfulness to His choices. God's choice of the People of Israel and the Land of Israel was confirmed and established stronger than ever

3. In Acts 10 we read of the acceptance of non-Jews into the family of believers. The very first non-Jew was a particularly hard case to swallow, an officer of the pagan Roman occupation army, Cornelius, and his family. Yet, after intense discussion among the all-Jewish followers of Jesus, this inclusion was accepted graciously and with a spirit of amazement at God's generosity.

4. In the Hebrew Bible there are stories of conquered enemies being killed and stories of conquered enemies being fed and freed. Israelis have almost without exception followed the second alternative.

when He sent His Son Jesus to be a Jew in the Land of Israel.⁵ God had promised that the house of Jacob would never be utterly destroyed, that there would always remain a remnant.⁶ Accordingly, He came down Himself as “Immanuel,” as “God with us,” to enter into that identity of “Israel,” those who “strive with God,” in order to express their utter dependence on Him. He thereby insured the indestructibility of the Jewish identity. Even torture and death were revealed as impotent by the resurrection of His Son, the ultimate Jew, Jesus, the epitome of the remnant of the Chosen People.

By choosing Abraham God created this identity, by naming Israel He defined it, and by sending His Son He confirmed it. No other identity can successfully compete with what God Himself has created, defined and confirmed.

As descendants of Abraham and Israel, Jews of today still have the ongoing responsibility to be God’s witnesses in the real world of concrete historical choices by maintaining their God-given special national-religious identity. To maintain it is a blessing, according to the Scriptures; to attempt to be no different from other nations is a curse.

History teaches that Jews outside the Land have never found more than an all too temporary respite from trouble. The same held true when they were in the Land but disregarded the instructions of the Torah. Be it duly emphasized that trouble in itself is no proof of separation from God’s purposes. On the contrary, hatred by a world of people who are not dependent on God is part of the fate of belonging to the family of God — whether a person belongs to the original chosen family or to its enlargement in the Christian family.

Some Jews thought they could find a lasting respite by becoming Israelis — this was the mistake of secular Zionists. But “oil has made us Jews again,” said one Israeli satirist. When the world discovered its dependence on Arab oil during the oil crises of the 1970s, the Jews were shown afresh that no matter how hard they try, they cannot become just one more nation. The Bible warns that it is a curse for them to try — because they alone among the nations have a particular God-given destiny as a nation that is different in kind from any particular God-given destinies which other nations may have. No other nation was chosen to be a blessing to all other nations, to be the home of the world Redeemer, and to be the locus of His return.

This understanding of Scriptures separates us Christian Zionists from all who think that God has abandoned the Jewish People: both from those who think of Jews as just one more **nationality** among the nations, and from those who think of Judaism as just the pre-Christian **religion** of one more culture in which Christianity is to be contextualized.

6. Christian response to God’s faithfulness to Israel. A certain deep biblical truth, neglected for centuries throughout most of Christendom, is now

5. In the synoptic Gospels the chief use of the word “Jews” is in reference to Jesus as “King of the Jews” — with only three exceptions.

6. “Fear not, O Jacob my servant, says the Lord, for I am with you. I will make a full end of all the nations to which I have driven you, but I will not make a full end of you, but correct you in measure, yet I will not leave you wholly unpunished” (Jer. 46:28). See the proceedings of the Jerusalem conference held on this issue, as recorded in Acts 10.

regaining recognition. It is the ongoing validity of God's claim on the Jewish People to maintain their specific, peculiar, combined identity: an identity that is at once both national and religious.

Christian Zionists welcome and support the renewal among Christians of this biblical concept of Jewish identity as a sign of God's faithfulness to His historical choices. It requires us both to support the national existence of the Jewish People, including their political sovereignty in the State of Israel, and to support their religious existence as a people called to maintain an identity of a specific dependence on God unlike that of any other people.

We affirm that dual heritage of theirs as belonging to our own heritage. Yet we do not immigrate to Israel to become Israelis, nor do we convert to Judaism, for we share the heritage but not the identity. This is because the early Jewish followers of Jesus were humble enough not to insist on making Jews out of all of us non-Jewish followers of Jesus.⁷

Who Joins Whom?

This is the key question, which has several facets. First, do we enter the People of God by joining the Jews, or do Jews enter the People of God by joining us in the Church? The ecclesiastical answer for centuries was that they join us. The biblical New Testament answer, which even some Christian non-Zionists have been rediscovering, is that we non-Jews join the Jews by our faith in the Jewish Messiah. We join the faithful remnant of the Jewish People who have always trusted in the God of Israel for their salvation and who refuse to give His honor to any other. We Christians join those Jews who are the stump whose root is God. That is, we are grafted into that remnant which is made up of those Jews who are faithful to God.

Second, however, who are those faithful Jews: Karaite Jews? Rabbinic Jews? Messianic Jews? Christian converts? In any case, we are not grafted into nor adopted by secular Jews. Yet when we join the Jewish remnant, even the secular Jews must be accepted as somehow a part of the family. However problematic it may seem, we gain some kind of special relationship even to them. Perhaps it can be compared to the relationship we have with nominal Christians, people who bear a name about which they are not fully serious. They are not to be rejected but to be challenged to live up to their name.

But what is this special relationship? Many Christian thinkers have been reawakened to this question by the gloom of the Holocaust and the glow of the revival of the Jewish People in the State of Israel. All Christians face an unfinished task: to redefine that relationship in light of what God has allowed and what God has instigated. He allowed Auschwitz and He instigated the return of the People of Israel to their Land.

We need to redefine our understanding of Scripture in terms of our relationship with the Jewish People whom God has not allowed to disappear, especially now in the twentieth century. Never before were we shown so vividly and so painfully what every Jewish family sings in the annual Passover Seder:

7. See the discussion in Acts 15.

“There have been in every generation those who stood over us to destroy us, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, has saved us from their hand.”

Guidelines

Without claiming to solve the problem of how best to understand our relationship with the Jewish People, guidelines can be suggested for a growing and hopefully better understanding:

1. Abandon the arrogant **replacement theology** which claims that the Church has replaced the Jewish People that no longer has any theological reason for continued existence as a people. A variant says: Jews exist merely as a negative example, to show Christians what they should not be.⁸

2. Beware of overreaction, which can lead to the opposite extreme of **two-covenant theology**, as if God works through two different methods with two different peoples.

3. Develop a **remnant theology**, which has at least six components:

a. Studying the behavior of the biblical remnant with regard to those fellow-Israelites who were not part of the faithful remnant. It will be of utmost importance to note how the remnant cried out to God on their behalf, rather than abandoning or rejecting them.

b. Clarifying our relationship to the various kinds of Jews. Who are the best candidates for being the stump which is organically connected to the Root? The Root is the Redeemer, Who is God Himself — as is so clear in the Passover Seder: “I and not another!” But which Jews are the remnant? Who constitute the stump into which we Christians are grafted? Who constitute the core of the family into which we are adopted?

c. Offering a Christian evaluation of the various forms of Jewish messianism, as a respectful, caring critique from within the family.

d. Insisting on the continuing faithfulness of God to the Jews, as seen in His refusal to let Jewish identity disappear even though many Jews have sought the route of assimilation.

e. Revealing the foundations of the New Covenant as being established with the same ancient people, and only later expanded to include others.

f. Specifying the newness of the New Covenant. What is meant by a later covenant being a better covenant (Heb. 8:6)? What is gained by a covenant “written in our hearts” (Jer. 31:33)? What is the advantage of a covenant that is opened up to the whole world? Stated more abstractly, how does the internalization of the locus of a covenant and the expansion of the scope of a covenant represent an improvement?

8. The option of replacement theology is already presented and flatly rejected in Numbers 14. The option was that God would kill all the Israelites because of their sinfulness, and start over from the beginning; He would not reject the idea of a chosen people, but would destroy the people descended from Abraham and start a new people from Moses. This new start with one individual was rejected, and God listened to Moses' prayer for his sinful people. God the Father has surely listened also to the prayer of Jesus. Moreover, in the New Testament, Paul makes it absolutely clear: “Has God cast away His people? God forbid!... God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew” (Rom. 11:1-2).

Conclusions Regarding the Land

Two conclusions can be drawn about the significance of the Land of Israel. First, through a reawakened recognition that nationality as well as religion is crucial to the full expression of God-given and God-preserved Jewish identity, we Christian Zionists realize that the Land is an integral and essential factor in Jewish identity. Second, because we consider ourselves to be somehow adopted into that identity, we are learning that the Land is critical also to our own identity as Christians, though we are not Jews and do not need to become Jews.

1. The Land as an essential part of Jewish identity. It has been proven over the centuries that Jewish identity can survive without the Jews being present in the Land of Israel.⁹ But the Land was not dropped from the ideal, full expression of that identity, as is obvious from this last century. Whether Jews actually live in the Land depends on the timing of God's purposes, and to a considerable extent on the condition of Jewish willingness to serve Him.

In other words, even though living in the Land is not essential to the **survival** of Jewish identity, the existence of a Promised Land is essential to the **concept** of Jewish identity. The ideal expression of that concept would necessarily include fulfillment of that promise by a Jewish population flourishing in the Land.

Christian Zionists understand that it would be wrong to drop the Land from the concept of Jewish identity. The existence of a Promised Land remains a powerful witness that the God of the Bible works in the world in specific ways to bring about His universal purposes: He works through concrete, particular, historical choices, including choice of land. Without a specific land as a witness to the specificity of God's choices, our Christian identity is weakened. If the significance of earthly Jerusalem is lost, it not only becomes less likely that God will send His Son, Jesus, to Jerusalem in the future, it also becomes less plausible that He did in fact send His Son to Jerusalem in the past.¹⁰

2. The Land as a part of Christian identity. The Land belongs to our identity as well as to Jewish identity, but with one difference. Since we were not obligated by the Jewish followers of Jesus to adopt the full Jewish religious-national identity in order to be followers of Jesus, we do not even need to consider *aliyah* (immigration to Israel). But whether we live in Jerusalem or not, Jesus as presented in the New Testament is inconceivable without His activity in Jerusalem in the past and in the future.

This understanding of Scripture separates us from those anti-Christian spiritualizers who abandon any significance of Jesus' presence in Jerusalem in the past. It also separates us from the anti-Jewish spiritualizers within Christendom

9. In fact a few Jews have been so assimilated into various cultures outside the land of Israel, i.e., so "diasporized," as to imagine a kind of Judaism that does not even want any present connection to the Land.

10. The "Jesus Seminar," which takes votes on whether the New Testament sayings of Jesus were really spoken by Jesus, has not yet voted Him out of existence, but so little of Him is left that such a step would not be surprising. Others have in fact already taken that step of concentrating on the contents of the teachings without feeling any need of the Teacher.

who abandon any notion of Jesus appearing in Jerusalem in the future. They teach that the Jews of today have no relationship to the Bible, and that Jerusalem no longer has any theological significance.

Consequences for Spiritualizers

Obviously Christian Zionists are separated from all spiritualizers. "Spiritualizing" is the counterfeit of Christian spirituality, which requires being in tune with the Holy Spirit of God. Since the actions of His Spirit have been recorded in the Scriptures, these serve to correct our various spiritual intuitions which may or may not be in tune with the Holy Spirit. Therefore reliance on the Holy Scriptures becomes the test of genuine spirituality.

A great loss occurs when genuine spirituality is abandoned in favor of that counterfeit. The genuine spiritual significance of God reaching out to us through real events in specific places is exchanged for counterfeit spiritualizations which depend on subjective experiences that are available anytime and anywhere. Objective, external, historical events are no longer made central to one's religious experience; in their place the spiritualizers exalt the experience of immediate contact with the divine, whose locus is supposedly within one's own soul. This focus on one's inward spirit is what is meant by spiritualization — it is the replacement of events subject to public scrutiny by hidden inner feelings not subject to external observation or critique.

The Bible story, in contrast, stands or falls on its historicity. It deals with specific individuals and specific events in specific places. It is open for anyone to critique its reliability in reporting about the past and in making projections about the future. No book has ever been critiqued like the Bible, yet its historical message continues to impact on people's lives in that very personal, subjective sphere to which spiritualizers try to reduce it. However, precisely because of the historical character of the Bible's message about a particular people and a particular Savior in a particular land, it is able to impact on each of us as particular individuals. We are not just meaningless numbers in the mass of universal humanity who are reaching inward to a nameless divinity formed in our image!

Only the particular can impact on the particular. When all particulars have experienced that impact, then true universality will have been achieved.

Spiritualizers are wrong when they think we should start with universality; it is the end to be achieved, not the means. There will never be universal harmony among human beings if the only universality allowed is the perfectly hollow and totally formal abstract universality of allowing anyone anywhere to decide or to create whatever that person wants to imagine as being divinity for him or her.

Spiritualizers, who want to get rid of a God of concrete choices and have no use for the Land of Israel, have got things backwards. They want the specific personal impact without the one kind of message that is capable of giving subjectivity a foundation that is reliable and secure, a basis that is open to scrutiny and can stand the scrutiny.

No such testing is acceptable to the New Age disciples of inner realities. Such people feel themselves to be so spiritually or intellectually competent

that they suppose themselves to be above the correction provided by the Bible's historical realities. They trust their own spiritual experience and intellectual expertise more than the biblical account, even though that account is abundantly clear about the basic requirements of God's Holy Spirit as recorded throughout centuries of amazingly consistent prophetic perception of His will.¹¹

It is no wonder that spiritualizers are so hateful toward Jews and Christians who sympathize with Jews. To their way of thinking, we represent old-fashioned traditionalist tribalism. We supposedly obstruct any chances for world harmony by clinging to exclusivist, particularist, limited club memberships. We are "team players" looking out for our own interests rather than "fire-fighters" willing to help anyone in trouble. They claim that our concern for Jews involves not caring about Arabs.¹²

This is the deception of the spiritualizers: the claim that following particularistic historical choices is the enemy of universal harmony. The very opposite is the truth: the claim that following God's particular suggestions is what makes for harmony. He makes specific choices regarding the specific life style He requests us to follow, as exemplified by the Jewish Messiah and world Savior, Jesus. The only guarantee of growing harmony among us is growing agreement in following God's leadership.

Looking inward into the multitude of deceptive human hearts is exactly what leaves us in the mess of a "multi-verse" with no hope whatsoever of attaining a "uni-verse." The natural result of spiritualizing is precisely to become pluralists who relativize the importance of any religion or any land. But that kind of pluralism is not the answer.

Consequences for Pluralists

There is a fear which causes people to become spiritualizers and thereby also pluralists. The fear is justified, but a relativizing pluralism is not the proper method of overcoming that fear.

The fear is based on the historical fact that particularisms all too often tend to become absolutisms. Then, in order to achieve their goals, absolutists use

11. "He has shown you, O man, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you, to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). The consequence of exalting one's own spiritual intuitions above the revealed Word of God is a disastrous loss of moral moorings; this is all too obvious in many Christian societies and ministries throughout Church history — not least among recent television evangelists in the United States.

12. They seem not even to notice that by supporting yet one more Moslem Arab state they have not moved one single step further in the direction of achieving a society in this land that would be more concerned about justice and harmony. On the contrary, they are actually supporting severe regression from such ideals; one need only look at Israel's neighbors. When there was a rebellion in Jordan in September 1970, for example, 2000 people were killed in three weeks and the rebellion was finished. Such stark anti-Israeli efforts are blind to Isaiah's vision, shared by many Israelis, of being a blessing to the Arabs. "In that day shall Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land: Whom the LORD of hosts shall bless, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance" (Is. 19:24–25).

coercion, including torture and murder, against their own citizens; they use military might against their neighbors. What is unjustified is to conclude that all particularisms must necessarily lead to absolutism and that therefore a relativizing pluralism offers the only escape from absolutism.

It is true that all humanly-based particularisms do ultimately lead to absolutism. But a particularism that is genuinely divine has no need to be absolutistic; its foundations in reality are so absolutely secure that it has no need to resort to absolutistic methods to prove or establish itself. This is why Jesus was willing to be killed rather than to kill, because no one can touch the reality for which Jesus stands, no matter how many people are ridiculed or tortured or murdered in an attempt to deny that reality. What is of God simply cannot be overthrown, no matter what any human does.

The test of true tolerance, therefore, is not refuge in a relativizing pluralism, but the willingness even to suffer from others, to allow them to live in error if they so choose, rather than turning to coercion to correct them. One can and should plead and warn, but no more than that because that is what God does according to the Bible. He then leaves us to ourselves to learn from the horrible consequences that it would have been better to have turned to Him earlier rather than later. God has simply chosen not to use coercion for His own reasons — among them perhaps the creation of the possibility of love. He is so absolute that He has no reason to be absolutistic.

Genuine and very deep confidence in God is the only protection against the evils of absolutism, not the ineffective hope for protection via relativism. Pluralism as a philosophy of life, achieved by relativizing all absolute claims, is unacceptable to traditional monotheists, whether Jews, Christians or Muslims.

There is only one very specific kind of pluralism acceptable in a truth-oriented religion. It is the pluralism of allowing others the right to be convinced, or remain unconvinced, of absolute truth by non-absolutist means of persuasion. Only a religion that is so confident as not to stoop to coercion is a viable alternative to the absolutisms that continue to plague us, that reduce us to less than human in our behavior toward one another.

Consequences for Evangelicals

That spiritualizers should turn their backs on Israel is not surprising, since they turn their backs in distrust against the Bible itself. But what about defections among the circles of Evangelical Christian supporters of Israel? Why should some who once were excited about the Jewish return to the Land of Israel now turn their backs on Israel? The problem seems to lie with their failure to perceive God's faithfulness to the **dual aspect** of Jewish identity. Professor Simon of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has said: "Though I am a social scientist and not a prophet, I dare to prophesy that if any Jew thinks that being Jewish is only a religious identity or if any Jew thinks that being Jewish is only a national identity, then his grandchildren will not be Jewish."¹³

13. An unpublished lecture given at the Hebrew University in the context of a public lecture series on Jewish identity.

Some Christians, if not most, would look favorably upon such a consequence. The loss of Jewish identity may be seen as something desirable rather than tragic. But even some Evangelical Christians who would not like to will Jews out of existence are lessening or even abandoning their support for the State of Israel. Their defection results from emphasizing only one aspect of Jewish identity.

Those who only emphasize Jewishness as a **nationality** can point to all kinds of mistakes made by the various Israeli authorities. These become reasons for backing away from Israel the nation — rather than praying all the more for Israelis to bring God into their daily decisions. Jews are not just one more nationalistic group to be treated sympathetically only as underdogs, but abandoned when they seem to be underdogs no longer.¹⁴

Those who emphasize Judaism as a **religion** can easily tire when they experience the high level of suspicion and opposition that exists among Jews toward Christians — rather than repenting all the more for the witness of hatred and contempt against Jews which has been the Jewish experience of Christians for centuries. Jews are not members of some religious group to be treated nicely only until they rebuff us.

We need to understand Jews biblically as a people whose dual identity is 1) created by God, 2) confirmed by Jesus and 3) faithfully affirmed by God even now as a continuing witness to Him. We may argue about how they ought best to give that witness. But we argue because we care about a biblically true witness to the God of Israel, because we see Him continuing to care for the well-being of the People of Israel, because we see Him able to bring them back to His Land today. With this understanding we may on occasion be furiously angry at the behavior of some Jews, but we will never turn our backs on the Jewish People because of offensive individuals.

Contrast this understanding with the antisemitic attempt at self-justification expressed in the notorious phrase that “Some of my best friends are Jews.” It only proves that the speaker does not like Jews in general for some reason or another, but allows a few exceptions. A Christian Zionist does just the reverse: he or she is quite willing to express disgust at a particular individual, but as an exception to the rule of good will toward the Jewish People.

We are willing to make the necessary theological corrections to our traditions in order to bring them more into line with Scripture and with what God is doing in our time. Accordingly, we Christian Zionists challenge all Bible-believing Christians to uphold the importance of the Land of Israel as an essential element of our faith and of the historical context of God’s revelation.

We keep faith in the God of history precisely because we observe Him keeping faith with His choices and with His methods. He has not abandoned His choice Israel, nor will He abandon the method of outreach through Israel’s Messiah to all nations. Therefore, we trust Him to send Jesus the Savior to

14. Underdog theology needs to be replaced by biblical theology. God cared for His people not only when they were suffering in Egypt, but also when they were unjust and were causing suffering to the Gibeonite minority. How God expresses care may change radically from sympathy to anger, but there is no question of abandoning the chosen people.

Jerusalem again — to be all if not more than any rabbi ever hoped or dreamed that the Messiah would be.

Postscript: Variety Within Christian Zionism

In general, Christian Zionism can be defined as Christian support for Jewish return to the Land. There is, however, an immense variety among those supporters. This article has dealt primarily with the lowest common denominator of Christian Zionism: the belief that being Christian links us inextricably with the Jewish People and should lead all Christians to be favorably disposed toward them and toward their return to the Land of Israel.

This unflinchingly “favorable disposition” is a far cry from being a support club which backs Israel in everything, right or wrong. Some Christian Zionists may favor right-wing Israeli politics, while others favor the left-wing tendencies. A few Christian Zionists may be fascinated with the rebuilding of the Temple, while others think that Jesus’ sacrifice fulfilled all the Temple ever stood for and therefore are opposed to any thought of ever rebuilding it. A handful of Christian Zionists even serve in the Israeli army, while others would be opposed to doing so.

Christian Zionism is most definitely not to be characterized by any one of those subgroups alone. Some of them represent no more than a minute extremist fringe. This article has attempted to make clear the biblical relevance of the Jewish return to the Land of Zion and its importance for all Bible-believing Christians.

Allow a Lutheran to conclude with a reference to Martin Luther’s lectures on the Book of Genesis. Luther was fascinated by the wonderful promises made to Abraham’s descendants and asked who those descendants might be. Looking at the situation of the Jews of his day, he concluded that they could not possibly be the ones to whom the Scriptures referred. “If the Jews are Abraham’s descendants, then we would expect to see them back in their own land. We would expect them to have a state of their own. But what do we see? We see them living scattered and despised.” Luther concluded that the Church was the spiritual heir of the promises to Abraham. He committed the sin of spiritualizing — just as he had been taught in the schools of his Augustinian order.

Luther thought that the Muslim attack on Vienna indicated that he was living in the Last Days. If that time had come, but there was not the slightest sign of the end of Jewish exile, in no way could Luther imagine that God was still capable of blessing the Jews. Luther’s false eschatology destroyed his excellent biblical methodology of looking at history to determine what God is doing. What if Luther had been alive today? He would have seen the Jewish return and become a Christian Zionist!

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