

Another Christian View of Israel Sees Church as New People of God

Evangelical Christian theology undergirding some reaction to the Arab-Israeli conflict hinges on one pivotal notion—that the Jewish people are God’s people, God’s chosen ones who must be protected.

But that’s not the only Christian view of modern Judaism.

“National Israel’s rejection of Christ meant forfeiture of God’s covenant blessings and that the true people of God today are Jews and Gentiles who have put their trust in Christ,” according to Paul Copan, a member of the Ravi Zacharias International Ministries team who is an authority on Jewish-Christian relations.

Copan holds degrees from Columbia Bible College, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Marquette University and is a well-published scholar. His books include “Who Was Jesus? A Jewish-Christian Dialogue.”

“Any theologically significant future of ethnic Jews is bound up in their embracing Jesus Christ, which is not a national and political future,” Copan said. He sympathizes with those who see a future for political Israel, but he finds “good scriptural reason to hold that this is not so.”

Here’s why: “The inter-ethnic church has replaced national Israel as the people of God. ... The promises to Israel have been fulfilled in Christ. The New Testament uses the same language of the church that the Old Testament does about national or theocratic Israel, and there is very good reason to believe the New Testament people of God in Christ, the church, are the fulfillment of the people of God.”

Copan cites numerous Scriptures to make his case, including Luke 19:44, where Jesus tells the Jews “your house is forsaken,” and Matthew 21:44, where Jesus says the kingdom of God will be taken away from the Jews and “given to a people

who will produce its fruit.”

“Christ threatened judgment upon Israel as though there would be no hope at all of restoration,” Copan concluded.

This view runs counter to the teaching of dispensational premillennialism, which has heavily influenced Baptist thought in the South since the mid-19th century. According to this worldview, not only will God restore political and national Israel, it is essential to the end-times that God do so.

“Read the Old Testament prophets,” said Ed McAteer, a well-educated Baptist layman in Memphis, Tenn., who is a staunch supporter of Israel. “God whipped the daylights out of them, scattered them. ... His constant call is ‘I will bring them back again.’

“He allowed them to go into captivity; he sent them there. ... God put the lash on them, but he did not reject them forever. ... They did crucify your Savior and my Savior, but God is a forgiving God.”

God will redeem Israel in the end times and bring the Jewish people to faith, according to McAteer and others who share his theological views.

Copan and other non-dispensationalists see it differently. “God’s covenant blessings are presently enjoyed only by those who are in Christ,” he said. “A Jew’s enjoyment of covenant blessings will come only through being joined to Christ.”

This requires a distinction between ethnic Israel and political Israel.

“Not one clear New Testament passage mentions the restoration of Israel as a political nation,” Copan asserted. “Romans 11:16-24 simply speaks of the conversion of Abraham’s physical offspring; it says nothing of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom.”

What, then, do non-dispensationalists think of the modern conflict over the existence of Israel as a state?

“We should be quite cautious about reading into the events of the Middle East what may not be there,” Copan suggested. “Even if these happened to be the outworking of biblical prophecy, we must be careful about being fatalists—thinking it’s going to happen whether we try to get involved or think contextually or not. We must be a people who seek peace, reconciliation, mediation and human flourishing wherever we can because of the cultural mandate God has given us.”

That doesn’t mean Christians must favor the Palestinians over the Israelis, but that Christians should take an informed perspective on both sides, Copan said.

While he is concerned about the Palestinians’ refusal to denounce terrorism, they should be allowed to create a Palestinian state if they renounce terrorism and acknowledge the right of Israel to exist, he said.

At the same time, Israel has a right to protect itself, he said, but sometimes has overstepped its boundaries.

It is not enough for evangelical Christians to assume Israel can do no wrong, Copan declared. “Even though I am sympathetic with Israel’s concerns and its actions of self-protection and even pre-emptive strikes against terrorist threats ..., evangelicals should also decry Israel’s actions when it goes too far.”

Still, the notion that American Christians should see Israel with a preferential view exists widely even beyond dispensational premillennialists.

“Paul says clearly that God’s promises to the Jewish people are irrevocable,” said Paula Fredriksen, a theology professor at Boston University and author of numerous books on ancient Christianity. Fredriksen is a nationally known scholar who was raised Roman Catholic but converted to Orthodox Judaism.

The “unmaking of Israel as a Christian theological position” emerged in the first and second centuries as part of the debate over whether Gentile Christians should have anything to do with the Jewish synagogue, she said. And by extension, this line of reasoning leads to anti-Semitism, she suggested.

<https://ethicsdaily.com/another-christian-view-of-israel-sees-church-as-new-people-of-god-cms-616/> April 16, 2002 Mark Wingfield

Wherever Christians fall on the status of Israel as the people of God, they should be willing to think critically about the current issues rather than merely assuming nothing can be done, said Weber, the history professor.

“Does believing in Bible prophecy absolve them of grappling with issues of right and wrong? Does knowing how everything is going to turn out justify turning a blind eye to injustice? Do the ends justify the means just because the ends have been prophesied?”

Mark Wingfield is managing editor of the [Baptist Standard](#), from which this article is reprinted with permission.