



# ISRAEL *matters*

Why Christians Must Think Differently  
about the People and the Land

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Gerald R. McDermott



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# Introduction

Some months back, a young Christian leader wrote to me about Israel. She is an intellectually curious, committed Christian who attended an elite Christian college.

"I was raised in a conservative church," she wrote, "and naively supported whatever Israel did. We were led to believe that God had given the land of Israel to his people, the Jews, and their fight for their land in 1948 was a religious act by a religious people looking to their God.

"But then in college I read *The Promise* by Chaim Potok. As I read the novel, it seemed that Israel reclaimed the land not as a faith-filled people finding their God-given inheritance but as a people who, crushed and disillusioned by the Holocaust, decided they could not and would not wait any longer for a messiah. They felt they had to take the land for themselves, and they did it by violence.

"So I have questioned whether that was right. Should the Jews have waited for the Messiah to return them to the land? Was their fight for the land perhaps turning their backs on God?"

## **Problems with Christian Zionism**

There was a time when I had similar questions. I had serious misgivings about what was called Christian Zionism. This was a term used for the belief that today's State of Israel was prophesied by the Bible and would play a major role in events at the end of the world, which was said to be coming very soon. I knew it was not the Jewish Zionism that some in the West unfairly associated with the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946. (I say "unfairly" because there have been Jewish Zionists for thousands of years who denounce terrorist acts.) The Christian Zionism that I heard about in the 1970s and 1980s was inspired by a kind of dispensationalist theology that I did not share. I knew that in one sense all Christian theologies are dispensationalist insofar as they believe God works differently with his people in different eras or dispensations. But one kind of dispensationalism in particular held that Israel and the gentile nations were running on two separate tracks, and that God dealt with each track separately.

I could not buy that. In the Bible, Israel's history always intersected with the rest of the world. And in the early Church, Jews and gentiles usually fellowshipped together in the same churches.

There were other reasons I could not accept that kind of dispensationalism. Some proponents seemed to think the State of Israel was beyond reproach. For example, I wondered if Israel was breaking international law by its continued occupation of the West Bank.

I knew that the Palestinians claimed that it was their land too. Many of them said they were being cruelly oppressed by their Israeli occupiers. Was that true? If so, how could the modern State of Israel be a God-thing, a fulfillment of his promises?

### **The New Israel**

Another reason I could not accept this sort of dispensationalist approach to Israel had to do with the confidence of some dispensationalists that they knew what was going to happen, event by event, in the end times. I knew of other kinds of dispensationalism that rejected these projections. But this more popular sort proposed elaborate schedules and date setting that seemed to be nothing more than fanciful speculation.

I had been convinced that the Church is the New Israel. This meant that after Jesus died and rose again, the covenant that God had made with Israel was transferred to those who believed in Jesus. The vast majority of Jews, who had refused Jesus' claim to be Messiah, were no longer the apple of God's eye. They were no different in God's eyes from any other people who had heard the gospel and had rejected it. The old Israel was no longer the true Israel. The Church of believers in Jesus Christ had now become the New Israel.

Or so I thought. This was the Christian interpretation that I had learned from Reformed theologians such as John Calvin and that was now embraced by many Christian churches—mainline Protestant, Catholic, and a growing number of evangelical churches.

So it was difficult for me to believe that modern Israel was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The fact that most Jews in Israel were either secular or religious-but-non-messianic seemed to preclude any connection between their land and the biblical prophecies. I thought that might change if one day most Jews in Israel were to accept Jesus. But in the meantime, modern Israel did not seem related to the Bible.

### **Didn't Christ End Distinctions between Jews and Greeks?**

There were still other reasons for not accepting dispensationalist or Zionist claims about Israel. I was struck by Paul's declaration in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek." This seemed to be saying that distinctions between Jews and gentiles, even between Jewish believers in Jesus and gentile believers in Jesus, no longer have relevance. In other words, nothing distinctly Jewish, unless it were to find its fulfillment in Jesus, is of relevance or interest to Christians.

This included the land and people of Israel today. They seemed to be of merely historical importance. I knew their history could help us appreciate Jesus' context thousands of years ago, but I did not understand their relevance for Christians today.

## **Startling Discoveries**

But then I began to come across some startling discoveries. One of the first was that the New Testament never calls the Church the New Israel. That made me wonder what the relationship between the Israel of the Old Testament and the Church really was.

Then I looked further into Galatians 3:28. Paul did indeed say that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. But he also said there is "no male and female," for all are "one in Christ Jesus." I realized that there are still differences between male and female and that Paul himself referred to different roles for men and women in marriage.

Paul said wives should submit to husbands as the Church submits to Christ. He also wrote that the husband is the head of the wife. He never taught that the wife is the head of the husband. I knew that interpreters disputed the meaning of those words—whether marriage should be egalitarian or complementarian. But the fact remained that for Paul, male and female are one in Christ *while remaining distinct* and the two seem to have different roles.

If male and female distinctions persist, what about Jewish-gentile differences? Does that distinction also remain in the Church, where all are one in Christ Jesus? And if the Jew-gentile distinction is not obliterated by their unity in Christ, what about Israel's distinction from the nations?

## **Still Beloved of God**

I will never forget the day that I stumbled upon Paul's insistence that Jews who rejected Jesus were still beloved by God and that God kept his covenant with them as a people. He told the church in Rome that "they are enemies of the gospel for your sake," but they "are still beloved of God because of their forefathers" and "because the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28-29 AT).

I had always assumed that Paul was talking only about Jews in the past, before Jesus came. But as I looked more closely, it became clear that Paul was talking about Jews in his own day who had heard his preaching of Jesus and rejected it. These Jesus-rejecting Jews "are beloved" of God, he said. Not "were beloved" but "are beloved." Not past but present tense. Even though they chose not to believe the gospel, they are still beloved of God. God still loves them. And not in the way that God loves all people, but with a special kind of love. That is clear from Paul's long discussion of Jews in Romans 9-11.

Their "gifts and calling" were still in place. Their "calling" was their covenant, enacted when God called Abraham into a special relationship with himself, so that Abraham and his descendants would be God's chosen people.

Paul used the word "covenants" explicitly in this passage where he discusses the majority-Jewish rejection of the gospel: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart... [for] my kinsmen according to the flesh... [because] to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, and the promises" (Rom. 9:2-4).

At first I was confused by Paul's reference to (plural) covenants. Then I saw that Jesus spoke of the "blood of the covenant" (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24), suggesting there was one fundamental (Abrahamic) covenant and that the other covenants, such as the Mosaic and Davidic covenants, were aspects of that one basic covenant with Abraham.

## **A Future for Israel**

This new understanding—that God continued to honor his covenant with Jews, even those Jews who rejected Jesus—opened my eyes to other things.

For example, I came to see more clearly that most of the major biblical prophets predicted a future return of Jews to their ancestral land. For a time I thought that must refer to the return from Babylon after the exile. But then I saw that both Jesus and the apostles said there would be a restoration of Jerusalem and Israel in their future, and that this restoration would affect the rest of the world.

Jesus said that sometime in the future all the Jewish tribes "of the land" would mourn him and that his apostles would judge those tribes (Rev. 1:7; Matt. 19:28). That did not happen in his own day and has not happened since. It can only mean, it seems, a future coming by Jesus to the land of Israel when the Jewish tribes will still exist.

It also means that at that future time, things will happen in Israel that do not happen in the rest of the world. That means there will be a distinction between Israel and the world—the very kind of distinction that I previously thought was impossible after AD 33.

Peter said in Acts 3:21 that a future restoration of all things was yet to come. For "restoration" he used the same Greek word for the return of the Jews from all over the world to the land of Israel that was used in the Bible of his day. So Peter was saying that after the resurrection of Christ there would be another return of Jews to their land.

That never happened until 1948 when the modern State of Israel was established. Could, then, the modern State of Israel have some connection to biblical prophecy?

When I started reexamining this question, I looked more closely at recent history. I discovered, among other things, that the founding of modern Israel was both secular and religious. There were secular Jews and religious Jews among the first Zionists. It was not a purely secular affair.

## **What about the Palestinians?**

I also learned that while there are Palestinians who are unhappy with Israel and its occupation of the West Bank, there are two million Arab citizens of Israel, and most of them are thankful to be living in the only state in the Middle East with religious freedom. They are grateful to be able to participate in the most vibrant economy in the region, and one of the strongest in the world. Some of them even believe that Israel was chosen by God to have the land.

When my son and I hiked through Galilee on the Jesus Trail in 2009,<sup>2</sup> Arab Christians told us privately that their real enemy was not the Israeli government but their "Muslim cousins." They could not say this publicly because they feared retaliation from Arab Muslims.

By then I had learned more about the charge that Israel was breaking international law. The principal charge concerned, as it still does today, UN Resolution 242. I discovered that this resolution, passed just after the 1967 war, ordered withdrawal from "territories," not all "the territories," and stipulated that withdrawal should take place only after Israel's neighbors recognized its right to exist and agreed with it on firm boundaries. Those who wrote the resolution knew that Israel would need to stay in some territories to protect itself. They probably suspected that its neighbors might neither recognize it nor agree on borders. They were right.

### **The Rest of This Book**

Let me sketch the rest of this book for you. The first chapter explains how Christians have thought about Israel for most of the last two thousand years. Basically, they have thought the way I did before I started my investigations. This chapter will show why Christians have thought in these ways.

Then in chapter 2 we will see that the authors of the New Testament did not think in these ways. When they spoke of Israel, they always meant the Jews and any gentiles who wanted to join Jewish Israel. The term "New Israel" is absent from the New Testament. So is the content of the term—the idea that there could be an Israel that does not have Jewish Israel at its foundation.

Chapter 3 surveys the history of Christian Zionism in the Church. It shows that in the last two thousand years a minority of Christians have resisted the majority view. This chapter shows why they have believed, especially since the Reformation, that the people and land of Israel are still important to God.

In chapters 4 and 5 we will go to the Bible directly. We will look at the Old Testament in chapter 4 to examine in detail God's covenant with Israel. There we will see that the land of Israel was at the heart of the covenant.

Chapter 5 is perhaps the most surprising chapter. We will see there that the New Testament has many references to the land of Israel and to the future of the people of Israel, the Jews. I say "surprising" because most Christians have thought that the New Testament is silent on both of these topics. But this chapter will demonstrate that the New Testament authors were Zionists. They believed that there would be a restoration of the *people* of Israel to the *land* of Israel at some point in the future.

Chapters 6 and 7 address the most common objections to this view, both political and theological. Chapter 6 focuses on the Palestinians. Did Jews steal their land? Does Israel now violate international law by occupying parts of the West Bank? Is Zionism racist? Am I saying we should support the current State of Israel no matter what it does?

Chapter 7 moves to theological stumbling blocks such as the book of Hebrews' statement that the old covenant is obsolete. Other problems are confronted, such as whether Christ brought

the end of the law, whether this new view that distinguishes Jews and gentiles undermines unity in Christ, and whether this implies that every Jew will be saved.

Chapter 8 discusses the implications of this new understanding of Israel—for how we read and interpret the Bible, how we think about the history of Christianity, and how we understand the history of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also discusses how we as Christians should relate to our Jewish friends.

Chapter 9 draws some final conclusions: that Israel shows who God is and who we are; that sacred history is not over; that the future is hidden as well as revealed; that we have not reached the end time yet; that Israel and the Church are inseparably linked; and that the history of the Jews shows us the mystery of iniquity.

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This book is meant to be an introduction for those who have never heard a serious presentation of these matters. I cover many issues, but because of space limitations I do not address any one issue in depth. If you would like a deeper and more academic approach to many of these issues, see *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (IVP Academic, 2016).

## Getting the Big Story Wrong

Most Christians for most of Christian history have been wrong about Israel. They have believed in what scholars call “supersessionism.” This is the view that the Church has superseded Israel. According to this view, after most of Israel rejected Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah, God revoked his covenant with biblical Israel and transferred the covenant to those who believed in Jesus. The Church thus became the New Israel.

As I said in the introduction, it seemed quite logical to me that the Church would be the New Israel. After all, Jesus opened the kingdom to all the world, after Israel had been restricted to the Jews. If Israel had anything to do with God’s kingdom—and I believed that it did—it seemed plausible that Jesus was simply extending the kingdom’s boundaries. It was now enlarged to include the whole world.

But then I met a learned Christian named Baruch who had lived in Israel for many years. He pointed out to me that God’s intention from the beginning was to use Israel to reach the world. When God first came to Abraham, the father of Israel, God said, “Through your seed, *all the peoples of the earth* will be blessed” (Gen. 22:18 AT). Then throughout the history of Israel, Baruch told me, people from outside Israel came to join the Jewish people. Ruth was one example of many who made this move. “But even with these foreigners joining Israel,” he explained, “Israel was still Israel—a Jewish people. They included foreigners, sometimes as Jews and sometimes not, but it was still a Jewish people.”

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me unpack the logic of supersessionism a bit more.

### **Supersessionism, or Replacement Theology**

Supersessionism holds that all the promises that God made to Old Testament Israel are now (since the resurrection of Jesus) applied to the Christian Church. The promises were contingent on obedience to the covenant. Biblical Jews broke the terms of that covenant—both before Jesus came, by breaking God’s laws, and then after Jesus came, by refusing to accept him as their messiah. But since Jesus obeyed all of God’s law, and all believers in him are joined to him, his obedience is

credited to them. So by virtue of his obedience and their inclusion in him, Christians receive the blessings of the covenant. They are members of the New Israel, which is his body, the Church.

This is also called “replacement theology.” The Church replaced biblical Israel as the apple of God’s eye. God’s covenant with ancient Israel was replaced by Jesus’ new covenant, which is made with all those who believe in him. The Church has replaced the Jews as the inheritors of all the biblical promises concerning Israel. When Christians read the Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of the people of Israel to the land of Israel, they should interpret those prophecies as referring to the Christian Church. The true meaning, according to this view, is that the Church will inherit the whole world in the age to come. All of those in the Church will be blessed, not just Jews. There will no longer be a distinction between Jews and gentiles among those who believe in Jesus, and there will be no land of Israel separate from the rest of the world. For the Church has replaced the ethnic people of Israel. And the little land of Israel has been replaced by a whole world. The Jews are no longer God’s people in any special way, and the land of Israel is like the land of any other country in the world—say, Uganda or Thailand.

These are the views of supersessionism. This has been the belief of most Christians ever since the second century AD. As we will see in the next chapter and the rest of this book, Christians had a very different view during the first century in the New Testament churches. But after AD 135, when Jews revolted for a second time against Rome and were driven out of Jerusalem completely, things changed. More than ever before in the history of the Roman Empire, it became dangerous to be a Jew. Since Christians until this time had been thought by the Romans—for good reason—to be Jews, many Christians believed it was time to change that perception. They started to dissociate themselves and their reputation from all things Jewish.

### **Justin Martyr: The “New Israel”**

Justin Martyr (100–ca. 165) was one of the first prominent Christian thinkers to say publicly that Christianity was fundamentally different from Judaism. He suggested that Jesus was starting a new religion, breaking decisively with his Jewish past. To be sure, Justin was not the first to suggest this break. The *Epistle of Barnabas* (written at some point between 70 and 131) had argued in detail that all the ceremonial laws of the Pentateuch were simply pointers to Christ and that Jewish sins disqualified them from possessing the covenant any longer. But most historians agree that Justin was the first to say that the Church was the “true Israel.”<sup>2</sup> His explanation of this new term became popular and became the new Big Story.

The old Big Story was narrated principally by the apostle Paul. He had told gentile believers that their union with Messiah Jesus by faith enabled them to become “fellow citizens” in the “commonwealth of Israel” (Eph. 2:12, 19). By “Israel” Paul meant the family of Abraham, who was the first Jew: “If you belong to Messiah [both “Messiah” and “Christ” mean “Anointed One”], then you are Abraham’s offspring” (Gal. 3:29 AT). Paul said this because, as he explained it, the offspring or “seed” was Christ (Gal. 3:16). By becoming one with Christ through faith, gentiles could become the offspring or seed of Abraham. Therefore the gospel was the good news that gentiles could now become part of Israel: it was “the blessing of Abraham . . . com[ing] to the Gentiles” because of “the promises . . . made to Abraham and to his offspring” (Gal. 3:14, 16). So

the good news was that gentiles could now, through faith in Jesus, become members of Abraham's family. This was great news because all of God's promises had been made to this man and his family—the father of Jews and all of his Jewish descendants. Gentiles could become sons or daughters of Abraham by faith (Rom. 4:11), and this meant connecting to Jewish Israel, not getting away from it.

### **Paul's Commonwealth of Israel Made Up of Jews and "Associates"**

For Paul, then, Israel meant the family of (Jewish) Abraham and all of his Jewish descendants, plus those gentiles who had joined this family by marriage or faith. This had happened many times in Old Testament history when gentile people like Ruth and Rahab and the Gibeonites became part of Israel and were accepted. They and their children eventually became Jews, members of Israel. God told Isaiah that these gentile foreigners were to be fully accepted by God and Jewish Israel if they came with faith in the God of Israel:

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,  
    "The LORD will surely separate me from his people."...  
"The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
    to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants,  
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,  
    and holds fast my covenant—  
these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
    and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;  
    for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isa. 56:3, 6–7)

For both Paul and Isaiah, Israel was the *commonwealth* of Israel, which non-Jews could join. Though gentile, they could become members of the Jewish family if they put their trust in the God of Israel—even if they did not actually become Jews. The rabbis in the first centuries BC and AD taught that if gentiles chose not to convert to Judaism but nevertheless believed in the God of Israel, attended synagogue worship where Moses "is read every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21), and obeyed the Noachian commandments (similar to the Ten Commandments), they would be "righteous gentiles" who would have a share in the world to come. They would be *associated* with Israel (associate members, if you will) even if they were not Jews, and so would enjoy the blessings of the new world that would come to all those *in* or *associated with* Israel. The key point here is that Israel still meant the family of Jews descended from biblical Abraham. Israel included both Jews and those who believed in the Jewish God but did not formally convert to Judaism. These latter "associates" of Israel did not get circumcised, which was required of men for conversion, but nevertheless considered themselves part of the Jewish people called Israel. To use a term that became important for Paul, they were "adopted" members of the Jewish family.

But for Justin, Israel was the Church, disconnected from Jews and biblical Israel. Theoretically, it was possible for Justin's New Israel to have few Jews or even no Jews, with no real connection to Jews or Judaism and thus to Abraham's family. Thus Justin's New Israel was very different from what Paul had meant by Israel.

Justin could think this way because, for him, the gentiles were more important than the Jews. The story of salvation was not about Jesus' fulfilling the promises made to the Jewish patriarchs, as Mary had exclaimed in her Magnificat and Paul had told the church at Rome,<sup>3</sup> but about the different ways the eternal Word—the Logos—speaks to different cultures. The Logos spoke one way to the Jews but in other ways to other peoples, especially the Greeks. The Jews had their prophets, but so did the Greeks: Socrates and Plato. The important thing was that Christ “was and is the Logos who is in every man” and inspires whatever truth we find in the world.<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament was important not because it revealed the God of Israel as the true God but because it predicted the true Logos.

According to Justin, the law given at Sinai was already “old” and belonged to Jews alone. The new law from Christ had made the old one cease, and now the new one belonged to everyone. God's relationship to Israel therefore was physical and temporary, but his new relationship to the Church was spiritual and permanent. The old Israel of Jews was no longer Israel in any permanent sense. Now the Church, which in Justin's day was being filled with more and more gentiles, had taken over the term “Israel.” Israel was no longer something that was essentially Jewish. It had become a people that was more gentile than Jewish, and one day would become overwhelmingly gentile. Since this was a new thing that God was doing, and God had left behind the old Israel, the New Israel was good and the old Israel bad.

### **Boasting over the Branches**

As Oskar Skarsaune observes, Justin fell prey to exactly what Paul had warned his gentile readers against: “Do not boast over the branches” (Rom. 11:18 NRSV). In Romans 11 Paul said the gentiles were like “a wild olive shoot” that was grafted onto the olive tree of Israel, some of whose “natural branches” (Jews) were broken off “because of their unbelief” (vv. 17, 20, 21). He cautioned the gentile followers of Jesus against the arrogance that forgets that “it is not you who support the root [Jewish Israel], but the root that supports you” (v. 18). Justin seems to have forgotten.