

Samuel Goldman
God's Country:
Christian Zionism in America

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Christian Zionism in America initially emerged during the colonial era with the arrival of the Puritans, and it persists to this day as a formidable political force in the United States. Over the intervening years, the prospect of a Jewish return to the “holy land” has captured the imaginations of a strikingly diverse set of American Christians. These include theologically liberal and theologically conservative supporters, along with both prominent political and religious leaders and countless women and men in the pews. The ever-changing political and religious milieu in the colonies and in the United States also helped foster numerous iterations of Christian Zionism, as proponents articulated a wide array of justifications for, and anticipatory visions of, a Jewish state. Considering the complexity and sheer scope of this history, it should come as no surprise that most scholarly assessments of Christian Zionism in the United States isolate very specific facets of the story.

Samuel Goldman has clearly spent significant time poring through primary sources as well as the relevant secondary literature. Yet he makes it clear right from the start that offering a thoroughly novel interpretation of the history of American Christian Zionism was never his primary goal. Rather, Goldman hopes to improve Americans’ religious literacy on the topic and thereby enhance the quality of public discourse. Much of his research complements and reinforces the best existing scholarship on Christian Zionism in the United States. The signal contribution of *God's Country* involves Goldman’s skillful narration of the full history of American Christian Zionist thought stretching from the 1600s through the present.

Whereas Goldman makes the history of Christian Zionist thought accessible to the general reader, he also writes with at least one specific audience in mind, namely, more secular-minded academics who view explicitly religious forms of

support for the nation of Israel as nothing more than a holdover from “the benighted past” (p. 12). On the contrary, his analysis stresses Christian Zionism’s long history as a respected expression of “political theology.” *God’s Country* illuminates how this discourse flourished in the mainstream of American political life for centuries, and how overlooking this history will inevitably lead to an underestimation of Christian Zionism’s appeal in the present.

Goldman takes direct aim at several widespread but inaccurate assumptions. A number of contemporary observers of the movement, for instance, reflexively associate Christian Zionism with prominent figures on the Religious Right, and with the strain of end-times prophecy interpretation called premillennial dispensationalism that has informed many evangelicals’ perspectives on Jews and Israel. Whereas premillennial dispensationalism grew out of the teachings of John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century, Goldman leaves no doubt that other forms of Christian theology supported a robust tradition of Christian Zionist thought dating back to Puritan New England. And despite the tremendous amount of attention paid in recent decades to vocal supporters of Israel such as the evangelical pastor John Hagee, much of the pro-Zionist action in American public life over the course of the twentieth century emanated from liberal Protestant circles.

Written primarily as an intellectual history of Christian Zionism, Goldman parses the thinking of major figures ranging from Increase Mather to Jonathan Edwards, William Blackstone, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Jerry Falwell, not to mention multiple lesser-known religious leaders. Throughout, he acknowledges the seemingly ubiquitous Israel-themed references that were used to describe God’s activity in the colonies and new nation. But Goldman also consistently stresses the fact that such analogies did not automatically “make New England or North America a substitute for the Promised Land of the Bible” (p. 45). Time and time again, he argues, prominent voices drew direct connections between ancient Israel and North America without relinquishing a commitment to Jewish restoration and a Jewish state. And by the mid-twentieth century an emphasis on the “Judeo-Christian” underpinning of American society helped buttress the religiosity of Americans in the face of “godless Communism” even as it reinforced for many the perceived spiritual ties linking the U.S. with the state of Israel. While it is less clear how many rank-and-file parishioners carefully fused notions of *America-as-Israel* and *America-for-Israel*, Goldman successfully underscores the continual presence of prominent pro-Zionist Christian voices in American public life.

In the concluding chapter Goldman chronicles the recent past and highlights several crucial developments: widespread fears on the political Left that an “American theocracy” would pursue doomsday policies rather than world peace,” a noticeable decline in support for Israel in certain evangelical circles coupled with a reduced emphasis on end-times prophecy, and the rapid global spread of Christian Zionism (p. 174). Goldman’s treatment of these topics is regrettably brief, and given his historical focus, he does not explore in any detail the practical significance of the book’s findings for contemporary political and legal thought. However, his observations shine a bright spotlight on key twenty-first century developments deserving further analysis in future studies.

In sum, *God's Country* convincingly demonstrates just how mistaken it is to view contemporary Christian Zionism as solely the province of wild-eyed prophecy enthusiasts. In succinct, well-written prose, he calls readers' attention to key figures and turning points without ever losing sight of the complex interplay of theology and politics or the fine-grained distinctions that frequently existed within various pro-Zionist Christian communities. Interested observers as well as academics whose research intersects with Christian Zionism will benefit from his nuanced exploration of Christian Zionism in America.