

**Donald M. Lewis**  
***A Short History of Christian Zionism***

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A fair-minded study of Christian Zionism is a rare find. *A Short History of Christian Zionism* by Donald M. Lewis could easily be the most enlightening work on the topic published to date. While his evangelical orientation influences some of his judgments, especially on missionizing Jews, Lewis' hope is that an unbiased evaluation of the movement's history will promote understanding of this important religious development. Given the author's purpose, this book represents a significant contribution to the history of Jewish-Christian relations.

Donald M. Lewis, professor of church history at Regent College, Vancouver, is a widely acclaimed expert on the history of evangelicalism. With a previous work on the *Origins of Christian Zionism* (2010), Lewis is highly qualified to narrate this updated and pithy history of Christian Zionism.

The purview of this book expands the swath of his previous work, telling the story from the early church forward to the present. Lewis defines Christian Zionism as "the belief that the Jewish people were destined by God to have a national homeland in Palestine and that Christians were obliged to use means to enable this to take place" (5). Lewis' approach differs from authors like Donald Wagner (*Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians* from 1995) and Stephen Sizer (*Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon?* from 2004) who caricature Christian Zionists as captivated by dispensational end-times scenarios which are used to exonerate supporters for injustices committed against Palestinians. Lewis rightly downplays the importance of dispensational eschatology in Christian Zionism generally. In his discussion of eschatology, he astutely sorts out various end-times scenarios, making a distinction between historicist premillennialism and dispensational pre-millennialism, as well as pre-tribulation and post-tribulation views of the rapture. These differ over the point in time when Jesus is expected to return, with dispensationalists opting for before the tribulation and historicist premillennialists after the tribulation.

The thesis that Lewis upholds is an elaboration of the argument in his earlier work. He contends that identity construction was an implicit factor in evangelical interest in the Jews and Jewish-Christian relations, holding that "Christian identity-

making invariably involves Christians coming to grips with their Jewish roots” (18). Christian Zionists are among those who share with the apostle Paul the insistence that the Christian church should never conceive of itself as disconnected from its Jewish roots (22). In linking the Jews to English nationalism, British evangelicals developed an activist political lobby in support of Zionism and set in motion a series of fateful historical events leading to the Balfour Declaration, the British mandate, the partition of Palestine, and the formation of the State of Israel in 1948. Based on a fluctuating range of theological assumptions, he argues that Christians have mobilized support for the Zionist project and the State of Israel, countered replacement theology, affirmed love and esteem for Jews, cheered waves of Jewish *aliyah*, and stood against antisemitism.

Lewis offers a genealogy of Christian Zionism, claiming it indirectly originated with eighteenth century German Pietists and their desire to correct the grievous mistakes in judgment made by Martin Luther by cultivating positive relations with Jews in the interest of missionizing them (81). The Pietists' stated love and esteem for Jews was a holistic strategy of restructuring the lives of converts, sometimes through vocational training. However, Lewis finds a more direct genesis of what would become Christian Zionism in Calvinist circles. He highlights important contributions of Edward Bickersteth and Lord Shaftesbury in actively promoting the Christian Zionist vision that the Jews would be restored to Palestine (108). Bickersteth and Cooper worked along with the mission of the London Jew Society (LJS) of evangelizing Jewish people, which some scholars have impugned as opportunistic imperialism and veiled antisemitism. Lewis notes that evangelicals believed it would be an act of antisemitism to exclude Jews from preaching salvation through the one they believed to be the Jewish Messiah (112).

Unlike Paul Merkley (*Christian Attitudes Towards the State of Israel* from 2001), Lewis expresses a disparaging view of Anglican Christian Zionist William Hechler (1845-1931), construing his non-insistence on Jewish evangelization as “a critical move away from a core evangelical identity” (128). Reflecting his own views (and no doubt those of some other evangelicals), he commends premillennialists (unlike Hechler) who held together evangelization of Jews and support for Jewish national aspirations. He links Hechler's position with G. Douglas Young, Billy Graham, and John Hagee, who also downplayed explicit efforts to evangelize Jews. Advancing his own view of the matter, Lewis states, “The historian is hard-pressed not to see that the impact of Christian Zionism on evangelical theology has sometimes led some of its proponents away from classic evangelical theology about the centrality of Christ and the universal claims of the Christian gospel. Evidence of the secularizing effect of Christian Zionism is hard to ignore—notably Hechler and Hagee” (266). Lewis is certainly entitled to his judgments (and the book is a publication of an evangelical press), though of course on this issue some readers will surely disagree with him about the importance and appropriateness of missionizing Jews. Further, I would welcome a more generous assessment of those evangelicals who tread lightly on efforts to convert Jews for the sake of promoting the cause of Jewish-Christian relations.

Lewis clearly charts the history of various phases of Christian Zionism across the centuries, identifying leading proponents and adducing their theological perspectives. He helpfully clarifies the distinction between Christian Restorationism and Christian Zionism, noting that the term Christian Zionist was not coined until the 1890s (108). His functional analysis of the factor of national identity construction in the English and American phases is well done. It is true that Christian Zionists starting in the nineteenth developed an identity intended to oppose competing religious identities. However, this theory cannot be applied across the board, especially to the forms of Christian Zionism spreading in the Global South.

Some have attempted to explain the provenance and nature of Christian Zionism in contemporary African Pentecostal contexts as a monolithic movement which is “obviously rooted in modern American history,” “stems from the dispensationalism of John Nelson Darby,” and “fully identified in its modern forms with Darby’s theological system—dispensationalism” (quoting here Paul Gifford in “The Complex Provenance of Some Elements of African Pentecostal Theology” from 2001 [74-5]). These three claims are also made by Wagner, Sizer, Clifford A. Kiracofe (*Dark Crusade: Christian Zionism and US Foreign Policy* from 2009), Grace Halsell (*Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* from 1986) and others. Lewis succeeds in confounding such attempts at essentializing Christian Zionism as the ideological progeny of Darby’s dispensationalist system. Rather, he says, the spread of Christian Zionism should be seen in terms of its appeal to indigenous Christians who resonated with Zionism based on their reading of the Bible.

Lewis generally writes with a positive and affirming tone, especially when he engages with other scholars’ published works on the topic (including my own). His book is well-written and accessible, and structured as if it were intended for a seminar-style discussion. Readers will be enriched by his circumspect analysis.