

REVIEW

Donald E. Wagner and Walter T. Davis, Eds.
Zionism and the Quest for Justice in the Holy Land

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The book seeks to continue debates about the long sought-after reconciliation of diverse peoples in the modern state of Israel and Palestine (or the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank). Much material in this collection of articles was previously available in a curriculum written and edited by Mark Braverman, Pauline Coffman, et al., *Zionism Unsettled: A Congregational Study Guide* (Louisville: Israel / Palestine Mission Network of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., 2014).

The briefer curriculum caught the secular media's attention and prompted disputes within the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. Copies were first sold on and then later removed from the denomination's official website prior to the meeting of its General Assembly in June 2014, the same Assembly that made the decision to divest the denomination's holdings in three multi-national corporations accused of providing support for the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza. The curriculum was viewed as highly provocative, not simply by the Jewish community, but also by mainstream Presbyterians who work for the cause of justice and peace in the region. Those opposed to the curriculum believed it used the lens of a neo-replacement theology, turning a critique of the state of Israel into a critique of the Jewish people and of Judaism.

The book is a longer version of the curriculum, with many of the same articles being represented but in fuller form. The contributors span the spectrum of those who have offered their “prophetic” voices on these issues for many years (e.g., p. xix, xxiii). The names Naim S. Ateek, Rosemary Ruether, Donald E. Wagner, Brant Rosen, Gary M. Burge, and Mark Braverman should be no strangers to those familiar with this terrain, and they hope here to amplify the message of the curriculum. In general, the contributors identify political and religious Zionism itself as the main problem and ideology supporting and sustaining what they view as the deeply unjust policies of the State of Israel. The contributors include those outside the mainstream Christian tradition: Brant Rosen (Jewish), Mark Braverman (Jewish), and Mustafa Abu Sway (Muslim, and apparently the only contributor who has lived under the Israeli occupation, apart from the authors of the 2009 statement *Kairos Palestine*, included in the Appendix).

Although several of the early chapters deal with the political history of Zionism, the remaining chapters touch primarily on theological concepts seen as contributing to violence among peoples in the region. Historic teachings about Jewish election and covenant are lifted up as the main culprits in these ethno-religious divisions. Although the issues of co-existence upon the land promised by God to the ancient Israelites (called pejoratively a divine “land grant” [p. 98]) are discussed throughout, the source of these supposed promises are, we are told, all-too-human constructions by the Israelites and by modern Zionists employing the biblical symbols of election and covenant. The contributors consistently argue that the God of the Bible never unconditionally and eternally promised a relatively small piece of real estate in the ancient near east to the modern Jewish inhabitants of Israel / Palestine.

The election of Israel has often been discussed and argued about throughout Christian history. As the incarnation of Jesus became the “scandal of particularity” in modern times, so the election of the Jewish people as described in the Bible remained a scandal for liberal Christian universalism (cf. e. e.

cummings' line: "How odd of God...to choose the Jews"). The contributors make the theological critique that claims to chosenness and to a special relationship with God are tantamount to believing in a racist God who supports the oppression of non-Jews. One Jewish contributor, Brant Rosen, is the most outspoken in his critique: "To put it plainly: a voice that affirms claims of theological superiority in the name of *one people* cannot be the voice of God. A voice that asserts God's word to humanity was vouchsafed *exclusively* to the children of Abraham cannot be the voice of God" (p. 75). In like manner, Wagner states, "[By] honoring Jews because Jews are God's 'first' and primary 'chosen people', then Christians are 'secondary', at least theologically. However, this theological position has serious political and ethical consequences" (p. 156). The underlying inference here is that theological particularism is always connected to political exclusivism and bigotry.

The theological concept of God's covenant with Israel comes under discussion and critique. A great deal of work in Jewish-Christian dialogue has sought to affirm the continuing validity of the covenant with the Jewish people from a Christian perspective. Historically, Christians have held to a "supersessionist" or "replacement" understanding of the people named Israel, i.e., the Jewish people, and of the Jewish covenant. The Christian covenant, in this traditional theological framework, has replaced God's unique covenant with the Jewish people. It has been transferred to those who follow Jesus as the Christ and to the church founded by his Apostles. For several contributors to the book, the turn of post-Holocaust Christians to a non-supersessionist theology—one that recognizes God's ongoing relationship with the Jewish people—is suspect and indeed contributes to the oppressive policies of the State of Israel. Rosen states, "While this new formulation may have served to assuage Christian guilt over centuries of Church anti-Semitism, it has failed to address the problematic exceptionalism of the original covenant" (p. 88). Again, the claim that echoes here is that religious exceptionalism or particularism creates political tyranny and racial oppression, at least in the case of Israel.

In his contribution, Wheaton College Professor Burge explores the diversity of views within the Evangelical world regarding Christian Zionism. While succinctly noting differences within global Evangelicalism, in the end, he argues for a traditional and familiar understanding of God's covenant with Israel that seems rooted in the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition of Christian replacement theology. Burge states: “[supersessionism] has been the historic teaching of the church and has never been considered a heresy” (p. 188). Further, Burge argues that “the promises to Abraham have been realized in Christ; he holds everything Judaism desired, and knowing Christ gains access to such promises...the work of Christ is definitive. There is one covenant. And it is with Christ” (p. 182).

Both of these views reflect hesitancy among all the book's contributors to giving support to the theological legitimacy of Judaism today, rather than more narrowly attacking particular Israeli policies and practices of occupation. Such theological critiques of topics such as covenant and election could have been strengthened by sustained engagement with the writings of theologians engaged in such issues, such as Jon Levenson, David Novak, Eugene Korn, John Pawlikowski, Mary Boys, and Philip Cunningham. The contributors' theological critiques therefore lack the thoroughness of presentation to engage a full discussion. They sometimes create a “straw man” argument against Judaism ultimately directed against Israeli policies. For example, Ateek's statement that “Zionism commits theological injustice by its appeal to God, history, and race” insufficiently engages the fullness and changing dimensions of Judaism(s) and Zionism(s) (p. 219). If anything, writings such as this show the chasm between progressive theologians in the Christian-Jewish dialogues and those theologians claiming the “prophetic” mantle and engaged in political advocacy for the Palestinians.

Although the book brings to the surface the danger of theological beliefs buttressing the policies of any state, the connection between the two in the case of Israel is not explicitly (or convincingly) proven here. They show that a particular people

indeed can find its identity within its sacred historic myth (such as Judaism) or sense of peoplehood (such as Zionism), something anthropologists have taught us for a long time. With this insight one might realize that much of what we assume to be normative within our own in-group looks very much like myth (in the pejorative sense) to those on the outside, and can tragically inflame passions all the more when inequalities and injustices are present. The contributors' highly negative presentations of such features of Jewish or Israeli identity neglect the positive aspects of identity, which sustain most members of our species.