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Review Essay, Gerald R. McDermott's *Israel Matters*
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A new Christian Zionism?

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Among the many ways to fracture a congregation, talking about Israel is one of the most dependable. Intersecting claims about justice, biblical prophecy, national identity, historical legacies, personal allegiances, geopolitical dynamics, confessional commitments, and headline-grabbing crises run through the topic and deep into bedrock convictions. Few statements can be made about the situation of Israelis and Palestinians that go uncontested, and discussions among Christians, Jews, and Muslims of what Aaron David Miller has called "the much too promised land" are guaranteed to evoke volcanic eruptions.

This volatility is part of what moves Gerald McDermott, I think, to couch *Israel Matters* in a personalistic style. He introduces his topics through personal encounters with an old friend, a senior pastor, a young Christian leader who asked him questions, a Christian friend who had lived in Israel, and a Palestinian attorney he met in Israel. McDermott seems to be asking us to recognize that ideas about Israel are held by real people and have real consequences in people's lives.

His aim is to move beyond the "old Christian Zionism" in which he was raised. He says that aspects of the old Christian Zionism always troubled him. He wondered, for example, if the initiative of Zionist groups to found and defend a Jewish state was an effort at forcing God's hand or a case of people "turning their backs on God." He also wondered if God could really be dealing with Israel and the gentile nations "on two separate tracks" and if it was right, as some Christian Zionists proposed, that "the State of Israel was beyond reproach"? And how could Israel be a fulfillment of biblical prophecy if "most Jews in Israel were either secular or religious-but-non-messianic" and if "modern Israel did not seem related to the Bible." The aspects of Christian Zionism he learned growing up did not seem consistent with his other biblically grounded beliefs.

The journey begins with the long history of Christian anti-Judaism, grounded in what Randall Zachman has called "the most ecumenical of all Christian doctrines": that the Jews were rejected by God for rejecting Jesus as Messiah, doomed to life in exile from the promised land until they repent of their error or the kingdom of God comes. From the margins of that baleful history McDermott assembles a panel of theological forebears whom he credits with attitudes toward Israel and the promised land that are positive enough to qualify as a pedigree for Christian Zionism.

This allows McDermott to distance himself from the old Christian Zionism, by tracing his understanding back through early modern, medieval, and ancient sources to an "older" reading of scripture. He asserts that God has not rejected the Jewish people nor has the history of salvation transcended them; rather, "this people are still important to him (Rom. 11:28-29), the land is now the place where prophecy is being fulfilled (Ezek. 37:11-14); Acts 3:21), and this people's King will one day rule visibly from that same land (Rev. 20:4, 9; 21:1-3)." McDermott says that Peter's sermon in Acts 3 about "the times of restoration" (3:21) envisions the restoration of Israel to the land. In the messianic age to come, according to this vision, the whole earth would be renewed, and "at the center of this world would be the Jewish people in their own land."

This vision of the end times is familiar from the old Christian Zionism, so what's different? What's different is that McDermott leaves behind the premillennial dispensational theology that was developed in the 19th century by John Nelson Darby and popularized by the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible as well as through Hal Lindsay's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series. Although McDermott is willing to say that biblical prophecy is being fulfilled in the repatriation of the Jewish diaspora to the biblical homeland in the past century, he demurs from asserting that this is the final ingathering foreseen in scripture or that we can know how the final scenes of history will play out.

He also insists repeatedly that his new Christian Zionism allows for critiques of the State of Israel and its policies. Seeing the nation's "warts and wrinkles," he is only somewhat troubled by them. He notes that "the present people and land seem a long way from the fulfillment of the promise," but declares that this makes Israel similar to the church. "If we can believe that the Church in all of its brokenness is the body of Christ, then we can also say that Israel with its sin is God's Zion." This doesn't mean that one can know how the ultimate redemption will be realized, however. For McDermott, the certainty of premillennial dispensationalism about present-day events gives way to a less precise understanding of modern Israel's role in history's unfolding, though he insists that its prominent role is uncontestable.

McDermott's book stands in a small copse of work that has grown up over the past decade or so. David Brog in 2006 published *Standing with Israel*, a manifesto for the Christian Zionist organization Christians United for Israel (CUFI) which also made a nondispensationalist case for Christian support for Israel. Over the next three years, Zev Chafets's *A Match Made in Heaven*, Stephen Spector's *Evangelicals and Israel*, Shalom Goldman's *Zeal for Zion*, and Donald Lewis's *The Origins of Christian Zionism* elaborated on different aspects of the complicated roots of evangelical Christianity's affinity for Israel. Yaacov Ariel in *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews* (2013) took a broader view, while Robert O. Smith in the same year offered a coherent thematic analysis of "the roots of Christian Zionism" in *More Desired than Our Owne Salvation*. More recently, Robert W. Jenson and Eugene Korn edited a collection of essays, *Returning to Zion: Christian and Jewish Perspectives* (2015). For all their differences, these books all seek to show that Christian support for Israel neither began with nor requires the confident assertions of premillennial dispensationalism.

They also stand together in another regard, having appeared since the collapse of the Oslo peace process and the rise of the Second Intifada. These years that have seen the construction of Israel's separation barrier with the occupied territories, the Israel-Hezbollah war and several wars with Hamas in Gaza, and the continued development of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. Israeli public opinion has hardened along with national policy in regard to Palestinian aspirations for national sovereignty and the Israeli peace camp has nearly disappeared. This era has also spawned the international movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel. Christian support for

Israel, once largely taken for granted in the United States in evangelical and nonevangelical circles, now has to justify itself.

Brog, writing in the early years of this shift, drew on a mix of "righteous Gentile" imagery and neocon "clash of civilizations" anxiety to make the case for defending Israel. He portrayed Israel and the Jewish people as frontline defenders of Western democracy long before most people in the West knew that it was under assault from Islamist forces. Drawing energy from the 9/11 attacks and associating them with the Second Intifada, Brog called on Christians to emulate the righteous gentiles in defending Jews under attack. Interestingly, he framed his case—as Zev Chafets also did—primarily as an address to Jews, seeking to allay their long-standing suspicion regarding Christian overtures.

McDermott, however, is clearly addressing Christians and trying to protect Israel more from its own undoing in Christian eyes than from any external enemy. While he acknowledges Israel's "warts and wrinkles," it seems intended to blunt them by likening them to the ongoing—but ultimately vanquished—sinfulness of the church. A Palestinian lawyer's allegations of Israeli arrogance, duplicity, racism, and illegal policies are given a full chapter's treatment, only to be rebutted with a fairly standard set of talking points from Israel's ministry of foreign affairs.

What most concerns McDermott is to "show theologically" (as he says in the introduction to the volume of essays he edited, *The New Christian Zionism*) "that the people of Israel continue to be significant for the history of redemption and that the land of Israel continues to be important to God's providential purposes" (emphasis in the original). His argument rests on his discernment of the particularity of Israel in the biblical witness and the continuing validity of its particularity in the era following the appearance of Jesus as Israel's Messiah.

"God reaches the universal through the particular," McDermott writes. Through Abraham all families of the earth will be blessed; Israel was called to be a light to the nations. And the pattern is the same in the New Testament: "salvation has come to men and women through the Jewish Messiah, the perfect Israelite, the one from Nazareth, Israel, who will one day glorify the people of Israel. Once again, salvation comes to the world (the universal) through Israel's Messiah (the particular)."

Indeed, McDermott argues that for Christians "the particularity of Israel is the new scandal of particularity." The scandal is evident in the fact that, for most Christian theologians today, "the particular people of the Jews and their particular land are no longer of importance to God." McDermott thinks, to the contrary, that a national Jewish identity and the land of Israel as the Jewish homeland will be features of the fulfilled kingdom, with Jerusalem its heart. While it's unclear what the symbolic passages in Revelation about the end times mean, it is clear to McDermott that they speak about "a renewed Jerusalem with some connection to today's Jerusalem." When Christians relinquish the particularity of the biblical promise of the land to Jews, they succumb to a "geographical-docetic temptation" and attempt to have "ecclesiology and eschatology without incarnation."

In his focus on the particular, McDermott stumbles into several complications. For one, he echoes Paul in distinguishing between the covenant with Abraham and the covenant with Moses, but he loses an important element of Paul's nuance and introduces his own categories of particular (Moses) and universal (Abraham). Moses' Torah is an "application" of the Abrahamic covenant to Jews, and in "Jesus' renewing and deepening it," the Abrahamic covenant is now applied to all the world. Counting and sorting covenants is a notoriously fraught enterprise, and this construal seems to slip into exactly the supersessionism McDermott wants to avoid.

His conviction that "Israel and the Church are joined at the hip" becomes complicated when he casts Jesus in the role of "the perfect Israelite" whose particularity reaches the universal with salvation: "He embodied [the law]. He was living Torah and … just as he would never pass away, neither would Torah. For they were one and the same."

On the one hand, applying such particularity to Jesus requires an identity of the (divine) Torah with a human that seems inimical to Jewish thought (pace certain Kabbalistic and Hasidic inklings). On the

other hand, anointing Israel—real, present-day, embodied Israel as people, land, and state—as the "particular" through which God is reaching the world makes it more difficult to engage in the kind of robust political critique that characterizes Israeli and Jewish internal debates and that is appropriate to any contemporary nation.

The emphasis on Israel's particularity places us on the horns of a dilemma, teetering between supersessionism and exceptionalism. If Israel's particularity must be recapitulated in Jesus in order for it to reach the world, then Israel seems to become irrelevant. And if Israel in the era since Jesus retains its particularity, then it is an exceptional case alongside the gentile nations, which may encourage Israel's expectation, or others' suspicion, that some special privilege accrues to its exceptional status—with potentially dire consequences for the Palestinian people.

This dilemma is shared by all who tread the fault lines of the issue. The challenge is to develop a dialectical theological model that recognizes the particularity of Israel in the biblical witness while eschewing any claim for its uniqueness in today's world that would lead to exceptionalism.

One might venture responding to this challenge by reading the Bible's presentation of biblical Israel as a paradigm. Israel is particular in its historical or narrative identity, yet viewed as a paradigm it offers a particular case of the ways in which God deals with every nation. The most direct hint of this comes in Amos 9:7: "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" Some understanding like this of the "scandal of particularity" might better serve the interests of achieving peace – not least by affording an aspiring Palestinian state theological parity with Israel.

Another complication focuses on the question of Israel's particularity beyond history, in the fulfilled kingdom. McDermott offers a vision of the kingdom as a renewed world with Israel at its center and Jerusalem at the center of Israel. The people who will populate that kingdom are, he argues, a multinational multitude that retains its manifold differences. McDermott builds his case on Galatians 3:28 and the fact that neither male nor female disappear in becoming one in Christ. If that is so for the sexes, he argues, then why should it be different for Jew and gentile? Why presume that the Jew must disappear?

What is true of both male and female, though, is that both are "one in Christ." And so one realizes that, throughout McDermott's book, the Jews of the fulfilled kingdom, though distinctively Jews and presumably in some way continuing their life in the Torah, are fulfilled precisely in living under the lordship of Jesus the Messiah. "Both Jews and gentiles become joined with Jesus when they place their faith in him. He brings them before the Father, where they are justified, sanctified, and finally glorified." McDermott goes on: "Both Isaiah and Jesus suggest that on the renewed earth, Jews will lead the world in being priests of the King. Think of the intensity with which Orthodox Jews study the Bible and pray. How much more will they know and love God when the Messiah is revealed to them?"

That vision may open a path for evangelical Christians and Messianic Jews to find common cause on Israel. But can this be considered a Zionist ideal? McDermott's affirmation of Jewish particularity may make it impossible for Christians to speak of a world without Jews, but the vision here seems to propose a Zionism ultimately without Judaism.

There have been many Zionisms over the past 125 years and they have differed widely regarding the land and its inhabitants. Only Christian Zionism has challenged the continuing legitimacy of Judaism into the world to come, and McDermott's new version still fits that mold.

Israel Matters is dedicated to Rabbi Eugene Korn, an Orthodox rabbi with no inclination toward messianic beliefs. Both in his own 2008 volume, *The Jewish Connection to Israel, the Promised Land: An Introduction for Christians*, and in his work with the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation in Efrat and Jerusalem, Korn has been fairly clear that Jews can be comfortable with nearly any Christian vision of Israel that supports present-day Israel. By that measure, McDermott's volume may be welcome comfort to many in the Jewish community. As Korn says in his endorsement of *Israel*

Matters, it “makes room for the Jewish people in their covenantal homeland.” Given both the classical and contemporary Christian assaults on the legitimacy of Jewish life in the land, this may be enough for many Jews right now.

For many Christians, though, a theology of the Promised Land that implies the ultimate elimination of Judaism, no matter the circumstances, remains problematic. That history of Christian anti-Judaism which McDermott chronicles was not only anti-Zionist, it was potentially genocidal. If Judaism is not within God’s will for the fulfilled kingdom, it is only a short step to saying that it and its adherents have no place on the way to that kingdom. Unless one is prepared to say that Christianity too is provisional and ultimately may not survive into the kingdom, the particularity of Israel seems again to put it in a precarious position already on the journey.

Moreover, a robust and transformed Christian theology of the land needs to affirm often competing values and respond to the fears and aspirations of both Jews and Palestinians. It will be grounded in the biblical witness, but it cannot ignore the historical conditioning of that witness as Judaism’s own national story; scripture must remain open to scrutiny under a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding self-interests that helped to shape it. A new theology will affirm God’s continuing covenant with Israel and the integral place of the promise of land in the covenant without absolutizing Israel’s experience of gift at the expense of others. It will make a place for a Palestinian people who were unknown to the biblical authors but who are well known to God and to us, and who must share in the dignity, autonomy, and security that accrues to every nation on the paradigm of God’s choosing Israel. Those are complex and challenging criteria to meet, to be sure, and it is not clear that anyone has yet achieved the goal.

Israel Matters is McDermott’s account of the calculus by which he seeks to meet this challenge. It is also an invitation to reflect on our own theological, personal, political, and communal commitments and how they lead us to understand Israel as people, land, and state. There is much to gain in engaging in the conversation with him, as he has engaged in the conversation with those along the way of his journey. Because Israel matters to real people, its complexity is best engaged through as wide a range of those people as possible, giving each of them the possibility of shifting our understanding in important ways. Better than simply refuting or dismissing McDermott’s perspectives with our own familiar positions, listening constructively to what moves his argument along helps us re-examine and clarify what moves us in our own arguments. In that regard, one of the truest insights in his book may be that “Israel shows us much about ourselves.”

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