

An Alternative Evangelical Reading of Scripture

Gary M. Burge, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament
Wheaton College & Graduate School

1. God's Promises to Abraham

In Genesis 12, 15 and 17 God promises the Holy Land to Abraham and his descendents. To Christian Zionists this promise of land inheritance was permanent and unconditional. And it is as true in Biblical times as it is today.

This means that for Christian Zionists, the covenant of Abraham continues to be in play today. And as Christians this forces them to have what we call a "two covenant" theology: one covenant for the Jews and one for Christians operates in the church. In a word, the work of Christ does not replace or supplant the Jewish covenant.

□ Reformed theologians (like myself) believe that something decisive happened in Christ. His covenant affected not simply the covenant of Moses – making a new and timeless form of salvation – but it also affected every Jewish covenant, including Abraham's covenant. Christ fulfills the expectations of Jewish covenant life and renews the people of God rooted in the OT and Judaism. Thus Jesus is a new temple, the new Israel, there are 12 tribes/apostles, etc.

When it comes to the land promises to Abraham – a crux for dispensationalists – I open immediately to Galatians 3:16. The Apostle Paul wrote: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say 'And to his offsprings,' referring to many; but referring to one, 'And to his offspring,' which is Christ." Remarkably Paul argues from the singular noun in Genesis to show that the promises to Abraham – and this means land – point to Christ! Christ is the locus of the promise of land! The promises to Abraham have been realized in Christ – he holds everything Judaism desired – and knowing him gains access to such promises.

Jesus' splendid homily in John 15 does the same. This is the great vine and branches sermon Jesus told in the upper room. The Old Testament image of Israel is that of a vineyard filled with many vines rooted in the soil of the Holy Land. You can see this outlined beautifully in Isaiah 5. But Jesus upends this. We see a vineyard again but now we learn that there is one vine – Christ – and the only question turns not on gaining access to the land but being attached to him.

To think Christianly about land and promise is to think differently than Judaism. *In short, the NT changes the spiritual geography of God's people.* The Kingdom of God is tied neither to an ethnicity nor to a place. And because the early Christians understood this, they carried their missionary efforts to the entire world. At a time when Jews were debating the meaning of Holy Land, Jesus'

prescription was quite remarkable: "the meek will inherit the land" (Mt 5:5). Not the aggressor or the conqueror.

So the point is this: Reformed theologians are not at all convinced that the promises to Abraham much less Moses are still theologically significant today. The work of Christ is definitive. There is one covenant. And it is with Christ. Which explains why Reformed Theologians cringe when they hear Rev. Hagee cite the Old Testament again and again. We are eager to hear him open his New Testament for us and think Christianly.

2. Israel Has Been Restored to the Land

The next step is crucial. 1948 is not simply a political marker in history, it is a theological marker. Israel has been restored to the land in fulfillment of prophecy. This is no different than the restoration following the Babylonian exile. Therefore modern Israel is not simply a politically significant event, it is a theologically ordained event, one that should garner profound Christian respect and awe.

□ Reformed theologians do not deny the right of Israel to exist. Like myself they speak against anti-Semitism and claim that Israel has a right to national security. I would be among the first to condemn Palestinian acts of terror just as I condemn Israeli acts of terror.

However Reformed theologians characteristically are agnostic with regard to Israel's theological significance. Some deny it outright. But the one thing we do is reject the following proposition: that to be critical of Israel is the same as being anti-Semitic. Israel began as a secular state, the nation barely reflects the beautiful national aspirations of the scriptures, and it has made choices that would inspire harsh criticisms from any Old Testament prophet such as Amos or Isaiah.

The Israeli writer, Avraham Burg, [\[1\]](#) has explained the roots modern Zionism. In the late 19th century two forms of nationalism were born: first there was *liberal nationalism* with its roots in the French Revolution where a multi-ethnic state is built and all citizens stand equal under the law. The second model came from German Romanticism where the state belonged to a particular ethnicity and members enjoyed privileges that non-members could not have. This German model is what shaped Theodor Herzl, the founder of 20th century Zionism and the creator of the World Zionist Organization. And it is this model that shapes Israel today. Therefore the Zionist idea was not born from the Bible but from an ethnic nationalism that also gave birth to other nations such as 1930s Germany with all their attendant problems. Christian Zionists who envision Herzl rebuilding Israel with a Bible under one arm are naïve to the realities of history.

Many modern Israelis see this model of a state coming to an end. In the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz Burg recently wrote, "We are already dead. We haven't received news yet, but we are dead. It doesn't work anymore. It doesn't work." And in the *New Yorker* he wrote this year, "The Israeli reality is not exciting. People are not willing to admit it, but Israel has reached the wall. Ask your friends if they are certain their children will live here. How many will say yes? At most 50%. In other words, the Israeli elite has already parted this place. And without an elite there is no nation." Avraham Burg is a liberal Jew who sees what is wrong and recognizes – with tears – that Herzl's ethnic state cannot sustain itself without resorting to enormous acts of violence.

For all these reasons Reformed theologians do not see commitment to Israel as a spiritual imperative. I believe that the protection of political Israel is a moral duty because of what happened to the Jews in European history. But that is a different matter. Rev. Hagee wants me to know that "those who bless Israel " God will bless. And those who "curse Israel " God will curse. Reformed theologians find the argument dubious.

3. History is Coming to Its Close

Many Christian Zionists believe that the coming of Israel to the land has started the countdown that will end history. Christian Zionists think that Israel 's national life, reborn in 1948, is the key prophetic piece we must watch. And this is not all. Israel 's return fits with what else is happening in the world. Moral values are in decline, an ecological crisis is looming, with our oil-based economy in peril – and most important, with a war in the Middle East , there is widespread agreement that history has reached a cul-de-sac. All of this is predicted in prophecy.

□ Reformed theologians remind us that millennial movements like this which predict the end of the world have been with Christianity from the beginning. And they have not come to pass. So they would have us pause and use sober judgment.

Their chief complaint, however, is how this zeal for the end has shaped the ethics of Christian Zionists. Passion for seeing the Second Coming of Christ now comes before a passion for justice and fairness. When presented with the remarkable losses, for instance, of 3 million Palestinians living under occupation, Hagee and others typically stand unmoved. Land cannot be returned to them, negotiations are against God's will. This summer Hagee showed us the depth of his opposition of fair play to Palestinians. When the Israeli settlers were removed from Gaza , he preached the following:

"I want to ask Washington a question. Is there a connection between the 9,000 Jewish refugees being forcibly removed from their homes in the Gaza Strip now living in tents and the thousands of Americans who have

been expelled from their homes by this tremendous work of nature, the hurricane Katrina? Is there a connection there? If you've got a better answer, I'd like to hear it."

Notice carefully what has just been said. God punished America with hurricane Katrina because America supported the withdrawal of the Gaza settlers. It is this sort of foolishness that stuns Reformed Theologians. They simply cannot understand this confident interpretation of modern history.

4. Fidelity to Israel

It then follows that the first obligation of the Christian is to watch the End Times prophecies. And to stand guardian over the political decisions of each nation. The first test of righteousness in this dangerous era is to align oneself with God's litmus test, the rebirth of Israel . One conviction is always held aloft: God blesses those who bless Israel and curses those who curse Israel . Hence nations will stand or fall based on this one creed.

□ Reformed theologians observe the zeal of these people to bless Israel and wonder if the gospel has been lost. My first call is fidelity to Christ and his Kingdom. I do not believe that there are two kingdoms of God at work in the world. There is one and it is found in Christ. And yet this commitment should inspire in me a deep love for Israel and a desire for its people to become what their scriptures call them to become: a nation of priests, a light to the nations. A people in whom there is such goodness that the nations will see the glory of God and rejoice.

I believe we are called to love the Jews. But to love someone is also to come alongside, giving them reassurances and offering them honest truth. Christian Zionists excel in one but fail in the other. They love Israel profoundly but I await the day when Rev. Hagee exhorts Israel (just once) to pursue a national life of justice and truth.

5. Jesus' Second Coming

This is where everything has been leading. This is the crown jewel in Christian Zionism's worldview. This is why Rev. Hagee is willing to risk throwing the Middle East into nuclear war. The birth of Israel has now set the stage for the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ. Therefore any national agenda that would contradict God's plan, any peace overture that will weaken Israel's hold on the land (such as the promise of a Palestinian state or the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from Gaza or the West Bank), any decision that stands in the way of this dramatic stage-setting is not a plan blessed by God.

□ Reformed theologians believe in the Second Coming as well. We actually stand with Christian Zionists committed to a longing for Christ's return.

The chief difference is that reformed theologians make profound investments in the world. *We are not sectarian.* We devote ourselves to promoting Christ's commitments here. And we do not despair about the course of the world. We have not abandoned it. Dwight Moody, the namesake of dispensational Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, once asked why you'd want to polish the brass on a sinking ship. There you can hear the pessimism in pristine simplicity. Christian Zionism with its roots in dispensationalism has a pessimistic view of human history – reversed only by Christ's return. Reformed theologians are not as convinced that the ship is sinking and we continue to be committed to polishing the brass, painting its hull, navigating its course, and making its passengers comfortable until we are surprised by Christ's return – just as the Bible tells us we should be.

This is my ultimate complaint perhaps: Christian Zionists believe in Jesus, but I wonder if they are always thinking like Christians in this matter. They have uncritically inherited the territorial world view of Judaism and wed this to prophetic predictions that are unsupportable. And that is why the great historians of the future (who are not yet born) will level a serious critique against this movement.

Gary M. Burge, Ph.D., is Professor of New Testament at evangelical Wheaton College and Graduate School in Chicago. He is the author of *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* (Pilgrim Press, 2003).