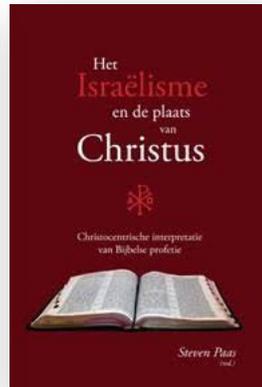
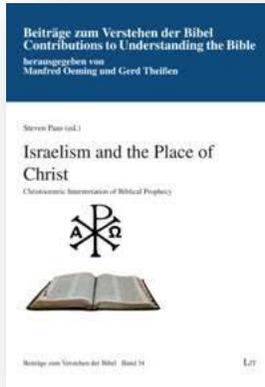


Israelism and the Place of Christ

Review by Rob Dalrymple, PhD



Steven Paas (Ed.), *Israelism and the Place of Christ: Christocentric Interpretation of Biblical Prophecy*, (Beiträge zum Verstehen der Bibel), Zürich: LIT Verlag 2018.

Steven Paas (red.), *Het Israëliisme en de plaats van Christus: Christocentrische interpretatie van Bijbelse profetie*, Utrecht/Soest: Boekencentrum & Boekscout, november 2017.

Significant Question

This collection of essays, published in English and in Dutch, includes such notable contributors as G. K. Beale, Colin Chapman, and O. Palmer Robertson. The book addresses the profound and deeply significant question: “what does the Bible say about Israel?” The question is profound, not simply because of the deep divide that separates evangelical Christian scholars, but because when answered poorly it has led to serious consequences. The Church has been on the wrong side of history too often. As a result, many fear to tread where this volume treads. Because of this, Steven Paas and the contributors to this work should be applauded.

The Bible and Israel

Chapter one begins with an introduction to the Bible and Israel by Steven Paas. Paas’ opening chapter wonderfully sets forth the tone of this collection of essays. He clearly establishes a Christocentric hermeneutic in which Israel is not rejected, but expanded, by finding its fulfillment in Jesus. That is, the Bible is by, for, and about Jesus. Though this is widely accepted among biblical scholars, it remains a central point of contention in the contemporary discussions pertaining to Israel and the Church. For either Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises throughout the Scriptures, or there remains a fulfillment for modern, ethnic Israel.

Paas contends that “In the history of salvation, Old Testament Israel—land, people and religion—does not have an end in itself. Its existence is functional, a means of God serving His plan of salvation for all peoples” (16). Paas then surveys the OT to flush this out. Israel was to serve as a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:4-6). Israel was a servant (Isaiah 42, 49). Most

significantly, Paas concludes, “On the cross of Calvary followed by His resurrection Old Testament Israel has reached complete fulfillment” (18).

As for the relation between the Christ, the church, and Israel today, Paas notes, “Christ is the root of the noble olive tree onto which the faithful branches are grafted” (19). Because of this, he concludes, “Believers of Jewish and of Gentile origin are not rooted in Israel but in Christ, who is the fulfillment of Israel” (20). Paas concludes that the true Israel are those (whether they are Jews or Gentiles) who believe in Jesus.

What does this mean for the Church and Israel today? Paas contends, “The advent and work of Jesus Christ did not end the promise of salvation to Israel as a people but widened it to all peoples. The people of God, observes Paas, are now defined by Jesus the King. The land of God now extends to the whole world. And the temple is Christ Himself (22). The result is that “This conclusion makes it impossible to stick to a certain separate status for the contemporary people of the Jews, or of Israel if one prefers, without (unintentionally) compromising the unique position of the Servant of the Lord” (25).

Chapters 2-13: Summary

Chapter two is an essay by Erik van Alten on John Calvin’s view of Israel and the Church. Van Alten primarily looks at Calvin’s remarks on the book of Acts as the basis for his assessment of Calvin’s views. He notes that Calvin looked at Israel and the Church as a continuum. Because of this, Calvin viewed the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel being found in Christ and the Church and leaving no room for the notion that there remain promises that will someday be fulfilled by ethnic Israel. Van Alten notes that, Ephesians 2:14, which Calvin references in his commentary on Acts 2, is a “hermeneutical key to his understanding” (48). He concludes, “For Calvin there is no discontinuity between Israel and the Church. The Church is Israel, of which the believing offspring of Abraham is an integral part” (56).

The third chapter is a vital chapter in this work. G. K. Beale addresses “Israel’s Land in Relation to the New Creation:” which was originally printed in Beale’s *A New Testament Biblical Theology*. There is no question that land and family are the two key components of the OT covenant. God’s promise to Abraham included a land and a family. Not only does God promise Abraham and his descendants the land, but after they were sent into exile the latter prophets promise a restoration in which Israel will be returned to the land and have a greater peace than before. Beale notes that there is a problem “when we try to discover in the New Testament how this land promise could have begun fulfillment in Christ and the Church. When Christ comes and performs His saving and restorative work, He does not return believing people to a physical land as a mark of their redemption. Nor is there mention of Christians returning to Israel’s promised land” (60). To this I would add the fact that the NT shows the people selling their land (Acts 4:34-37). Beale postulates that the land has been fulfilled by Christ. He notes, “redeemed people do not go to a geographical place to be redeemed; rather, they flee to Christ” (60). Beale concludes that “these promises [of land to Abraham and Israel] have begun [to be fulfilled] spiritually and will be consummated physically in the final new creation” (61).

Beale, then, contends that the promise of land must be connected with Eden. The reason why this connection is so important is that as Adam and Eve were fruitful and multiplied and filled the Earth, Eden would also expand and fill the Earth. Since Israel was a corporate Adam, then it stands to reason that the OT land promises were also not limited to the land of Israel. Beale notes, "It is this expansive Temple-land theology that underlies other prophecies of the universal expansion of Israel's land" (63). Beale provides ample references from the OT to confirm his thesis that the promise of land was to expand and fill the earth. He also confirms that extra-biblical Judaism anticipated the universalization of the land promises.

Beale then looks at the New Testament's universalization of land promises. He sets forth Matt 5:5; Rom 4:13; Heb 11:8-16; and Rev 21:1-22:5, as instances in which the OT land promises are universalized. Beale, also, appraises Heb 1:2; Romans 8; Eph 1:13-14; and Col 1:12-14 as examples of the "already/not yet" references to the land promises. (Though Beale's chapter focuses upon the land promises it is important to observe that the promise of family to Abraham was also extended to include an innumerable multitude that certainly would extend beyond the borders of the land promises.)

The fourth chapter is a contribution by Colin Chapman. Chapman, who has spent much of his ministry in and around the Middle East, writes on "Christian Interpretation of Ezekiel's Prophecies." Chapman argues that the book of Ezekiel provides a good template for seeing how the NT writers understood the OT prophecies. He argues, with a good level of depth that Ezekiel's prophecies about a coming Davidic king, the sanctification of the name of God, the nations knowing God, the cleansing from sin, the gift of a new heart and of God's Spirit, the covenant of peace, and God's sanctuary being among His people forever, are all fulfilled according to the NT in the coming of Christ.

Chapman then responds to those who, though agreeing that these prophecies are fulfilled in Christ, still wish to contend that some of these prophecies require a literal fulfillment in the return of the Jewish people to the land. Chapman provides five responses to this line of thinking. First, he observes the differences between the return of exiles in the 6th BC and the return of Jews to the land in the last century or more. He notes that the recent historical return of Jews to the land was not preceded by repentance, as required by Deuteronomy 30. Thirdly, he affirms that the return of the Jews to the land also speaks of a spiritual renewal, which has not accompanied the modern day return. Chapman adds that Jesus never spoke of an exile and return when He spoke of judgment on Israel. Finally, Chapman contends that the redemption and restoration of Israel was fulfilled in Jesus according the Gospel of Luke.

In chapter 5, Bram Maljaars contributes a thorough look at Acts 3:17-26 and suggests that it has been misunderstood. Maljaars' study is very well researched. He concludes that the traditional understanding that the repentance of Israel will result in the coming of Christ, or the "times of refreshing," is mistaken. Instead, Maljaars demonstrates that the "times of refreshing" coincides with the first coming of Christ and not the return of Christ.

Chapter 6 is a contribution by Joost van Meggelen, who looks at the issue of the restoration of the kingdom in Acts 1:6-8. This passage is, perhaps, one of the most commonly misunderstood by dispensationalists and Christian Zionists. Meggelen concludes that the restoration of the

Kingdom is realized in the proclamation of the Gospel. Thus, for the book of Acts, the fulfillment occurs as the Gospel goes from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, to the end of the Earth.

Chapter 7 is an interesting look at “Israel, the Nations and the Mission of the Church,” by Duane Alexander Miller. Miller shows that throughout the OT and the NT the mission to the nations has played a fundamental role. Miller notes, among several examples, that the nations were included among the Israelites in the Exodus. He then reiterates, what several authors of this present work have noted, that many of the promises in the OT were pointing to Jesus. He addresses the interpretation of Hosea 11:1 as found in the Gospel of Matthew and concludes that it too finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

Theo Pleizier addresses “In Spirit and Truth” in chapter 8. Pleizier asks what it might mean for us today that worship is now “in Spirit and in truth.” He concludes that Christian spirituality “is about a spiritual attitude that keeps itself in tune with different interests and loyalties, to discern truth and justice in the here and now and to be steadfast in the hope for a new constellation of heaven and earth, and to keep alive the expectation of Christ’s reappearance” (191).

In chapter 9, Raymond Potgieter, in his chapter “Gnostic Traits of Israelism and Messianism,” presents an interesting argument in which he concludes that those views that propose a chronological process that results in an idealistic view of the return of Christ risk becoming a form of modern Gnosticism.

O. Palmer Robertson tackles the massive question of “The Israel of God in Romans 11.” Romans 11, of course, is one the pillar texts for Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism, who suggested that Paul sets for the contention that there will be a national restoration of ethnic Israel. Palmer concludes that when Paul refers to “all Israel” he has in mind all believers. Palmer also notes that nothing in Romans 11 leads to any conviction that a national restoration of ethnic Israel is set forth in Paul. Palmer concludes, “the redefined Israel of God includes both Jews and Gentiles in one body” (231).

Chapter 11 is a contribution by Stephen Sizer titled “The Jewish Temple: Past, Present, and Future.” Sizer addresses the notion that a literal temple must be rebuilt—a common position among Christian Zionists—before the return of Christ. Sizer contends that Ezek 43:19, which states that “you are to give a young bull as a sin offering,” is the “Achilles’ heel” for Christian Zionists (236-37). After all, Sizer notes, the sacrificial system has been fulfilled by Christ: something Christian Zionists affirm also. Sizer finishes his chapter by noting that the promises of the temple are fulfilled in the NT people of God.

In chapter 12, Jos M. Strengholt addresses the issue of a “literal” interpretation and the Christian Zionist’s use of Zechariah 14. As Strengholt points out, the use of “literally” is quite problematic. The term is thrown around often by Christian Zionists without much attention as to what it means. He observes, “I’ve never observed someone who proclaims that we all must take all prophecy ‘literally’ who really does what he preaches. Usually one is not aware of the selective way in which one takes literally only what fits in one’s own perception” (247). After showing that taking everything “literally” is not practical, Strengholt addresses the common

criticism from the Christian Zionists that to not take everything literally results in “spiritualizing” the text (which it is assumed to be bad). Finally, Strengholt addresses the interpretation of Zechariah 14. He argues well that a Christocentric interpretation of the NT confirms that the prophecy was fulfilled in Christ.

In the final chapter, Martin van Veelen addresses “Who are the Goyim?” Van Veelen looks at Psalm 2 and Acts 4. He notes that in Psalm 2 the Davidic ruler is given to the nations, which van Veelen contends are those that surrounded Israel (265). This Psalm is then cited in Acts 4 as fulfilled in Christ. Van Veelen then points out that in the interpretation of Psalm 2 the unbelieving part of Israel is taking on the role of the nations who rebel against the Lord’s anointed.

Comments

Overall, this is an excellent collection of essays. I applaud Steven Paas and the writers of this volume. This work addresses the fundamental issues with regard to Christian Zionism and the Christian Zionist’s interpretation of Scripture. In particular, a number of essays address the assumption that Scripture must be interpreted literally. Several address the OT promises of land and family and how to understand them in light of Jesus and the NT. Still others address the nature of the kingdom of God.

One of the chief criticisms I have is that several of these essays fall into the trap of concluding that either the promises of land were fulfilled “literally” or “spiritually.” This is the same problem that plagues various versions of Christian Zionism. Both sides seem to concede that the promise of land isn’t fulfilled literally in the NT. The Zionists then assert that, therefore, there must be a future, literal fulfillment. Several of the writers within this book postulate that the promises were fulfilled spiritually. This conclusion was prominent in two of the stronger essays in this collection: the chapters by Beale and Chapman.

Beale’s conclusion that the land promises are spiritually fulfilled in the present and will be fulfilled physically in the new creation too heavily relies on Epicurean dualism. Such a dualistic approach is not warranted, nor is it necessary. Chapman concludes that the promises were fulfilled in the NT’s kingdom of God, but that they were fulfilled spiritually. He argues that the Kingdom of God “is spiritual and therefore has nothing to do with any piece of land” (112-13).

But the NT does not transform the land promises to some spiritual reality. Instead, as I have argued in my book, *These Brothers of Mine*, which has been translated into Dutch and published as, *Op zoek naar de familie van Jezus, Wie zijn familie van Jezus?* the physical and spiritual fulfillment is in Christ Himself and, through the Spirit, the NT people of God. There will indeed be a final consummation in the New Jerusalem, when the Temple of God fills the whole Earth. What makes it hard for some to understand in this regard is how land promises could be fulfilled in a person and a people. But this is no different than the promises of the temple being fulfilled in Jesus and the NT people of God. If the promises of a restored temple are fulfilled in a person (and this is virtually undisputed in light of John 2:19-21) and in a people (cf Eph 2:19-22; 2 Cor 6:16), then it should not be hard to see that the promises of land could also be fulfilled in Christ and the NT people of God.

When we add to this that the land promises are related to the promises of the restored temple—the land was to be the place where God dwelt—then it is even clearer to see that if Jesus and the NT people of God are the temple, then the promise of land must also be where they are—i.e., Christ and the NT people are the land! This is why the NT promises of inheritance are so consistently applied to the people of God (cf Acts 20:32; 26:18; Gal 3:18; Eph 1:11, 14, 18; Col 1:12; 3:24; 1 Pet 1:4; see also Jesus’ assertion that the land will be given to others: Mark 12:8).

I would also question Pleizier’s conclusion that we should be “reticent” about speculations regarding the significance of contemporary events (190). I understand why he says this. It is a gracious response to the Christian Zionist’s claims that 1948 and 1967 were a fulfillment of prophecy and their continued efforts to find further fulfillments in other contemporary events. At the same time, I see no reason for such a gracious concession. The events of 1948, 1967, and any others, are not a fulfillment of prophecies. God has not abandoned the Jewish people. Nor, has He replaced them with the nations. But, as several authors in the volume have noted, the NT people of God (comprised of Jews and Gentiles—whose distinction is absorbed into one: Gal 3:28) are the true Israel. Therefore, any fulfillment of prophecies in the present world would have to do with the true Israel of God. This might include ethnically Jewish people becoming Christians. But beyond that there are no prophecies that can be fulfilled apart from Christ, by the Jewish people or the modern state of Israel.

I affirm Chapman’s conviction that the NT provides the basis for understanding how to view the OT. The notion that the OT stands on its own, as some Christian Zionists contend, makes sense, but is simply contradicted by Jesus and the NT writers. The NT writers clearly understood the OT in a transcendent manner—note: it is not a matter of did they understand it literally or spiritually. The NT writers understood the OT Christologically and pneumatologically, and ecclesiologically. Thus, the promises of the temple are clearly fulfilled, according to the NT, in Jesus. There is no need to debate if this fulfillment is literal or spiritual. Such an effort reflects a modern worldview, which is, as mentioned above, influenced by Epicureanism, and has no basis in understanding the biblical text. If we were to use such a distinction, I would have to say that Jesus is the temple of God spiritually and physically—though I think such a distinction is ultimately meaningless.

Maljaars’ essay was the most insightful. I was personally convinced that his interpretation and recommended translation of Acts 3:19-21 is correct. This is the case even though I have written and supported a modified traditional interpretation. Looks like I will need to consider a third edition of my book (*Understanding the New Testament and the End Times*)!

Conclusion

In all, this is an excellent collection of essays. They set forth a Christological reading of the Scriptures and address most of the key issues pertaining to dispensationalism and Christian Zionism.



*The author of this article, Rob Dalrymple (PhD Westminster Seminary), is a pastor and professor. He has been teaching and pastoring for over 29 years at colleges, seminaries, and the local church. He is the author of numerous books and articles. His work, *These Brothers of Mine*, looks at the theological issues relating to the Holy Land. His other writings include: *Understanding the New Testament and the End Times*; *Follow the Lamb: A Guide to Reading, Understanding, and Applying the Book of Revelation*; and *Revelation and the Two Witnesses*. You can learn more about Rob by examining his website www.determinetruth.com and following his podcast “determinetruth” at podbean.com or on itunes.*