

Christian Approaches to the State of Israel

John M Wilson

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A Summary by John R. Kleinheksel Sr.

Dr. Wilson suggests the two main approaches and then offers his “third way”.

1) Replacement Theory

This is the view that the Church of Jesus has “replaced” Israel. The Church’s “New” Covenant has superseded the “Old” Covenant of Judaism. Thus the Jewish people and state have no theological legitimacy.

In its extreme form, *the best that world Jewry can now hope for is to be part of the new people of God, the Church—but without nationality, land, or statehood* (p. 264).

2) Restoration Theory

This view affirms Jewish restoration to the land as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy that the land is hers by divine right. This view is held by “premillennialists” (who take the 1000 years mentioned in Rev. 20, literally), who tend to give modern Israel unquestioning support (plus speculation on detailed prophecies soon to be fulfilled).

Before giving his “third way”, John Wilson critiques these views.

As to “replacement theory”: *The New Testament seems to affirm a future for ethnic Israel: the nature of that future, however, deserves further comment. In Romans 9-11, Paul climaxes his theological discourse by addressing the theme of Jew and Gentile in the future plan of God. The main thrust of Paul’s argument is that the destiny of Jew and Gentile is so intimately connected that the later does not find God except through the former (as in the metaphor of the olive tree). In Romans 11, Paul is emphatic that despite Israel’s unbelief, God has not rejected his people (v. 1). Israel still belongs to God and is called a “holy” people (v. 16) and “loved on account of the patriarchs” (v. 28). Israel’s historically unique preservation lends added support that it still has a vital role to play in the history of redemption (cf. v. 15). This divinely willed coexistence of God’s ancient covenant people and the Church in the present age is, to Paul, a great “mystery” (vs. 25). He is convinced, that God “does not change his mind about whom he chooses and blesses (v. 29, TEV) [ibid, p. 267].*

With regard to “restoration” Christians, Dr. Wilson writes: *In truth, no one has the privilege to lay claim to any land simply on the grounds of “divine right.” The corridors of time are strewn with the wreckage of individuals and societies who have been tragic victims of those who had a “biblical mandate” or some “divine voice” giving approval to their inhumane acts. . . [Inquisition, Crusades, killing of witches in Salem]. . . Therefore, we argue that no solution to the problem of the land may be imposed on any people on the grounds that “it is willed by God.” This also means that military conquest may not be used to prove a nation’s right to a given land (ibid, p. 266).*

Then Dr. Wilson quotes with approval historian Dwight Wilson’s cautionary word to fellow premillennialists: “. . . [I]f every action is pre-ordained, then there is no need to measure one’s actions by moral law, since the decision to obey or disobey the

*standard has already been made. Is Israel is the elect, and Jewish history is predetermined by God and foretold by prophecy, then ordinary rules of international law do not apply to God's chosen people; and there is no absolute standard by which they can be judged. This is not implicit in the premillenarian view of prophecy, but it is what has worked out in practice in the response to Israel" (Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!* p. 143), [quoted by John Wilson, *ibid*, p. 266].*

John Wilson continues his critique: *Upon close examination of Scripture, many of the details about Israel's future must remain obscure and uncertain for several reasons. 1) The hermeneutic [ways of interpreting scripture] employed by the New Testament writers indicates that many OT prophecies were fulfilled in ways totally unexpected by both the OT authors themselves and the Jewish people of Jesus' day.*

2) The language of prophecy has a certain indefiniteness about it. Prophecy is written in poetry rather than prose and so partakes of a certain measure of ambiguity with it numerous figures of speech.

3) Some Christians frequently use unsound biblical exegesis to arrive at the supposed prophetic details about Israel's future. These questionable interpretations often derive from an eisegetical approach (reading into the text) characterized either by sensationalism or sheer speculation. This approach often results in a unwarrantable attitude of arrogant anticipation and dogmatic certainty.

*4) Christians have seldom taken time to allow Jews the right to interpret their own Scriptures. Often the Church has been too anxious to tell Jewish people how to interpret their own Bible, which it received from them (*ibid*, p.267).*

Additional cautionary comments by John Wilson before he articulates his "third way": *Markus Barth seems correct in cautioning Christians not to consider the return of Jews to the land as a realization of eschatological promises in Scripture. . . .Nevertheless we would insist, in the very least, that the State of Israel is a remarkable sign of God's continuing love, preservation, and purpose for his people (p. 268).*

*[On the other hand], Jews have an ongoing role in the furthering of God's ultimate redemptive purposes. But no matter what standard or position one adopts, Christians must not be blind to Joseph Klausner's objection that Christianity has sought to remove the national and political aspects of the prophetic hope (The Messianic Idea in Israel, p. 10). God works through the sacred and the secular. . . .[I]f God can call a pagan Persian named Cyrus 'his anointed' (Isa. 45:1), and another pagan king, Nebuchadnezzar, 'my servant' (Jer. 25:9), and accomplish his holy purposes among the nations through both, who can say what plans God may yet have in store for those who from of old have been his people? (*ibid*, p. 268).*

*Real estate theology is, at best, precarious theology. . . .For centuries Jews suffered discrimination and victimization at the hands of Christians whose theological convictions seemed to permit [encourage] such unjust activity. . . .Therefore, we conclude, as long as Arabs and Jews argue from nonnegotiable theological absolutes, human beings can offer little hope for peace (*ibid*, p. 268, 269).*

3) The “Respect for Justice” Theory

This third option, which I support, lies between the other two. It recognizes that this complex issue must be resolved neither by abandoning all theological concern of whatever stripe, nor simplistically on the grounds of divine right. Rather, in this view, one’s understanding of the right of the Jewish people to a secure homeland is based primarily on the issues of justice, morality, and history.

We begin by recognizing that both Arabs and Jews seek the right to self-determination, national identity, and legitimate human rights. [Palestinian] Arabs desire a homeland, and Jews desire a secure state with recognized borders.

None of these goals will be fully realized until each group accepts the reality of the other with a spirit of mutual respect, humility and trust.

Though the Bible, as we have sought to demonstrate, bears witness to God’s unceasing relation to his covenant people and their historic homeland, we must primarily pursue the prophetic concern for justice, righteousness compassion, and peace. If Christians support the right of Israel to exist as a nation--and they should—they should do so on the basis that it is moral, just, and humane rather than simply on the grounds that ‘it fulfills prophecy.’

The creation of the State of Israel has allowed the Jew, once the ‘outsider of history,’ to re-enter history. Christian encouragement and support of Israel today for juridical and moral reasons can be interpreted only as a giant step forward in seeking to right an ugly historical wrong. Built by the hand of survivors of a holocaust that claimed six million lives, Israel always has the issue of Jewish survival as a central concern.

Modern Israel is not a theocracy. As a secular state, Israel was not, even during the time of the prophets, and is not now, the kingdom of God. Therefore, today’s Christian should not blindly condone all Israeli acts. [We should hold all nations to the same standard of morality.] Israel’s own prophets call the people to practice justice and compassion to those they consider ‘strangers’ in the land. This term often means the displaced, homeless, and powerless. Justice, however, is a two-way street. Only when bitterness, hostility, and hatred give way to a spirit of compromise, friendship, and recognition will all residents of the land know peace.

While not dismissing specific biblical texts that point to both an historical and future relation of the pole of Israel to the land, this third approach responds to Zionism from a different, yet not contradictory, point of view. We have argued that this perspective focuses on history and on the burning biblical issues of justice, compassion, and moral sensitivity. All too often the church has been so intent on looking toward the future that it has failed both to deal with the present and to learn from the past.

Our task is to ‘follow justice and justice alone’ (Deut. 16:20), and then let God worry about whether this path, in any specific way, fulfills his future prophetic plan for Israel. Either way, it accomplishes that passion for justice which the prophets demanded (Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8) [ibid, pp, 269, 270].

JRK critique: Admirable “third way”, BUT, it does **not** take into account the “injustice” of the Western powers imposing Jewish persons (and their state) on the native people, including treating them as the Nazis treated the Jews, confiscating their land, (“for security purposes” as the rationale), using the hostility this engenders as an excuse to intensify draconian reprisals and fence-building, thus making resolution impossible).