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Review: 'More Desired than Our Owne Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism'

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More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism. By **Robert O. Smith.** Foreword by **Martin E. Marty.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Xvi + 284 pp. \$26.96 cloth.

The degree of American “affinity with the State of Israel,” to use Robert O. Smith’s language in his enlightening book, is simply remarkable. As Smith documents, polling results over the last few decades make abundantly clear that American Christians – led by white evangelicals -- consistently and overwhelmingly side with Israelis and against Palestinians. Regarding U.S. policies in the Middle East, while polls show that a majority of people throughout the rest of the world – including, as revealed in a 2003 poll, Israelis themselves – believe that American foreign policy is unfairly tilted toward Israel, Americans maintain that U.S. policies are fair and evenhanded. In short, “Americans’ consistently positive attitude toward the State of Israel is exceptional” (32).

This sets up the question animating *More Desired than Our Own Salvation*: why do so many Americans understand support for the state of Israel as a God-mandated responsibility? Smith rightly rejects the simplistic argument that this exceptional affinity is the product of assiduous efforts made by the “Israeli lobby.” But Smith also rejects the notion – advanced by many others (including himself in the past) – that it can simply be explained by the popularity in America of John Nelson Darby’s 19th-century prophetic schema, dispensational premillennialism. While Darby’s emphasis on the prophesied restoration of the Jews to Palestine certainly fuels Christian (particularly evangelical) support for the state of Israel, Smith argues that there are not enough Americans who hold to Darby’s schema to explain the level of pro-Israel sentiment. Moreover, Darby adamantly held to the notion that the “church age” had to end with the “rapture” before the prophesied “restoration of the Jews” could take place. Smith puts it succinctly: “the most elegant approach is to recognize that premillennial dispensationalism alone is not a sufficient cause to explain Christian political activity on behalf of Jews or the State of Israel” (160).

Instead, Smith convincingly argues that the roots of Christian Zionism in the United States go back much further, to the “English Protestant tradition of Judeo-centric prophecy interpretation” (3). He devotes three detailed and interesting chapters to the development of this interpretation in 17th-century England, along the way noting that this interpretation consistently included “Catholics and Muslims as eternal enemies of God” while simultaneously – in the hands of Puritan interpreters – “constructing Jews . . . as eventual allies against the Turko-Catholic Antichrist”(70). Remarkably, or perhaps not so remarkably, these interpretations were being developed in a country where Jews had been banned for centuries. These Puritans brought the Judeo-centric prophecy interpretation to America, understanding the Jews as a typological referent for their national covenant in the New World. According to Smith, when “the Judeo-centric national covenantalism of the Puritan canopy was transferred to the American state,” the “typological identification with Jewish covenantal identity” remained, thus fueling America’s understanding of itself as a “redeemer nation.” (139-140).

Smith is particularly keen to highlight how this Anglo-American Judeo-centric prophecy tradition has produced a political Christian Zionism that seeks to “promote or preserve Jewish control over the geographic area now comprising Israel and Palestine” (185-186), the understanding being that the nation that supports Israel brings blessings

upon itself. Smith focuses on three examples of Christian Zionism: the Cartwright Petition of 1649, which called on the English government to allow for Jews to return to England (and to assist in their eventual return to Palestine); the 1891 “Blackstone Memorial,” calling on President Harrison to hold an international conference with the aim of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine; and, Christians United for Israel, established in 2006 by the fundamentalist minister, John Hagee.

While Hagee makes much of the notion that Christians and Jews are one in their struggle against what Hagee sees as an irredeemably evil Islam, Smith observes that “when the circle is drawn around Christian Zionists and Jews, many Jews may not recognize themselves in the picture that results.” (25) As Smith cogently and repeatedly points out, in the Judeo-centric prophecy tradition, Jews are but bit players in the Christian drama, “their salvation . . . limited to earthly things until they confess that Jesus is the Messiah” (22). Many Jews in the United States and in Israel are willing to swallow their concerns and accept the support of Hagee and other Christian Zionists; as Smith quotes former American Israel Public Affairs Committee researcher Lenny Davis, “Sure, these guys give me the heebie-jeebies. But until I see Jesus coming over the hill, I’m in favor of all the friends Israel can get” (20). Such thinking might make sense in the political short-term, but enabling such typecasting carries with it significant dangers, given that the prophetic script can change (particularly if Jews do not play their Christian-assigned roles).

The author’s story seems a little neat, too much of the straight line from the Judeo-centric prophecy tradition to contemporary Christian Zionism. Still, this seems almost an unnecessary quibble, given what Robert O. Smith has accomplished in *More Desired than Our Own Salvation*: a detailed and sophisticated examination of the historical roots of Christian Zionism that gets us past an obsession with dispensational premillennialism. And if Smith is right about the depth of American typological identification with the state of Israel, it is hard to see how the United States develops any time soon what the rest of the world would understand as a more balanced foreign policy. Some readers of Smith’s valuable study will see this as a good thing. Others, not so much.

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