

## Israel, The New Christian Zionism, and the Future of Pentecostal Eschatology

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### Abstract

A historic affinity for national Israel among classical Pentecostals, largely due to the widespread influence of dispensational theology within their movement, is well documented. Nonetheless, in recent years, dispensational hermeneutics have been criticized by some Pentecostals who claim that their appropriation by the movement was a mistake that has hindered the development of Pentecostal ecclesiology. At the same time, there has arisen within evangelicalism an innovative approach to the State of Israel known as “The New Christian Zionism,” which, proponents claim, does not presuppose dispensational principles. This paper discusses the role that national Israel has historically played in Pentecostal eschatology and suggests that New Christian Zionism may provide a framework for dialogue between dispensational and non-dispensational Pentecostals who believe that national Israel should continue to occupy a key role in Pentecostal eschatology.

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Pentecostalism has demonstrated a strong eschatological bent since the movement’s infancy. As adherents experienced a new work of the Spirit, empowering the church for witness through Pentecostal baptism, many became convinced that the end of time was drawing near. One may sense an eschatological fervor from a cursory reading of early denominational literature, as world events were being interpreted through an apocalyptic lens.<sup>1</sup> However, another young, burgeoning movement started gaining momentum around the turn of the century that heavily impacted the development of Pentecostal eschatology. Modern Zionism, fuelled by the Jewish people’s desire to establish a new state, started gaining serious traction in the 1880s through the World Zionist Organization.<sup>2</sup> In light of an

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1 *The Weekly Evangel*, 184a (April 10, 1917), 1–3.

2 Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society*, Studies in Jewish History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

impending restoration of the biblical people of God to their ancient homeland, many Christians—Pentecostals included—believed that the Lord was fulfilling his promises to national Israel and that Christ would soon return. Speculating on the prospect of a British takeover of Palestine toward the end of the First World War, *The Weekly Evangel* declared that the establishment of a Jewish state would serve as a precursor to the Second Coming:

The Jew will flock back, Britain merely being the trustee for the Jew and guarantee against outside molestation. Jerusalem then will be trodden under Gentile feet no longer. The times of the Gentiles will have been fulfilled. Then we may look for the closing of this dispensation. The Lord's coming is very near. These are not theories, but Christ's own words and the facts you can verify from your daily paper.<sup>3</sup>

The years immediately preceding the First World War offered much encouragement for those who saw Israel's restoration to Zion as a sign of the times. In 1896 Theodore Herzl, widely considered the father of modern Zionism, authored his landmark essay *The Jewish State*, in which he lamented the intolerable persecution of his people in the diaspora and laid out his detailed vision for a Jewish political entity.<sup>4</sup> However, it would be amiss to conclude that the efforts and circumstances of the Jewish people alone encouraged Pentecostals toward their popular eschatology. One of the prime catalysts for the rise of the pro-Israel sentiment among Pentecostals was a dispensational eschatology, adopted by much of the movement at an early stage. As Dale Coulter notes, "On the whole, Pentecostals have shared the dispensational view of the end articulated in the Left Behind series. They have preached it from their pulpits and promoted it through their official Church publications."<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding, in recent years, some Pentecostals have suggested that the dispensational view of Scripture, which undergirds dispensational eschatology, may not be the natural fit within Pentecostalism that many early adherents believed it to be. Peter Althouse, in a 2012 work on Pentecostal eschatology, contends that

3 *The Weekly Evangel*, 184a (April 10, 1917), 3.

4 See Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State: The Historic Essay That Led to the Creation of the State of Israel* (New York: Skyhorse, 2019). While early Pentecostals insisted that a Jewish return to Zion would be an essential component of the end of days, Herzl proposed Argentina as an alternative should a return to Palestine be unattainable, declaring that "We shall take what is given to us, and what is selected by Jewish public opinion" (11). Thus, in a truly ironic sense, it appears that the father of modern Zionism himself was less dogmatic about the necessity of a Jewish return to Zion than many Pentecostals.

5 Dale M. Coulter, "Pentecostal Visions of the End: Eschatology, Ecclesiology and the Fascination of the Left behind Series," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 14.1 (2005): 82. Coulter says that the system "appealed to Pentecostal theological sympathies because it allowed them to articulate their primitive impulse in a way that would maintain the continuity between the eschatological fervor of the early years and the entrenchment of the later years."

dispensationalism represents a marked departure from the optimism characterizing many early Pentecostal adherents' expectation for the end of the age:

Dispensationalism is undergirded by a cessation doctrine, which argues that all the spectacular charismatic gifts ceased in the apostolic age. The problem of wedding dispensationalism to Pentecostal pneumatology is immediately obvious, and, as Gerald Sheppard skillfully argues, undercuts Pentecostal ecclesiology and the doctrine of Spirit baptism. The meaning of the Blessed Hope thus changed from the advent of the Second Coming to this new view of the rapture. Passive withdrawal from society thus replaced the original vision of hope in Pentecostal eschatology.<sup>6</sup>

The dispensational system has also come under increasing scrutiny in ecclesial bodies. In 1984 The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada amended its *Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths* to allow for its credential holders to believe in a mid-tribulation rapture of the church rather than the classic dispensational pre-tribulation position.<sup>7</sup> And since 2018, its Theological Study Commission has continued the discussion on how such traditional doctrines as Spirit baptism and dispensational eschatology should be defined within the denomination, with both earmarked for possible revision—perhaps, opening the door for ministers to hold the post-tribulation view, a clear departure from dispensational eschatology.<sup>8</sup> Although no official revisions have yet been made, observers have noted a marked decline in eschatological preaching among PAOC pastors in more recent times, as compared with the those of the early movement,<sup>9</sup> suggesting that support for dispensationalism is no longer a firm commitment of Pentecostal clergy.

### *An Uncertain Future?*

Whether Pentecostals should or should not hold to a traditional dispensational eschatology is beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose here is to consider the implications of the current debate among Pentecostals over that question for the movement's attitude toward national Israel. Indeed, recent changes in eschatological attitudes among Pentecostals raises the question of whether national Israel

6 Peter Althouse, "The Landscape of Pentecostal and Charismatic Eschatology," in *Perspectives in Pentecostal Eschatologies: World Without End* (ed. Peter Althouse and Robby Waddell; Cambridge: James Clarke, 2012), 15.

7 Thomas William Miller, *Canadian Pentecostals: A History of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada* (Mississauga: Full Gospel, 1994), 361.

8 See Andrew K. Gabriel, "The Changing of the PAOC's Statement of Faith. . . Again," n.p. [cited June 2, 2020] Online: <https://www.andrewkgabriel.com/2018/04/10/changing-paoc-statement-of-faith/>.

9 Van Johnson, "The End of Pentecostal Preaching," in *Pentecostal Preaching and Ministry in Multicultural and Post-Christian Canada*, McMaster Ministry Studies Series (ed. Steven M. Studebaker; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 103–24.

will continue to factor into Pentecostal eschatology.<sup>10</sup> So far, trends are indicating that if the dispensational system—which influenced Pentecostals to place a high importance on the Jewish nation in their eschatology—declines in popularity, then the number of Pentecostals who see Israel’s future as theologically relevant to their movement will decline as well.<sup>11</sup> That said, an increasing number of evangelicals who are not dispensational but find great merit in Christian support for Israel insist that Christian Zionism is not strictly a feature of dispensational theology. A 2016 volume entitled *The New Christian Zionism*, edited by Gerald McDermott, includes essays both from scholars in the progressive dispensational camp and those who hold to covenant theology.<sup>12</sup> All contributors to the volume agree that supersessionism—the replacement of Israel as a nation by the church—is a misguided notion, and that Christians should still view the Jewish nation as essential not only to salvation history, but to our eschatological future. “Most scholars have assumed that all Christian Zionism is an outgrowth of premillennial dispensationalist theology,” McDermott claims; however, the New Christian Zionism (hereafter referred to as NCZ) “looks to a long history of Christian Zionists who lived long before the rise of dispensationalism and to other thinkers in the last two centuries who have had nothing to do with dispensationalism.”<sup>13</sup> McDermott’s work should interest Pentecostals as their movement’s relationship with dispensationalism evolves from one of firm commitment to open debate. What impact might such changes have on their eschatology? How might Pentecostals on opposite sides of the dispensational question handle the question of national Israel? How might Pentecostal history inform this ongoing discussion?

In an effort to address some of these questions, this paper will first document Israel’s indispensable role in Pentecostal theology, discussing how the movement’s theology of Israel was shaped, developed, and revised throughout its history. It will suggest that if Pentecostalism continues to grow more diverse in its attitude toward dispensationalism, this NCZ that McDermott and his colleagues espouse could serve as a bridge for Pentecostals on both sides of the dispensational-covenantal divide who desire to maintain their long-held affinity for the Jewish people. Just as this position has managed to bring together dispensational and covenantal scholars from outside the Pentecostal camp on several central

10 Note that this article has in mind classical Pentecostal bodies, such as the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada or the Assemblies of God, not independent or third wave streams of the charismatic movement. The eschatologies of the latter are beyond the scope of this paper.

11 Some studies have already led Evangelicals more broadly to recognize such a trend among adherents. See “Evangelical Attitudes toward Israel Research Study - Lifeway Research,” accessed October 29, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Evangelical-Attitudes-Toward-Israel-Research-Study-Report.pdf>.

12 Gerald R. McDermott, ed., *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016).

13 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 11.

convictions regarding the church and the Jewish people, one wonders if NCZ might do so for those within the Pentecostal movement as well.

## Restoration To Zion

There is perhaps no more extensive a work on Pentecostalism's long held regard for Israel as an object of its eschatological study than Ray Gannon's *The Shifting Romance with Israel*.<sup>14</sup> Gannon documents the rise of what he considers twin movements, classical Pentecostalism and Zionism, including their rise at the turn of the twentieth century and their relationship since. He discusses how many Pentecostals saw the church's restoration to its apostolic, Spirit-empowered form as parallel with the Jewish nation's restoration to the Holy Land.<sup>15</sup> For Gannon, Zionists and Pentecostals were twins of sorts, fulfilling their respective destinies in the program of God; thus, he laments Pentecostalism's subtle shift away from its unflinching support for the State of Israel that began to take place around the mid-1970s.<sup>16</sup> He documents staunch support for the idea of Israel's future restoration and salvation among early Pentecostals, quoting from leaders such as David Myland and Bennett Lawrence who spoke of their own movement as parallel with the Zionist project. Myland claimed that spiritual latter rain was falling in the Pentecostal revival, just as physical latter rain was falling on the Holy Land through the return of the Jewish nation.<sup>17</sup> Lawrence, for his part, spoke extensively about the state of Jerusalem during the Messiah's reign, envisioning it as the seat of Christ's government and the heart of the Jewish homeland.<sup>18</sup> Both viewed God's renewal of the church as analogous to his renewal of national Israel. However, perhaps the most adamant Christian Zionist among the early Pentecostals was Charles Parham. In an innovative twist, he identified the bride of Christ mentioned in the New Testament as those Christians who would return to the land with the Jewish people to establish their new state. So convinced was he of this novel interpretation

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14 Ray Gannon, *The Shifting Romance with Israel* (Shippensburg: Destiny Image, 2012), 8. Gannon notes that he was encouraged to complete this work by his friend Moishe Rosen, the founder of Jews for Jesus, and subsequently undertook his research at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

15 Gannon, *The Shifting Romance*, 21–22.

16 Gannon, *The Shifting Romance*, 138. It is fascinating to note that, incidentally, it was in the very next decade, the 1980s, when the PAOC altered its *Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths* to allow for a non-dispensational eschatology, and Gerald Sheppard presented a paper at the 1984 Society for Pentecostal Studies conference critical of dispensational hermeneutics (see Gerald T. Sheppard, "Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship," *Pneuma* 6.2 (Fall 1984)).

17 See David W. Myland, *The Latter Rain Covenant and Pentecostal Power*, in *Three Early Pentecostal Tracts*, ed. Donald Dayton (New York: Garland, 1985), 4, quoted in Newberg, *The Pentecostal Mission*, 161. Newberg labels Myland "perhaps the most theologically innovative of the Pentecostal proponents of Zionism" based on his "Latter Rain Covenant" theology.

18 Gannon, *The Shifting Romance*, 64–65. One of the founders of the Assemblies of God denomination in the United States, he was a convinced proponent of Myland's Latter Rain theology.

that he labelled anyone who rejected such an interpretation a false teacher.<sup>19</sup> He also claimed that, once the nation was restored, it would mark the beginning of a 7-year countdown to Christ's return on earth—an ironic assertion considering he often criticized others for setting specific dates for prophetic matters.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the theology of such figures, any discussion of Christian Zionism within early Pentecostalism would be incomplete without mentioning resources like the Scofield Reference Bible.<sup>21</sup> According to Paul Alexander, the impact of this work “can scarcely be understated despite attempts to show that Pentecostals were not originally dispensational.”<sup>22</sup> Just as it had been for nineteenth-century fundamentalism, for Pentecostals “the premillennial, pretribulational brand of dispensationalism . . . nearly became dogma.”<sup>23</sup> With its extensive system of cross-references, commentaries, and historical surveys, Scofield's Bible had great appeal for those who had little access to formal education.<sup>24</sup> Though Scofield rejected the Pentecostal view of spiritual gifts, the popularity of his Bible grew in large part through the growth of Pentecostalism. Todd Mangum and Mark Sweetnam note that in the years immediately following the Azusa Street Revival,

*The Scofield Reference Bible* became the Bible of choice among converts of those revivals. This was despite the fact that Scofield's notes do not consistently support Pentecostal theology. In fact, a couple of points distinctive to Pentecostal theology are actually opposed in Scofield's notes . . . . Yet, except for its difference with dispensationalism's cessationist view of apostolic sign gifts of the Spirit, Pentecostalism firmly upholds other dispensationalist discontinuities. Pentecostalism typically affirms a revival of ethnic, national Israel in the last days, a pre-tribulation rapture, and, often, even seven distinct dispensations.<sup>25</sup>

Due to their apocalyptic outlook, Pentecostals were willing to lock arms with dispensationalists and adopt their eschatological distinctives despite deep

19 Parham, *A Voice Crying*, 80, quoted In Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit*, 45. Parham also notoriously espoused a form of British Israelism, and blatantly embraced white supremacist ideals to the point of rejecting the Holy Spirit's work at Azusa Street on account of its racial diversity. For further reading, see Chris Green “The Spirit That Makes Us (Number) One: Racism, Tongues, and the Evidences of Spirit Baptism,” *Pneuma* 41.3–4 (2019): 397–420.

20 Parham, *A Voice Crying*, 122, quoted In Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit*, 35.

21 Calvin Smith, “Revolutionaries and Revivalists: Pentecostal Eschatology, Politics and the Nicaraguan Revolution,” *Pneuma* 30.1 (2008), 62.

22 Paul H. Alexander, “Scofield Reference Bible,” in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Stanley Burgess and Gary McGee, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 771.

23 Alexander, “Scofield Reference Bible,” 771.

24 Todd R. Mangum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012), 174.

25 Mangum and Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible*, 173–74.

pneumatological and even ecclesiological differences. With the spread of the dispensational system came the spread of its distinctive view of Israel's future, one that included restoration to the land and national salvation. As a result of such an influence, early Pentecostalism was so thoroughly Zionist that those who rejected the idea of Israel's restoration were sometimes branded as false prophets. It is striking that even when the movement was still in its primitive stages, with little systematized theology, national Israel, as a subject of its eschatology, demanded significant attention.

## A New State

If the Zionist rumblings of the early 1900s convinced Pentecostals that the end was drawing near, it stands to reason that the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 would have only cemented that conviction. However, the state's establishment also brought with it a new and unique set of challenges to Pentecostal eschatology. During the interwar period, Pentecostal periodicals often included segments on the Jewish people and their restoration to the Holy Land, concurring with Zionist leaders that their cause was "more than a mere political move."<sup>26</sup> Decrying such injustices as the 1929 slaughter of Jewish residents in Hebron,<sup>27</sup> Britain's subsequent suspension of Jewish immigration to Mandate Palestine in 1930,<sup>28</sup> and rising antisemitism in Europe during the 1930s,<sup>29</sup> Pentecostals demonstrated deep solidarity not only with the Jewish people but their efforts to re-establish themselves in their homeland. After the Second World War, Pentecostals—indeed, Christians in general—gained another reason to be supportive of a Jewish state that transcended eschatology: the horror of the Holocaust. A deep sense of compassion for a people mercilessly persecuted under the Nazi regime, coupled with an already existing theological framework that looked forward to Israel's restoration, led postwar Pentecostals to respond positively to the establishment of the Israeli state—albeit with some caution due to its secular nature.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, were one to read the predictions of early Pentecostal leaders of Israel's return to Zion, one would find they hardly envisioned a liberal democracy.<sup>31</sup> Far from ready to accept her Messiah, in

26 *The Pentecostal Evangel* (November 15, 1930), 4–5.

27 *The Pentecostal Evangel* (November 15, 1930), 5.

28 *The Pentecostal Evangel* (November 15, 1930), 4.

29 *The Pentecostal Testimony* 2.16 (February 1935), 1–2. See Donald Gee's article. Although Gee's condemnation of German antisemitism falls short of the sharp rebuke from fellow Pentecostals, he asserts their treatment during his 1934 visit to be "beyond defence of the broader bar of humanity."

30 Gannon, *The Shifting Romance*, 115.

31 Charles Parham, for example, "thought that the seven-year sequence that would conclude the present age would begin the moment Israel declared itself a free and independent state. The ruler of the newly restored nation of Israel would be a charismatic figure whom many, both within Israel and outside, would come to consider the long-promised Messiah" (See Jacobsen, *Thinking In the Spirit*, 36). This vision was in stark contrast to the parliamentary democracy that Israel adopted, resembling western governments far more than the theocracy envisioned by Parham.



1948 the State of Israel contained less than 100 Jewish believers and no known Messianic congregations.<sup>32</sup> This was a far cry from anything Myland envisioned when he spoke of God pouring out his Spirit on the nation, or when A.A. Boddy predicted that the Jews would join and bolster the Pentecostal missionary effort in the Land.<sup>33</sup> To what extent, Pentecostals asked, should they embrace the new State when most of its citizens still rejected their Messiah? This question came to be regarded as of the utmost importance after the Jewish people were restored to the land as nonbelievers.

Pragmatic political concerns also hampered Pentecostals from embracing the Jewish state as eagerly as one would expect. Surrounded by enemies, what effects could its destruction have on Pentecostal eschatology if it were annihilated at the hands of Islamic neighbours?<sup>34</sup> Ironically, one of the key tenets of Pentecostal eschatology that the movement's founders anticipated—the establishment of a Jewish state—induced a degree of hesitation among 1940s Pentecostals that Parham and Myland never foresaw. One could credit this hesitation to a better knowledge of global events; Eric Newberg notes that Pentecostal missionaries who travelled to Ottoman Palestine in the early 1900s realized that American Pentecostals were quite ignorant of its life and culture, explaining:

The Pentecostal missionaries arrived in Jerusalem with little knowledge of the culture, languages, people, history, politics, and religions of Palestine. Their image of Jerusalem was constructed from mental pictures derived from their reading of the English Bible, anti-Arab stereotypes in popular Christian literature, slanted Western newspaper reports of current events in the Middle East, and travel journals of Christian pilgrims. . . . Pentecostals possessed an image of Jerusalem that was slanted by their ideological interests.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, by the time of the UN partition plan of 1947 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli War, the writers and editors of Pentecostal denominational publications, while far from political scientists, certainly were more familiar with the facts on the ground. An April 1948 edition of the *Evangel* informs readers of the ongoing conflict; while the author reassures readers that Israel would indeed be reborn, consistent with God's promises, he also recognized the dire situation the

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32 Erez Soref, "The Messianic Jewish Movement in Modern Israel," 161–77 in *Israel, the Church, and the Middle East: A Biblical Response to the Current Conflict*, Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser, eds. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 167.

33 See Newberg, *The Pentecostal Mission*, 18. Newberg notes that Boddy, one of the leading founders of the movement in the United Kingdom, actually exceeded the likes of Charles Parham in his extravagant parallels between the Pentecostal movement and national Israel's restoration.

34 Gannon, *The Shifting Romance*, 114–15.

35 Newberg, *The Pentecostal Mission*, 39.



Jewish people found themselves in militarily.<sup>36</sup> By this time, Pentecostals were much more informed of the realities of life in Israel-Palestine than their predecessors, who had leaned heavily on predefined notions and unsubstantiated myths. This still did not change the fact that Pentecostals continued to believe in a future for national Israel as a crucial component of God's eschatological plans. What changed was the way this belief was articulated—less fervently than it was by first-generation Pentecostals, with closer attention paid to the harsh realities of the rapidly changing Middle East. Perhaps a quote from the *Evangel's* May 15, 1948, edition—published the day after the State of Israel declared independence in the city of Tel Aviv—can sum up the conflicted Pentecostal reaction:

The Jews already have set up a 31-member Provisional council of Government and a Cabinet of 13. "The Jewish State already is a fact," they claim. David Ben Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency executive, has been named head of the Cabinet as Premier. So the Jews have a government with a David at the head of it—but it is a far cry from that time which is foretold in Hos. 3:5, when the children of Israel shall "return, and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; and shall fear the Lord and his goodness in the latter days."<sup>37</sup>

Thus, it certainly wasn't that Pentecostals ditched their belief in a future-restored Israel; indeed, the above quotation clearly assumes that belief. What seemed clear to them, however, was that Ben-Gurion's government in this renewed Israel would not fulfill their expectations.

Some have looked to factors beyond secular Israel's emergence to explain this development; Gannon, for example, points to the movement of Pentecostalism from its status as a radical sect to a credible part of evangelicalism, which he believes led to Pentecostalism downplaying its eschatologically oriented mindset.<sup>38</sup> The hallmark of Pentecostalism shifted from the soon return of Jesus to Spirit baptism—the distinctive for which it is best-known today. With a subtle shift away from emphasizing the Second Coming came a subtle shift away from the strong concern for Israel that first-generation Pentecostals expressed. Certainly, support for national Israel's reestablishment remained strong following independence, with major denominations such as the Assemblies of God continuing to identify Israel's future salvation as key to God's eschatological plans.

36 See *The Pentecostal Evangel* (April 1948), 9, in which the author declares, "By force of arms the Jews are staking their claim to the Promised Land—but the situation is anything but promising. They are so few in number. They hold such a little plot, surrounded on every side by such large Arab lands. Every nation on which they have leaned has broken its word in the end. But God has made promises, too . . . He will fulfill His promise if the Jews will meet His conditions."

37 *The Pentecostal Evangel* (May 15, 1948), 10.

38 Gannon, *The Shifting Romance*, 119.

Likewise, the PAOC reaffirmed its commitment in the 1980 edition of its *Statement of Fundamental & Essential Truths*, declaring that Christ would restore Israel to its homeland before the end of the age.<sup>39</sup> Pentecostals, in the decades following Israel's rebirth, may not have expressed the same fervor as Parham or Myland, but most of the movement remained resolutely committed to keeping Israel at the heart of their end times theology.

### Ditching Dispensationalism

As the Pentecostal tradition matured and broadened, so did its eschatology; it was inevitable that some would question the wisdom of Pentecostals adopting their eschatology from cessationists like Scofield. The long indispensable union appeared, in some ways, mismatched;<sup>40</sup> although, the movement is not anywhere near a disassociation with its historical eschatology, nor its position on Israel. After all, even with subtle shifts taking place, major Pentecostal bodies such as the AG and the PAOC still hold to a future for national Israel. What has changed, however, is that what was once a clear distinctive—a basically dispensational eschatology—may no longer be assumed of all Pentecostals. This once unquestioned hallmark has become ground for debate, particularly within Pentecostal academia.

Gerald Sheppard, for example, claims that Pentecostal ecclesiology has been harmed by the movement's attempt to wed itself to dispensationalism. He argues that not all early Pentecostals held to a pretribulation rapture—or, indeed, dispensational assumptions about eschatology at all—and that the hermeneutical principles utilized by dispensationalists to support such doctrines are anathema to Pentecostal pneumatology. Sheppard records that the dispensational view of Scripture considers the church a parenthesis between Acts 2 and the rapture, a result of the Jews rejecting the Kingdom of God during Jesus' first coming.<sup>41</sup> According to dispensationalism, the church must be removed by the rapture prior to God's resuming his program with Israel. Not only have Pentecostals historically rejected that interpretation, but some such as Myer Pearlman have identified the church itself as the Kingdom of God, undermining the very essence of classic dispensationalism.<sup>42</sup> Thus, some see dispensationalism as not only detrimental to Pentecostal ecclesiology, but essentially incompatible with it. Notably, the early Pentecostal adoption of Scofield-style dispensationalism resulted not from doctrinal consensus between fundamentalists and Pentecostals, but, as Matthew

39 Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, *Statement of Fundamental & Essential Truths: Article V of the General Constitution and Bylaws Adopted by General Conference 1980* (Toronto: Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada, 1980).

40 Gerald Sheppard, *Pentecostals and Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship* (Society for Pentecostal Studies Papers, 1983), 1–26.

41 Sheppard, *Pentecostals and Dispensationalism*, 8.

42 Sheppard, *Pentecostals and Dispensationalism*, 8–9.

Thompson writes, the “cultural-religious wars of the early twentieth century between Christian liberalism and fundamentalism.”<sup>43</sup> That war forced many Pentecostals to feel as though they, like virtually all of American Christendom, had to take a side. “Whatever their misgivings about fundamentalism,” Thompson claims, “Pentecostals apparently saw it as the lesser of two evils,”<sup>44</sup> and therefore accepted it, though a system largely incompatible with their pneumatology.

Recognizing such an incompatibility, a 2012 volume edited by Althouse and Robby Waddell includes the work of several Pentecostal scholars offering alternative eschatological perspectives for the Pentecostal movement to consider. John A. Bertone, for example, charges that the apostle Paul himself contradicts the dispensational principle that the Old Testament promises applied to Israel in no way find their fulfillment through the church, most explicitly in Gal 3,<sup>45</sup> and charges dispensationalism with making too much distinction between blessings to be enjoyed by Israel in the Millennium and those for the church presently. However, the same volume includes an essay from Murray Dempster, who grants that dispensationalism, with its doctrine of the imminent rapture, was partly responsible for the Pentecostal zeal for world evangelization.<sup>46</sup> Thus, it appears that the question cuts much deeper than Israel alone; will the Pentecostal zeal for evangelism survive if dispensationalism falls by the wayside?

Then there is the question of Palestinian believers, most of whom feel that the Israeli state behaves unjustly toward them. Though hardly a new challenge for Christians in the land, the lingering political stalemate between Jews and Arabs has made it impossible for believers globally to avoid the question.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, the work of Palestinian theologians—including some Pentecostals—on matters of peace and justice has rightly drawn sympathy from those who have been skeptical of some evangelicals’ unquestioning support of the Jewish state.<sup>48</sup> The issue is further complicated by the fact that the vast majority of Messianic Jews may also be classified as broadly Pentecostal-Charismatic, including roughly 85 % of adherents worldwide and 60 % of those in Israel.<sup>49</sup> One wonders, therefore, if the Pentecostal movement can serve as a home both for those who see Zionism as

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43 Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 50. The author, in line with Sheppard, disagrees with the view held by many other Pentecostals that all the early leaders of the movement were more or less dispensational.

44 Thompson, *Kingdom Come*, 50.

45 John A. Bertone, “Seven Dispensations or a Two-Age View of History,” in *Perspectives in Pentecostal Eschatologies*, 73.

46 Murray W. Dempster, “Eschatology, Spirit Baptism, and Inclusiveness: An Exploration into the Hallmarks of a Pentecostal Social Ethic,” in *Perspectives in Pentecostal Eschatologies*, 157.

47 Newberg, *The Pentecostal Mission in Palestine*, 153.

48 Newberg, *The Pentecostal Mission in Palestine*, xiii.

49 Peter Hocken, *The Challenges of the Pentecostal, Charismatic and Messianic Jewish Movements: The Tensions of the Spirit*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 97.

crucial to their identity and those who view it as a questionable political ideology.

Incidentally, the Israeli-Palestinian political divide brings up another point that may be lost on Western Pentecostals. While Pentecostalism, and its dispensational eschatology, may have deep roots in the United States, it would be a mistake to conclude that Zionism is relevant only in the eschatology of American Pentecostals. The idea that national Israel will play a key role in the end of days has become quite popular globally, even affecting the internal political affairs of other nations. In Nicaragua, for example, Pentecostals found themselves caught in the fray during the 1979 revolution, in which some Christians aided the Marxist Sandinistas' rise to power.<sup>50</sup> Due in no small part to their eschatological convictions, including staunch support for the State of Israel, Pentecostals rejected the communist-aligned—and therefore anti-Israel—convictions of these revolutionaries. A dispensational eschatology that included a future for the Jewish nation caused most Pentecostals to break with proponents of liberation theology, highly popular among the Sandinistas.<sup>51</sup> The former viewed the God's Kingdom as an eschatological reality yet to come; the latter proposed it was something to be manifested in the present world. Likewise, in Korea, a majority of evangelical believers may be classified as Christian Zionists, Pentecostals included.<sup>52</sup> They hold to such doctrines as the pre-tribulation rapture, a distinction between the church and Israel, and a future salvation for the Jewish nation. This has profound implications for the future of global Christianity, as South Korea sends out more missionaries than any other nation besides the United States.<sup>53</sup> As these missionaries share their faith abroad, their presentation of Christianity will inevitably involve their eschatological distinctives as well. Therefore, if the Pentecostal movement does jettison dispensationalism—and the Christian Zionism that stems from it—what effect will it have on global politics, given its impact in the past? Most of the debate, as discussed so far, has taken place in North American denominations and academia. But could Western Pentecostals find themselves at odds with their brethren the world over on the question of Israel, were the former to drift away from their traditional view while the Majority World maintains it? Perhaps Sheppard and his dispensational counterparts could at least agree that eschatology is inseparably tied to ecclesiology. This impending divide is one that calls for a creative solution—one that involves looking outside dispensational, even Pentecostal, circles.

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50 Smith, "Revolutionaries and Revivalists," 55–56.

51 Smith, "Revolutionaries and Revivalists," 59.

52 Sung-Gun Kim, "Korean Christian Zionism: A Sociological Study of Mission," *International Review of Mission* 100.1 (2011): 88–89.

53 Kim, "Korean Christian Zionism," 85–87.

## The New Christian Zionism: A Potential Bridge?

Gerald McDermott is a far cry from the caricature of the “Christian Zionist.” As the Anglican Chair of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School, he admits that at one point, “[he] had been convinced that the Church is the New Israel. This meant that after Jesus died and rose again, the covenant that God had made with Israel was transferred to those who believed in Jesus.”<sup>54</sup> However, upon further study, he became convinced that such a position was unbiblical. Scripture, he notes, never uses the term “New Israel” to refer to the church. Moreover, Paul’s teaching in Romans 9–11 that the Jews “were still beloved by God,” and Jesus’s statements about returning to a Jewish Jerusalem at the end of the age convinced him that supersessionism was unscriptural.<sup>55</sup> Though McDermott affirms that, eschatologically, “there will be a distinction between Israel and the world,” he also rejects the dispensational hermeneutic that views the church as a parenthesis in the plan of God and suggests that all biblical covenants—the Mosaic, the Davidic, etc.—are all “aspects of that one basic covenant with Abraham.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, contrary to what many would assume, McDermott clearly believes that one need not hold a dispensational view of Scripture in order to recognize a unique role for the Jewish nation in the future program of God. He further asserts this in a 2016 edited volume entitled *The New Christian Zionism*, noting:

The authors of this book reject those dispensationalist approaches that are confident they can plot the sequence or chronology of end-time events. We also disagree with many of the political beliefs associated with dispensationalism at the popular level (most of these are not embraced by dispensationalist scholars), such as the idea that the present state of Israel is never to be criticized because it is God’s chosen people, or that any concessions of land are forbidden on theological grounds.<sup>57</sup>

The contributions to McDermott’s edited volume bear out his above quote clearly, with support from both dispensational and non-dispensational authors. Diverse enough to include a chapter on the future of Christian Zionism by Darrell Bock, professor at the markedly dispensational Dallas Theological Seminary, as well as an essay on morality and theology by Shadi Khalloul, an Israeli citizen and Aramean Christian, it is undeniable that this brand of Christian support for the Jewish state has precious little to do with the Left Behind series or Scofield Reference Bible. In fact, in his introduction, McDermott makes frequent use of the “olive

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54 McDermott, *Israel Matters*, xi.

55 McDermott, *Israel Matters*, xiii–xiv.

56 McDermott, *Israel Matters*, xiii.

57 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 14.

tree” analogy to refer to God’s people,<sup>58</sup> a classic symbol of covenant theology and its vision of one united people of God. For NCZ, Israel’s destiny is viewed as a part of God’s larger story that includes his purposes for both the church and ethnic Israel under one covenant—not with the church and Israel on two distinct tracks, one with an earthly purpose and one a heavenly, as in classical dispensationalism. While a pretribulation rapture is not ruled out *per se*, it is not necessarily required—hence the potential for unity between Pentecostals on both sides of the dispensationalism question.

While dispensationalism itself is a fairly recent development in church history, advocates of NCZ claim that it is, in essence, an ancient doctrine. They draw support from a diverse array of historical voices who have not held to dispensationalism yet insisted on a key role for the Jewish nation, restored to the land, as part of God’s eschatological purposes.<sup>59</sup> In contrast to certain traditional Pentecostals, who have been ambivalent toward the idea of a secular Israel, hoping for a restoration of the Old Testament Kingdom (or something resembling it), NCZ celebrates the existence of this Israeli state precisely because it is not a theocracy, having legal protections for ethnic and religious minorities similar to that of other western countries.<sup>60</sup> Notably—and mercifully—NCZ also resists setting dates and pinpointing the timing of eschatological events, which have been popular both in classical dispensational and Pentecostal circles. McDermott writes that NCZ,

Holds that the schedule of events leading up to and including the eschaton are in God’s secret providence. We believe that the return of Jews to the land and their establishment of the state of Israel are partial fulfillments of biblical prophecy and so are part of God’s design for what might be a long era of eschatological fulfillment. As Mark Kinzer puts it, today’s state of Israel both awaits redemption and is a means to it. It is a proleptic sign of the eschaton, which means that it is a provisional sign of the not-yet-actualized consummation. While a sign of God’s final redemption, perhaps a type (divine prefigurement) of the new earth with Israel at its center, the state of Israel is still only a pointer to a far greater consummation to come.<sup>61</sup>

So, advocates of NCZ agree with dispensationalists that a restored Israel is vital to “eschatological fulfillment,” but do not demand an airtight chronology of apocalyptic events or relegate God’s Kingdom to a future era rather than seeing it as an inaugurated reality.

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58 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 15, 26, 28.

59 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 27–28.

60 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 24.

61 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 14.

NCZ also seems much better positioned to address the plight of the Palestinian people than classical dispensationalism, often criticized for its uncritical support of the Jewish state's actions. This is a matter on which Pentecostalism has a rather unenviable track record; Newberg notes that many of the early Pentecostal missionaries in the land alienated vital co-workers, local Arab pastors and laity, by attaching themselves to the Zionist project without properly considering how this affected Arab believers.<sup>62</sup> They often viewed Arab resistance to the establishment of a Jewish state as a sign of the near return of Christ,<sup>63</sup> not as an outworking of the concerns of a people worried about their own national survival. Denominational publications often fared no better, with a May 1948 issue of the *Evangel* declaring, "the entry of Jews has worked no harm to Arabs"—a striking statement when one considers the enormous refugee crisis triggered by the Arab-Israeli War.<sup>64</sup> NCZ, in contrast, holds the potential to be much more balanced in its assessment of the Middle East's geopolitical realities. One need only recall McDermott's statement that NCZ's proponents reject "the idea that the present state of Israel is never to be criticized because it is God's chosen people, or that any concessions of land are forbidden on theological grounds," to see that this form of Zionism is a far cry from that of the charismatic televangelists,<sup>65</sup> or even old school dispensationalists, who rarely grant that the Palestinians have any right to live in the land as well.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the very fact that McDermott's volume includes a chapter on the legal questions surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian land dispute,<sup>67</sup> and praises the internal debate in Israeli politics regarding Palestinian relations, shows NCZ to be markedly different from old school dispensationalism, which had given very little attention to such questions.<sup>68</sup> The understanding advanced by McDermott and his colleagues avoids supersessionism, while stopping short of bare nationalism. Moreover, by encouraging a balanced critique of the Jewish state and refusing to close the door on conceding land to a hypothetical Palestinian state, NCZ invites more credibility than other forms of Christian support for Israel. Therefore, it may lend a voice toward encouraging a lasting peace

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62 Newberg, *The Pentecostal Mission in Palestine*, 115.

63 Newberg, *The Pentecostal Mission in Palestine*, 214.

64 *The Pentecostal Evangel* (May 15, 1948), 10.

65 For an example of this combative brand of Zionism, see this article by Texas pastor John Hagee entitled "Who Owns the Land of Israel?" *Israel Hayom*, n.p. [cited June 3, 2020] Online: <https://www.israelhayom.com/2020/05/31/who-owns-the-land-of-israel/>. Hagee insists that "The land was given to the Jewish people exclusively and eternally in Genesis," and "The concept that the Palestinians have owned the land of Israel in times past that God almighty promised Abraham and the Jewish people forever is one of history's greatest frauds."

66 See, for example, Hindson and LaHaye, *Target Israel*, 145, in which the authors decry the "heresy that this land is the home of the Palestinians."

67 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 29.

68 McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism*, 24.



in the region. In short, this is not only a new form of Christian Zionism, but a much more responsible one.

What is most striking about NCZ, especially for Pentecostal eschatology, is its ability to bring together dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists around several common convictions. If NCZ has bridged the divide between dispensationalists and covenant theologians within broader Christendom—Aramean Christians, Anglicans, Baptists, and others—could it also accomplish such within the Pentecostal movement? On the one hand, NCZ does not rule out a pre-tribulation rapture, which many Pentecostals insist on; on the other hand, NCZ does not require it, as dispensationalism seems to. NCZ thus allows dispensational Pentecostals to maintain their core convictions, even while enjoying common ground with their covenantal counterparts. For the non-dispensationalist, who insists that not all early Pentecostals were dispensational, NCZ allows them to maintain a unique role for national Israel, even while rejecting a hermeneutic they consider deeply flawed. In bodies like the PAOC, currently engaged in serious reflection over the future of Pentecostal eschatology and its relationship to dispensationalism, the view articulated by McDermott and his colleagues could serve as a timely contribution.

## Conclusion

Considering how intensely many of the founders of the Pentecostal Movement were influenced by the idea of Christian Zionism, it is not difficult to understand why the concept continues to hold a powerful influence. Given current trends in Pentecostal academia, and even denominational discussions, however, the question is unavoidable: will Pentecostals still hold a special place for national Israel in God's eschatological plan, even as dispensationalism's influence declines? Considering that NCZ is not grounded in the dispensational framework, it seems to provide a natural starting point for those who, while differing over hermeneutics, reject supersessionism. While some Pentecostals may favour an approach to biblical interpretation in line with the historic Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions, viewing the church as Israel's successor, such is unlikely to be popular with Pentecostal laity, clergy, or even academics who wish to maintain their support for the Jewish nation. Based on their theological tradition and their understanding of Scripture, many Pentecostals will inevitably cling to a distinct and crucial role for Israel in the eschatological plans of God—even those who bear some discomfort with dispensationalism. Indeed, it is on this point that NCZ may prove a rewarding concept for discussion. Given Pentecostalism's uncanny ability to adapt to its time frame and cultural context, as proven by its remarkable global growth over the past century, it will be fascinating to observe how its adherents adjust to this emerging theological challenge.