

A night sky filled with stars and constellations, including the Orion constellation, is visible above a desert landscape. The landscape features several prominent, flat-topped rock formations (hoodoos) in the foreground and middle ground, illuminated by a low light source, possibly the moon or a distant star. The ground is covered in sparse, dry vegetation and small shrubs.

Zionism Unsettled: A Congregational Study Guide

Wasatch Presbyterian Church

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Better web link for the companion videos:

[Vimeo.com/channels/zuepisodes](https://vimeo.com/channels/zuepisodes)

Part 3:

- Mainline Liberal Protestants and Israel
- Israel's "Image Problem"
- Evangelicals and Christian Zionism
- What Diaspora?

Mainline Liberal Protestants and Israel:

Myths of National Origin:

Israeli and American myths of origin are similar and derived from the same biblical sources.

- The roots of American Protestant pro-Zionism lie in the ideology of the early Pilgrims whose beliefs were derived from the story of God's election of the ancient Israelites. (II Samuel 7:10: "And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more.")
- These [American] "new Israelites" believed God would guide them and had in fact gone before them, preparing their way and granting a divinely ordained entitlement to a land that was, as it happened, already inhabited.

- Other white colonizers would join the Pilgrims. The settlers' mission came to be identified as "Manifest Destiny." Political scientists would later refer to this as "settler colonialism," i.e. doctrines of racial superiority, divine entitlement to the land and its resources, and various systems of segregation, slavery, ethnic cleansing, genocide and other forms of discrimination and violence against people of color and minority ethnic groups.
- The myths of entitlement, inequality, racial superiority, and conquest/dispossession have coexisted uncomfortably with constitutional guarantees of equality for all. It has taken generations to even begin to correct the moral and spiritual imperfections of these founding myths within the United States. In fact, the history and ideology of settler colonialism have been so central to the political history of the United States that it is not surprising the political and religious leadership in the US has been predisposed to uncritical support for the Zionist movement.

Four influential and progressive American Protestant theologians of the twentieth century who were pro-Zionist despite their denunciations of fundamentalism and dispensationalist “End Times” speculation:

1. Paul Tillich (German-American Lutheran theologian, 1886-1965)
2. Reinhold Niebuhr (American reformed theologian, 1892-1971)
3. Krister Stendahl (Swedish theologian, 1921-2008)
4. Paul van Buren (Episcopal priest, 1934-1998)

1. Paul Tillich:

- Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.
- A strong critic of Nazism.
- Not initially a supporter of Zionism. (Questioned the concept of a nation-state “Israel” and argued that the Jewish people should not be limited to an attachment to “space [land] and time.”)
- However, he changed his position as the news of the Nazi concentration camps and the genocide were confirmed.
- Came to believe that the only answer was to provide Jews with a safe haven in a state of their own.
- Critiqued Nazism as a false, secular alternative to prophetic Judaism and Christianity...and as a closed system with no room for the prophetic critique that the Hebrew Prophets and Jesus brought to humanity.

2. Reinhold Niebuhr:

- Professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.
- In 1941, broke with Protestant nondenominational publication *Christian Century* to found a new liberal journal *Christianity and Crisis*. (*Christian Century* was calling for caution and patience following *Kristallnacht* in Germany and Austria on 11/9/1938 and for the U.S. to stay out of World War II.)
- Niebuhr supported the Zionist movement uncritically, with more vigor than did Tillich. Niebuhr understood a Jewish state to be the necessary response to the Holocaust and Western anti-Semitism. He was adamant that the United States had a primary responsibility to protect Israel and the Jewish people for moral reasons and U.S. national interests, particularly as a dimension of Cold War politics. He also believed that Israel deserved U.S. political, military, and economic support. He viewed Israel as “the only democracy in the Middle East.”

- Famous for the aphorism: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice make democracy necessary.”
- Ironic that Niebuhr would demonstrate moral blindness to the fact that the establishment of a “Jewish democracy” in Palestine was preconditioned on the exclusion of the native Palestinians.

The Biltmore Platform:

- By 1939, if not before, most Zionist leaders were convinced the Nazis were committing genocide against the Jews in Poland and Germany.
- By the early 1940s, Zionism had taken a commanding role in the organized American Jewish community. The Zionist movement shifted its operational center from London to New York City.
- The conference held at New York's Biltmore Hotel in May 1942 and the resulting "Biltmore Platform" crystallized the Zionist movement's commitment to nothing less than the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine as an answer to Nazi atrocities.

- The Biltmore conference united most major Jewish organizations and leadership behind a highly aggressive form of Zionism from this time forward. Membership in the major Zionist organizations grew rapidly as did the donations to underwrite their campaigns.
- Also emerging from the Biltmore meetings was a proposal to establish and fund Christian organizations to support the call for Jewish statehood, mobilize Christians to support the Zionist cause, and lobby their members of Congress.

After the turbulent but decisive decade of the 1940s there was a gradual shift in the Protestant churches toward increased support for Israel:

- The primary Protestant organization was the American Christian Palestine Committee (ACPC), which received major financial support from Jewish Zionist organizations.
- An additional development that advanced pro-Israel bias in Protestantism was the increased interest in Christian-Jewish dialogue.
 - The National Conference of Christians and Jews played an important role for many decades.
 - B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League (ADL) did as well.
 - Eventually most Zionist organizations did as well.
 - The “Ecumenical Deal” was struck: Christian silence on Israel as expiation for guilt incurred during centuries of anti-Semitism. Discussion of the fate of Palestinians was taboo, a divisive hazard to be strenuously avoided for risk of derailing these interfaith dialogues.

On 9/15/2012, 15 Protestant and Roman Catholic leaders broke these rules for the first time by writing a letter to Congress asking for sanctions against Israel.

Jewish theologian Marc Ellis announced this as the death of the ecumenical deal. He noted that Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel was quoted by one church leader for the proposition that “[n]eutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” Ellis concluded: The ultimate sin is silence in the face of injustice.

3. Krister Stendahl:

- Swedish New Testament scholar and Harvard Divinity School professor.
- One of his radical claims was that Paul's letter to the Romans was not primarily a discussion of "justification by faith," which had been the traditional interpretation.
- Rather, he asserted that Paul's thesis in Romans was a discussion of God's mysterious plans for the Jews, an argument he found especially in Romans 9-11. He claimed that Paul's argument demonstrates that God desires harmonious coexistence between Judaism and Christianity. Christians should no longer follow Paul's example of attempting to convert Jews, nor should they practice any form of anti-Semitism or claim superiority with such arguments as "replacement theology," which asserts on the basis of New Testament texts that the old covenant of God with the Jews has been replaced by the new covenant in Christ.
- Stendahl's exegesis and interpretation of Romans transformed New Testament scholarship in terms of Christian-Jewish dialogue and interfaith relationships.

Stendahl also asserted that Jews are not only equal to Christians in the eyes of God, but that Christians are “honorary Jews.” This statement raises several theological concerns. Stendahl implies that Christians should adopt a theology of Jewish “chosenness,” a choice by God that means superiority and exclusive privileges for the Jewish people. Christians can be called “honorary Jews” because Jews are God’s first, and by implication, God’s primary “chosen” people. Certainly the arguments made by Stendahl are theological. Nonetheless, they can be harnessed to support Israeli political goals.

Is Stendahl suggesting Christians should adopt a form of Jewish exceptionalism?

One of the many negative consequences of this tendency toward Jewish exceptionalism in liberal Protestant theology is its failure to hold the state of Israel to the same standard of international law and human rights as that to which every other nation should be held.

Sidebar note about Krister Sendahl's friendship with Rabbi David Hartman (founder and President of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem):

Rabbi Hartman wrote, in responding to a Palestinian suicide bombing in Jerusalem in 2002: "Let's really let them understand what the implication of their actions is. Very simply, wipe them out. Level them."

Sendahl never publicly disavowed his relationship with Rabbi Hartman.

4. Paul van Buren:

- Taught theology at Temple University in Philadelphia.
- Popularly remembered as a “Death of God” theologian and for his advocacy of “Secular Christianity.”
- His *magnum opus* was his post-Holocaust theology titled *Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* (3 volumes).
- He wrote: “God’s promises to Israel include, for example, possession of the Land. In Jesus Christ, if we are to believe the apostle Paul, God said Yes also to that promise. The church of Jesus Christ, therefore, cannot coherently do other than confirm and support the promise of the Land to the Jewish people.”
- Van Buren served as an associate of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem during the 1980s. It is reasonable to assume that he visited the West Bank and must have seen some of the effects of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Evidently the Holocaust and his dialogue with Jewish Holocaust theologians had so touched him that he was unable to question Israel’s confiscation of Palestinian land and the pauperization of the Palestinian people underway during his time of residency in the country.

Is Orientalism the Culprit?:

Why are we comfortable with Orientalism while we find anti-Semitism abhorrent and unacceptable?

As a new theology and language emerged after World War II, the work of liberal Protestant theologians was grounded in an unconscious Orientalist framework. Niebuhr, Stendahl, and van Buren stood on a “Western shore” that defined itself as “Judeo-Christian” and by default treated anything outside that framework as alien “other,” rendering it susceptible to criticism, assumptions of cultural inferiority, and ultimately aggression and war... Western Christianity has arrived at a place where the “other” is no longer Jews, but Islam and its 1.5 billion adherents. Arab Christians have been largely ignored and left out of the discussion.

Israel's "Image Problem":

Hasbara: The Hebrew term for "explanation," "public relations," "media spin," or "propaganda."

- As of 2012, Israel's Foreign Ministry was planning to spend \$28.4 million on branding Israel, in bringing over experts, academics and opinion makers, and organizing pro-Israel events around the globe.
- As of 2013, the Jewish Agency for Israel was planning to spend \$300 million annually for pro-Israel public relations programs, with a focus on U.S. campuses. \$100 million of this amount was to be supplied by the Israeli government.

Evangelicals and Christian Zionism:

For decades, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has opposed the evangelical blend of dispensationalism and Christian Zionism because it fuses religion with politics, distorts faith, and imperils peace in the Middle East.

Dispensationalism: Was developed in the mid-19th century among Plymouth Brethren and was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible first published by Oxford University Press in 1909. The Scofield Bible contains the text of the King James version along with commentary that divides history into seven different time periods – or “dispensations” – in which God’s covenants with humanity operate differently. Millions of Christians believe that the last dispensation – the Second Coming of Christ, the great battle of Armageddon, and Christ’s one-thousand-year rule of the world from its center, Jerusalem – is about to arrive.

One extremely visible contemporary advocate of Christian Zionism is Rev. John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, a Pentacostal mega-church with 19,000 members.

- He is also the founder of Christians United for Israel (CUFI), which has over one million members.

Dispensationalist evangelicals adopted a Christian version of Zionism during the 20th century, claiming that:

the catalyst of the end of time was the reestablishment of the secular State of Israel – which thrilled them in 1948 when Israel announced its nationhood. Israel's various military victories in 1967 and 1973 were confirmations of a divine hand on Israel's future.

The corollary of this belief is that evangelical Christian Zionists now have a divine mandate to support the modern state of Israel because they believe that (1) modern-day Israel is the heir of the Old Testament promises of land to Abraham and his descendants; and (2) by supporting Israel they help usher in the return of Christ and His one-thousand-year reign.

Discussion of the work of Prof. Gary Burge, an evangelical Presbyterian and Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College.

- Wrote *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology*. (2010)
- Offers five critiques of evangelical Christian Zionist theology.
- Evangelicals of the Reformed Tradition like Burge believe that Christ has already come and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ is already at work in the world transforming it. Therefore they engage in the work of justice and peace rather than seeking an escape from history and God's final blockbuster, the destruction of all unbelievers.

The problem of replacement theory (supersessionism):

- This is the Christian theological doctrine that the Christian Church has superseded the nation of Israel, assuming their role as God's covenanted people.
- Replacement theology has been the source of much Christian anti-Semitism.
- Burge's solution is found in Romans 11:

“God continues to hold a place for Judaism in history. However, this is a ‘suspended blessing’ for they are ‘branches ...broken off’ (Rom. 11:17, RSV) that will be restored at the end of history when Christ returns, when ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Rom 11:26, RSV). This understanding of Romans 11 means that we should not tolerate anti-Semitism and that church and synagogue should share mutual respect.”

What Diaspora?

More than half of the world's Jews choose to live outside Israel.

[T]he great achievement of the [Jewish] Diaspora was precisely the formation of a living, meaningful Judaism in the absence of a political or territorial base. To deny the worth of Jewish life outside the land of Israel is thus essentially to deny millennia of Jewish creativity.

Lacking an answer to the question “Who is a Jew?” expansive enough to describe the many ways Jews relate to their history, identity, and culture, Jewish communal institutions have “made support for Israel a civic religion around which to build a modern secular Jewish identity.” (Quoting from Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (2005).)

Questions for Reflection:

Pages 43 & 47.