
Pro Rege

Volume 42 | Number 1

Article 7

September 2013

Christian Zionism Examined and The Last Days of Dispensationalism (Book Reviews)

Keith C. Sewell
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Sewell, Keith C. (2013) "Christian Zionism Examined and The Last Days of
Dispensationalism (Book Reviews)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 42: No. 1, 33 - 35.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol42/iss1/7

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

lege students they couldn't write term papers about abortion because, really, what else could be said? Everything becomes cliché—and there's some of that in *Me Before You*, quite simply a novel about assisted suicide.

I've been at the bedsides of a dying father and a dying mother-in-law in the last half-dozen years. Our two remaining parents are both mid-90s, and while both of them are doing well, both have also told us that they're more than ready to die. Both are believers. Both look forward to an after-life that will restore peace and joy and love and free them of the walkers both depend on. Let's face it—what remains for both of them could be harrowing; I've seen suffering I wouldn't wish on anyone.

I've often thought that our culture will inevitably entertain quality-of-life questions with more vehemence than it does presently. The inconceivable cost of medical care for elderly—and I'm one of them—will bring that discussion on. There are millions of “boomers” after all, millions and millions of us, and we're going to live longer and longer and longer and need more and more and more medical care, which is ever more and more expensive. We are, alive, a daunting legacy for our children. It's almost impossible to believe that the specter of assisted suicide won't become more of an issue very soon.

But this sweet novel proves, without a doubt, that doctor-assisted suicide will never be easy. Will has an acidic personality when Lou begins to tend him. He's angry and bitter; but then Ms. Moyes gives us every reason to believe he has a right to be a horror—he is,

after all, totally dependent on others to perform every last physical function—and clean up after him.

Louise, the innocent, through her own naive persistence, gets him to love her, something she never guessed she'd do, even if she'd wanted to early on. But even her love for him and his for her, all of it artfully orchestrated by Ms. Moyes, is not enough to keep him from standing by a decision he told his mother he wanted six months before.

This novel is all about assisted suicide.

Jojo Moyes has created wonderful characters, a man and a woman who almost blessedly incarnate the arguments for and against euthanasia. I honestly loved this novel. It's everything the reviewer said it would be.

But there's no escaping the fact that its joys and its riches can't compete with the “problem” it faces—a problem we do. It's a mark of its strength that, had Will Traynor ditched his plans to die and taken up life with a woman who grew to love him, we would have believed the story, even if we would have rolled our eyes at the expected outcome.

Still, when Will Traynor wins, by losing, it's somehow wrong, which means, finally, that the novel itself is deeply unsatisfying simply because of its outcome: Will Traynor chooses death over life. Even though he has every reason in the world to do exactly what he does, it's still a god-awful choice.

I really loved this novel, but when it's all said and done, it's finally less of a love triangle than it is an argument for death. And that's always sad.

Paas, Steven. *Christian Zionism Examined: A Review of Ideas on Israel, the Church and the Kingdom*. Nürnberg: Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft Publications, 2010. 135 pages. ISBN: 9783941750869, and Donaldson, Alistair W. *The Last Days of Dispensationalism: A Scholarly Critique of Popular Misconceptions*. Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011. xv + 168 pages. ISBN: 9781608995158. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, emeritus professor of history, Dordt College.

These two books—Stephen Paas's *Christian Zionism Examined: A Review of Ideas on Israel, the Church and the Kingdom* and Alistair W. Donaldson's *The Last Days of Dispensationalism: A Scholarly Critique of Popular Misconceptions*—come from distant parts of the globe. Steven Paas has been active as a Presbyterian minister in the Church of Central Africa and a lecturer in the Zomba Theological College in Malawi. He has published a number of works with the Reformatorische Verlag Beese of Hamburg, Germany. Alistair Donaldson is Lecturer in Biblical Theology,

Biblical Studies, Hermeneutics, and Worldview at Laidlaw College in Christchurch, New Zealand. These two books are united in their opposition to “Christian Zionism” of the pre-millennial dispensationalist variety—a view of the “end times” remarkably prevalent in the United States, presented in Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and by other figures, including Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Derek Prince (94-5). This view is presupposed in the best-selling “left behind” novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

Paas's work arose out of his contact in the Netherlands with "Christian Zionists" (5). By "Christian Zionism," he means the pre-millennial dispensationalism of John Darby (1800-82) as popularized by the Scofield Bible (60-4). Paas's doctrinal standpoint is close to that articulated by writers such as O. Palmer Robertson, in his *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (2000), and Stephen Sizer, in *Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon?* (2004) and *Zion's Christian Soldiers: The Bible, Israel and the Church* (2007). Paas concurs with many protestant Reformers (47-8), as well as post-reformation authors, in affirming that "in Scripture the name Zion is used for ... the people of God. In the New Testament, Zion is the Kingdom of God, which in principle has arrived and will be consummated at Christ's return" (7).

By contrast, the dispensationalism of "Christian Zionism" arises from an "extreme literalism" (15), which sunders the unity of *tota scriptura* (17), fractures the single covenant of grace, and de-centers Christ himself (18-22). The literalist hermeneutic of this tendency (22) produces a dual-track doctrine in which "the Church and Israel both are said to represent a Biblical way of salvation. There are two covenants, one with the Jews and the other with the Gentiles" (91). By contrast, Paas affirms that "The Church has not replaced Israel but represents its real meaning" (24).

Christian Zionist dispensationalism repeatedly misconstrues the meaning of "Israel" (31), in passages such as Romans 11:26 ("all Israel") and Galatians 6:16 ("Israel of God"). As a result of this improper literalism, the Christian Zionism of dispensationalism teaches false conceptions of the Kingdom, Israel, and the Church (110).

Regrettably, on occasions, Paas can somewhat mislead his readers. For example, to say that J.C. Ryle (1816-1900) and C.H. Spurgeon (1834-92) adhered to the post-millennial standpoint (58) is misleading. They were pre-millennial in outlook *without* being dispensationalists. Nevertheless, his extended discussion of the rise of pro-Zionist Christian sentiment in post-reformation German Pietism, from Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and August Hermann Franke (1663-1727), is highly instructive (51-4, 66-85). What calls for further explanation is how this "Christian Zionism" metamorphosed into the virulent anti-Semitism that reached its hideous climax under the Nazi regime (58, 85-9). In Paas's judgment, during the post war period, "specific Christian Zionist ideas became radicalized among Dutch Evangelicals ... and

gradually penetrated into orthodox Reformed circles" (97). A result has been an excessive support for the state of Israel in the west, which seriously "infuriates Muslims" and "saddens Christian minorities in Islamic countries" (104). Such Christian Zionism is given a spurious legitimacy by pre-millennial-dispensationalist teaching, but it is also driven by shame in the west for centuries of anti-Semitism, culminating in the holocaust itself (106).

Paas harbors profound concerns. Not least, he fears a recrudescence of "Christian" anti-Semitism. In a passage that begs for quotation, he outlines the following scenario:

What will happen if the universal Jewish community ceases to fulfill the expectations of the opinion-makers and politicians of Christian Zionism? What if their "idol," the Israeli State, stopped being an icon of the fulfillment of Biblical restoration prophecy? There are various possible scenarios that would probably not be agreeable to Christian Zionism enthusiasm. For instance, the world is plunged into a devastating nuclear disaster triggered by a war between Israel and Iran. Christian chiliasts believing in being protected by the rapture would be shocked to find themselves in the midst of the tribulations they had sought to escape (114).

In some respects Alistair Donaldson begins where Paas concludes. He is concerned at the way in which premillennial dispensationalism can be and is being used to legitimize military action by and on behalf of Israel against Iran, a point Stephen Sizer, the evangelical Anglican opponent of "Christian Zionism," makes in his Foreword (vii), with a quotation attributed to John Hagee, chief pastor of Cornerstone Church, San Antonio, Texas: "The United States must join Israel in a pre-emptive military strike against Iran ... which will lead to the Rapture, Tribulation and Second Coming of Christ." Such statements serve to substantiate Paas's apprehensions and are a sober reminder that wrong doctrine can have serious consequences.

Donaldson's short but well-written book is not in the first instance about contemporary international politics, although these are not ignored (34-7, 50-1, 69). It is, rather, a lucid critique of premillennial dispensationalism, which from a Reformed standpoint may be seen as a densely packed thicket of inter-related errors. As he is well aware, those in the grip of the system can be impervious to discussion and liable to question the Christian standing of those who do not agree (xiii, 1. 36).

Donaldson faces these challenges in a calm, careful, and charitable manner. He rightly discerns that the key issue is hermeneutical—exactly how is the Bible to be interpreted? He addresses this question in his initial chapter (1-30), which explores the false and inconsistent literalism on which so much dispensationalism is based. Only when the first order interpretative questions are addressed is it then possible to proceed to answer the question “Who is Israel?” (31-69). He effectively exposes the dispensational dual-track “Israel on Earth, Christians in Heaven” approach. This approach clears the ground for a much-needed clarification of the nature of “the kingdom of God,” which rejects the restoration of some sort of territorially delimited Davidic realm (70-95).

Thereafter, Donaldson proceeds to correct dispensationalist misreading of passages such as Daniel 9:24-7, Matthew 24, I Thessalonians 4:13-18, II Thessalonians 2:1-10, and Revelation 20:1-10 (96-147). The discussion of these passages offered by Donaldson is rich with insight and worthy of careful study, especially by those who have allowed the dispensational system and outlook to become part of their mental furniture. Donaldson clearly draws from writers familiar to many readers of *Pro Rege*, such as William Hendriksen (1900-82), Herman Ridderbos (1909-2007), and David Holwerda, late of Calvin Seminary. Also, and especially in his conclusions (150-160), Donaldson’s thinking has been influenced by

N.T. Wright, currently Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, at St. Mary’s College in the University of Saint Andrews, Scotland. He exhibits a deep accord with Wright’s contextual readings of Scripture and integral approach to eschatology (55-7, 68, 80-1, 154, 159). Donaldson acknowledges that he has drawn on the work of J. Richard Middleton, Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, NY, as did N.T. Wright (152-4, 159).

Those seeking a lucid and accessible introduction to the many problems inherent to premillennial dispensationalism should make Donaldson’s book their first choice. It is strongly recommended. Of course, there is more to be said—as is always the case. A passing reference is made to the fact that what has passed for a Christian worldview “has been influenced by Platonic dualism and by ideas reminiscent of Gnosticism” (154). Arguably, this observation, if followed through, would serve to recast our understanding of the entire history of post-Apostolic Christianity and, not least, provide considerable insight into the philosophical roots and historical origins of more than dispensationalism itself. Certainly, an appreciation of the teachings and influence of premillennial dispensationalism helps to explain why so many avowedly “Bible-believing” evangelical Christians remain tragically impervious to more biblically grounded and directed calls for integral Christian thinking and living.

Smith, James K. A. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. Volume 2 of *Cultural Liturgies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. 198 pages. ISBN 978-0-8010-3578-4. Reviewed by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., visiting professor at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary, Riga, Latvia.

Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works begins in a Costco food court as author James K.A. Smith reads Wendell Berry’s *Bringing it to the Table*, an anthology of essays critiquing the dominant systems of food production and consumption. While reading, Smith realizes that there is a gap between his worldview and his actions; he ponders that “the food court at Costco’ might be a kind of shorthand for Berry’s picture of the sixth circle of hell” (*Imagining* 8). Asserting that *Imagining the Kingdom* “is something of a hybrid, pitched between the academy and the church, since its argument is aimed at both” (*Imagining* xvii), Smith uncovers the roots of a Costco lifestyle and contrasts those roots with those of the kingdom of God. In other words, he presents two visions of the good life that are each struggling for dominance.

Imagining the Kingdom is the second volume of a 3-volume series on the theology of culture that Smith calls the *Cultural Liturgies* Project. In a superb manner, Smith packs a lot into a book that is less than 200 pages. Seeking the renewal of liturgical and cultural practice leads Smith to write for educators, pastors, and worship leaders who are reflective and open to new ways of envisioning liturgical practice. He invites scholars to explore phenomenology and philosophy of religion, offering some original, constructive proposals for a research agenda. Throughout the book he uses sidebars from fiction, art, and life stories, as well as philosophical, cultural, and liturgical passages.

Professor of philosophy at Calvin College, where he holds the Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology & Worldview, Smith is also the