A Short History of Christian Zionism

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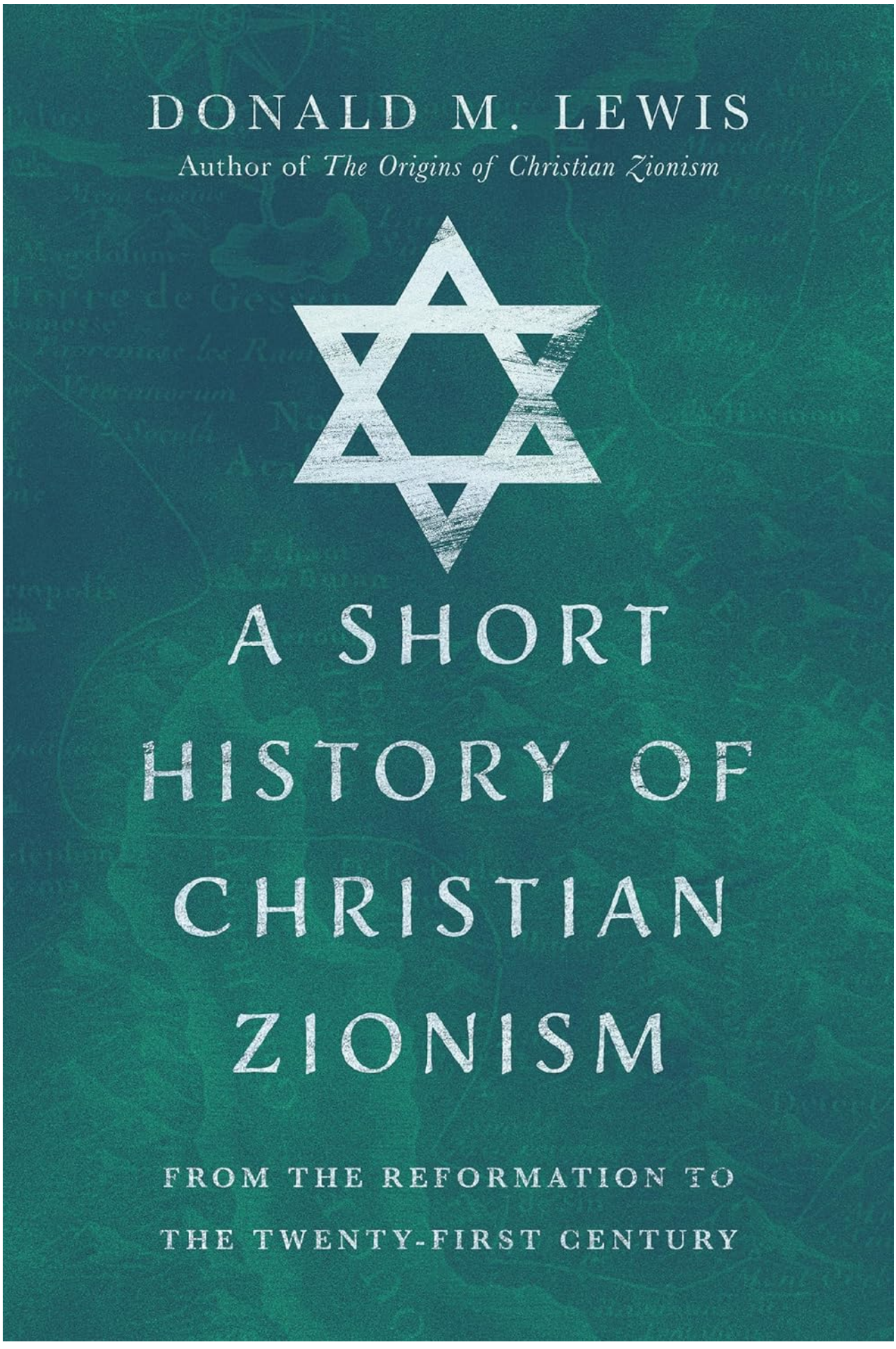
Donald M. Lewis:A Short History of Christian Zionism. From the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century IVP Academic: Westmont, Illinois, 2021, 384 Pages, $36.00



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In *A Short History of Christian Zionism: From the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century*, the now-late Donald M. Lewis (1950-2021) charts the titular movement's theological roots and branches from the Reformation to the present. As he remarks in the introduction, there have been many studies of Christian Zionist politics but a surprising lack of scholarship on Christian Zionist theology. While indeed making theology central, Lewis consistently weaves relevant scholarship on Christian Zionists politics into his overview. The book's flow is at times weighed down by far too many scholarly quotes, but Lewis should be commended for bringing often disparate corners of the academy into conversation.

There are several themes worth highlighting in this volume. First is the diversity of Christian Zionism and related positions, a point reflected in how Lewis defines the movement: "a Christian movement which holds to the belief that the Jewish people have a biblically mandated claim to their ancient homeland in the Middle East" (3). This definition allows him to distinguish between restorationists and Christian Zionists, the former of which set the table for Christian Zionism but lacked the political activity to be called a movement. The distinction helps correct common misperceptions as well. The most compelling concerns the views of John Nelson Darby. While it's easy to assume Darby, the famed dispensationalist theologian, was a Christian Zionist, he was really a restorationist—he put no energy into activism for a Jewish homeland.

Rather, it was William E. Blackstone who adapted Darby's teachings for "an activist Christian Zionism" (154). And so, though often viewed monolithically, dispensationalism actually had two streams—"an activist Christian Zionist stream" and "a passive, yet curious stream" (162). But Lewis also does not let dispensationalists crowd his discussion since, after all, "politically engaged American liberal Protestant supporters were more important to the American Zionist movement up to the 1970s than were the dispensationalists" (8). The book's concluding chapters, which focus on "renewalist Zionism" (mostly outside the United States) and "'new' Christian Zionism" (aiming to "bring balance to Christian Zionism" [348]), make the diversity theme even stronger.

Another persistent theme is how Christian Zionism (and restorationism too) was principally about the self-definition of Christian traditions and communities. Early restorationists, like the English Puritans, discussed Jews and Palestine as a means of teasing out the contours of national identities, a way to distance themselves from the domains of Catholicism and Islam. In the United States Blackstone's activist Christian Zionism was also deeply concerned with constructing a definitively American Christian identity. Through much of the 20th Century, American Christian Zionists used their political activism to set America apart from the "godless Communism" of the USSR. After 9/11, Islam re-emerged as the Christian Zionists' foil. Touching on one notable example, John Hagee's Christians United for Israel, Lewis helpfully summarizes this perspective: "Christian Zionists and Jews are on God's side; Americans and Israelis are united as defenders of 'Judeo-Christianity.' Both stand opposed to the Arabs and Islam (which are often equated)" (285). From beginning to end, this book reminds readers of the self-serving aspects of restorationism and Christian Zionism.

There is one more significant theme worth noting here: restorationists and Christian Zionists responded to antisemitic canards and antisemitic oppression with ambivalence. Lewis writes that some Christian Zionists, out of their disdain for radical politics, embraced the conspiracies charted in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (unknown author, Small, Maynard & Company, 1920). Likewise, while most Christian Zionists detested Adolf Hitler, some appreciated him as a supposed guard against the spread of "Jewish-inspired Bolshevism" (208), and some framed the Holocaust as God's judgment (239). Along these same lines, the complexity of Christian Zionist attitudes toward Jews can be seen in their criticisms of the irreligious Jews who formed the leadership of most prominent Zionist groups, and in their often-convoluted sentiments regarding Palestinian Jews' responsibility toward Palestinian Arabs.

As with any broad overview, there are things to quibble about. The structure could have been

streamlined: The entire work is fifteen chapters, but a couple of the chapters are only six to eight pages, while others are almost thirty. There are also some gaps. Lewis has a keen eye for how Christian Zionists have influenced politics, so it's odd that Christian Zionist influence on American presidents since Ronald Reagan occupies only two-and-a-half pages, and Donald Trump's presidency consists of one, six-sentence paragraph. (The latter oversight may be related to the comparatively slow schedule of book publishing and the timing of the author's death, however.) Similarly, the final chapter, which considers evangelical challenges to Christian Zionism, should have addressed how Christian Zionists have responded (and not responded) to growing antisemitism in some American Christian contexts. Though public awareness of these antisemitic streams has undoubtedly increased since the book was ready for typesetting, growing antisemitism has been a not-so-inconspicuous undercurrent that Christian Zionists have had to confront. It would also be interesting to know how this group has responded to American Jews' increasingly complex opinions on Israel. (The current war in Israel/Palestine may change the landscape further.)

Finally, Lewis's arguments are not always especially compelling. As a case in point, when summarizing why most American Jews remain suspicious of Christian Zionists, he draws on David Rausch's *Communities in Conflict: Evangelicals and Jews* (Trinity Press Interntional, 1991) to seemingly posit that evangelicals' radically different worldview leads Jews to associate them, and by extension Christian Zionists, with the Christian antisemitism present in other historical periods and in other contexts. There may be some truth to this claim, but political trends and voting habits in post-Civil Rights America offer a simpler, more likely explanation, and one in which American Jews accurately recognize what evangelicals and Christian Zionists represent—conservative Christians overwhelmingly vote Republican, a party lacking a strong track record of concern for minority group interests. Thus, American Jews have a clear reason to be suspicious of conservative Christian philosemitism.

Minor criticisms aside, this book accomplished what Lewis intended. He writes, "It is not a polemical work, either for or against Christian Zionism. It seeks more to understand than to persuade, in the hope that a fair-minded evaluation of the movement's history will promote understanding" (1). It is indeed a fair-minded evaluation, and it will prove interesting and accessible to academics and non-academics. I already have plans to add some of my favorite chapters to course syllabi, and it will surely be a reference point and dialogue partner for years to come. It's unfortunate that Dr. Lewis no longer walks among us, but the care and concern with which he wrote about deeply held beliefs is a model for us all.

Matthew Brittingham is an adjunct instructor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and Oxford College (Georgia).

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