

'Worthless promise?'

An initial response to
Stephen Sizer's new book -
'Zion's Christian Soldiers?'

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Introduction

In making an initial response I will focus in on what I perceive as four main weaknesses within Stephen Sizer's new book, namely 1) His over simplistic defining of Christian Zionism. 2) His dependence on secondary sources. 3) His largely polemic style and 4) His repeated Biblical and Theological errors. However in this initial response, one is aware of being somewhat selective and also that there is much further discussion and debate needed.

Two opening questions

I will begin with two related questions; namely, why is Stephen Sizer's new book important and why does it demand a coherent response?

Firstly, the book is important and demands a coherent response because of the themes it engages with, namely the Bible, Israel and the Church. Such themes are fundamental within any mature Christian theological system of understanding. This is especially the case for a missionary society like CMJ with a calling to share the Gospel faithfully within Jewish communities and to work towards true reconciliation. Alongside this theological significance, there is clearly both a 'political' focus especially within the context of the

search for justice and peace within the Middle East and a ‘spiritual’ focus to do with God’s redemptive purposes and promises. However, I would be cautious of separating the ‘political questions’ from the ‘spiritual’, as I believe they are interwoven within the one calling of Christian discipleship. Stephen Sizer should be applauded for raising such issues and challenging the wider church community to face tough questions about the pursuit of peace and justice alongside interpreting the Bible in faithful ways.

Secondly, the book is important and demands a coherent response because of the numerous and significant endorsements the book has received. For example, John Rackley (President of the Baptist Union) describes Stephen Sizer as “the foremost authority on the phenomenon of Christian Zionism in Britain today”¹ and Greg Albrecht (President of Plain Truth Ministries) states that “ZCS ought to be on the required reading list for all students of the Bible”² In addition to such endorsements the book concludes with a sermon on “The place of Israel” from John Stott, who is perhaps the most respected Anglican Evangelical theologian and communicator of recent decades. Within all of this I sense there has been a shift within the theological climate especially as it relates to CMJ. In the past most key evangelicals, building on from the foundations laid by early

¹ Quoted in *For Zion's Sake*, Paul Wilkinson, Paternoster, 2007 :49

² From list of endorsements - *Zion Christian Soldiers*, IVP, 2007.

Biblical restorationist pioneers such as William Wilberforce, Charles Wesley, Charles Simeon, Lewis Way, Bishop Alexander, Bishop Ryle, Charles Spurgeon etc, would be to differing degrees in broad support of the general assumptions and goals of groups such as CMJ. However, this is no longer the case. The evangelical Christian community both within and beyond the Anglican communion seems in a much more ‘fluid state’ with input from Colin Chapman, Stephen Sizer, Sabeel³ and others gaining significant support and causing a possible paradigm shift in general support and theological thinking.

The role of CMJ

I believe CMJ is in a hugely privileged and significant position to make a coherent response and to help the wider evangelical Christian community to explore what is meant by terms such as ‘Christian Zionism’ and to engage robustly with Stephen Sizer’s presuppositions, arguments and agendas. This is because CMJ has a historically proven track record of demonstrating Christ-like love for Jewish People alongside a Biblically mature ministry rooted in reconciliation and expressed through evangelism, encouragement, and education. Clearly CMJ has and continues to have a vision of

³ Sabeel is an Arabic word meaning “The way or the spring” and is the popular term for the Palestinian Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre. This centre has grown out of a number of conferences, the first being in 1990 and was closely related to Naim Ateek (Canon of St Georges Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem) publication “*Justice and only Justice :A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*”

restoring Jewish people to their inheritance but this is done in ways which simply do not correlate to Stephen Sizer's overview of Christian Zionism, which is deemed by him to be an unhealthy mix of the eschatologically pessimistic, the naïvely fundamentalist, the Palestinian hating and the right wing oppressive. If Christian Zionism means what Stephen Sizer describes then CMJ is definitely not a Christian Zionist group. In fact, I would find it hard to imagine any genuine Christian rushing to sign up to be identified in such a way! However, if Christian Zionism is a healthy mix of those maintaining a clear Biblical distinction between Israel and the Church, of those working and praying towards the national restoration and salvation of Jewish people, of those combating anti-Semitism,⁴ of those rejoicing in God's faithfulness to the Jewish people, of those carefully restoring the Church to her true Biblical roots, of those seeking the healing of the schism between Jew and Gentile, of those longing for the promised return of Jesus to Jerusalem, then CMJ I believe would be honoured to be described under the umbrella term of 'Christian Zionism.'

⁴ I would want to maintain the distinction between being Anti-Semitic and Anti-Zionist. I think Stephen Sizer is right to insist on this difference. However, I think the voice of many Jewish people (see for example the open letter written this year by the British Messianic Jewish Alliance to Church leaders- www.bmja.net/statement) need to be heard which argue that the current rapid growth of anti-Semitism all too often these days appears in the guise of anti-Zionism.

The main weaknesses of “Zion’s Christian Soldiers?”

Let me now turn to addressing the main four weaknesses which I see are contained within Zion’s Christian Soldiers.

Firstly, as I have already indicated in his dealings with ‘Christian Zionism’ Stephen Sizer describes Christian Zionism in a very simplistic and one-dimensional way. He quotes from a few supporters of Christian Zionism such as John Hagee, Hal Lindsey and Edgar Whisenants. However, these supporters of Christian Zionism are far from representative of the wide spectrum of Christian Zionists and many Christian Zionists would question or deplore some of their views and the way in which they use (or abuse) Biblical texts. Also Stephen Sizer places Christian Zionism almost entirely into a pre-Millennial dispensational theological structure. Again this is over simplistic and unrepresentative. In addition to this Stephen Sizer historically reviews Christian Zionism from a starting point in 1800. This is in my opinion too late as it misses some significant earlier developments in ‘Christian Zionist’⁵ theology especially in regards to aspects of prophetic interpretation within early (16th century) Puritanism.

⁵ I use the term ‘Christian Zionism’ here as I think it is a helpful inclusive term, yet I think the term was not first used until as late as 1896 by Theodore Herzl.

Secondly, Stephen Sizer relies heavily on secondary sources. I sense he has not really engaged with those who he is so critical towards. He then builds his own position up by drawing from “dubious” sources such as Uri Davis, a known holocaust denier and Noam Chomsky who publicly defended the 9/11 terrorist actions. In all of this the reliance Stephen Sizer has on the ‘Chomsky-Finkelstein-Ateek school of history’ in partnership with a prevailing Sabeel based liberation theology is clearly demonstrated.

Thirdly, Stephen Sizer writes in the style of a propagandist. There is nowhere in which I sense Stephen Sizer has engaged with Jewish identity issues. There is no mention of the Holocaust, no mention of the 583,000 Jews expelled from Arab lands, no mention of the centuries of ‘Christian anti-Semitism’, no historical context given to the United Nations partition plan or resolution 242, no mention of Arab aggression, no mention of the concessions Israel made in order to make the Camp David initiative possible, no mention of the recent growth of Messianic Judaism⁶ (Jewish Believers in Jesus). Alongside this there is a ‘deafening silence’ in regard to the ‘militant Islamic

⁶ I would want to present a case that the growth of Messianic Judaism is both a sign of God’s on-going restoration of Israel (beginning with a faithful remnant?) and a potential gift within the pursuit of true reconciliation firstly between Jew and Christian and then more widely.

agenda'⁷ which has caused great sufferings to Arab/Palestinian Christians within parts of the Palestinian controlled areas. In all of this and more we are given a fearsome polemic. In the desire for the church to act justly and love mercy we need a balanced peace advocate. Sadly Stephen Sizer fails to provide this.

Fourthly, Stephen Sizer offers us repeated Biblical and theological errors. He often misuses or abuses the text. These are so numerous, space does not allow me to list them fully or to deconstruct them completely, however, I will focus on the following five.

1) For example, on page 86-87 he states in his discussion on the chronology of return to the Land, that return is always preceded by repentance. I do not necessary see this as the only pattern outlined in scripture. For example, in Ezekiel 36 v24, the text seems to suggest return to the land is followed by a later period of cleansing and renewal. Also under the return linked to Nehemiah/Ezra, the return to the Land was followed by a major renewal of Torah living, repentance and restoration.

⁷ I find it at best strange that Stephen Sizer in analysing (in the preface of Zion Christian Soldiers) the plight of Arab Christian and the subsequent depopulation of Arab Christian Communities, he puts the focus of “blame” upon Christian Zionism.

2) In his dealings with the restoration of the Kingdom and the outpourings of the Holy Spirit on page 90 he states; “Since the Holy Spirit has not yet been given.....” I find this statement confusing. Christian theology has wrestled⁸ with the issue of how and to what extent were “believers” indwelt or empowered by the Holy Spirit prior to the events of Acts 2. For example, Simeon (Luke 2v25-35) was clearly able to minister in and through the Holy Spirit. Clearly the Holy Spirit had not been given in fullness until the events in Acts 2, but this is vastly different to the statement Stephen Sizer makes. Again and again Stephen Sizer appears to want to ‘disconnect’ the Gospel message from the Biblical covenants. There is clearly an element of discontinuity which flows from the new-life Jesus brings in the fullness of the Holy Spirit, however there is also a profound continuity with the covenantal hopes and promises. There appears to me to be in ‘Stephen Sizer’s theology’ a preference to see the Gospel, not as a fulfilment of God’s faithfulness to Israel but as some sort of replacement or reworking of God’s plans and promises.

3) On page 36-37, Stephen Sizer deals with the text Mark 7v1-23 and makes the statement that “Jesus annulled the restrictive Levitical Laws that determined what food could or could not be eaten. Bacon was now kosher.” I think Stephen Sizer’s conclusion is false. The

⁸ For a full discussion of this important area see the Themelios Journal, Volume 30, 2004.

issue here is not about kosher foods, but rather about ritual washing (v2) and specifically how the 'Oral Torah' is to be interpreted by Jesus and his disciples.⁹ I find the teaching given by David Stern within his commentary¹⁰ very helpful on this point. I am not sure how other Christians would weigh up Stern's arguments, but I am sure that they need to be heard and weighed rather than simply ignored¹¹ as Stephen Sizer does.

At one level it may seem somewhat of a side issue in terms of how one interprets Mark 7, however, I think it is indicative of a wider issue, namely, that Stephen Sizer again wants to wrench the gospel from its living Jewish heritage. He seems to want to avoid giving any acknowledgement of the prominent Jewish context of the early Church (Acts 21:20) or as already mentioned the current growth of Messianic Judaism. He seems determined (rightly in my opinion) to stress the unity of the "People of God" as embracing all people, but in so doing he confuses unity with uniformity.¹² From my reading of key texts such as Romans 9-11, the Gospel message is for everyone (Jew and Gentile) who believes/trusts in the person and work of

⁹ I think a similar issue is at the heart of the encounter recorded in John 7:14-24.

¹⁰ David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, Clarksville, Jewish New Testament Publications 1992.

¹¹ I assume Stephen Sizer is aware of the line of argument Stern advances?

¹² In a similar way I suggest Sizer confuses possession of the Land with residency in the Land.

Jesus.¹³ There is indeed a wonderful inclusiveness. Yet this inclusiveness is not sourced by Jews losing their 'Jewish identity' (or by Gentiles becoming Torah observant Jews) but through the person and work of Jesus which enables Gentiles to be grafted into the redemptive promises of God's covenantal people symbolised by the cultivated Olive tree.¹⁴ Such an understanding of God's redemptive promises is fundamental to our concept of Israel and the Church. A true biblical exploration of these issues are clearly lacking in Zion's Christian Soldiers.

4) On page 95, Stephen Sizer comments on Romans 9v2-5. He states that "Significantly, Paul omits only one blessing, the land." This seems to me to be an unwise conclusion. Stephen Sizer is right that there is no specific mention of the land, however; there is in the list of blessings a clear mention of the covenants. It seems to me that to any faithful Jewish person speaking of the covenants that the reality of the land would be implicit within the understanding of the outworking of the covenantal promises. It is also worth noting that when Paul wrote this the Jewish People were in the land.

¹³ Romans 1:16, Romans 10:11-13, John 3:16.

¹⁴ Romans 11:17-27.

5) On page 90,¹⁵ Stephen Sizer focuses on Acts 1 v6-8. He presents his position by a reference to John Stott's¹⁶ commentary. Stephen Sizer insists that Jesus refutes the mistaken notions implicit within the disciple's question. Again I think such a conclusion is false. The question is one of timing relating to the restoring of the Kingdom not about the concept of restoring the Kingdom itself. The text records that Jesus does not rebuke the disciples as recorded in Luke 24v25, but rather deals with the question as a valid question with valid assumptions, namely that Israel had a Kingdom, Israel had lost it, God had promised to restore it and Jesus as the risen Lord and Messiah has the power to deliver the promised restoration. The restoring of the Kingdom will take place, this has been set by the Father (v7) but the focus is now to be on the calling to be witnesses to risen Lord in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that the rest of the book of Acts is a commentary on the outworking of Acts 1v8.

¹⁵ See also page 27

¹⁶ John Stott, *The Message of Acts*. Leicester, IVP, 1990.

Some concluding general thoughts

The restoring of the Kingdom to Israel is in my understanding interwoven with God's restoring of all things (Acts 3v21). Christian Zionism must therefore have as its true goal the perspective of establishing God's Kingdom in the fullest sense. Therefore any Christian Zionist eschatology must be centred on the person and work of Jesus. This reality of the Kingdom which Jesus brings is the true source of hope and shalom for all people.¹⁷ This restoring is rooted in the rich prophetic tradition which includes the promise of the land. In total, there are 109 occasions in the 'Old Testament'¹⁸ in which the Land is described as a gift or promise to the Jewish People. On 35 of these occasions the context is a solemn oath made by God. Some of these promises link return and restoration, some have been partially or completely fulfilled under the return under Cyrus (Ezra/Nehemiah), but most are not in this category. Some of the promises may be conditional, but most are not. Some may be interpreted within an allegorical hermeneutical method, but in most cases a literal interpretation seems from the context to be the most

¹⁷ This concept of Israel being blessed in order to be a blessing to others is at the heart of the mandate in Genesis 12:3. It is of interest that in Stephen Sizer's earlier book "*Christian Zionism: Road Map to Armageddon*" he explores (p147) this text but interprets it in a somewhat obtuse manner.

¹⁸ Some questions have been raised relating to why there is so little mention of returning to the land in the New Testament texts. I found David Pawson's teaching helpful on this point. His argument is that while the bulk (if not all) of the New Testament was being written, many Jewish people were still in the land. The argument is based on the view that most of the NT predates the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The final expulsion of Jews from the land took place around 135 CE.

appropriate. Jesus himself spoke about the gathering and scattering of Israel.¹⁹ He spoke of His return as being a time when Israel will look upon the one whom they have pierced.²⁰ The scripture also speaks about the place of Christ's return²¹ and of God's purposes flowing from Jerusalem and of all Israel being saved!²²

In the light of the vast amount of Biblical teaching it seems at the very least to be sound Biblical reasoning to believe that 1) God's character is verifiable in history. 2) The modern day ingathering of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel is to be understood as a fulfilment of some key scriptures and 3) In the light of the scriptures the land of Israel and the Jewish People clearly have a distinctive role within the on-going purposes and promises of God.

In order to faithfully respond to these purposes of God, Christians are not called to stand uncritically with Israel, but to stand as a critical friend who prays and works for peace²³ with justice and who prays and works for Israel's restoration and salvation²⁴ believing that the God of Israel is faithful and out of this faithfulness he calls Israel to

¹⁹ Luke 21:23-28.

²⁰ Zechariah 12:10

²¹ Zechariah 14:3

²² Romans 11:26

²³ Isaiah 62:6-7, Psalm 122:6

²⁴ Romans 10:1

her Messiah - the Lion of Judah²⁵ and the only Saviour of all—who died, who rose and who will return- to rule and judge.

²⁵ Revelation 5:5

Concluding principles for Christian Zionism

In the context of the above concluding thoughts, I would understand that those Christians who welcome the term 'Christian Zionists' must endeavour to follow the following five principles.

1) Christian Zionist thinking must always be addressed through the hermeneutical lens of the key focus of the New Testament which is the person and work of Jesus. By seeking to do this there is the commitment to see the all-sufficiency of Jesus in terms of the salvation of all people.

2) Christian Zionists must not in any way reinforce the current rejection of Jesus as Messiah which is sadly the current prevailing view of the majority of Jewish people, both in Israel and the Diaspora.

3) Christian Zionists must not invalidate or bypass the work of the church. This should include both a commitment to fellow believers in Israel (and the region) and a personal commitment to the life and witness of a local church community.

4) Christian Zionists must not treat Jews in Israel as the only (or most important) Jews.

5) Christian Zionists must be advocates for peace and justice.

In it my conviction that a Christian Zionism which follows these principles will not only be able to refute the presuppositions, arguments and agendas of Stephen Sizer, Sabeel and many others but will be able to offer to the wider church community a faithful model of engagement with the Bible, Israel and God's redemptive purposes and promises for the world. Such a model is vitally needed! Without such a model God's character of loving faithfulness both to the Jewish people and to the church will be severely undermined.



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