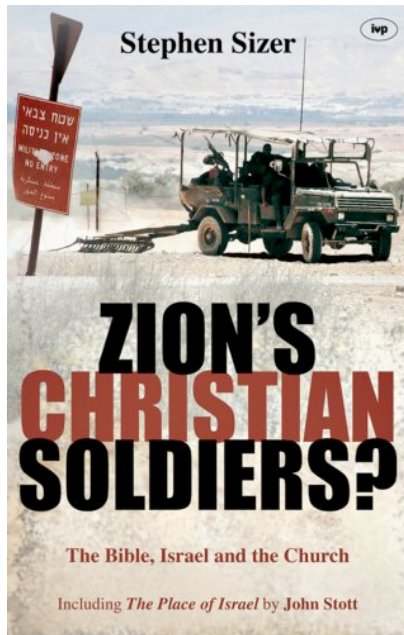


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Sizer, Stephen

Zion's Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel and the Church

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In 2004 Stephen Sizer wrote *Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon*. *Zion's Christian Soldiers* is Sizer's attempt to reach a wider audience, by simplifying and shortening his previous work, taking out much of the detailed historical and political material to be found there. *Zion's Christian Soldiers* is left with some scarce resources to make its point and is primarily a politically motivated theological critique of Christian Zionism.

In the introduction to *Zion's Christian Soldiers*, the author sets out the basic terminology for his later discussion, most importantly contrasting covenantalism and dispensationalism. Sizer also takes the time to debunk what he refers to as the “three red herrings”: that dispensationalism is the only biblical literalism; the assertion that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism; and the “straw man” of supersessionism. Sizer is careful in chapter 1 to emphasize that in his eyes the issue is not solely political; rather, “It is not an understatement to say that what is at stake is our understanding of the gospel, the centrality of the cross, the role of the church and the nature of our missionary mandate, not least, to the beloved Jewish people.” (19) In chapter 2 the author takes pains to distinguish what he deems a kind of acceptable biblical literalism from that of what he

calls the “ultra-literalists.” The section on “five common mistakes made by ultra-literalists” is a brief but trenchant look at some of the creative reading techniques used to interpret biblical prophecies in light of current events. Chapter 3 engages Sizer’s central question of the identity of God’s chosen people. For Sizer, the answer is unambiguously that believers of all nations are the real children of God and that it is thus “inappropriate to ... claim the Jewish people have a separate relationship with God based on their ancestry or Mosaic Law” (71). Chapter 4 takes up the issue of “the Promised Land.” It is here that Sizer paints a utopic picture of the nature of the state following the return from exile in Babylonia, asserting that “The Promised Land under the old covenant was to be shared and inclusive. This is a biblical model many Christian Palestinians, who favor a one-state solution, long to see accepted within the modern State of Israel” (89) Chapter 5 challenges Christian Zionist support for Jerusalem as the eternal and undivided capital of Israel, arguing that Christians ought not to focus on an exclusivist, physical city of Jerusalem; rather, their vision should be trained on the inclusive and eternal heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation. From here Sizer moves smoothly into a chapter sharply criticizing Christian Zionists who support rebuilding the temple. Chapter 8 examines the doctrine of the “rapture” and premillennialism generally as creating a “destructive culture of pessimism and fatalism in Western Christianity” (150). The book ends with a chapter of conclusion, followed by a reprint of a sermon by John Stott (Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, London) entitled “The Place of Israel.”

Zion’s Christian Soldiers suffers from some significant weaknesses. Sizer not only overestimates the influence of Christian Zionism among American evangelicals and significantly overrates the importance of dispensationalism to their Zionism, but he utterly exaggerates the role of Christian Zionism in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and global politics more generally. Sizer’s suggestion in the introduction that Christian Zionism explains everything from the West’s concern about Iran’s development of nuclear capability to Arab terrorism in Britain and America (“despite our commitment to the rule of international law, democracy and human rights” [10]) is simply hyperbolic. On page 19 Sizer likewise asserts that “the movement [Christian Zionism] as a whole is nevertheless leading the West, and the church with it, into a confrontation with Islam,” as if were it not for evangelical support for Israel, the West and Islam would have nothing to disagree about. Statements like these reduce the author’s credibility to such a degree that any valuable parts to his argument are lost along the way.

Sizer clearly does not quite “get” Judaism as an entity that is neither “religion” nor “race.” This is clearly illustrated in his assertion that “The myth of racial purity is nothing new, nor is the desire to limit or exclude those deemed inferior. This is particularly so today when defining Israel, since national identity tends to be restricted to those who are Jewish by race” (46). Beyond the simplistic understandings of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism

here, Sizer's echo of Nazi terminology here is a cheap shot and utterly irresponsible. To paraphrase, Sizer is trying to argue here that, unlike contemporary Israel/Zionism, Israel of the Old Testament was not based in "racial exclusivity." Yet such allegations of a program of "racial purity" in contemporary Israel are difficult to reconcile with the fact of a state with non-Jewish Arabs comprising some 20 percent of its population, together with the racially heterogeneous mix of Jews in Israel that includes Yemenite Jews, Russian Jews, Indian Jews, Ethiopian Jews, and Chinese Jews.

Zion's Christian Soldiers never pretends to be the work of objective scholarship and should not be thought of as such. The author has a very strong opinion that is anti-Israel and highly critical of Christians (or presumably anyone) who support Zionism. Sizer's passionate anti-Zionism and anti-Judaism give this work a great deal of energy, yet they harm any scholarly aspirations this book might have. Sizer writes in the preface that the "fear of being labeled an anti-Semite is a powerful disincentive" (8) to challenging Christian support for Israel. Rather than simple anti-Semitism, his work expresses something more complex, deeper, and ultimately more terrifying—a sincere, theological, Christian anti-Judaism. In several instances the reader hardly knows whether to laugh or cry. Bizarre assertions such as "If we have come to know Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior, we will read the Hebrew Scriptures with Christian eyes—the way Jesus and his apostles did" (27) or "The challenge the apostles faced was proclaiming this good news among the very people [Jews?] who had crucified Christ" (110) speak for themselves and make it difficult to take the work seriously as a contribution to scholarship.

It would be remiss not to mention here that Stephen Sizer is a man familiar with controversy. A Church of England vicar, the author has been accused of connections with known figures in the American far right and the world of Holocaust denial, which he categorically denies having engaged in knowingly.