



3-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Halverson, Taylor (2011) "Ancient Israelite Sion Theology, Judeo-Christian Apocalypticism, And Biblical (Mis)Interpretation: Potential Implications for the Stability of the Modern Middle East," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 64 : No. 64 , Article 8. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol64/iss64/8>

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Ancient Israelite Zion Theology, Judeo-Christian Apocalypticism, And Biblical (Mis)interpretation: Potential Implications for the Stability of the Modern Middle East

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Introduction

There is a long history of apocalyptic fervor in the Judeo-Christian tradition. These notions often gain intensity during moments of social or political strife. However, the peace and security some theological notions offer, if misinterpreted or misapplied, may potentially help precipitate crises and conflicts that upset the stability of civilized society. This paper will explore a case from ancient Israel where the misinterpretation of an ancient theological notion may have contributed to the fall of Jerusalem. Then this paper will consider the role that modern Biblical (mis)readings and (mis)interpretations have upon Judeo-Christian apocalyptic thought as a contributor to social unrest and conflicts in volatile regions of the world, particularly in the Middle East.

Between the years 597 – 587 BCE the Neo-Babylonian¹ Empire systematically dismantled and destroyed the Jewish society and civilization known as the Kingdom of Judah. In July 587 BCE, facing imminent destruction—the Babylonians had surrounded Jerusalem and famine had swept through the city—King Zedekiah fled by night with some of his military escort. Babylonian forces captured Zedekiah and his contingent and forcibly hauled them before Nebuchadnezzar’s central Syrian military headquarters at Riblah. The last thing Zedekiah saw before his eyes were put out was the gruesome execution of his sons. In August, the Babylonians burned the city of Jerusalem, tore down its walls and destroyed the temple. They executed many of the remaining leaders of Judah and deported the citizenry to Babylon, leaving only the poorest of the poor in the land.²

What were the causes that led to this catastrophic defeat and destruction? Why did the Kingdom of Judah choose consistent rebellion and confrontation against such a fearsome foe? This paper will suggest that one of the contributing reasons³ to Judah’s recalcitrant stance towards Babylon had to do with the misinterpretation and misapplication of a popular theological notion, Zion theology,⁴ which led many of the leaders and people of Judah to believe that they were impervious to Babylonian threats: God was on their side; not even the Babylonians could assail such an awesome power. This misinterpretation of a theological concept contributed to Judah severely misreading the political and military situation of their day and thus helped to precipitate the very crisis Zion theology ostensibly promised to avert.

¹ For an introductory review of the Babylonian civilization see Gwendolyn Leick, *The Babylonians: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003).

² John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 309. Some scholars argue that the some of the biblical narratives regarding the destruction and eventual rebuilding of society follow well-worn literary patterns for Ancient Near Eastern conquest narratives, see Lisbeth S. Fried “The Land Lay Desolate: Conquest and Restoration in the Ancient Near East” in Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), pp. 21-54.

³ Other factors contributing to the fall of Judah include religio-nationalistic aspirations, economic considerations, and Zedekiah’s fear of being betrayed by his people (see Jeremiah 38:17-28).

⁴ John H. Hayes, “The Tradition of Zion’s Inviolability” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (December 1963), pp. 419-426.

This catastrophic historical event—the fall of Judah—should give pause to any society today: Strident attachment to religious or ideological positions can blind us from critically assessing current events and making wise and informed decisions to steer civilization through potentially destructive crises. Specifically, the popular notion that the Bible functions as a single, coherent work of literature with a definite beginning and end has led many to misinterpret the Bible. These misinterpretations may unintentionally ignite explosive crises in volatile regions such as the Middle East, thus potentially bringing about the collapse of some aspects of civilization as we know it.

This paper is divided into two parts. Part 1 is a case study, investigating the role of theology as a contributing cause to the fall of the Kingdom of Judah. The paper will provide a brief historical context for the fall of Judah; describe broadly the origin, development and interpretation of Zion theology in the society of Judah; and review how misinterpretation and misapplication of Zion theology contributed to the collapse of Judah. Part 2 takes its cue from the case study of Judah to explore potential misinterpretations and misapplications of the Christian Bible⁵ that could have negative effects in the current socio-political realm of the volatile Middle East.

Part 1: Zion Theology and the Fall of Judah

Brief Historical Context for the Fall of Judah

The Babylonians, together with their Median allies, knocked the Neo-Assyrian Empire out of power in a series of battles culminating in decisive victory at Nineveh (the Assyrian capital) in 612 BCE.⁶ The Babylonians then spent several decades consolidating their power, asserting control over the very areas that the Assyrians had recently controlled, including the Kingdom of Judah. But Judah was an unwilling vassal.⁷ In addition to nationalistic, economic and social reasons, Zion theology, as interpreted and understood by many Jerusalemites at the time, provided substantial comfort to Judah for resisting foreign domination. Yet Babylon was not inclined to let this petty kingdom's self-assertiveness and rebelliousness go unanswered for long. Indeed, after Babylon had secured its Eastern flank against former Median allies, and having put down Egyptian military, political and economic aspirations over the

Levant, Babylon turned its attention to the Judean nuisance.⁸ Though Babylon punished Judah in 597 BCE, Judah still did not become submissive.⁹ Therefore, over the years Babylon ratcheted up the pressure on Judah to conform, yet without success, resulting in the final destruction of the city and temple and dissolution of the civilization as much of the citizenry was carted off to exile in the year 587 BCE.

What is Zion Theology?

In addition to political, economic, and religio-nationalistic motives, what was the theology that may have contributed to such brazen, but misplaced, trust that God would secure Judah's survival in the face of

⁵ By Christian Bible I mean the Old Testament and New Testament. In this designation, I am following Protestant conventions instead of Catholic. That is, I am not including the deuterocanonical works or apocryphal works that Catholics consider to be canonical. Jews do not accept the New Testament as a canonical; they only accept the books of the Old Testament as canonical. Indeed, Jews prefer to use the term "Hebrew Bible" to refer to the same books that Christians call the "Old Testament."

⁶ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 303.

⁷ Abraham Malamat, *The History of Biblical Israel: Major Problems and Minor Issues* (Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 299-337, 381-386; Martin Sicker, *The Rise and Fall of the Ancient Israelite States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), pp. 240-245; Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel*, trans. Chiara Peri and Philip R. Davies (London: Equinox, 2003), pp. 183-199.

⁸ Sicker, pp. 241-243.

⁹ Malamat, pp. 311-319.

such serious threats? In essence, Zion theology¹⁰ comprised three core, though originally independent but mutually reinforcing, beliefs.¹¹ First, God had made eternal promises regarding the perpetuity of the Davidic dynasty. Davidic kings were God's anointed earthly representatives.¹² Though relevant to Zion theology,¹³ not least because of the idea of eternal kingship of the Davidic line was related to the eternal kingship of God at his temple, this paper will primarily focus on the next two aspects of Zion theology. Second, God had chosen Zion (i.e., Jerusalem) as his earthly abode and that evidence was visibly manifest through the physical structure of the Jerusalem temple, the symbol of God's enduring presence. As long as the temple stood, God's glory was undeniably there. Third, God was a divine warrior who provided unassailable protection against all antagonistic forces natural or human. This protection was believed to extend from the temple to encompass the entire city of Jerusalem and by extension all her citizens.

Origin and Development of Zion Theology

God as an Indomitable, Divine Warrior

The Israelites appear to have borrowed the idea of Zion from the Canaanites. Canaanite religious tradition believed that their god, Baal, was a warrior god who triumphed over all nations and over all nature. He subdued the forces of chaos at creation. Once victorious, Baal entered into his earthly abode atop a high mountain against which no nation or foe could ever assail him.¹⁴ In the Canaanite tradition, this mountain is known as Mt. Zaphon, situated in the northern reaches of ancient Canaanite territory on the Mediterranean coast.¹⁵ Eventually, Israelites, who appear to be culturally, religiously, and linguistically¹⁶ related to the Canaanites, transferred these theological ideas to their own holy mountain (Mt. Zion),¹⁷ a high ridge in the city of Jerusalem.¹⁸

In addition to the Israelites metaphorically transferring Canaanite Mt. Zaphon to Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, Israelites also adopted and adapted the motif of the Canaanite divine warrior to their own national god,

¹⁰ J. J. M. Roberts, "Zion in the Theology of the Davidic-Solomonic Empire" in Tomoo Ishida (ed.), *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), pp. 93-108; Ben C. Ollenburger, *Zion The City of the Great King: A Theological Symbol of the Jerusalem Cult* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987).

¹¹ Biblical passages foundational to the concept of Zion theology, or "Zion traditions" as some scholars call them, are primarily found in Psalms 2, 46, 48, 65, 76, 84, 87, 95-99, 110, 112, 125, 128, and 132; and in Isaiah 8:5-10; 17:12-14; 24:21-23; 25:6-12; 26:1-7; 30:27-33; 33:5-6, 14-24; 37:33-38; 60-62; and 65:17-25. Adapted from "Zion Traditions" in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), vol. 6. See also Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), pp. 78-84.

¹² The most important biblical passage regarding the promises to David for an eternal dynasty is found in 2 Samuel 7:1-17.

¹³ J. J. M. Roberts, "The Davidic Origin of the Zion Tradition" *Journal of Biblical Literature* (September 1973), pp. 329-344.

¹⁴ Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹⁵ Today known as Mt. Cassius, situated in the south-central Turkish province of Hatay at Latitude: 35° 57' 0 N, Longitude: 35° 58' 0 E.

¹⁶ In fact, the Hebrew word for "north" is "zaphon" indicative both of this northern Canaanite mountain where Baal was once enshrined and of the linguistic connection between Canaanites and Israelites. A. Robinson, "Zion and Šāphôn in Psalm XLVIII 3" *Vetus Testamentum* (January 1974), pp. 118-123.

¹⁷ Though there is a compelling argument that there are two holy mountains for ancient Israelites, Zion and Sinai, our focus here is only on the Zion traditions. See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985).

¹⁸ By tradition, that ridge is identified today in modern Jerusalem with the burial spot of King David.

known as Yahweh.¹⁹ As the divine warrior, God overcomes the primordial waters of chaos at creation (see Genesis 1:1-10) and then sits in majestic glory in his mountain top abode where nothing can assail his impenetrable presence. These ideas are clearly expressed in biblical Psalm 93:²⁰

The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty; the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength. He has established the world; it shall never be moved; your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting. The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods lift up their roaring. More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the LORD! Your decrees are very sure; holiness befits your house, O LORD, forevermore. (Psalm 93)²¹

As the divine warrior, God's attributes envelope Mt. Zion (equated with the temple in Jerusalem) as the geographical theophany of God's invincible supremacy. The biblical passage below conveys ideas such as the high mountain, the far north (originally referenced the Canaanite Mt. Zaphon but now repurposed for Mt. Zion), and that the kings of the nations come to fight against God. Yet when the

foreign kings see God's glory as evident by the city and the temple, they turn and flee. The ramparts, citadels, and walls are the physical visual reminders of God's glory; they constitute a geographical theophany:²²

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense. Then the kings assembled, they came on together. As soon as they saw it, they were astounded; they were in panic, they took to flight; Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever. (Psalm 48:1-4, 12-14)

Perhaps one of the most influential biblical passages for Zion theology is Psalm 46. This passage conveys unmistakably God's unassailable power over all humans and nature.²³ Those who trust in God will have security and peace:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall

¹⁹ For additional thoughts on Israelite views of God see Bernard F. Batto, "The Divine Sovereign: The Image of God in the Priestly Creation Account" in Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (eds.), *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), pp. 143-186; Johannes C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism, Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1997).

²⁰ John S. Kselman, "Sinai and Zion in Psalm 93" in Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (eds.), *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), pp. 69-76; Dirk J. Human, "Psalm 93: Yahweh Robed in Majesty and Mightier than the Great Waters" in Dirk J. Human (ed.), *Psalms and Mythology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 147-169.

²¹ All English translations are from the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version translation) unless otherwise noted.

²² "Zion Traditions" in David Noel Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), vol. 6.

²³ In some biblical texts, God is even described as having power over mythological foes, Leonard P. Maré "Some Remarks on Yahweh's Protection Against Mythological Powers in Psalm 121" in Dirk J. Human (ed.), *Psalms and Mythology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 170-180.

not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge..." Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth." (Psalm 46:1-8, 10)

The Ark of the Covenant, the Symbolic Presence of God, Relocates to the Temple at Jerusalem

In addition to the concept of the divine warrior, those who accepted Zion theology believed that God's presence had permanently chosen to reside in Jerusalem at the temple. Ancient Israelites believed that the Ark of the Covenant was the throne of God.²⁴ Wherever the Ark of the Covenant was, so, too, was his glory and power. When did God's presence as the unassailable divine warrior arrive in Jerusalem? By following the Ark of the Covenant we'll follow the presence of God from the wilderness into the Jerusalem temple.

Early in Israelite existence, Moses built the portable tabernacle for God's glory to accompany them in the wilderness. As soon as the tabernacle was completed and the Ark of the Covenant situated inside, God's presence entered his holy abode and filled the space with his glory:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34-35)

Another story describes how the Israelites brought the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle believing that this would bring them victory against the Philistines, historic enemies of the Israelites. Remarkably, the Israelites lost the battle and the Philistines captured the Ark (see 1 Samuel 4:5-8). Some might think this poses a theological conundrum. If God was all powerful, how could his enemies capture the symbol of his presence? As the biblical story continues, we learn the narrative purposes in sharing this story: Now God had an opportunity to demonstrate his power to the Israelite enemies. The Philistines brought the Ark of the Covenant into their own temple of Dagon with disastrous consequences. Demonstrating God's immense power, the Philistine image of Dagon essentially bowed in obeisance before God (see 1 Samuel 5:2-4). And then as the story continues, God afflicted the Philistines with hemorrhoids because they kept the Ark of the Covenant (1 Samuel 5:6).

Finally acknowledging the fearsome power, and destructive potential, of God's glory in their midst, the Philistines decided to send the Ark of the Covenant back to the Israelites. But the presence of God was not just powerful and dangerous to the Philistines, it was to the Israelites as well when they were too curious or when they violated the presence of God. For example, when the Ark of the Covenant arrived in Israelite territory, some of the men of Beth-shemesh opened the Ark of the Covenant for a look inside. What happened? Just like in the infamous climactic scene of the movie *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* when the Nazis opened the Ark of the Covenant, many people were killed (1 Samuel 6:19).

Eventually, the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the Jerusalem temple during the reign of King Solomon, chosen heir of King David, who had built and dedicated the temple.²⁵ The arrival of God's glory to the Jerusalem temple was accorded the most serious of theological import. In fact, the Bible asserts that God chose Mt. Zion in Jerusalem as his abode,²⁶ "For the LORD has chosen Zion; he has

²⁴ There is evidence that Israelites considered the Ark of the Covenant as the throne upon which God sat. Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, "YHWH SABAOTH—The Heavenly King on the Cherubim Throne" in Tomoo Ishida (ed.), *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), pp. 109-138.

²⁵ For a study of the political dimension of Solomon's succession of the David throne see Tomoo Ishida, "Solomon's Succession to the Throne of David—A Political Analysis" in Tomoo Ishida (ed.), *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), pp. 175-187.

²⁶ Heinz Kruse, "Psalm CXXXII and the Royal Zion Festival" *Vetus Testamentum* (July 1983), pp. 279-297.

desired it for his habitation: ‘This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it’” (Psalm 132:13-14). This crucial idea and promise that God would forever rest in Zion²⁷ was exceedingly motivating, but ultimately erroneous, to those in Judah at the height of the Babylonian crisis who believed that God would fight all their battles and protect them from any enemy.

In summary, these biblical passages demonstrate the ancient Israelite theological notions that God’s all powerful presence was with the Ark of the Covenant and that anyone who was not careful with the presence of God would be deeply afflicted, perhaps even killed. Once the Ark of the Covenant was immobilized, the Israelites began to believe that God’s impregnable power was eternally enshrined at the temple in Jerusalem. As long as the temple was in their midst they had physical proof of God’s everwatchful divine protection.

Zion Theology Confirmed When Assyrian Army is Destroyed at Jerusalem (701 BCE)

In addition to believing that God was a divine warrior who had chosen to live eternally at the temple in Jerusalem, another crucial story that may have contributed to the people of Judah trusting Zion theology during the Babylonian crisis was the tale of God destroying the invading Assyrian army at Jerusalem in 701 BCE, a century prior to the Babylonian crisis.²⁸ The Assyrians had dominated Judah for several decades, but near 701 BCE, King Hezekiah of Judah found an opportunity to exert nationalistic and religious independence by rebelling against Assyria. Though the historical record outside the Bible tells a different story (that Hezekiah eventually did resubmit to paying tribute to his suzerain),²⁹ the biblical record preserves a narrative that demonstrates the inviolability of Jerusalem because of God’s promises.

According to the Bible, the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem with 185,000 soldiers. King Hezekiah was demonstrably distraught. When he asked for prophetic intervention, Isaiah responded that God would save the city for God’s own sake.³⁰ According to the biblical record, the angel of God destroyed the

²⁷ J. J. M. Roberts, “Yahweh’s Foundation in Zion (Isa 28:16)” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (March 1987), pp. 27-45.

²⁸ Before the Babylonians were the major power players in the region, the Assyrians had dominance. Indeed, just as the Kingdom of Judah sought to resist Babylonian imperial advances c. 600 BCE, so too did the Northern Kingdom of Israel seek to stop Assyrian expansion more than a century earlier. They failed with disastrous consequences. The Assyrians besieged Samaria (722-721 BCE), the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. When the city fell, many of the people were put to the sword; many others were hauled off to Assyrian captivity and lost to the annals of history. Assyria reinstated their imperial dominance throughout the region, including over the Kingdom of Judah. Martin Sicker, *The Rise and Fall of the Ancient Israelite States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), pp. 212-216; Herbert Donner, “The Separate States of Israel and Judah” in John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (eds.), *Israelite and Judean History* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1977), pp. 381-434, see especially pp. 421- 434.

²⁹ Bustenay Oded, “Judah and the Exile” in John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (eds.), *Israelite and Judean History* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1977), pp. 435-488, see especially pp. 446-451.

³⁰ Isaiah is one of the ancient Israelite prophets whose writings may have influenced Zion theology and promulgated Zion traditions. A review of the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible reveals numerous instances of Isaiah’s use of Zion and Zion imagery. Because Isaiah 40-66 (known in scholarly circles as Deutero-Isaiah) may be attributed to a writer (or group of writers) after the destruction of Jerusalem (587 BCE), the Zion theology reflected in those passages cannot be used as evidence for how the misinterpretation of Zion theology may have contributed to the destruction of Jerusalem. Indeed, there is an intriguing argument that Deutero-Isaiah drew upon the prophet Jeremiah’s writings (see Benjamin D. Sommers, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusions in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998)). Consequently, we cannot rely on Isaiah 40-66 as primary source for understanding Zion theology prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. The passages of Isaiah 1-39, on the other hand, are primarily pre-exilic and thus provide a valuable glimpse at some perspectives on Zion and Zion theology that existed in Jerusalem during the time period of Hezekiah, which could have been misinterpreted by later groups to their own demise, especially if they failed to practice the requisite righteousness Isaiah described as accompanying those who merited the protection of God’s presence at Zion. The major concepts found in Isaiah 1-39 related to Zion are that (1) God, or his presence, dwelt at Zion (Isaiah 4:5-6; 8:18; 12:4-6; 18; 33:5) and therefore (2) those at Zion would be protected (Isaiah 10:24-34; 14:31-32; 30:19; 33:20; 35:10; 37:31-32) because (3) God would destroy their enemies (Isaiah 10:10-12; 24:21-23; 29:8; 31:4 31:8-9) insofar as (4) those at Zion practiced righteousness (e.g., lived the commandments, worshipped God only, practiced social justice, etc.) (Isaiah 1:26-28; 2:3; 4:2-3; 28:16-18; 33:14).

185,000 Assyrian soldiers (2 Kings 19:32-35). The miraculous saving of Jerusalem while so many other cities in the region were destroyed (King Sennacherib's official count was 46 cities in Judah alone)³¹ created a powerful confirming narrative for Zion theology that long persisted in the psyche of the Jerusalemite citizenry.

(Mis)Interpretation of Zion Theology

We've reviewed at a basic level the development of Zion theology in ancient Israelite society. We began by seeing how ancient Israelites adopted and adapted ancient Canaanite notions of Mt. Zaphon and the divine warrior god to their own context and needs in Jerusalem. We then reviewed how biblical Psalms assert that God chose Zion (Jerusalem) as his eternal resting place. Combining the ideas of the indomitable warrior God, Jerusalem as an eternal resting place for God, and the story of God's miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army created an unquestioning faith in the validity of Zion theology. Now we'll turn our attention to understanding how the (mis)interpretation and (mis)application of this theology in the face of the Babylonian crisis between 597-587 BCE may have contributed to precipitate the collapse of the kingdom of Judah. Instead of seeing the socio-political situation for what it was, too many of the Judean leaders and people turned to the comfort of Zion theology as an answer for their very real challenges and problems.

We already know the outcome when the Babylonians came to power and threatened Jerusalem. And we are beginning to see why the people of Jerusalem thought that God would save them just as he did a century prior when the Assyrians came to town. There were many prophets and leaders preaching "all is well in Zion", assuming that because God was the divine warrior and his temple was in Jerusalem, there was no possible way that the Babylonians could meaningfully threaten their existence. Instead, God would destroy the Babylonians.

The prophet Hananiah...spoke...in the house of the LORD, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon." (Jeremiah 28:1-2)

Other Jewish prophets believed and preached otherwise. One was Jeremiah. He adamantly told the people to humbly submit to the Babylonians, to not listen to the religious or political authorities in Jerusalem who preached rebellion against Babylon in the name of Zion theology:

And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie." (Jeremiah 28:15)

I [Jeremiah] spoke to King Zedekiah of Judah in the same way: Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live. Why should you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as the LORD has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are telling you not to serve the king of Babylon, for they are prophesying a lie to you. (Jeremiah 27:12-14)

Jeremiah more specifically urged the people not to trust that the physical presence of the temple was sufficient to save them from impending Babylonian military advances. In the following passage, Jeremiah, relaying the word of God, explains that the people must practice righteousness (e.g., social

³¹ For an English translation of Sennacherib's official account of the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE see A. Leo Oppenheim "Assyrian and Babylonian Historical Texts" in James B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East: Volume I, An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 199-201.

justice) if they expect to be saved. They must turn away from false worship.³² And they cannot trust simply in their temple. Notice, specifically, that Jeremiah tells the people not to trust in the lying words “the temple of the Lord...” as though such statements would grant them protection from the Babylonians or God.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, "We are safe!"-- only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, says the LORD, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. (Jeremiah 7:1-14)

Such teachings landed Jeremiah in jail and he was nearly executed, for such ideas were considered apostate blasphemy in his days:

And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the LORD had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of [Jeremiah], saying, “You shall die!...” Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, “This man deserves the sentence of death because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.” (Jeremiah 26:8, 11)

³² In addition to placing their trust in the physical presence of the temple or in the rituals of the temple, some ancient Judeans also put their trust and safety in the worship and ritual of other gods and religious traditions. See Susan Akerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); John Day (ed.), *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005). Jeremiah specifically inveighed against these practices in Jeremiah 44:15-19, 25. The following quote is suggestive that former inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem (now exiles in Egypt) thought that ritual was enough to save them: “Then all the men who were aware that their wives had been making offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: ‘As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, we are not going to listen to you. Instead, we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. We used to have plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no misfortune. But from the time we stopped making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have perished by the sword and by famine.’ And the women said, ‘Indeed we will go on making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her; do you think that we made cakes for her, marked with her image, and poured out libations to her without our husbands’ being involved?’ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: You and your wives have accomplished in deeds what you declared in words, saying, ‘We are determined to perform the vows that we have made, to make offerings to the queen of heaven and to pour out libations to her.’ By all means, keep your vows and make your libations!”

The majority of Jerusalem rejected Jeremiah's message and clung to popular notions of Zion theology or other forms of popular religion. Many put their trust in leaders who claimed that God would save them no matter what, even if they continued to unwisely rebel against the Babylonian overlords. Their fate is written in history. Jerusalem was ignominiously destroyed.

Part 2: Misinterpreting and Misapplying the Christian Bible Today

Just as some in ancient Jerusalem became very comfortable with their ideological position and hence were unable to appropriately participate in healthy decisions in the socio-political realm, thus eventuating in the collapse of their civilization, so too in our society there are too many people who try to read the events of our modern day, especially events in the volatile Middle East, as fulfillment of what they believe is found in the Christian Bible. There are two distinct interpretive threads in modern North American Christian readings of the Christian Bible that when brought together can lead to a culture, not unlike that of misinterpreting Zion theology during the Babylonian crisis, of misreading the modern Middle Eastern socio-political challenges, specifically the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. These two interpretative traditions are reading the Bible in a novelistic literary format and interpreting the Bible with an apocalyptic mindset.

(Mis)Reading the Bible as a Novel

Most people are not "genre" conscious when they read texts. Most readers of the Bible only have experience with linear narrative literature, primarily the genre of the novel, generically speaking.³³ Most readers expect narratives (especially books with narrative) to have a definite introduction and beginning where characters and themes are introduced, a definite main body to the text where those characters and themes are developed and some major crisis is described, and a definite end where the crisis is resolved and the characters and themes have been provided a meaningful conclusion. To uninformed readers, the Bible seems to fit this literary pattern perfectly and since the Bible is such a large book, few take the time to verify. One can open to the beginning of the Bible and, indeed, the Book of Genesis appears to introduce the key themes and characters of the Bible.

Since most readers do not take the time to read the body of the Bible they just skip to the last chapter of the novel, which in Christian Bibles is the Book of Revelation. And just as expected for a proper conclusion to a novel, in the Book of Revelation there seems to be a lot of talk of the last days and the end of times when God will solve all the problems for the characters introduced in Genesis (or the descendents or disciples of the characters introduced in Genesis). That sounds like a thrilling novel. No need to read all the boring stuff in the middle; just skip to the end to see how everything plays out. But this interpretive approach is wrong.

We do not have time to go into all the specifics here but a few ideas will suffice to demonstrate that the Book of Revelation is not a sourcebook for understanding, interpreting or acting in the Middle East. First, the Book of Revelation is not the last recorded Book of the Christian Bible and was therefore not written to function as a conclusion to the entire Christian Bible, as a novelistic literary reading of the Bible would demand.³⁴ That the Book of Revelation is presently at the end of Christian Bibles is a historical accident

³³ For an introductory approach on literary approaches to reading the Bible see Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature...and Get More Out of It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984). For other literary approaches to Biblical interpretation consider Northrup Fry, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982); Northrup Fry (Michael Dolzani, ed.), *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987); and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1983)

³⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), pp. 773-813, especially pp. 805-811.

due to the canonization process.³⁵ Biblical canonizers may have placed the Book Revelation last in the Bible because it thematically offers an eschatological vision of the last days, including a description of the New Jerusalem (for many this represents the new Zion). Consequently, the Book of Revelation appears to bring closure to the overall Biblical narrative. But this is precisely the point; the original composition of the Book of Revelation was not intended to serve as a conclusion to the entire Bible. It was only later Christian readers who thought that it served such a purpose. And so by placing it at the end of the Bible, the Book of Revelation has continued to be understood throughout nearly two millennia as a handbook for interpreting the meaning of world events both natural and human.

Second, the Book of Revelation was, among other things, originally intended to give comfort and assistance to ancient Christians in the Roman Empire experiencing persecution. The bizarre images and symbolism in the book were used to disguise the message from enemy Roman readers while informed ancient Christian readers would understand and be comforted. The context of those symbols and images are no longer relevant in the modern day, especially from a socio-political perspective and so they are often misunderstood or misused.

Interpreting the Bible according to a novelistic literary format, though perhaps innocuous in some individual circumstances, is erroneous. When large or influential groups in society apply this novelistic literary interpretive approach to the Bible, and then couple that reading with an apocalyptic mindset, the ability to appropriately make judicious choices and take judicious actions in the Middle East can be seriously hampered (even if choices or actions are required).

The Problem Apocalyptic Thinking Poses for Judicious Action in the Socio-Political Realm

What is Apocalyptic Ideology?

In a nutshell, apocalyptic thinking in the Christian theological tradition assumes that the end of the world is soon to happen when in the midst of terrible suffering and chaos God will come, destroy evil and suffering, and lift up the oppressed and the righteous to live in peace. This Christian idea derives in part from Israelite theological Zion traditions.³⁶

Examples of the Potential Problems Posed by Apocalyptic Mindset throughout Christian History

There is a long historical trajectory of apocalyptic theology among biblical interpreters, much of it misguided.³⁷ Many have preached that the end is nigh, using the Book of Revelation (and/or the Old Testament Book of Daniel) to make elaborate predictions about world events, riling up huge masses of people to give up society, their money, or their livelihoods. The unscrupulous among these false interpreters make loads of money selling their books and seminars. The earnest among these interpreters simply waste people's time and money when everyone could have been more appropriately engaged in constructive pursuits.

The Christian apocalyptic preachers named below may not be currently well-known, but certainly in their time they influenced the uninformed masses. We'll begin our review with several North America examples from the 19th and 20th century and then work our way backwards through history to Germany in the 16th century and then into the ancient Roman empire of the 2nd century. Our purpose here is not to be exhaustive but to demonstrate the historical trajectory and continuity of those who have used apocalyptic theology mistakenly.

³⁵ Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995).

³⁶ Matthew J. Lynch, "Zion's Warrior and the Nations: Isaiah 59:15b-63:6 in Isaiah's Zion Traditions" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (April 2008), pp. 244-263.

³⁷ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 3-19.

The first example is American Edgar Whisenant, who, based on his interpretation of various biblical passages and modern historical events, predicted in 1988 that the world would end that very year.³⁸ Though not to be detained by the full details of his fantastic predictions (or of any of the predictions of the apocalyptic exemplars reviewed here), in essence, Whisenant claimed that a Soviet invasion of Israel would precipitate a cataclysmic World War Three—in the year 1988. Was he right? As of 2011, he was demonstrably wrong.

A decade earlier, American Hal Lindsey predicted that the world would end in nuclear holocaust by the 1980s because of conflict between Russians, Chinese, Arabs, Israelis, and Europe.³⁹ Was he right? At the time of writing this paper (early 2011), no! Despite his failed prophecy, Lindsey became a multimillionaire and still commands a large following of believers.

Then there was the 19th century American William Miller who in the 1820s believed that, according to his reading of the Bible, the world would end by 1843. So convincing were his claims that mass rallies were held, some people gave up their possession or let their farms turn to ruin so that they could await the end times. When his prediction did not materialize he changed his prediction by a year. He was wrong again.

Lest we think that apocalyptic readings of the Bible are an American phenomenon we need only go to the European continent to find examples. One of the most destructive and egregious examples is 16th century German Thomas Müntzer, a failed religious reformer,⁴⁰ originally inspired by his contemporary Martin Luther, but then later turned far more radical. Müntzer convinced German peasants and miners in the area of Mühlhausen to rise in revolt against the ruling class. Müntzer promised that this represented Armageddon, that God would vanquish their foes while “he [Müntzer] would ‘catch all the bullets of the enemy in the sleeve of his coat.’”⁴¹ Heinously, thousands of peasants were cut down in battle. The opposing army captured and tortured Müntzer, decapitated him, and displayed his mangled body as warning to other revolutionaries. Another apocalyptic preacher proved wrong.

Stepping back another fourteen hundred years and moving Southeast from Germany, Monatus, who lived in the 2nd century CE in an area that is now encompassed by the modern state of Turkey, predicted the world would end in his lifetime. He coupled his charismatic predictions with a particular moral reasoning that did attract some adherents, including for a time Tertullian, who later become one of the most influential early Christian writers. Yet again we see that the apocalyptic reasoning and prediction making was historically incorrect. The world still stands.

With such a long tradition of apocalyptic thinking, it is no wonder that many Christians today cling to some form of an apocalyptic theological mindset. However, such thinking can be problematic for peaceful civilization to flourish.

Apocalyptic Mindset Alive and Well in the Modern World

PBS has created an entire website devoted to exploring the idea of apocalyptic thought, particularly in the Christian tradition as part of their “Frontline” series.⁴² One of the subpages of this website,

³⁸ Edgar C. Whisenant, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988* (Nashville, TN: World Bible Society, 1988).

³⁹ Hal L. Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970).

⁴⁰ Michael G. Baylor (trans. and ed.), *Revelation and Revolution: Basic Writings of Thomas Müntzer* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1993); Eric W. Gritsch, *Reformer without a Church: The Life and Thought of Thomas Muentzer 1488[?]-1525* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967); Eric W. Gritsch, *A Tragedy of Errors: Tomas Müntzer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989).

⁴¹ Quoted on p. 261 of Abraham Friesen, *Thomas Muentzer, a Destroyer of the Godless: The Making of a Sixteenth-Century Religious Revolutionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Hans J. Hillerbrand, “Thomas Muentzer” in B. A. Gerrish (ed.), *Reformers in Profile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), pp. 213-229.

⁴² “Frontline: Apocalypse! The Evolution of Apocalyptic Belief and How It Shaped the Western World.” Published November, 1999 at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/>. Accessed on January 31, 2011.

“Apocalypticism Explained: Jerusalem”,⁴³ provides a concise introductory explanation of how the apocalyptic mindset influences many Christians to interpret the socio-political events in the modern state of Israel as fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Such reasoning has convinced some Christians that they need to support efforts to rebuild the Jewish temple at Haram al-Sharif, the third holiest spot in all of Islam and the general location where the ancient Jewish temple of Jerusalem once stood.⁴⁴

For a specific case study of how one person is seeking to hasten the end consider the story of Clyde Lott, a Mississippi cattle breeder who in the 1990s attempted to breed red heifer cows in fulfillment of Numbers 19, which requires such a cow for the Jewish tabernacle or temple to be properly constructed from a ritualistic perspective.⁴⁵ Lott believed that if he could provide that cow to the Jews so that they could rebuild their temple on the Temple Mount, the last of three elements required for the return of God would be fulfilled: (1) Israel would be restored, (2) Jerusalem would be a Jewish city, and (3) the Jewish temple would be rebuilt on the Temple Mount.

These Christian efforts to support the building of the Jerusalem temple, even if just innocuously by providing a red heifer, are just one example of how a particular ideology can actually lead to the very destabilizing of society and civilization the ideology appears to support.⁴⁶ In other words, the Christian apocalyptic mindset believes that when God returns he will usher in many years of peaceful civilization. However, if Christians take matters into their own hands to support the rebuilding of the Jewish temple at such a sensitive and volatile spot, might it be possible that the Christians precipitate the very destruction they believe their apocalyptic expectations will save them from?⁴⁷

The point of this review is that the apocalyptic ideology has been deeply misplaced and incontrovertibly wrong throughout the past two thousand years. If the apocalyptic mindset has not been advantageous to civilization and society in the past, it will not be so now. Lest we think that apocalyptic ideology is confined to one particular group in the United States, there is compelling evidence that such fundamental readings of the Christian scripture span the Republican-Democrat political spectrum.⁴⁸ The apocalyptic ideology, especially when shared by large and influential groups in society, is unlikely to contribute to a peaceful, stable society because of the risk it poses for upsetting people’s lives. We’re more likely to preserve peaceful civilization by not seeing each news event as the next piece of evidence for apocalyptic thinking.⁴⁹

⁴³ Published November, 1999 at

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/jerusalem.html>. Accessed on January 31, 2011.

⁴⁴ Hal Lindsey, “Revived Sanhedrin discusses Temple.” Published February 17, 2005 at

http://www.wnd.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=42898. Accessed on January 31, 2011; “Third Temple in Jerusalem Plans to be Rebuilt.” No publication date, <http://www.squidoo.com/templejerusalem>. Accessed on January 31, 2011.

⁴⁵ Lawrence Wright, “Forcing the End: Why Do a Pentecostal Cattle Breeder from Mississippi and an Orthodox Rabbi from Jerusalem believe that a Red Heifer Can Bring Change?” No publication date,

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/readings/forcing.html>. Accessed January 31, 2011.

⁴⁶ “Palestinians and Israelis in a Clash at Holy Site.” Published September 28, 2000 at

<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/09/28/world/palestinians-and-israelis-in-a-clash-at-holy-site.html>. Accessed on January 31, 2011.

⁴⁷ Michael S. Arnold, “Faithful to the Bitter End?” Published, August 18, 2000 at

<http://www.templemount.org/bitterend.html>. Accessed on January 31, 2011. There are some Jewish groups as well that have sought to build a Jewish temple on the Holy Mount, which has caused some social unrest. One example is the plot by Yehuda Etzion. Paul Wood, “Jerusalem ‘Bomb Plot’” Published January 15, 2001 at

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1118459.stm. Accessed on January 31, 2011.

⁴⁸ Charles M. Blow, “Rise of the Religious Left.” Published July 2, 2010 at

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/03/opinion/03blow.html?_r=1&emc=eta1. Accessed on January 31, 2011. For a recent view of the myths and histories told by the American political Christian Right and Christian Left, see James Davidson Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), especially pp. 111-149.

⁴⁹ <http://www.prophecynewswatch.com/>. Accessed on January 31, 2011. (No publication date.)

Conclusion

Too many people in the ancient kingdom of Judah were influenced by Zion theology to believe that they were impervious to outside forces; this led to their downfall. So too, there are large strands of Christian society today that cling to an apocalyptic theology to explain socio-political events in the Middle East, not recognizing that their beliefs and actions have consequences in the lives of other people—consequences not just for the peace and prosperity of Jerusalem, or the Middle East, but for any country that has an interest in the peace of the region.

For our civilization to survive we must be civilized. That means that we may have to temporarily suspend our own ideologies in order to understand others and to critically evaluate the socio-political circumstances in which we live. We should be willing to reconsider the “end” of our ideologies. Do they promote peace, civilized stability, growth and opportunity? Or do they cause serious strife and division?

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