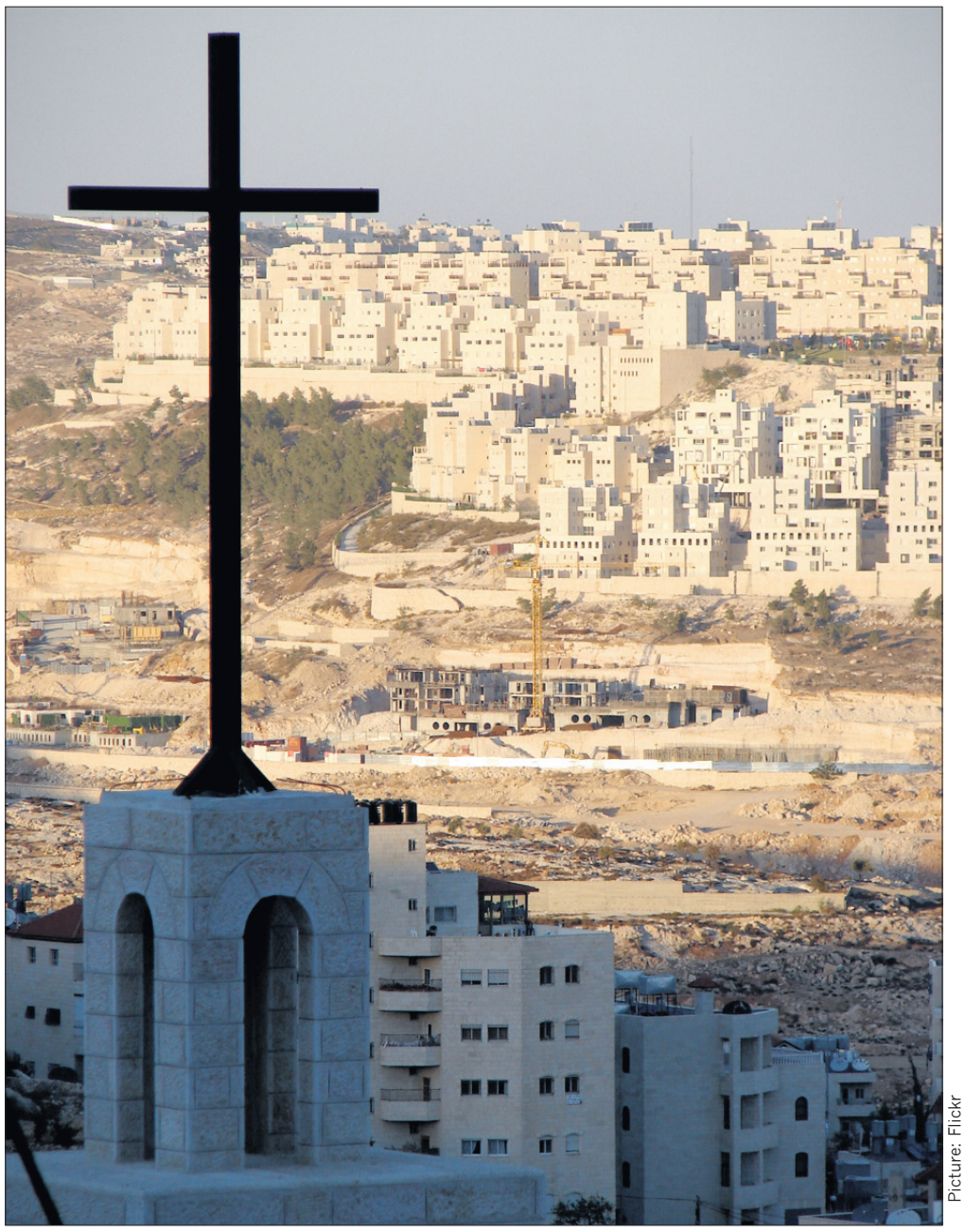
Zion's Christian Soldiers?



Picture: Flickr

Land expropriation - A church looks out over a new Israeli settlement

Ali Hull talks to Stephen Sizer about Christians and Israel

GAZA lies in ruins, with thousands of injured and more than a thousand killed by Israeli bombs and rockets - many of them women and children. Settlers move onto Arab land, expel the legal owners and are protected by the Israeli army. There's talk of bringing Israel to book for war crimes.

Israel's founding 60 years ago gave a home and security to millions of the most victimised people on earth, who'd just emerged from a genocidal nightmare. It's a modern democracy, which can justifiably boast of its social, economic and technological achievements over its short life. And it provides the foundation story for the Church, and every page of the Bible speaks of its history.

So when Stephen Sizer says that it's Israel, rather than abortion, sex or climate change which Christians find to be the most controversial subject of all, he's probably right.

He's the vicar of Christ Church, Virginia Water, and a long-time campaigner against what he believes is the misguided theology of Christian Zionism.

His book, *Zion's Christian Soldiers* analyses the movement, whose adherents believe that the modern state of Israel is God's fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and that Israel should expand to its biblical borders at the expense of Palestine. He believes this is a profoundly unscriptural view, which has led to catastrophic consequences, and that the Church is deeply compromised by its failure to speak out against it.

As a young Christian, he says, 'I was raised on books like the *Scofield Reference Bible* and Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth.*

'It took me a while to appreciate that the theology these books assume has radical implications for how we view our faith and the world we live in.'



Christian Zionism 'provides a biblical justification for US intervention in the Middle East. It is deeply mistrustful of the United Nations and the European Community, and actively opposes the implementation of international law and the right of Palestinians to a sovereign state alongside Israel.'

In his book, he says, 'I wanted to show that Jesus, not Israel, is central to God's purposes on earth. The Gospel needs to be proclaimed to all, including Jewish people. Faith in Jesus is the basis of God's blessings, not our political affiliation or foreign policy.'

So *Zion's Christian Soldiers* is aimed at Christians who want to understand how the Old and New Covenants fit together. It has chapters about God's 'chosen' people, the Land, Jerusalem, the Temple and the future. It also has an important chapter on how to interpret different kinds of scripture – in particular, prophecy. At the end of each chapter there is a summary, some Bible passages to read and discussion questions, making it ideal for home group study.

At the heart of his own view is that 'There is only one people of God not two.' So he believes that Christian Zionists like Baptist minister David Pawson, for whom he has a high personal regard, are mistaken.

'Christian Zionists take an overliteral interpretation of some Old Testament promises made to the ancient Jewish people,' he says. 'They apply them to their descendents today without acknowledging the way the New Testament interprets, annuls, fulfils and applies those promises first to Jesus Christ and secondly to those that follow him irrespective of race.

'The New Testament, and Romans 9-11 in particular, sees a central place for Jewish people within the people of God on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ.'

So there's no place for the sort of race-based ideology promoted by Christian Zionists. 'When you distil it down, what are you left with? An exclusive theology driving a political agenda which elevates one nation over others rather than an inclusive theology centred on Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

'In its worst forms, Christian Zionism uses the Bible to justify racial superiority, land expropriation, home demolitions, colonial settlements, the denial of international law and the dehumanisation of Arabs.

'It not only fuels Islamophobia but also anti-Semitism and Islamist retaliation against Christians.'

He's very clear about what he believes Jesus thinks about all this. He quotes Luke 19: 41-42, where Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and says, 'If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes.'

'I believe Jesus continues to weep not only over Jerusalem, a city whose very name means "peace,"' says Stephen, 'but also for his children who promote a theology of war and conquest.'

He's passionate about the duty of the Church to speak out. 'The Church is largely paralysed by guilt and fear,' he says. 'Guilt for complicity in the Holocaust and fear of anti-Semitism.

'Both guilt and fear are justified. The Church institutionally has had an appalling record in the way it has treated Jewish people.

'But remaining paralysed is not God's will. Passivity toward the legitimate rights of the Palestinians and one-sided political support for Israel has merely led to the perpetuation of injustice, has exacerbated the conflict and undermined Christian witness throughout the Middle East and Islamic world. Silence in the face of injustice is complicity.'

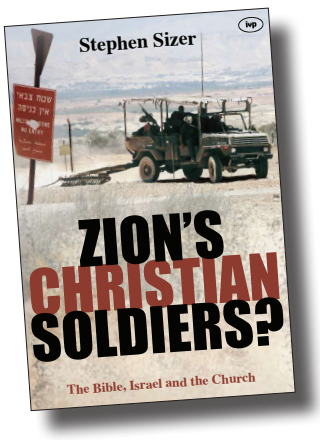
What of the future? The world waits for Barack Obama, and hopes that his presidency will bring a new drive for peace after eight years of stalemate under George W Bush.

Stephen is not as optimistic as he would like to be, given some of Mr Obama's appointments' track records on the Israel/Palestine question. There are no magic bullets. The most he'll say is that 'If - and it is a big if - Barack Obama can persuade Congress in Washington to cooperate with the United Nations in New York and take a multilateral rather than a unilateral stance in the Middle East, then I am hopeful of progress, in my life time.'

The Arab-Israeli conflict is the most significant one in the world, with implications not just for regional but for global peace.

'It is time Christians became part of the solution instead of the problem,' says Stephen. 'Peace with justice that leads to reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians will have a profound impact on other conflicts in the world.

'The Church has been called to be peace-makers, not widow makers, and to fulfil a ministry of reconciliation, not confrontation. We need to bring Jews and Muslims together both in our prayers as well as our missionary endeavours. Both peoples need to see and hear the authentic Gospel in action.'



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Picture: Jon Clark

Palestinian wall - 'In its worst forms, Christian Zionism uses the Bible to justify racial superiority, population transfer and the dehumanisation of Arabs'