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***Learning Messiah: Israel and the Nations:
Learning to Read God's Way Anew***

Edjan Westerman

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018; xxxv + 392 pp.,
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SUMMARY

This book offers an alternative for supersessionism and its challenge requires a response. The odd-sounding title *Learning Messiah* was chosen to convey the author's position as still on a journey of discovery about how to read the Bible in the light of God's unending call and commitment to Israel. The book has three parts which cover the Old Testament, the New Testament, and 'Living in a "New" Canonical Narrative'. The author's purpose is not exegetical, but many readers will want proof that transcends proof-texting.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur offre ici une autre position que le supersessionisme et son point de vue appelle une réponse. Le titre étrange, *Learning Messiah*, vise à présenter la

position de l'auteur comme se situant encore au cours d'un voyage pour découvrir comment lire la Bible à la lumière de l'appel irrévocable d'Israël par Dieu et de l'engagement divin en faveur d'Israël. L'ouvrage comporte trois parties, consacrées respectivement à l'Ancien Testament, au Nouveau Testament et à « la vie dans une nouvelle narration canonique ». L'approche de l'auteur n'est pas exégétique, mais de nombreux lecteurs resteront en manque de preuves allant au-delà de la simple citation de textes.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das vorliegende Buch bietet eine Alternative zur Erfüllungs- oder Ersatztheologie, deren Herausforderung nach einer Antwort verlangt. Der seltsam anmutende Titel *De Messias leren (den Messias lernen)* wurde gewählt, um die Position des Autors zu erläutern, der sich noch auf einer Entdeckungsreise befindet; die Reise geht darüber, wie die Bibel im Licht von Gottes fortwährender Berufung Israels und seiner Verpflichtung seinem Volk gegenüber gelesen werden soll. Das Buch hat drei Teile, die das Alte Testament, das Neue Testament sowie das „Leben in einer ‚neuen‘ kanonischen Narrative“ umfassen. Ziel und Zweck des Autors ist nicht die Exegese, doch nicht wenige Leser werden Belege haben wollen, der über die Vorlage von Beweistexten hinausgehen.

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Westerman's *Learning Messiah* was originally published in Dutch as *De Messias leren. Israel en de volken – Gods weg nieuw leren lezen*. The author writes from a long experience as a minister to university students and a Reformed pastor in the Netherlands. Westerman writes admittedly as a *goy*, but one who has not only a Reformed theology but who has reformed his theology and thinking about the traditional treatment of post-exilic Israel by the gentile Church, and whose goal is to be a co-reader of the Tanakh (= OT) with all (not just Messianic) Jews (xxiii). The word 'Church' in the book is used historically and inclusively for all Christian faith-communities (xxii n. 3). Westerman invites his readers (whom I assume he expects mainly to be Christians) to read along with him as he scans and summarises the history of Israel and the ebb and flow of its relationship to Christians as they have tried to understand Israel's place in God's economy, especially since its collapse and capture by Babylon. Hence, the book's title was chosen to convey his position (and hopefully his readers' agreed position) as still on a journey of discovery about how to read the entire Bible in light of God's unending (his presupposition) call and commitment to Israel. He hopes to re-educate readers who adhere to the traditional way of reading the biblical canon in which Israel disappears as the Church dawns. His style, consequently, is

not that of scholarly research proving a thesis, and he writes for the learned and the lay alike. The reader is invited to think along with the author as he reviews and reflects on his unfinished quest for the historical Judaism and Jesus as received and recognised by Christians since the Church Fathers.

The book has three parts: I. The Canonical Narrative of the Tanakh; II. The Canonical Narrative of the New Covenant; and III. Living in a 'New' Canonical Narrative. The style is quite readable as one experiences Westerman 'thinking out loud' along the way; but much has the air of special pleading. In Part I he discusses Israel's creation as a priestly nation and its calling. In Part II he discusses the Bible as one canon and narrative with two parts (synchronic rather than diachronic), and Israel as a worshipping (*avoda*) and treasured (*segula*) community in relation to the 'Eighth Day', the consequences of disobedience, and messianic sanctification. In Part III he asks his readers (those steeped in replacement theology) to rethink Israel's election and place within God's eternal economy. All this is accompanied by copious footnotes providing biblical references, excurses and references.

I applaud this book for providing a comprehensive overview of the biblical narrative. It contains a wealth of information. It seeks to address a very recent and relevant debate regarding the merits of supersessionism and replacement theology. It challenges those who hold to supersessionism to rethink and reconsider its importance. Westerman's canonical (rather than biblical-historical-contextual) hermeneutic, however, is employed without nuances regarding its presuppositional liabilities. He admits that his thinking was influenced mostly by an encounter he had with living Judaism (xxii) and that his purpose for the book is not to answer many objections (xxxiv). His purpose is not exegetical, which is his prerogative, but many readers will want proof that transcends proof-texting. A more careful consideration of the problem with supersessionism is wanting. The fact that historically some who held this view mistreated Jews offers no exegetical evidence against it. This is the guilt-by-association logical fallacy. The horrible reality of the *Shoa* is an argument against the mistaken application of a belief, but it offers no proof that this belief itself is wrong, although it might suggest so (cf. 141-146). Westerman paints supersessionists with a broad brush – but consider the irony that dispensationalists make Israel disappear but are also some of the strongest defenders of the State of Israel as fulfilled prophecy and of a literal, eschatological function for the land, the people and the temple.

Those committed to a canonical hermeneutic and who share an agenda to discredit replacement

theology will find the book powerful and convincing. However, I recommend reading it (critically) for its rich, substantial and heart-felt content on a topic of increasing critical-theological importance for all evangelicals, regardless of one's hermeneutical or theological camp. It puts forth a challenge to supersessionism that requires a response.

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