

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 163

Other Gods and Other Religions with Gerald McDermott

June 17, 2017

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Gerald R. McDermott (PhD, University of Iowa) is Anglican Chair of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. Before joining Beeson, he was the Jordan-Trexler Professor of Religion at Roanoke College. He is also associate pastor at Christ the King Anglican Church and Distinguished Senior Fellow in the History of Christianity at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion. In this episode of the podcast we discuss two of Dr. McDermott's books: *God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions?* and *Israel Matters: Why Christians Must Think Differently about the People and the Land*.

God's Rivals raises the question of why there are other religions—why would God permit that? The content of the book takes note of the Deuteronomy 32 worldview discussed so often on the Naked Bible Podcast – that, for biblical writers, the gods were real and allotted to the nations (and vice versa) in judgment at the Babel event (Deut 4:19-20; 17:1-3; 29:23-26; 32:8-9 [per the Dead Sea Scrolls “sons of God” reading]; 32:17). Dr. McDermott surveys early church thinkers reflections on this situation and what it meant in God's plan of salvation. *Israel Matters* discusses the diversity of opinion (positive and negative) in the believing Church toward the people, land, and state of Israel.

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 163: Other Gods and Other Religions with Gerald McDermott. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how are you doing this week?

MH: Pretty good, pretty good. It was a busy week, as usual, and I think fairly productive, actually.

TS: That's good! It's hot here in Texas. We're getting into the thick of the heat. How's it up there in Washington?

MH: It's pretty mild. We actually had some cold weather and some rain, so it feels kind of normal. But we've got sun, so we know we're not in the rainy season. Most of the time, anyway.

TS: Speaking of Texas, David Burnette is speaking in a church in Austin, is that correct?

MH: That's true. I blogged this a few days back, and we had something on Facebook about it. David is going to be actually talking about the Divine Council at a church in Austin—it's Mosaic Church of Austin. I would encourage anybody within a few hours' distance to go hear David. Frankly, this is not just for David's sake (although he'd be thrilled), but any church that has anybody in to speak about the Divine Council ought to be encouraged by a good turnout. So you can go to my website (drms.com) and look for the blog post about David Burnette speaking. You'll find it on Facebook as well (David is pretty active on Facebook). But please, if you're able to go to that it's June 23 (a Friday). I think the event is scheduled for 6:00 or 6:30. So June 23 in Austin, Texas. If you can make that, it would just be encouraging to anybody involved. So if we want more churches to do this kind of thing, you've gotta show up and thank them for it.

TS: And if you're not able to get to Austin, Texas, to hear David speak, he will actually be on the Naked Bible Podcast next week. Is that right?

MH: Yeah, that's true.

TS: What will we be discussing with him?

MH: We're going to be talking to David about his work on Paul's ascent to heaven in 2 Corinthians. Of course, that involves the messenger sent to plague Paul. Was that a divine being or not? We've talked about this on the podcast before, but David has spent a good bit of time on the passage. And you know when he's on we're going to get into lots of Second Temple Jewish stuff. I think it'll be a great topic. It will add to and layer upon what we've already done in a past episode. So "Paul's Ascent to Heaven with David Burnette."

TS: Always excited for David Burnette to come on the show. But this week we've got another special guest.

MH: We're really excited to have Dr. Gerald McDermott with us today for the podcast. Dr. McDermott has his PhD from the University of Iowa. He is Anglican Chair of Divinity at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. Before that he was the Jordan-Trexler Professor of Religion at Roanoke College. He's also an associate pastor at Christ the King Anglican Church and Distinguished Senior

Fellow in the History of Christianity at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion.

The reason I'm drawn to do this interview... Jerry and I have chatted back and forth by email a few times, and way back... I think it was 2007 that *God's Rivals* came out. Is that about right?

GM: I think that's about right, yeah.

MH: I heard of this book and I don't know if I contacted you first or you contacted me, but we're going to discuss two books today that Jerry has written. One is *God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions?* And then we will get to *Israel Matters: Why Christians Must Think Differently About the People and the Land of Israel*. The first one (*God's Rivals*)... When I came across this it was one of the few things I'd ever seen that sort of dipped into what we call on this podcast... we've mentioned this many times. We go through a lot of material that touches on what I call the Deuteronomy 32 Worldview—that the biblical writers took the gods of the nations seriously because they viewed their existence as real and their control over the nations as a punishment from Yahweh, the God of Israel, in reaction to the Babel event.

5:00

Jerry, you're one of the few people in your field—I guess it's fair to say it's church history... I don't know if that's too broad—but you're one of the few people outside the Semitics world that I've seen sort of give a good amount of space to this idea. So can you tell everybody what the basic thrust or proposition of *God's Rivals* was? What were you trying to accomplish in the book?

GM: Sure, Mike. I was trying to introduce what you described so well (the Deuteronomy 32 Worldview) to the theology of religions. I've done six or seven books on the theology of religions over the years, so I'm working much more in theology now than church history. I wanted to introduce this worldview to our Christian theology of world religions, where this sort of approach has been largely absent—even on the evangelical side... Or maybe I should say *especially* on the evangelical side.

MH: That would probably be better!

GM: Evangelicals, as I'm sure you've experienced, are so wary of talking about any other gods but the God of Israel. Then, of course, as I'm sure your audience knows, the gods of the Old and New Testaments (and I argue in here as you do, as I've seen from your writings that I've read) are real. But, of course, the only creator and the only Redeemer is Yahweh, the God of Israel. So I wanted to introduce this worldview at an accessible level to a crossover book published by Intervarsity for both scholars and also for interested laymen, so to speak, and pastors. What might that mean for our understanding of the world religions? And particularly the question, why did God allow these other religions if the God of

Israel and the God of Jesus Christ is the only God who is and he's all-powerful? Why would he permit not only the rise of these rival religions (there's the title *God's Rivals*), but the flourishing of these world religions?

MH: I think we could almost stop the interview right there and you'd have people in my audience wanting to buy the book already. I get lots of email about this sort of thing: where does this fit in, not only to my faith, what happens in church, how I should look at something like spiritual warfare and not sort of go off the deep end with it? And just as you said: world religions. Your book establishes not only that it has clear roots in an Old Testament supernatural worldview, but that people (namely Early Church figures, thinkers) were aware of this and really gave it some thought. The thesis, generally, is that if they gave it some thought, maybe we ought to do that, too. (Gerald laughs) That might contribute something to our understanding, not of just what's going on in Scripture but how we parse it, how we teach it, really what it means in today's world.

Your second chapter is entitled "Not Even in Israel Have I Found Such Faith." The chapter, as I think people can already tell, is sort of about how you get believers... You actually have believers—people who have a faith in the God of Israel or something that gravitates toward the truth—outside of Israel. So can you tell us what role that had in the book as you were leading up to this worldview?

GM: Yes. I supposed that my readers would be primarily evangelicals, since it was published by Intervarsity Press. I supposed at the time I was writing it (which was at the beginning of this century, which seems like a long time ago now) that most evangelicals then (and it's a little different today) would be surprised to hear or see that the biblical authors acknowledged that non-Jews and non-Christians in the ancient world knew some true things about God—even, in many cases, without being saved. Now, this is harder for Protestants to take in than for Catholics because Catholics have had a long tradition of believing in natural law—that some basic truths about God are accessible to all human beings by reason. Protestants used to believe that, up until the beginning of the 20th century, but ever since Karl Barth (the Swiss theologian of the 20th century) said that all natural theology (all knowledge of God coming through nature) is unchristian and unbiblical... Ever since he made that argument and persuaded millions and millions and millions of Protestants (particularly Protestant theologians who taught future pastors in seminaries), Protestants have tended to reject that idea that non-Christians could know anything true about God—particularly because the Reformed doctrine of Knowledge (which I hold to)—that all knowledge of God of non-Christians is tainted to some degree by sin, and therefore they can't have any absolutely true knowledge of God... But that doesn't necessarily conflict with the biblical view (as I argue in this book) that many, many, many outside of Israel in the Old Testament Israel, and even in the New Testament period outside the Church had some true knowledge of God, whether or not they had personal knowledge of Jesus Christ.

10:00

MH: The timing of this is kind of interesting because about three or four weeks ago I actually gave a sermon (my second sermon in thirteen years... I don't know if that tells you anything). I actually got Sunday morning at church. What I decided to do was present sort of... A lot of Christians affirm in their heads the idea of what grace is (the simplicity of the gospel) but then they worry constantly whether God is accepting them or not on the basis of all sorts of peripheral things. So I decided to take a look at Naaman in 2 Kings, which takes you to Jesus' first sermon at Nazareth, where he uses Naaman and the widow at Zarephath as examples of faith to contrast what he was seeing with the people in his hometown—how he rebuked them using those two individuals as an example. It just so happens that they're both pagans. One's in Phoenician territory, you've got Naaman the Syrian... And Naaman has a change of heart, for sure. He only knows one thing: "Now I know that the Lord is the real God and give me some dirt so I can go and sacrifice to him." He's never going to go to Temple, he's never going to have a copy of the Law, he's never going to be part of the Jewish ritual system or calendar, he's not going to get circumcised, he's not going to do anything. What he does is believe.

GM: Mm, hmm...

MH: And Elijah's like, "Hey, you're good!" (laughs) This is the most important thing. This is the greatest commandment. This is why things are said, because you can be incomplete and even kind of dopey when it comes to theology and the niceties of it, but if your believing loyalty is in this One against all others (you don't bow to any other), that's what God wants. So here we have a situation where... You're right, you do find (and Jesus even references two of them)... If Jesus is good with what's going on in their hearts, I'm going to align myself with him and say okay. And you know in historical theology that we have all sorts of people who are doctrinally unorthodox (for lack of a better term) in their conclusions or standards now but they were still referred to as brethren. They might be aberrant in one thing but they're not trading the way of salvation in for something else. They can be very clear on that and not clear on something else.

So this is an important chapter and I know why you placed it here because it's going to lead you into the thesis, then, that despite the other nations being under the dominion of other gods and the systems of worship going on, people can (and do) discern some point of truth in all of that.

GM: Yeah. Now, of course I don't take that to the places that liberal Christian theologians of religion do—namely, to say that God can save people through non-Christian religions. I want to make that clear to the audience and it's very clear in the book. I make that point many times in the book. So it's one thing to have personal knowledge of Jesus Christ (and I'm convinced that Scripture teaches it's only by personal knowledge of Jesus Christ is there salvation—Romans 10:9), but it's quite another thing to have true knowledge of the true God. For instance, Paul on Mars Hill in Athens in his talk (or you could call it a

15:00

sermon) before these Athenian philosophers who have never heard of Jesus Christ, he quotes two pagan poets. He's not claiming that they're saved, but nevertheless, he quotes them with affirmation and approbation, clearly suggesting that what they say about God is true. "In him we live and move and have our being" was one of the quotes. He's saying this pagan poet knew something true about God and he's not at all saying this pagan poet was necessarily saved. This is the thing that so many Christians have a hard time comprehending—that a pagan can have true knowledge about the true God, but that doesn't mean that pagan is on his way to heaven. That whole question about whether pagans can be saved is a whole other question for maybe another podcast that I'd be happy to talk about, but I don't want to get into that now unless you want to.

MH: No, we're fine with that. There's obviously a relationship between the two things. They don't conflate. True knowledge about the true God and then salvation is not necessarily a one-to-one conflation there. There's a relationship to it because we have Old Testament Israelites who are pre-Cross, but yet they respond positively to the revelation God has given them. Or they can reject it, as well. A lot of people look at Israel's status as elect in the Old Testament and they forget that most of the nation apostasized, so what did that election mean? You get into this whole thing about assuming that election means salvation (I'm saved because of my ethnicity). Well, not so much. The other side of that coin is you have a pagan that responds in the way that God wants his own people to respond (laughing), and then he's outside the camp in another sense. So there's some relationship between the two. You're right, that's a bit peripheral.

What I really want to get into... We've already touched on your recognition (this is going to sound really odd) of what the Old Testament actually shows us—how the Israelites looked at the gods. They're real but lesser. There is none like Yahweh, and they qualify that in a number of ways in the scriptures. That's going to be real familiar for our audience, so we don't need to go over all that. But you have four successive chapters after you do Deuteronomy 32. You have one on Justin Martyr, one on Irenaeus, one of Clement of Alexander, and then Origen.

GM: You skipped a chapter, though, on Paul.

MH: Oh yeah, you're talking about chapter 4? You want to start with that? We can, but where I'm ultimately going is that you have four chapters because these four major figures didn't all say the same thing or think the same thing, and we want to get into how they thought about all this. We want to give a little bit of time to each one. But go ahead—you jump in where you want.

GM: Well, very briefly, after my chapter on the Old Testament I say that Paul picks up this line of thinking and develops it. The argument of the book is if this line of thinking (that there are these other gods out there, all of which were created as angels who apostasized—they were fallen angels—and then they

masqueraded as the true God, and this is the origin of the false religions around the world)... This basic germ idea is developed by Paul into his doctrine of principalities and powers, and then it's picked up by Justin Martyr and developed further. It's picked up then later by Irenaeus and is developed even further. Then it's picked up by Clement of Alexandria and it's developed even further. And then Origen goes even further with it. So what I'm trying to say is that the Early Church Greek theologians took what they found and believed was very clear in the Bible (they didn't have the blinders on their eyes that we do from the Enlightenment, so they could read it and see things much more clearly than we do)... So they picked up this presentation in the New Testament and they developed it and applied it to the world religions of their day with (I think) tremendous insight that can help us in dealing with the world religions of our day.

MH: So where was Justin Martyr at? What are some of the things he said?

GM: Justin Martyr keys on John 1:9: "The true light that was coming into the world that enlightens every man." And, of course, this is Jesus—the *logos*, the Word. And he says it's no wonder that it's Jesus (the second person of the Trinity) who enlightens every man because, after all, Jesus is the light of the world and Jesus said that "no one knows the Father unless the Son reveals the Father" to that person. So he says every human being, every historian, every philosopher in the ancient world who had any part of truth (who said anything true) said it because he had part of the *logos*. Christ was and is the *logos* who is in every man, he wrote. "And so whatever things [I'm just quoting Justin here] were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians." So he drew upon Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed and he said the Stoics, the poets, and the historians all "spoke well in proportion to the share they had of the seminal [and you know that word comes from "semen"—seed—the parable of the sower and the seed] divine *logos*."

Now, these philosophers in the ancient world didn't have the complete truth. They often contradicted themselves because they didn't have the whole *logos*, they only had part of the *logos*. So they did not possess Christian grace, but insofar as they spoke truth... And people like Socrates (and he called Socrates a Christian because of all the truth he had)...

MH: Hmm...

GM: He didn't really know Aristotle, I don't believe, but he believed Socrates and Plato spoke truth, in part, because of the *logos* that gave them a part of the truth.

MH: Did he look at that as an impartation of insight, or was it something more than that when he says they had something of the *logos*?

GM: Impartation of insight by and from the *logos*.

MH: So he viewed this as an act of God, an act of Christ, to enlighten them to some extent?

GM: Yes, exactly. Yes! He also believed that some truth in the world religions came by the *prisca theologia*. This was a long tradition that, in fact, has continued even to the 20th century. It's been going on for 2,000 years that most Christians are completely unaware of. *Prisca theologia* is Latin for "ancient theology." This is the idea that the truths of the Christian faith were passed down by tradition from generation to generation and they were often corrupted by sin and so God had to reinvigorate the truth by fresh revelations. They were particularly passed down by the sons of Noah, who were the founders of the nations in Genesis 10 and 11 (primarily Genesis 10), and that's why you have so much truth in the world religions—because of the initial deposit that was given to Adam and Eve in the garden of truth about the coming Messiah and justification by faith and the Trinity, and that this was passed down generation after generation. And that's why Plato had truth. So not only by impartation of enlightenment by the *logos*, but also because he picked up on truth from his contact with Jews in Egypt (there was a long story in the ancient world about Plato going to Egypt and meeting rabbis) and also because of this *prisca theologia* that had been passed down.

MH: For the sake of our audience, that idea is both more nuanced and also more particular than something like Joseph Campbell, where you have these major archetypes that are passed down.

25:00 **GM:** Oh, absolutely. Joseph Campbell rejects the Scandal of Particularity. I'm glad you used that word "particular." The Scandal of Particularity... is your audience familiar with that?

MH: Probably not.

GM: That's the basic idea that the true God must reveal himself in the same way to all human beings in all times and places, and so any god like the God of the Bible, who reveals himself only to particular nations (i.e., Israel) at particular times, and in particular ways and then passes on that revelation only to parts of the world and not all the world at the same time cannot be the true God. So that's the Scandal of Particularity.

MH: I wanted to bring that out because this audience will have been exposed to archetypal thinking, and whenever you do that you run into Campbell. So I wanted them to know that we're not talking about the same thing that Campbell is talking about that, and neither were the Church Fathers.

GM: No, not at all.

MH: How did Irenaeus build on Justin Martyr? What does he add?

GM: Irenaeus is the first philosopher of Christian history. He takes up what Justin Martyr says: that the ministry of truth by the logos is in every human being. But then he talks about whole societies and the course of human history, which Justin was not particularly interested in. What Irenaeus teaches is that God has always been at work in all the religions, working by the logos. So just as God revealed himself and his plan only in stages to the Jews (as you work through the Old Testament), so, too, God has progressively trained the peoples of the world through history in a developmental way to help prepare them to receive the fullness of the gospel. Irenaeus also has some intriguing things to say about why some people receive the gospel and others did not. He did not believe that God saves through other religions, contrary to what a lot of contemporary theologians of religions teach. What's fascinating about Irenaeus is he believed everyone in his day had already heard the gospel. He was wrong about that, but that's what he believed. And he believed that all the righteous pagans who had died before the coming of Christ and the gospel could be saved by being resurrected in the Millennium, where they'd have a chance to hear the gospel. Or maybe on Holy Saturday in Hades, since they were living in that upper realm of Hades and Jesus (by his interpretation and most of the Fathers' interpretation of those classic mysterious texts in Peter—Christ preached the gospel in Hades to the righteous pagans), they could be saved that way.

MH: He and I would disagree on that one, but you're right—that's very common.

GM: So he and all the Fathers believed that there's no such thing as non-Christians going to heaven. Anyone going to heaven is going to say yes to the gospel of Jesus Christ by Romans 10:9. But they had creative ways of understanding how that was going to happen.

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MH: (laughing) Yeah. Irenaeus is interesting in this respect, too, because he does spend a good bit of time talking about the Watchers (which is the Second Temple term for the sons of God in Genesis 6 and all that) and he was really fixated on the sense that they contributed to human depravity, specifically driving people to idolatry. So there you have a supernatural resistance, again, to the truth that would have been seeded (to use Justin's term) to the other nations amid all of this pagan worship. So here you have this perspective of spiritual warfare that includes this Deuteronomy 32 Worldview and actually even draws the Watchers into the picture for this opposition. We mention Irenaeus a lot on the podcast. I find he's really interesting. I don't know if you've read Schultz's article or dissertation about his view of the Watchers and depravity, but it's really interesting what Irenaeus says there. And it really fits nicely with what you're describing.

So what about Clement?

GM: Just a little preface... I was going to say that all Fathers believed that non-Jewish/non-Christian religions are ultimately demonic because they believed that are infiltrated by and empowered by and enlightened by these fallen angels. But that's also why they have a lot of truth. Clement agreed with Irenaeus that God is in charge of all of history and that religions are part of God's plan to sum up all things in Christ. But what he added was the idea that God gave some of the religions as covenants to the Gentiles, just as God gave the covenant of the Law to the Jews. His picture was pretty big—that is, he said that all these covenants (both the "Gentile covenants," as he called them, and the Jewish covenant) were meant to lead people eventually to Christ (who, of course, is the fulfillment of all the promises of the covenants). He even was bold enough to say that some of the Gentile religious teachers were prophets. He called Socrates a prophet that was given by God (he said), but he also in the same breath (so to speak) would make clear that what Socrates was teaching was ultimately different and defective. He said God allowed these pagan prophets and allowed these Gentile covenants to keep the peoples of the world from their utter destruction. So they were secondary way-stations on the path that would lead civilizations ultimately to fullness of faith in Christ.

MH: That is pretty bold! (laughs) We give him points for that. That's pretty bold to cast it in these terms. Origen usually gets cast as the one who's either the most bold or the most out-there. I'll admit I have a fondness for Origen because he's really outside the box. I enjoy learning things about him. So where was he at in all this?

GM: He's surprising because those of us who study church history and the history of theology know that Origen probably (we don't know this for sure, but it's 95% sure) taught not only reincarnation but also universalism—that everyone will be saved eventually (including the devil). Most Christians don't want to pay any attention to Origen, but he was a giant of a theologian and he always said that "if the Church ever declares definitively on any subject that disagrees with me, I will yield because the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit." At that time, when he was alive, the Church had not declared definitively on the question of universalism. The reason why I say he was surprising is because, despite what later became the clearly heretical teaching of universalism, he was the most conservative of all these early Greek theologians. That is, he warned his readers and his hearers not to mess with the other religions. He said, "Don't even dabble; it's too dangerous." He said, What you need to do is to dive headfirst with complete commitment into Jesus and into the Church and completely immerse yourself in the Church and its sacraments. Only when you've become extremely mature in Christ would you be ready (and only if God calls you) to start learning about other religions."

MH: Wow. Yeah, Origen was also one of the few... If you know the answer to this question (this just popped into my head), boy, I'd love to hear it. I've only ever found reference to maybe three or four Early Church Fathers who could work in

Hebrew and he was one of them. I think that contributed to how he argued certain things. Granted, he's still centuries removed from an Old Testament Semitic worldview, and these other languages that we have access to were not deciphered yet, but the fact that he could read Hebrew I think really helped him in a number of respects.

GM: That's true, and you're right—there weren't very many famous Fathers who knew Hebrew. But actually, Origen (if you want a transition to the next book) did incredible damage to the Church—despite his knowledge of Hebrew.

MH: You can see it cutting both ways, that's true. I think I know where you're going with this. But let me ask you one question before you hit the next book: where is Augustine in all this? He's like the elephant in the room here.

GM: On the world religions.

MH: Yes.

GM: On the Deuteronomy 32... he takes in all of that. He believes it. In his great masterpiece that was written to answer the question of whether Christianity was responsible for the fall of the Roman Empire (*The City of God*)... He has read Justin and he's read Irenaeus, and he's read Origen on the religions and he completely accepts this view that the world religions are primarily inspired by demons (which means fallen angels). So he takes that in completely, but he also recognizes that there are truths there—even religious truths there—that non-Christians possess. That we are to use the truth—the many, many truths that God has sprinkled abroad about in the world and that have been found and developed by non-Christians—and use them in the Church.

MH: It's just interesting because he had a reaction to some other things that he and Irenaeus would not have agreed on, related to the Watchers and Enoch and Genesis 6 and all that stuff. So I think it's important to bring out the fact that he wasn't a killjoy with all of these sorts of things. He participated in the wider community here and didn't react against it really unnecessarily. He's part of the stream here.

Let's go into your other book. This is a subject that we've talked a little bit about on the podcast. We've had a couple episodes on Paul's Israel-talk (sometimes it's clear, sometimes it's not, who is Israel, it might depend on what page you're on and that sort of thing). When it comes to this book (*Israel Matters: Why Christians Must Think Differently About the People and the Land*), the first question I have for you, of course, in the context of our audience: are you talking about a theological construct/concept in this book? When you use the term "Israel matters," is that a theological construct or are you referring to the national/political entity, or both.

GM: Primarily the former. The book is theology. Now, this is a popular book (that's addressed to people in the pews and pastors) coming out of an academic book that I edited and wrote four chapters to called *The New Christian Zionism*. So the question is, what does Israel mean? What's the theological meaning of Israel? The principle argument is against what's called "supersessionism," which has been the majority view of the Church since Origen. Origen played a large role in teaching and perpetuating it, and then Augustine did, too. Supersessionism is the idea that the Church has totally superseded Israel.

MH: And that's an important word. There's an important word in there: "totally."

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GM: Yeah, totally. And a synonym for it is "Replacement Theology" (the Church has entirely replaced Israel). There are two important parts. The first part [of supersessionism] is that the people of Israel... that the Church (which is 99.9% Gentile, or at least that's the way it's usually characterized) is all that God is concerned with now. He's not concerned with ethnic Israel at all. So in 33 A.D. (if that's the year that you accept as the date of the crucifixion and resurrection), God transferred the covenant that he made with ethnic Israel to the Church. So the covenant that he made in the Old Testament with ethnic Israel was ended in 33 A.D. and was transferred to those who believed explicitly in Jesus of Nazareth. The second part of supersessionism is that the land of Israel is of zero theological importance anymore after 33 A.D. Of course, it was the land that was part of the covenant promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, but after Jesus comes, the land has become a world, so it's replaced by the world. So those are the two parts of supersessionism: that the people of Israel are no longer theologically important to God (or are of any interest to God whatsoever, any more than the people of Uganda or Thailand are), and the land of Israel is of zero theological importance—no more important theologically than Wisconsin or... uh... Crimea.

MH: (Laughing) You could have said "Madison and Leningrad" and it would have fit together really nicely!

GM: Yeah, that's good, that's good!

MH: I can say that, having spent nine years in Madison!

GM: Oh, that's right! The University of Wisconsin—that's where you did your PhD! Yes, yes.

MH: "Red Square of the Midwest," there we go.

GM: (Big laugh) I like that!

MH: So in the book, then... I'll try not to be too categorical here. I think it's fair to say you spend less time giving readers options as far as viewpoints than you do trying to rebut this total Replacement idea. Is that fair enough?

GM: Oh, sure. Yes. Because we've all been thoroughly educated in supersessionism—both evangelicals and Catholics and mainline Protestants. That's what we've been taught in our seminaries and in our churches, with the exception of dispensationalists. One thing I make clear (in this book a little bit, but I make it abundantly clear in the much larger academic book, *The New Christian Zionism*) is that this has nothing to do with dispensationalism. I'm not a dispensationalist. I don't agree with dispensationalism. Unfortunately, when you use those two words—Christian Zionism—people automatically think, "Oh, that's dispensationalism... a bunch of crazy views—the rapture and *Left Behind* and two parallel tracks that don't intersect (the Israel track and the Church track) and these crazy eschatological scenarios with the antichrist and Israel and the ten-nation conspiracy. That's a bunch of craziness! So how could anybody believe in Christian Zionism?" Well, our proposal in this book (I wrote it with ten other scholars) has nothing to do with dispensationalism.

MH: Did you have dispensationalists contribute to it? I'm not familiar with the list.

GM: Well, yes... progressive dispensationalists.

MH: Progressive, yeah. See, my own tradition was dispensationalism, but then I moved over to the progressive side. I would be somewhere still in the middle. I would be like a small "s" supersessionist—not a total. People on the podcast know this. I file this under the "okay, we can affirm some obvious things, but let's not extrapolate to the unnecessary." It's very clear in some passages that there is some sort of replacement going on, but does that have to be a totality? Is it correct to say (as you just laid out, I think really nicely) that God just has no interest at all (zero) in the land and the people? I think that goes too far. So I've actually sort of participated... When I was in grad school I was in a Reformed congregation, so I've basically run the gamut on this in terms of church position or tradition, and I see merits to both. I think it is a mistake to go all the way in one direction or the other, but that's typically what happens, just like you said.

45:00

GM: Well, I'm not sure if you're saying this, but let me say this and tell me if it's part of what you mean by what you just said. In a certain way, all Christians have to be a kind of supersessionist and a kind of dispensationalist. That is, if Christ is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets, that is a kind of supersessionist. Christ is superseding the law and the prophets as they were previously understood. All Christians believe that as you look through biblical history God did deal with peoples and people in different ways through history—not all the same way (contrary to those who are scandalized by particularity). In that sense, all Christians who understand anything about biblical theology have to be a kind of dispensationalist.

MH: I wouldn't use that word because it's loaded (for all the reasons that you said). I would say that I think it's painfully obvious that Paul (and others, it's not

just Paul)... that the concept of what Israel is was changed or altered in the New Testament so that the Gentiles are included. But then the question becomes, well, does that mean ethnic Israel is excluded? I don't think that is a necessary conclusion. That's an easy place to go.

GM: That's where we disagree. Paul uses the word "Israel" eighty times in the New Testament, and I would argue (and I have argued) that every one of the eighty times refers to either the people of Israel (Jews) or it refers to larger Israel that is primarily Jewish and has people who were previously not Jews become Jews, or it's got these righteous Gentiles who have attached themselves to Israel because they recognize the God of Israel is the true God. In Acts, these are the God-fearers. They're coming to synagogue every Sunday morning, and Philo tells us that thousands and thousands all over the Roman Empire are coming to synagogue every Saturday morning. Now, this is before Jesus and at the time of Jesus, actually—but they haven't heard about Jesus.

But these Gentiles are coming to synagogue every Saturday morning because they recognize that this God of Israel is infinitely superior to anything in their Greco-Roman religions. Now, they don't want to become Jews and the rabbis tell them, "You don't have to become a Jew to have a share in the world to come. All you have to become is a righteous Gentile, which means you come here and you worship the God of Israel with us. You listen to Moses with us. You participate in our Jewish worship. You don't have to get circumcised. But you will have a share in the world to come—you will be a righteous Gentile." So every time I argue that each one of those eighty times in the New Testament where you see the word "Israel," that's what it's referring to... Or it's referring to actually the geographical territory of Israel.

MH: For me, the issue is wider than the term "Israel."

GM: Sure, sure.

MH: It's really wrapped up for me in the way the New Testament repurposes the Old, the way you get... For instance, in Romans 9 where Paul quotes Hosea—the *lo ammi* passage, "those who were not my people I will call my people." And he applies that very clearly to Gentiles. So there's some sort of redefinition going on there. But again, I don't think it has to exclude the other side, whereas the true supersessionist would say "That's a done deal. It's pushing one out to bring the other in." I think that says too much. Then there's the temple language attributed to the Gentiles and to individual Gentile believers. So to me, it's a lot bigger than the term "Israel." It's the way Old Testament material (and a lot of it comes from the Torah and a lot of it's covenantal) gets repurposed in the New Testament.

Again, I don't know if it's... This is just a general statement about theology in general. It just seems to me that with so many things, it's not... I don't know why Christians get so polarized. I don't know why people get so married to systems.

On one hand, I guess, okay—systems are in place and traditions are there. We get raised up as either children or young believers (if we come to the Lord later and we get involved in some tradition) and this is how the truth of the Scripture is mediated to us. I get that. But it just seems to be such an easy intellectual propensity to want to put things in boxes and stake out these positions that are often quite polarizing, as opposed to what I see in Scripture, which is a lot of (I'll use the other buzz-word) "already but not yet." Okay, there's something going on here, but there's going to be some consummation of it. I think that plays itself out in a whole bunch of areas, and I think this is one of them. So when I see these ideas held in tension in the text, I've just come to the position where I'm okay with that—that somehow both of these things are like computer programs running in the background here. They're both going on. We have enough RAM for both. Somehow, they are going to both emerge and both be validated at some point.

GM: Yeah, I know what you're saying, I think, Mike. I guess I would ask that you read this book (now, maybe you've looked at it, I don't know) and tell me what you think. For instance, I've got a whole chapter that asks, "Is the Church the New Israel?" And I argue that it's not. Of course, we've all been taught that it is. N.T. Wright is probably, I think, the most influential biblical theologian in the world today—Protestant or Catholic or Orthodox. He argues strenuously (and it's a major part of his whole project) that the Church is the New Israel.

MH: I would change the definite article to an indefinite article. The Church is *a* New Israel, because I don't see the identity of Israel being wiped off the map, both in terms of theology or eschatology—just generally. I see alteration, but not replacement. In other words, we don't have to push one out to bring the other one in, that kind of thing.

GM: Well, that's been the typical supersessionist view, though—that Israel has been expanded to include Gentiles. That's what I think is wrong. I don't think that's Paul's view. Paul, of course, is all about Gentiles—yes! That's the great mystery—that the Gentiles are included now. But not in Israel.

MH: Maybe we need a new nomenclature, then. Because there are supersessionist ideas I think are just really unwarranted. We might need a new nomenclature to describe what's going on.

This isn't going to be at all topically related, but just analogous to this. When I was doing my work on *elohim* (this whole thing about divine plurality and what about monotheism), you just reach the point where, look, the terms we're using just don't work. They work in part and then they fail. So rather than trying to use words like "monotheism," "polytheism," and "henotheism"—all these words that we've sort of grown up with that people are used to—I just came to the point where I'm going to abandon them and I'm going to try to describe what I see, more than stick a label on it. I can't really come up with a new label, like "monoyahwism," like that's helpful. Who's going to walk around using terms like

that? At some point, the terminology gets in the way, I think, and it becomes less serviceable to try to convey a set of ideas. That's just where I'm at. I see validity on both ends of this, and I'm not willing to reject valid thinking on either side.

We should get back to the actual content of the book because I have at least one question. We're not going to change topics here, but it helps us orient a little bit. How far apart do you think... Let's narrow this to the evangelical community. How far apart do you think Christians are within the evangelical world on their attitude toward (we'll use the word) "Zion" or "Zionism"—the land? Can you put a percentage on it? If you can, if you can sketch out how far apart you think the different views are, what has that led to? In other words, this is sort of the strife question. How much of a hot potato is this within the church?

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GM: I cannot give you percentages. I don't know. I mean, that's a sociological question. But I can tell you (and I don't think you'd disagree with me on this) that there's huge division in the evangelical world. Younger evangelicals tend to be anti-Zionist and tend to reject anything that smells of Zionism. Older evangelicals (particularly dispensationalists, of course) have been pro-Zionist. How has it played out? I think that's the second part of your question. I think it's played out in two ways: theologically and politically. Theologically, I think there's a huge, growing tendency toward a new Marcionism. Marcion was the Early Church heretic who said the Old Testament was really about an evil God.

MH: Did you happen to see this last week that *Christianity Today* picked up from Twitter something somebody in our building did? Rick Brannan presented a graph of how many times the Old Testament is cited in sermons. Did you see that?

GM: And systematic theologies. Yes, I did. And it's not surprising to me.

MH: Me, either.

GM: Systematic theologies! That's even more disturbing. So I think you've got a growing acceptance even among evangelicals (because evangelicals don't read the Bible anymore) of this old canard that the Old Testament God is the God of wrath and the New Testament God is the God of love. How many sermons do you hear on the Old Testament anymore? Very, very few. You've got leading evangelical theologians who are outright Marcionites. I think theologically that is one result. Politically, the other result is that more and more young evangelicals (and particularly those who have been educated even at some of the evangelical colleges, like Wheaton College, because of the influence of some professors) are very, very anti-Israel, very anti-Zionism. They perpetuate the Palestinian narrative, which says that all the Palestinians' problems are caused by the Israeli government, the Israeli government is ruthlessly oppressing the Palestinians and is prevent them from having their own state, that it's violating international law, and the Jews stole the land from the Palestinians. Now, all of those things are

part of the Palestinian narrative, and young evangelicals who grew up under their parents' pro-Zionism think they don't want to be like their parents and they accept these new very, very anti-Zionist, anti-Israel messages.

MH: I was going to ask you... You brought up the theological and political narratives. Which do you think is driving the bus? But now you've interjected the third one: we just don't want to be like our parents! (laughs) But I'll ask the same question: what do you think is driving the bus? Is politics or youth driving theology, or is it the other way around?

GM: You know, I'm not sure, Mike. I think both are going on. I think there's been an increasing Marcionite tendency in pulpits and in seminaries that has made this a perfect storm, along with the young evangelical passion for social justice. And they associate the pro-Palestinian cause with everything good in social justice, and therefore it's something they should support. They're tired of being known as evangelicals who are just against abortion and who are trying... all about the "Christian America" kind of thing, and just about atonement. They want to be known for being socially just, which of course, culture promotes—but with its own narrow definition of social justice.

MH: I would agree with that, and I'd be on the side that would say that the politics is driving the bus because we do have a dearth of Old Testament teaching, biblical theological teaching. So when politics drives the bus, then kids are naturally going to gravitate toward the thing that reinforces where they're already at politically. Having said that, I think on the theological side I'll add one element here (and there will be some in my audience who might be troubled by this, but this is nothing new coming from me). I've never given you my "Christian Middle Earth" metaphor. Christian Middle Earth is basically where a lot of Christians who aren't being taught in church go for their information, and that's the internet. Which is completely unvetted, and you find wonderful things and awful things. That realm might include like the prophecy movement, and this is an outgrowth of the dispensational thing, but sort of dispensationalism on steroids for a lot of it. But I think that has poisoned the theological well. I think the wackiness of the prophetic movement has really turned a lot of people off. It's become cartoonish enough so that young people, when they're asked to identify with something theologically, if they see this element (a very high view of Israel) as being part of this cartoon over here in Middle Earth, they don't want anything to do with it. They're going to run the other way. And it's a real shame. It really is.

GM: Yeah, and I think what you're doing, Mike, and what I'm trying to do (and what I think we need to do) to remedy some of this is good old-fashioned biblical theology. Getting back to your opening remarks on this book, let's get away from polarities and labels. And I say, yes—as long as we get to the biblical terms and try to figure out what did Isaiah mean, what did Jesus mean, what did Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and John mean by (in this case) Israel? What did Paul mean by Israel? Let's really do some deep digging in the text and let's really put on the

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shelf for awhile what our tradition has taught about Israel. What is really going on in the text? That's what I'm trying to do.

MH: And that's just healthy. That's the nice word for it. I would say it's *essential*, as well. Can we just take a look at the text in context and then describe what we see? It infuriates a lot of people because there's comfort in labels, there's comfort in being able to put someone in this box (this system or this label or this tradition). I understand that and I've benefitted from that personally in certain points in my Christian life. I get that. I'm not anti-any of that. I like to say I'm more or less apathetic to it, that it takes on a secondary importance to me but I'm not going to wipe it all off the table. I like having church historical theological questions because these guys weren't dumb! They lived a long time ago and they're not modern, but they weren't dumb! They had a lot of time to think about a lot of things and they had a lot to contribute. But at the end of the day, we have to be careful that we don't swap them in for exegesis (exegesis in an ancient context).

I hope my audience doesn't get tired of hearing it, but my goal as always: I want the Israelite living in your head. I want the first century Jew living in your head. What you see might scare you, but that's what they were thinking. If you can think their thoughts after them, or at least try to read the text the way they... Because they wrote for their audience. They wrote to a particular audience. We benefit from what they wrote and it's for us, but not to us. The closer we can get to that enterprise and then describe what we see... I can only speak for myself here and maybe a little bit for people who email me and follow the podcast, but it gives you an appreciation for the text and also we can be charitable to people that would make a different exegetical decision at some point, and then they go down a different direction because of that. But to know *why* it is and to not have our politics drive our theology, or this nebulous pursuit of relevance (whatever that means) be driving the bus here.

GM: Oh yeah—relevance drives too many buses these days in the Church. You know, Mike, that's what we really are trying to do in the academic book called *The New Christian Zionism*, and now in this popular book, *Israel Matters*. We're trying to get into the text. What is it really saying? And let's try to leave on the shelf, temporarily, what we've been taught about Israel. Let's try to see if we can figure out what the New Testament authors meant by "Israel."

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MH: We'll post a link to that book, as well. We don't want to have that excluded. There will be a lot of people in this audience who will get the academic one. They'll just gravitate toward that sort of thing.

Well, we need to wrap up. But this was a really good discussion. I'm really grateful that you could take the time to do this. On this podcast, we like to expose the audience to scholars who actually care about doing stuff for the non-specialist. That is the sweet-spot here—trying to take scholarship and mediate it

to the people who are interested, who aren't going to go out and get degrees or whatever. They're just interested. And I see real value in that. So we're grateful that you could come on and talk with us about what you're doing.

GM: Well, I appreciate the work you're doing and I'm grateful that you invited me!

MH: Yep, thank you again!

GM: Well, keep up your good work, Mike. And Trey, too.

MH: We'll try. Like I said, this is what we're trying to do. We need more people like you and some of the other ones that we've had on that want to try to do something to put a dent in the ignorance in the pew—just try to get them back into the text. Thanks a lot.

GM: Thank you.

TS: Wow! What a great conversation, Mike! I completely agree that the young Christians need some good, solid theology. Just another great conversation. That was a good one.

MH: Yeah, it's nice to know I'm not the only person really thinking that our culture—our political climate—is really driving the theological bus. Something needs to happen there to sort of switch that around.

TS: Yeah, and I will definitely post the links to Gerald's books, so please go visit those links. My library is growing every day, Mike! I've got so much reading to do that I need two lifetimes to achieve it. I'm getting in trouble here.

MH: That's what it feels like to be a grad student. (laughs) That's familiar!

TS: I hear ya. Well, good deal. That was a great conversation. Don't forget to look forward to David Burnette's interview next week. With that, Mike, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God bless.