



# America as New Jerusalem

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“New Jerusalem” symbolizes humanity’s twin hopes. First, the New Jerusalem indicates God’s gracious presence with some, for “they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them” (Rev 21:3). It thus serves as shorthand for election (space). Second, the New Jerusalem envisions unrealized goodness, where “death will be no more” (Rev 21:4). It thus serves as shorthand for eschatology (time). All attempts to connect the American experience with one’s chosenness and the righteous end express this notion of “America as New Jerusalem,” even if “New Jerusalem” is not explicitly invoked. The notion appears in every genre and style imaginable: poetry, songs, presidential speeches, novels, political pamphlets, sermons, and academic writings. Although rarely systematically constructed, it has been a powerful force in American self-understanding and motivation. A thematic and roughly chronological overview of such attempts shows the diversity and prevalence of this notion. This story is of utmost concern for those who proclaim the gospel, since this notion is at heart resistance to God’s methods of electing sinners and triumphing over evil.

*Across the religious spectrum of American Christianity, the symbol of the New Jerusalem has exerted a powerful attraction. The hope for the New Jerusalem from God in Revelation has often been tied to the founding of America, and to the American exceptionalism that sees this founding as connected with God’s will for humanity.*

## THE PURE CITY

Christopher Columbus believed he had found “the terrestrial paradise” when he bumped into a new continent, making him “messenger of the new heaven and the new earth.”<sup>1</sup> Despite wildly different orientation and objectives, the New England Puritans would concur with Columbus’s sense of eschatological possibility in the New World, and they would simply transfer his sense of divine mission to themselves.

Nevertheless, the Puritan vision of America as New Jerusalem had particular roots. John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* implied that not only were the end times commencing, but England, with its history of bold confession, had a special role to play. England’s sixteenth-century unrest spawned eschatological speculation, and the Puritan project literally brought apocalyptic hopes down to earth. As Thomas Brightman argued, the “new Jerusalem . . . is not that city which the saints shall enjoy in heaven after this life, but a [transfigured] church to be expected on earth.”<sup>2</sup> When Puritans lost hope of England’s reform, the redeemer nation birthed a saving remnant who sailed to America. Arguing that the christological categories of prophet and priest had been restored with the Reformation, Cambridge pastor Jonathan Mitchell argued that “now the great CAUSE and WORK of God’s *Reforming People*, is, to set up His Kingdom,”<sup>3</sup> and he was unapologetic that “the public setting up of Christ’s kingdom . . . was our end in coming hither.”<sup>4</sup>

The New Englanders’ apparent success at restoring primitive Christianity heightened their expectation of the end times.<sup>5</sup> John Cotton rebuffed Roger Williams’s complaints about New England intolerance by insisting that it brought forth a “visible state of a new *Hierusalem*, which shall flourish many yearse upon Earth, before the end of the world.”<sup>6</sup> Cotton reportedly lured John Davenport to New England with the claim that its churches and civil order brought to mind “the new heaven and the new earth,” a notion that fit Davenport’s own project “to render the renowned church of New-Haven like the New Jerusalem.”<sup>7</sup> Even while chastising New Englanders for their sin, Increase Mather offered comfort that “here the Lord hath caused as it were, a *New Jerusalem* to come down from

<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 39–40.

<sup>2</sup> Francis J. Bremer, *Building a New Jerusalem: John Davenport, a Puritan in Three Worlds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role*, Midway Reprint (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 98. Emphasis in original.

<sup>4</sup> Gershon Greenberg, *The Holy Land in American Religious Thought, 1620–1948: The Symbiosis of American Religious Approaches to Scripture’s Sacred Territory* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Thus demonstrating Mircea Eliade’s claim that “the mythical visions of the ‘beginning’ and the ‘end’ of time are homologous.” Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return; or, Cosmos and History*, Bollingen Series 46 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 73.

<sup>6</sup> Richard T. Hughes and Crawford Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 43. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Joy Gilsdorf, *The Puritan Apocalypse: New England Eschatology in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1989), 75.

heaven; He dwells in this place.”<sup>8</sup> And according to Edward Johnson’s famous *Wonder-Working Providence*, Massachusetts was the place “where the Lord will create a new Heaven, and a new Earth.”<sup>9</sup>

Such sentiments provoked a response from Joseph Mede, whose 1628 groundbreaking Revelation commentary influenced many Puritan leaders. Understandably, Mede agitated many New Englanders by arguing that America was not the soil for Christ’s kingdom but the site of Gog and Magog. Samuel Sewall countered with the other extreme, speculating that Mexico was the site of the literal New Jerusalem, a theory defensible in part because “Jews” (American Indians, whom he thought to be part of the lost tribes of Israel) were present to gather in the Celestial City.<sup>10</sup>

Sewall’s concern for the Jews highlights a fundamental tension in Puritan hermeneutics. If typology resulted in American Puritans believing they supplanted Israel, this could contradict their espoused eschatology, particularly the view of most that the Jews would be restored to their *Palestinian* homeland. Several New England eschatological writings, therefore, refuted Mede by insisting that the millennial kingdom would encompass America, rather than be centered there.<sup>11</sup> But theological movements are rarely fully consistent, and “doctrine” should not necessarily trump rhetoric. For example, based on New England’s extraordinary profession of religion, evangelical purity, general morality, and godly leadership, Cotton Mather’s *Theopolis Americana* argued for the special eschatological status of “American Zion,” God’s “premier seisin.”<sup>12</sup> Mather concluded that “our Glorious LORD, will have an Holy City in AMERICA, the Street whereof will be *Pure Gold*.”<sup>13</sup> It is hard to imagine that New Englanders heard such words purely as “hortatory example.”<sup>14</sup>

The Establishment’s was not the only colonial vision of America as New Jerusalem. Banished from the Bay Colony, Roger Williams committed himself to “Mourn dayly . . . till the Lord . . . bring all his precious living stones into one New Jerusalem,”<sup>15</sup> which required divine intervention through angelic institution of a new apostolate. But Williams nonetheless believed religious liberty was a necessary precondition of this restoration, that America had the greatest potential for

<sup>8</sup> Ryan S. Gardner, “A History of the Concepts of Zion and New Jerusalem in America from Early Colonialism to 1835 with a Comparison to the Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith” (MA Thesis, Brigham Young University, 2002), 56. Emphasis in original.

<sup>9</sup> Sanford, *Quest for Paradise*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Reiner Smolinski, “Israel Redivivus: The Eschatological Limits of Puritan Typology in New England,” *The New England Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1990), 379–80; Gilsdorf, *The Puritan Apocalypse*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Smolinski, “Israel Redivivus.”

<sup>12</sup> Cotton Mather, “Theopolis Americana: An Essay on the Golden Street of the Holy City (1710),” ed. Reiner Smolinski, *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, January 1, 1710, 27, 36, <https://tinyurl.com/wympnl2>.

<sup>13</sup> Mather, “Theopolis Americana,” 30–31. Emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffery Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth: Joseph Mede (1586–1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 206.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 56.

this liberty, and that his efforts to decry the errors of the day paved the way for this divine work.<sup>16</sup>

Building on English ideas that the gospel spread westward because of its poor reception on the Continent, many American Puritans imagined that the progress of religious truth mimicked the course of the sun, and once it reached its western limit, time would cease.<sup>17</sup> Cotton Mather quipped that the colony of Connecticut was “so far westward, that some have pleasantly said, ‘the last conflict with anti-christ must be in your colony.’”<sup>18</sup> A generation later, Jonathan Edwards refracted the solar image, arguing that as the “Sun of Righteousness,” the millennium “shall rise in the West, contrary to . . . the course of things in the old heavens and earth.”<sup>19</sup> For Edwards, religious awakening in America suggested it was likely the site of the beginning of the millennium:

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It is not unlikely that this work of God’s Spirit, so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or, at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture. . . . And there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in America.<sup>20</sup>

Edwards envisioned America as a people and place with a special apocalyptic role within a larger international Protestant sense of mission.<sup>21</sup>

### *NOVUS ORDO SECLORUM*

According to Nathan Hatch, during the Anglo-French wars, New England ministers developed a “republican eschatology” that they subsequently used to decry

<sup>16</sup> Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Sanford, *Quest for Paradise*, 52. See also Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 95–96; Robert O. Smith, *More Desired Than Our Owne Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72.

<sup>18</sup> Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England; from Its First Planting, in the Year 1620, unto the Year of Our Lord 1698. In Seven Books.* (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1853), 332.

<sup>19</sup> Sanford, *Quest for Paradise*, 98. Emphasis in original. For more on Edwards, see also pages 86 and 95.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Thoughts on the Revival of Religion in New England,” in *The Works of President Edwards: In Four Volumes with Valuable Additions and a Copious General Index, and a Complete Index of Scripture Texts*, vol. III (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1881), 313.

<sup>21</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 99–100.

British oppression and, after the revolution, insist on order and virtue.<sup>22</sup> This “civil millennialism” was a major alteration of Edwards’s message that tied the millennium primarily to evangelical awakening. Instead, in what Ernest Tuveson called “apocalyptic Whiggism,” republican notions of liberty became the measure of the millennium.<sup>23</sup> In 1777, the minister Abraham Keteltas linked “the cause of liberty against arbitrary power” with “the cause of pure and undefiled religion,” proclaiming that the revolutionary era expected the time when “the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and his Christ.”<sup>24</sup> The Puritan typological scheme continued, now with the republic as “God’s American Israel.”<sup>25</sup> Herman Husband’s 1779 vision of a literal New Jerusalem beyond the Alleghenies, along with his related proposal, *Fulfilling of the Prophecies in the Latter Days, Commenced by the Independence of America*, was only a crasser version of widespread belief.<sup>26</sup> No one better expressed early republican millennialism than Timothy Dwight of Yale. In the flush of new nationhood, Dwight remarked that “this continent will be the principal seat of that new, that peculiar kingdom, which shall be given to the saints of the Most High.”<sup>27</sup>

The millennium was not completely secularized, however. Republicanism still, for many, served religious ends. Freedom from tyranny was precious precisely because it helped Protestantism flourish. And end-times propagation of the gospel was essential, even if it became dependent on political liberty. New England minister John Mellen queried whether “the expansion of republican forms of government will accompany that spreading of the gospel, in its power and purity, which the scripture prophecies represent as constituting the glory of the latter days.”<sup>28</sup> Nor was the millennium a *fait accompli*. For ministers who provided the foundation for the millennial mission of the nineteenth century, republican freedom—and the millennial dawn—could only be ensured with virtue: “If all the youth were educated, in the manner we recommend, *The Kingdom of God* would appear to have come.”<sup>29</sup>

## MILLENNIAL MISSION

The shift in eighteenth-century millennialism introduced the notion that “God predicted the defeat of evil before the final conflagration.”<sup>30</sup> The millennium was

<sup>22</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 24; Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 55, 60.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Haddon Jones, “Herman Husband: Millenarian, Carolina Regulator, and Whiskey Rebel (North Carolina)” (PhD diss., Northern Illinois University, 1983), 274.

<sup>27</sup> Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 139.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Turner, address to Harvard students, 1783. Cited in Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 166. Emphasis in original.

<sup>30</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 12.

not just a prelude or foretaste, but the beginning of righteousness's unbroken, eternal triumph. Already in Dwight, Tuveson discerns the belief that "the final battle, intervening between the millennium and the resurrection is being 'smoothed' away."<sup>31</sup> Samuel Hopkins claimed that in the millennium, "death will in some measure loose [sic] its sting."<sup>32</sup> As Alexander Campbell wrote, the millennium is "the consummation of that ultimate amelioration of society proposed in the Christian Scriptures."<sup>33</sup> Campbell's term *consummation* revealed that millennialists believed the arrival of the kingdom would be gradual—which is also why phrases like "dawning of the millennial day" were common: the rising sun spreads its light over the horizon in smooth progression. Nineteenth-century millennialism blurred the beginning and end of the millennium.

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In the early nineteenth century, this triumphant millennialism interwove religious and political threads. The Restoration Movement, led by Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, demonstrated this well. The stated purpose of Campbell's *Millennial Harbinger* was "the development and introduction of that political and religious order of society called THE MILLENNIUM."<sup>34</sup> Such a vision required God's intervention and could only be realized when all Christians united in adherence to primitive Christianity. But Campbell also saw signs of its advent in the progress of human liberty, and his notion of ecclesiastical "freedom from despotism" depended on the birth of the republic. As a correspondent remarked to Stone, "The present conflict between the Bible and party creeds and confessions . . . is perfectly analogous to the revolutionary war between Britain and America; liberty was contended for on the one side, and dominion and power on the other."<sup>35</sup> For these "Christians" (as the colonists were called), freedom from *all* Old World tyranny was the key to establishing the millennium.

While the more biblically sensitive preachers of American New Jerusalem had to awkwardly admit the unique status of Jews and their Palestinian homeland, the Latter-Day Saints had the advantage of new revelation that allowed them to pursue

<sup>31</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 108. As Tuveson points out, nineteenth-century millennialists "more and more relegated the Last Things which had so obsessed Christians in most previous centuries—The Last Judgment, the transformation of the earth, the ending of the temporal—to some far-off, dimly envisioned place." Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 90. In their more comprehensive accounts, however, the millennialists retained the release of Satan to deceive the nations for a little while. See Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 43, 115–116.

<sup>32</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 62.

<sup>33</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 217–18. Emphasis in original.

<sup>35</sup> Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 105.

literal “dialectical Holy Lands” in America and Palestine.<sup>36</sup> The Book of Mormon explicitly supported this doctrine,<sup>37</sup> but Saints also enlisted their idiosyncratic use of traditional scripture, inferring, for example, the existence of a second Zion from Isaiah 30:19. Joseph Smith neatly packaged the election and eschatology themes of American New Jerusalem when he told his followers that in “the building up of Zion . . . we are the favored people that God has made choice of to bring about the Latter-day glory.”<sup>38</sup> But Latter-Day Saints millennialism was not purely about revelation. Like the “Christians,” they found support for their restorationist program in the dominant politicized millennialist ideology. Even today, Saints are the largest religious subgroup to agree that “the U.S. has a special role to play in world affairs and should behave differently than other nations.”<sup>39</sup> Early Mormon leader Parley Pratt revealed his commitment to Americanized visions of political millennialism in an epic poem: “. . . the Gentiles break their foreign yoke / While tyrants tremble at the dreadful stroke / Assert their freedom, gain their liberty / And to the world proclaim Columbia free.”<sup>40</sup> In Mormon eschatology, the American Zion of liberty and restored gospel would merge with the historic Zion.<sup>41</sup>

As religious hopes cooled, a more socially and politically focused millennium appeared.<sup>42</sup> The towering ecclesiast Lyman Beecher is something of a transitional figure. While Beecher echoed Edwards’s view that revivals “seem to declare the purpose of God to employ this nation in the glorious work of renovating the earth,”<sup>43</sup> he expressed millennial hopes in social and political terms unfathomable to Edwards:

If it is by the march of revolution and civil liberty, that the way of the Lord is to be prepared, where shall the central energy be found, and from what nation shall the renovating power go forth? What nation is so blessed with such experimental knowledge of free institutions, with such facilities and resources of communication, obstructed by so few obstacles, as our own?<sup>44</sup>

Herman Melville was blunter: “Long enough have we been sceptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the political Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterances to his promptings.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Greenberg, *The Holy Land in American Religious Thought*, 227.

<sup>37</sup> 2 Nephi 10; 3 Nephi 21; Esther 13.

<sup>38</sup> Gardner, “History of the Concepts of Zion,” 137.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *More Desired Than Our Own Salvation*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 180.

<sup>41</sup> Greenberg, *The Holy Land in American Religious Thought*, 228–29. See also Gardner, “History of the Concepts of Zion,” 104.

<sup>42</sup> For instance, with the “Christians” losing confidence in the prospect of Christian unity. Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 130–131.

<sup>43</sup> Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories That Give Us Meaning* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 103.

<sup>44</sup> Lyman Beecher, *A Plea for the West* (Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1835), 10.

<sup>45</sup> From *White Jacket* (1850). Cited in Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 36. Emphasis in original.

The millennial mission was expansive and contradictory, animating the abolitionist movement, justifying both sides of the Civil War, and buttressing “manifest destiny.” In 1885, Josiah Strong brought the millennial chorus to its crescendo, infusing it with new racial tones: Once unoccupied lands are taken, said Strong, “then will the world enter upon a new stage of its history—the *final competition of races*.” Of course, the winner was predetermined: “this race,” said Strong, “is destined to dispossess many weaker races, assimilate others, and mold the remainder, until in a very true and important sense it has Anglo-Saxonized mankind!”<sup>46</sup> Race fused with place. According to another social gospel leader, Washington Gladden, “Here, upon these plains, the problems of history are to be solved; here, if anywhere, is to rise that city of God, the New Jerusalem, whose glories are to fill the earth.”<sup>47</sup> In his bid to keep America in the Philippines, Senator Albert Beveridge exulted that “[God] has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.”<sup>48</sup> Although not without its critics, the American New Jerusalem of the late nineteenth century envisioned itself making all things new through eradication of inferior cultures.

The mission lived on in twentieth-century Americanism. Woodrow Wilson tried to sell Americans on the League of Nations by proclaiming that “when America was born . . . we were lifted along the levels of civilization to days when there should be wars no more.”<sup>49</sup> In his 1984 State of the Union address, Ronald Reagan called America “the last, best hope of man on earth.” He then quoted Carl Sandburg, who saw “America in the crimson light of a rising sun fresh from the burning, creative hand of God.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, he saw the New Jerusalem. And even secular theorists saw the “end of history” in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although this millennialist vision was generally the preserve (and often oppressors’ rod) of white Americans, many black leaders believed that America’s espoused values, despite an abysmal track record, positioned it to be the land where blacks could sing, “Free at last!” For Dr. King, civil rights was cashing a check written by the republic’s founders.

## UTOPIANISM

Outside mainstream American millennialism, several groups declared for themselves a special eschatological calling. While millennialists sought to transform the world, these utopianists endeavored primarily to protect themselves from it. In 1761, John Christopher Hartwick, a Lutheran pietist minister, attempted to settle an area in central Upstate New York with like-minded pursuers of

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 133. Emphasis in original.

<sup>47</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Leon Fink, *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era: Documents and Essays*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2000), 272.

<sup>49</sup> Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 211.

<sup>50</sup> Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, 224–225.

holiness, calling the settlement New Jerusalem. The venture was a failure.<sup>51</sup> Ann Lee's "Shakers" called themselves the "Millennial Church" and, despite rejecting emerging politicized notions, believed the millennium had started "gradual and progressive" in America.<sup>52</sup> In the 1790s, a Quaker offshoot known as the Universal Friends declared their leader Jemima Wilkinson to be messiah and built a celibacy-friendly settlement in New York that they called Jerusalem.<sup>53</sup> For all its millennialist mission, the Mormons were also fundamentally utopian, hoping to plant New Jerusalem first in Ohio, then Missouri, before fleeing to Deseret. John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida community distinguished itself by intentional socialist economies, perfectionist doctrine, and "complex" marriages. Noyes pitted himself against the dominant millennialism of his time: "My hope of the millennium begins," he told William Lloyd Garrison, "where Dr. Beecher's expires—viz., AT THE OVERTHROW OF THIS NATION."<sup>54</sup> Noyes believed that Christ's Spirit had uniquely descended upon his community, which would usher in the kingdom of heaven through moral regeneration, unite with the primitive church, and make the republic obsolete.

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Perhaps the most impressive utopia was Zion City, Illinois. The city was founded in 1900 on the shores of Lake Michigan midway between Milwaukee and Chicago—or "Beer and Babel," as its founder, John Alexander Dowie quipped. Dowie was a faith healer committed to holiness and the restoration of the miraculous, whose legacy fed into the Pentecostal movement emerging at the same time. During Dowie's lifetime (he died in 1907), Zion City peaked at about 7,500 residents, a tightly woven community who looked to Dowie and other leaders for healing and willingly submitted to prohibitions on smoking, dancing, drinking, gambling, and even spitting. Dowie demanded loyalty and progressively heightened his eschatological role from Elijah to First Apostle. All this occurred in the

<sup>51</sup> Karl J. R. Arndt, "John Christopher Hartwick: German Pioneer of Central New York," *New York History* 18, no. 3 (1937), 293–303.

<sup>52</sup> Hatch, *Sacred Cause of Liberty*, 19–20; Calvin Green and Seth Youngs Wells, *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers (Commonly Called Shakers): Comprising the Rise, Progress, and Practical Order of the Society, Together with the General Principles of Their Faith and Testimony* (Albany, NY: Packard & Van Benthuysen, 1823), 207, 210.

<sup>53</sup> Herbert A. Wisbey, *Pioneer Prophetess: Jemima Wilkinson, the Publick Universal Friend* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Robert David Thomas, *The Man Who Would Be Perfect: John Humphrey Noyes and the Utopian Impulse* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), 150. Emphasis in original.

shadow of Christ's return: leasing their property for 1,100 years, residents staked territories for Christ's righteous rule during the soon-coming millennium.<sup>55</sup>

Many small utopian groups appeared in the twentieth century, but one notorious example should suffice. The Branch Davidians, a splinter group rooted in Seventh-Day Adventism, claimed eschatological greatness. They believed God would miraculously relocate the faithful Davidians to Palestine in preparation for the end. While they condemned the United States as Babylon, they also taught that their rural community, Mount Carmel, outside Waco, Texas, was, for the time being, Jerusalem, which when purified by fire would be the "gateway into the new kingdom."<sup>56</sup> The group celebrated Jewish festivals and believed that, once relocated to the Holy Land, they would establish a kingdom under their leader, whose messianic pretensions were clear in his self-chosen name: David Koresh (Koresh being a rendering of "Cyrus").

## ZIONISM

The interplay between American chosenness and the Holy Land is also evident in Christian Zionism. A lesser-known version appears in British Israelism. Employing a historicist interpretation of biblical prophecies, British Israelists believe the Anglo-Saxon people are direct descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel and that English royalty preserved the Davidic dynasty. In this system, Jews will be restored to Palestine, along with generous numbers of Anglo-Saxon "Israelites," all ruled under a restored Davidic king.<sup>57</sup> Achieving its height of popularity in the early 1900s, British Israelism gave biblical literalism to the message of Gilded Age racial propagandists like Josiah Strong and Albert Beveridge.

The more influential form of Christian Zionism is tied to dispensationalism. Although futurist in their prophetic approach, dispensationalists closely watch current events, believing that the restoration of Jews to Palestine and their political control of the region are necessary preludes to Christ's return. American dispensationalists most vehement about the restoration of Jews in Israel tend also to insinuate the United States into the eschatological story, making the Israeli Jerusalem also an American New Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup> As William E. Blackstone said, "Our Nation [is] God's chosen instrument in these last days. . . . [God has] raised up you . . . to bring blessing, not only to Israel, but to the whole world."<sup>59</sup> Carl McIntire's proposed "Florida Temple," a model meant to inspire other Christians to support

<sup>55</sup> Philip L. Cook, *Zion City, Illinois: Twentieth-Century Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 55, 113.

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 166.

<sup>57</sup> J. H. Allen, *Judah's Sceptre and Joseph's Birthright: An Analysis of the Prophecies of Scripture in Regard to the Royal Family of Judah and the Many Nations of Israel*, 18th ed. (Merrimac, MA: Destiny, 1902).

<sup>58</sup> Jason M. Olson, *America's Road to Jerusalem: The Impact of the Six-Day War on Protestant Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2018), 283.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, *More Desired Than Our Owne Salvation*, 175.

Zion, dropped all subtlety. McIntire mused: “Why cannot we rebuild it? . . . Truly God gave it to us. You feel a special sense of mission in realizing that this now is our responsibility.”<sup>60</sup> And at the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem in 2017 (a move supported by most American evangelicals), John Hagee prayed that God would “remind the dictators of the world that America and Israel are forever united.”<sup>61</sup> In supporting Zion, American Christian Zionists ironically threaten to overshadow it.

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

All humans ache for New Jerusalem—that is, for evidence of election and the end of injustice. Americans, however, have tied visions of the New Jerusalem to peculiarly American conceptions of religion, culture, politics, and even race. One need not be a jingoist, millennial speculator, cult member, or avowed Zionist to be enthralled by the American New Jerusalem. As varied as the visions have been, our common adherence to this creed is displayed in the twin mottos of the Great Seal of the United States: “He Has Favored Our Endeavors” (election), and “New Order of the Ages” (eschatology). Like any apocalyptic force, the American New Jerusalem is inescapable.

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The church must expose this notion of election and eschatology for the sin that it is, as an attempt to escape God’s judgment either in time or at the end of time. We are chosen in baptism, put to death as sinners and raised to new life, with the Spirit our pledge. The signs of election are not moral or doctrinal purity or racial prowess, much less spiritual zeal. God’s elect, in fact, don’t even know how to pray as they ought. For that reason, evangelical signs are known best in weakness, where we hear “sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:25).

Likewise, the godly do not possess this world before the resurrection of the dead (*Augsburg Confession XVII*). Every attempt to advance ultimate justice—democracy, communism, capitalism, even human rights—is an enthusiastic dream, even if consummation is supposedly distant or requires God’s aid. What is believed to advance justice inevitably causes suffering, as history shows; and the Son in his glory will expose many blind spots in our self-perceptions (Matt 25:31–46). The tension of *simul iustus et peccator* is always to do good for the

<sup>60</sup> Olson, *America’s Road to Jerusalem*, 123.

<sup>61</sup> Olson, *America’s Road to Jerusalem*, vii.

neighbor without believing you are bending the arc of justice. Today we plant the tree, understanding that tomorrow, God may destroy it and us. 

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