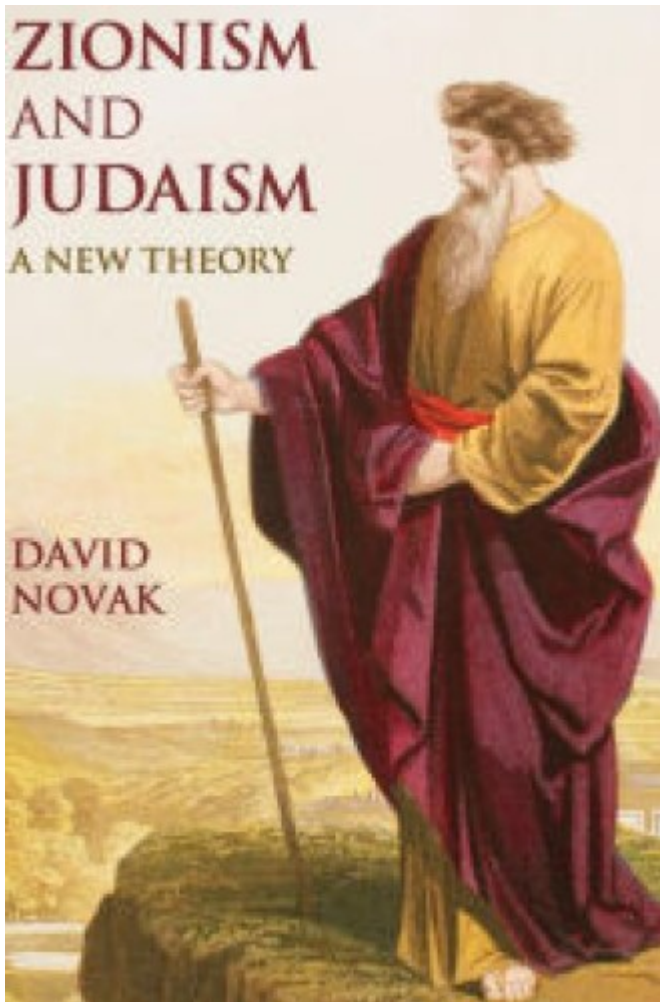


Zionism's theological roots

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 3, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Zionism and Judaism

By David Novak

Cambridge University Press

Michael Walzer, in *The Paradox of Liberation*, has written of the complex and vexed relationship between Judaism and contemporary Zionism. Now David Novak has weighed in on the same question but finds nothing vexing or complex about it. His

book is a rigorous and coherent theological argument that will illumine those who pay attention to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, as well as those who wish to probe the theological and ideological underpinnings of the state of Israel.

The heart of that theology is the claim of election, which Novak traces in four dimensions, all of them unilateral on God's part and without explanation. Novak writes that God's choices are "infinitely more radical than our own." These four aspects of God's electing action are simply givens on which his entire argument rests.

First, God chose to create the universe as God's possession. The universe is always to stand before God. Second, God chose to create human persons who are God's "partners in their own making." Human persons are addressed by and answerable to God. Third, God chose Israel/the Jewish people as "the optimal community for the God-human relationship." Novak reiterates much that Joel Kaminsky has written on the election of Israel, which both authors take as an absolute given. These three claims are unexceptional in theological discourse; readers of my *Theology of the Old Testament* will recognize that I have treated these elective choices as "God's partners," a phrase that Novak also uses.

Novak's argument pivots on his fourth point: God chose the land of Israel as "the optimal earthly locus for the God-Israel relationship." It is important for Novak that this fourth claim has the same normative status as the previous three. God's choice of the land is elemental for Novak's read of Judaism, and Zionism serves the chosenness of the land. He does not say that the state of Israel is chosen, but that the state of Israel is a compelling embodiment of the choice of the land, so allegiance to the state of Israel is an inescapable expression of God's choice of the land.

Novak adds a fifth choice: "the political choice of the Jewish people . . . to choose the kind of polity . . . they judge to be the best means of keeping the divine commandment to settle the land of Israel as the earthly center of the covenant between God and the people Israel." Novak is clear about the priority of land over the state: "The state of Israel is for the sake of the people Israel in the land of Israel; the people Israel in the land of Israel is not for the sake of the state of Israel."

Inescapably Novak must come to the question of how the state of Israel will be both "Jewish and democratic." The Jewish part is not difficult. The state of Israel is

destined to be Jewish because it occupies the land that is nonnegotiable Jewish. The democratic part of the equation is more difficult, and Novak gives great attention to it. His argument is not informed by issues of contemporary constitutionalism or any other practical consideration. It is an argument from the tradition about how Jews can host non-Jews in their own land.

Novak eschews a “French approach to democracy” that appeals to “natural rights” and appeals instead to the Noahide commandments. He makes much of the command that Jews must “acquire and settle the land,” so non-Jews have the status of “resident aliens” whose civil rights are to be guaranteed. Such gentiles must adhere to the Noahide commandments, the principle ones of which concern idolatry, murder, and sexual license. In the end, however, Novak must define *democracy* in a doubtful way because he concludes that non-Jews cannot have full political autonomy because they do not have full legal autonomy under the laws of the Torah. At best, non-Jews are to be granted hospitality, but completely on the terms of full and uncontested Jewish authority. Novak allows that a democracy must depend on the rule of the majority, but he does not comment on the prospect that Jews may eventually not have a majority in the land.

In the end the book is a disappointment. Its subtitle proposes a new theory, but it seems rather to be a careful and thoughtful reiteration of long-held Jewish insistence. By now we have a right to expect that in crucial conversation every triumphalist tradition (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, capitalist, or whatever) should entertain a modicum of self-critical awareness and an acknowledgment that very particular triumphalism has been deeply problematized. Novak evidences no such awareness. The careful argument eventuates in a conclusion that is all too familiar.

Consideration of the “Jewish and democratic” must finally come to the Palestinian question. Novak’s terse comment is this:

Now there might be very good realpolitik type reasons why the Jewish state cannot recognize the legitimacy of a non-Jewish (Palestinian) state at the present time. After all, it does not seem that the Palestinians are ready now to recognize that their autonomy could only come from it being conceded to them by the Jewish state already in full control of the land of Israel. And it does not seem that the Palestinians are now ready to even recognize the political legitimacy of the Jewish state of Israel.

Novak adds a wistful comment that the possibility of Palestinian status as “resident aliens” by the grant of Israel seems to have no practical application, but it “‘might have practical application in the as yet unpredictable future.’ . . . It is hard for many Jews to contemplate what should be the presence of non-Jews in the land of Israel or as citizens of the state of Israel.”

I judge that it is even harder for many Palestinians to entertain the argument he advances. Such hope might be a way to keep the future open; or it might be a way to avoid facing the undoing of every absolutism, even the ones that have established theological genealogy.