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Conrad Cherry - God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny

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Conrad Cherry (ed). *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. Pp. x + 410. \$49.95 (cloth), \$18.95 (paper).

[1] This is a revised and update edition of the original 1971 anthology of the same title. Cherry has added selections (e.g. by Ralph Reed and Rosemary Radford Ruether), revised his commentary, and altered his suggested readings to extend coverage into the 1990s. Otherwise the volume continues to be intended for use as a college text, with additional potential interest for scholars seeking articulations of American civil religion.

[2] *God's New Israel* traces the theme of American destiny under God through the major developments in United States history. Most of the documents are from the pens of religious and political leaders. Although Cherry attempts to be inclusive, this version of America's destiny owes its historical development to mainstream Protestantism. As a result, the majority of those represented in this collection are white male Protestants. Also not surprisingly, the women, blacks, and Native Americans Cherry includes (e.g. Frances Willard, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Chief Seattle) are critical of the ideology.

[3] The idea that America has been providentially chosen for a special destiny was planted along with the first colonies, and it continues to find expression in our current so called "secular age." Governing this aspect of the nation's mythology is the belief that the American people are God's New Israel, his newly chosen people. Cherry allows that a sense of providential calling is not exclusively American. He also suggests that the accumulated tradition of civil religion to which his documentation points does not guarantee that it will persist as a vital religious orientation in American life. Much of its symbolism has lost its clarity and specificity, he points out. Words such as freedom, democracy, providence, and even God, all of which are central to celebrations of our national faith, lack uniform meaning for contemporary Americans.

[4] Cherry has divided some thirty-one documents into seven sections. The selections in Part One show how the rudiments of the theme of American destiny under God emerged in the English colonization of the New World. The most articulate colonial spokesmen for this theme were the Puritans. They were on an "errand into the wilderness," leaders suggested, their purpose being to build a holy commonwealth in which colonists were to covenant with each other by a profession of faith and with God by their pledge to erect a City on a Hill, whose light would show the rest of the world how God would have it live. Particularly useful in this section is Governor John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity*.

[5] The documents in Part Two show how the American Revolution awakened the people to a new errand. Victory was interpreted as both a hard-earned opportunity for American self-determination and proof of God's continuing favor, thereby requiring a rededication to the task of creating an American model for the Old World. After the war, no one speaks more deliberately of the nation's destiny than deist President Thomas Jefferson, who writes, in his second inaugural address: "I shall need . . . the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life" (65).

[6] In the nineteenth century the American understanding of destiny under God was decisively shaped by

westward expansion. "Manifest Destiny" became a popular slogan, reflecting an important extension of the belief in America's sense of mission to adjacent western lands and the people therein. Particularly useful in this section is the Reverend Lyman Beecher's *A Plea for the West*, which adds a virulently anti-Catholic element, long-standing in early Protestant American thought but given greater urgency by nineteenth century Irish Catholic immigration.

[7] The American Civil War provided history's greatest threat to an undivided American destiny. What the documents in Part Four show, however, is how both Northern and Southern apologists (e.g. Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Morgan) identified their separate causes with that destiny. Both felt that they were defending an authentically American mission, invoked the help of the nation's God, viewed their own section as the citadel of the fundamental principles of American government, and assumed that their military was the advance guard of the New Israel crossing the Red Sea of war.

[8] At the close of the nineteenth century, American life once again passed through some transformations that substantially affected perspectives on the national destiny. As the documents in Part Five show, rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration both alarmed Americans who feared that such changes threatened the nation's divine mission and gave evidence that in its rise to economic power and to becoming a refuge of freedom and opportunity for the peoples of the earth, the United States was fulfilling its destiny as God's New Israel. In a particularly apt selection, *The Tendencies of American Progress*, Henry Ward Beecher gives voice to the idea that poverty more often springs from sin, than sin from poverty, and that American destiny under God was inextricably intertwined with American wealth.

[9] The United States hesitated before entering the two world wars. Most citizens initially preferred that their nation remain aloof from what they took to be strictly European conflicts. But after U. S. entrance, defenders of the Allied cause envisioned war as an instrument for the achievement of a higher destiny. This latter sentiment is expressed by President Woodrow Wilson in his defense of the Treaty of Versailles and its plan for a League of Nations, included in Part Six. Reinhold Niebuhr delineates the interlocking nature of American destiny, Allied war aims, and national responsibility for world peace in his 1943 essay titled *Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility*.

[10] In the final section of *God's New Israel*, Cherry documents some of the critical challenges that have decisively shaped America's sense of national destiny since the middle of the twentieth century. These include race problems at home, that have caused Americans to question whether their nation can justly be termed a promised land of liberty, and setbacks abroad that have stirred disquieting questions about the limits of power in America's mission of safeguarding "the rights of democratic freedom around the globe" (303). Particularly insightful on the first is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, while J. William Fulbright effectively represents the second in *The Arrogance of Power*.

Reviewed by Bryan F. Le Beau  
Creighton University

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