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CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

By: Randall Reed

Christian Zionism shares many goals with Jewish Zionism. Historically they have both worked steadfastly for the establishment of an independent Jewish state, and been ferocious defenders of Israel. However, Christian Zionism, as opposed to Jewish Zionism, has been motivated by the prophetic expectations of dispensationalism, which anticipated the return of the Jews to Israel as part of the end time drama. To this end, Christian Zionists associate the creation, defense, and expansion of Israel's territory as a necessary precursor to Christ's return. The Israeli government has exploited this belief for its own political advancement in the United States, even though the dispensationalist scenario ultimately envisions the mass murder of Jews on an enormous scale. Critics of Christian Zionism question the morality of working for an end that envisions the death of Jews that dwarfs the Holocaust, as well as the tendency of Christian Zionists to blindly support the Israeli government. Critics also question Christian Zionists' abandonment of Palestinian Christians in the occupied territories, and the possibility that their inflexibility toward a negotiated settlement with Palestinians may ultimately lead to a less secure Israel because of future demographic conditions.

INTRODUCTION

In 2008 John McCain, Republican nominee for president, announced that he was rejecting the support of Pastor John Hagee. Hagee had said in a sermon that "God sent a hunter. A hunter is someone with a gun and he forces you. Hitler was a hunter. . . . God allowed it to happen. Why did it happen? Because God said my top priority for the Jewish people is to get them to come back to the land of Israel" (Stein 2008). The inference that Hitler was an agent of God's will, and that the Holocaust was a part of a divine plan, shocked Americans. McCain quickly distanced himself saying, "I just think that the statement is crazy and unacceptable" (Reston and Silverstein 2008).

Yet oddly, days later, Hagee received support from an unusual source. Several prominent Jews defended Hagee's statement. Rabbi Aryeh Scheinberg said Mr. Hagee's "words were twisted and used to attack

him for being anti-Semitic.” Scheinberg defended Hagee, saying he had “interpreted a biblical verse in a way not very different from several legitimate Jewish authorities. Viewing Hitler as acting completely outside of God’s plan is to suggest that God was powerless to stop the Holocaust, a position quite unacceptable to any religious Jew or Christian” (Duin 2008). Such a strong defense might seem mysterious to the uninitiated, for both Jewish Zionists and Christian Zionists the connections are clear: Christian Zionism’s steadfast support for Israel is grounded in the logic of dispensationalism, and the relationship between Jewish Zionism and Christian Zionism. By understanding the connections within these seemingly disparate groups, Hagee’s words, and his unexpected defender’s comments, are quite ordinary.

HISTORY OF ZIONISM

An understanding of Jewish Zionism is required to understand Christian Zionism. It is important to recognize that Zionism differs from Christian Zionism. Zionism is a movement that came out of Europe in the nineteenth century. Its most famous founder was Theodore Herzl. Herzl wrote *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) in 1886. Herzl rejected the assimilationist aspect of European Judaism, which sought to integrate into European life. Herzl was profoundly influenced by the Dreyfus Affair in which a Jewish officer in France was tried and convicted for spying, even though the charges proved to be baseless. The Dreyfus Affair set off pogroms throughout Europe, and the promise of safety through assimilation of Jews into mainstream European life disappeared. In the wake of the Dreyfus affair, Herzl rejected the notion that Jews could assimilate in Gentile countries, or that small groups of settlers should migrate to Palestine and set up communities. Both these approaches were ultimately failed experiments from Herzl’s perspective. The only approach left, argued Herzl, was to establish a new Jewish homeland. Herzl was optimistic about the possibilities for success. The nations of Europe did not want the Jews anyway, he reasoned, so they would only be too happy to ship them off to somewhere else.

The question, of course, was where? Zionism fastened on the ancestral homeland of Palestine as their desired place of residence. The fact that previous European groups that had settled in Palestine had not found a warm welcome from the resident Jews, and that the Ottoman empire that currently controlled the territory was adamantly opposed to Jewish expansion in the area, did not deter most Zionists. Herzl was more realistic seeing that the Turks were intransigent regarding Palestine. He suggested in the 1903 Zionist Congress that it consider Uganda, which was part of the British Empire, and which Britain had signaled it might be willing to make a Jewish state. The resulting uproar among the attendees quickly had Herzl retreating from the suggestion and returning to a position of Palestine as the only acceptable Jewish state. Herzl was a tireless advocate for his cause, moving from capital to capital making his case. He ultimately died an early death at age 44.

Timothy P. Weber has noted the various obstacles within the Jewish community that Zionism faced:

Socialists objected to the way Zionism drained off Jewish money and energy from their causes. Ultra-orthodox Jews preferred to wait for God to reestablish Israel through the coming of the Messiah rather than engage in human schemes for doing so. Assimilated Jews refused to forsake their hard-earned status in European society for what they

considered a sentimental dream. . . . Clearly, not all Jews welcomed or accepted Zionism's dream of a Jewish state. (Weber 2005, 99)

Thus, while Zionism had its advocates, among many Jews it was a minority position alternately considered fantastic or dangerous. It is perhaps also notable that for Herzl this was not a religiously oriented endeavor. In fact, as noted above, some of his most ardent critics were from the Jewish religious community. But for Herzl, the argument was not about religion, but about the preservation of the Jewish people. Even in his discussion of Palestine, he commends Palestine as an appropriate homeland, not because of religious reasons, but rather because of the positive impact this would have on getting other Jews to join the movement. In fact he specifically rejects all "theocratic" impulses, and affirms religious freedom (belief and disbelief) for all. In the end, his argument centers on a place free from anti-Semitism, rather than on the Abrahamic promise.

Things looked more positive for Zionism after the British took control of Palestine from the Turks following World War I. The British had promised to pursue the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Yet after the war, Jewish immigration to Palestine was soon restricted following Arab revolts in the area. Eventually, Britain changed its position again and increased its immigration limits. During the Second World War, Jewish immigration picked up again, but was still restricted. Arab riots and revolts during this period continued to cause problems, and Britain struggled to find some way to deal with the situation, eventually earning the enmity of British Zionists, and resulting in an assassination of a British Lord by the Zionist underground. This act was quickly condemned by the Zionist leadership, and perpetrators and collaborators were turned over to the British.

However, the aftermath of World War II, and the horrendous atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis during the Holocaust was the final event that catapulted Zionism to the realization of a Jewish state in Palestine. While Zionists contend that eventually, even without the Holocaust, a Jewish homeland would have been established, even they concede that the collective horror the Holocaust engendered shifted world opinion in their favor. And thus, in November 1947, the U.N. General Assembly passed Resolution 181 in which a Jewish homeland was created in Palestine. The resolution was a high-minded document that opted to create two separate states, one Jewish and one Arab, and put Jerusalem under U.N. jurisdiction. It was shortly after this, in May 1948, Israel declared its existence as an independent state. The path of Zionism had now hit its most notable success.

Of course the path would not be simple; Israel as a state would endure several wars for its existence that in the end would increase its territorial holdings. With the significant increase in land taken in the 1967 Six Day War, a new form of Zionism came to prominence: Religious Zionism. Religious Zionism undoubtedly had played a part in the Zionist longings of many advocates, even if spokespeople like Herzl avoided it. But after the 1967 war, Israel controlled all of Jerusalem, Sinai, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. The result of this is that Israel now held the land known in biblical times as Galilee, Judea and Samaria. In May of 1967, Rabbi Z. Y. Kook, shortly before the Six Day War, proclaimed the state of Israel as "the very fulfillment of the messianic ideal, precisely as it was envisioned by the Prophets" (Aran, 268). Israel's acquisition of the lands of the Bible was therefore justified religiously. The orthodox objection in the beginning days of the Zionism that the reestablishment of the land was the duty of the Messiah and could not be usurped by earthly institutions was eliminated, as the state was now ordained to fulfill precisely those messianic duties. Kook then began the first attempts at

establishing settlements in the occupied territories, but was not content with the acquisitions of the Six Day War, but instead demanded the “true whole Land of Israel” be obtained.

However in 1973, things turned again. After territorial losses in the Yom Kippur War, religious Zionists saw a challenge to their faith. They understood it as a time of God’s testing, and presented themselves as the faithful who would withstand the temptation. They proclaimed an end to the messianic status of the secular state, and proclaimed themselves as the rightful heirs of the Zionist movement. It was then, in 1974, that Gush Emunim (The Block of the Faithful in Israel) was established. It began as a protest movement, but soon became a political force of its own, focused on keeping the land and establishing new settlements in the occupied territories.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF EVANGELICALISM TO ZIONISM

A cursory understanding of the history of Jewish Zionism is important as a backdrop to Christian Zionism as the two will ultimately join forces in common cause. Christian Zionism, likewise, is committed to the territorial preservation and expansion of the state of Israel. Like Jewish Zionism, it focuses on the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, and like religious Jewish Zionism it believes that such a Jewish state is the fulfillment of the biblical promise. Yet the history of Christian Zionism is much different, as are some of its base motivations.

The history of Christian Zionism begins formally with the teachings of John Nelson Darby. Darby developed Dispensationalism, which argued the Bible divided history into ages or “dispensations.” The first five ages reflected the Hebrew Bible until Christ. The Sixth was the age of the Church, and the Seventh the Millennial Reign of Christ at the end of time. There was a gap between the sixth and seventh dispensations, however, as the Jews failed to recognize Jesus as their messiah. This began what was called “The Great Parenthesis,” a period of time between the sixth and seventh dispensations that would end with the rapture, and the seven-year tribulation culminating in the battle of Armageddon and the return of Christ.

The key to dispensationalism’s relationship to Christian Zionism is its rejection of “replacement theology.” Replacement theology held that the Church had become the new Israel, the new chosen people, and that the Jews were thereby no longer relevant for the history of salvation. The prophecies and promises that were given to Judaism were thus transferred to the Church. Dispensationalism denounced such a position. It was, in fact, Judaism’s refusal to accept Jesus as Messiah that opened the great parenthesis, and it would be the Jewish return to the land of Israel, which would signal the impending closure of the great parenthesis.

Thus, dispensationalism had a large stake in Zionism from its very inception. The return of Jews to Palestine, and the reconstitution of the state of Israel, was an essential part of the dispensationalist chronology. In 1891, American dispensationalist William E. Blackstone called for the restoration of Palestine to the Jews in light of the persecution of Jews by the Czar. He circulated a petition signed by prominent people including senators, congressmen, mayors, and even the chief justice of the Supreme Court. While the Harrison administration disregarded the request, and some Jewish Americans actively opposed it, the petition showed the strength dispensationalism and its Christian Zionist agenda was gaining in the states.

History also encouraged Christian Zionists. When Britain took Jerusalem from the Turks and promoted the Balfour Declaration, dispensationalists cheered, as well as Jewish Zionists. Though the actual founding of the state of Israel was further off than dispensationalists expected, dispensationalists were confident that such establishment was only a matter of time.

The dispensationalist agenda has several components beyond the creation of a Jewish nation. Dispensationalists were also keen to convert Jews to Christianity. Part of the dispensationalist chronology coupled the Jewish return to Palestine with mass conversions of the Jews. Christian missions were therefore established early on in Palestine after the British took control of the area.

This desire to convert the Jews also played in to how dispensationalists viewed the Holocaust. While dispensationalists were initially ambivalent toward Hitler in the early 1930s, when they perceived his attacks not against Jews per se, but against Communists who were also incidentally Jewish, by the late 1930s dispensationalists were clear about Hitler's anti-Semitic and murderous end. Yet they also understood such persecutions as part of God's plan, and the pattern God had used in the Old Testament to chasten his people. As with the Babylonians and the Assyrians before them, God was using Hitler to punish the Jews for their lack of faith, though this time it was their lack of faith in Jesus that had provoked God's wrath. Dispensationalists believed that "the spreading crisis had two unintended consequences: It had made Jews more open than ever to the claims of Christ, and it had increased their longing for a Jewish homeland in Palestine" (Weber 2005, 148).

Thus, when Israel declared its independence on May 14, 1948, it was a cataclysmic triumph for dispensationalists, the vindication of everything they had believed. Though at that time the entirety of the biblical lands had not been acquired, the very establishment of a key point of the dispensationalist chronology represented a tremendous moment of confirmation for the dispensationalists, and a reinforcement of its Christian Zionism. Thus, dispensationalists confidently predicted that it was only a matter of time until Israel expanded its holdings. Such confidence proved merited as the Six Day War increased Israel's territory to biblical proportions. Though dispensationalists still remained unsatisfied, they expected Israel to encompass the land from the Nile to the Euphrates River, they saw God's hand clearly at work in both the defense and expansion of the nation of Israel.

CURRENT STATE OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Since the heyday of Christian Zionism after the Six Day War things have been mixed for Christian Zionism. The 1973 Yom Kippur War ended with Israel losing some of the territory captured in 1967. Likewise, the Camp David Accords returned Sinai to Egypt, and removed Israeli settlements from the area. Christian Zionists were disconcerted by both. Hal Lindsey, prominent dispensationalist prophecy writer, predicted that the Camp David Accords would not last. His prophetic ability in this regard was found wanting.

From the other end, Israel soon recognized the potential ally in fundamentalists. The Israeli tourism board arranged free trips for Evangelical pastors to the Holy Lands, and taught the clerics how they could conduct tours for their parishioners. Israeli politicians courted major evangelical preachers like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. Israel understood that evangelicals could be motivated allies for them in the United States, allies who were compelled by an ideology that advocated the strengthening of Israel

and allowed for no compromise with its neighbors. Political groups like the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel, Christians for Israel and the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem were established by Christian Zionists to create public pressure in support of Israel.

The marriage between Christian Zionism and Israel has been an odd one. Christian Zionists who have historically held that conversion of the Jews was necessary, have often had to give up such notions in order to work with the Israeli government. In fact, several of these organizations explicitly disavow any attempt to missionize in Israel. In contradiction with the position of previous Christian Zionist groups, modern groups have seen fit to leave the conversion of the Jewish people in Israel “to God.”

On the other hand, there is a certain amount of cold calculation on the part of Israel as it seeks to exploit its connections with Evangelicals. While it is not necessary that Christian Zionists are dispensationalist (christianzionist.org explicitly rejects the notion that their position is based on “end-times prophecy”), certainly a great majority of Christians interested in biblical prophecy are Christian Zionists precisely because of the role of Israel in the final drama. Still, Israeli leadership seems to discount the predictions of doom and destruction that dispensationalists see in the future for Israel.

More recently, things have been far more complicated for Christian Zionists. The moves of the Olmert government, particularly the dismantling of the Amona settlement in the West Bank, have proved difficult for Christian Zionists to support. Additionally, the “Middle East Road Map” propounded in the first term of the Bush administration was seen as giving up far too much. The Road Map called for the removal of even more settlements in the West Bank, as well as the return of land to the Palestinians as part of the two-state solution. Such positions have been denounced by Christian Zionists like Gary Bauer.

CRITICISM OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

While Christian Zionism has a stable list of advocates and organizations in the United States that continue to support its issues and lobby both churches and congress on its behalf, it has not been without critics. Many critics feel that the problem with Christian Zionism is that it is far too uncritical of the Israeli government. There is a confusion, claim its critics, that support of Israel equals support for any Israeli government action. As the Israeli government moves towards a negotiated settlement of the contested territories, which will likely include ceding some of those territories, this equivalency between “Israel” and the policies of the Israeli government is breaking down for Christian Zionists. Though when it comes to human rights abuses of Israel in the occupied territories, Christian Zionists most often still support Israel without question.

More centrally, however, critics of Christian Zionism argue that the movement is unethical, insofar as its support of Israel is based on dispensationalist prophetic expectations. Gary DeMar and Gary North (both Evangelicals, but not dispensationalists) have argued that it is ultimately morally outrageous that Evangelicals should support Israel, because they see it as hastening the return of Christ when part of that end times scenario is an even greater holocaust of Jews than ever seen before (Demar 2001; North 2000). The dispensationalist chronology promises that Jews in Israel will be massacred by the millions by the Antichrist. That Christian Zionists who believe that this is the ultimate result of their actions continue to work to ensure its eventual occurrence, strikes these critics as demonically Machiavellian.

Other critics have pointed out that Christian Zionism abandons those Christians that live in the Occupied Territories. By steadfastly supporting the expansionist policies of Israel, and supporting Israeli oppressive actions in the Palestinian areas, those Palestinian Christians that suffer under such policies are summarily forgotten. While Christians in the Palestinian territories are a minority (and estimates indicate their numbers are declining), they are rarely mentioned in Christian Zionist literature and speeches. Critics charge that Christian Zionists have abandoned their Christian brothers and sisters in the occupied territories because it is not politically (or prophetically) expedient.

Finally, it is possible that Christian Zionism's advocacy for continual Israeli expansion and resistance to a two-state solution might, in the end, have the opposite effect than the Zionists expect by making Israel less secure. The reason Rabin, Sharon, and Olmert have refused to give up the notion of an independent Palestinian state is because they understand the "demographic time bomb" that awaits them if they do not. As of 2006 the combined population of Israel including the occupied territories was roughly 10.5 million people. In terms of demographic proportions 50.3 percent of that population was Jewish and 49.7 percent was Arab. Currently, Palestinian birthrates far exceed Jewish birthrates. At current levels, Arab peoples in Israel and the occupied territories will outnumber Jews in the near future (some estimates put this as early as 2010, others at 2020). This leaves a united Israel two unpalatable choices; they could enfranchise their Arab citizens and then live as a minority in their own country. Or they could proceed to minority rule of a majority population. Neither of these choices is in keeping with the Zionist ideals or democratic traditions of Israel. The Christian Zionist unyielding perspective, then, could lead to an even less stable Israel, as it has to confront the demographic realities that await it.

See also Genocide; Just War; Right-Wing Extremism.

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