

Countering Armageddon Theology

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The Origins of Christian Zionism

The Zionist dream, so forcefully articulated by Theodor Herzl in *Der Judenstaat* in 1896 and a year later at the First Zionist Congress, may actually be attributed to the writings and activities of Christians like Edward Irving, Lewis Way, Joseph Wolff and Henry Drummond from as early as the 1820's.^[1] The Albury prophetic conferences, named after the village where Drummond lived, gave birth to a proto-Zionist movement committed to the restoration of the Jews to Palestine. Early 19th Century organizations committed to this end included the London Jews Society and Palestine Exploration Fund.

Through the efforts of leaders such as John Nelson Darby, Charles Simeon and Charles Spurgeon, the idea of active British involvement in the restoration of the Jews to Palestine also took shape. Their theological ideas were translated into political reality through the zealous efforts of British politicians such as Lord Shaftesbury, Lord Palmerston, David Lloyd George and Lord Balfour who saw the strategic value of a Jewish State in Palestine. The Jewish Zionist movement itself grew in no small measure due to the involvement of Christian restorationists such as William Hechler. Zionism eventually gained international recognition through the Balfour Declaration, which in 1917, finally guaranteed a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

Christian Zionism Defined

At its simplest, Christian Zionism is a political form of philo-Semitism, and can be defined as 'Christian support for Zionism.'^[2] Walter Riggans interprets the term in an overtly political sense as, 'any Christian who supports the Zionist aim of the sovereign State of Israel, its army, government, education etc., but it can describe a Christian who claims to support the State of Israel for any reason.'^[3] Colin Chapman observes, 'It is hard to think of another situation anywhere in the world where politics have come to be so closely bound up with religion, and where scriptures have such a profound effect on political action.'^[4]

Christian Zionists are essentially apologists for the State of Israel. This support usually involves accusing those critical of Israel of anti-Semitism, and invariably leads to the justification of Israel's illegal occupation and settlement of the West Bank, Golan and Gaza on biblical grounds.

Grace Halsell, for example, asks: 'What is the message of the Christian Zionist? Simply stated it is this: every act taken by Israel is orchestrated by God, and should be condoned, supported, and even praised by the rest of us.'^[5] This leads Dale Crowley, a Washington based religious broadcaster, to describe dispensational Christian Zionism as a cult, indeed, the 'fastest growing cult in America':

'It's not composed of "crazies" so much as mainstream, middle to upper-middle class Americans. They give millions of dollars each week – to the TV evangelists who expound the fundamentals of the cult. They read Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye. They have one goal: to facilitate God's hand to waft them up to heaven free from all the trouble, from where they will watch Armageddon and the destruction of planet earth.'^[6]

The Middle East Council of Churches similarly reject Christian Zionism, 'as representing a heretical interpretation of Holy Scripture',^[7] while John Stott describes it as 'biblical anathema.'^[8]

Whether consciously or otherwise, Christian Zionists subscribe to a religious Jewish agenda best expressed by Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, who claims: ‘We should not forget ... that the supreme purpose of the ingathering of exiles and the establishment of our State is the building of the Temple. The Temple is at the very top of the pyramid.’^[9] Another rabbi, Yisrael Meida, explains the link between politics and theology within Jewish Zionism: ‘It is all a matter of sovereignty. He who controls the Temple Mount, controls Jerusalem. And he who controls Jerusalem, controls the land of Israel.’^[10] This paradigm may be illustrated by way of three concentric rings. The land represents the outer ring, Jerusalem the middle ring and the Temple is the centre ring. The three rings comprise the Zionist agenda by which the Land was claimed in 1948, the Old City of Jerusalem was occupied in 1967 and the Temple site is being contested. For the religious Zionist, Jewish or Christian, the three are inextricably linked.

The Distinctive Theology of Christian Zionism

Seven basic theological tenets are accepted, in varying degrees, by Christian Zionists.

Christian Zionism is founded first of all upon a literal and futurist interpretation of the Bible which leads proponents to distinguish between references to Israel and the Church. Injunctions and promises concerning the ancient Jews are applied to the contemporary State of Israel rather than to the Church. From this hermeneutic flows the conviction that the Jews remain God’s ‘chosen people’, distinct from the Church.

God’s end-time purpose for the Jews is expressed in Restorationism. The destiny of the Jewish people is to return to the land of Israel and reclaim their inheritance promised to Abraham and his descendants for ever. This inheritance extends from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates. Within their land, Jerusalem is recognised to be their exclusive, undivided and eternal capital, and therefore it cannot be shared or divided.

At the heart of Jerusalem will be the rebuilt Jewish Temple to which all the nations will come to worship God. Just prior to the return of Jesus, there will be seven years of calamities and war known as the Tribulation which will culminate in a great battle called Armageddon during which the godless forces opposed to both God and Israel will be defeated.^[11] Jesus will then return as the Jewish Messiah and king to reign in Jerusalem for a thousand years and the Jewish people will enjoy a privileged status and role in the world.

The Political Implications of Christian Zionism

Christian Zionists have shown varying degrees of enthusiasm for implementing six basic convictions that arise from their literal reading of the Bible:

The belief that the Jews remain God’s chosen people leads Christian Zionists to seek to bless Israel in material ways. However, this also invariably results in the uncritical endorsement of and justification for Israel’s racist and apartheid policies, in the media, among politicians and through solidarity tours to Israel.

As God’s chosen people, the final restoration of the Jews to Israel is therefore actively encouraged and facilitated through partnerships between Christian organisations and the Jewish Agency.

Eretz Israel, as delineated in scripture, belongs exclusively to the Jewish people, therefore the land must be annexed and the settlements adopted and strengthened.

Jerusalem is regarded as the eternal and exclusive capital of the Jews, and cannot be shared with the Palestinians. Therefore, strategically, Western governments are placed under pressure by Christian Zionists to relocate their embassies to Jerusalem and thereby recognise the fact.

The Third Temple has yet to be built, the priesthood consecrated and sacrifices reinstated. Christian Zionists offer varying degrees of support to Jewish Temple Mount organisations committed to achieving it.

Since Christian Zionists are convinced there will be an apocalyptic war between good and evil in the near future, there is no prospect for lasting peace between Jews and Arabs. Indeed, to advocate Israel compromise with Islam or coexist with Palestinians in a 'land for peace' deal is to compromise the promises of God and identify with those destined to oppose God and Israel in the imminent battle of Armageddon.

The Significance of the Christian Zionist Movement

Christian Zionism as a movement is very diverse, ranging from individual Christian leaders whose denominations have no stated position on Zionism,^[12] to major international evangelical organizations which are unapologetically Zionist.

Some have an explicit political agenda, such as Bridges for Peace^[13] and the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem^[14], which also enjoys diplomatic status in several Central American countries.^[15] Both have disavowed or redefined the Christian gospel and identify with right-wing Israeli opinion, lobbying the US government to continue to finance Israel's expansionist agenda. Other organisations such as Jews for Jesus and the Churches Ministry among Jewish People (CMJ) are primarily evangelistic or messianic but also espouse Zionism on biblical grounds. Exobus and the Ebenezer Trust are representative of organisations specializing in facilitating the transportation of Jews to Israel from Russia and Eastern Europe, while Christian Friends of Israel Communities encourage churches to adopt Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories.^[16]

Contemporary Christian Zionist leaders include Derek Prince,^[17] Jerry Falwell,^[18] Pat Robertson,^[19] Hal Lindsey,^[20] Mike Evans,^[21] Charles Dyer,^[22] John Walvoord^[23] and Dave Hunt,^[24] These individuals have achieved considerable influence in popularising an apocalyptic view of the future legitimising Zionism among Western Christians. That their teaching also warrants the description 'Armageddon Theology'^[25] is evident from the provocative titles of many of their recent books.^[26]

Christian Zionism is pervasive within mainline evangelical, charismatic and independent denominations including the Assemblies of God, Pentecostal and Southern Baptists as well as many of the independent mega-churches. Crowley claims they are led by 80,000 fundamentalist pastors, their views disseminated by 1,000 Christian radio stations as well as 100 Christian TV stations.^[27] Doug Kreiger lists over 250 pro-Israeli organisations founded in the 1980s alone.^[28]

Estimates as to the size of the movement as a whole vary considerably. While critics like Crowley claim, 'At least one out of every 10 Americans is a devotee', advocates such as Robertson and Falwell claim the support of 100 million Americans with whom they communicate weekly.^[29] Dale Crowley's own estimate is that there are between '25 to 30 million' pro-Israeli Christians in America, a number that is growing.^[30] Robert Boston, for example, in his biography of Pat Robertson, argues that his Christian Coalition, with an annual budget of \$25 million and over 1.7 million members, is 'arguably ... the single most influential political organisation in the U.S.'^[31]

At the other end of the scale, the National Unity Coalition for Israel brings together 200 different Jewish and Christian Zionist organisations including the International Christian Embassy, Christian

Friends of Israel and Bridges for Peace and claims a support base of 40 million active members.[\[32\]](#) These organisations, in varying degrees, and for a variety of reasons, some contradictory, make up a broad coalition which is shaping the Christian Zionist agenda today.

Without the sustained political support of Christian Zionists in America, and significant government funding, it is doubtful whether the State of Israel would have remained in existence since 1948, let alone continued to occupy and settle the West Bank since 1967.

The Constructive and Destructive Aspects of Christian Zionism

The following chart summarises the constructive and destructive aspects of Christian Zionism.[\[33\]](#)

Constructive

1. Encouragement of dialogue between Jews and Christians
2. Commitment to share the Christian message with Jewish people (except Political Dispensationalism)
3. Stand against anti-Semitism
4. Education of the Gentile Church in the Jewish origins of the Christian faith
5. Compassion for and humanitarian work among Jewish refugees

Destructive

1. Justification of apartheid within an exclusive Jewish State
2. Undermining Christian witness in the Middle East by partisan support for Israel
3. Encouragement of religious intolerance and Islamophobia
4. Tacit acceptance of the ethnic-cleansing of Palestinians by their support for the Jewish Settlements
5. Denigration of moderate Jews willing to negotiate a land for peace deal
6. Incitement of religious fanaticism by supporting the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple on Haram Al-Sharif
7. Apocalyptic eschatology in danger of becoming a self fulfilling prophecy.

It may be observed that none of the constructive aspects are necessarily intrinsic or exclusive to Christian Zionism but are shared by other philo-Semitic agencies which work among Jewish people and yet do not support Zionism.[\[34\]](#)

A Critical Assessment of Christian Zionism

The fundamental question Christian Zionists must answer is this: what difference did the coming of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ make to the traditional Jewish hopes and expectations concerning the land and people?[\[35\]](#) Clarence Bass crystallises the issue with a series of more specific rhetorical questions:

‘It is legitimate to ask whether Dispensationalism is not orientated more from the Abrahamic Covenant than from the Cross. Is not its focus centred more on the Jewish kingdom than on the Body of Christ? Does it not interpret the New Testament in the light of Old Testament prophecies, instead of interpreting those prophecies in the light of the more complete revelation of the New Testament?’[\[36\]](#)

Christian Zionists appear to believe that the coming of Jesus Christ made little or no difference to the nationalistic and territorial aspirations of 1st Century Judaism. As a result, the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), representing the indigenous and ancient Oriental and Eastern Churches, regard Christian Zionism as a deviant heresy. They assert, for instance, that Christian Zionists have aggressively imposed an aberrant expression of the Christian faith and an erroneous interpretation of the Bible which is subservient to the political agenda of the modern State of Israel. They claim the movement represents a tendency to:

‘... force the Zionist model of theocratic and ethnocentric nationalism on the Middle East ... (rejecting) ... the movement of Christian unity and inter-religious understanding which is promoted by the (indigenous) churches in the region. The Christian Zionist programme, with its elevation of modern political Zionism, provides the Christian with a world view where the gospel is identified

with the ideology of success and militarism. It places its emphasis on events leading up to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today.'^[37]

In its apocalyptic and political forms especially, Christian Zionism distorts the Bible and marginalises the universal imperative of the Christian message of equal grace and common justice. Bishop Kenneth Crag summarises the implications of its intrinsic ethnic exclusivity:

'It is so; God chose the Jews; the land is theirs by divine gift. These dicta cannot be questioned or resisted. They are final. Such verdicts come infallibly from Christian biblicists for whom Israel can do no wrong - thus fortified. But can such positivism, this unquestioning finality, be compatible with the integrity of the Prophets themselves? It certainly cannot square with the open peoplehood under God which is the crux of New Testament faith. Nor can it well be reconciled with the ethical demands central to law and election alike.'^[38]

Such literalist assumptions preclude any possibility of an alternative reading of the Bible, history or a just and lasting outcome to the Middle East peace negotiations. Instead, Christian Zionism shows an uncritical tolerance of Rabbinic Judaism and an endorsement of the Israeli political Right. At the same time it demonstrates an inexcusable lack of compassion for the Palestinian tragedy and the plight of the indigenous Christian community. In doing so, whether intentionally or otherwise, it has legitimised their oppression in the name of God while committing the Jewish people themselves to an apocalyptic future far more horrifying than even the Shoah.

Christian Zionism: An Alternative?

Colin Chapman suggests that a form of Biblical Zionism which accepts the existence of the State of Israel, can work and pray for the peace and security of the Jewish people alongside a Palestinian state on political and humanitarian grounds without needing to justify or sacralise Israel through biblical or theological arguments.^[39]

Garth Hewitt, a peacemaker and friend of all three faith communities, Jews, Christians and Muslims, has expressed this hope in a song based on words taken from the Jewish Talmud, 'Ten Measures of Beauty.'^[40] The words are offered as a prayer.

'May the justice of God fall down like fire
and bring a home for the Palestinian.
May the mercy of God pour down like rain
and protect the Jewish people.
And may the beautiful eyes of a Holy God
Who weeps for his children
Bring the healing hope for his wounded ones
For the Jew and the Palestinian.'^[41]

For a detailed analysis of Christian Zionism see www.sizers.org

^[1] Stephen Sizer, unpublished PhD, Christian Zionism, Middlesex University, 2002, www.sizers.org; Regina Sharif, *Non-Jewish Zionism, Its Roots in Western History* (London, Zed, 1983).

^[2] Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land, Israel or Palestine?*, revised edition (Oxford, Lion, 2002), p274.

^[3] Walter Riggans, *Israel and Zionism*, (London, Handsell, 1988), p19.

[4] Chapman, op.cit., p304.

[5] Grace Halsell, 'Israeli Extremists and Christian Fundamentalists: The Alliance', Washington Report, December (1988), p31.

[6] Dale Crowley, 'Errors and Deceptions of Dispensational Teachings.' Capital Hill Voice, (1996-1997), cited in Halsell, op.cit., p5. Grace Halsell herself defines Christian Zionism as a cult. See Halsell, op.cit., p31.

[7] MECC, What, op.cit., preface; See also Peter Makari, 'Abrahamic Heritage' MECC News Report, 10:2/3 Summer (1998).

[8] John Stott, cited in Don Wagner, Anxious for Armageddon, (Scottsdale, Herald Press, 1995), p80.

[9] Rabbi Shlomo Chaim Hachohen Aviner, cited in Grace Halsell, Forcing God's Hand, (Washington, Crossroads International, 1999), p71.

[10] Yisrael Meida, cited in Halsell, Forcing, op.cit., p68.

[11] Most dispensationalists, (but not covenant premillennialists) also believe in the Rapture when Christians will be removed from the earth either prior to, during or after the Tribulation – hence three sub divisions within Dispensationalism – Pre-Trib, Mid-Trib and Post-Tribulationists. See Marvin Rosenthal, The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1990).

[12] For example, David Pawson, When Jesus Returns, (London, Hodder, 1998); 'Israel in the New Testament' Israel & Christians Today, Summer (2002), p5; John MacArthur, The Future of Israel, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1991); R.T. Kendall, 'How literally do you read your Bible?' Israel & Christians Today, Summer (2001), p9.

[13] <http://www.bridgesforpeace.com>

[14] <http://www.icej.org.il>

[15] ICEJ have diplomatic status in Honduras and Guatemala and have been implicated in facilitating the funding of the US-backed Contras during the 1980s. Donald Wagner, Anxious for Armageddon, (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, Herald, 1995), p109.

[16] Sarah Honig, 'Adopt-a-Settlement Program', The Jerusalem Post, 2nd October (1995); <http://www.bridgesforpeace.com/publications/dispatch/lifeinIsrael/Article-12.html>

[17] Derek Prince, The Last Word on the Middle East, (Fort Lauderdale, Derek Prince Ministries International, 1982); The Destiny of Israel and the Church, (Milton Keynes, Word, 1992).

[18] Jerry Falwell, Listen, America, (New York, Doubleday, 1980); The Fundamentalist Phenomenon, (New York, Doubleday, 1981); Merrill Simon, Jerry Falwell and the Jews, (Middle Village, New York, Jonathan David, 1984).

[19] Pat Robertson, The New Millennium, 10 Trends That Will Impact You and Your Family By The Year 2000, (Dallas, Word, 1990); The Secret Kingdom: Your Path to Peace, Love and Financial Security, revised edition (Dallas, Word, 1992).

[20] Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth, (London, Lakeland, 1970); The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon, (New York, Bantam, 1981); Israel and the Last Days, (Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House Publishers, 1983); The Road to Holocaust, (New York, Bantam, 1989); Planet Earth 2000 AD Will Mankind Survive? (Palos Verdes, California, Western Front, 1994); The Final Battle, (Palos Verdes, California, Western Front, 1995).

[21] Mike Evans, Israel, America's Key to Survival, (Plainfield, New Jersey, Haven, n.d.); The Return, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1986); Jerusalem Betrayed, (Dallas, Word, 1997).

[22] Charles Dyer, The Rise of Babylon, Signs of the End Times, (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House, 1991); World News and Biblical Prophecy, (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House, 1993).

[23] John Walvoord, Israel in Prophecy, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1962); The Nations in Prophecy, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1967); The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1975); The Rapture Question, revised edition (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1979); The Nations, Israel and the Church in Prophecy, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1988); Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1990); Major Bible Prophecies, (New York, Harper Collins, 1991).

[24] Dave Hunt, The Cup of Trembling: Jerusalem and Bible Prophecy, (Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House, 1995).

[25] Donald Wagner, Anxious, op.cit.; See also Gary DeMar, Last Days Madness, Obsession of the Modern Church, (Atlanta, Georgia, American Vision, 1997); Richard Kyle, The Last Days are Here Again, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker, 1998).

[26] Notably, Hal Lindsey, The 1980's Countdown to Armageddon, (New York, Bantam, 1981); The Road to Holocaust, (New York, Bantam 1989); The Final Battle, (Palos Verdes, California, Western Front, 1995); Edgar C. James, Arabs, Oil and Armageddon, (Chicago, Moody Press, 1977); Marius Baar, The Unholy War, Oil, Islam and Armageddon, (Worthing, Henry E. Walter, 1980); Mike Evans, Israel, America's Key to Survival, (Plainfield, New Jersey, Haven, n.d.); John F. Walvoord, Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan, 1990); The Final Drama, (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1993); Moïse Rosen, Beyond the Gulf War, Overture to Armageddon, (San Bernardino, Here's Life Publishers, 1991); Dave Hunt, Peace, Prosperity and the Coming Holocaust, (Eugene, Oregon, Harvest House, 1983).

- [27] Halsell, Forcing, op.cit., p50.
- [28] Grace Halsell, Prophecy and Politics, (Westport, Connecticut, Lawrence Hill, 1986), p178.
- [29] 'Christians Call for a United Jerusalem' New York Times, 18 April (1997), <http://www.cdn-friends-icej.ca/united.html>
- [30] Halsell, Forcing, op.cit., p50.
- [31] Robert Boston, The Most Dangerous Man in America? Pat Robertson and the Rise of the Christian Coalition, (New York, Prometheus, 1996).
- [32] <http://www.israelunitycoalition.com>
- [33] Stephen Sizer, 'Christian Zionism, True Friends of Israel?' Evangelicals Now, December (2000), p14; 'Justifying Apartheid in the Name of God', Churchman, Summer (2001), pp147-171.
- [34] Based on interviews with representatives. These agencies would include InterVarsity Fellowship, the YMCA, World Vision, and Youth for Christ.
- [35] Colin Chapman, 'Ten questions for a theology of the land' in The Land of Promise, edited by Philip Johnston and Peter Walker, (Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp172-187.
- [36] Clarence Bass, Backgrounds to Dispensationalism, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1960), p151.
- [37] MECC, What is Western Fundamentalist Christian Zionism? (Limassol, Cyprus, Middle East Council of Churches, 1988), p13.
- [38] Kenneth Cragg, The Arab Christian A History in the Middle East, (London, Mowbray, 1992), p238.
- [39] Colin Chapman, Whose Promised Land? (Oxford, Lion, 2002), p.274.
- [40] Talmud, Kiddushin 49b