

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

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AN INTRODUCTION

Politics in the Middle East, which have centered around the possession of the land of Palestine, have been an explosive and recurring issue for many centuries. Many of the disagreements can be traced back to conflicts between religious factions who claim they have a God-given right to the land. Even though the focus has been on religious differences between the Jewish and the Arab peoples, Christian religious groups have and will continue to have a major interest in politics that refer to the land in the Middle East.

Groups of Protestants referred to as Christian Zionists are one such group of Christians that have this interest. They have been active in the political arena when topics have focused on Zionism and/or the reestablishment of the nation of Israel. For the Jewish people, the Zionist movement has been a vehicle used to rally support for their desire to return to the land of Palestine and re-establish themselves as a nation. The movement is organized and universal, and it has branches, committees, and headquarters established worldwide.

However, Zionism has been subject to various interpretations by the Jewish people themselves. Some people think of the movement as a means for the rebirth of a national Jewish consciousness or as a path leading to the reestablishment of the Jewish culture. Others consider Zionism as a religious revival or as a "last and only solution to the Jewish problem" (Davis, 1977, p. 217). Overall, the Jewish people intend to rebuild Jerusalem, erect the temple, and restore the faith that their fathers, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, once had in the land of Palestine.

Christian Zionists support Zionism because they believe that the land of Palestine was prophetically promised to the Jewish people since the time of Biblical Abraham. During the nineteenth century, these Christians actively sought to see the nation of Israel be re-established in the Holy Land. Their interest was due, not only to the prophecy of God's favor of returning "his chosen people" (Horowitz, 1988, p.104) to the promised land, but due to an interest in seeing the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jesus' second advent which was to occur around the same time. Thus, these believers have an interest in the reestablishment of Israel from a theological perspective.

Currently, even though the term Christian Zionist refers to people with the same eschatological belief, they are dispersed amongst diverse religious movements and are referred to by different labels. A majority of believers are associated with Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Russellites. Also, some followers of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Charles T. Russell, Hal

Lindsey, Jimmy Swaggart, and Billy Graham are considered Christian Zionists. In addition, some members of the Evangelical New Christian Right and members of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ) have been referred to as Christian Zionists. Furthermore, the people in these numerous groups have also been labeled Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, Pre-millennialists, Post-millennialists, Bible Students, and “born again” Christians (Ariel, 1991; Horowitz, 1988; Barry & Preusch, 1989; Everett, 1988; Hanna, 1982; Sidney, 1992).

Historical Basis Of Christian Zionism

Prevalence of the Belief that Jews Would Return to Homeland

As early as the sixteenth century, men began to promote the belief that the Jewish people would return to the land of Palestine. Francis Kelt was one of the first advocates of this thought; however, he was considered a heretic and was burned in 1589. In the 1590s, Thomas Brightman believed that Jerusalem would be the center of the universe and that the Jews would be restored to the land of Palestine. Also, he put the thought of the Jews’ restoration in the context of a Millenarian scheme. In 1621, Henry Finch wrote *The Calling of the Jews*. He believed the biblical references to Israel, Zion, Judah, and Jerusalem were to be understood literally and that the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel were meant to be fulfilled through the actual descendants of Abraham.

Increase Mather also was an early advocate of present-day Zionism. He expressed hope that the Jews would be converted to Christianity and restored to the land of Palestine. In 1669, he wrote a book, *Mystery of Israel’s Salvation*, and stated that “the conversion of the Jews to Christianity and their restoration to Zion would come as a prelude to the Millennial Age” (Ariel, 1991, p. 3). However, even though Mathers had supporters, no movement which advocated these beliefs formed during the seventeenth century.

Concurrent with these American promoters of the Jewish restoration ideology, people in England were beginning to change their attitude toward the Jewish people. To explain, in 1290, Jewish people had been expelled from England as a result of the Expulsion Act (Ariel, 1991). However, during the 16th century, a reformation was beginning to take form. The civil war that began in England in 1642 gave rise to groups and individuals who anticipated the imminent return of Jesus. These expectations had a direct effect on the attitudes of the English Commonwealth toward the Jews. Consequently, the Expulsion Act of 1290 was canceled and Jews were allowed to enter England. Thus, the Bible began to influence people’s thinking, and the idea of a national Jewish restoration became popular. Ariel stated that these ideas proved to be “the seeds and early beginnings of . . . a movement that was to appear later” (p. 2).

Roots of Christian Zionism and Theological Concepts

The roots of Christian Zionism can be traced back to the early 1800s. At that time, Christians who believed that the Zionist movement was necessary in order to fulfill prophecy

were referred to as Dispensationalists, Premillennialists, Millenarians, or Russellites. In order to better understand and appreciate their eschatological theology, it is necessary to understand the difference between some of the key theological concepts that were popular at that time. Some of the major concepts were dispensationalism, amillennialism, post-millennialism, pre-millennialism, literalism, and futurism.

Dispensationalism is based on the belief that God has a divine plan for mankind which is revealed in the Bible. Each part of the plan will take place during a specific era or time period. Dispensationalists assert that “history has a definite and predetermined course, which was decided by God and written in the Scriptures by his prophets” (Ariel, 1991, p. 20).

Amillennialism is a religious belief that has prevailed since the fifth century. Amillennialists believe that prophecies concerning a millennial kingdom (a kingdom in which Jesus will reign on earth for a thousand years) should be interpreted symbolically; they do not believe that an actual millennial kingdom will come to pass (Ariel, 1991; Rausch, 1979).

Post-Millennialism refers to the belief that a millennial kingdom will come to pass through human efforts, such as efforts to spread the gospel or the implementation of Christian values. Thus, post-millennialists believe that conditions amid mankind will steadily improve until society is brought to perfection (Ariel, 1991; Rausch, 1979).

In contrast to post-millennialism, pre-millennialism refers to the belief that Jesus will return to earth at his second advent, and he will be the agent who will set up a kingdom of God. This kingdom will last for a millennium, and mankind will be restored to a condition of peace and perfection. Premillennialists base this belief on the inerrancy of the Bible; therefore, they are staunch believers in a literal interpretation of the Scriptures (Ariel, 1991; Rausch, 1979; Horowitz, 1988; Sandeen, 1970).

Literalistic believers interpret the prophetic references in the Bible, which relate to the promises to Israel, as applying to the Jewish people. This is in contrast to mainline Christians, such as Catholics and liberal Protestants, who interpret the Scriptures that refer to Israel as applicable to the Christian Church. This doctrinal debate dates from the time of the Apostles and the early church fathers.

At that time, Chiliasm, which refers to the belief in a millennium, was thought to be a common inheritance of Jewish and Gentile Christians. However, during the time of the union of Church and State under Constantine, the Roman Catholic Church spiritualized the doctrine and applied it to itself. Consequently, from that time, “the same anti-chilastic theory held control of theology” (Rausch, 1979, p. 69).

Literalists believe that the Scriptures prophesy that the Jews will be restored in the land of Palestine (Ariel, 1991). In summation, literalists believed that all the prophecies in the Bible which concern Israel should be taken literally and applied to the Jewish people and not the Christian church. Thus, the Scriptures refer to an earthly restoration of the Jewish people.

One of the results of this literal interpretation of Scripture is the doctrine of futurism. Futurism means that prophetic interpretation of some events are to occur in the future (Ariel,

1991). This view is in contrast to the historicist view which posits that prophetic events have already taken place. Thus, futurists feel that some prophecies referring to Israel have not yet been fulfilled. Therefore, futurists expect to see specific prophecies fulfilled in a future dispensation (Allis; 1978).

In summation, during the beginning of the 1800s, many Christians in both England and America were beginning to express interest in the belief that Jesus' second advent was due and that the Jews would eventually return to Palestine.

English Influence on Christian Zionism

In London, by the year 1809, The Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews was organized. However, the society achieved most success as an advocate of Protestant Zionism. Eventually, this society became a missionary society which was devoted to training and supporting Jews who converted to Christianity (Allis, 1978; Sandeen, 1970).

Simultaneous to the activity in England during the 1800s, Americans began to visit the Holy Land and sent missionaries to Palestine. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions was the first major missionary society that was formed. In 1827, a man named Moses Montifiore made a series of trips to Palestine. When he returned, he founded the Palestine Fund. (Davis, 1977; Jolly, 1985) Overall, these missionaries influenced the attitudes of American Protestants toward the Holy Land; consequently, interest in the land of Palestine increased amongst Christians in America.

Concurrent with these events, some Protestants in England and America began to believe that in order for Jesus to be able to return and set up a millennial kingdom, the restoration of Israel had to take place (Ariel, 1991). Ariel stated that a man named Jonathan Edwards advocated the idea of a millennium; he believed that America would have "a rule and mission in spreading the true gospel to the world" (p. 5).

Pastor John McDonald's Influence

Also, in 1814, Pastor John McDonald, a Presbyterian minister in Albany, New York was fascinated by Old Testament prophecies that concerned the nation of Israel. He and his congregation were particularly interested in the passages found in the book of Isaiah 18. Of special importance was the verse that evokes "the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia." (Grose, 1984, p. 9) McDonald felt that the United States was the land under the outstretched wings of the mighty eagle, and he believed this verse was a "call to faith and action" (Grose, p. 9). By this he meant that the Christians in America were to lead other nations in the call of having the Jews return to the land of Zion.

John Nelson Darby's Influence

A man who began to solidify these beliefs into a theological system was John Newton

Darby. Darby shaped and crystallized the earlier ideas concerning the second coming of Jesus and the restoration of the Jews in the Holy land. These beliefs eventually were the basis for the eschatological theology of a religious group which formed in England, and the followers were referred to as Dispensationalists, Millenarians, or Plymouth Brethren (Ariel, 1991; Sandeen, 1970).

Their founder, Darby, held to a philosophy of history which divided time into distinct eras which were called dispensations, and he felt that the Scriptures should be applied to different groups in different time periods. Thus, he distinguished the difference between the Scriptures that were intended for the spiritual Christian church and the Scriptures that were intended for the nation of Israel). Darby's theological system became known as dispensationalism.

Darby and almost all of the Plymouth Brethren advocated a futurist rather than a historicist interpretation of the book of Revelation (Sandeen, 1970). Darby felt that Scripture applies to different time periods; therefore, people should "rightly divide the word of Truth" (Sandeen, 1970) in order to understand which Scriptures apply to which time period.

In 1828, Darby published an article entitled, "Consideration on the nature and unity of the Church of Christ" (Allis, 1978, p. 288). The rise of Brethrenism is dated from this event. From that time, the group of Christians who followed Darby's theological system became known as the Plymouth Brethren. The adherents were known as Plymouth Brethren because Plymouth was the center which had the most substantial group of adherents of this doctrine (Allis, 1978).

The Brethren Movement began to spread in England and Ireland, and the adherents began to denounce manmade systems of Church government. Eventually, they withdrew from the established denominational Churches because they wanted to revive apostolic Christianity. Thus, many Brethren withdrew membership from their established churches and began to form sects (Sandeen, 1970). Consequently, "they developed a religious system as distinctive as those they renounced" (Allis, 1978, p. 16).

By 1826, The Society for the Investigation of Prophecy was formed in London. That same year, the Brethren held their first meeting, which was referred to as a Bible Conference. These believers, which were sometimes referred to as Millenarians, were specifically interested in the restoration of the Jews to Palestine which they firmly believed was prophetic. Sandeen stated that, "Millenarians had come of age by 1828. . . . (and) the doctrine formulation of this eschatology was established by 1830" (p. 22). By 1842, another prophetic society was formed which was named The Prophecy Investigation Society. Overall, these societies helped Darby's theology and the Millenarians to flourish.

Darby's dispensational theology spread to America when he visited the United States and Canada seven times between 1862-1877. He found a greater scope for his influence particularly in the larger cities of the midwest and east. Thus, Darby's visit to America spread his dispensational teaching to members of mainline Protestant denominations (Ariel, 1991). As a result of his visits, dispensationalism and Millenarian theology influenced millions of Americans.

In 1862, John Inglis of New York began a monthly publication of a journal entitled “Waymarks in the Wilderness.” This journal helped to spread the teachings of the Brethren. The Brethren Movement, from which dispensationalism derived, denounced the historic needs of the Church and manmade systems. Therefore, in America, as in England, Darby’s dispensational teaching spread mainly amongst Christians from Protestant denominations. The group insisted that they alone were truly subject and submissive to the Bible. Eventually, many followers in America broke away from their traditional denominations, and as stated earlier, they developed a system as distinctive as those they renounced (Allis, 1978; Sandeen, 1970; Ariel, 1991).

In summation, the dispensational teaching of today can be traced directly back to the Brethren movement which arose in England and Ireland about the year 1830. Darby’s dispensationalism drew a sharp distinction between Christianity and Judaism, and the Church as distinct from Israel. The followers of this theology believed that God has assigned different roles to the Church and to Israel. Dispensationalists differentiate sharply between Israel and the Church. In contrast to traditional Christian understanding that identifies the Church as Israel, premillennialists recognize the Jewish people as the heirs of the Old Testament. They emphasized the restoration of the Jews to Palestine as fulfillment of the literal interpretation of Scripture. As a result, the literal interpretation of the Scriptures became a marked feature of the Dispensationalists (Allis, 1978; Ariel, 1991; Sandeen, 1970).

Dispensationalists believe that God has a different plan for humanity in each dispensation of age. Dispensationalism asserts that history has a definite and predetermined course which was decided by God and written in the Scriptures by his prophets. This belief system was crystallized in Britain in 1820-1830 and is connected with Darby and Plymouth Brethren. It emphasized the importance of the Jewish nation in the great events that would precede the establishment of the Millennial kingdom (Ariel, 1971).

Social Organizations Begin to Form

Eventually, the movement began to divide the Protestants into conservative and liberal groups. At that time, two social organizations were formed which assisted the individuals in these groups to form cohesion with one another. These organizations also helped the movement gain momentum. The organizations were Bible Institutes and Prophetic Conferences.

A major figure associated with Bible Institutes was Dwight L. Moody. Moody was influenced by the theology of the Plymouth Brethren since his exposure to their teachings in the late 1860s. As a result, he established a Bible house in Chicago which became known as the Moody Bible Institute. The Institute was especially interested in converting and evangelizing Jewish people to Christianity. However, the Institute eventually became an educational center for training people who held to the premillennialist beliefs (Ariel, 1991; Rausch, 1979; Sandeen, 1970).

Also, the Bible Institute became a “rallying point for the entire movement” (Rausch, 1979, p. 32), and Bible teachers from the United States and overseas were regular speakers at the

Institute. In 1866, Moody formed the Student Volunteer Movement which was an agency to train students to serve as foreign missionaries.

Following the example of the Moody Bible Institute, other Institutions began to develop between the years of 1875 and 1908 (Ariel, 1991; Sandeen, 1970). Overall, the development of Bible Institutes made it possible for believers of the same premillennialist, dispensationalist theology to not have to affiliate with their denominational churches. Sandeen stated that the function of the Bible Institutes became comparable to the role of a headquarters of a denomination. Thus, many leaders affiliated with the Bible Institutes did not possess any traditional denominational ties.

Another social system which served as a center point of gathering were the Prophetic Conferences. (See Z1872 and Z1903 for Paster Russell's comments about the conferences.) At these Conferences, ministers, theologians, and laymen from different denominational backgrounds united around the same eschatological beliefs. These conferences were held annually in America from 1878 to the beginning of the twentieth century (Allis, 1978; Sandeen, 1970; Rausch, 1979). The conferences were modeled after conferences which were held by the Plymouth Brethren in Britain from 1826 to 1831.

At the conferences, the attendants were able to collaborate and exchange ideas about their beliefs. However, these discussions were controlled. Sandeen (1970) stated that "no appeal to authority was allowed in these sessions except the authority of direct biblical quotation or an arrangement designed to reconcile Scriptural references" (pp. 20-21). Individuals would give discourses about certain Biblical topics. However, the main focus at these conferences were talks given on prophetic chronology, the second advent of Christ, and the restoration of the Jews (Ariel, 1991; Rausch, 1979).

A principle aim at the conferences was to restore prophetic study of the Bible as well as to encourage the Christians gathered there to inform the Jewish people about God's plan (Rausch, 1979). By 1895, the participants at the conferences became engaged in an aggressive missionary work toward the Jews (Ariel, 1991).

Overall, the conferences provided occasions when participants made friendships with other believers and provided the forum where leadership could be developed. Also, the conferences gave structure to the Millenarian movement, and the Millenarians were able to have a spiritual home as well as develop a sense of community (Sandeen, 1970). In addition, due to publicity of these conferences, the public became more aware of the movement and the followers' doctrines.

William Blackstone and Arno C. Gabelein

William Blackstone, a Methodist, wrote a book in 1878, entitled *Jesus Is Coming*, which sold over a million copies. His book emphasized the Jewish people's right to the land of Palestine and their eventual restoration. Eventually it was translated into 48 languages including Hebrew. (Ariel, 1991; Rausch, 1979)

In 1888-1889 Blackstone visited Palestine. When he returned, he came to believe that the United States had a special role to play in God's plan for mankind. He felt the United States was to lead other nations in taking steps to restore Palestine to the Jews. (Ariel, 1991; Grose) Therefore, in 1891, Blackstone petitioned President Harrison on a humanitarian basis to consider the need to do "something" for the Jews. (Grose, p. 36) Again in 1914 and 1920, Blackstone wrote to the Presidents of the United States. In his correspondence, he expressed his belief that, based on Isaiah 18, the United States had a special mission to accomplish toward the restoration of Israel to Zion (Ariel, 1991).

Thus, a half of a decade before the formation of political Zionism by the Jewish people, a Christian from America perceived that Zionism was to be the means for the fulfillment of God's Divine plan (Ariel, 1991). Ariel stated that "His (Blackstone's) efforts toward the establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine by means of international consent antedated the rise of political Zionism" (pp. 56-57). Ironically, through Blackstone's personal efforts, he made the prophetic reference of Isaiah 18 come to pass.

Another Christian, who was prominent a promoter of Zionism was Arno C. Gabelein. Gabelein was a German who had no direct connection with the Zionist movement. During the 1890's, Gabelein's ministry was directed toward the Jews in New York. He published a monthly Yiddish paper to spread his beliefs amongst the Jews. In his publications, he told of the prophecies applicable to the regathering of Israel which were still unfulfilled (Rausch, 1979.) Gabelein believed that the only hope for the Jewish people would be to accept Jesus as their Messiah. Gabelein felt that the converted Jews would not be obligated to join any particular Christian denomination, but that they would form their own congregation and retain their Jewish identity (Ariel, 1991). Gabelein felt that after the Jews' conversion, "the Jewish people would then be redeemed and would fulfil their religious and national hopes" (Ariel, 1991, p. 99).

Gabelein also published a periodical written in English entitled *Our Hope*. With this publication, he attempted to awaken Christians' interest in the prophetic message in the Bible. Also, he wanted to "alert the Gentiles to the remarkable Zionist awakening among the Jewish population" (Sandeen, 1970, p. 215). By the beginning of 1900, Gabelein was holding conferences on a regular basis throughout the United States.

In summation, Gabelein is noted for the good will and kindness he showed toward Jews. In his publications, he reported on the Zionist achievements which he felt were proof that the coming of Jesus at his second advent was imminent. Overall, he believed that the national revival among the Jewish people and their resettlement of Palestine were indicative that the dispensationalist understanding of the Bible was correct (Ariel, 1991).

Charles Taze Russell's Contributions

Another active Christian in promulgating the Zionist ideal during that era was Charles T. Russell. Russell, born in 1852, also believed that the secret of God's plan was written in the Scriptures and that the secret could be understood by properly understanding the different

dispensations in the Bible (Horowitz, 1988). Consequently, Russell began to study Bible chronology. He discerned from the Scriptures that the period between 1878 to 1914 would be an important time for the Jewish people (Jolly, 1985). More specifically, Russell believed that the Scriptures indicated that 1878 was the “set time for the return of divine favor to Israel” (p. 70). By this he meant that God’s favor would return to the Jewish people; therefore, God would ensure that the Jews would return to the Holy land and their establishment as a nation would come to pass.

In 1870, Russell formed a religious group in Allegheny, Pa. At that time, he published several books explaining God’s plan for mankind and the return of the Jews to Palestine (Horowitz, 1988). Russell wrote a booklet, “Jewish Hopes and Prospects” which was directed toward Christians. In this publication, he explained specific Scriptures which referred to the restoration of Israel. Also, he wrote numerous sermons which were published in over 1000 newspapers in the United States and Canada. In these publications, he showed through Scripture that the dominant theme of the Bible is centered around the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland in Palestine (Horowitz, 1988).

The climax of Russell’s work with the Jewish people took place in 1910. At that time, Russell addressed the Jewish people at the Hippodrome in New York City. At this meeting, he was enthusiastically received and spoke to 4,000 prominent Jews gathered there.

In sum, Russell endeavored to stimulate interest in the prophecies relating to the Jewish people’s reestablishment as a nation in the Holy land. He stressed that a divine blessing was to be poured out upon the Jews after their return to the promised land (Horowitz, 1988). However, Russell differed with his contemporaries on some fundamental Biblical doctrines; therefore, he did not participate in the work done by the Millenarians. (See Z1872 and Z1903.) Even though he held to the same doctrines of premillennialism, dispensationalism, and the return of the Jews to Palestine, his work was separate from the Millenarians. Consequently, to this day, his followers are considered a separate body of Christians and are referred to as Russellites (Ariel, 1991; Allis, 1978).

In conclusion, during the late 1890s, the Millenarian movement reached a level of influence and power that marked their meridian (Sandeem, 1970). Rausch (1979) stated that “the 19th century was a triumphal century for the premillennial doctrine” (p. 58). However, within the United States, the Millenarians and the Russellites never grew larger than any of the denominations to which the followers previously belonged.

Millenarians Become Fundamentalists and Evangelicals

Eventually, in the 1920s, the Millenarian movement changed its name to Fundamentalism (Sandeem, 1970; Rausch, 1979). The Fundamentalists continued to hold to the same theological beliefs, and they encouraged Bible Study. Also, they continued to hold Prophecy Conferences and supported Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges where dispensational theology was stressed (Ariel, 1991).

Also around the 1920s, the followers of C.T. Russell became dispersed among different groups, and most of his followers referred to themselves as Bible Students. They, too, continued to encourage Bible study, publish books and periodicals, and hold numerous Bible conventions in different regions of the world throughout the year.

Between the years of 1920 and 1940, the Fundamentalist movement became more militant than the Millenarians of the nineteenth century. Consequently, the word “fundamentalist” acquired a negative connotation. Therefore, the Fundamentalists experienced a split around 1940 with the more moderate individuals calling themselves Evangelicals (Ariel, 1991).

In summation, Christians from these different movements, Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Russellites, are part of the historical movement that has flowed from the nineteenth century to the present. Even though they hold to similar eschatological beliefs, their differences on specific religious doctrines have an effect on politics relevant to Israel in the Holy Land today.

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