

## How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend

Timothy P. Weber

In its fiftieth anniversary year, the State of Israel has no better friends than American evangelicals. So it seemed to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when he addressed the Voices United for Israel Conference in Washington, D.C., in April 1998. Most of the 3,000 in attendance were evangelicals, including Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition, Kay Arthur of Precept Ministries, Jane Hanson of Women's Aglow, and Brandt Gustavson of the National Religious Broadcasters. (Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson supported the conference but did not attend.)

On the day before he met with President Bill Clinton, who urged him to trade West Bank land for peace with the Palestinians, Netanyahu told the conference: "We have no greater friends and allies than the people sitting in this room."

To many observers, the close relationship between Israel and many American evangelicals seems baffling. Many American evangelicals pledge their love for the State of Israel, support its claims against those of the Palestinians, and resist anything that might undercut Israel's security. But they also target Jews for evangelism and sometimes blame them for the mess the world is in. Israel eagerly accepts evangelicalism's public support and aggressively courts its leaders. But many Jews bitterly condemn Christian proselytism and do what they can to restrict the activities of missionaries in Israel. Nevertheless, both sides seem to be getting more than enough out of their relationship.

The close tie between evangelicals and Israel is important: It has shaped popular opinion in America and, to some extent, U.S. foreign policy. To understand how it developed, one must know something about how many evangelicals interpret Bible prophecy and what difference their beliefs have made in the world of politics.

Why do evangelicals care so much about Israel? How did this special relationship develop? What has it produced? On the most basic level, evangelicals love Israel because of the Bible. Many evangelicals have vivid memories of sitting in Sunday school rooms, staring at maps of Bible Lands and listening to Bible stories week after week. Through such experiences, evangelicals came to view the Bible's story as their own and the land of the Bible as a kind of home away from home. Israel is where the Lord Jesus was born, ministered, was crucified, and rose again. Every year thousands of evangelicals take what amounts to a religious pilgrimage to Israel to "walk where Jesus walked" and see for themselves places they have read about their whole lives.

Evangelicals' view of the Bible gives them a proprietary interest in Israel. It is the Holy Land, the site of God's mighty deeds. In a way, they think the Promised Land belongs to them as much as it does to Israelis.

### **Writing the end-times script**

But there is much more to the evangelical-Israel connection: Most of those who gathered in Washington to show their support for Israel believe that the Holy Land will be ground zero for events surrounding the second coming of Jesus Christ. Such evangelicals read the Bible as though it were a huge jigsaw puzzle of prophecies, with Israel in the center. They believe that human history is following a predetermined divine script, and they and Israel are simply playing their assigned roles.

These beliefs come out of a complex system of biblical interpretation known as dispensationalism, which is a version of premillennialism (the belief that Christ will return *before* setting up his millennial kingdom). As the name implies, dispensationalism divides up the Bible and human history into various eras or dispensations, based on how God deals with humanity. Basic to the system was the way it detected two distinct divine plans, one for an "earthly" people (Israel) and the other for a "heavenly" people (the church). According to John Nelson Darby, the Englishman who shaped dispensationalism in the mid-1800s, biblical prophecies for one group do not apply to the other, and God deals with only one group at a time. Thus "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15) means keeping the two peoples and programs completely separate.

God's dealings with Israel are the key to the dispensational system. Through a series of covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, God made Israel his chosen people and promised to establish Messiah on David's throne forever. In Daniel 7-9, nineteenth-century dispensationalists believed, God spelled out the divine plan: because of its sin, Israel will be subjugated by four successive Gentile powers until, finally, the "times of the Gentiles" are complete. On divine cue, one of the Gentile rulers will issue a decree to rebuild Jerusalem's fallen walls. Sixty-nine weeks later, Messiah will come to the Holy City but be rejected ("cut off") by his own people. During the Seventieth Week, an evil ruler will try to destroy the Jews, but at week's end Messiah will return to defeat him and re-establish David's throne.

These dispensationalists believed that much of Daniel's prophecy of the Seventy Weeks was literally fulfilled in the history of Israel and the first coming of Jesus Christ. But there was a major problem: why did Messiah not return to finish his work at the end of the Seventieth Week as predicted? To answer this question, those dispensationalists developed a "postponement theory." When Jews rejected Jesus, as the prophecy said they would, God unexpectedly postponed Jesus' return, started putting together a new people, the church, and unplugged the prophetic clock. Thus, for its entire history, the church has existed in a prophetic time warp, what dispensationalists call the "great parenthesis."

A second question then needed answering: When and how will God resume the prophetic countdown? Dispensationalists answer, "At the pretribulation rapture of the church." Since God had decided to work with only one group at a time, God must remove the church from the earth before focusing attention again on the Jews. After Jesus comes *for* his saints in the "Rapture" (1 Thess. 4:13-17), the prophetic clock starts ticking again. Once the church is gone, Daniel's Seventieth Week (the "great tribulation" of Matt. 24, 2 Thess. 2, and Rev.) can begin, after which Jesus will return *with* his already raptured saints to defeat Antichrist, the great persecutor, and establish his millennial reign.

During the 1870s, Darby made a number of trips to the United States, where his dispensationalism got mixed reviews. Most evangelicals at the time were either postmillennialists (Christ will return *after* the world is Christianized) or amillennialists (the millennium should be taken figuratively). In an age of optimism, dispensationalism seemed too pessimistic for most evangelicals, some of whom labeled it a "heresy."

Despite its minority status among evangelicals initially, dispensationalism gained a respectable following through prophetic conferences, Bible institutes, a plethora of magazines and popular books, and a committed clientele for whom it was the key to unlock biblical truth. Every major American revivalist since D. L. Moody has been a premillennialist of some kind; and Pentecostalism has more or less followed the dispensationalist line since its inception in the early twentieth century. The Scofield Reference Bible, whose notes explained biblical texts from a dispensational perspective, was published in 1909 and became an authoritative and effective recruiter for the movement.

By the twenties, many fundamentalists considered dispensationalism a nonnegotiable part of Christian orthodoxy. Since then, the system has been nurtured through an elaborate network of schools, publishing houses, mission agencies, radio and television programming, and the like. Channel surfers on cable tv know that dispensationalists are master communicators.

#### **Dispensationalism's sensational influence**

Clearly, one does not have to be a dispensationalist to be influenced by one. In his recent study of prophecy belief in modern American culture, historian Paul Boyer found that in addition to the relatively small number of committed "experts" who study Bible prophecy and seem to have everything figured out, there are millions of others who are not so well informed but still believe the Bible contains valuable clues about the future. Such people are susceptible to popularizers who "confidently weave Bible passages into highly imaginative end-time scenarios, or who promulgate particular schemes of prophetic interpretation."

Even secular people who normally ignore the Bible may, during times of crisis, pay attention to someone who uses the Bible to explain what is going on when the world seems to be falling apart. Boyer concludes that dispensational views about Israel and the course of history have influenced popular opinion far beyond the boundaries of the dispensational movement.

**In the last 50 years, Israel has needed all the friends it can get, and evangelicals have been loyal and productive supporters.**

What dispensational beliefs have influenced a significant number of evangelicals and the broader American culture? For a hundred and fifty years, dispensationalists have been predicting something like the following:

- After the "times of the Gentiles" are finished and the Jews are regathered in the Holy Land, human civilization will begin to unravel. Morals will decline, families will break apart, crime and anarchy will increase. Wars, political and economic unrest, natural disasters, unstoppable epidemics, shifts in weather patterns, and other calamities will increase suffering and despair. Organized Christianity will experience apostasy; religious leaders will abandon historic beliefs and behavioral standards and openly embrace heresy and immorality. Despite massive efforts to stop civilization's demise, nothing can stop its downward slide.
- After the rapture of the church, a charismatic leader will gain a following by promising peace and security. This Antichrist heads up a ten-nation confederacy in western Europe. Unaware of Antichrist's true identity, Israel will sign a treaty with him to guarantee its security, then rebuild its temple in Jerusalem. After three and a half years, Antichrist will break the treaty, declare himself to be God, and persecute all who refuse to worship him and receive his mark on their foreheads. Antichrist will be helped by a False Prophet, a seductive religious leader, who will use miraculous powers and repressive measures to force compliance. For three and a half years, a remnant of God's people who were converted after the Rapture (Rev. 7:4) will suffer horrible persecution in the Great Tribulation.
- Despite Antichrist's power, other nations will rise in opposition. Some time after Antichrist betrays Israel, a northern confederation of nations under Russian control will join with a southern confederacy to launch a devastating double attack against Israel. This move will prompt the intervention of Antichrist's armies from the west and a 200-million-man army under the "kings of the east." As armies from east and west converge on Israel, the Russian confederates will try to destroy Israel; but God will intervene to destroy them. With the northern confederacy annihilated, the forces of Antichrist and the "kings of the east" will do battle at Armageddon, a valley northwest of Jerusalem. While the battle rages, Jesus will return, wipe out the surviving armies, subdue Antichrist, and set up his millennial kingdom. Finally, the surviving Jews will accept Jesus as their Messiah. For a thousand years, King Jesus will rule the world from Jerusalem, while Jewish priests perform sacrifices in the restored temple. In the end, God will fulfill all the promises to Israel. The redemptive plan will be complete.

Obviously, the key to this entire prophetic plan is the refounding of Israel as a nation state in Palestine. Without Israel, the whole plan falls apart.

#### **Reading the signs of the times**

In the nineteenth century, most British and American evangelicals did not believe in the restoration of the Jews. They believed that God is essentially finished with the Jews as a people. According to this "replacement theology," because Jews had rejected Jesus, God had rejected them and had transferred divine favor to the church. The church has become the New Israel and has received all the Old Israel's promises and prophecies.

Dispensationalists (and a few nondispensationalists besides) insisted that God is not yet finished with the Jews, and while there was little movement in that direction, they looked for evidence that Jews were heading back to Palestine. A few Jewish agricultural colonies were established in Palestine in the 1880s and '90s, but the number of colonists was small. The Zionist movement was organized in the 1890s, yet at first few Jews paid it much mind. Dispensationalists at that time seemed more eager for Jews to move back to Palestine than did Jews themselves.

Most dispensationalists were content to let God handle the details. It was their job to teach the truth and monitor the signs of the times. But not all dispensationalists were bystanders. A small minority wanted to help move things along.

No American dispensationalist beat the drum for a Jewish state more than William E. Blackstone (1841-1935). Born in New York and reared in an evangelical Methodist home, after the Civil War Blackstone settled in Oak Park, Illinois, and established himself as a successful businessman and lay evangelist to the Chicago business community. He became a dispensationalist and a close friend of D. L. Moody. In 1878 he published *Jesus Is Coming*, which went through three editions, was translated into 42 languages, and was dispensationalism's first bestseller in America.

In the late 1880s, Blackstone visited new Jewish settlements in the Holy Land and returned to Chicago committed to helping the restoration of the Jews. In 1890 he organized the first conference of Christians and Jews in Chicago and used the occasion to push for a new Jewish state. Most participants, including the Jews, were not interested.

Undeterred, in 1891 Blackstone drew up a petition (or "memorial") advocating the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. In short order, he collected 413 signatures from leading Americans, including the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the speaker of the House, the mayors of Chicago, New York, and Boston, and business leaders such as Cyrus McCormick, John D. Rockefeller, and J. Pierpont Morgan. Blackstone forwarded the memorial to President Benjamin Harrison, who ignored it, and later he sent others to Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

In spite of his ongoing efforts to convert Jews to Christ, he became good friends with Zionist leaders and regularly sent them the results of his prophetic study. In 1918, at a Zionist conference in Philadelphia, organizers hailed Blackstone as a "Father of Zionism"; and in 1956, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of his memorial to President Harrison, the citizens of Israel dedicated a forest in his honor.

A few of Blackstone's Chicago friends took another approach. In 1881, Horatio and Anna Spafford and 16 others established the American Colony in the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem to watch at close hand the restoration of the Jews and the second coming of Jesus. The Spaffordites held all property in common and, at least for a while, made celibacy the house rule.

The Spaffordites went there primarily for prophetic reasons. As one settler put it, "We wanted to see the prophecies fulfilled." One of the children of the community recounted years later how for a while the group "went every day to the Mount of Olives with tea and cakes, hoping to be the first to offer the Messiah refreshment." When hundreds of penniless Jews from Yemen arrived in Jerusalem in 1882, the colony considered them part of the Ten Lost Tribes and a clear sign of prophetic fulfillment, so they provided them with food, shelter, and other support. The colony became a popular stopover for visitors to the Holy Land. Blackstone came; so did Moody. The colony prospered economically when over 100 Swedes from Chicago and the old country joined up in 1896.

For over 50 years the colony survived as a religious community, but subsequent generations lost their prophetic zeal and turned the colony into a business concern. By the 1930s, their perspective on life in Palestine had changed. The colony identified more with the needs of the indigenous Arabs and considered Zionism a threat to their legitimate rights.

Blackstone and the American Colony in Jerusalem were exceptions, not the rule. Most dispensationalists were content to study the Bible and scan the horizon for prophetic fulfillments. During the twentieth century, signs of the times multiplied. World War I gave a major boost to their hopes for the future. Dispensationalists used their Bibles to predict with uncanny accuracy the results of the war, including the redrawing of the map of Europe, which was necessary to get ready for their end-times scenario. But nothing brought them more pleasure than the disposition of Palestine.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Palestine was firmly in the grasp of the Ottoman Empire. By 1916, there was widespread speculation, even in the secular press, about the restoration of a Jewish homeland if the Turks could be vanquished. By late 1917, events were rapidly moving along those lines. As British forces fought their way into Palestine from the south, Lord Arthur Balfour, the British foreign secretary, wrote to Lord James Rothschild, a leader in international Zionism: "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best efforts to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."

Five weeks after the Balfour Declaration, the Turks surrendered Jerusalem to British forces, virtually without a fight. This sent shock waves through dispensationalist ranks. Here was the most concrete proof ever that the "times of the Gentiles" were coming to an end. It made little difference to dispensationalists that Jerusalem had passed from one Gentile power to another. The important thing was that the British had declared their intention to establish a Jewish state. If the "times of the Gentiles" were coming to an end, could the restoration of Israel be far behind?

Dispensationalists could barely contain themselves. Arno C. Gaebelein, editor of *Our Hope*, called the coming restoration of Israel "the sign of all signs." In 1918, dispensationalists organized two well-attended prophetic conferences in New York and Philadelphia, where the real possibility of establishing a Jewish state got much attention.

### **The Protocols conspiracy**

Despite such rising expectations, it would take 30 more years and another world war to establish a Jewish state. But the events of 1917-18 gave dispensationalists ample assurance that they were reading the Bible correctly; and further evidence was pouring in: Ecclesiastical wars between fundamentalists and modernists confirmed the rise of religious apostasy. The public schools were overrun by evolutionists and secularists. Personal and public morals took a nosedive, with increasing divorce rates, the obscenities of the "new woman," and the open flouting of Prohibition laws. Dispensationalists watched the rise of fascism in Europe, the spread of communism, and growing anti-Semitism. Civilization was obviously spinning out of control, and for the prophecy pundits, everything fit and was right on schedule.

During the twenties and thirties, a number of leading dispensational teachers promoted right-wing conspiracy theories and even fell prey to Nazi propaganda. Shortly after World War I, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* started making the rounds in Europe and America, purporting to be the secret minutes of a group of Jewish conspirators plotting to take over the world by destroying Christian civilization. When Henry Ford serialized them in his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, in the early 1920s, many people believed what they read. From then on, American anti-Semites made *The Protocols* "exhibit A" in their propaganda campaign.

Not all dispensationalists were fooled by *The Protocols*, but a number of leading Bible teachers were. In 1921, James M. Gray, president of Moody Bible Institute, called *The Protocols* "a clinching argument for premillennialism and another sign of the possible nearness of the end of the age." Arno Gaebelein also believed that the plan outlined in *The Protocols* was consistent with Bible prophecy. Well known as an evangelist to Jews, Gaebelein obviously loved some Jews more than others. He liked Orthodox Jews because they still expected the coming of Messiah, read Bible prophecies with expectancy, and honored their traditions. But he had no use for Reform or secular Jews, whom he considered apostates capable of anything. Though he could not be sure, Gaebelein thought that *The Protocols* were "from the pen of apostate Jews" who were responsible for Russian Bolshevism, the illegal liquor traffic in the U.S., and the general decline in morals. "There is nothing so vile on earth as an apostate Jew who denies God and His Word."

**The history of prophetic interpretation shows that the Devil is in the details.**

Most dispensationalists paid little attention to *The Protocols* until Gerald Winrod gave them a new lease on life. In 1933, Winrod, founder of the Defenders of the Christian Faith in Wichita, Kansas, published an elaborate exposé to show that Jews were in charge of the world's banking system and responsible for World War I, the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, and just about everything else.

In 1934, William Bell Riley, who presided over a fundamentalist empire in the upper Midwest, published *The Protocols and Communism* to show that the same conspiracy that turned Russia communist was at work in Roosevelt's New Deal. "Today in our land many of the biggest trusts, banks, and manufacturing interests are controlled by Jews.... Most of our department stores they own.... The motion pictures, the most vicious of all immoral, educational and communistic influences, is their creation." Riley preached such views regularly from his pulpit at the First Baptist Church of Minneapolis, which some Jewish leaders considered a major center of anti-Semitism.

Gray, Winrod, Gaebelein, and Riley strenuously denied that they were anti-Semites. They were simply explaining events in light of biblical prophecy. But most dispensationalists quickly figured out that using such arguments put them in very bad company. By the thirties, *The Protocols* were identified with the peddlers of virulent anti-Semitism, which dispensationalists said was a horrible sin against God.

Eventually *The Protocols* split the dispensational movement. Jewish-Christian believers objected to their use, arguing that it was not enough to distinguish between good Jews and bad: when people believed conspiracy theories, all Jews suffered, even Christian ones. Others concluded that some of their colleagues had been duped by Nazi propaganda. Harry Ironside, pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, was grieved "to find that the *Protocols* are being used not only by godless Gentiles, but even by some fundamentalist Christians to stir up suspicion and hatred against the Jewish people as a whole."

In 1938, Keith Brooks, a former Winrod associate, founded the American Prophetic League in California to put as much distance as possible between dispensationalism and Nazi anti-Semitism. The next year Brooks published a "Manifesto to the Jews," signed by 60 leading dispensationalists, which condemned the spread of pro-Nazi propaganda under the guise of biblical prophecy and disavowed further use of *The Protocols*. Three years later, Brooks was still trying to get fellow prophecy teachers to "clear the church at large from the charge laid against it by unbelievers, that it had been a tool of Hitler and the Jew-baiters." Before his death in 1935, Gray swore off ever using *The Protocols* again; but Winrod and Riley never backed down. Some time after the "Manifesto" appeared, Gaebelein tried to get his name added to the list of signers. The fact that he never told his own constituency and continued to sell *Conflict of the Ages* until he died in 1945 made the gesture disingenuous.

#### **Suffering with a purpose**

Dispensationalism had a dark side that grew out of its beliefs about the Jews' complex role in prophecy. Jews are God's chosen people and heirs to all the prophetic promises; but present Jews are under the power of Satan and contributing to the decline of the present age. The glory of Israel is future.

It is no surprise that dispensationalists received news of the Holocaust with a combination of horror, resignation, and hope. They were among the first to warn the world of the coming catastrophe. In 1930, Gaebelein told his readers about Hitler and what might happen to Jews if he ever got control of Germany; and by the late thirties, premillennialist leaders had figured out what was going on in places like Buchenwald long before most people realized what the Nazis were capable of.

While dispensationalists condemned persecution of the Jews, they believed such things were inevitable and were happening for a reason. Just like Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians centuries before, Hitler and the Nazis were God's instruments of judgment. God was using them to increase the Jews' desire for a homeland of their own in Palestine. As Harry Rimmer observed, "By driving the preserved people back into the preserved land, Hitler, who does not believe the Bible..., is helping to fulfill its most outstanding prophecy." Needless to say, once their awful work was done, God would judge the Nazis just as he judged the Babylonians.

Sometimes dispensationalists took comfort in their belief that persecution made Jews more susceptible to the gospel. Moody Bible Institute president Will Houghton claimed that Jewish youth in Warsaw turned to Christ *en masse* in the summer of 1939, immediately before the Nazi invasion. "Perhaps that is the reason the Devil saw to it that Warsaw was wrecked and the Jews scattered."

Later the same year dispensational leaders called for an international day of prayer for the Jews. Interestingly, the organizers did not advise people to pray for the persecutions to stop, only that Jews might turn to Christ in their despair. The best thing people could do for Jews under the circumstances was send them more New Testaments and missionaries.

#### **The State of Israel**

As bad as things got, dispensationalists knew that the Nazis would never annihilate the Jewish people. After all, God's entire prophetic plan hinges on getting a Jewish remnant back to Palestine to establish their own state in preparation for Armageddon and the Second Coming. Prophetically speaking, the most crucial point was not that millions were dying, but that some would survive.

In the thirties and forties, dispensationalists thought that the formation of a Jewish state was imminent. But the British were not so sure. For obvious reasons, the Palestinians, who greatly outnumbered Jews in the Holy Land, disliked the Balfour Declaration and mounted a massive resistance campaign. They went on strike, rioted, and occasionally committed acts of terrorism against the British and the Jewish population. The British did what they could to stop the protests, including restricting Jewish immigration and suggesting in the spirit of compromise that the Holy Land be partitioned into both Arab and Jewish states. But nothing worked. In 1939 the British issued a white paper that essentially abandoned the Balfour Declaration.

By the end of the war, not much had changed, except the Jews were now well armed and ready to force the issue of statehood, sometimes through their own brand of terrorism. Looking desperately for a way out, the British appealed to the newly organized United Nations. In August 1947, the UN Special Committee on Palestine also recommended that the area be partitioned into Arab and Jewish states; but Arabs refused to relinquish their land, so the UN abandoned the idea. By the spring of 1948 it was obvious to everybody that a political solution was not possible.

The British finally announced plans to withdraw their forces from the region on May 14, 1948. On that day the Jewish National Council declared statehood; and Arab armies invaded. Almost immediately, the U.S. recognized the new state. The fighting was fierce. By November the better-trained Israeli troops had prevailed, and a cease-fire was called. In May 1949 Israel was admitted to the UN.

Dispensationalists were ecstatic. This was the "sign of all signs." Louis Talbot of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles declared, "I consider it the greatest event, from a prophetic standpoint, that has taken place within the last one hundred years, perhaps even since 70 A.D. [sic], when Jerusalem was destroyed."

In the flush of prophetic fulfillment, most evangelicals showed little or no concern for Palestinian rights—which was ironic since there have always been more Arab Christians in the Middle East than Jewish ones. During the thirties and forties, a few evangelicals raised questions of justice, self-determination, and fair play for Arabs. After all, Palestinians had been there for centuries, much longer than the United States had been a nation. But most evangelicals believed that God's prophetic purposes were more important than such local concerns. Their attitude seemed to be, "This is the fulfillment of prophecy; the Palestinians will just have to get used to it."

Many evangelicals saw the establishment of an Israeli state as the beginning of the end. But there were unresolved problems: The new Israel occupied only a fraction of the land it held in Bible times. Therefore, dispensationalists were eager to see Israel expand its territory. In 1956, with French and English support, Israel attacked Egypt: the Israelis wanted the Sinai; their European allies wanted the Suez Canal. The U.S. government opposed the action. Most dispensationalists objected to the U.S. position because they considered it anti-Israel. For dispensationalists, not to support Israel was to align oneself *against* the purposes of God.

Evangelicals who thought this way were elated by the Six-Day War of June 1967. Fearing an imminent attack from Soviet-supplied Egyptian and Syrian forces, Israel struck first. In less than a week, the Israelis defeated the Arab coalition and occupied the Sinai peninsula, territory west of the Jordan River, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights. Now the modern State of Israel looked more like the "Bible Lands" maps on the walls of Sunday school rooms. The most important result of the Six-Day War was that Israel controlled all of Jerusalem. Nelson Bell wrote in *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, "That for the first time in more than 2,000 years Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews gives a student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible" (CT, July 21, 1967, p. 28). Here was an obvious fulfillment of Luke 21:24: "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (NRSV).

For most evangelicals, the war for Jewish statehood and the Six-Day War were nothing short of miraculous. News reports on the wars of 1948 and 1967 read like excerpts from Exodus and Joshua. How could Bible believers complain or question what was happening? One did not have to be a dispensationalist to see that God was obviously in control and vitally concerned with Israel. After 1967, many people who had not given it much thought before were willing to consider Israel's prophetic significance.

### **The late great planet Earth**

The 1970s brought a major change in the evangelical-Israel relationship. The Israelis began to understand the importance of the American evangelical community. According to Paul Boyer, "As liberal Protestant support eroded, Israel played its fundamentalist card. Privately ridiculing premillennialist readings of prophecy..., they recognized an important political bloc and dealt with it accordingly." On the American side, evangelicals realized that they needed to become more hands-on in their support of the Jewish state due to the increasing pressure on Israel to make peace with its neighbors by giving up occupied territory. Often this support turned into strong political advocacy, with right-wing political connections.

An intense courtship began. In 1971 Carl Henry, former editor of *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, announced a prophecy conference in Jerusalem. Fifteen hundred delegates from 32 nations showed up. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion greeted the delegates, and the Israeli government provided the meeting hall free of charge. That started a flood of favored treatment of American evangelicals from the Israeli government. The airport in Tel Aviv was quickly overrun by evangelical tour groups.

Entourages led by the likes of Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, or Hal Lindsey were treated to briefings by Israeli cabinet officers, such as Defense Minister Moshe Arens or Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Every televangelist worth his Nielsen Ratings scheduled his own tour; and the Israeli Ministry of Tourism brought evangelical pastors to Israel at little or no expense so that they could return later with their own tour groups. In January 1998, Israel brought at its own expense a large contingent of American evangelical seminary presidents and deans to the Holy Land.

The more this relationship developed, the more blatantly political evangelical support for Israel became. Hal Lindsey is a perfect case in point. In 1970 he published what became the best-selling book of the decade, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which introduced dispensationalism to the widest audience ever. Lindsey jazzed up the standard dispensational scenario by showing its connection to current events. The Antichrist's revived Roman Empire was the European Common Market. The northern confederacy was the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. The southern confederacy was an Arab-African coalition headed by Egypt. The kings of the east were the Chinese Communists. He translated "fire and brimstone" into nuclear explosions and showed the chaos of the sixties as signs of the times.

He predicted that before Antichrist is revealed and end-times events accelerate, the United States will decline into a second-rate power, done in by materialism, immorality, addiction to drugs, and false religion—or possibly destroyed by a surprise nuclear attack.

It was scary stuff, and Lindsey said exactly what he wanted his readers to do about it: accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and escape the wrath to come. For all its prophetic razzle-dazzle, *The Late Great Planet Earth* was essentially an evangelistic exercise.

When Lindsey took another look at world conditions ten years later, his perspective had changed considerably. Though still interested in evangelism, *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* contained a full-blown political agenda. He maintained his prediction that "the U.S. *must* fade from its place of leadership for the west and its former supreme superpower status," but now he believed that if American Christians acted quickly, it might not happen until *after* the Rapture. His suggestions for slowing America's downward slide sounded like a page from the political Right's playbook. He blamed America's ills on a group of conspirators (the Council on Foreign Relations, the Trilateral Commission, and other political liberals) who had dismantled the military and undercut free enterprise. "...I believe that the Bible supports building a powerful military force. And the Bible is telling the U.S. to become strong again." "We need to clean house in Washington, and elect a Congress and a President who believe in the capitalist system." Only then could America give Israel the help it needed.

### **The politics of loving Israel**

By the time Lindsey wrote *The 1980s*, conservative American evangelicals were finding their political voice. Concerned about what was happening to their country, they formed groups like the Moral Majority and the Religious Roundtable to help elect Ronald Reagan President in 1980. For the first time ever, premillennialists were becoming political insiders, and they liked it. In *The 1980s* Lindsey reported that the success of *The Late Great Planet Earth* had opened many doors for him. He had been invited to speak about Bible prophecy to Jamaican government officials, military planners at the American Air War College and the Pentagon, and to Israeli government officials.

**Bible prophecy teachers are not inerrant; and they have changed their minds often.**

It was becoming obvious to everybody that believing in Bible prophecy could have profound political consequences. Shortly after the Six-Day War, evangelicals organized Christians Concerned for Israel, which later changed its name to the National Christian Leadership Conference for Israel. The NCLCI's goal was to "educate the American public, and especially the Christians, in the political and religious significance of the close relationship between the United States and Israel." The NCLCI opposed any attempt to internationalize Jerusalem or trade West Bank land for peace. It defended Israel's invasion of Lebanon by putting on a pro-Israel rally at the White House and running a large ad in the *New York Times*.

No Israeli prime minister since Menachem Begin would think of making a trip to the United States without checking in with leaders of the New Christian Right in both public and private meetings. In April 1998, Benjamin Netanyahu spoke to a National Unity Coalition for Israel gathering, which included Kay Arthur of Precept Ministries, the *700 Club's* Terry Meeuwsen, Paige Patterson (now president of the Southern Baptist Convention), columnist Cal Thomas, and a host of politicians such as Senators Trent Lott and Sam Brownback and Representatives Dick Armey, Dick Gephardt, and Tom DeLay. Jerry Falwell was there, too, and gave a speech against the internationalization of Jerusalem.

Falwell is a major player in the evangelical-Israel connection. When Netanyahu visited the United States in January 1998, Falwell helped arrange a meeting between the prime minister and a number of other evangelical leaders, including John Hagee and Southern Baptists Morris Chapman and Richard Land. Falwell and the others pledged to mobilize the evangelical community against the Clinton administration's pressure on Israel to give up more land to the Palestinians. "There are about 200,000 evangelical pastors in America, and we're asking them all through e-mail, faxes, letters, telephone, to go into their pulpits and use their influence in support of the state of Israel and the prime minister."

Pat Robertson likewise uses his vast connections and his Christian Broadcasting Network to promote Israel. He regularly features news stories about the Holy Land on his *700 Club* and invites Israeli officials to appear. During a January 1998 interview with Netanyahu, Robertson asked him, "What would you like our audience to do?" He replied, "I think they are already doing it..., letters to the editor, communications with representatives ... to support Israel."

### **The pro-Israel network**

Examples of this kind of public advocacy by evangelical leaders are endless. But the real story in the last 20 years is the founding of scores of small, grassroots, pro-Israel organizations that rarely get into the headlines. They exist to educate and mobilize their local evangelical community to support Israel in the current crisis.

Some have rather specialized missions. Many help Israel by teaching Christians about the Jewish roots of their own faith. The Restoration Foundation of Atlanta puts on seminars, colloquia, and retreats to promote "the restoration of all believers to their rightful heritage in the Judaism of the first century church" and love for Israel and its people. The Arkansas Institute of Holy Land Studies in Sherwood, Arkansas, advertises itself as a "specialty college" and offers unaccredited bachelor's and master's degrees in "Middle East History."

Some of these groups promote Messianic Judaism as the truest form of Christianity. Hebraic Heritage Ministries of Houston wants Christians to worship on the Sabbath (Sunday worship is a product of paganism) and observe the Jewish festivals. First Fruits of Zion Ministries is based in Jerusalem but tries to get American Christians to live like Jews: to keep kosher, study Hebrew, keep the Sabbath and the festivals, and learn messianic Jewish dances (see [CT, Sept. 7, 1998, p. 62](#)).

Some of the pro-Israel evangelical groups are more humanitarian than educational. The Tulsa-based Bridges for Peace is a charitable organization working in Israel. Its "Operation Ezra" provides food, blankets, kitchen and school supplies, home-repair items, and the like to new immigrants and others in need. It claims its food bank is the only one currently operating in Israel. Its pitch for support says, "Don't just read about prophecy when you can be part of it!"

One of the most innovative humanitarian organizations is Christian Friends for Israeli Communities, which was founded in 1995 by Ted Beckett, a commercial real estate developer from Colorado Springs. He organized the CFIC to provide "solidarity, comfort, and aid" to Jewish settlements in Judea, Samaria, and the regions of Gaza by linking them with evangelical congregations in the United States.

At present 35 congregations are part of the program. Beckett's goal is to provide an evangelical partner for every Jewish settlement that wants one, which he estimates to be 100 to 110 out of 150 settlements. Each congregation is taught how to "link" with its assigned community by identifying pen pals, making e-mail connections, helping with fundraising, sending books or other supplies. Churches are also expected to promote awareness of Israel in their own communities. Beckett knows that his work is also political because, he says, God is sending Jesus back to Israel to set up his kingdom. There is nothing more political than that.

In short, there is an enormous network of pro-Israel and Christian Zionist organizations. Most of them have their own Web pages on the Internet, and they usually have links to one another. Unlike many other evangelical groups, they understand the virtues of cooperation. An umbrella organization that tries to bring them together from time to time is the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. Founded in 1980, the embassy, which has no real diplomatic standing, opposes internationalizing Jerusalem and establishing a Palestinian state. It has offices in over 50 countries and does what it can to encourage and facilitate Christian Zionism. Over 1,500 people from 40 countries attended its Third International Christian Zionist Congress in Jerusalem in 1996.

### **Last things**

Israel has needed all the friends it can get, and evangelicals have been loyal, productive supporters. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, no one defended it more strenuously in the U.S. than evangelicals. At one time, Israeli prime ministers could count on the strong support of both the U.S. President and the American Jewish community. But the present prime minister has neither. Netanyahu's relationship with President Clinton is strained, and the Jewish community is deeply divided over some policies of Israel's present government. Netanyahu was correct when he said that American evangelicals are the best friends Israel (i.e., his government) has.

But friendship comes at a cost. Supporting Israel has often meant that evangelicals must not be as evangelistic as they would like to be. Cooperation is difficult when one side is trying to convert the other. This does not mean that evangelicals stop believing that Jews need to be saved, only that evangelism must always be the first priority in their relationship. Evangelicals probably learned how to do this when they re-entered the world of politics in the late seventies. The Moral Majority welcomed Jews, Catholics, Mormons, and anybody else who shared common concerns. Falwell often said that since the organization was political, not religious, everybody could get along. Ted Beckett tells participating churches that people are always free to share their faith if asked, but they are not permitted to engage in any kind of overt proselytism. He says that he will "yank the charter" of any congregation in his project that tries to make a direct religious appeal to Jews in Israel. But old habits die hard.

For their part, Jews must learn to ignore what evangelicals believe about Bible prophecy and the need for all Jews to come to Jesus. Just as it is difficult for evangelicals to lay evangelism aside, so some Jews find it hard to ignore the motives behind evangelical support.

Rabbi James Rudin, interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, complains that "some of the very same people who are most supportive of the state of Israel and its security and well-being don't see Judaism as a full and valid religion. It's like 'Israel si, Jews no.'" Rudin is also critical of Jews who turn a deaf ear to such teachings in order to gain more allies for Israel. "Many American Jews will say: 'Any port in a storm. If they support Israel,...don't worry too much about the apocalypse.'"

**Some evangelicals have demonized the Palestinians: Because they are the enemies of the modern State of Israel, they are also the enemies of God.**

One Jew who prefers not to worry is Esther Levens. In 1990 she and Christian friend Allen Mothersill decided to start a pro-Israel, interreligious study group after the Bush administration started making loans to Israel contingent on not allowing new Jewish settlements on the West Bank. Levens was surprised to discover the level of support for Israel among evangelicals, so she decided to network as many evangelical and Jewish organizations as she could find. The result was Voices United for Israel, which currently enrolls two hundred organizations, of which two-thirds are evangelical.

In 1998, the Kansas City-based organization sponsored two conferences in Washington, D.C., at which Netanyahu spoke, and the group's "media committee" has consulted with Israeli government officials in the development of new promotional and educational materials for use in American media markets. The organization faxes information about Israel to anyone who is interested and sponsors a speakers' bureau of heavy hitters from think tanks involved in Middle East policy.

Politically, Voices United for Israel is fairly homogeneous, but religiously, it is diverse. While the Christian contingent is almost all evangelical, the Jewish contingent ranges from Orthodox to Reform. What holds everyone together, says Levens, is their support for Israel and its current government and their willingness not to press religious differences. She knows about the prophetic views of the evangelicals in her organization and chooses not to dwell on them. For her, the important thing is that evangelicals love and support Israel. But still, Levens and her Jewish friends can get a bit mystified. A common joke in their circles is, "When the Messiah finally comes, my first question to him will be whether this visit is his first or second."

Ira Nosenchuk of Brooklyn, who attended the Voices United for Israel Conference in April, summarized the spirit of cooperative compromise well: "When you have people supportive of your beliefs,...you have to go with them.... Sometimes I feel like there are more supporters for Israel among evangelicals than among Jews." Supporting Israel makes the strangest bedfellows.

The evangelical-Israel relationship also raises important theological issues. Despite the widespread influence of their views, dispensationalists have always made up a minority of the entire evangelical family. But their prophetic beliefs raise important questions that all Christians need to think about seriously.

As Christian history makes clear, in the wrong hands the doctrines of providence, divine sovereignty, and eschatology become fatalism; and fatalism takes the significance out of human action. If the future is fixed, people are merely playing out their assigned roles, with no ability to alter the direction or outcome of the divine drama. If one is privy to the process, one can identify the players, evaluate

their performance, and make judgments about them. When one knows how the drama is going to end, there are no surprises. At times, then, dispensationalist prophecy can be quite fatalistic.

### **Eschatological activism**

So why are evangelicals working so hard to keep Israel strong and independent? Why bother when they know how things are going to end up? How do their prophetic views and their political involvement fit together? These are hard questions to answer because evangelical political activists and prophecy teachers rarely if ever reflect on such issues. They do say that Christians must "occupy" until the Lord comes and that supporting Israel is a basic biblical imperative, citing Genesis 12:3 as their proof text: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (NIV). But neither observation says anything about what constitutes responsible action when historical outcomes are essentially determined.

Obviously, many evangelicals do not want to do anything to put themselves at cross purposes with God over Israel and the end times. The tendency is for many evangelicals to idealize Israel and believe that it can do no wrong. Some evangelicals have demonized the Palestinians: because they are the enemies of the modern State of Israel, they are also the enemies of God and the servants of Satan.

When evangelicals force all the complicated issues in the Middle East through the tight grid of their prophetic views, they can lose the ability to think critically and ethically about what is really going on there. For example, many evangelicals are reluctant even to consider the ethical issues involved in the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and their 1982 invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon. Many Christians—mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, and evangelicals among them—believe that Israel has some hard explaining to do.

While Jews have a right to be secure within their own borders, do they have the right to seize other people's land, occupy their territory, ignore their rights of self-determination, and bulldoze or blow up the homes and businesses of Palestinian families? Certainly the relationship between Jews and Palestinians in Israel poses difficult questions, and people of good will may disagree about what is justifiable when survival is at stake. But for prophetic reasons, many evangelicals seem unable to entertain the possibility that Israel may be at fault in some way for the stalemate in the region. Evangelicals need to consider whether believing in Bible prophecy absolves them of grappling with issues of right and wrong. Does having a handle on the prophetic details allow them to turn a blind eye to injustice? Do the ends justify the means, just because the ends have been prophesied? Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals believes that most evangelicals simply have not thought through the issue of Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories. Maybe it is time they start.

Of course, premillennialists are not the only Christians who struggle with issues of human responsibility and divine providence. These are tough issues and worth thinking through. Answers do not come easily. How do human beings participate with God in unfolding history? Drawing lines on a prophetic chart is easy in comparison to unpacking the complexities of the divine-human relationship within the historical process.

The most serious issue that grows out of the relationship between evangelicals and Israel is whether the connection has helped or hindered the peace process. Because of their prophetic views, evangelicals are often less than optimistic about the prospects for peace. For instance, Jerry Falwell sounded downright scornful of the Camp David peace accords that were brokered by fellow evangelical Jimmy Carter in 1979. "In spite of the rosy and utterly unrealistic expectations by our government, this treaty will not be a lasting treaty.... You and I know that there's not going to be any real peace in the Middle East until the Lord Jesus sits down upon the throne of David in Jerusalem."

Falwell and other evangelicals have a right to be skeptical. Agreements have been fragile. But 20 years is not bad for a Middle East peace treaty. Even so, no one really expects any human peace accord to be "lasting." Most are only temporary. But that does not mean that they are worthless. The pessimistic attitude of many other evangelicals toward peace in the Middle East does not give even a temporary peace much of a chance. And it certainly does not honor Jesus' words "Blessed are the peacemakers." No peace is perfect; no peace lasts forever. But how can anyone be sure that we are so close to the end that peacemaking is a waste of time?

Part of the problem is the overconfidence evangelicals have about their prophetic views. Bible teachers are not inerrant; and they have changed their minds often. The history of prophetic interpretation shows that the Devil is in the details. Premillennialist prophecy pundits have been wrong over and over again about identifying Antichrist, setting dates for the Rapture, and a host of other things. Nobody anticipated the demise of the Soviet empire or most aspects of the Gulf War. When history takes unexpected turns, the experts have to make adjustments, redraw their maps, and come out with new editions. History is still full of surprises—so why make categorical statements about what cannot happen between Israel and her neighbors?

A new generation of dispensationalist scholars has toned down the excesses and sensationalism of its predecessors. "Progressive dispensationalists," though seeing a future for national Israel, are less inclined to engage in map drawing and categorical predictions. When one is teaching or writing for a well-defined religious community, speculating about the future is one thing; but when one is engaging in political advocacy with far-reaching consequences, it is another. The future is in God's hands; in the end, Jesus wins. But getting to that point may be more complicated and full of surprises than many people think. It is time for a strategy of humility and hope.

*Timothy Weber is professor of church history and dean at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lombard, Illinois.*

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