
CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Zionism

The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines Zionism as ‘a movement aiming at the re-establishment of the Jewish state in Palestine.’ In his influential *Der Judenstaat* (1896), Theodore Herzl (1860-1904) argued for the creation of a such a national homeland. Herzl refused to make Judaism the basis of Zionist ideology, with the result that it appealed to only a minority of Jewish people. Religious Jews only began to accept the case for Zionism when it was learned that between 1919 and 1921 units of the Red Army had massacred around 100,000 Russian Jews. Strictly orthodox Judaism still preserves a strong anti-Zionist perspective, believing that only with the coming of the Messiah would Palestine become the Jewish homeland.

Zionism gained momentum after World War II when the scale of the Nazi Holocaust was realised and thousands of Holocaust survivors flocked to Palestine. The founding of the State of Israel in May 1948 provided the longed-for homeland for the Jewish people but threatened Palestinian Arab welfare at every conceivable level. Israel’s seizure of Palestinian towns caused immense suffering by the displacement of more than 656,000 Palestinian people. During its first twenty-five years Israel fought five wars with its Arab neighbours. In 1975 the United Nations declared Zionism to be racist. Jewish thinkers like Albert Einstein believed a national home in Palestine would have profound benefits for the Jewish Diaspora. The reality has been very different. Persistent controversy surrounding both the principle of Zionism and its often-ruthless application has created an intractable spiral of violence and fuelled anti-Semitism. In practice, Zionism has proved a disappointment to many.

A Short History of Christian Zionism

Arguments in favour of the re-establishment of a Jewish home in Palestine have long been held by Christians; the history of pro-Zionism stretches back at least as far as the Reformation. The epithet ‘Christian Zionist,’ however, was probably unknown until the First International Zionist Congress at Basel in 1897 when Herzl

described Henry Dunant, a Swiss Calvinist and influential banker, as a 'Christian Zionist'.

Postmillennial Pro-Zionism

After the Reformation, when the British became a Bible-reading people, the idea of a national affinity with ancient Israel became part of the national psyche. According to Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) the Bible linked the genius and history of the English to the genius and history of the Jews. Pro-Zionism found support through the marginal notes of the Geneva Bible (1560). In 1655 Cromwell's Commonwealth permitted the resettlement in England of a Jewish community, banished by Edward I in 1290. Puritan writers, such as Sibbes, Goodwin and Owen, believed that Scripture prophecy taught the conversion of Israel, some also believed in a national return in Palestine. In 1621, Sir Henry Finch (1558-1623), MP, jurist and eminent Hebraist, published his pro-Zionist manifesto, *The World's Great Restoration - or Calling of the Jews*. The conversion of Israel found theological formulation in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the *Larger Catechism*, *Shorter Catechism* and the *Directory for Public Worship* in 1643.

The Scottish Church's long-entertained hope that the Jewish people would be restored was articulated by leaders such as Samuel Rutherford and Thomas Boston. When the *London Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews* was set up in 1809 Scottish auxiliary societies were rapidly established to provide support. In 1838 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland established its own Jewish mission committee. Belief in the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland was given a new lease of life through the writings of the postmillennialist, David Brown (1803-1897). His book *The Restoration of the Jews* argued both for Jewish conversion to Christ and a return to Palestine. For Brown the terms of the Abrahamic covenant meant that 'the choice of the people and the grant of the land went together.' He did not, however, believe the return to Palestine was, in itself, the fulfilment of prophecy; there must also be conversion to covenant faith. Jewish restoration would entail 'the final resettlement of the whole nation in their own land, *under Christ, as their King...*'

By 1839, English evangelicals, led by Lord Shaftesbury, and Scottish Presbyterian pro-Zionists influenced British government policy concerning the new consulate at Jerusalem, which was charged not only with taking care of British travellers but also with concerns of Jewish residents in Palestine. Arthur J. Balfour (1848-1930), having been brought up under the influence of Scottish Presbyterianism developed a life-long interest in the Jewish people and a sympathy for Zionism. As Lloyd George's foreign secretary, he issued, on 2 November 1917, a note to Lord Rothschild, indicating the British government would be favourably disposed to the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. Although the Balfour Declaration, as it came to be known, contained an assurance 'that nothing

shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine' such conflicting promises were impossible of equitable fulfilment. With Britain having the League of Nations' mandate for Palestine there was little the Arab people could do to oppose the Zionist thrust of the Declaration.

Recent research has revealed that The Balfour Declaration was drafted by Leopold Charles Maurice Amery (1873-1955), assistant secretary to the British war cabinet in 1917. Amery, who hid his Jewishness by changing his name 'Moritz' to 'Maurice,' was descended from a notable family of Hungarian Jewish Christians. His mother was Elizabeth Johanna Saphir, a cousin of Adolph Saphir, who, like many of his family, was converted through the activities of the Scottish mission in Budapest in the early 1840s.

Premillennial Christian Zionism

Premillennialism was revived by the teaching of the Scottish preacher and theologian, Edward Irving (1792-1834). Among those impressed by Irving's flamboyant 1828/29 Edinburgh lectures were Andrew and Horatius Bonar who went on to be powerful advocates for the theory. Henry Drummond (1851-1897), an influential English banker, promoted premillennialism through his Albury Conferences. The influence of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) reached across the Atlantic to D. L. Moody and C. I. Scofield, whose 1909 Scofield Reference Bible became the most potent force for the propagation of premillennialism. Divided into 'historic' and 'dispensational' camps, premillennialism holds to the belief that there are two peoples of God, the Church and Israel.

Classical Dispensationalism teaches that during the present 'Church Age', the Jewish people are under the judgement of God, being 'set aside' for the time being. Today, God's people are Christians, the Church. Israel will achieve its prophesied fulfilment when restored to the land, and ruled over by the returned Christ enthroned in Jerusalem. Both systems hold that the primary hope for the salvation for the Jewish people is not conversion through the preaching of the gospel, but the impact of the personal return of Christ. Although Horatius Bonar acknowledged that evangelism had resulted in 'a goodly number [of Jews] ... turning their eyes to the Cross,' he held that Israel's 'full salvation... is reserved for the coming of their Messiah.' It would take place 'then and not till then'. Andrew concurred: 'There is not to be any national turning of Israel to the Lord till that day.'

Modern Dispensational Christian Zionism, as advocated by Hal Lindsey, Gerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and other Fundamentalists, argues that the Church and Israel are separately, but equally and concurrently, the people of God. To those of this perspective, the priority, more important than evangelism, is to 'comfort Israel' and assist Jewish return to the land. Modern Dispensationalism's distorted

view of Judaism and the Jewish people, is at best unclear and at worst hostile to the idea that Jews need to repent and be converted in order to benefit from God's covenant promises. Consequently, some Christian Zionist agencies refuse to allow any form of evangelism to be carried out under their auspices.

'Two Covenant' Christian Zionism

Franz Rosenweig (1886-1929), feeling the attractiveness of Christianity, prepared for baptism, only withdrawing at the last moment. Profoundly disturbed by this experience, he pondered how Christians might be dissuaded from missionary activity. His ingenious solution was a reinterpretation of Jesus' words, 'no man comes to the Father but by me.' (John 14.6). He held that Christ was indeed the only way for those who need to return to God, but the Jewish people 'already repose in the house of life.' They could not be considered as lost, therefore proclamation to them of a saviour is both incongruous and irrelevant.

This 'two covenant' theology influenced Karl Barth (1886-1968), who saw the Jewish people, not as the focus of mission but as the Church's ecumenical partners. German-American theologian, Paul Tillich (1886-1965) called on the Church to renounce evangelism in a fresh climate of 'openness,' in which 'we should subject ourselves as Christians to the criticism of their prophetic tradition.' The American, Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962), also influential in European neo-orthodox circles, taught 'the two faiths are sufficiently alike for the Jews to find God in ... their own religious heritage.' The Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (GKN) endorsed the goals of the Christian Zionist kibbutz, Nes Ammim, which include the repudiation 'both practically and in principle [of] any pretension to engage in missionary proselytism (that is efforts to make Jews members of the Church).' In 1980 the Synod of Protestant Churches of the Rhineland issued a statement affirming Christian mission 'but not to the Jewish people'.

The shocking reality of the Holocaust was taken by European churches as a call for a radical re-appraisal of Jewish-Christian relations. Since 1945, influenced by 'two covenant' theology, some European churches have bought into the preposterous notion that Jewish evangelism is anti-Semitic and have substituted mission for dialogue and a Christian Zionist agenda of social and political support for Israel. Ironically, such refusal to engage in gospel witness to the Jewish people is the ultimate anti-Semitism, with not only temporal but eternal consequences.

A-millennial Supersessionism

Modern a-millennial eschatology, overreacting to dispensationalism, has no room for Christian Zionism. Writers such as William Hendriksen, Charles Proven and Louis de Caro, as well as the post-millennialist, Lorraine Boettner, deny that Scripture teaches a future restoration of Israel and represent the New Testament Church as replacing the Jewish people in the purposes of God. Yet more extreme are the

preterist views of writers such as James B Jordan, who in his 1991 Biblical Horizons article, *The Future of Israel Re-examined (I)* recycled the discredited Khazar myth, arguing that Jewish people have not survived to the present time and today's Jews are counterfeit. Mainstream a-millennialists, such as W. J. Grier, J. H. Bavink, J. Verkuyl, and A. A. Hoekema, do not teach Gentile supersessionism, understand God's historically-continuous covenant community as comprising both Jews and Gentiles, and expect an extensive Jewish conversion to covenant faith and obedience.

Christian Zionism: A Flawed Theology

At this point, sensitive to the possible charge of being indifferent to innocent Israeli suffering at the hands of Arab suicide bombers and other terrorists, we pause to comment that it is not our purpose to examine the evils of the Palestinian Authority under the jurisdiction of Yasser Arafat. The purpose of this essay is to provide a critique of Christian Zionism. Three serious flaws can be detected in modern Christian Zionism.

A denial of legitimate Palestinian aspirations

Just as the Jewish people were vilified and stereotyped by the Nazis as economic parasites, so Christian Zionism tends to stereotype Palestinian people as Islamic extremists and terrorists. This results in a dismissive attitude towards the case for a Palestinian State. The moral argument in favour of an economically and politically-viable sovereign Palestine, within defensible borders is both clear and irrefutable. The dismantling of some Jewish settlements will be a necessary corollary.

The oft-cited but tendentious argument, that because the Land was given by God to the Jewish people in perpetuity therefore no portion may at any time be relinquished, is refuted by reference to Genesis 13:8-9 and the precedent created by Abraham when he traded land for peace with Lot and his family. According to Amos, it was ancient Israel's hypocritical tendency to hide systematic oppression of the poor and rampant social injustice behind a façade of high-sounding religious principles and rituals, that led to its national dissolution, with ultimate restoration promised only to a faithful remnant.

The implication is clear: the political and social injustices inflicted by successive Israeli governments on the Palestinian people threaten the moral viability and ultimately the very existence of the State itself. Twice before, Israel, as God's tenant in the Land, has been driven from it because it violated the moral imperatives of God's covenant. It is only Christian Zionism's prejudiced conjecture that affirms Israel's current tenure of the land to be inviolable. God's management of history teaches the contrary.

Failure to support evangelism

Christian Zionism's betrayal of biblical Christianity lies in its supine capitulation to the anti-mission argument and its abandonment of Jewish evangelism for a programme of 'comforting Israel'. The slogan 'comforting Israel' is derived from Isaiah 40.1. But the text says nothing of a social-aid programme; rather, it clearly enunciates that God's 'comfort' is channelled through the proclamation of his Word, ultimately fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The biblical call to make disciples from among the Jewish people is irrefutable and Christians dare not allow themselves to be manipulated into conceding that evangelism is, as some Jewish leaders allege it to be, an act of hostility. What, one may ask, will it profit the Jewish people if they gain the entire land, economic prosperity, political stability and military security, and lose their own souls?

Betrayal of Israel's Messianic Jews

Arguably, the greatest sign of God's covenant faithfulness is seen not in the survival of Israel as a people, great though that may be, but rather in the preservation of a community of Jewish believers in Jesus - the 'Israel of God.' In Israel, Messianic Jews have suffered frequent harassment from religious and quasi-official bodies. Officially backed anti-missionary agencies, such as Yad L'Achim, have sought to deny Messianic Jews religious and civil rights. Local municipalities have refused to licence Hebrew-speaking congregations. Expatriates judged to be missionaries have been expelled from the country. For such persecution to be justified in a modern state, whose constitution provides for religious freedom, is intolerable. Messianic Jews expect to be rejected as apostates by Orthodox Jews, or dismissed as eccentrics by secular Jews, but are bemused and disappointed when they are cold-shouldered by Christian Zionists who mainly direct their support to a militantly anti-Christian community. The callous betrayal of Israel's Messianic Jewish community is one of the most serious charges to be levelled against Christian Zionism.

Beyond Zionism: Jewish and Arab Christian Solidarity

In Israel today, led by Jewish and Arab Christians, there is a remarkable alternative paradigm for a viable peace plan, making Christian Zionism redundant. Thankfully, most Arab and Jewish Christians deplore the violent pursuit of national goals. Present tensions impose their own reporting restrictions, sometimes making it irresponsible to identify Christians in the Arab community who have refused to become part of the violent struggle. Nevertheless, Christian solidarity obliges us to publicise a gospel-based accord that exists between Jewish and Arab evangelicals. A few snapshots may illustrate: In 1987, at the outbreak of the first Intifada, Messianic Jewish pastors wrote an open letter assuring their Arab colleagues that their commitment to their brothers in Christ transcended regional politics. Years later a team of indigenous Christians engaged in evangelistic outreach at an arts

and music festival in Akko. Half of the sixty-strong group were Arab Christians with a passionate concern to introduce Jewish people to Jesus, as their own Messiah. In London, Christian Witness to Israel has twice had the privilege of welcoming Israeli Arab participants to its bi-annual Summer School of Jewish evangelism.

In North Galilee, an Arab Christian regularly makes his home available as the venue of a congregation of Messianic Jews. In Israel, but sadly not in the Palestinian areas, Arab and Jewish congregations can, and do, get together for weekends of worship, teaching and hospitality. Almost every Messianic congregation in Israel is a spiritual home to Israeli Arab Christians. Roundly rejecting any kind of racial bias, Paul Liberman, director of the Messianic Jewish aid organisation, *The Joshua Project*, has affirmed, 'When someone lacks food or clothing, their politics or ethnic background is not relevant'. Christian Zionism generally fails to recognise or support such a perspective and undermines the biblical priority of gospel proclamation. In Acts 1:8 Christ called the Church to be his witnesses to all peoples, regardless of their ethnic identity or political aspirations.

It behoves us to counter the misguided Christian Zionist agenda by supporting the gospel peacemakers in the region, Jews and Arabs, who today are working with the grain of our Lord's great project to reconcile to himself Jews and non-Jews and make of them 'one new man' in Christ.

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John S Ross is a minister of The Free Church of Scotland

For Further Reading

David Brown *The Restoration of the Jews* republished as Steve Schlissel and David Brown *Hal Lindsey and the Restoration of the Jews* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1990)

Brown's masterly postmillennial exposition of the biblical basis for the territorial restoration of Palestine to the Jews is a *tour de force*. It is probably safe to say it has never yet been refuted.

Colin Chapman *Whose Promised Land?* (London: Lion Publishing, 1983)

Moved by personal experience, Chapman sets out to refute Zionism and favours Palestinian occupation of the Promised Land.

David Grossman *The Yellow Wind* translated by Haim Watzman (New York: Delta, 1988)

In this penetrating collection of essays, Grossman, a secular Israeli, advocates a Palestinian State and exposes the brutalising effect of the struggle between Jew and Arab.

Michael J. Pragai *Faith and Fulfilment: Christians and the Return to the Promised Land* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1985)

A thoughtful and well-researched book by Israel's former advisor for Christian relations in North America.

Barbara W. Tuchman *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1956)

A lucid and vivid account of the special relationship between England and Palestine.

Michael Fry *The Scottish Empire* (Edinburgh : Tuckwell Press and Birlinn, 2001)

In chapter thirty Fry traces Scottish Presbyterian influence in securing a Palestinian homeland for the Jewish people.

Stephen Sizer's Website <http://www.stephensizer.com/articles/>

Though, in my view, somewhat injudicious in his anti-Israel polemic and rarely doing justice to the continuity of the Abrahamic covenant as the root 'grace' covenant, Sizer is often thought-provoking and ethically challenging. His website provides easy access to material helpful in making an assessment of Christian Zionism.

Table Talk is a series of occasional papers published on line by the Affinity Theological Team. Its purpose is to stimulate theological thinking on significant issues. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Theological Team.

Foundations is an online journal published twice a year by the Affinity Theological Team. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, including in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics and indicating their relevance to pastoral ministry.