

WHEN AND HOW DID EVANGELICALS BECOME ZIONISTS?

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As the “appointed theologian” at the 2018 Washington Report conference, “The Israel Lobby and American Policy,” I opened by acknowledging, especially in this time when hypernationalism and creeping fascism are undermining American democracy, that we operate within a very secular climate. However, we also function within a framework of justice laws built into the creation order, which we violate at our risk. Sometimes that is forgotten.

I cut my social justice teeth on human rights in the Middle East. In 1989, at the last protest against segregated beaches in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu approached me with these words: “Thanks for your solidarity, Tom, but if you really want to prove your human rights *bona fides*, you must now turn your eyes to the Palestinians.” My gratitude knows no bounds for that redirection because, truth be told, I was uninformed about and therefore complicit with the fundamentals and consequences of evangelical Zionism. I think many faith-oriented Americans are in the same situation, owing to ignorance and not having taken the opportunity to see for themselves the suffering caused by Zionism. In its secular form it violates universal principles of human rights. For Judaism, it is out of step with Rabbinic principles of compassion and justice. For Christianity, it is heretical with respect to fundamental principles of the equality of all people, and it is non-biblical.

Having lived in Palestine for five years and having now worked on the Middle East for more than two decades it is possible to see that there is a hopeful breaking forth of history that is beyond our usual comprehension. It helps to remember, as we seek reasons for hope, that those who lay traps get their own feet ensnared. Those that do things in

the dark are destined to have them revealed in the light. What is happening on university campuses today, because of the persecution of our sister Professor Rabab Abdulhadi at San Francisco State, and others like her, shows that what human means for evil the transcendent creation order understands and directs for good. So the topic, “When and How Did Evangelicals Become Zionists?” beckons us to seek understanding and correction. To approach the question it is helpful to know that American Christians in particular speak two theological languages when it comes to Israel and Zionism. We are living in a troubling national dark culture war. It can help us to understand how we arrived here.

The great majority of mainstream Christians (Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox), and even more than 20% of the 100 million evangelicals, are rooted in a 2000-year orthodoxy that was quantified during the creedal debates of 3rd and 4th Centuries. It is not just creedal material we are talking about but social justice doctrine as well (1. Sizer). On the other hand Zionism, both Jewish and Christian, is rooted theologically in a 19th and early 20th century minority belief. According to this supposedly bible-based worldview, the Bible predicts seven (some say eight) dispensations of history. It is a real stretch to do this kind of cherry picking of several texts. It presumes to move us toward the return of all Jews to all of Palestine, in order to hasten the day of the End Times. This is a view widely popularized by the “Left Behind” fiction series. It purports that at that time, Christians will suddenly disappear, presumably to heaven. A final apocalyptic war, Armageddon, occurs against the evil anti-Christ, and a thousand-year peaceful reign of the Messiah begins. Everyone is judged as to their faithfulness to God’s plan. Ironically, however, 2/3rds of the Jews are killed and the rest become Christians (2. Ateek).

Zionism becomes dangerous when it aligns with empires and ethnic religious nationalism. The millennial reign, according to Zionists, began with 1948 and 1967 in which the State of Israel militarily took control of all of the land of historic Palestine. As you might well ascertain, with this “leap of faith,” ethical guidance takes a back seat, and religious and ethnic exceptionalism triumph (3. Burge). This highly imaginative view, considered outright heresy by some, is no longer widely embraced by an increasing number of progressive evangelicals, and certainly not by

Jews and the mainstream believers, who think what was prophesied has already happened (4. Ateek).

A straightforward definition of Christian Zionism is offered by Dr. Don Wagner, a former Zionist himself, when he states, it “is a movement within Protestant [now Catholic] fundamentalism that understands the modern state of Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and thus deserving of political, financial and religious support” (5. Wagner). Christian Zionism, preceded by 50 years and even influenced the emergence of Jewish Zionism. When British literalists cherry picked biblical references, wedding politics with theology to support the establishment of a state for diaspora Jews, they helped to fulfill the very theology they had been promoting. It should be noted that such an accomplishment has no precedent in the history of religious institutions, certainly not the church (6. Burge).

In this writer’s perspective, this nationalistic interpretation can be seen as key to understanding the troubling geopolitical fire fanned by the action by the theologically ignorant U.S. President in moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, an event attended by the equally fumbling United States Vice President. It explains the division within the Jewish community which resulted in the contamination of Rabbinic social justice Judaism by secular Jewish Zionism. Recent history shows the resulting marriage of convenience between Jewish, Christian, and secular interests in the form of the “Israel Lobby.”

So how did we arrive at this crucial juncture? The 200- year progression of this history is at once instructive and frightening. We can see the consequences of using the Bible to justify colonization and the bald influence of religion over partisan politics in the flagrant abuse of human rights of one group by another. The law of love has been replaced by that of domination and violence. National Research Director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission South African theologian Charles Villa Vicencio explains: “It’s the fault line running through western civilization. The 1st Century Common Era church was born [and the synagogue was transformed] in the midst of this issue” of whether one group will be dominated by another, or whether we can “bring humankind to the realization of our unity and connectedness” (7 Villa Vicencio, Braverman).

This is the central issue. The “Israel Lobby,” writ large, is the questionable combining of forces between the Israel government and American Christian Zionists. Our government and our church people are complicit in this furtive enterprise, sometimes unwittingly. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, is successful as an agent of minority Gentile sentiment, not only Jewish support for Israel. I put it to you that this is bad for Israel as well as for America’s place in the free world. And it is destined for failure. Sadly, as mentioned earlier, the majority has been silent. We must stir them up.

Dr. Mark Braverman declares, “It is not a stretch to say that this is the theological issue of our times. And it is not only about liberating the Palestinians from a racist, genocidal system and regime. Understanding and taking a stand against Christian Zionism is more deeply and broadly about examining the assumptions, beliefs, textual interpretations and understandings that have guided and shaped our actions for so long, not only about the Holy Land but about how the church -- its leaders, teachers, lay, clergy and academics, have supported an Empire-based theology and practice by providing a theological basis for oppression and inequality” (8. Braverman). It is important, therefore, to trace the progression of Christian Zionism’s development.

Christian Zionism has roots at least as far back as the 16TH century European Reformations. The early translations of the Bible into the vernacular, such as the King James Bible, and later the Scofield Reference Edition, which contained footnotes and commentary that promoted dispensational Zionism. Ironically, this led to several centuries of campaigns against Jews and ultimately to the genocide of European Jewry. Christian Zionism persists in best-selling *Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey and the fictional *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye.

The modern movement can be traced to the early 19th century, to a group of eccentric British Christian “restorationists” who lacked formal theological-training. They began to lobby for the Jewish return to Palestine as a necessary precondition for the 2nd coming of Christ. John Darby was their leader, and the Darbyists gained traction in the middle of the 19th Century, when Palestine became strategic to British, French and German colonial interests in the Middle East (9. Sizer). These

Christian Zionists preceded Jewish Zionism, and were some of political Zionism founder's Theodor Herzl's strongest advocates. Herzl's appeal to British leadership was based in part on understandable anger for what had happened to Jews in the past, but also undergirded by the misinterpretations of Scripture. Ironically, it was both clergy and lay people who embraced anti-Semitic theology and the genocidal images built around racial nationalism. In the early 20th Century America, evangelists Billy Sunday, D.L. Moody, and others promulgated the Scofield Bible dispensationalism to convert people by playing on the fear of the End Times.

In 1917, the British bartered away Palestine with the issuing of the Balfour Declaration, declaring that "His Majesty's government views with favor the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine." The 1919 American King-Crane Report urged caution, citing the Zionist's intention of dispossessing the indigenous inhabitants of the land. However, the Report's attention to the local population was buried for several years by President Woodrow Wilson. This was concurrent with the Arabs' false confidence that they would gain Palestinian liberation with their alliance against the Ottomans (10. Wagner). Arthur J. Balfour and Lloyd George were predisposed toward Zionism in their support for a Jewish national home, along with mixed racist motives about white British superiority. Their primary goal was to advance British imperial interests. Zionism continues to reflect some of these strains.

After WW II, popular and urbane American evangelist Billy Graham avoided being labeled a Zionist. He did not, however, warn about the dangers of Zionism in churches to which he sent his converts. Despite his anti-Semitic misstep recorded with Richard Nixon, Graham fortunately founded "Christianity Today" (CT) magazine, a "globally minded modern" evangelical publication that reflected his social justice abolitionist roots. Later CT began the more critical view of Zionism through a succession of progressive editors partnering with Anglican scholar anti-Zionist John Stott, Dallas Seminary Professor Charles Ryrie, and NGO-sponsored trips to the Holy Land (11. Neff).

The impact of the Holocaust in this era was a legitimate concern and then was coupled with guilt about the U.S. turning away Jews seeking

asylum through restrictive immigration policies. The UN Partition Resolution of Nov. 29, 1947, supported by President Harry Truman, officially brought the State of Israel into being. Truman was influenced by his dispensational beliefs, but likely even more by the upcoming reelection campaign and by financial infusions from pro-Israel donors. The partition plan, which gave 56% of the land to the Jews, ignored the fact that the Jews comprised only 34% of the population and owned only 6 to 10% of the land.

Christian Zionism was given a huge boost by the events of 1948. The creation of a Jewish state was assumed to be the sign of God's intervention and the presaging of the End Times. AIPAC's predecessor, the American Zionist Council, did not dispute this claim. The association between the State of Israel and Christian Zionism gained impetus after Israel took political control of what they called the "eternal undivided capitol Jerusalem" in 1967. This encouraged the populist teaching of dispensational theology by the graduates of Dallas and other fundamentalist theological seminaries, especially in the Bible belt.

The secular Israeli Labor Party had few relationships with Christian Zionists prior to the election of Likud's Menachem Begin in 1977. Begin, however, saw the necessity of the theo-political "match made in heaven." Likud courted relationships with leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, John Hagee, and other TV preachers and Christians from the now booming fundamentalist Zionist churches in the U.S. South. In 1979, with great fanfare, Falwell was presented a private jet by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, purportedly to support Israeli policies such as the 1981 bombing of the Iraq nuclear site, but also to spread a Zionist action plan. The election of Ronald Reagan, who was converted to Christian Zionist beliefs, helped solidify Christian Zionism at the center of the Republican party and the White House, along with several Speakers of the House. Opposition began to be more public by well-known liberal ministers and scholars, and even the late Senator John McCain, who accurately called Falwell and Robertson "agents of intolerance" (12. CNN).

Still, Jewish Zionists had few encounters with Christian Zionists before 2000. Even with the assumption by Christians that the "miracle" of the 1967 war was final proof of the imminent return of Jesus, it took

politics to bring the strange bedfellows together. Jewish lack of faith in the Christian Zionist End Times creed also contributed to the distancing of Jews from this form of Christian Zionism. The 9/11 attacks sealed the marriage. The glue was fear and hatred of Muslims. This hastened the growth of so-called Evangelical Zionism.

In this present era, and especially with the election of the Trump Administration and a Republican Congress, an encouraging movement in opposition to Christian Zionism has grown among mainstream political and religious entities. This has helped to battle complicity as it has become more apparent that they who lay traps will have their own feet caught.

As the Zionist profile became more public through the pro-Israel Lobby of Christians and Jews, especially through John Hagee's CUFI (Christian United for Israel) 3 factors were apparent:

1. The Lobby served to undermine peace and increase, even encourage, violence.
2. The biased and one-sided statements and massive funding directed to promulgation of Christian Zionism have been opposed by Jews as well as Christians.
3. The United States is seen increasingly to be a party to injustice rather than an honest broker for a just settlement of the conflict (13. Ateek)

The Lobby's goal to exert significant influence in Washington by portraying Israel in a positive light in public discourse is proving more difficult and counterproductive. The evidence for this grows:

1. The Israel Lobby is being seen as an agent of a foreign power, in part because of Mr. Netanyahu's demands and Mr. Trump's ignorance and intrusion.
2. A more open debate is happening on university campuses, such as San Francisco State, especially as the increasing effectiveness of the Palestinian call for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions has spawned legislation on state and federal levels, in violation of First Amendment

Freedoms, to limit or stifle participation by Americans. Legislation in Israel making BDS illegal has also created controversy, debate, and activism.

3. Print and broadcast media pro-Israeli editorial and news bias shows signs of change in the form of questioning the legality and fairness of Israel's expansionist and oppressive policies.

4. Awareness is growing among Christians, including clergy and theologians, about the faulty theology underlying support for Israel's oppressive policies, and about the complicity of American Christians in Israel's illegal, weaponized, neo-colonial project.

There is, therefore, increasing concern for how Palestinians, both Muslim and Christian, have been demonized. Treatment of other minorities within Israel and elsewhere in the region is stirring opposition, especially because of the horrors of Gaza and Israel's expulsion of African refugees, and the effort by Israel to dispossess church institutions or limit their activities through taxation and other economic measures.

Many more people, including the young, are travelling with alternative social justice agencies to the traditional Holy Land sites. These include passage through the onerous checkpoints and barriers into West Bank refugee camps and towns to hear and advocate for "living stones" of Palestine demanding liberation. The arc of history is being bent toward justice by these courageous young people, with and without religious backgrounds.

Polling and experience indicate that evangelicals, especially millennials, are more pro-immigrant, less Islamophobic, and increasingly concerned about the negative impact of occupation/annexation. Appreciation for and solidarity with influential progressive Zionists (e.g.: +972, Americans for Peace Now, and Rabbis for Human Rights) is growing, as well as with human rights groups in Israel such as Combatants for Peace (14. Gal).

Pilgrims, including now growing numbers of progressive evangelicals, are embracing the prophetic biblical declarations about responsibility

toward the marginalized poor and oppressed. Genesis 12 has been the basis of much of Zionist propaganda in stating that “God will bless those who bless you,” and above all that “the people who you curse you He will curse!” The problem is that the promise was not made to political Israel but to Abraham, the father of all his children. That seems to have been forgotten.

But there is a changing sensitivity. Increasingly, all people are understood to be “chosen” as in the old children’s song “All the children of the world; red and yellow, black and white.” Most of my evangelical say “Jews, Christians and Muslims are precious in His sight.” The more liberal and progressive social justice denominations and believers (including many Jews) align themselves with the 2006 statement on Christian Zionism by the Jerusalem Patriarchs of the traditional religious faiths, who have been recently demonstrating against oppressive taxation. They declared, “We categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrine as a false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation.” The American National Council of Churches adds, “The theological stance of Christian Zionism adversely affects justice and peace in the Middle East” (15. Ibid Sizer).

Significantly, on February 22, 2018, in response to U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capitol, 25 well-known senior evangelical leaders expressed concern (albeit too late and timidly) about “unprecedented actions...that may jeopardize lives and future security of the people of the Holy Land.” They declared, “we cannot support President Trump’s decision(s).” I hope they and their increasing numbers can be more concerned about current Palestinian suffering. But it opens the door for more dialogue in both government and civil society. As a result, it is questionable to what extent contemporary American theology, electoral politicking, and legislation are being driven by a heretical dispensational understanding of Eretz Israel.

Further evidence of this change in orientation and attitude can be found in the actions by evangelical organizations such as Sojourners, Evangelicals for Social Action, and faith-based NGOs, some of which have had staff arrested or detained at Tel Aviv airport or at the bridges over the Jordan River that serve as entry points to Israel. These and other faith groups are partnering with J Street, Jewish Voice for Peace,

the New Israel Fund, and operational agencies, as well as think tanks such as the Middle East Institute, the Foundation for Middle East Peace and the Jerusalem Fund. In addition, a growing number of informative films such “God on our Side,” “Roadmap to Apartheid,” “Occupation of the American Mind,” and Noura Erakat’s “Gaza in Context” are circulating widely. Social justice evangelicals are working to rehabilitate their brand, or even to desert it if necessary, in order to differentiate further from the Hagee-Pence - Judge Roy Moore-like enablers of the world. These defections have the potential to impact elections.

Members of Congress who have expressed quiet opposition for Israeli policies are being more vocal regarding Israel’s treatment of children. Betty McCollum (D-MN) has introduced a bill to protect Palestinian child prisoners, which has garnered 29 signatures so far. Over 100 congresspersons have signed in support of a bill to restore funding for UNRWA, sponsored by MCs David Price (D-NC) and Peter Welch (D-VT).

In conclusion

All the contributors to this article, each from their particular standpoint and area of knowledge, are in agreement that the exceptionalism and exclusivism engendered by Zionism creates monsters -- especially among those who consider themselves the exceptional ones or the “chosen!” For the social solidarity needed in our societies, we must stand with the marginalized and for equity and justice.

British Anglican priest and former director of Peacemaker Trust Garth Hewitt, recounts an exchange about Zionism with author-activist Catholic Father Michael Prior:

“Prominent progressive leaders are helping to sharpen our thinking in regard to Christian Zionists, for the god portrayed looks to be a militaristic and xenophobic genocidist who would not be sufficiently moral to conform to the Fourth Geneva Convention” (16. Hewitt).

Has God turned from the source of love, compassion and grace to become the great ethic cleanser?

Renowned Jewish ethicist Martin Buber said in his declaration of opposition to Zionism, "The Arabs must be made to feel, must be convinced, by deed as well as word, that, whatever the future numerical relationship of the two nations in Palestine, we, on our part, contemplate no political domination. Only in this way shall we succeed in cooperating with the Arab peoples, who themselves are struggling toward the light and now, after many centuries, are reentering the political arena of the world." Buber and his biographers repeatedly asserted that hatred is bound to bring ruin upon a complicit government and society.

Anglican Theologian Naim Ateek states, "We must oppose Christian Zionism by asserting one clear principle: Any religion that does not promote justice, truth, peace, love, forgiveness and reconciliation among people has lost its rudder and is undeserving of respect. Their religion and its teachings are destructive rather than a liberating force in the world."

Having seen their impact personally while living in Jerusalem and at home in the United States, I would do the same. It is time, and the time is urgent, that Christians as well as all people of all faith traditions recognize the destructive impact of Christian Zionism in its many forms.

NOTES:

1. Dr. Stephen Sizer, <<http://middleeastmonitor.com/articles/guest-writer/6743-christian-zionism-the-new-heresy>>.

At least one in four American Christians surveyed by Christianity Today magazine said they believe it is the biblical responsibility to support the nation of Israel. The Pew Research Center put the figure at 63% among white evangelicals.

2. Dr. Naim Ateek, in email exchange 1/26/18 and pp.78-91 in *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*.

3. Dr. Gary Burge, in email exchange 1/25/18.

4. op cit. Ateek.

Gershom Gorenberg on 60 Minutes said “it’s a 4 Act drama where in the 2nd 2/3rd of all Jews die & in the 4th the “Left Behind” are converts to Christianity...as a Jew I don’t like my chances”.

5. Dr. Donald Wagner– email exchange 1/25/18.

6. op cit Dr. Gary Burge.

7. Dr. Mark Braverman, quoting Charles Villa-Vicencio in *A Wall in Jerusalem...* “the point of split in the first century between the followers of Jesus and those who clung to their Rome-granted power base in Jerusalem.” And in conversation with author 11/2017.

8. Braverman, personal communication.

9. op cit, Sizer.

10. op cit. Wagner.

11. David Neff, former editor “Christianity Today” – email exchange 2/24/18 and phone conversation 2/25.

Charles Ryrie was for many years the most prominent dispensationalist expositor of Bible prophecy. Yet in an article which he wrote for CT, in 1969, he said that the political events surrounding the founding of Israel are simply political events and not of spiritual significance, They are a precursor to the eventual fulfillment of the promise, but they are not the fulfillment...he goes on to say that the needs of refugees in the region and particularly of Arab Christians are paramount. And if Christian Zionists do not act to relieve their suffering, then there is something lacking in their Christian Zionism.

12. CNN report, 2/28/2000. However August 17, 2008 Presidential Debate Media Matters report February 2006/2008 “McCain recants in regard to Falwell”.

13. op cit Ateek pp. 86-88.

14. Dr. Reuvan Gal, Carmel Clinic, resigned his IDF commission as chief psychiatrist because of trauma of guilty soldiers.

15. op cit. Sizer drafted 2006 Patriarchs’ Declaration.

16. Garth Hewitt, Anglican priest and former director of Peacemaker Trust, quoting prolific author Rev. Michael Prior, latest written with Desmond Tutu: *Speaking the Truth: Zionism, Israel & Occupation*, Northampton, Olive Branch Press, 2005:– personal conversation + email exchange with author 2/5/18 “How, I constantly ask myself , are such people so unconcerned about others being kicked out of their homes, children being shot, people struggling for survival against very oppressive forces of occupation? Instead of trying to give food to the hungry and sight to the blind as Jesus (and Isaiah) exhorted, the people support institutions that make seeing people blind, put free people in prison, and make the poor poorer. Is God moral? Is God just? Is God a God of love, compassion, tenderness and justice?”

17. Martin Buber – quotes in *More Than A Nation* “The Cultural Zionism of Martin Buber” by Solveig Eggerz Issues, The American Council for Judaism, Fall 1998.

18. op cit. Braverman in email exchange 2/5/18, quoting Sizer: *Christian Zionism* “embraces the most extreme ideological positions of Zionism in which the Christian message of non-violence, equality, compassion for the poor an oppressed is reduced to an ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. This has lead Christians to place an emphasis on the apocalyptic and the end of history rather than living out Christ’s love and justice through action for socials justice in the world today. Christian Zionism has played a significant role, I fear, to the failure to achieve a just peace in Palestine and Israel.”

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