

Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?

Part 1: The Historical Roots

Unanswered Questions

What subject do Christians find most controversial? Abortion? Sex? Climate change? - The correct answer is probably *Israel*. No other subject ignites such strong emotions.

Why is there such a close relationship today between the Christian Right, the American political establishment and the State of Israel? Why after 40 years, does Israel continue to occupy territory in Lebanon (the Sheba Farms), Syria (the Golan Heights) and Palestine (the West Bank) while Syria has been pressured to withdraw from Lebanon? Why is Israel the subject of more UN Resolutions than any other country in the world? Why has the USA vetoed virtually every one of them? Why will you not find a single serving US Senator or Congressman express criticism of Israel?

Why have Britain and America become the focus of so much hatred from the Islamic world? Why are our countries the target for Islamist terrorism - despite our commitment to the rule of international law, democracy and human rights?

The answers to these questions remain inexplicable unless we factor in what is now probably the most influential and destructive movement amongst Christians today – Christian Zionism.

Christian Zionism Defined

Don Wagner defines Christian Zionism in this way,

“Evangelical Christian Zionism is a political movement within Protestant fundamentalist Christianity that views the modern state of Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, thus deserving our unconditional economic, moral, political, and theological support.”

Grace Halsell summarises the message of the Christian Zionist in this way: *“every act taken by Israel is orchestrated by God, and should be condoned, supported, and even praised by the rest of us.”*¹ Christian Zionists are convinced that God blesses those nations that stand with Israel and curses those that don't.

Christian Zionism provides a biblical justification for greater US intervention in the Middle East. It is deeply mistrustful of the United Nations and the European Community and actively opposes the implementation of international law and the right of Palestinians to a sovereign state along side Israel.

The Significance of the Christian Zionism

Let me give you a flavour of the movement and their strategy from a recent speech given by John Hagee. Hagee is the Founder and Senior Pastor of Cornerstone Church, an 18,000 member evangelical church in San Antonio in Texas. Hagee broadcasts a national radio and television ministry to Americans on 160 T.V.

¹ Grace Halsell, 'Israeli Extremists and Christian Fundamentalists: The Alliance', Washington Report, December (1988), p31.

stations, 50 radio stations and eight networks into an estimated 99 million homes worldwide on a weekly basis. In 2006 he founded Christians United for Israel with the support of 400 other Christian leaders.

“For 25 almost 26 years now, I have been pounding the evangelical community over television. The bible is a very pro-Israel book. If a Christian admits “I believe the Bible,” I can make him a pro-Israel supporter or they will have to denounce their faith. So I have the Christians over a barrel, you might say.”²

The assumption Hagee makes, that Bible-believing Christians will be pro-Israel, is the dominant view among evangelical Christians, especially in the USA. In March 2007, Hagee was a guest speaker at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Policy Conference. He began with these words:

“The sleeping giant of Christian Zionism has awakened. There are 50 million Christians standing up and applauding the State of Israel...”

As the Jerusalem Post pointed out, his speech did not lack clarity. He went on to warn:

“It is 1938. Iran is Germany, and Ahmadinejad is the new Hitler. We must stop Iran’s nuclear threat and stand boldly with Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East... Think of our potential future together: 50 million evangelicals joining in common cause with 5 million Jewish people in America on behalf of Israel is a match made in heaven.”³

² John Hagee, The One Jerusalem Blog, 25 January 2007.
http://www.onejerusalem.org/blog/archives/2007/01/audio_exclusive_12.asp <Accessed March 2007>

³ “Christians for Israel” Editorial, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 March 2007.

Is there an Elephant in the Room?

I think you are beginning to see why this is such an important and controversial subject. There is one giant elephant in the middle of the room and its time Christians started talking about it. Fear of being labeled anti-semitic has kept too many evangelicals under their beds. While not all Christian Zionists endorse the apocalyptic views of Hal Lindsey, John Hagee and Tim LaHaye, the movement as a whole is nevertheless leading the West, and the Church with it, into a confrontation with Islam. Using biblical terminology to justify a preemptive global war against 'the Axis of Evil' merely reinforces stereotypes, fuels extremism, incites fundamentalism and increases the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust. From a theological perspective, it is not an understatement to say that what is at stake is our understanding of the gospel, the centrality of the cross, the role of the Church and the nature of our missionary mandate.

Part 1: The Historical Roots of Christian Zionism

The rise of contemporary Christian Zionism can be traced back to the 19th Century and a group of British Christian leaders who began to distinguish in Scripture between what they believed were God's purposes for the Jews and those of the Church. John Nelson Darby, who founded the Brethren, became their chief exponent. He travelled to the USA six or seven times in the 1850s and 1860s and came to have a profound influence over DL Moody, James Brookes and Cyrus Scofield, author of the Scofield Reference Bible. Scofield's Bible along with the early 20th Century Bible Prophecy Conferences, institutions such as Dallas Theological Seminary and writers such as Lewis Sperry Chafer, Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye, have ensured Christian Zionism has become part of what defines much of the Evangelical community in the USA.

The Contemporary Catalyst

The founding of the State of Israel in 1948 came to be seen as the most significant fulfilment of biblical prophecy,⁴ indeed for many, *'the greatest piece of prophetic news that we have had in the 20th Century.'*⁵ Following the Six Day War of 1967, Billy Graham's

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze*, (Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity, 1992), p92; Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, (London, Lakeland, 1970), pp43, 53-58; Hannah Hurnard, *Watchman on the Walls*, (London, Olive Press, 1950), pp11-12.

⁵ Louis T. Talbot & William W. Orr, *The Nation of Israel and the Word of God!*, (Los Angeles, Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1948), p8.

father-in-law Nelson Bell, then editor of Christianity Today, expressed the sentiments of many evangelicals when, in an editorial for the magazine he wrote,

‘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.’⁶

In 1976 a series of events brought Christian Zionism to the forefront of US mainstream politics. Jimmy Carter was elected as the ‘born again’ President drawing the support of the evangelical right. In Israel, Menachem Begin and the right wing Likud Party came to power the following year. A tripartite coalition slowly emerged between the political Right, evangelicals and the Jewish lobby. Grace Halsell describes Falwell’s conversion:

‘The stunning Israeli victory made a big impact not only on Falwell, but on a lot of Americans ... Remember that in 1967, the United States was mired in the Vietnam War. Many felt a sense of defeat, helplessness and discouragement. As Americans, we were made acutely aware of our own diminished authority, of no longer being able to police the world or perhaps even our own neighborhoods ... Many Americans, including Falwell, turned worshipful glances toward Israel, which they viewed as militarily strong and invincible. They gave their unstinting approval to the Israeli take-over of Arab lands because they perceived this conquest as power and righteousness ... Macho or muscular Christians such as Falwell credited Israeli General Moshe Dayan with this victory over Arab forces and termed him the Miracle Man of the Age, and the Pentagon invited him to visit

⁶ Donald Wagner, ‘Evangelicals and Israel: Theological Roots of a Political Alliance’ The Christian Century, November 4, (1998), pp1020-1026.

*Vietnam and tell us how to win that war.'*⁷

In 1979, the same year Falwell founded Moral Majority, the Israeli government gave Falwell a Lear jet to assist him in his advocacy of Israel. A year later in 1980, Falwell also became the first Gentile to be awarded the Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky medal for Zionist excellence by Israel's Prime Minister, Menachem Begin.

Jabotinsky was the founder of Revisionist Zionism and held that Jews had a divine mandate to occupy and settle 'on both sides of the Jordan River' and were not accountable to international law.⁸

When Jimmy Carter vacillated over the aggressive Likud settlement programme and proposed the creation of a Palestinian homeland, he alienated the pro-Israeli coalition of Jews and evangelicals who switched their support to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 elections. Reagan's election as President gave a considerable boost to the Christian Zionist cause. Don Wagner shows,

*'The election of Ronald Reagan ushered in not only the most pro-Israel administration in history but gave several Christian Zionists prominent political posts. In addition to the President, those who subscribed to a futurist premillennial theology and Christian Zionism included Attorney General Ed Meese, Secretary of Defence Casper Weinberger, and Secretary of the Interior James Watt.'*⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Allan C. Brownfeld, 'Fundamentalists and the Millennium: A Potential Threat to Middle Eastern Peace' The Washington Report, June (1999), pp82-84.

⁹ Donald Wagner, 'Beyond Armageddon', The Link, New York: Americans for Middle East Understanding; October-November, (1992), p5.

'White House Seminars' became a regular feature of Reagan's administration bringing bringing Christian Zionists like Jerry Falwell, Mike Evans and Hal Lindsey into direct personal contact with national and Congressional leaders.

When Israel attacked Iraq's nuclear plant in 1981, Begin phoned Falwell before he called Reagan. He asked Falwell to 'explain to the Christian public the reasons for the bombing.'¹⁰ In 1982, Reagan invited Falwell to give a briefing to the National Security Council on the possibility of a nuclear war with Russia.¹¹

During the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Falwell similarly defended Israel's actions:

*'When the massacres occurred at the two Palestinian camps, Falwell just mimicked the Israeli line: "The Israelis were not involved." And even when The New York Times was giving eyewitness accounts of Israeli flares sent up to help the Phalangists go into the camp, Falwell was saying, "That's just propaganda".'*¹²

In a personal conversation reported in the Washington Post two years later in April 1984, Reagan elaborated on his own personal convictions to Tom Dine, one of Israel's chief lobbyists working for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC):

'You know, I turn back to the ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if - if we're the generation that is going to

¹⁰ Donald Wagner, 'Evangelicals and Israel: Theological Roots of a Political Alliance.' The Christian Century, November 4, (1998), pp1020-1026.

¹¹ Halsell, Prophecy., op.cit., p47

¹² Brownfeld, op.cit., pp82-84.

*see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of these prophecies lately, but believe me they certainly describe the times we're going through.'*¹³

While George Bush Snr., Bill Clinton and George W. Bush have not necessarily shared the same theological presuppositions of either Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan, they nevertheless have maintained, the strong pro-Zionist position of their predecessors.¹⁴ This is largely due to the influence of the Christian Zionist lobby considered by many to be the most powerful in the United States.¹⁵

In 50 years of service to Israel, Jerry Falwell succeeded, probably better than any other American Christian leader, to ensure his followers recognise that their Christian duty to God involves providing unconditional support for the State of Israel. While Jerry Falwell may have been the most influential Christian Zionist, he became a figurehead, along with Pat Robertson, for a much wider alliance of over 300 influential fundamentalist Christian leaders including John Hagee, Mike Evans, Tim LaHaye, Kenneth Copeland, Franklin Graham, Paul Crouch, Chuck Missler and

¹³ Ronnie Dugger, 'Does Reagan Expect a Nuclear Armageddon?' Washington Post, 18 April (1984).

¹⁴ George Bush, Speech to the American Jewish Committee, May 3, (2001), <http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/US-Israel/presquote.html>

¹⁵ Michael Lind, 'The Israel Lobby and American Power' Prospect, April (2002), pp22-29; Halsell, Prophecy., op.cit.

Jimmy Swaggart who have all taken a pro-Zionist stance in their writings or broadcasts.¹⁶

The Size & Significance of the Christian Zionist Movement

Estimates as to the size of the movement as a whole vary considerably. At least one in four American Christians surveyed recently by *Christianity Today* magazine said that they believe it is their biblical responsibility to support the nation of Israel for theological reasons.¹⁷ While critics like Dale Crowley claim, between '25 to 30 million' subscribe, leaders such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell claimed weekly access to 100 million sympathetic Americans.¹⁸ Whatever the true figure, all are agreed, that number that is growing in size and influence.¹⁹ They are led by 80,000 pastors and clergy, their views disseminated by 1,000 local Christian radio stations as well as 100 Christian TV stations.²⁰ The Pew Research Centre recently discovered that 60% of evangelicals said they supported the state of Israel,²¹ and

¹⁶ Regular meetings between Christian Zionist leaders and Israeli officials take place such as at Harvard Business School. At one held in early 2002, participants included Avigdor Itzhaki, the Director General of the Israeli cabinet, James Watt, former Secretary of the Interior, Mike Evans and Richard Hellman of CIPAC. Those invited also included Tony Campolo, James Dobson, Kenneth Copeland, Robert Schuller, Chuck Smith, Joyce Meyers, E.V. Hill and Marlin Maddoux.

¹⁷ Michael Prior, *Zionism and the State of Israel, a Moral Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1999), 143.

¹⁸ 'Christians Call for a United Jerusalem' *New York Times*, 18 April (1997), <http://www.cdn-friends-icej.ca/united.html>

¹⁹ Halsell, *Forcing*, op.cit., p50.

²⁰ Halsell, *Forcing*, op.cit., p50.

²¹ The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics," August 24, 2006. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, <http://peoplepress.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=1084> <accessed March 2007>

32% cited their religious beliefs as the primary reason for such support.²²

The Unity Coalition for Israel, founded in 1991, is the largest pro-Israel network in the world bringing together over 200 different autonomous organizations. They claim to have 40 million active members, and lobby on behalf of Israel through 1,700 religious radio stations, 245 Christian TV stations, and 120 Christian newspapers.²³ Besides, Christian's United for Israel (CUFI), the other three largest Christian Zionist organizations are the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem (ICEJ), Christian Friends of Israel (CFI) and Bridges for Peace (BFP).

A powerful lobby movement? You bet. Christian Zionism is undoubtedly a dominant force shaping US foreign policy in the Middle East.²⁴ What I would like to do now is focus on the theological basis of Christian Zionism. How is the Bible used to justify Christian support for the State of Israel?

²² The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Americans' Support for Israel Unchanged by Recent Hostilities," July 26, 2006. The Pew Research Center, <http://pewresearch.org/reports/?ReportID=37>

²³ <http://www.israelunitycoalition.org/about/index.php> <Accessed March 2007>

²⁴ See Robert Jewett & John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003); Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2004); and John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, 'The Israeli Lobby', *The London Review of Books*, 23 March 2006, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n06/mear01.html> <Accessed March 2007>