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CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

*And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will curse,
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

—God to Abraham (Genesis 12:3)

The last couple of years the secular community and some in the religious community have woken up to the fact that most of the American Evangelical community is pro Israel. Guess what? They do not like it one bit. There have been a number of articles in the media about the alleged dangers of the Christian support for Israel. A widely noted article appeared in the May 23, 2002 issue of the *Wall Street Journal* entitled, "How Israel Became a Favorite Cause of Christian Right." For some, this is horrifying.

CURRENT CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

At the beginning of this article I have quoted Genesis 12:3, which is God's promise to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants (i.e., Israel). Does this promise still stand or has it been changed? If the Bible is to be taken literally and still applies to Israel and not the church, it should not be surprising to anyone that such a view leads one, such as myself, to Christian Zionism. Zionism is simply the desire for the Jewish people to occupy the land of Israel. Christian Zionists are Christians who advocate this belief.

Back in the spring of 1992, *Christianity Today* did a cover story on Christian Zionism. The article "For the Love of Zion" (March 9, 1992; pp. 46-50) reflected a generally negative tone toward Christian Zionists, which is normal for *Christianity Today*. They made the case that evangelical support for Israel is still strong but it has peaked and is declining. Yet, today, over a decade later the consensus appears to be that Christian Zionism is getting stronger, but so are those Christians who oppose it.

In February 2003, the Zionist Organization of America released extensive polling results from the polling firm of John McLaughlin and Associates indicating rising support by Americans of the modern state of Israel as against the Arab Palestinian state. 71% of Americans were opposed to creating a Palestinian state and by almost the same margin Americans oppose any support to the Palestinian Arabs. Much of this current support is surely generated by those who are classified as Christian Zionists.

CHRISTIAN ANTI-ZIONISTS

Probably for the first time ever, an organized effort appears to be on the rise of Christians (many who are Evangelical) who are outspoken Anti-Zionists. Knox Theological Seminary, founded and headed by D. James Kennedy (interestingly Dr. Kennedy did not sign the document) has posted a document on their web site denouncing those who are supportive of the modern state of Israel as engaged in "a serious misreading of Holy Scripture." Oh really!

Stephen Sizer is writing a major new book against Christian Zionism. I guess we have gotten so bad that they believe one is necessary. It will be called *Christian Zionism: Fueling the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, due out in December 2003 from Intervarsity Press. Colin Chapman has written what amounts to an anti-Zionist book in *Whose Promised Land? The Continuing Crisis Over Israel and Palestine*, Baker, 2002. He attempts throughout his work to refute the biblical teaching about ethnic Israel's right to the land of Israel.

Gary DeMar has for many years exhibited his anti-Zionism in the many incarnations of *Last Days Madness* (American Vision, 1999). pp. 407-23. In an appendix entitled "Anti-Semitism' and Eschatology," DeMar quotes from Assembly of God premillennialist, Dwight Wilson's *Armageddon Now!*, (Baker, 1977) saying that premillennialism fostered anti-Semitism during the Holocaust. Both Wilson and DeMar have made a statement that is ridiculous and cannot be supported from the facts of history. DeMar says, "Wilson maintains that it was the premillennial view of a predicted Jewish persecution prior to the Second Coming that led to a 'hands off' policy when it came to speaking out against virulent 'anti-Semitism.'"¹

Wilson and subsequently DeMar's interpretation of the premillennial record on this matter is simply wrong. Instead, historian David Rausch is correct when he declared:

This theory of "Fundamentalist anti-Semitism" is not only biased—it is totally inaccurate. Fundamentalist Protestants are not historically anti-Semitic, nor are they anti-Semitic at the present time. In fact, Fundamentalism is itself a religious movement which grew out of a millennialism which was Zionist. Fundamentalists are ardent supporters of Israel and the Jewish heritage.²

Convoluting Calvinism

Calvinist DeMar must be desperate in his attempt to label dispensational premillennialists as anti-Semitic, that he would adopt and advocate Wilson's Arminian logic in relationship to the sovereign decrees of God. Wilson's interpretation that the premillennial belief in the certainty of the fulfillment of prophetic decrees from the Bible leads to fatalistic inactivity by its adherents is not only factually wrong, but would be rejected by DeMar as theologically wrong if he had applied his Calvinism to all issues involving the sovereignty of God and human responsibility.

DeMar does not believe, nor do I, that because God has decreed who will be saved and who will remain lost that the believer's response should be fatalistic inactivity in regards to evangelism or any decreed fact of history. History shows that Calvinists have led the way in evangelistic concern and activity. History also shows that premillennialists have led the way in their support for the Jewish people and Israel, and have led Christian opposition to anti-Semitism, just as they are doing at the present time. If this were not the case then there would not be all the press about our love and support for Israel.

Hands Off

Wilson,³ and therefore DeMar⁴, made a number of mistakes in their characterization of premillennialists in regards to anti-Semitism. Wilson quotes a poem written by a premillennialist entitled “Hands Off” relating to anti-Semitism. The poem is saying that those who have persecuted the Jews would be better off keeping their hands off of God’s people because God will judge them for their sin. Wilson characterizes the poem as if the author was advocating a hands-off policy of Christians toward helping the downtrodden Jew. The actual viewpoint of the poem was telling people like Hitler to keep their hands off the Jews, not for Christians to be apathetic towards persecution in Europe.

Hands On

Contrary to the Wilson/DeMar viewpoint, Rausch argues that premillennialists were involved in fighting anti-Semitism and did not sit back and do nothing. Rausch cites example after example of American and European premillennialists warning against anti-Semitism in Europe (especially in Germany and Russia) during the many Prophetic Conferences convened between 1878 and 1918.⁵ Rausch notes that American dispensationalist, Arno Gaebelein, a German immigrant, “castigated Gentile Christendom in his lectures and writings for its attacks on the Jew.”⁶ In 1895, Gaebelein, upon returning to the US from a trip to Germany, sadly stated, “It is only too true that Protestant Germany is Jew-hating, and we fear, from what we have seen and heard, that sooner or later there will come another disgraceful outbreak.”⁷

The fact of the matter is that there were not too many premillennialists in Hitler’s Germany since most of Christianity in Germany at that time was of a liberal variety. In my entire life thus far I have never met or heard of a liberal who was premillennial. Much of the Christian resistance to Hitler came from those who also hid Jews and they were often premillennial. Joop Westerville, a leader in the underground was a Plymouth Brethren and has a prominent place in the Israeli memorial to the “Righteous of the Nations.” Corrie Ten Boom’s family were premillennial and are synonymous in the minds of American evangelicals with activism on behalf of the Jews in WW II. Rausch has noted, “Contrary to popular opinion, this prophetic viewpoint (premillennialism) combated anti-Semitism and sought to reinstate the biblical promises that God had made to the Jewish people through Abraham—biblical promises that postmillennial Christendom had determined were null and void.”⁸

Further Wilson Confusion

Wilson says that premillennialists like Gaebelein “seemed to provide legitimacy for the Nazi attitude”⁹ because, on a few points, they were critical of some Jewish activities and because they did not believe that the anti-Semitic document *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was a forgery. Wilson portrays premillennialists as if belief that the *Protocols* were not forged was belief that they were true. Premillennialists like Gaebelein thoroughly disagreed with the anti-Semitic agenda of the *Protocols*, but Wilson does not bring this out. Premillennial criticism could not in any way be interpreted as anti-Semitic attitudes. Rausch, contra Wilson, has observed: “It was premillennial eschatology that led the early Fundamentalist to have a high view of

Jewish history and Jewish heritage. Even in negative remarks, there is no malevolence toward the Jewish people because the Proto-Fundamentalist believed that all men were unworthy of God's grace and that even the Proto-Fundamentalist was a sinner."¹⁰

DISPENSATIONALIST LOVE FOR ZION

I believe that it is safe to say that there has not been a group of Christians who have cared more for the Jewish people and their destiny than dispensationalists in the 2,000-year history of the church. Previous to the rise of dispensationalism, Christians did not seem to be able to acknowledge that God had a future plan of glory for national Israel, without at the same time making the church subordinate to Judaism.

J. N. Darby, the father of modern dispensationalism, developed his theology in the 1820s and 1830s by saying that God's plan for history included two peoples, Israel and the church. Darby took the Old Testament literally and at face value so that he recognized Israel's future destiny. At the same time, he took the New Testament and the church literally and at face value. Darby did not have to spiritualize either Israel or the church recognizing from the Bible two peoples of God. "J. N. Darby has testified that it was his coming to understand that 'there was still an economy to come, of His ordering; a state of things in no way established as yet' which compelled him to formulate his distinction between Israel and the church."¹¹ Because of the rise of the dispensational viewpoint "premillennialists were able to stress the evangelization of the Jews while at the same time they supported Jewish nationalistic aspirations."¹²

In fact, the heightened interest in dispensational evangelization of the Jews has been recently documented in a new study of the history of Jewish evangelism. Yaakov Ariel says,

The rise of the movement to evangelize the Jews in America also coincided with the rise of Zionism, the Jewish national movement that aimed at rebuilding Palestine as a Jewish center. The missionary community, like American dispensationalists in general, took a great deal of interest in the developments among the Jewish people. . . .

Perhaps not surprisingly, missionaries to the Jews were among the major propagators of the dispensationalist premillennialist belief. . . .

They condemned anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews worldwide.¹³

William E. Blackstone

Dispensational theology explains why this form of premillennialism has been the most effective in evangelizing Jews, while at the same time standing with Jews in causes like Zionism. In fact, dispensationalists were the earliest advocates of Zionism, even before it began within the Jewish community. "Zionism humanly speaking owes its origin not primarily in the Jewish fold, but in the efforts of a Christian, one whom we all respect, and who has been a great friend of Jewish Missions, William E. Blackstone."¹⁴ Benjamin Netanyahu also recognizes the early rise of Christian Zionism when he declared that it "antedates the modern Zionist movement by at least half a century."¹⁵

Blackstone's contribution was acknowledged by the Jewish community in 1918 by Elisha M. Friedman, secretary of the University Zionist Society of New York, who said, "A well-known Christian layman, William E. Blackstone, antedated Theodor Herzl by five years in his advocacy of the re-establishment of a Jewish state."¹⁶ Contrary to the image presented by DeMar and Wilson, Blackstone provides another example of premillennial "hands on" involvement in combating anti-Semitism. "After traveling to Europe, Egypt, and Palestine in 1888, Blackstone organized in Chicago in 1890 one of the first conferences between Christians and Jews. The Jews of Russia were being persecuted and William Blackstone felt that mere resolutions of sympathy were inadequate."¹⁷

CONCLUSION

In spite of our critics, who unjustly attempt to cast us in a bad light, dispensational premillennialism has always been the best friend the Jewish people have ever had within Christendom. For years many in Israel have recognized this. What is amazing is that in the last few years even the Orthodox community has come to realize that they have friends and supporters within the conservative Christian community. At the same time that we support Zion, dispensational premillennialists have been the leaders in evangelizing the Jewish community during the present church age. I believe that such support of Zion by Christians will continue to be the case from now throughout all eternity. Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church*, (Power Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), p. 413.

² David Rausch, *Zionism within Early American Fundamentalism, 1878-1918*, (New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), p. 2.

³ Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), p. 96.

⁴ Noted by DeMar, *Last Days Madness*, p. 413.

⁵ Rausch, *Zionism*, pp. 79-133.

⁶ Rausch, *Zionism*, p. 243.

⁷ Rausch, *Zionism*, p. 241.

⁸ David Rausch, *The Middle East Maze* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), p. 64

⁹ Wilson, *Armageddon Now*, p. 97.

¹⁰ Rausch, *Zionism*, p. 212.

¹¹ Floyd Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby," Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990, p. 77.

¹² Timothy Webber, *Living In The Shadow Of The Second Coming*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), p. 141.

¹³ Yaakov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000, pp. 12, 13, 14.

¹⁴ Elias Newman, cited by Rausch in *Zionism*, p. 269.

¹⁵ Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place Among The Nations: Israel and the World* (New York: Bantam, 1993), p 16.

¹⁶ Rausch, *Middle East Maze*, p. 66.

¹⁷ Rausch, *Middle East Maze*, p. 66.