

Evangelicals and Israel: Theological roots of a political alliance

by [Donald E. Wagner](#) in the [November 4, 1998](#) issue

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Washington this past January, his initial meeting was not with President Clinton but with Jerry Falwell and more than 1,000 fundamentalist Christians. The crowd saluted the prime minister as "the Ronald Reagan of Israel," and Falwell pledged to contact more than 200,000 evangelical pastors, asking them to "tell President Clinton to refrain from putting pressure on Israel" to comply with the Oslo accords.

The meeting between Netanyahu and Falwell illustrates a remarkable political and theological convergence. The link between Israel's Likud government and the U.S. Religious Right was established by Netanyahu's mentor, Menachem Begin, during the Carter and Reagan administrations. However, the roots of evangelical support for Israel lie in the long tradition of Christian thinking about the millennium.

In Luke's account of the ascension, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?" The question illustrates the early church's fascination with Israel and its prophetic role at the end of history--a fascination that continues to this day. Reflections on the end times draw on the Book of Daniel, Zechariah 9-14, Ezekiel 38-39 and various apocryphal books, as well as Matthew 24, the early Pauline letters (1 Thess. 4:16-17; 5:1-11) and the Book of Revelation.

An early version of Christian eschatology, called "historic premillennialism," held that Jesus would return and establish his millennial kingdom after the world had been evangelized. However, by the 18th century another model of eschatology emerged in England that emphasized the role of a reconstituted Israel in the end times. This eschatology was rooted in three streams of British Christianity: the piety of English Puritanism; the view that Britain was the "new Israel," a theme that dates back at least to the seventh century and the Venerable Bede; and a hermeneutic that interpreted biblical prophetic texts as having a literal, future fulfillment. Among

the forerunners of this movement was Sir Henry Finch, a prominent lawyer and member of Parliament. In 1621, Finch wrote a treatise in which he called upon the British people and its government to support Jewish settlement in Palestine in order to fulfill biblical prophecy.

As the year 1800 approached, several premillennial theologies emerged as a result of the insecurity surrounding the American and French revolutions. Among them were various utopian movements and the Millerites (a group that later became Seventh-day Adventists). During this period John Nelson Darby (1800-82), a renegade Anglican priest from Ireland, popularized and systematized eschatological themes while simultaneously developing a new school of thought which has been called "futurist premillennialism."

During 60 years of unceasing travel and preaching across the European continent and North America, Darby converted a generation of evangelical clergy and laity to his views. Darby held that biblical prophecies and much of scripture must be interpreted according to a literal and predictive hermeneutic. He believed that the true church will be removed from history through an event called the "rapture" (I Thess. 4:16-17; 5:1-11), and the nation Israel will be restored as God's primary instrument in history.

According to Darby, Christians must interpret history in light of seven epochs or "dispensations," each of which reflects a particular manner in which God deals with humanity. For example, we currently live under the dispensation of "Grace," whereby people are judged according to their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This hermeneutical method is called dispensationalism.

According to the dispensational model, a time of turmoil lies ahead, but believers will be "raptured" away before it begins. This period of tribulation will culminate in the final battle at Armageddon, a valley northwest of Jerusalem. As evangelical historian Timothy Weber points out, for premillennialists "the historical process is a never-ending battle between good and evil, whose course God has already conceded to the Devil. . . . History's only hope lies in its own destruction."

Through Darby's influence, premillennial dispensationalism became a dominant method of biblical interpretation and influenced a generation of evangelical leaders, including Dwight L. Moody. Perhaps the most influential instrument of dispensational thinking was the Scofield Bible (1909) which included a commentary that interpreted

prophetic texts according to a premillennial hermeneutic. Another early Darby disciple, William E. Blackstone, brought dispensationalism to millions of Americans through his best seller *Jesus Is Coming* (1882). Blackstone organized the first Zionist lobbying effort in the U.S. in 1891 when he enlisted J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Charles B. Scribner and other financiers to underwrite a massive newspaper campaign requesting President Benjamin Harrison to support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Similar efforts were under way in England, led by the social reformer Lord Shaftesbury, who, like Blackstone, was so taken with Darby's eschatology that he translated it into a political agenda. These seeds of the Christian Zionist movement preceded Jewish Zionism by several years. Lord Shaftesbury is also credited with coining an early version of the slogan adopted by Jewish Zionist fathers Max Nordau and Theodor Herzl: "A land of no people for a people with no land." Both Lord Arthur Balfour, author of the famous 1917 Balfour Declaration, and Prime Minister David Lloyd George, the two most powerful men in British foreign policy at the close of World War I, were raised in dispensationalist churches and were publicly committed to the Zionist agenda for "biblical" and colonialist reasons.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 gave dispensationalism new momentum. The restoration of a Jewish nation was taken as a sign that the clock of biblical prophecy was ticking and we were rapidly approaching the final events leading to the return of Jesus. During the cold war, dispensationalists readily interpreted the Soviet Union and its allies as the Antichrist. Passages such as Ezekiel 38-39 were read as predictions of an impending Soviet attack on Israel. A ten-member confederation--often interpreted as the European Union--was expected to join the Soviet Union in this attack.

When Israel captured Jerusalem in the 1967 war, dispensationalists were certain that the end was near. L. Nelson Bell, Billy Graham's father-in-law and editor of *Christianity Today*, wrote in July 1967: "That for the first time in more than 2,000 years Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews gives the student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible."

By the early 1970s numerous books, films and television specials publicized the premillennial dispensationalist perspective. Hal Lindsay made a virtual industry out of his book *The Late Great Planet Earth*: it sold more than 25 million copies and led to two films, as well as a consulting business with a clientele that has included

several members of Congress, the Pentagon, and Ronald Reagan.

In the mid 1970s at least five trends converged that accelerated the rise of Christian Zionism. First, evangelical and charismatic movements became the fastest-growing branch of North American Christianity. Mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church were declining both in budgets and attendance.

The election of Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher, to the presidency in 1976 increased the visibility and legitimacy of the once-marginalized evangelical movement. *Time* magazine declared 1976 "the year of the evangelical." Still, the mainstream media seemed confused by the various traditions and polarities within the complex evangelical movement, failing to distinguish between the diverse political and theological voices clamoring to claim the term "evangelical" for their particular viewpoint.

Israel's occupation of Arab lands after 1967 created tension between many Jewish organizations and the mainline Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic communities. Many Jewish organizations, particularly lobbying groups such as the American Israel Political Affairs Committee (AIPAC), turned to the growing evangelical community for support. As Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee stated, "The evangelical community is the largest and fastest-growing bloc of pro-Jewish sentiment in this country." AIPAC and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) added staff to focus on relationships with evangelicals and fundamentalists. The Israeli ministry of tourism eyed evangelicals as a major new market for Holy Land tours and thus a source of revenue.

The fourth factor that stimulated the emerging evangelical Christian Zionist movement's political agenda was the election of Menachem Begin as Israel's prime minister in May 1977. Prior to Begin's election, Israeli politics had been dominated by the secular Labor Party. Begin's Likud Party was dominated by hard-line military figures such as Raphael Eitan and Ariel Sharon, and supported by the increasingly powerful settler movement and by small Orthodox religious parties. Likud constituencies used the biblical names "Judea and Samaria" for the West Bank and employed a religious argument to justify Israel's confiscation of Arab land for settlements: since God gave the land exclusively to Jews, they have a divine right to settle anywhere in Eretz Israel. Evangelicals welcomed the Likud leaders and endorsed their political and religious agendas.

The final development that accelerated the alliance between Likud and the Religious Right was Carter's March 1977 statement that he supported Palestinian human rights, including the "right to a homeland." Likud, when it came to power just two months later, immediately reached out to Christian evangelicals. Likud's strategy was simple: split evangelical and fundamentalist Christians from Carter's political base and rally support among conservative Christians for Israel's opposition to the United Nations' proposed Middle East Peace Conference.

Within weeks, full-page advertisements appeared in major U.S. newspapers stating, "The time has come for evangelical Christians to affirm their belief in biblical prophecy and Israel's divine right to the land." Targeting Soviet involvement in the UN conference, the ad went on to say: "We affirm as evangelicals our belief in the promised land to the Jewish people We would view with grave concern any effort to carve out of the Jewish homeland another nation or political entity."

The ad was financed and coordinated by Jerusalem's Institute for Holy Land Studies, an evangelical organization with a Christian Zionist orientation. Several leading dispensationalists signed the ad, including Kenneth Kantzer of *Christianity Today* and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, singer Pat Boone, and dispensationalist theologian and Dallas Theological Seminary president John Walvoord.

The advertising campaign was one of the first public signs of a Likud-evangelical alliance. A former employee of the American Jewish Committee, Jerry Strober, who had coordinated the campaign, made the political connection in a statement to *Newsweek*: "[The evangelicals] are Carter's constituency and he [had] better listen to them The real source of strength the Jews have in this country is from the evangelicals."

At times the new alliance was uncomfortable for Jewish leaders. On one such occasion, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bailey Smith, stated that "God does not hear the prayers of the Jews." Within weeks, the AJC took Smith on a trip to Israel and corrected his views. While Christian Zionists and Jewish organizations agree on many points, the Christian Right's enthusiasm for evangelizing Jews remains an unresolved point of tension.

Evangelicals, major Jewish organizations and the pro-Israel lobby supported Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. Carter's loss of the evangelical vote played a significant role in his defeat. Likud policy was aggressively represented by AIPAC

both on Capitol Hill and within the Reagan administration. For example, when Israel decided to invade Lebanon in the spring of 1982, Begin sent Ariel Sharon, his defense minister, to Washington to enlist the Reagan administration's support. By late May, Sharon was reportedly given the green light by Secretary of State Alexander Haig. Within days of the June invasion, full-page ads appeared in leading newspapers requesting evangelical support for the invasion.

Begin developed a unique relationship with Reagan and many fundamentalist leaders, especially Jerry Falwell. Falwell and his Moral Majority had long supported Israel. In 1979, Grace Halsell reports, Israel gave Falwell a Lear jet and in 1981 gave him the prestigious Jabotinsky Award during an elaborate dinner ceremony in New York. When Israel bombed Iraq's nuclear plant in 1981, Begin called Falwell before he called Reagan. He requested that Falwell "explain to the Christian public the reasons for the bombing."

In March 1985, while speaking to the conservative Rabbinical Assembly in Miami, Falwell pledged to "mobilize 70 million conservative Christians for Israel and against anti-Semitism." He also takes credit for converting Senator Jesse Helms (R., N.C.) into one of Israel's staunchest allies. Helms soon became chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The Reagan administration regularly conducted briefings and seminars for its Christian Right supporters, briefings in which the pro-Likud lobby (Americans for a Safe Israel and AIPAC) participated. Among the approximately 150 Christian fundamentalist leaders invited to each event were Hal Lindsay, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Bakker, Pat Robertson and Tim and Bev LeHaye.

Reagan himself was a committed Christian Zionist. His support for Israel derived from both strategic political concerns and a vague dispensationalist perspective. He told Tom Dine, AIPAC's executive director, "I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if we're the generation that is going to see that come about." The remark was published by the *Jerusalem Post* and widely distributed by the Associated Press.

Netanyahu's 1996 defeat of Shimon Peres brought Likud back to power. During his years as Israel's representative at the UN, Netanyahu spoke regularly on the Christian Right's "Prayer Breakfast for Israel" circuit and similar venues. Within a few months of his election, in conjunction with the Israeli ministry on tourism, he

convened the Israel Christian Advocacy Council. Seventeen American evangelical and fundamentalist leaders were flown to Israel for a tour of the Holy Land and a conference at which they pledged support for what was essentially a Likud agenda. Included in the delegation were Don Argue, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Brandt Gustavson, president of the National Religious Broadcasters (an organization that oversees approximately 90 percent of Christian radio and television broadcasting in North America); and Donald Wildmon, president of the American Family Association. The evangelical leaders signed a pledge expressing the hope that "America never, never desert Israel."

Several members of the Advisory Council backed the pro-Israel advertisement in the April 10, 1997, *New York Times*. Titled "Christians Call for a United Jerusalem," the ad may have been a direct response to a December 1996 *Times* ad sponsored by Churches for Middle East Peace, calling for a "Shared Jerusalem."

The Christian Zionist ad claimed that its signatories reach more than 100,000 Christians weekly and called for evangelicals to support the Likud position on Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem. Using several familiar dispensationalist themes, the ad claimed: "Jerusalem has been the spiritual and political capital of only the Jewish people for 3,000 years." Citing Genesis 12:17, Leviticus 26:44-45 and Deuteronomy 7:7-8, it spoke of Israel's biblical claim to the land. The ad was signed by Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network; Ralph Reed, then director of the Christian Coalition; Ed McAteer of the Religious Roundtable; and Falwell, among others. Voicing one of Netanyahu's themes, the ad asked that Israel "not be pressured to concede on issues of Jerusalem in the final status negotiations with the Palestinians."

Likud also turned to evangelical and fundamentalist Christians to offset the decline in contributions for Israel from the American Jewish community. In response to the increasing power of the Orthodox parties in Netanyahu's government and the second-class status these parties assigned to non-Orthodox Jews, Reformed and Conservative Jewish communities cut back their usual generous contributions to the Jewish National Fund and other agencies in the U.S. that support Israel. But the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, led by Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein of Chicago, raised more than \$5 million for the United Jewish Appeal, almost all of it from evangelicals and fundamentalists.

In a separate initiative, John Hagee, pastor of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, and a signer of the Christians for a United Jerusalem Statement, announced in February of this year that his church was giving more than \$1 million to Israel. He claimed that the money would be used to help resettle Jews from the former Soviet Union in the West Bank and Jerusalem. "We feel like the coming of Soviet Jews to Israel is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy," Hagee stated. When asked if he realized that his support of Israel's Likud policies was at cross-purposes with U.S. government policy and possibly illegal, Hagee retorted: "I am a Bible scholar and a theologian and from my perspective, the law of God transcends the law of the United States government and the U.S. State Department."

While the U.S. and European governments in 1997 were pressing Netanyahu to negotiate with the Palestinians, the prime minister's public relations specialists developed another strategy involving the cooperation of Christian Zionist organizations in Jerusalem. The initial phase of this strategy was launched in an October 22, 1997, report on Israeli Radio (Kol Israel) News, a report claiming that the Palestinian National Authority (PA) was persecuting Christians.

Two days later the *Jerusalem Post* published an article charging that, according to a new Israeli government report, "the few Christians remaining in PA-controlled areas are subjected to brutal and relentless persecution." The report alleged that "Christian cemeteries have been destroyed, monasteries have had their telephone lines cut, and there have been break-ins to convents." Moreover, the Palestinian Authority "has taken control of the churches and is pressuring Christian leaders to serve as mouthpieces for Yasser Arafat and opponents of Israel."

A month later, Congressman J. C. Watts (R., Okla.) reiterated these charges in the *Washington Times*, blaming Arafat and the PA for the Christian exodus from the Holy Land and calling into question the \$307 million in grants the U.S. has given the PA.

Palestinian Christian leaders were quick to respond. Said Bethlehem mayor Hanna Nasser, a Christian: "Our churches have complete freedom, and I've never heard that they've been under pressure." Mitri Raheb, pastor of Bethlehem's Lutheran church, challenged the Israeli report as pure propaganda. He noted that while Bethlehem was under Israeli occupation, his house had been robbed and his car stolen twice; but "there have been no robberies since the Palestinian Authority has taken over. On the contrary, there is a greater sense of security now than there was under occupation."

Last May, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding and Open Doors International sent a 14-member team to the Holy Land to investigate the allegations of persecution. The delegation interviewed more than 60 spokespersons in Israel and the Palestinian territories, including a number of Christian leaders; Uri Mor, director of the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs in the Department of Christian Communities; and several Christian Zionist leaders.

The delegation concluded that though there were isolated incidents of discrimination and increased tension between Christian and Muslim communities in certain areas, there were no cases that could be characterized as persecution in the territories under the Palestinian Authority. Four converts from Islam to Christianity had experienced pressure from their families and communities. One or two who had criminal backgrounds had been pressured by the PA. But in neither case could the context and reasons for the pressure be construed as persecution. Furthermore, though some Christian Palestinians are concerned that if Islamic law (Shari'a) becomes the law of the Palestinian areas, the religious freedom of Christians may be restricted in the future, no evidence of this development is present.

The investigative team found "disturbing indications of political motivations behind [the] recent publicity about Christian persecution." The team learned that a Christian Zionist group, the International Christian Embassy-Jerusalem, had cooperated with the office of David Bar-Ilan, Netanyahu's chief spokesman, in exaggerating accounts of Christian persecution and circulating them to the international press. A staff member of the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem interviewed Mor, the Israeli religious affairs official, who stated that the report was intended to be an internal document, but Bar-Ilan's office leaked it to the Christian and secular media.

Asked why the prime minister's office would do such a thing, Mor noted that Bar-Ilan uses such information as his "bread and butter" in the Israeli propaganda war against the PA. Clearly, there was no attempt by either the Israeli government or the Christian Embassy to note the criminal status of some claiming to be persecuted, or to distinguish between persecution and understandable pressure from families or communities opposing a member's conversion to another faith.

It is true that Palestinian Christians are leaving the Holy Land. But it is not because of Muslim persecution. They are leaving because of the brutality of Israeli occupation and because Israel's resistance to negotiating a just peace with the Palestinians makes them despair about the future.

At this juncture, it appears that the hardline Likud position has the backing of both houses of Congress, the major Jewish lobbies, and the Christian Right. President Clinton and those who advocate the Israeli Labor Party peace formula, or the Oslo Accords, have little leverage with Likud. Palestinian Christians and their supporters fear that the Christian Right's alliance with Likud may in the end serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy, heightening tensions in the region and leading to a new round of conflict in the Holy Land, which the Christian Zionists will readily interpret as "the final battle."