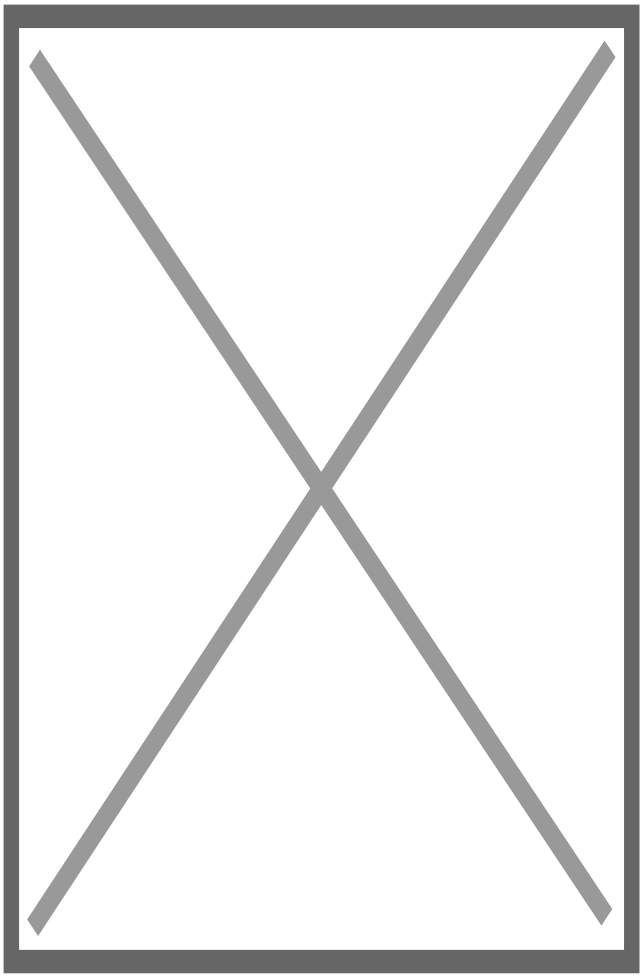
Mapmakers for God

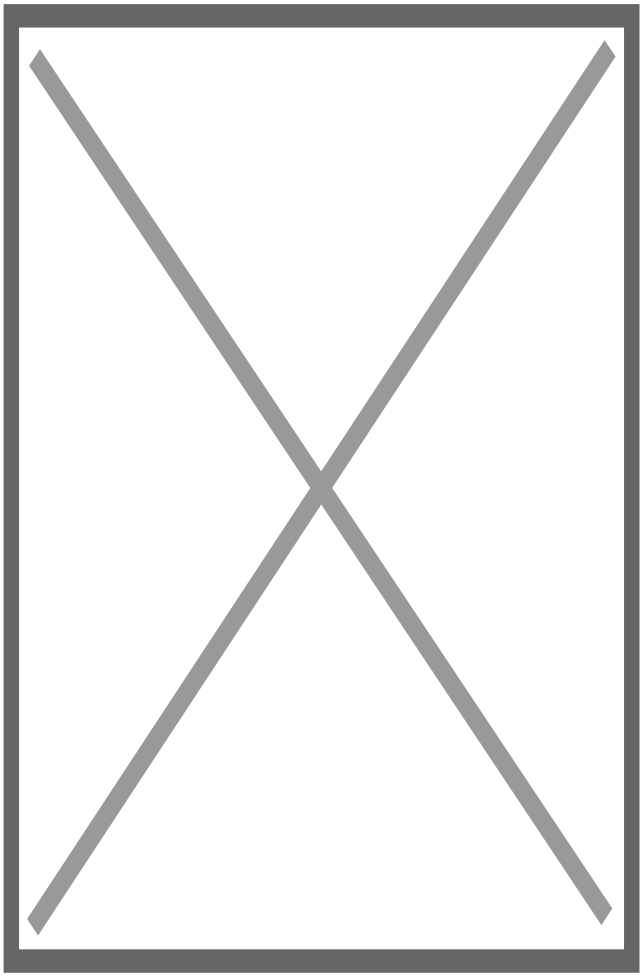
by Matthew Avery Sutton in the October 5, 2010 issue

In Review



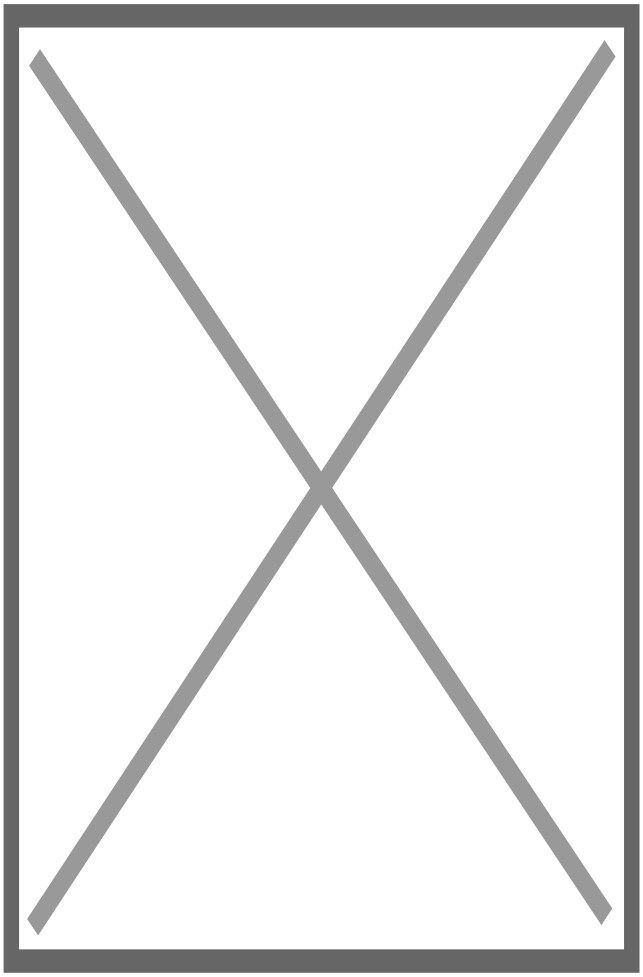
The Origins of Christian Zionism

By Donald M. Lewis
Cambridge University Press



Zeal for Zion

By Shalom Goldman
University of North Carolina Press



Evangelicals and Israel

By Stephen Spector
Oxford University Press

In the spring of 2008, Texas minister and best-selling author John Hagee endorsed John McCain in the race for president of the United States. Three short months later, McCain rejected the endorsement, leaving Hagee with little choice but to withdraw his support. In initially accepting the minister's overture, McCain had hoped to find an open door into the big house of evangelical political power. Earlier he had called leaders of the religious right "agents of intolerance." Now he needed a fresh start. He also wanted to bolster his pro-Israel credentials. As for Hagee, he apparently had aspirations of joining Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson in the pantheon of televangelists-turned-GOP-powerbrokers. Both men terribly misjudged the situation.

McCain recognized that evangelicals have been among Israel's closest friends in the United States, and he knew that Hagee had deep ties to the Middle East. But he failed to understand the motivations behind Hagee's Zionism. The Texas minister had long linked support for Israel with premillennial eschatology. Premillennialists believe that in the final days leading up to the Apocalypse, Jews will return to Israel where they will experience a second holocaust at the hands of the Antichrist. Their tribulations will conclude with the literal battle of Armageddon played out on Israeli soil.

While some Jews don't hesitate to work with premillennialists while dismissing their theology as quaint and/or insignificant, others are more leery of apocalypse-obsessed evangelicals. Israelis and evangelicals both want a

strong Jewish state—but their long-term goals are clearly in conflict. *New Republic* editor Leon Wieseltier famously summed up the relationship: "This is a grim comedy of mutual condescension. . . . The evangelical Christians condescend to the Jews by offering their support before they convert or kill them. And the conservative Jews condescend to Christians by accepting their support while believing that their eschatology is nonsense. This is a fine example of the political exploitation of religion."

While there is some truth to this statement, Wieseltier failed to understand the deep and rich history of the evangelical relationship to Zionism. Ministers like Hagee represent only one of the streams that feed into the much broader river of Christian support for Israel.

To understand the origins of Zionism we need to look in three different places. First, evangelicals in early 19th-century Great Britain—some of whom held very high political positions—began working toward a secure homeland for Jews in Palestine. Anthony Ashley Cooper, earl of Shaftesbury (1801-1885), led this charge. He and his allies built alliances with Jews in England and around Europe, and they sent British church and government officials to Palestine to begin laying the foundations for a Zionist state.

A handful of evangelicals in the late 19th-century United States also played a key role in Zionism. Influenced by premillennial interpretations of history, they called for the establishment of a new Jewish homeland. William Blackstone, a wealthy Chicago businessman whose best-selling book *Jesus Is Coming* had become a foundation of fundamentalist thought, was probably their most important leader. Blackstone drafted a petition advocating a Jewish state in Palestine; it was signed by more than 400 prominent Americans, including the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the editors of the *New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* and corporate barons J. P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller. He sent it to then-president Benjamin Harrison in 1891.

Finally, to uncover the history of Zionism, we also need to look to continental Europe. While most Jews in the 19th century focused primarily on assimilating into their various cultures, some dreamed of returning to the land of their forebears. Their yearning became even more intense as anti-Semitism increased in the late 1800s. Theodor Herzl was their leader. He published *The Jewish State* in 1896 and then organized the First Jewish Congress to establish the foundations for a state in Palestine. Together these three groups—Christians in England, Christians in the United States and Jews in Europe—made a Jewish homeland a reality.

Three new books give fresh insights into the complicated history of evangelical Zionism. Together they present a compelling argument that the founding fathers of the modern state of Israel were not just Theodor Herzl and his Zionist Congress, but American and British evangelicals who exercised tremendous political and economic power in the 19th century—power that modern-day evangelicals like Hagee and his allies can only dream of. Furthermore, two of the three books also argue that evangelicals continue to influence policy in the Middle East, though not to the extent that conspiracy-minded critics believe.

Donald Lewis, professor of church history at Regent College (Vancouver), opens his compelling and well-researched *The Origins of Christian Zionism* with the famous Balfour Declaration of the World War I era. British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour—who was deeply influenced by evangelicalism—penned a letter to Lord Rothschild promising that the British government would work to secure Palestine as a new homeland for the scattered Jewish people. A few weeks later, British field marshal Edmund Allenby captured Jerusalem from the crumbling Ottoman Empire, making Balfour's pledge a reality.

Lewis argues that the Balfour Declaration makes sense only in the context of the deep religious and cultural influences undergirding it. Unlike previous scholars who maintained that British leaders were primarily interested in Palestine for its strategic and economic value, Lewis contends that Christian Zionism shaped the wartime administration and policies of Balfour and Prime Minister Lloyd George. To make this argument, he traces the origins of philo-Semitism in Britain. "Between 1810 and the late 1830s," he writes, "a revolution

occurred within British evangelicalism: from a time when there was a virtually complete lack of interest in the Jews and Judaism, large numbers of British evangelicals came to adopt the Jews as their special concern and promoted the idea of Britain as the unique protector of 'God's Chosen People.'"

Their motives were mixed. Many evangelicals fell under the influence of the growing premillennial movement, which hit England a generation before it made a discernible impact in the U.S. Others, however, drew on more generic Calvinist ideas of election and calling to explain their sympathy for Jews. Both groups were extremely mission-minded, seeking avenues for bringing Jews into the Christian fold. (While some scholars view all efforts to convert Jews as inherently anti-Semitic, none of the books reviewed here takes this position.)

The most important character in Lewis's study is not Balfour, however, but the earl of Shaftesbury, who famously quipped that Palestine was "a country without a nation" in need of "a nation without a country." Shaftesbury is usually remembered as the leading social reformer of his generation; Lewis wants us to recognize him also as the "leading Christian Zionist of the nineteenth century." Along with his evangelical contemporaries, Shaftesbury developed a special "love" for Jews, whom he viewed as modern-day representatives of God's ancient people. He was instrumental in initiating evangelistic missions to Jews and establishing a British consul, an Anglican church and an Anglican-Lutheran bishopric in Jerusalem. By using his influence to shape British policy at the highest levels of government, he pushed the Zionist cause forward.

In *Zeal for Zion,* Shalom Goldman presents a smartly conceived and original approach to the history of Zionism. Like Lewis, Goldman believes that Christians were instrumental in helping Jews establish the modern state of Israel. "Bible-reading Christians all over the world," he explains, "had for centuries thought of Palestine as the Land of Israel, as had Jews throughout the Diaspora. It was this identification that had enabled Jewish Zionists, with the help of some Christians, to turn that perception into a political reality in the half century between the First Zionist Congress and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948." But rather than unearth the roots of Christian Zionism, he focuses on the interplay between Christians and Jews, who "have always been inextricably bound."

Goldman, professor of Hebrew and Middle Eastern studies at Emory University, demonstrates the complexities of these Jewish-Christian relationships by presenting six case studies. His subjects vary in their approaches to their faiths—both Judaism and Christianity—and in the nature of their influence on the larger Zionist movement. The first study analyzes the encounter between poet Naphtali Herz Imber and British novelist and diplomat Laurence Oliphant. Imber, inspired in part by his relationship with Oliphant, penned *Hatikvah,* which became the Israeli national anthem. Goldman turns next to Herzl, who brought Jewish Zionists and a handful of Christian leaders together. Once he realized that he could count on Christians for support, Herzl linked his vision of Zion with Christian plans for Israel. During the post-Balfour British mandate period, Goldman focuses on the relationship between Herbert Danby, a respected scholar of Hebrew and a minister at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, and Hebrew University scholar Joseph Klausner. Their friendship illustrates the challenges that Christian and Jewish intellectuals wrestled with in 1920s Palestine.

The second half of the book focuses on Christian-Jewish relationships in the post-Holocaust statehood period. Goldman begins by examining the Catholic Church's relationship with Israel. Catholics in general and the Vatican in particular, Goldman explains, have had a troubled history with Zionism. Nevertheless, Goldman saw new opportunites emerging with the visits of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II to Jerusalem in 1964 and 2000 and the Vatican's 1993 diplomatic recognition of Israel. Next, he explores the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Robert Graves and Vladimir Nabokov, explaining how each helped paint pictures of Israel that were consumed by the non-Jewish world. Finally, Goldman analyzes the controversial alliance between the Jewish settler movement and American fundamentalists (who in this case are almost all premillennialists). "Jewish and Christian messianisms, at odds for two millennia, have now, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, begun to

converge."

Goldman concludes with Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak's invocation at the United Nations' Millennium Summit in 2000 of Jesus walking near the Temple Mount. "Like all Israeli leaders from Ben-Gurion onward," Goldman explains, "Barak recognized the power exerted by ancient images and ideas on the religious and political imaginations of Christians the world over." For Goldman, Christian-Jewish relationships that began almost a century and a half ago are still shaping and influencing the Middle East.

Stephen Spector also believes that Christian-Jewish relationships shed light on developments in modern Israel. *Evangelicals and Israel* is an excellent analysis of evangelical support for Zion. Of the three books under review, his is the most accessible and lively narrative. A professor of English at Stony Brook University, Spector identifies himself as Jewish. He opens with the grim assertion, "The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is one of the most hotly contested questions in the world, freighted with existential fears and elemental indignation and rage. Adding the conservative Christian marriage of faith and politics to that dangerous mix heightens the intensity of the debate." Despite the dangers, he is not afraid to plunge fearlessly into the world of contemporary Christian Zionism with the goal of understanding its impact on politics in the Middle East.

Early in the book Spector quotes Jimmy Carter: "There's a fairly substantial and very influential group of Christians" who seek "the complete eradication of any non-Jews from the West Bank and Gaza, the ultimate coming of Christ, the death or conversion of all Jews." Spector, however, fundamentally disagrees with the former president. After conducting dozens of interviews with Christian Zionists in Israel and the United States, attending their meetings and church services and studying their literature, he discovered "an unexpected pragmatism, flexibility, and nuance in evangelicals," which "was true even of many of the most ardent Christian Zionists." Nevertheless, he asserts, "one of conservative Christians' main political accomplishments in the last eighty years has been to broaden popular American support for almost unrestricted backing of Israel."

Like Lewis, Spector found a number of different issues driving evangelicals' Zionist passions. One was a simple reading of Genesis 12:3, in which God promises Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse." Evangelicals cite this passage regularly, arguing that the United States has been blessed as a result of its history of support for Jews. But they also invoke it prophetically, warning that if the United States ever abandons Israel, God's wrath will rain down on North America. A second reason many evangelicals unequivocally support Israel relates to their premillennial ideology. An entire generation of evangelicals, Spector notes, was deeply influenced by Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*, the runaway 1970s best seller. Lindsey makes the case that evangelicals must side with Israel if they hope to side with God. Prophecy preachers like Lindsey and John Hagee believe that God has called the Jews to return to the Promised Land in the last days and that statehood for Israel signaled the nearness of the second coming.

While Lewis, Goldman and Spector each emphasize the long Christian-Jewish relationship, Spector adds a dimension to this history by demonstrating how evangelicals have become even more intensely Zionist since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. "Convinced that Islamists seek nothing less than worldwide Muslim domination," he writes, "many evangelicals believe that Israel is fighting not only for its own existence but for the survival of the West. The Jewish state, for them, is the front line in the global war against Islamic fascism." Because evangelicals share Jews' general concern over the growing power of Islam, they have found natural partners in Israel and especially among Israel's right wing.

Goldman concludes with a fascinating examination of the relationships between evangelicals, the Bush presidency and Israel. Bush's endorsement of a sovereign, independent Palestinian state seemed to contradict everything that he—as an evangelical and a conservative—was supposed to represent. But for Spector the move was not surprising. Evangelicals, as he illustrates throughout the book, are radically individualistic and highly pragmatic. Although many of them felt disappointed by Bush's move, they were certain that the future of Israel

was written thousands of years ago. No American president was going to change God's promise to the Jews that they will inhabit the land of their fathers.

The history of Zionism is complicated and fraught with controversy. These three books will do little to alleviate the pain and suffering that occurs in the Middle East on a daily basis, but at least they help explain why, at least from the Christian and Jewish perspectives, tensions in the region have always been high.

Although engaging Muslim visions for and of the Promised Land was beyond the scope of these authors, such visions constitute another necessary piece in the Zionist puzzle. In the same way that myths of the "Holy Land" have engendered the support of millions of Christians the world over for Israel, Muslim myths of that very same territory—and many of the same religious sites—have prompted millions of followers of Islam to champion the Palestinian cause.

While presidential candidates of the future may still sweat endorsements from the Zionist ministers of the evangelical world, such endorsements matter little in comparison to the real problems they point to. Reducing and redirecting competing Christian, Jewish and Muslim visions for Zion is the true challenge a president must address. If he or she cannot quash this zeal, the apocalypse may really be imminent.