

**DEFENDING
CHRISTIAN
ZIONISM**

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Contents

INTRODUCTION — <i>the controversy</i>	7
1 TWO ZIONISMS	21
2 FIVE COVENANTS	41
3 TWO PEOPLES	73
4 THE PROMISED LAND	95
5 THE SECOND COMING	127
CONCLUSION — <i>the consequences</i>	149
APPENDIX <i>Stott's sermon</i>	157

INTRODUCTION

—THE CONTROVERSY

‘Zionism’ is a comparatively recent word, coined to describe the return of the Jews to the land of their ancestors and the re-establishment of the nation-state of Israel, with Jerusalem (Zion) as their capital. A ‘Zionist’ is one who takes part in this or supports those who do.

There are Jewish Zionists and Christian Zionists. There are also Jewish anti-Zionists and Christian anti-Zionists. This book is written with the last mentioned group in mind.

JEWISH ZIONISM

This is a movement among Jewish people to re-establish a national home for themselves in their ancient territory in the Middle East, believing it to be the only safe haven from the continual history of anti-Semitic persecution that has been their lot during two millennia of their ‘Diaspora’ (dispersion among other nations).

Historically, it began with the first groups making ‘*aliya*’ (immigration, a Hebrew word for ‘go up’ in the last verse in

DEFENDING CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Hebrew scriptures, our 2 Chronicles 36:23), in the last quarter of the nineteenth century under the patronage of Sir Moses Montefiore (whose colony outside Jerusalem is marked by a prominent windmill). The project was crystallised in a manifesto of 1896 entitled ‘Der Judenstaat’ (‘The Jewish State’), by an Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl, who called the first Zionist Congress in the Basel Casino in Switzerland in 1897 (the assimilated Jews of Germany refused to have it in Munich). There he predicted that the Jewish State would be established in fifty years at the very most (he was two months out).

Another key person was Chaim Weizmann, the Manchester chemist who saved Britain during World War I when running out of ammunition; he successfully produced synthetic acetone from wood pulp. His reward was the ‘Balfour Declaration’, a letter from the Foreign Secretary giving the approval and backing of the British government, who were to be given the Mandate to govern Palestine in the post-war settlement of the Middle East after liberating it from the Turks.

The appalling attempt to wipe out European Jewry during World War II, known as ‘the Holocaust’ (in Hebrew *Shoah*, from Isaiah) led directly to David Ben Gurion’s declaration of the State of Israel in 1948. In 1967 the old city of Jerusalem (Zion) was recaptured from the Jordanians, completing the hopes of Jewish Zionists and becoming their ‘eternal’ capital.

INTRODUCTION

JEWISH ANTI-ZIONISM

It may come as a surprise that any Jews would be opposed to the re-establishment of their ancestral homeland, with its offer of a safe refuge for those under pressure elsewhere. But there are, from both ends of the religious spectrum.

At the orthodox end, the belief that Israel can only be properly restored under the reign of the Messiah and must therefore await his return leads to a denial of the present secular democracy as unworthy of the name. This extreme view can be found among Jews living in Jerusalem itself, notably in the orthodox quarter known as the Mea Shearim. They pray for the day when Messiah will legitimise the situation.

At the liberal end, especially among those who do not practise the faith, their objections are political rather than religious. Their desire is to stay where they are, assimilating to the surrounding culture as much as they can. They may support Israel, as a necessary sanctuary for their persecuted relatives, but also see it as a threat to their own security, putting pressure on them to emigrate. They are also aware of the problems facing the infant state, both external and internal, and wish to keep a safe distance away. Conflict in the Middle East affects the whole world and can foster anti-Semitism elsewhere.

So not all Jews welcome Zionism, but those who do not are in a minority.

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

This is a movement among Gentile believers in the Jewish Messiah to advocate and support the Jewish return to their own land, convinced that they still have a God-given right to be there and, indeed, that he would bring and has brought them home again, thus keeping his promises recorded in the scriptures.

Historically, this began before Jewish Zionism and was initially the result of the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe, which gave the Bible to ordinary people in their own language, encouraging them to interpret it for themselves, instead of the official party line of the medieval church. A fresh appreciation of Israel's past, present and future was inevitable.

Britain could claim to be its birthplace, with two groups as midwives. First were the preachers. In England: the Puritan John Owen, the Wesley brothers, Charles Simeon of Cambridge, Bishop Ryle of Liverpool, the Baptist Charles Haddon Spurgeon. In Scotland: the Presbyterians Andrew Bonar and Murray McCheyne.

Then there were the politicians, laymen well-versed in scripture: Oliver Cromwell, William Wilberforce (who played a leading role in abolishing slavery), Lord Shaftesbury (industrial reformer whose memorial stands in Piccadilly Circus), Lord Palmerston, Earl Balfour (who wrote the famous

INTRODUCTION

‘Declaration’ assuring the Jewish people of the support of the British Government for a homeland in Palestine), David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Harold Wilson (whose large book, *The Chariots of Israel*, revealed his Zionist sympathies). There were prominent military figures, like General Gordon of Khartoum (who ‘discovered’ Calvary and the Garden tomb), General Allenby (who liberated Jerusalem from the Turks in 1917) and Orde Wingate of Burma (who laid the foundation of the Israeli army, insisting that officers led their troops into battle, as in biblical days).

All these were Christian Zionists, based on their biblical knowledge. Few today are aware of what a major role Britain has played in the rebirth of the State of Israel.

It was the opening of a British consulate in Jerusalem in the middle of the nineteenth century, while the Ottoman Turks occupied desolate and sparsely populated Palestine, that opened the door for Jewish immigrants. Significantly, it shared a compound with the first Protestant church building in the Middle East (Christ Church is still there, just inside the Jaffa Gate), soon to have the first bishop.

One of the major influences on Theodor Herzl was William Hechler, chaplain to the British Embassy in Vienna.

Then, of course, Britain was given the Mandate to govern Palestine by the League of Nations after World War I, making her the last Gentile power to be responsible for the Holy Land. It was the relinquishing of this burden, after violent

DEFENDING CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

tensions between Jews and Arabs resulting from incompatible commitments to both, that led directly to Israel's Declaration of political independence.

So Britain as a country, and British Christians, have done more than any other nation to foster Zionism. It is therefore a surprise, to many a shock, that within the same nation has arisen a wave of anti-Zionism, a vociferous — and some would say vicious — attack on Christian Zionists.

CHRISTIAN ANTI-ZIONISM

England has had its own share of anti-Semitism, particularly in the Middle Ages. False accusations of child murder lay behind the building of cathedrals in Lincoln and Norwich. All Jews were banished in 1291. The last Jews in York, besieged in the castle there, did what their forbears had done at Masada, committing suicide rather than be slaughtered by soldiers. During their long absence they were only known by rumoured caricature, as in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Not until Cromwell's day were they encouraged to return, for economic reasons, at first illegally but soon legally.

It was the atheistic French Revolution which led to their emancipation in Europe, which in turn led to assimilation which could have meant their elimination in time. But the centuries of religious anti-Semitism ('you killed Jesus so we can kill you') gave way to a racial hatred (as the 'least fittest to survive in the struggle between races'). The rise of nationalism

INTRODUCTION

in the early twentieth century led to the worst expression of anti-Semitism in history — the Holocaust. However, there was a direct link from Luther's solution to the 'Jewish problem' and Hitler's.

But is anti-Zionism another variety of anti-Semitism, political rather than religious or racial? Its proponents vehemently protest that it is not. Is it then a complete coincidence that there is a simultaneous rising tide of anti-Semitism in Western civilisation, particularly in Britain and America? We can only say that anti-Zionists need to be extra careful not to be tainted themselves or to exploit in others the hostility towards God's chosen people that seems latent in fallen human nature.

However, we are talking about Christian anti-Zionism in particular, not anti-Semitism in general. Noticeably, this has arisen in Britain following the extraordinary reversal in Israel's fortunes during just one decade in the mid-twentieth century, the 1940s. From being the helpless and hopeless victims of mass extermination they recovered the status of national statehood, players on the world stage influencing all other nations. In spite of a series of wars with her neighbours, Israel has survived against overwhelming odds, ultimately building up the sixth largest army in the world, with nuclear weapons at its disposal.

World sympathy, influenced heavily by the media, has shifted from the Jews to the Arabs, from Israelis to Palestinians.

DEFENDING CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

The oppressed are now seen as oppressors. Israel has been accused of ‘racism’, ‘fascism’ and ‘apartheid’ (the last by President Jimmy Carter of the USA). More resolutions have been passed by the United Nations against Israel than any other nation.

Attention has been focused on the plight of Palestinians, both inside and outside Israel’s boundaries. Politicians seem to ignore the religious factor (the virulent anti-Semitism of many militant Islamists determined to re-capture Palestine for their god Allah), concentrating on political and humanitarian issues.

The surprising thing is that this swing is reflected in and shared by an increasing number of Christian individuals, churches and organisations (from Christian Aid to the World Council of Churches). Are they just following the opinions of the world, influenced by the spirit of the age?

All Christians know that they should not do this, but have their thinking governed from the inside (Romans 12:2). They need to have godly reasons for their attitudes, another way of saying ‘theological justification’. There are four kinds of theology being used to undergird anti-Zionism:

1. Liberal theology. With its assumptions of the universal Fatherhood of God and brotherhood, it is inherently opposed to the divine choice of one nation over against others (scholars call this ‘the scandal of particularity’). The ‘enlightened’ New Testament is thought to have left all that behind.

INTRODUCTION

2. Replacement theology. The international Church has replaced the national Israel as God's people on earth, inheriting all their promised blessings, but not their curses.

3. Fulfilment theology. Israel was reduced to a 'remnant' of one true Israelite in the person of Jesus. In him all the promises made to the people of Israel were fulfilled and then extended to all who believe in him, whether Jew or Gentile.

4. Liberation theology. Originating among Catholic priests in Latin America and now adopted by many Palestinian Christians, the gospel is seen as good news of freedom from injustice, deprivation and oppression, with a strong emphasis on human rights.

We shall make comments on these throughout the book.

The strongest current wave of anti-Zionism has surfaced among evangelical Christians, noted for their devotion to biblical study. To be more specific, among evangelical Anglican clergy, in sharp contrast to the preachers and politicians of that denomination in previous generations, whom we have already mentioned. Three in particular need to be named.

Colin Chapman put anti-Zionism on the agenda with his book *Whose Promised Land?* (2002). I was invited to discuss it with him on television, but the recorded programme was a disaster and I do not think it was ever broadcast. We had too little in common.

Stephen Sizer has now become the main protagonist. The

DEFENDING CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Vicar of Virginia Water, near Windsor, he was relatively unknown but is now making a name for himself on this issue. He used to be a keen Zionist, even listing myself as an early influence! He has now swung to the opposite extreme. I first met him at a symposium on Israel in London, sponsored by the Evangelical Alliance, but I have since visited him at his home, just up the A30 from me. It was a friendly but unproductive encounter — except that my burden to write this book became heavier.

He has written two books, both published by Inter-Varsity Press, not hitherto associated in my mind with taking strong sides on the subject. The first was a rather academic volume entitled: *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (2004). A thesis, for which he was awarded a doctorate, provided the basis for that book. IVP requested a more popular version ‘for a wider audience’ and he produced *Zion’s Christian Soldiers? The Bible, Israel and the Church* (2007).

It is this later publication that I am going to address, since it is more likely to be read, with only side references to the former volume, pointing out some quite radical differences between them. One is the omission of a complete section on the ‘Political Implications’, in which Sizer accuses Christian Zionism of outright militarism, leading to bloodshed, dispossession and division. Is that why both book covers display photographs of armoured vehicles of the Israeli army?

INTRODUCTION

John Stott has made a contribution to both books, in the form of a commendation on the front cover of the first and a previously unpublished sermon in the second. Much more widely known and revered for his many years of biblical preaching, his name undoubtedly adds weight and will ensure a wider readership of Sizer's writings than would otherwise have been the case.

I share the respect and gratitude of many evangelicals for his faithful and consistent expositions of scripture, though we have had our differences of interpretation, notably over the nature of hell, and baptism in the Holy Spirit. However, we share a conviction over male leadership, though our different ecclesiastical affiliations lead us to draw the line at different points. I am saddened that he is making such a public and negative stance on the Zionist question towards the close of such a ministry. (Why was I reminded of Luther's final anti-Semitic outburst?) I have kept my comments on his sermon to an Appendix, since it was not an integral part of the text.

However, Sizer is my main 'target'. His criticisms are expressed in the strongest language, not unlike that of Hamas, who at the time of writing control the Gaza Strip. One of their leaders pronounced that, 'Christian Zionism is the greatest danger to world truth, justice and peace.' Sizer's language in *Christian Zionism* seems to share that opinion.

I am not venturing into the political aspects of the Middle East conflict. It is a minefield (forgive the pun). With rights

DEFENDING CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

and wrongs on both sides, it is far too easy to select the facts most congenial to one's sympathies. In any case, Sizer has dropped the extensive political section in his first book from the second more popular version.

However, my main reason for leaving that aspect to others is that for Christians, evangelicals in particular, the biblical question is both fundamental and decisive, whatever the political repercussions. It is a classic case of beliefs affecting attitudes and actions. In addition, I am a Bible teacher rather than a politician and have more experience and a slender claim to expertise in the field of scriptural study.

Every author has to ask why he is writing. The answer defines his reader target and shapes his style. I do not write for scholars but for all interested in the subject and willing to think for themselves. What do I hope to achieve?

Obviously my primary aim is to counter Sizer's case among those who have heard him speak, read his books or simply been aware of his attack. I confess my faith is stretched to believe that Sizer himself will be persuaded to change his mind — again. As an ex-Zionist, who blames me, among others, for misleading him in his earlier position, a reversal would be proof of supernatural intervention! But I hope that many of those who have been impressed by his presentation are still open-minded enough to consider the alternatives objectively and come to their own conclusions.

A secondary aim is to correct the views of some of my fellow

INTRODUCTION

Zionists, particularly those of a ‘dispensational’ viewpoint. They will be disturbed by my agreement with much of Sizer’s criticism of this position. I am convinced that association with what I regard as exegetical error is a real handicap to the Zionist cause, preventing its case being heard in many ecclesiastical circles. Until there is a clear disassociation from it, the promotion of Zionism will languish, at least in the United Kingdom, where dispensationalism is widely discredited.

I have also written this book for myself. Writing a book serves to clarify an author’s own convictions, even re-thinking some of them. It has also given me an opportunity to present my own position, about which there have been rumours and misunderstanding (Sizer himself classifies me as a dispensationalist!) I need hardly add that I do not speak for anyone else, though I know that many will be glad that I have written.

My first chapter is inevitably negative. In severing any links with dispensational Zionism, I am clearing the site before constructing a positive case for what Sizer used to call ‘covenantal’ but I now call ‘classical’ Zionism, based on three of the five covenants in the Bible. We then look at both the people and land of Israel in the light of New Testament data. Finally, we look into the future, helped by New Testament prophecies.

Thank you in advance for your perseverance!