

THE UNTOLD STORY

The Role of Christian Zionists in the Establishment of Modern-day Israel

by Jamie Cowen

The church is rightly criticized for centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, but what is overlooked is the pivotal role British Christian Zionists played in the establishment of modern-day Israel. Almost all books written about the Zionist movement focus on the early Jewish leaders, their creativity and courage in making the impossible a reality, i.e., the restoration of a Jewish state in the land. But Jewish involvement in modern Zionism did not begin until the mid to late 1800's, whereas British Christian leaders were advocating the restoration of a Jewish state in the land for the prior 200 years. The theology of British Puritans with regard to God's plan for the Jewish people so influenced British public opinion that governmental leaders in the 19th century began maneuvering international events towards the re-establishment of a Jewish Israel, culminating, of course, in the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 establishing Palestine as the homeland for the Jews.

Jews lived in England as early as the 11th century. But the perpetuation of medieval anti-Semitic myths caused the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290. Following King Henry VIII's decision to sever ties with the Roman church and the increasing availability of the Scriptures, the Puritan movement took hold in England. The Puritans were known to take the Scripture literally, but also believed that civil government should be based on the Biblical model, largely that of ancient Israel's. As they scoured the Scriptures, beginning in the 1580's the Puritans authored various treatises on Jewish salvation and God's plan to restore the Jews back to their land. The height of Puritan involvement in government came during the Cromwell Republic of the mid-1600's. The Puritans had overthrown the monarchy and attempted to establish a Puritan state in England.

This same period coincided with the horrible slaughters of Jews in Eastern Europe following the end of the Thirty Years' War. The chief Rabbi of Amsterdam, Holland, Manesseh Ben Israel, concluded that Jews were not safe in Eastern Europe, but rather safety lie with the West, and particularly with the Puritans. He discovered in the Scriptures that the coming of the Messiah was linked to the Jews being scattered to the ends of the earth, and in Hebrew the word for "end" was the same as that for "England." Consequently, he wrote a pamphlet called, "Hope of Israel," proposing that the Jews be invited into England in fulfillment of prophecy. Ben Israel knew that the Puritans were very

interested in Biblical prophecy and the plight of the Jews, so he successfully made an appointment with Cromwell and convinced him to support the immigration of Jews into his country. Thus, the banishment of Jews from England ended and with it began a series of articles and books from renowned British, including John Milton and John Locke, supporting a Jewish state.

In 1733 Sir Isaac Newton suggested an interpretation of the prophet Daniel necessitated another nation assist the Jews to return to their land. By the late 1700's England's major papers began discussing the issue. In 1799 Joseph Priestly, a well-known British scientist wrote a book addressing the Jews and said, referring to Israel, "the land is uncultivated and ready to receive you, but the Turks control it. Their power must first fall. Therefore, I earnestly pray for its dissolution. But it may not happen for sometime." This was followed by another book, *The Restoration of the Jews - the Crisis of All Nations*, by Thomas Witherby who proposed England would be "a new Cyrus" and be God's instrument to restore the land to the Jews. In 1819 another book, *Call to the Christians and the Hebrews*, by Theaetetus, proposed Jews and Christians combine efforts for re-establishment of the nation of Israel.

By now the proliferation of both theological and philosophical works proposing the return of land to the Jews was so widespread that politics was effected. In 1838 at the urging of a Christian Zionist, Lord Shaftesbury, Britain established a consulate in Jerusalem, the first diplomatic appointment in the land of Israel. This was followed by the appointment of Michael Solomon Alexander as Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, the first Jewish bishop of Jerusalem since 135 C.E. In 1853 the Crimean War erupted between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The British and the French both sided with the Turks, assisting them in the defeat of the Russians. The Paris Treaty of 1858, concluding the war, granted Jews and Christians the right to settle in Palestine, forced upon the Ottoman Turks by the British for their assistance in the war effort. This decision opened the doors for Jewish immigration to Palestine.

A pivotal event occurred in 1868 with the election of Benjamin Disraeli as British Prime Minister. Disraeli, a Jewish Christian who strongly regarded his Jewish heritage, wrote in an 1877 article entitled, "The Jewish Question is the Oriental Quest," that within 50 years a nation of one million Jews would reside in Palestine under the guidance of the British. Around the same time George Eliot, the great British novelist wrote her book, *Daniel Deronda*, about the struggle of a Jewish person to retain his identity. She propounded the idea that Israel become a nation of vision for the Jewish people. The book was translated and read by a

Russian Jew named Yehuda Perlman who became convinced that a modern state of Israel was the ultimate answer for the Jewish people. He later changed his name to Eliezer Ben Yehuda, the father of modern Hebrew and an early Zionist.

Up to this point the idea of a resurrected Israel resided only in the hearts of most Jews. But things radically changed with the appearance of Theodore Herzl, who in his pamphlet *The Jewish State* began to turn the far-fetched idea of a Jewish land in Palestine to a believable reality for many Jews. What is little known about Herzl's work was the critical role played by another British Christian Zionist, William Hechler. In 1897 following an ultimately disappointing meeting with the Sultan of Turkey, Herzl became distraught about the future of Zionism. Somehow Hechler found a copy of Herzl's *Jewish State* and became so excited that he searched Herzl down around the world. Herzl found Hechler to be a religious zealot but became interested when Hechler could provide Herzl entrée to the German Kaiser and later the British Prime Minister. In an extremely humorous story as related by Herzl, he tells of the meeting with the Kaiser. Herzl had been preparing for weeks for the meeting, intending to show the Kaiser the political advantages to Germany to declare Palestine a future homeland for the Jews. When the meeting day arrived, Hechler accompanied Herzl into the meeting because he knew the Kaiser personally. Before Herzl could say a word, Hechler whipped open his Bible and began discussing Biblical prophecy with the Kaiser. Herzl was appalled, seeing this as another lost opportunity. But to his amazement the Kaiser is convinced by the Scriptures to support the concept.

Later Hechler also provided open doors for Herzl to meet with the British leadership, the relationship that bore ultimate fruit, although at the beginning the Zionist story took a bizarre twist. Britain did not want to upset the delicate balance of relationships in the Middle East, so as a short-term solution, the British offered Herzl and the Jews the land of Uganda as a respite. Herzl reluctantly accepted the offer, but at the next Zionist Congress the offer was resoundingly rejected. The following year Herzl died. A new Zionist leader emerged - Chaim Weitzman. The British government continued to apply pressure on the Zionists to accept Uganda as a temporary shelter, but things changed in a pivotal meeting between Weitzman and another Christian Zionist, Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary. Balfour asked Weitzman why was Uganda rejected and why were the Jews hung up on Palestine. Weitzman responded by suggesting the tables be turned and he offer to Balfour, Paris instead of London. Balfour replied that the British currently had London but the Jews do not have Jerusalem. Weitzman said, "We had Jerusalem when London

was a swamp." That was enough to persuade Balfour to begin to argue for Palestine for the Jews.

Of course, all of these discussions and arrangements were restrained by the fact of the Ottoman Empire's continued control of Palestine. This changed in World War I. The Ottoman Turks sided with Germany. Germany and the Allied powers bogged down along the German/French borders. Millions perished. The British were in desperate need to enhance the power of their explosives in order to win the war. The person who discovered the chemical processes to do just that was the chemist, Chaim Weitzman. Near the end of the war the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George (another Christian Zionist), called for Weitzman to offer him an award for his assistance in the war effort. In a classic statement, Weitzman declared, "I want nothing for myself but rather a homeland for my people." As a result Lloyd George directed his Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, to issue what became known as the Balfour Declaration, proposing Palestine become a homeland for the Jewish people. A month later a British military force led by General Allenby overthrew Ottoman rule in Palestine, and Britain now became the ruling sovereign in the area.

Isaiah prophesied that the Gentiles would bring the Jewish people back to their land (Is. 49). The remarkable story of the British Christian Zionists was, I believe, a fulfillment of that prophecy. The establishment of the modern state of Israel is directly related to God awakening and then directing a certain people to cooperate with Him in His plan for the restoration of the Jewish people to their homeland.

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