

ZIONISM AS THEOLOGY: AN EVANGELICAL APPROACH

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The skeptic Voltaire once asked, "Why should the world be made to rotate around the insignificant pimple of Jewry?"¹ In reality, Voltaire's question is the stark recognition by him that from Abraham's day till now the Jew has had a central and unique role in contributing the values, skills and talents that have molded western civilization. Such thinking runs contrary, however, to the perspective of the late historian Arnold Toynbee, who once stated that the Jew was merely a dried-up fossil, the vestige of a dead culture. Who is right, Toynbee or Voltaire? Is world Jewry dead or alive?

It is my deep conviction, in presenting the following Christian perspective on Zionism, that the people of Israel lives. Accordingly, it has been observed that when Israel chose to enter into a living covenant relationship with God she became "the first people in history to have done something truly revolutionary."² This unique relationship carried with it a mission to be a servant.³ Israel was created to be "a light to the nations" (Isa 42:6). The revolutionary role to be played by this covenant community was to shape the very course and destiny of mankind. Israel's task was to extend not only throughout "this age" but also to "the age to come," the time of Israel's final vindication and redemption. This sense of the continuing relevance of the Jewish people over the centuries has been captured in a striking way in a delightful little story told about Frederick the Great. It is said that one time the cynical Frederick brusquely inquired of the court chaplain, "Herr Professor, give me a proof of the Bible, but briefly, for I have little time." The chaplain answered, "Majesty, the Jews."⁴

I. BIBLICAL ROOTS

The topic of Zionism has a long history, for in a sense the history of Judaism is equally as long.⁵ It was an ancient dream; it is now a living reality. But what of the current charge that "Zionism is racism"? And what about those who say that the Zionism of the Hebrew prophets was messianic and spiritual but that of the

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¹E. van den Haag, *The Jewish Mystique* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969) 42.

²Golda Meir makes this observation in regard to the Jews choosing God. See *Time*, November 24, 1975, p. 102.

³See W. S. LaSor, *Israel: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 11-29.

⁴This conversation is related by A. Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Harper, 1955) 246.

⁵There is strong disagreement among scholars whether Zionism and Judaism are one. E. Rackman ("Faith, Land, and People," in *Keeping Posted* [March 1976] 5) argues that "anyone who professes that his faith is Judaism must, of necessity, be a Zionist." He concludes, "If the heritage itself encompasses God, soil, and nation, then a Jew committed to the whole cannot distinguish between his Jewishness and his Zionism."

modern state of Israel is secular and political? Or again, is the Church the *new* Israel, having triumphantly superseded Israel of old and the covenant promises made to her? Only by tracing this movement from Biblical times to the present day can these questions be approached knowledgeably. Without careful consideration of the theological and historical roots associated with the "land of promise" and Zion in ancient times, there cannot be any real appreciation for Jerusalem⁶ and the new Zionist state of today.

It has been pointed out by the late Abraham Joshua Heschel that there are four pillars upon which Judaism stands: God, Torah, the people of Israel and the land of Israel, each one depending on the other.⁷ Judaism involves a mysterious intermingling of faith (God and Torah) and folk (people) tied to a fatherland (the land of Israel) with an attendant sense of destiny (fulfillment of the commandments). The covenant, "the existential root and core of Jewish being,"⁸ causes each of these foundational pillars to forcefully interact, each evolving from the other. It is clear that Israel's covenant involved far more than spiritual commitments. "The promises are tied to earth, life, land."⁹

Underlying the matter of covenant is the concept of election or "chosenness." Convinced of the centrality of election to the Jewish faith, Arthur Hertzberg has stated that "the essence of Judaism is the affirmation that the Jews are the chosen people; all else is commentary."¹⁰ Some have wrongly interpreted "chosenness" to imply superiority, privilege, or spiritual elitism, rather than summons to responsibility and action. A case in point is made by a well-known historian who said, "The most notorious historical example of idolization of an ephemeral self is the error of the Jews . . . (thinking) to be God's chosen people. The arrogance of a people thinking themselves to be chosen has introduced racism into the Middle East."¹¹ In whatever ways—in addition to the example above—the concept of election is capable of being corrupted, chosenness is to be understood primarily in terms of God's mysterious and efficacious love calling a people to be different.¹² It is not to be understood in terms of innate giftedness (cf. Deut 7:7, 8). The knowledge of being a people who were chosen, who in turn freely chose God—in Biblical

⁶It should be noted that "Jerusalem is a concept as well as a place." See B. Litvinoff, *To The House of Their Fathers: A History of Zionism* (New York: Praeger, 1965) 295.

⁷A. Heschel, "The Nation and the Individual," *Conservative Judaism* 15 (Spring, 1961) 26.

⁸L. Trepp, *Judaism: Development and Life* (rev. ed.: Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1974) 2.

⁹S. Siegel, "The Meaning of Israel in Jewish Thought," in *Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation* (ed. M. H. Tanenbaum, M. R. Wilson and A. J. Rudin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 105.

¹⁰A. Hertzberg, *The Condition of Jewish Belief: A Symposium Compiled by the Editors of "Commentary" Magazine* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 90. See also J. M. Cuddihy, "Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg and the Jewish Chosenness," in *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 101-155.

¹¹Quoted in S. Siegel, "Meaning," p. 99.

¹²The noted German rabbi, L. Baeck, in his classic volume *The Essence of Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1948) 261, states that "to be different was the law of existence. . . . 'You shall be different, for I the Lord your God am different.' . . . The Jew was a great nonconformist, the great dissenter of history. That was the purpose of his existence."

terms, man's *hesed* ("loyal love") for God's *hesed*¹³—gave to Israel of old what social psychologists today might call a "sense of identity."¹⁴ From this writer's Christian perspective, it is a serious error for today's Jew to alter or renounce the Biblical concept of chosenness in order to avoid the charge of triumphalism or "better-than-thou-ism" brought about through the channel of American civil religion. If the Jew has a Biblical destiny to fulfill—and it is my conviction that he does—then that destiny is inescapably tied to the concept of election.

Early in the life of Abraham, God made known his purpose in choosing him (Gen 12:3). It was a call to bring salvation to the world, which implies that the elect or chosen people have more than a passive role to play.¹⁵ Through the prophet Amos, God reminded Israel of her peculiar covenant relationship: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" (Amos 3:2). Bound to her God in covenant faithfulness, the existence of Israel as a nation is given "eternal validity."¹⁶ In the words of David: "Thou didst establish for thyself thy people Israel to be thy people forever" (2 Sam 7:24). In a similar vein the prophet Jeremiah wrote in conclusion to his teaching on the new covenant, "Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD of hosts is his name: 'If this fixed order departs from before me, says the LORD, then shall the descendants of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever'" (Jer 31:35, 36). Centuries later Maimonides, with this same unshakable conviction, wrote in his epistle to the Jews of Yemen, "God promised us through his prophets that we shall never perish and that we shall never cease to be a nation of faith."¹⁷ If the Hebrew Scriptures teach that Israel was to be set apart among all the nations as recipient of the gift of God's election love, so also they teach that Israel received the promise of the gracious gift of land. It was to serve as the "laboratory of the covenant."¹⁸

Mention of the land is a frequent theme in the book of Genesis.¹⁹ The covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants was to be an "everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:19), and the land was to be an "everlasting possession" (Gen 13:15; 15:18; 17:7, 8). Many passages concerning the promise of land are found in the first person of the verb, with God himself offering the promise. These passages are often set in the form of an oath, thereby underlining the "certainty of the promise."²⁰ The permanent nature of the promise was not to be "spiritualized

¹³See J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (New York: Abingdon, 1953) 28.

¹⁴R. J. Z. Werblowsky, "The People and the Land," in *Speaking of God Today: Jews and Lutherans in Conversation* (ed. P. D. Opsahl and M. H. Tanenbaum; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 74.

¹⁵G. E. Wright and R. H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960) 71.

¹⁶See P. and E. Achtemeier, *The Old Testament Roots of Our Faith* (New York: Abingdon, 1962) 96.

¹⁷Quoted in N. Glatzer, ed., *A Jewish Reader* (New York: Schocken, 1961) 169.

¹⁸L. Trepp, *Judaism*, p. 5.

¹⁹See Gen 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7, 8, 18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3-5; 28:13, 14; 35:12; 48:4; 50:24.

²⁰R. M. Hals, "The Promise and the Land," in *Speaking of God Today*, p. 58.

or transmuted into some type of heavenly Canaan of which the earthly Canaan was only a model."²¹ Unfortunately, in this way the Church has too often spiritualized the concept of land. The Hebrew Bible, however, describes an actual piece of earthly real estate marked by carefully-spelled-out geographical boundaries²² (Gen 15:18-21; Num 34:2-12; Josh 15:1-12; Ezek 47:13-20). In this regard it is of more than passing note that Martin Buber emphasized that the national rebirth of world Jewry "was named after a place and not, like others, after a people." The term Zionism, he said, is "not so much a question of a particular people as such, but of its association with a particular land."²³

In the experience of the Jews it is significant that even before Israel becomes a people her relation to the land is preordained (Gen 12:1). "The election of Abraham and the election of the land came together."²⁴ The Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly emphasize that God is the true owner of the land and that Israel is to "possess" and "inherit" the land as his gift.²⁵ Thus the land became a precious possession to Israel, a place which—despite exile—she never entirely left at any time in history. Since the landless were always looked down upon by the landed as outsiders or gypsies, the fact that Israel had land provided needed psychological security as well. Canaan was more than a home; it was Israel's "passport to identity."²⁶

In time, however, Israel was to be "plucked off the land" and "scattered among all peoples." Her ongoing possession of the land was conditioned on obedience. Moses and the prophets had warned Israel that disobedience to the Lord of the covenant would result in punishment by exile (Deut 28:63-68; Isa 7:17; Jer 13:19; 16:13; 25:11). At the same time, Israel knew that exile would not be forever. Despite dispersion and persecution God would "remember the land" (Lev 26:42) and "fetch" his people (Deut 30:4) and "bring them into the land their fathers possessed" (30:5). Indeed, "there is hope" for Israel's future (Jer 31:17), "for the LORD has chosen Zion . . . for his habitation . . . forever" (Ps 132:13, 14). The land covenant, therefore, was not cancelled or annulled; rather, "it was interrupted by the diaspora but not set aside forever by it."²⁷ This point is vital, in my opinion, for any Christian theological perspective on Zionism. For if God has a future for Israel—and I believe he does—it stands to reason that there must be a place on this earth where he intends to fulfill his purposes. And, I submit humbly, I do not think that place will be Uganda.

²¹W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 90.

²²See R. Wolf, *Israel Today* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1970) 13-23.

²³Quoted in R. J. Z. Werblowsky, "Prophecy, The Land and The People," in *Prophecy in the Making* (ed. C. F. H. Henry; Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971) 352.

²⁴A. Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969) 100.

²⁵W. C. Kaiser, *Toward*, pp. 125-126, notes some twenty-five passages in Deuteronomy (e.g., 1:20, 25; 2:29) where the land is viewed as a gift from the Lord. He further states that the land was "always granted . . . as a fief in which she could cultivate and live on it as long as she served Him."

²⁶D. Silver, *A History of Judaism* (New York: Basic, 1974), 1. 51.

²⁷G. D. Young, "Israel: The Unbroken Line," *Christianity Today*, October 6, 1978, p. 22.

The writings of the prophets “reverberate with the promise of return.”²⁸ But when the seventy years of captivity had run their course, a comparatively small number of Jews actually returned to the land. What is more, the ancestors of those who did return would later find themselves driven from the land by a world-wide second dispersion at the hands of Roman overlords. This could hardly be the permanent return described in the prophecy of Jeremiah: “I will plant them and not uproot them” (24:6), or in Amos: “‘I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land which I have given them,’ says the LORD your God” (9:15). In addition the return from Babylonian captivity was not the universal ingathering spoken of in the prophecy of Isaiah (11:11, 12; cf. Zech 8:3-8). Likewise Israel’s ultimate restoration to the land is pictured in prophetic literature as a time of great peace and spiritual renewal affecting both Israel and all nations of the earth (Ezek 36:24-28; Mic 4:1-5). Was postexilic Israel that redeemed nation, who would yet be in bondage to Persia, Greece and Rome?

The hopes and dreams of the Hebrew prophets were never fully realized. The triumph of God’s kingly rule and the final redemption of his covenant people Israel lay in the future. Thus it has been correctly observed that “the Old Testament is an incomplete book, a history with no ending. It announces a conclusion, but it never arrives at it.”²⁹ Accordingly it would seem that those who arranged the order of the canon of Hebrew Scripture had something more in mind than purely historical concerns by ending with 2 Chronicles. For is not the last word in the Hebrew Bible a prophetic word of hope pointing to an unfinished task? 2 Chr 36:23 says, “Let him go up” (*ya’al*). It is a call for an *aliyah* to Zion.

II. SCATTERING: THE LONG NIGHT OF EXILE

In exile the Jews found it difficult to “sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land” (Ps 137:4). Zion could not be forgotten; its remembrance became the Jews’ “highest joy” (137:5, 6). Even in captivity the Jew conceived of history as being imbued with a theological purpose. It was a “meaningful process *en route* to a goal.”³⁰ The land he had left was holy not just for historical reasons but also in light of an “ultimate purpose—the future—the perfect society.”³¹

The Zionist movement chose as the national anthem for the modern State of Israel *Hatikvah* (“The Hope”). It is a song that resolutely states, “Our hope is not yet lost, the hope of two thousand years.” Hope is perhaps the “most characteristic quality of Jewish existence.”³² It derives from the doggedly tenacious faith found in Biblical Israel of old. In the words of John Bright:

This covenant-people idea imparted to Israel a tremendous sense of destiny and a confidence that would not down. . . . Old Testament faith housed a glorious hope

²⁸A. Heschel, *Echo*, p. 101.

²⁹J. Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (New York: Abingdon, 1967) 137.

³⁰G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM, 1952) 40.

³¹E. Rackman, “Faith,” p. 6.

³²A. Heschel, *Echo*, p. 94.

which no tragedy, however total, could defeat. . . . Israel's faith was strongly eschatological in orientation: it was guided to a destination by God. And this gave to the Israelite a robust confidence in the future.³³

To the Jew in exile, "out of the Bible comes a voice: You shall be patient, for I the Lord your God am patient."³⁴

In the post-Biblical era, while Jews remained scattered among the nations, an intense yearning to return to the land of Israel is reflected in rabbinic texts. Also, a certain spiritual mystique and aura begins to be associated with the land. For example, a Jew was instructed to remember Zion by leaving a corner of the walls of his house unpainted, or to make jewelry with some part incomplete. The land of Israel was considered to be the "navel of the world." It was a *mitzvah* (commandment) to live there, for it brought one closer to God. To be buried in the land was thought of as being buried on an altar of atonement.³⁵ The fruit of Israel was deemed better than that of any other country. Even the atmosphere of the land was thought to make people wise. Higher moral standards were believed to exist there. Accordingly, Judah ha-Levi once wrote, "The land of Canaan is in special favor with the God of Israel, and no function can be perfect except there."³⁶ This mystical quality of the land is likewise underscored by Abraham Kalisker who wrote as follows:

Many, many changes and events, experiences, and fates befall every single man who comes to this land, until he adjusts to it, has joys in its stones, and loves its dust, until the ruins in the Land of Israel are dearer to him than a palace abroad, and dry bread in that place dearer than all delicacies elsewhere.³⁷

In short, the Mishna states that "the Land of Israel is holier than any other land."³⁸

For centuries, in both liturgy and poetry Jews have continued to give concrete expression to Israel and the thought of her restoration. The Seder on Passover, and Yom Kippur, two of the holiest days of the year, conclude with the hopeful announcement, "Next year in Jerusalem!" The *Amidah* or Silent Devotion, the daily core prayer of contemporary Judaism, calls for God to restore Jerusalem and set up the throne of David,³⁹ a distinctly messianic concept. This theme of the hope of a Davidic Messiah who would restore Israel at the time of the ingathering of the exiles has been beautifully expressed in a poem written by an eleventh-century Spanish Jew, Solomon Ibn Gabirol:

³³J. Bright, *Kingdom*, p. 29.

³⁴A. Heschel, *Echo*, p. 94.

³⁵Today in a related practice it is customary for American Jews to be buried in the United States with a packet of earth from Israel, thus symbolizing burial at home.

³⁶Quoted in N. Glatzer, ed., *Reader*, p. 208.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 218.

³⁸*Kelim* 1:6; H. Danby, ed., *The Mishnah* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 605.

³⁹J. H. Hertz, ed., *Daily Prayer Book* (rev. ed.; New York: Bloch, 1948) 145-146.

Root of our saviour,
 The scion of Jesse,
 Till when wilt thou linger,
 Invisible, buried?
 Bring forth a flower,
 For winter is over!

Why should a slave rule
 The lineage of princes,
 A hairy barbarian
 Replace our young sovran?

The years are a thousand
 Since, broken and scattered,
 We wander in exile,
 Like waterfowl lost in
 The depths of the desert.

No man in white linen
 Reveals at our asking
 The end of our Exile.
 God sealed up the matter,
 And closed up the knowledge.⁴⁰

As will be discussed later, the above view that ties the restoration to the land to the days of the Messiah is crucial for understanding the conflict in opinion within Judaism and Christianity over the rise of the modern, secular, Zionist state of Israel.

III. REBIRTH: THE DAY OF RETURN

The state of Israel was proclaimed on May 14, 1948. Return to Zion, the historic homeland, was an "unprecedented drama, an event *sui generis* for which there is no model, no analogy."⁴¹ The state of Israel came as a surprise. Never before had a nation been restored to its ancient cradle after being dispersed abroad for nearly nineteen hundred years.⁴² For this reason, Israel today is an anomaly in the Middle East. She differs from her neighbors demographically in that most of her citizens were born outside her borders.⁴³

In 1896 Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, wrote: "Let the sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the rightful requirements of a nation. . . . The creation of a new State is neither ridiculous nor impossible."⁴⁴ In about fifty years Herzl's dream was realized. In 1917 the British government issued the Balfour Declaration in which it viewed favorably "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for Jewish people." In 1922

⁴⁰Quoted in C. F. Pfeiffer, *The Arab-Israeli Struggle* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 23, 24.

⁴¹A. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken, 1972) 50.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³D. Peretz, *The Middle East Today* (3rd ed.: New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978) 255.

⁴⁴Quoted in W. Laqueur, ed., *The Israel-Arab Reader* (New York: Bantam, 1969) 9.

Britain was granted a mandate over Palestine. On November 29, 1947, a partition plan for dividing Palestine into two sovereign states, one Jewish and the other Arab, was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The following May, amid much fanfare, the state of Israel was reborn.

Modern Zionism is hard to define. It is the product of a complex number of Biblical, historical, political, economic and social factors. Zionism means different things to different people.⁴⁵ Hence, "Zionism is not simply another label for Judaism."⁴⁶ It is to be stressed, however, that Herzl's vision grew primarily out of secular, not religious, considerations. In Europe toward the end of the nineteenth century the pain of anti-Semitism was being felt among the Jews in exile, the Dreyfus scandal being but one noted example. The Jewish "problem" was not solved by conversion or assimilation. Jews were getting restless. They saw other nations undergoing national revivals. As the Zionist dream began to crystallize, the desire of Jewish people to create a sovereign Jewish state was motivated in part by a will to achieve "social and cultural normalization" on the basis of "mundane political power."⁴⁷ But the rationale behind Zionism is far deeper than that of a political movement to provide a homeland for the disenfranchised of the diaspora. Lying under the surface was another factor that nurtured the whole—namely, that "for two thousand years the Jews never forsook their Bible and never came to believe that the word *Israel* in their Bible meant the church."⁴⁸

During the early 1940s, as the horrors of the holocaust gradually came to light, the conscience of the world began to be pricked as never before about the Jews' need for a secure and free national homeland. Hitler's "final solution" was no solution. And the Church lay undisturbed as a slumbering giant. If Jewish bodies were to be rescued from destruction, then the establishment of Israel was a matter of life or death. The state of Israel was not "God's humble answer to Auschwitz."⁴⁹ It would be blasphemous to consider it as an "atonement" or as "compensation."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, as Jacob Neusner has pointed out, Zionism serves as a religion in that it "supplies the meaning of felt-history; it explains reality, makes sense of chaos . . . and neurotic nightmares."⁵¹ Yet despite the need to deal with human misery and destruction, the holocaust reminds us of something else in jeopardy of extinction. "Paradoxical as it may seem, when the danger of physical extermination recedes, the place is taken by the danger of spiritual

⁴⁵M. H. Tanenbaum ("Israel's Hour of Need and the Jewish-Christian Dialogue," *Conservative Judaism* 22/2 [1968] 17, 18) makes the point that since Jews have not clarified among themselves the meaning of Israel it becomes difficult for them to clarify this question for their Christian neighbors.

⁴⁶M. Selzer, ed., *Zionism Reconsidered* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) xi.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. xii, xiv.

⁴⁸G. D. Young, "Christian and Jewish Understandings of the Word 'Israel,'" in C. F. H. Henry, ed., *Prophecy in the Making*, p. 163. As a Christian scholar resident in Jerusalem for many years, Young further observes that "it is due to the influence of [the Jewish] Scriptures more than a result of their persecution that they ultimately came home and built the nation again" (*ibid.*).

⁴⁹A. Heschel, *Echo*, p. 113.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹J. Neusner, ed., *The Life of Torah* (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1974) 220.

death.”⁵² The holocaust painfully teaches that man is not a dichotomous being—a body and soul. Rather, he is a unit—a body-soul—and no one part can survive without the other.

When the modern Zionist state was founded, this newborn entity was difficult for many Jews and Christians to accept. National rebirth did not stem directly from messianism; it came from secular and naturalistic forces. Zionism became, as it were, “a manifesto through action that the previous two thousand years of Jewish history were all wrong.”⁵³ Both synagogue and Church were now faced with two conflicting viewpoints. These have been dramatically portrayed in Chaim Potok’s best-selling novel, *The Chosen*. Representing the Zionist position, Malter says:

Some Jews say we should wait for God to send the Messiah. We cannot wait for God! We must make our own Messiah! We must rebuild American Jewry! And Palestine must become a Jewish homeland! We have suffered enough! How long must we wait for the Messiah?⁵⁴

Countering Malter is Reb Saunders, a Hasidic Jew. He espouses the traditional messianic viewpoint by arguing as follows:

The land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob should be built by Jewish goyim, by contaminated men? . . . Never! Not while I live! Who says these things? . . . And where is the Messiah? Tell me, we should forget completely about the Messiah? For this six million of our people were slaughtered? . . . Why do you think I brought my people from Russia to America and not to Eretz Yisrael? Because it is better to live in a land of true goyim than to live in a land of Jewish goyim!⁵⁵

From the time of the prophets, Jews were taught as a nation to renounce political alliance and worldly power. In exile, driven from their land, they became more of a “spiritual” people, believing that their powerlessness, victimization and sufferings would hasten the Messiah’s coming. This “passive stance toward history” became “the hallmark of rabbinic Judaism.”⁵⁶ Put in the words of Maimonides:

As the dove stretches out her neck to the slaughter, so do the Jews, for it is said, “Nay, but for Thy sake are we killed all the day.” As the dove atones for sins, so do the Jews atone for the nations.⁵⁷

Modern Zionism has rejected this role of passive withdrawal by “initiating action rather than merely responding to the action of others.”⁵⁸ The early Zionists sought to control rather than be controlled, for “they could depend neither on na-

⁵²L. I. Rabinowitz, “How Jewish is the Jewish State?”, in *ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵³R. Alter, “Zionism for the 70’s,” in *Commentary Reports* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1970) 10.

⁵⁴C. Potok, *The Chosen* (Greenwich, CN: Fawcett Crest, 1967) 186.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 187-188.

⁵⁶S. Siegel, “Meaning,” p. 114.

⁵⁷Quoted in M. Selzer, ed., *Zionism*, pp. xvi, xvii.

⁵⁸R. Alter, “Zionism,” p. 5.

tions of the world nor even God to free them."⁵⁹ Did not the rabbis of old exhort their people not to rely on miracles but to go out and create them?

This tension formed between traditional messianic thinking and modern secular thinking created the necessity for the former to be transformed or transmuted. There would be a radical break with the past. Now a so-called "secularized messianism" had evolved, in which "Jews would seek their own salvation, and at the same time await the Messiah. . . . [They] would work and build instead of wait and sigh."⁶⁰

In the final section it will be this present writer's task to discuss how the Zionist departure from the traditional theological concept of restoration to the land under the Messiah relates to a Christian perspective on the contemporary state of Israel and its future.

IV. THE FUTURE: A CHRISTIAN ASSESSMENT OF ZIONISM AS THEOLOGY

Having traced the Biblical and historical roots of Zionism I shall now deal more specifically with the future implications of this movement. Zionism is more than a Jewish issue. It is also vital to Palestinian Arabs, those descendants of Abraham's other son, Ishmael. In addition, Israel's future is of interest to many other people—Christian and otherwise—in the Middle East and around the world.

In this final section I have sought to set forth my Christian understanding and assessment of Zionism as theology. Like Jews, Christians have many varied interpretations of contemporary Zionism. As a conservative Christian, mine is representative of only some, not all. Following are four concluding assertions. They are aimed at providing some needed synthesis to this theme and some direction for future discussion.

1. *The NT affirms that there is a God-ordained future for ethnic Israel and that her brightest hour is yet to come.* In Romans 9-11 the apostle Paul climaxes his theological discourse by addressing the theme of Jew and Gentile in the future plan of God. The main thrust of Paul's argument in these chapters is that the destiny of Jew and Gentile is so interlaced that the latter does not find God except through the former.⁶¹ Israel is the channel through which salvation and riches have come to the Gentile world (Rom 11:11, 12). There is therefore no occasion for spiritual pride or superiority on the part of Gentiles (11:20, 25). Paul further describes the nature of this interdependence by using the metaphor of an olive tree. The nourishing sap of the olive tree (Israel) supports and sustains the branches from the wild olive tree (Gentiles) that have been grafted in (11:17, 18, 24). The new people of God thus join the old people of God to form one people of God comprised of Jews and Gentiles.

Paul is emphatic that despite Israel's unbelief God has not rejected his people

⁵⁹S. Siegel, "Meaning," p. 114.

⁶⁰I. Miller, *Israel: The Eternal Ideal* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955) 71.

⁶¹M. R. Wilson, "An Evangelical Perspective on Judaism," in M. H. Tanenbaum, M. R. Wilson and A. J. Rudin, eds., *Evangelicals*, p. 23.

Israel (11:1). Though spiritually the Church has become heir to Israel's inheritance,⁶² there has been no permanent displacement of God's covenant people. "Israel in some real sense remains the people of God."⁶³ She yet belongs to God and is called a "holy" people (11:16) and "beloved" on account of the patriarchs (11:28). Israel has a vital role still to play in the history of redemption. As a people, Israel will be the "handmaid of God for the salvation of the world"⁶⁴ (cf. 11:15).

In the mysterious plan of God the apostle affirms a "God-willed coexistence between Judaism and Christianity."⁶⁵ As an "apostle to the Gentiles" (11:13), Paul does not say that God's choosing of the Gentiles to share in Israel's promises has thus forever excluded her. Israel is not to be thought of as "the first stage of the 'salvation rocket,' thrown off at the right moment having served its turn."⁶⁶ In other words the Gentiles are not superseders, having cast Israel off for all time; but the Gentiles are grafted onto Israel. To be sure, without Israel Christianity would not exist. Thus "the church understands itself only insofar as it understands original Israel."⁶⁷ The very existence and preservation of Israel throughout the Church age is, to Paul, a great "mystery" (11:25). But God remains faithful in preserving his covenant people (2 Sam 7:24); he "does not change his mind about whom he chooses and blesses" (Rom 11:29 TEV).

The denouement of Paul's argument is an eschatological announcement. The apostle states that the future salvation of Israel will be from Zion: "And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, 'The deliverer will come from Zion' " (11:26). This is to be Israel's brightest hour: Zion will realize the ultimate fulfillment of the prophets' dreams.

Paul's understanding of this deliverance is clearly tied to Jesus, the one he called the Messiah. This NT idea, however, of the human drama ending through divine intervention is not necessarily in conflict with traditional Jewish thinking. Accordingly Abraham Heschel has written, "There are two views concerning the coming of the Messianic era. The one view maintains that the redemption will appear suddenly from heaven, and that amid miracles and wonders he will gather the Israelites of the Diaspora to their ancient inheritance."⁶⁸ As for the apostle

⁶²That the Church is the "spiritual Israel" may be argued from such texts as Rom 4:11, 16, 18; Gal 3:7; 3:29; Col 2:11. It is stated by H. Berkhof, "Israel as a Theological Problem in the Christian Church," *JES* (Summer, 1969) 335, that Christian theologians should do away with the title "New Israel" in reference to the Church. Such language, according to Berkhof, implies that national Israel has been permanently discarded and has no continuing relevancy. To lend support, Richardson points out that it was not until the time of Justin Martyr (A.D. 160) that the Church saw itself as the "Israel of God"; see P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969) 205 ff.

⁶³G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 538.

⁶⁴G. E. Ladd, "Is There a Future for Israel?," *Eternity* (May, 1964) 36.

⁶⁵K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 4.

⁶⁶H. Berkhof, "Problem," p. 335.

⁶⁷A. R. Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers* (New York: Schocken, 1973) 143.

⁶⁸A. Heschel, *Echo*, p. 158.

Paul, he does not elaborate on how this deliverance from Zion will take place. The OT, however, constantly envisages Israel's salvation as a distinct entity, thus suggesting that Paul may have in mind its fulfillment at the second coming of Jesus.⁶⁹

The last word the NT gives us about Israel's future is in Rev 21:10, where the holy city of Jerusalem comes "down out of heaven from God." In this new Jerusalem both Jews and Gentiles will live in peace and security.⁷⁰ On the gates of the city are the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and on the foundations the names of the twelve apostles. Just as Paul's use of the olive tree symbolizes the joining of Jew and Gentile in the plan of God, so John's use of the one wall around the holy city (21:12) illustrates the oneness of the people of God in its highest and most spiritual sense.

2. *Though Biblical evidence is of great value, neither Jew nor Christian should be limited to a simplistic proof-text method to establish on the basis of "divine right" Israel's claim to the land.* Within the religious community there are a number of views that have been held concerning Israel's right to the land. One view sees the promise of land literally fulfilled during the OT period. It happened during the conquest under Joshua, and again during the extensive reign of Solomon.⁷¹ Implicit in this view is the assumption that any OT prophecies not fulfilled in the old economy are now spiritually (not literally) fulfilled in the Church, the "new" and "true Israel." The Church, being Abraham's real seed, is a universal, worldwide body, not restricted to people from any particular nation or origin. American Protestant missionary work in Arab lands, and the consequent political support toward Arab nationalism, is no less significant theologically than support of Jewish nationalism.⁷² The modern Zionist effort, therefore, to return and settle in the entire land of Palestine is viewed to be a "futile effort, not in harmony with God's ultimate purpose."⁷³ In short, "such a trek to the land of the fathers has nothing to do with prophecy."⁷⁴

A second view claims that Israel's title to the land is prophetically decreed in the Bible, and hence the land is rightfully hers by divine sanction. As Jacques Maritain once said, "It is a strange paradox to behold Israel being denied the only territory of which—considering the whole course of human history—it is absolutely, divinely certain that a people has a title to it."⁷⁵ In a similar manner, popular expression of this position has been publicly voiced by Israel's prime minis-

⁶⁹G. E. Ladd, "Future," p. 28.

⁷⁰See W. S. LaSor, *Israel*, p. 108.

⁷¹D. Beegle, "The Promise and the Promised Land," *Sojourners* (March, 1977) 24.

⁷²H. Fishman, *American Protestantism and a Jewish State* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973) 179.

⁷³*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷⁴W. Hendriksen, *Israel and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 63.

⁷⁵Quoted in R. J. Z. Werblowsky, "Jewish-Christian Relations," *Christian News from Israel* 24 (Autumn-Winter, 1973) 121.

ter, Menachem Begin, who said, "There are some people who accuse me that I am founding our right to this land on the Bible. What an accusation. I plead guilty."⁷⁶ Begin's address in Jerusalem, before a predominantly premillennial group of evangelical Christians, may in part have been political opportunism. Nevertheless it must be recognized that there are many evangelical theologians who hold to what they refer to as "Israel's divine right to the land."⁷⁷

In an article that addresses the question of "Which Christians Can Israel Count On?", Martin Marty concludes that "premillennialism demands support of Israel" and is therefore the highest rung on his so-called "ladder of sympathies."⁷⁸ Marty is correct in pointing to the strong support that evangelical premillennialism has historically shown for Israel. In a similar vein, Meir Kahane of the Jewish Defense League has argued that because of the kind of faith in the Bible evangelical Christians have they are "the most potent weapon that Israel has within the United States . . . [to] convince others that the United States' true interest is total and unconditional backing for the Jewish State."⁷⁹ Unfortunately, at times in the past this backing has been eagerly expressed in language which is not only highly deterministic but also often devoid of ethical and moral considerations as well.⁸⁰ In the words of Gartenhaus: "The Jew will have Palestine with or without the help of Britain or any other nation on earth! . . . To oppose [Zionism] is to oppose God's plan."⁸¹ Or again, quoting Lambie:

Of course the inhabitants of the land do not want them. Neither did the Canaanites of old want them . . . and yet they came and they are coming again. God has decreed it. It must be so.⁸²

Needless to say, this kind of extremely unbalanced deterministic thinking has some important implications, if not consequences, for world history. This may be put into further focus when viewing the questions of anti-Semitism, the holocaust, and the potential casting of Arabs into a "demonic role in the fulfillment of end-time prophecies."⁸³

A third point of view looks at the land from an historical-existential perspective. This view is particularly popular among Jewish scholars. Since most Jews do not interpret prophecy literally, they do not expect the Bible to contain predicted details of forthcoming events. Rather, the Bible is approached with a sense of mystery whereby the prophetic texts become real not through exegetical skills

⁷⁶Quoted in *The Chosen People* (September, 1978) 15.

⁷⁷An expression of this thinking is found in a full-page advertisement entitled "Evangelicals Concerned for Israel," signed by fifteen evangelical leaders. See *The New York Times* (November 1, 1977) 12.

⁷⁸M. E. Marty, "Which Christians Can Israel Count On? A Ladder of Sympathies," *Christian Century* (March 8, 1978) 235.

⁷⁹M. Kahane, "Christians for Zion," *Jewish Press* (January 24, 1975) 34.

⁸⁰D. Wilson, *Armageddon Now!* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 141.

⁸¹Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 91.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 402.

but in the depth of the soul.⁸⁴ The relationship to the land is one of historical self-awareness that expresses itself in an inner certainty and conviction. The right to the land is not a title deed to present in a court of law.⁸⁵ Briefly, "what is involved is not proof or prediction, but witness."⁸⁶

It is my own conviction that the question of the right to the land must be resolved looking at the issue from both a Biblical and practical-historical perspective. Our approach to such a complex question must neither on the one hand be simplistically resolved by the proof-text approach nor on the other by an abandonment of all theological concern whatever. From a personal Biblical perspective, granting the presupposition of the validity of predictive prophecy and granting the trustworthiness of the covenant promises bound by the testimony of God's solemn oath, the land remains a legitimate part of Israel's historic earthly inheritance. God's initial promise of the land to the Jews has never been abrogated. Though Israel has been in exile, that Biblical promise has only been interrupted, not cancelled. What is more, as David Flusser of the Hebrew University has pointed out, "In the New Testament, God's promises of the Land to Israel are never expressly denied."⁸⁷ If the Bible speaks truth about Israel's past, then it also speaks truth about her future. God has an interest in all peoples, but history alone bears witness to the uniqueness of Israel's calling and the continued sense of destiny she bears.

From the practical-historical perspective, no one may lay claim to any land simply on the grounds of "divine right." The corridors of time are strewn with the wreckages of individuals and societies who have been tragic victims of those who had a "Biblical mandate" for their inhumane acts. No solution of the problem of the land may be imposed on any people on the grounds that "it is willed by God." This means that even military conquest may not be used to prove a nation's right to a given land. For a nation or people to "misuse the Bible for political purposes is as blasphemous as to isolate it from the burning political and social questions of our day."⁸⁸

The ultimate solution would seem to be a matter of sensitivity to history and contemporary existential need. Should Israel be judged by a double standard compared with other nations? When people of this world are truly cognizant of the historic roots, present hurts and future dreams of a people who have brought far more into this world than they have taken from it, then the question, "Whose land is Israel?", becomes little more than academic. As for Israel, then, the final question is not really a matter of land. It is a question of the right of survival, or no question at all.

⁸⁴R. J. Z. Werblowsky, "Prophecy," p. 346.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 348-349.

⁸⁶R. M. Hals, "Promise," p. 69.

⁸⁷Quoted in D. Flusser's introduction to E. A. Josephson, *Israel, God's Key to World Redemption* (Hillsboro, KS: Bible Light, 1974) 13.

⁸⁸R. J. Z. Werblowsky, "Prophecy," p. 353.

3. *The modern Zionist state of Israel could be a fulfillment of prophecy and is most surely a remarkable sign of God's continuing love, preservation and purpose for his people.* The question of whether the modern Zionist state of Israel is a fulfillment of prophecy is much debated. Considerable discussion centers around the fact that the state of Israel came into being by secular political forces, while the Biblical picture of the messianic kingdom is of a more spiritual order. In Jewish thinking, however, it should be kept in mind that a central concern is to

overcome the tendency to see the world in one dimension, from one perspective, to reduce history exclusively to God's actions or to man's action, either to grace or to man's initiative. The marvelous and the mundane, the sacred and the secular, are not mutually exclusive, nor are the natural and the supernatural, the temporal and the eternal, kept apart.⁸⁹

Christians have usually tended to emphasize theological and spiritual concerns about modern Israel, while Jews have usually put greater stress on political, economic and social needs relating to Israel's national survival.⁹⁰ It should be pointed out, however, that it was this tendency of Christians to understand the term Israel in only one dimension—that is, spiritual—that Klausner was objecting to when he pointed out that Christianity has sought to remove the national and political aspects of the prophetic hope.⁹¹ Klausner's point is well taken, for Israel has always found her identity in the world of flesh and blood. Christians especially need to be reminded that "the Hebrew Bible is not a book about heaven—it is a book about the earth."⁹²

As for myself, I am not prepared to say at this point that Israel's return to the land is clearly a fulfillment of prophecy. But it could be. "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled"⁹³ (Luke 21:24 NIV). Israel's presence in the land, albeit as a secular state unredeemed and fighting for survival, could be the first stage toward the fulfillment of God's eschatological plan, which will culminate in such a way that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26). At the same time, it could be that the present state of Israel will collapse. Who really knows? If this were to happen God some day would gather a new Israel in her place, for his promise concerning Israel's future is inviolable. Jesus never denied to the Jews that there would be an earthly kingdom. He only asserted that the time of its coming remained in doubt (Acts 1:6, 7).

From the NT perspective many of the specific details surrounding Israel's future must remain obscure and uncertain. This is the case simply because of the hermeneutics employed by the writers of the NT. OT prophetic texts were interpreted in light of Jesus' messianic mission and the birth of the Church. This al-

⁸⁹A. Heschel, *Echo*, p. 159.

⁹⁰C. E. Armerding, "The Meaning of Israel in Evangelical Thought," in M. H. Tanenbaum, M. R. Wilson and A. J. Rudin, eds., *Evangelicals*, pp. 119-122.

⁹¹J. Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel* (New York: Macmillan, 1955) 10.

⁹²A. Heschel, *Echo*, p. 146.

⁹³See W. S. LaSor, "Have the Times of the Gentiles Been Fulfilled?", *Eternity* (August, 1967) 32-34.

lowed the NT writers to find deeper meaning in these texts.⁹⁴ A classic example of this method of hermeneutics is found in the "servant of the Lord" passage in Isaiah 53. The NT authors tell their readers that the prophecy of the unnamed servant is really a prophecy of the Messiah. Since many OT prophecies were fulfilled in ways totally unexpected by the OT authors themselves as well as the Jews of Jesus' day, one must be cautious in pressing details about the "how" of Israel's future salvation (cf. Rom 11:26, 27).

An additional problem centers around the indefiniteness of the language of prophecy itself. There may be a conditional element in the prophecy (cf. Jer 18:7-10) that results in a lack of preciseness or total change in its fulfillment. In addition, as one scholar has wisely cautioned,

that which makes the language of prophecy so vivid and yet so difficult is that it is always more or less figurative. It is poetry rather than prose. . . . The present, the past, and the future, the declaratory and the predictive, are all combined and fused into one.⁹⁵

Prophetic language, therefore, partakes of a certain measure of ambiguity, which may cause one to confess that he cannot be sure about all the details of fulfillment.

We have already sought to establish that the NT teaches that there is a God-ordained future for ethnic Israel. Israel is now in her land. But "to say that one knows what God has for his people Israel would be arrogant anticipation."⁹⁶ The state of Israel is not the fulfillment of the messianic promises. The promises that yet await fulfillment will happen "in God's way and in God's time."⁹⁷ At the very least, the preservation of Israel and her return to the land are remarkable signs. They remind us that the Bible is a drama that is unfinished and that God's sovereign purposes will yet be brought to completion in and through his covenant people.

4. *The ultimate human concern in dealing with Zionism must be a prophetic and theological concern: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice. . . ."* It is a fallacy to think that the main focus of the Hebrew prophet was on the future. His concern was primarily on that of the social, political and ethical issues of his own day. He preached and protested far more than he predicted. The prophet called his people to account for justice and righteousness as well as to concern for the poor and oppressed.

Since Israel's statehood was proclaimed in 1948 the Middle East has been a tinderbox ready to ignite at the slightest provocation. The demands of Yassir Arafat, representing the Palestinian cause, have been heard around the world. The problems Jews and Arabs face span centuries, literally from Abraham to Arafat. They are complex, and there is no simple solution. We offer none here.

⁹⁴See G. E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium* (ed. R. G. Clouse; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977) 18-29.

⁹⁵R. B. Girdlestone, *The Grammar of Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1955) 48.

⁹⁶A. A. van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 97.

⁹⁷B. Ramm, "Behind the Turmoil and Terror in the Middle East," *Eternity* 17 (September, 1967) 34.

Nevertheless, in the midst of the debate over peace it is important that two main concerns be affirmed lest Israel's right to reside in the land only appear to be that of an aggressive, militaristic intruder.

The first concern is that of Israel's right to survival. Does Israel have a right to exist as a free and secure people in her ancestral homeland? If she does, then every effort should be made to enhance between Arabs and Jews a sense of mutual respect and trust. It has been difficult for Israelis to live in a land along with those who are committed to their destruction. Reconciliation will never be possible until one group accepts the reality of the other. Jewish survival must be more than a theological affirmation. It must be transformed into a physical reality.

From a historic perspective, Zionism can hardly be conceived of as racism. Zion (Jerusalem), from David's day to the present, remains the most holy of cities to the Jew. For the Arab, however, Jerusalem is third in order of most holy cities. With a huge Arab hinterland surrounding Israel on three sides, far more should be done to help solve the tragic problem of the Arab refugee, the innocent victim of several wars.

A second concern is directly related to the first: It is the need to practice justice for all peoples in the Middle East. Ultimately Zionism revolves around a prophetic and theological question, one which the eighth-century prophet Micah addressed to his people:

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:8)

If one grants the right of Israel to exist as a nation, that decision must be made on the basis of what is just and moral rather than simply on the grounds that it fulfills prophecy.⁹⁸ Humanitarian and altruistic motivations must be of prime consideration. From the view of God's sovereign, eternal, cosmic perspective, events are determined. He is the Lord of history and controls it in accord with his plan. Nevertheless, man is accountable for the way in which he fulfills the purposes of God. The Hebrew Scriptures are replete with examples of those who stood under the judgment of God for their unjust actions. The end has never automatically justified the means.

Whether or not the current Israeli government is more deserving of God's blessing and of possessing the land than the government under which the prophet Jeremiah lived⁹⁹ could be discussed ad infinitum. What is important is that nations—whether old or new—practice righteousness and justice in their dealings with one another. Without this basis of operation no nation can survive.

Modern Israel is not a theocracy, and so today's Christian should not blindly condone all her acts. As a secular state, Israel is not the kingdom of God. She was not even during the time of the prophets. But the Israelis of today have a prophetic mandate. It is to practice justice toward those whom they consider to be "strangers" in the land. This often means the displaced, homeless and powerless. At the same time the nations of the Middle East must seek to practice justice in relation to Israel, a tiny nation built from the survivors of a holocaust that claimed six million precious lives.

⁹⁸D. Wilson, *Armageddon*, p. 217.

⁹⁹See J. Bayly, "Marching to Zion," *Eternity* (February, 1978) 66.

For a variety of reasons, Christians and Jews will continue to find a common bond of interest in Israel's future. Israel is the land of the Bible. There is the stage on which the events of Holy Writ have been played for centuries. It is a sacred land. And it will always be that way. For the prayer of the Biblically informed Christian is the same as that of the Jew:

Thou wilt arise and have pity on Zion;
it is time to favor her;
the appointed time has come.
For thy servants hold her stones dear,
and have pity on her dust.
(Ps 102:13, 14)