

An Historical Account of Christian Zionism: Donald Wagner

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In this piece, Wagner details the history of Christian Zionism and its impact from the British Empire through the present day Bush Administration. Donald Wagner is professor of religion and Middle Eastern Studies at North Park University in Chicago and executive director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, and author of Anxious for Armageddon. He wrote this commentary on Christian Zionism, published in five parts in THE DAILY STAR, October 2003.

Christians And Zion: British Stirrings

The British have had a long-term fascination with the idea of Israel and its central role in biblical prophecy that dates back to their earliest recorded literature. The Epistle of Gildas (circa. 6th century AD) and the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History (735 AD) both saw the British as the new Israel, God's chosen people, who were destined to play a strategic role despite repeated invasions by their Nordic neighbors. In the British perception of being an elect, these battles were understood in the context of Israel's battles against the Philistines, Babylonians and others.

A clear resurgence of such themes was evident in the 16th century, perhaps influenced by the Protestant Reformation and its emphasis on the Bible and varied interpretations of its texts, now that Rome had lost its control over the new clergy and theologians. One of the early expressions of fascination with the idea of Israel was the monograph Apocalypsis Apocalypseos, written by Anglican clergyman Thomas Brightman in 1585. Brightman urged the British people to support the return of the Jews to Palestine in order to hasten a series of prophetic events that would culminate in the return of Jesus.

In 1621, a prominent member of the British Parliament, attorney Henry Finch, advanced a similar perspective when he wrote: The (Jews) shall repair to their own country, shall inherit all of the land as before, shall live in safety, and shall continue in it forever. Finch argued that based on his interpretation of Genesis 12:3, God would bless those nations that supported the Jews return. However, his idea did not find support from fellow legislators.

While these writers cannot be classified as Christian Zionists, they might be viewed as proto-Christian Zionists, as they prepared the way for those who would follow. Gradually their views receded, but the turbulence following the American and French revolutions provoked significant feelings of insecurity across Europe. As the anxiety rose in the run-up to the centennial year at the beginning of the 19th century, prophetic speculation concerning Jesus return and related events was in the air.

During the decade that followed the year 1800, several Christian writers and preachers began to reflect on the events leading to Jesus would-be imminent return, among them Louis Way, an Anglican clergyman. Way taught that it was necessary for the Jews to return to Palestine as the first stage prior to the Messianic Age, and he offered speculation as to the timing of Jesus second coming. Within a short period of time, Way gained a wide readership through his journal The Jewish Expositor, and counted many clergymen, academics and the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge as subscribers.

A number of influential proto-Christian Zionists emerged in the generation that followed Way. John Nelson Darby (1800-81), a renegade Irish Anglican priest, added several unique features to Way's teachings, including the doctrine of the Rapture, whereby born again Christians would be literally removed from history and transferred to heaven prior to Jesus return. Darby also placed a restored Israel at the center of his theology, claiming that an actual Jewish state called Israel would become the central instrument for God to fulfill His plans during the last days of history. Only true ("born again") Christians would be removed from history prior

to the final battle of Armageddon through the Rapture, based on his literal interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

Darby's extensive writings and 60-year career as a missionary consolidated a form of fundamentalism called premillennialism (Jesus would return prior to the Battle of Armageddon and his millennial rule on earth). Darby made six missionary journeys to North America, where he became a popular teacher and preacher. The premillennial theology and its influence on Christian fundamentalism and the emerging evangelical movement in the United States can be directly traced to Darby's influence.

Christian Zionism is the direct product of this unusual and recent Western form of Protestant theology. Found primarily in North America and England, it is now exported around the globe via satellite television, the Internet, best-selling novels such as the Left Behind series, films and a new breed of missionaries. These unique doctrines were found among fringe movements in Christianity throughout the ages, which most Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant churches regarded as extreme and marginal, if not heretical.

One of the influential British social reformers to be influenced by premillennial theology was Lord Shaftesbury, a conservative evangelical Christian who was intimately linked to leading members of the British Parliament. In 1839, Shaftesbury published an essay in the distinguished literary journal the Quarterly Review, titled The State and Restoration of the Jews, where he argued: (T)he Jews must be encouraged to return (to Palestine) in yet greater numbers and become once more the husbandman of Judea and Galilee. Writing 57 years before Zionist thinkers Max Nordau, Israel Zangwill and Theodor Herzl popularized the phrase, Shaftesbury called the Jews a people with no country for a country with no people. The saying was curiously similar to that of the early Zionists, who described Palestine as a land of no people for a people with no land. Gradually, Shaftesbury's views gained acceptance among British journalists, clergy and politicians.

One of the most important figures in the development of Christian Zionism was the Anglican chaplain in Vienna during the 1880s, William Hechler, who became an acquaintance of Herzl. Hechler saw Herzl and the Zionist project as ordained by God in order to fulfill the prophetic scriptures. He used his extensive political connections to assist the Zionist leader in his quest for an international sponsor of the Zionist project. Hechler arranged meetings with the Ottoman sultan and the German kaiser, but it was his indirect contacts with the British elite that led to a meeting with the politician Arthur Balfour. That meeting in 1905 would eventually lead to Balfour's November 1917 declaration on a Jewish homeland, which brought the Zionists their initial international legitimacy. Balfour's keen interest in Zionism was prepared at least in part by his Sunday school faith, a case put forth by Balfour's biographer and niece, Blanch Dugdale.

Then-British Prime Minister David Lloyd-George was perhaps even more predisposed to the Zionist ideology than Balfour. Journalist Christopher Sykes (son of Mark Sykes, co-author of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916), noted in his volume Two Studies in Virtue that Lloyd-George's political advisers were unable to train his mind on the map of Palestine during negotiations prior to the Treaty of Versailles, due to his training by fundamentalist Christian parents and churches on the geography of ancient Israel. Lloyd-George admitted that he was far more familiar with the cities and regions of Biblical Israel than with the geography of his native Wales or of England itself.

British imperial designs were undoubtedly the primary political motivation in drawing influential British politicians to support the Zionist project. However, it is clear that the latter were predisposed to Zionism and to enthusiastically supporting the proposals of Herzl and leading Zionist officials such as Chaim Weizmann due to their Christian Zionist backgrounds. Balfour's famous speech of 1919 makes the point:

For in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country...The four great powers are committed to Zionism, and Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land.

The phrases rooted in age-long traditions and future hopes were perhaps grounded in Balfour's British imperial vision, but they were also buttressed by his understanding of Bible prophecy, which under-girded his bias toward the Zionist project as well as his grand designs for Britain's colonialist policy.

Christian Zionists, Israel And The 'Second Coming'

The term Christian Zionism is of relatively recent vintage and was rarely used prior to the early 1990s. Self-proclaimed Christian Zionist organizations such as the International Christian Embassy-Jerusalem and the US-based Bridges for Peace, both with offices in Jerusalem, have been operating for 20 years, but were under the radar of most Middle East experts and the mainstream media until after Sept. 11, 2001.

Briefly stated, Christian Zionism is a movement within Protestant fundamentalism that sees the modern state of Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and thus deserving of political, financial and religious support. Christian Zionists work closely with the Israeli government, religious and secular Jewish Zionist organizations, and are particularly empowered during periods when the more conservative Likud Party is in control of the Knesset. Both the secular and religious media place Christian Zionism in the Protestant evangelical movement, which claims upward of 100-125 million members in the US. However, one would more accurately categorize it as part of the fundamentalist wing of Protestant Christianity, since the evangelical movement is far larger and more diverse in its theology and historical development.

Christian Zionism grew out of a particular theological system called premillennial dispensationalism, which emerged during the early 19th century in England, when there was an outpouring of millennial doctrines. The preaching and writings of a renegade Irish clergyman, John Nelson Darby, and a Scotsman, Edward Irving, emphasized the literal and future fulfillment of such Biblical teachings as the rapture, the rise of the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon and the central role that a revived nation-state of Israel would play during the latter days.

Premillennialism is a type of Christian theology as old as Christianity itself. It has its roots in Jewish apocalyptic thought and generally holds that Jesus will return to earth before he establishes, literally, a millennial kingdom under his sovereignty. Darby added the distinctive elements of the rapture (or removal to heaven) of true, born-again Christians prior to Jesus return, and interpreted all major prophetic texts as having predictive value. He also marked world history according to certain periods called dispensations, that served to guide believers in how they should conduct themselves. The fulfillment of prophetic signs became the central task of Christian interpretation.

Darby's ideas became a central feature in the teachings of many of the great preachers of the 1880-1900 period, including evangelists Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday, the major Presbyterian preacher James Brooks, Philadelphia radio preacher Harry B. Ironsides, and Cyrus I. Scofield. When Scofield applied Darby's eschatology to the Bible, the result was a superimposed outline of premillennial dispensationalist notations on the Biblical text, known as the Scofield Bible. Gradually, the Scofield Bible became the only version used by most evangelical and fundamentalist Christians for the next 95 years.

In developing a working definition of Christian Zionism, one can say it is a 19th and 20th century movement within Protestant fundamentalism that (particularly last century and today) supports the maximalist claims of Jewish political Zionism, including Israel's sovereignty over all of historic Palestine, including Jerusalem. The modern state of Israel, as a fulfillment of prophetic scriptures, is regarded as a necessary stage prior to the second coming of Jesus. Christian Zionism is marked by the following theological convictions:

** God's covenant with Israel is eternal, exclusive and will not be abrogated, according to Genesis 12:1-7; 15:4-7; 17:1-8; Leviticus 26:44-45; and Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

** There are two distinct and parallel covenants in the Bible, one with Israel that is never revoked and the other with the Church that is superseded by the covenant with Israel. The Church is a mere parenthesis in God's plan, and as such it will be removed from history during the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and 5:1-11). At that point, Israel, as a nation, will be restored as the primary instrument of God on earth.

** Christian Zionists claim that Genesis 12:3 (I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you) should be interpreted literally and lead to political, economic, moral and spiritual support for the state of Israel and for the Jewish people in general.

** Christian Zionists interpret the Bible literally and have a hermeneutic understanding of Apocalyptic texts--the book of Daniel, Zechariah 9-12, Ezekiel 37-8, 1 Thessalonians 4-5 and the Book of Revelations-- and assume their messages will be fulfilled in the future. To be more precise, the version of premillennialism popularized by Darby, Irving and Scofield should be called futurist premillennial dispensationalism, so as to differentiate it from historic premillennialism, the eschatology held by many Church Fathers, such as Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Justin Martyr and others.

** Christian Zionists adopt a dispensationalist approach to history as advanced by Darby and popularized by Scofield's version of the Bible, published by Oxford University Press in 1909. Because fundamentalist leaders, clergymen, Bible colleges, institutes and seminaries used the Scofield Bible, it became the most significant transmitter of premillennial dispensationalism and, as such, paved the way for Christian Zionism.

** Christian Zionists and premillennial dispensationalists have a pessimistic view of history and wait in eager anticipation for the unfolding of a series of wars and tragedies pointing to the return of Jesus. The establishment of the state of Israel, the rebuilding of the Third Temple, the rise of the Antichrist and the buildup of armies poised to attack Israel, are among the signs leading to the final battle and Jesus' return. Leading Christian Zionist authorities in Bible prophecy seek to interpret political developments according to the prophetic schedule of events that should unfold according to their view of scripture. As an apocalyptic and dualistic type of theology, the movement looks in history for the escalation of power and influence of satanic forces aligned to the Antichrist, who, as the end draws near, will do battle with Israel and those aligned with it. Judgment will befall nations and individuals according to how they bless Israel (Genesis 12:3).

** Christian Zionism differs from church doctrine, due in part to its being developed by anti-state church clergymen and theologians in England. Today its views find significant support among the charismatic, Pentecostal and independent Bible churches in Protestant fundamentalism. Christian Zionists often view mainline Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic denominations with hostility and have at times considered the World Council of Churches and related bodies to be tools of the Antichrist. In the Holy Land, Christian Zionists have been hostile toward Palestinian Christians and generally detest Muslims as evil forces worshipping another God. Recent comments by Christian Zionists such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham (the son of evangelist Billy Graham) have added to the suspicion with which many Muslims view the Christian West.

Christian Zionism is a growing political and religious movement within the most conservative branches of Protestant fundamentalism, but it can also be found in the broader evangelical branches of Christianity, including the evangelical wings of the mainline Presbyterian, United Methodist, Lutheran and other Protestant churches. It thrives during periods of political and economic unrest such as the present, characterized by international terrorism, global recession and fear of wars in the Middle East. With its pessimistic view of history, Christian Zionism seeks to provide simple and clear answers through a literal and predictive approach to the Bible. Some estimate that 20-25 million American fundamentalist Christians hold these views, and the phenomenon is growing.

Bible And Sword: U.S. Christian Zionists Discover Israel

The first lobbying effort on behalf of a Jewish state in Palestine was not organized or initiated by Jews. It occurred in 1891, when a popular fundamentalist Christian writer and lay-preacher, William E. Blackstone, organized a national campaign to appeal to the then-president of the United States, Benjamin Harrison, to support the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

Blackstone gained notoriety through his 1882 national bestseller *Jesus is Coming*, his summary of end-of-time premillennial doctrines. He saw a need to politically support the Jewish people after hearing horrifying stories of the pogroms in Russia. Blackstone appealed to multimillionaire friends such as oil magnate John D. Rockefeller, publisher Charles B. Scribner and industrialist JP Morgan to finance advertisements and a petition campaign that were carried in major newspapers from Boston to the Mississippi. Aside from wealthy financiers, Blackstone also received support from most members of the US Senate and House of Representatives and the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Despite powerful backing, his appeal went nowhere.

There is little record of significant political backing for the Zionist cause after Blackstone's initiative, as fundamentalists began to withdraw from political activity following the Scopes trial and battles over evolution. However, after a 50-year hiatus, gradual change began occurring after World War II. Two post-war developments galvanized conservative Christians: the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the Cold War.

A previously small and marginalized school of Biblical interpretation called premillennialism began to assert itself within the larger evangelical Protestant community. Israel and the Cold War were usually linked by premillennial preachers and authors who interpreted them using selected prophecy texts. According to their prophetic timetable, as the end of history approached an evil global empire would emerge under the leadership of a mysterious world leader called the Antichrist and attack Israel, leading to the climactic Battle of Armageddon. Israel was understood by conservative Christians to be at the center of these Biblical events,

and thus commanded unconditional financial and spiritual support.

When Israel captured Jerusalem and the West Bank (not to mention Gaza, Sinai and the Golan Heights) in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, conservative Christians sensed that history had entered the latter days. L. Nelson Bell, the father-in-law of evangelist Billy Graham and editor of the influential journal *Christianity Today*, wrote in July 1967: That for the first time in more than 2,000 years Jerusalem is now in the hands of the Jews gives the students of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible.

Premillennialism gained popularity through a flurry of books and the activities of radio evangelists and television preachers. For example, Hal Lindsay's *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which became one of the best selling books in history. Lindsay's message popularized the premillennialist narrative for a generation of Americans, placing Israel at its historical center. Lindsay also developed a consulting business that included several members of the US Congress, the CIA, Israeli generals, the Pentagon and the then-governor of California, Ronald Reagan.

With the American bicentennial in 1976, several trends converged in America's religious and political landscape, all pointing toward increased US support for Israel and a higher political profile for the religious right. First, fundamentalist and evangelical churches became the fastest growing sector of American Christianity, as mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic branches saw a decline in their members, budgets and missions.

Second, Jimmy Carter, an evangelical from the Bible Belt, was elected president of the United States, giving increased legitimacy to evangelicals as *Time* magazine confirmed when it named 1976 the year of the evangelical.

Third, following the 1967 war, Israel gained an increased share of US foreign and military budgets, becoming the western pillar of the US strategic alliance against a Soviet incursion into the Middle East, particularly after the revolution in Iran took the country out of the US orbit. It is during this period that AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations started shaping US foreign policy.

Fourth, the Roman Catholic Church and mainstream Protestant denominations began to develop a more balanced approach to the Middle East, bringing them closer to the international consensus on the Palestine question. Pro-Israel organizations interpreted this shift as being anti-Israeli and, in turn, began to court conservative Christians. Marc Tannenbaum of the American Jewish Committee captured this sentiment well when he told the *Washington Post*: The evangelical community is the largest and fastest-growing bloc of pro-Jewish sentiment in this country.

The fifth development was the victory of Menachem Begin and the right-wing Likud coalition in the Israeli election of 1977. Begin's Revisionist Zionist ideology that mandated establishing an iron wall of Israeli domination, and his policy of annexing Arab land, accelerating construction of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories and militarizing the conflict with the Arab world, all found ready support within the American Christian right. Likud's tactic of employing Biblical names for the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) and Biblical arguments to defend its policies (God gave us this land) found resonance with fundamentalist Christians.

A surprising development, and arguably the lynchpin in forging the fundamentalist Christian-Zionist alliance, occurred in March 1977, when Carter inserted the clause Palestinians deserve a right to their homeland into a policy address. Immediately, the pro-Israel lobby and the Christian right responded with full-page ads in major US newspapers. Their text stated: The time has come for evangelical Christians to affirm their belief in biblical prophecy and Israel's divine right to the land. The text concluded with a line that took direct aim at Carter's statement: We affirm as evangelicals our belief in the promised land to the Jewish people ... We would view with grave concern any effort to carve out of the Jewish homeland another nation or political entity.

The advertising campaign was one of the first significant signs of the Likud's and the pro-Israel lobby's alliance with the Christian right. It redirected conservative Christian support from Carter, a Democrat, to the Republican right. Jerry Strober, a former employee of the American Jewish Committee, coordinated the campaign and told *Newsweek* magazine: "The evangelicals are Carter's constituency and he (had) better listen to them ... The real source of strength the Jews have in this country is from the evangelicals."

By the 1980 elections the political landscape had shifted, both in the Middle East and in the US. The Iranian hostage crisis helped ensure Carter's defeat against his Republican rival, Ronald Reagan. However, it was not the only factor: An estimated 20 million fundamentalist and evangelical Christians voted for Reagan and

against Carter's brand of evangelical Christianity that failed the test of unconditional support for Israel.

The power of the pro-Israel Republicans became a prominent feature during the Reagan years, with the president leading the way. On at least seven public occasions Reagan expressed belief in a final Battle of Armageddon. During one of his private conversations with AIPAC director Tom Dine, Reagan said: "You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if we're the generation that is going to see that come about." The conversation was leaked to the Jerusalem Post and picked up across the US on the AP wire. This stunning openness displayed by an American president with the chief lobbyist for a foreign government indicated the close cooperation that had developed between the administration and Israel.

A little-known feature of the Reagan White House was the series of seminars organized by the administration and the Christian right with assistance from the pro-Israel lobby. These sessions were designed to firm up support for the Republican Party, and, in turn, encourage AIPAC and Christian Zionist organizations to advance their respective agendas. Participation by the Christian right in gala dinner briefings at the White House reads like a Who's Who of the movement, including author Hal Lindsay, Jerry Falwell, the head of the Moral Majority, and evangelist Pat Robertson, as well as Tim LeHaye (co-author of the influential Left Behind series) and Moral Majority strategist Ed McAteer. State Department official Robert McFarlane, one of those implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal, led several briefings. Quietly working in the background was another Christian fundamentalist, Marine Colonel Oliver North.

Begin developed a close relationship with leading fundamentalists, such as Falwell, who later received a Learjet from the Israeli government for his personal travel and in 1981 was honored with the Jabotinsky Award in an elaborate ceremony in New York. When Israel bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981, Begin made his first telephone call to Falwell, asking him to explain to the Christian public the reasons for the bombing. Only later did he call Reagan. Falwell also converted former Senator Jesse Helms from a critic of Israel into one of its staunchest allies in the US Senate, where he chaired the influential Foreign Relations Committee.

Late in the Reagan administration, a number of scandals in the Christian right began to erode its public support. Pat Robertson's ineffective run for the presidency in 1988 led to a decline in fundamentalist political fortunes. Resilient as ever, the pro-Israel lobby was able to somewhat reassert itself with the election of another Bible-toting Southern Baptist president, Bill Clinton, despite his liberal social agenda. However, Christian Zionist influence did decline after the Reagan presidency, though it would return with renewed vigor after the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001.

The Interregnum: Christian Zionism In The Clinton Years

During his two mandates, former US President Bill Clinton increasingly took on the role of chief negotiator and mediator of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although his background had a hint of Southern Baptist evangelicalism, Clinton was more inclined toward the secular Labor Party in Israel and found a close affinity with the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Meanwhile, the Likud-Christian Zionist alliance, which opposed the Oslo Accords, found itself on the political sidelines.

In May 1996, Benjamin Netanyahu became Israel's prime minister, defeating Shimon Peres. Once again Likud ideology dominated Israeli policy. Netanyahu had long been a favorite of the Christian Zionists, a relationship that developed during his years as Israel's representative to the UN, and he was a frequent speaker at important Christian Zionist functions, whether the Feast of Tabernacles hosted by the International Christian Embassy-Jerusalem or the annual National Prayer Breakfast for Israel held in Washington.

Within a few months of his election, Netanyahu convened the Israel Christian Advocacy Council, bringing 17 American fundamentalist leaders to Israel for an update on the Mideast situation. The tour concluded with a conference and statement that reflected Likud's political platform. The fundamentalist leaders signed a pledge stating that America will never, never desert Israel. Among the other pledges were statements of support for Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, and for a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty. Each declaration was upheld by Biblical citations and a veneer of evangelical Christian language.

The Christian Zionist leaders returned to the United States and launched a national campaign with full-page advertisements in major newspapers under the banner Christians call for a united Jerusalem. Of little concern to the Christian Zionists was the fact that their positions were in conflict with official US policy and could

undermine the delicate negotiations of the Oslo process. Signed onto by Pat Robertson of the Christian Broadcasting Network, Ralph Reed, then director of the conservative Christian Coalition, prominent minister Jerry Falwell and Ed McAteer of the Religious Roundtable, the campaign was one of Likud's answers to the Clinton-Labor strategy. It was also a direct challenge to the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic campaign led by Churches for Middle East Peace that called for a shared Jerusalem.

Likud also turned to the Christian Zionists for help in offsetting the dramatic decline in contributions to Israel from the American Jewish establishment during the conflict between the Orthodox and Reform-Conservative branches of Judaism. When the latter cut back on their contributions to the Jewish National Fund in the late 1990s, several Christian Zionist-oriented churches were asked to make up the difference. The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, led by a former Anti-Defamation League employee and Orthodox rabbi, Yechiel Eckstein, claimed to have raised over \$5 million, mostly from fundamentalist Christian sources.

For example, John Hagee, pastor of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, announced in February 1997 that his church was donating over \$1 million to Israel. Hagee claimed the funds would be used to help resettle Jews from the Soviet Union in the West Bank and Jerusalem. We feel like the coming of Soviet Jews to Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, Hagee stated. When asked if he realized that support of Likud's policies and the increase in Jewish settlements was at cross-purposes with US policy, Hagee answered: I am a Bible scholar and a theologian, and from my perspective the law of God transcends the laws of the United States government and the US State Department.

The Netanyahu government used American Christian Zionists in another way as it sought to undermine the faltering Oslo negotiations. On Oct. 22, 1997, Israel Radio claimed that the Palestinian Authority (PA) was persecuting Christians. Two days later the Jerusalem Post published an article citing classified information made known to the Israeli government in which it was claimed that Palestinian Christians faced relentless and brutal persecution from the predominantly Muslim PA. The report alleged that Christian cemeteries have been destroyed, monasteries have had their telephone lines cut, and there have been break-ins in convents. It went on to claim that the PA had taken control of the churches and was pressuring Christian leaders to serve as mouthpieces for Yasser Arafat and opponents of Israel.

Within a month, US Congressman J. C. Watts, an Oklahoma Republican, reiterated these charges in a Washington Times opinion piece, blaming Arafat for the Christian exodus from the Holy Land and calling for a review and possible freeze on the \$307 million in grants pledged to the PA by the United States. The campaign grew, thanks in part to publicity generated by the articles of A.M. Rosenthal and William Safire of the New York Times, and pressure exerted on Congress by Michael Horowitz, a pro-Israel lobbyist. Palestinian Christians were quick to denounce the charges. Mayor Hanna Nasser of Bethlehem stated: Our churches have complete freedom, and I've never heard that they've been under pressure.

Together with the international evangelical leader Brother Andrew, president of the Netherlands based Open Doors, I led a May 1998 investigation of the Israeli charges on behalf of Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding. We interviewed more than 60 Muslim and Christian leaders, people at the grass roots level throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip and officials and leaders from the PA and Israeli government. We found no evidence of PA or Muslim persecution of Palestinian Christians, although there were three isolated cases of Christian-Muslim family disputes over intermarriage. The most telling interview was with Uri Mor, the director of the Department of Christian Communities at the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs, which oversees all Christian activities in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Mor said the charges were traceable to David Bar-Ilan, Netanyahu's chief spokesman, and told our team that Bar-Ilan used shreds of information as his bread and butter in the propaganda campaign against the Palestinians.

We later interviewed a staff member of the US Consulate in Jerusalem, which had previously interviewed Mor and looked into the problem. The consulate had received a report on the persecution of Christian Palestinians as a confidential internal document. Upon investigation, it determined that the basis of the report came from four Palestinians who had been converted to Christianity by a Messianic Jewish evangelist who resided in an Israeli settlement. Two had criminal backgrounds and the others were suspected of collaborating with the Israeli secret services. The PA had imprisoned the converts, based on their criminal activities, not their conversions.

Apparently, Bar-Ilan's office leaked the report to the International Christian Embassy-Jerusalem, which then published the stories and launched a campaign against the PA. After our investigation, Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding issued a statement clarifying the matter and citing disturbing indications that political motivations were behind the publicity about Christian persecution in the Holy Land. The Christian Zionist

campaign against the PA came to a halt but undoubtedly the tactic will be pursued again.

A Heavenly Match: Bush And The Christian Zionists

When Israel responded to the Netanya suicide bombing in March 2002 by reinvading the West Bank and besieging Jenin, the ensuing international outcry led US President George W. Bush to order Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to withdraw his forces from Palestinian areas. Bush sent a strong message to Sharon at an April 2 news conference: Withdraw! Withdraw your troops immediately!

At that point longtime Christian Zionist spokesman and pro-Israel advocate Jerry Falwell and other Christian Zionist leaders, working closely with pro-Israel groups, used their media and internet outlets to mobilize their constituencies to deliver tens of thousands of telephone calls, e-mails and letters to the president, telling him to refrain from pressuring Sharon and to allow Israel to finish its job. In the aftermath of that campaign, Bush did not utter another word of opposition to Israeli military actions. Falwell told the CBS news program 60 Minutes that after the incident, Israel could count on Bush to do the right thing for Israel every time. The lesson was that even when the Bush administration criticized Israel, the Israelis, conscious of the extensive support they enjoy in the US Congress, would not take it seriously. As Falwell said: "The Bible Belt is Israel's safety net in the US."

Christian Zionist organizations and the pro-Israel lobby are among the significant special interest groups whose interests have converged since Bush's election to shape the administration's policy toward the Middle East. In some respects, most of these groups and political tendencies were lined up and waiting to merge their ambitions even before the election. The tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, provided the spark for this.

Among these interest groups, of which we can broadly identify six, is, first of all, the right wing of the Republican Party. During his election campaign, Bush, with the help of former members of the Reagan administration, discarded the Middle East strategy of the first Bush administration, which advocated a more nuanced, multilateral and collaborative approach to the UN and to international law in resolving conflicts. By 2000, a shift had taken place in the Republican Party. It began embracing the doctrines of neoconservative ideologues who advocated US unilateralism and favored military solutions over diplomacy. This more aggressive approach was put into action after Sept. 11, and to no one's surprise, Israel's war against the Palestinians and its other enemies was soon linked to the US war on terrorism.

A second interest group was comprised of neoconservatives, among them Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who submitted a strategy paper during the first Bush administration in 1991 advocating unilateralist and pre-emptive doctrines. Baker and advisers to the president, who viewed the document as too extreme, buried it. Eventually a larger group of Reagan hawks found various means to express their displeasure with the Republican mainstream and leadership.

That displeasure grew during the Clinton era, particularly with regard to the administration's Middle East policy. In 1996, the Project for a New American Century was born, based on neoconservative doctrine, and the same year several neocon leading lights issued a strategy paper for Benjamin Netanyahu, the Likud candidate for prime minister in Israel's elections, titled A Clean Break. The paper recommended that Israel abandon the Oslo Accords and adopt a strategy of military aggression toward the Palestinians and Arab countries. The strategy helped win Netanyahu victory and became the modus operandi not only of his government but also that of Sharon. Bush's election and Sept. 11 gave the neocons the opportunity to shift US foreign policy toward more military, imperial and unilateralist approaches.

Two other interest groups are multinational construction firms and the petroleum industry on the one hand, and the arms industry on the other: Access to high quality and inexpensive oil reserves has long been a primary strategic US goal in the Middle East. Multinational companies have also recently become important political players in Iraq's reconstruction efforts, including Halliburton, an oil company whose former CEO was Vice-President Dick Cheney, and Bechtel. The US arms industry has also benefited from US Middle East policy, particularly after Sept. 11, thanks to the heightened security atmosphere, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the post-war situations in both countries. Israel, meanwhile, has long been a favorite of US arms producers.

A fifth group is made up of the pro-Israel lobby and think tanks. The lobby works closely with a variety of special interest groups, including the Christian right, to exercise considerable influence over the direction of US Middle East policy. By bringing relentless pressure and a steady flow of policy recommendations to elected officials on a daily basis, pro-Israel organizations outpace counter-initiatives, whether from Middle Eastern

interest groups, academia, or mainstream churches. It is crucial to understand that the range of pro-Israel groups does not merely include Jews, so that the appellation the Jewish lobby is simply inaccurate.

Proof of this is the existence of a sixth interest group whose interests were also served during the Bush administration: fundamentalist Christian Zionists. During the past two or three decades, the conservative Evangelical movement has been the fastest growing sector within the American Christian churches. Estimates of the number of evangelicals range from 100-130 million, out of which 20-25 percent could be classified as fundamentalist — some 20-26 million Americans. Of the fundamentalists, most, but not all, are inclined to support the Christian Zionist position. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center noted that 58 percent of evangelicals believe in the Battle of Armageddon, an indicator that they would be predisposed to Christian Zionism.

Today, Christian Zionists form the largest base of support for pro-Israeli interests in the US. Working since the late 1970s, the pro-Israel lobby has mobilized both economic and political support for Israel among fundamentalists. For example, a relatively new organization, Stand for Israel, has emerged in the past two years to work closely with AIPAC, the leading pro-Israel lobby, to support and hold rallies on behalf of Sharon's policies. Last April 2, Stand for Israel held a convention and lobbying day immediately after the annual AIPAC convention, inviting many of the same speakers and adopting several of the same policies. Former US Presidential candidate Gary Bauer, a co-founder of Stand for Israel, addressed the convention and urged attendees to oppose the Palestinian-Israeli road map and an exchange of land for peace.

Bauer declared: "Whoever sits in the confines of Washington, and suggests to the people of Israel that they have to give up more land in exchange for peace, that's an obscenity."

Others present at the dinner reflected the intimate relationship the Bush administration has with the Christian right and the pro-Israel lobby. This included US Attorney General John Ashcroft, Israel's Ambassador to the US Daniel Ayalon, Southern Baptist Convention leader Richard Land, and House of Representatives Minority Leader Tom DeLay. DeLay and Congressman Tom Lantos, perennial advocates of Israel's interests in the House, received the first annual Friend of Israel Award for their success in leading Congress to pass House Resolution 392, restating the strong solidarity of the US with Israel in their joint stance against international terrorism.

Pro-Israel groups and fundamentalist Christian groups have brought significant political and economic pressures to bear on Congress and the Bush presidency. Their support for Sharon's militant Likud ideology are unquestioned and usually supported by selected Biblical footnotes. Policies such as increased Israeli settlements, the pre-emptive assassination of Palestinian leaders, Israeli sovereignty over all of historic Palestine (especially Jerusalem), and, if it occurs, the expulsion of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat (and indeed the mass expulsion of large sectors of the Palestinian population), would find ready support within the Christian right.