



## Christian Zionism

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### Summary of movement

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Christian Zionism is a millenarian movement that draws adherents from different denominations and persuasions within the Christian faith. It is primarily made up of those who hold a Protestant evangelical perspective. Zionism is broadly understood as the belief that the Jewish people have a right to return to Israel. Christian Zionism is a particular belief in the Jewish right of return, based upon the Old Testament covenant made by God with Abraham. The term 'Christian Zionist' was first used by Theodor Herzl at the First Zionist Congress in 1897 (Hedding [2010](#)). The most commonly quoted Bible verse relating to this covenant is Genesis 12:3. God tells Abraham 'I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed'.



View of the Old City of Jerusalem. Source: ©2005 Wayne McLean. Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic.

The millenarian aspects of Christian Zionist belief have proved controversial. Christian Zionists believe that the return of Jews to their homeland heralds the beginning of the biblically prophesied 'End Times'. The conversion of Jews to Christianity is considered by many Christian Zionists to be a vital element in this process. Numerous prominent Christian Zionists have sought to distance themselves from these views. However, others (including the Southern Baptist Union of the United States) have openly declared their adherence to these beliefs.

Christian Zionism is a belief system without a formal structure. However, there exist high-profile leaders and established bodies that seek to represent the views, aims and objectives of Christian Zionists. Chief amongst these is the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ). This body seeks to 'connect the global church with the nation of Israel... We are here to affirm to Israel and to the nation that God is a covenant-keeping God' (ICEJ video: 0:55).

### *ICEJ: Over 30 years blessing Israel*

The ICEJ defines its mission in terms of bringing Christians into relationship with Jews in the Holy Land. It also undertakes education of Christians globally through its offices in 86 countries ([ICEJ](#)). These outreach efforts result in drawing huge numbers of Christians to the Holy Land each year. Particularly noteworthy is the annual Feast of the Tabernacles held in Jerusalem. This is a celebration of a Jewish holiday bringing

together Christians and Jews with a common purpose: to uphold the significance of Israel as both a nation-state and as a symbol of the truth of biblical prophecy.

Christian Zionists can be found in significant numbers across Europe and Latin America. However, the most sizeable population of Christian Zionists exist in the United States (Sturm 2017a, 2). Hundreds of American churches, particularly Protestant evangelical congregations, focus their worship upon Old Testament prophecy and the role of the Holy Land in fulfilling this prophecy. Prominent Christian Zionist leaders among these churches have included the Rev. Jerry Falwell, Rev. Tim LaHaye and Pat Robertson (Clark 2007, 184). However, Christian Zionism is not limited to those churches and leaders considered part of the traditional American conservative religious right. Martin Luther King, Jr was a supporter of the Zionist cause (Sundquist 2005, 110). Christian Zionist belief in the United States brings together Christians from a variety of backgrounds. 'A poll conducted by Pew Forum of Religion and Public Life in July 2006 found that 42% of all Americans believe 'Israel was given to the Jewish people by God' and that 35% believe that Israel is 'part of the fulfilment of biblical prophecy about the Second Coming of Jesus' (Clark 2007, 5). These figures demonstrate the strength of support for Israel among American Christians in the twenty-first century. American evangelical Christians are considered to have been the key driving force behind the international Zionist agenda over the past half-century.

## History/Origins

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The roots of the Christian Zionist movement can be traced back through seventeenth-century Protestantism to the earliest Christian communities (Ariel 2006, 74-5). The amillennial leanings of many modern Christian groups began to emerge in the 4th and 5th centuries. At this time, believers began to expect the return of Christ in a remote (rather than an immediate) future.

*According to [this] view, the church has replaced Jesus on earth and has a mission to instruct its followers and ensure their salvation. However, millennial groups, which expected the return of Jesus to earth, came about during the Middle Ages, drawing on messianic passages in biblical tracts, such as Daniel and the Revelation of John, and predicting the imminent end of the world-as-we-know-it (Ariel 2006, 74-5).*

Following this tradition, modern Christian Zionism began to flourish in Victorian British non-conformist Christian communities.

Christian interest in the return of Jews to their homeland was heightened in the nineteenth century among British Protestants who began to interpret biblical texts in a more literal manner. They viewed Jews as the descendants of biblical Israelites and heirs to the covenant between God and Abraham (Ariel 2006, 75). This belief in the modern-day applicability of the covenant stems from literal interpretation of Genesis 12:1-7:

Now the Lord said to Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to

the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him... And they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abraham passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

The 'land of Canaan' corresponds roughly to present-day Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and parts of Syria and Jordan (Tubb 1998, 5). The fulfilment of this biblical promise is viewed by Christian Zionists as being the pre-requisite for Christ's return to earth. For this reason, Christian Zionists have actively lobbied for both the return of Jews to modern-day Israel and for an end to the existence of the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority.

*Christian Zionists question any peace process in the Middle East designed to solve the Arab-Israeli dispute over Palestine. They oppose the Middle East peace process because they oppose a physical division of Jerusalem or of Israel. That is, they denounce the principle of exchanging land for peace, which is at the heart of any negotiated peace process.... [they] oppose the idea of a Palestinian state located on territory which, [they] argue, the Bible says should be in Israel's possession (Kiracofe 2009, 174)*

This religiously motivated refusal to entertain any compromise pertaining to control of land in Israel/Palestine has been interpreted by Tristan Sturm as a performance of 'outsider' nationalism so bound up in religious belief that the two cannot be separated (Sturm 2017a, 2).

With the British occupation of Palestine during WWI, British Christian Zionism began to become as much political as religious. Palestine was controlled under a British mandate from 1920 - 1948. This mandate was legitimised by the League of Nations in 1922. The Mandate was part of a system designed to provide administration to parts of the defunct Ottoman Empire, which had controlled the Middle East since the 16th century (Cleveland and Bunton 2016, 159).



Map of Mandatory British Palestine in 1946, with major cities. Source: ©2015 Bolter21. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

The Balfour Declaration was written a short time before Palestine came under British control. From the British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to the most prominent British Jew of the time, Lord Rothschild, it laid out British intentions with regard to the Holy Land:

Foreign Office,

November 2nd, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of his Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious

rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Arthur, Lord Balfour (Cleveland and Bunton 2016, 230)

According to historian Donald M. Lewis, the Balfour Declaration is regarded as 'the single most significant political development in the history of Zionism between the first Zionist Conference of 1897 and the United Nations' vote in 1948 establishing the state of Israel' (Lewis 2010, 1). However, controversy continues to this day regarding what was actually promised in the Balfour Declaration. Numerous commentators have pointed out that the language of the declaration is deliberately vague. Victoria Clark has suggested that those involved in its drafting were well aware of the document's 'moral ambiguities' (Clark 2007, 121). Numerous motivations underpinned British support for the creation of a Jewish homeland. Prominent among these was the Protestant belief in the Jewish return heralding the beginning of events predicted in the Old Testament (Lewis 2010, 6).

More pragmatically though, political alliances were at stake. British Prime Minister Lloyd George wished to erode French political influence in the Middle East. He also 'calculated that by promising the Jews a British-sponsored homeland in Palestine after the war he could place them in Britain's debt forever' (Clark 2007, 121). The nineteenth-century British self-conception as an 'elect' nation, destined to play a role in the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, was also a factor motivating the British support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland (Lewis, 2010, 20). This final factor has over the past century dissipated almost completely within Britain. Christian Zionism is no longer a significant religious or political force in the UK. However, many Americans have adopted a similar belief in their nation having a role to play in fulfilment of biblical prophecy (Lewis 2010, 20).

Few Jews supported the idea of a Jewish homeland at the time of the Balfour Declaration. Theodor Herzl had been championing the cause for decades but many of his fellow Jews opposed the idea. Edwin Montagu, then British Secretary of State for India, rejected Zionism on the grounds that to create a Jewish homeland would 'imply that his sort weren't one hundred per cent British' (Clark 2007, 115-6). At the time, most European Jews shared this perspective. However, the horrific events of WWII were to bring about a seismic shift in how 'European' many Jews felt. Once the state of Israel was created in 1948, Jewish migration from Europe to their newly created homeland increased exponentially from what had been allowed under the British mandate. It has been estimated that 170,000 Jews had immigrated to Israel by 1953 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

## Beliefs

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While holding to the central tenets of the Christian faith, Christian Zionists differ from other Christians in one key way. They consider themselves 'dispensationalists' rather than adherents of 'replacement theology'.

'Dispensationalist' thought is the millenarian branch of Christian belief. This branch holds that the return of Christ will be heralded by the 'rapture'. The rapture will involve true believers being snatched from earth to meet with Jesus in an other-worldly realm. Turmoil, violence, and misery will rule on earth for seven years. This will be caused by natural disasters, by war and by dictatorial regimes. Jesus will then return to earth with his true believers to reign for a thousand years. For Christian Zionists, the rapture will be preceded by the return of Jews to the Holy Land, and the conversion of Jews to Christian belief (Ariel 2006, 76). However, many Christian Zionist bodies have sought to distance themselves from elements of dispensationalist theology. This is largely due to hostility within Israel towards Christian groups seeking to proselytise amongst the Jewish population. The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem has sought to distance itself from these beliefs by stating on its website:

*Christian Zionism is not based on prophecy or end-time events. Most Christian Zionists would agree, however, that Israel's re-emergence on the world's scene, in fulfilment of God's promises to her, indicate that other biblically-predicted events will follow (Hedding, [ICEJ](#))*



The Western Wall of Jerusalem. Source: ©2010 Sheepdog85. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Germany. GNU Free Documentation License, Version 1.2.

By contrast, replacement theology is the belief that the Christian church is the 'continuation and heir of biblical historical Israel and that Judaism has no further purpose in God's plan for humanity' (Ariel 2006, 87). Replacement theology forms the views of significant segments of Christianity, including the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches of the Middle East (Kiracofe 2009, xii). Reference to the Catholic Church as 'the People of God' by various Popes in speeches and encyclicals can be understood as evidence of Catholic belief in replacement theology (Benedict XVI). However, certain Christian theologians have sought to distance themselves from this thinking, particularly in light of the events of the Holocaust (Soulén 1996).

Each tradition has a history of hostility toward the other. The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem interprets replacement theology in the following way:

*Christian Zionism differs with Replacement Theology which teaches that the special relationship that Israel had with her God in terms of her national destiny and her national homeland has been lost because of her rejection of Jesus as Messiah, and therefore the Church has become the new Israel. The Church has then inherited all the blessings promised to Israel but the judgments and curses still conveniently remain over the Jewish people. (Hedding, [ICEJ](#))*

The dispensationalist theology of Christian Zionism was condemned in a 2006 letter signed by the Anglican, Catholic, Syrian Orthodox and Lutheran Churches' leaders in Jerusalem. Known as the Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism, it stated that:

*The Christian Zionist programme provides a worldview where the Gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. In its extreme form, it places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history rather than living Christ's love and justice today. We categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrines as false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation. (Electronic Intifada [2006](#))*

The hostility of these Christian leaders towards one another is underpinned by competing desires. A majority of those who hold a belief in replacement theology desire a negotiated peace to be reached in the Middle East. However, many dispensationalists believe that a negotiated peace is a betrayal of biblical prophecy. Instead, they desire Israel's total control of the Holy Land. Dispensationalists hold that God created the Jews to be a blessing to the world and that every empire which has persecuted the Jews throughout history has fallen. Modern Christian Zionists believe 'this will be the fate of America as well if the people do not bless Israel in every way possible. However, if America cooperates with God in blessing Israel, America will not only be blessed but will also see Israel become a blessing to all nations' (Phillips 2014: 22).

## Millennial Beliefs

Christian fundamentalism became firmly established in Britain, Europe, and the US in the early twentieth century. Fundamentalist beliefs became manifest in the publication of *The Fundamentals* between 1910 and 1915. These volumes served to formalise the doctrine of fundamentalist Christianity and gave rise to widespread use of the term 'fundamentalist.' This burgeoning movement within Christianity was spurred on by two major events in 1917: the capture of Jerusalem by British forces and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Both impressed believers within fundamentalist Christianity as being 'signs of the times', indicating an imminent fulfilment of biblical prophecy (Kiracofe 2009, 72).

Although no such fulfilment occurred, events throughout the twentieth century continued to be interpreted by millenarian Christian groups as significant of the coming 'End Times'. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was viewed by Christian Zionists as being the historical event of greatest importance in heralding the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Furthermore, the survival of the state of Israel, surrounded by



hostile Arab nations, has been interpreted as a miracle almost as significant as the establishment of Israel itself.

Together, these geopolitical events have been understood by Christian Zionists as the first two steps in God's plan for his world (Clark 2007, 3).

The 'End Times', which are believed by Christian Zionists to be heralded by the establishment and survival of the state of Israel, are commonly referred to as 'the Rapture'. While the chaos of war, famine and natural disaster breaks out on earth, true believers will be taken to a heavenly realm. Existing in peace with Jesus, they will return to the earth once the tribulations have ended. At this time Christ's rule over earth will commence, with 'Jerusalem serving as the capital of the entire world' (Ariel 2006, 77). World events are monitored closely by evangelical Christian groups for signs that the 'End Times' are imminent. [RaptureReady](#) is perhaps the most prominent monitoring service, providing 'commentary on world events that relate to bible prophecy' ([RaptureReady](#)).

Articles on RaptureReady examine such events as the September 2017 bombing of a chemical weapons facility in Syria by Israeli forces. It is claimed that such events mean readers should 'get ready for the rapture. Believers are one major step closer to going home' (Olsen [RaptureReady](#)). Alongside reporting of current events, readers of RaptureReady will find articles examining the varying degrees of favour with which US Presidents have treated Israel; and articles signed off with the Hebrew 'Shalom b'Yeshua' - Peace in Christ. As one of the most prominent 'End Times' monitoring services, RaptureReady is imbued with Christian Zionist theology throughout its reporting.

The necessity or not of converting Jews to Christianity as a precursor to the Rapture is a contentious issue among Christian Zionists. While some assert that Jews as God's chosen people need to be saved through conversion, various prominent Christian Zionists have disclaimed any belief in such a necessity (Clark 2007, 235 and 248). Among them is Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. Eckstein has raised millions of dollars for Israel from American Christian Zionists. However, he has been criticised by Orthodox Jews for ignoring the implications for Jews of Christian Zionists' 'End Times' prophecies (Clark 2007, 232). It has been pointed out that the refusal of some prominent Christian Zionist leaders to engage in discussion of the issue of conversion may be due to political expediency, Israeli authorities being hostile to groups engaging in such activities (Clark 2007, 248). However, among Christian Zionists the belief is common that Jews will not be saved due simply to their status as God's chosen people within Old Testament prophecy. Conversion is considered by many Christian Zionists to be necessary for Jews to be a part of Christ's reign on earth.

In a *New Yorker* profile of the former US Republican presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee, Ariel Levy accompanied a group of American Christians Huckabee was guiding around the Holy Land. Numerous members of this group 'politely admitted that they had no doubt that most Israelis, and anyone else who had not accepted Christ as Lord and Saviour, would be spending an eternity in Hell' (Levy, 2010). The professed love of Christian Zionists for Israel and the Israeli people is seen by some as a contradictory element within the evangelical Christian belief system. According to academic Dan Hummel, tension over the necessity of converting Jews as a precursor to the Rapture has resulted in Christian Zionists engaging in 'theological gymnastics' in order to align their 'evangelistic impulses' to convert Jews to Christianity with their Zionism - i.e., their love of Israel and the Jewish people (Hummel 2017).

Historian Donald M. Lewis has sought to bring a balanced perspective to this inflammatory debate, suggesting that it needs to be remembered that the evangelistic impulses of Christian Zionists are not limited to Jews (Lewis 2010, 13). However, the focus of the millennial belief system of Christian Zionists upon Israel undeniably brings a particular prominence to the role of the Jewish people within this millenarian theology.

## Practices

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Modern-day Christian Zionism exists in many countries throughout the world. By far the largest population of those subscribing to this belief system reside in the United States. The overwhelming majority of Christian Zionists belong to evangelical churches of the South-East and South-Central American 'Bible Belt' (Ariel 2006, 84). Christian Zionist religious traditions and practices are therefore carried out within the parameters of the Protestant evangelical tradition. Such a tradition places a strong emphasis upon Bible teaching and Old Testament prophecy. It must be noted, however, that not all evangelical Christians are Christian Zionists. Nor are all Christian Zionists from the evangelical tradition. Christian Zionism is a belief system which draws adherents from a variety of backgrounds and traditions.

Although the majority of Christian Zionists identify as evangelical Protestant Christians, many have adopted practices which do not originate in the Protestant tradition. Such practices are drawn from Judaism and include the observance of the Sabbath on Saturday. Tristan Sturm has suggested that this is a part of Christian Zionists viewing themselves as 'proto-Jews on earth' (Sturm 2017b).

Many evangelical Christian congregations in the United States that consider themselves part of the Christian Zionist movement have partnered with Israeli settler communities for which they raise funds. The raising of such funds is seen as being in accordance with the biblical teachings of the evangelical Protestant tradition. These funds enable settler communities to provide higher standards of healthcare and education to their residents than would otherwise be available. However, the fundraising efforts of American congregations have been criticised for providing support to settlement communities which are considered illegal under international law (UN Security Council, Mearsheimer and Walt 2007, 138).

Many Christian Zionist congregations and groups organise guided tours to the Holy Land. These tours are designed predominantly to provide support to Israelis. Like the raising of funds, these solidarity visits are understood as being central to the Christian Zionist belief system (Phillips 2014, 21). One particular Israeli settlement, Ariel, receives an average of fifteen visits per year from Christian Zionist groups (Phillips 2014, 27).

*A Christian perspective on visiting the Holy Land*

## Controversies

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Christian Zionist beliefs have proved controversial not only for their emphasis upon the 'End Times', but

also for their political ramifications. Yaakov Ariel has argued that:

*Especially in America, Christian Zionists have turned into a pro-Israel lobby that uses its political power to promote policies favourable to the interests of the Jewish state. The decades following the Six-Day war were marked by massive American support for Israel in terms of money, arms and diplomatic backing. For many conservative Christians in America, their pro-Israeli stand was an appreciation of the importance of the State of Israel for the advancement of history. It was, at the same time, a fulfilment of America's historical role, as well as going hand-in-hand with American interests. (Ariel, 2006, 81-2)*

There exists a strong relationship between Christian Zionists, the American political elite, and Israeli national leadership (Clark 2007, 193). American presidents have subscribed to the Christian Zionist agenda to varying degrees, with George

### *Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu applauds Christian Zionists*

The influence which Christian Zionists hold in American politics has been a significant source of controversy, particularly (as Ariel notes above) since the Six-Day War. It has been pointed out that the failure to negotiate peace in the Middle East has been, at least in part, an achievement of the Christian Zionist biblical and political agenda. This failure 'lies at the heart of the Muslim sense of grievance towards the West, and the West's struggle with Islamic fundamentalism' (Clark 2007: 5).

[This lecture](#) from Dr Tristan Sturm explores some of the controversial aspects of Christian Zionist involvement in conceptions of Palestinians and the Palestinian right to land.

The International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ) is one of the most prominent Christian Zionist organisations in the world. However, the ICEJ has been a source of considerable controversy. It was set up in defiance of the majority of international embassies removing to Tel Aviv in 1980 in protest against the Israeli Knesset's passing of the 'Jerusalem Law' (Ariel 2006, 84). The ICEJ draws thousands of Christian Zionist visitors to Jerusalem each year, particularly in celebration of the annual feast of the Tabernacles (ICEJ). However, the Middle Eastern churches reject the mission and the message of the ICEJ. Leaders of the Middle Eastern churches have highlighted the role played by Christian Zionism in preventing a 'just peace' being negotiated in Israel and Palestine. They have highlighted in a co-signed letter that the alliance of Christian Zionists with political leaders has led to 'unending cycles of violence that undermine the security of all peoples of the Middle East and the rest of the world' (Electronic Intifada [2006](#)).

Jewish commentators have highlighted the problematic elements within Christian Zionist attitudes towards Jews (Ariel 2006, Gorenberg 2002). Although the Christian Zionist agenda upholds the nation of Israel, it inherently views 'the Jews as the people who fail to recognise and accept the true Messiah and have thus deprived themselves of both eternal life and sound moral guidelines' (Ariel 2006, 95). Christian Zionists have also condemned the views of those who do not wholeheartedly support the Zionist agenda. On the

website of the ICEJ, Rev. Malcolm Hedding draws attention to the lack of support for European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, and aligns modern-day opposition to the policies of the state of Israel to the events of WWII (Hedding, [ICEJ](#)).

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