Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

John C. Hagee

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Introduction

John C. Hagee (b. 1941–) is an American pastor, televangelist, author, and political activist. He is the founder and senior pastor of Cornerstone Church, a non-denominational mega-church in San Antonio, Texas, which claims to have over twenty-two thousand active members. Hagee is CEO of Global Evangelism Television. In 2006 he founded Christians United for Israel, a pro-Israel lobby group designed to act as a Christian version of the predominantly Jewish American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Hagee's pro-Israel politics are connected to his theological beliefs. In addition to believing that Israel's establishment in 1948 was the fulfilment of biblical prophecy that will lead to the return of Jesus within his lifetime, Hagee maintains that God has an unbroken covenant with Israel and Jews more generally. In addition to preaching about these and related themes on a regular basis, he has also documented them in his published books, many of which focus explicitly on Israel, biblical prophecy, the End Times, and the return of Jesus.

Today Hagee is one of America's most prominent Christian Zionists. He has received the 'Humanitarian of the Year' award from the San Antonio B'nai B'rith Council. The Zionist Organization of America has awarded Hagee its Service Award and its Israel Award. In the West Bank settlement of Ariel, Hagee also has a sports complex named after him. In 2012 Hagee was listen by *Foreign Policy* magazine as one of the fifty most powerful Republicans (Anderson 2012).

This article provides an overview of Hagee's early life and career. It focuses primarily on his political and theological beliefs, and how the two define his support for Israel.

Early Life

Hagee was born on 12 April 1940 in Goose Creek, Texas, to a family of preachers. His father, William Bythel Hagee, founded Assemblies of God congregations in Channelview and Houston, Texas, prior to serving as the pastor to Glad Tidings Assembly of God in Corpus Christi, Texas, until his death in 1988. While firm details of Hagee's early life are not well documented, in a biographical retrospective produced by Hagee's own ministry, he describes his upbringing as a strictly religious one. In that retrospective,

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Hagee also claims he was ambivalent about his involvement with the church as a teen. Although he attended out of familial obligation, his real passion lay in sports. Despite his father's disapproval of sports, Hagee was captain of his high school football team. Although he says he planned to never return to church as soon as he was able to leave home, like many preachers of his theological persuasion, Hagee states that 'God had called him to preach', and he therefore decided to start his own congregation (John Hagee Ministries 2018b).

In 1966, Hagee founded the Trinity Church in San Antonio, Texas. Nearly a decade later, in May 1975, Hagee resigned from his role as the senior pastor of Trinity Church. That same year, he founded a new congregation, simply called 'The Church', in Castle Hills, a suburb of San Antonio. In 1976 he married his current wife, Diana Hagee (née Castro), and in 1987 the couple established what is now Cornerstone Church, which today claims to have over twenty-two thousand active members.

Hagee's Theology: Premillenial Dispensationalism

Hagee's theology is derived from the Pentecostal word of faith or 'prosperity gospel' tradition, which attributes physical health and material wealth to divine favour (e.g. Hagee 2012). Hagee is also a premillennial dispensationalist. He believes that Jesus will return before the millennial kingdom is established, because he will be the central actor in that kingdom's establishment. This belief is in contrast to postmillennial theologies, which emphasize that Jesus will return after humans have worked to achieve God's kingdom on earth through their own actions.

Through his dispensational theology, Hagee maintains a clear distinction between Israel and the gentile Church, while also believing that the Israel depicted in the Hebrew Bible is synonymous with the modern nation-state of the same name. This distinction is based on the premise that God deals with humanity in different ways during different epochs or 'dispensations'. According to dispensationalists like Hagee, we are currently living in the 'dispensation of grace', which means that God is currently preoccupied with building up the gentile Christian church. The dispensation of grace ends once the church is 'raptured' into the air. The rapture is one of dispensationalism's most distinctive theological innovations, characterized by the secret, any-moment disappearance of the church (composed only of 'true believers') from the earth. Dispensationalists believe that once the rapture occurs, God's focus will return to Jews and Israel for a period of seven years, known as the Tribulation, during which all unfulfilled prophecy concerning Israel will be fulfilled (Weber 2004).

In this respect, Hagee's belief in prophecy revolves around specific prophetic events that are expected to happen in and to Israel once the Christian church has been removed from the earth. These events include an attack on Israel by Iran and Russia (known as the Gog–Magog war, outlined in Ezekiel 38–39) and the rise of the Antichrist, who will broker a false peace between Israel and its neighbours before bringing the nations of the world under his control in a one-world government. In *Earth's Last Empire*, Hagee writes that 'the Antichrist will make his entrance on the world stage promising peace, but instead will initiate the most massive, vicious, global bloodbath the world has ever known'. The world peace established by the Antichrist will, he says, last for three and half years, after which 'his primary target will be the Jewish people' (Hagee 2018, Chapter 5). During this period, Hagee claims that a great number of the Jewish population will be destroyed, with only a remnant who will be saved once Jesus returns with the raptured

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church to judge the nations for their historical treatment of Israel and establish his kingdom on earth, where he will rule from Jerusalem for one thousand years of uninterrupted peace (see Weber 2004).

In 2007 Hagee caused some controversy within the evangelical world due to some of the theological claims he made in the first edition of his book *In Defense of Israel* (2007). In a chapter entitled 'Answering Christian Critics', Hagee claimed that 'the Jews did not reject Jesus as Messiah; it was Jesus who rejected the Jewish desire for him to be their Messiah' (2007, 145). This reading is tempered by Hagee's dispensationalist theology, which maintains a distinction between Israel and the church. The implication, then, is that Jesus's first coming was to be messiah to the gentiles, while his second coming will be for Israel (Shapiro 2011).

Israel: God's Prophetic Clock

While the specifics and peculiarities of dispensationalism are often debated within theological circles, its emphasis on Israel and Jews as significant markers of God's prophetic work in history is clear and Hagee promotes this view of Israel. Hagee writes, 'Dispensational theology was drilled into me from an early age. … The rebirth of the state of Israel as a nation was an unmistakable milestone on the prophetic timetable leading to the return of Christ' (Hagee 2007, 11).

In this respect, modern Israel's establishment is the centrepiece of Hagee's understanding of prophecy and, as such, contemporary world events that involve Israel shape, and are shaped by, this prophetic framework (Durbin 2012). Hagee's writing always engages with the contemporary social issues that he believes are important precursors to, or may have an effect upon, Jesus's return. Examples include *Beginning of the End: The Assassination of Yitzak Rabin and the Coming Antichrist* (1996), which incorporated Rabin's assassination by Jewish nationalist Yigal Amir into the sequence of prophetic events described above. Hagee, who opposes any peace deal that involves setting land aside for a Palestinian state, described the assassination of Rabin as an event which would further entrench the desire for peace in Israel, a peace process which 'based on the words of the prophets of Israel [Ezekiel 38–39] … will lead to the most devastating war Israel has ever known. After that war, the longed-for Messiah will come' (Hagee 1996, 13). Successive books also connect current events of their time with Israel's role in prophecy. After the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, Hagee published a revised version of *The Battle for Jerusalem* (2001a) entitled *Attack on America: New York, Jerusalem, and the Role of Terrorism in the Last Days* (2001b), which incorporated the events of 9/11 into the chapters previously written for *The Battle for Jerusalem* and the role of Islam in the prophesied rise of the Antichrist, the battle of Gog and Magog, the rapture of the church, the battle of Armageddon, and the return of Jesus.

A central feature of all of the above eschatological scenarios and throughout Hagee's writing and preaching is a claim that God wants and needs Israel to be a Jewish state in order to fulfil his plans in the world. This conception was taken to its extreme in a 2005 sermon in which Hagee declared that God had used Hitler to coax European Jews to return to Israel. In the sermon, Hagee cited excerpts from the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah in order to claim that after Theodor Herzl, whom he says God sent as a 'fisher', was unsuccessful in encouraging a sufficient number of Jews to emigrate to Palestine, he then used Hitler as a 'hunter' to force them back. Hagee then asked rhetorically, 'Why did it happen? Because God said, "my top priority for the Jewish people is to get them to come BACK to the land of Israel"' (Wilson 2008). For

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Hagee, they had to be ‘back’ in Israel because Israel is where unfulfilled prophecy will unfold for Jews and where Jesus will finally establish his millennial kingdom. Despite the controversy stirred up by the video (Stein 2008), Hagee has maintained his image as a strong supporter of Israel and a prominent Christian voice against antisemitism among certain segments of the American Jewish establishment, and especially with leaders in Israel, such as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Hagee’s Politics and Support for Israel: Combining Genesis 12:3 with the Book of Revelation

Hagee’s political support for Israel began in 1981 after Israel bombed the Osirak Nuclear Facility in Iraq during Operation Opera. Hagee claims that the worldwide criticism Israel received for its actions, ‘despite doing the world a favour’, caused him to organize the first of what would become an annual Night to Honor Israel in San Antonio, to show his support for Israel’s actions (Durbin 2018, 54–85).

A significant part of Hagee’s career has involved translating his theological interests in Israel into active political support for the state. This support for Israel is also consistent with a view of the Middle East that mirrors neoconservative views about American power in the region, albeit underpinned and authorized by theological claims. In particular, Hagee cites Genesis 12:3 (NIV) (‘I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse’) as well as Joel 3:2 (NIV) (‘I will also gather all nations and bring them down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and *for* my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land’) as biblical mandates that not only require Christians to support Israel lest they be cursed but also stipulate that supporting a two-state solution (and therefore ‘dividing’ God’s land) is blasphemous and must be rejected by Christians lest they be judged. In a sermon series based on his book *Can America Survive?* (2010), Hagee claimed that the Obama administration was ‘sticking its finger in God’s eye’ and would bring America into judgment if it put pressure on Israel to ‘divide Jerusalem’ (Durbin 2018, 183).

Like other American televangelists, Hagee has profoundly conservative social politics. Although his premillennialist theology stipulates that society is bound to get worse in the lead up to Jesus’s return, like other politically active fundamentalists Hagee also maintains that God will judge those who do not stand up to things that they claim are counter to God’s will (such as abortion, homosexuality, and welfare). Consequently, Hagee has been a vocal supporter of political candidates whom he supports. In 2000, while still relatively unknown outside Pentecostal circles, he wrote *God’s Candidate for America* in support of George W. Bush. In a 2008 interview, former Bush White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said that Hagee ‘was one of a number [of conservative pastors] that certainly had some influence and was able to quickly get someone on the phone at the White House’ (National Public Radio 2008).

In 2006 Hagee’s support for Israel entered the mainstream when he, along with other prominent American evangelicals such as the late Jerry Falwell, founded the lobby group Christians United for Israel (CUFI). CUFI is designed to be a Christian version of the predominantly Jewish American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), to shore up strong Christian support for Israel among America’s evangelical community. Hagee and other CUFI officials have claimed on various occasions that the organization was started at the behest of Benjamin Netanyahu (Durbin 2018).

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Throughout the Obama administration's two terms, Hagee amplified his voice as cultural Jeremiah, warning his congregation and the wider public about the danger he claimed the nation faced with Obama in the White House. In 2010 he published *Can America Survive? 10 Prophetic Signs that We Are the Terminal Generation*. In that book and accompanying sermon series, Hagee argued that the Obama administration was rejecting Israel and criminalizing Christianity. Linking the Obama administration's purported rejection of Israel with his interpretation of Genesis 12:3, Hagee argued that if Christians in America did not lobby their government to support Israel more, then God would judge them and the nation harshly (Hagee, 2010; Durbin 2013).

In 2016, Hagee endorsed Donald Trump for President. When Trump did win the election, Hagee credited Trump's victory to his support for Israel, claiming that God 'stirred the evangelicals to get out and go vote—and they stormed the voting booth to have a change in America' (Beamon 2016).

Hagee and his organization CUFI have long been proponents of moving the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Hagee claims that he met with Trump on numerous occasions in 2017 to explain the 'biblical significance' of moving the US embassy to Jerusalem (Hagee 2018). On 14 May 2018, Hagee was one of two evangelicals invited to speak at the opening of the US embassy in Jerusalem. There, he gave the closing benediction, in which he described Jerusalem as the city of God, to which Jesus would soon return (John Hagee Ministries 2018a).

With Donald Trump in the White House, Hagee's political influence appeared to continue to grow. In 2019, Hagee was one of a number of Christian Zionist pastors who met with Jared Kushner and Donald Trump to discuss the administration's Middle East Peace Plan (Ravid 2019).

Further Reading

As the list of primary sources from Hagee demonstrates, he has published widely on Israel's role in prophecy. While each book focuses on a specific event or set of events, those events are described and analysed by Hagee based on what he believes they mean for biblical prophecy. In that respect, like other books and primary sources, they provide a glimpse into the way contemporary events shape people's understanding of the world.

It is clear, based on his writing and preaching, that Hagee believes that Jesus will return soon. What is less clear is exactly how these beliefs relate to his and others' support for Israel. In my own work (Durbin 2018, 9), I have argued that attempting to determine exactly how specific beliefs in eschatology relate to Christian Zionists' support for Israel is extremely difficult because such motives can either be affirmed or denied. Hagee is a particularly interesting example because he has consistently expounded his understanding of the prophetic significance of Israel and described the violence that awaits that part of the world. Yet, he also claims that his support for Israel has nothing to do with eschatology or End Times prophecy.

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