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Messianic Nationalism and the Credibility of the Bible

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If you care about the subject, you will either sentence this essay to the stake as a piece of heresy or consign it to the efficient oblivion of the file cabinet. In either case, it will be remembered on earth no more. Please, neither flame nor file! Perhaps a ten-year time capsule? Any significance of this piece is in its survival more than its approval.

Here it is. The state of Israel does not fulfill prophecy, so if it falls, the Bible will not fall with it. Should Russia fail to show up for an Armageddon, Scripture will not be broken. Nowhere does the Bible suggest Russia will invade Israel. With God there is no longer a distinction between Jew and non-Jew, in or out of the church, and He gave no signs for the immediate return of Jesus. There. Right or wrong, it's in the record. Ten years from now it might be important to remember that a teacher of eschatology said it in 1982.

I have on my desk a news photo of Baptist clergyman and Moral Majority president Jerry Falwell in a Washington meeting with Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin. After Begin dispatched his warplanes against Iraq's atomic power facility and before word of the mission hit the news services, he phoned to assure Falwell that the raid was purely defensive. Think of that! Is it not past wonder that a Zionist statesman who shrugs off the censure of the United Nations should be found explaining himself to an American fundamentalist preacher!

Begin's administration has sponsored strict anticonversion legislation designed to restrain existing Christian groups and prohibit missionary activity. Falwell could not hand out a tract on the streets of Jerusalem without breaking one of Begin's laws. The attitude of Zionism toward Christianity is expressed by Israel Zangwill:

Beware of the Goyim (Gentile), his elders told Jacob,
They are Goyim, foes of the faith.
Beings of darkness, drunkards and bullies,
Swift with the fist or the bludgeon.
Many in species, but all engendered of God for our sins,
And many and strange their idolatries.
But the worst of the Goyim are the
creatures called Christians.

We are not surprised to learn that Israeli officials are reported to look the other way when mobs harass and intimidate Christians.

Begin would not cross the street to greet a Christian in Jerusalem; why does he go to such trouble to preserve the goodwill of one on the other side of the world? Begin's motive for cultivating Falwell is no secret. Israel follows the advice of Ben Gurion that she should always have at least one world power to rely on, and America is it. Israel is under the Arab gun and cannot survive indefinitely without American support. Since the Arabs have the oil, the United States must often choose between Israeli interests and her own. Pro-Arab legislation is bitterly contested in Congress. (At this writing the proposed sale of AWAC planes to Saudi Arabia is under debate.) Begin depends on pro-Israel interests to lobby on his behalf, and he can recognize Falwell's role as leader of the most powerful such bloc in America outside the Jewish community. Unconditional support for Israel is one of the planks in the Moral Majority platform.

Begin despises the faith of the man he uses, and Falwell profits from the public notice of an important world figure. But why should Falwell, who crusades for evangelism and religious freedom in America, so fervently endorse a nation that falls just short of Russia in the suppression of Christianity? (Orthodox *Jews*

are also reported to be repressed in Israel as they are in Russia!) The answer to this question is also the reason why this essay should be remembered.

A view of prophecy – Falwell advances the dispensational premillennial school of eschatology. This is to say that he believes that the New Testament answers to the Old, that modern Jews are the people of God first – the church second, and that modern Israel anticipates a thousand-year Jewish world empire with Jesus on a Jerusalem throne. Begin’s Israel, therefore, must be honored and protected by the church, Israel’s official hatred of Christ notwithstanding. Grace bows to race, faith to flesh.

Just as no one is more anti-Christian than a Zionist, no one is more pro-Israel than a dispensationalist. From the ranks of the latter, in fact, has come the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem with branch offices in the U.S. and fourteen other countries. Embassy spokesman Jan Van Der Hoeven makes it his mission to persuade Jews to go and live in Israel and die for Jerusalem if necessary. If Begin would announce plans to build a Temple, dispensationalists in the West could be expected to finance it immediately.

Israel-the-key-to-prophecy is dogma for such denominational bodies as the Assemblies of God and Independent Baptists, and Messianic nationalism has its disciples everywhere. A storm of paperbacks hits with each political shift in the Middle East. Hal Lindsey in his vastly popular *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and the recent *The 1980’s – Countdown to Armageddon* says that an honest reading of Scripture leads to the assurance that we are in the last hours of this age. He promises that within forty years or so of 1948 – the founding date of Israel, the following must take place: (1) the temple will be rebuilt and Mosaic worship resumed; (2) Russia will invade Israel and will be defeated miraculously by the returning Christ; and (3) the thousand-year kingdom will be established. The church is inconsequential in all this and will be removed before, during, or after the first seven “tribulation” years.

The Lindsey scenario is standard for radio and TV futurists. Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Rex Humbard, Oral Roberts, and Billy Graham are joined by a host of lesser lights to fill the air with the word that modern Israel fulfills prophecy and “if the Bible is true, Israel will never fall.” In the minds of the watching and listening public, the credibility of the Bible is being tied to the political fate of an anti-Christian state. The most ambitious predictions are delivered with a hard-and-fast “the Bible says!”

Doubting the Bible – This confident futurism might be right or wrong. New it isn’t. End-time experts have always been with us. In 1842 William Miller set the eastern America aboil with dispensational heat: “I am satisfied that the end of the world is at hand. The evidence flows in from every quarter . . .” (Quoted in Clara Endicott Sears, *Days of Delusion* (1924) pp. 35, 36). In 1843 believers were singing:

We are living, we are dwelling
In a grand and awful time;
In an age on ages telling
To be living is sublime.
Hark the waking up of nations
Gog and Magog to the fray;
Hark! What soundeth? Is Creation
Groaning for its latter day!?

Old prophecy books, out of print, pitiful, mildewed monuments to dead visions – gravestones for prophecy “scholars” long-since buried in the shroud of misbegotten charts, locked in the tomb of eschatological disgrace by their own “keys.” Their ghosts: cults. Their stepchildren: believers made doubters, unbelievers made cynical.

The wonderful promise of our Lord’s return has become a joke to the enemies of the church. I recall colleagues at the university snickering that the prospect of an improbable event was “as sure as the Second Coming.” If Jesus does not follow Lindsey’s schedule, many intelligent, sensitive people will see it as proof that the Bible is not to be taken seriously. Who can blame them?

If Falwell and his tribe are right, it will make no difference that I am wrong. The presence of Jesus on the throne in Jerusalem will put me to silence. If they are wrong and Jesus coincidentally returns but refuses to follow the dispensational program, it will not be important that their eschatology misfired. If history repeats itself, however, and it turns out that the signs of His return existed only in well-meaning but misguided imaginations, it will again be tragically important that futurism has failed again.

Perhaps Christianity will be less a laughingstock in a few years if we can have it on record that Falwell and Lindsey represent a minority view of God's future. God has one plan of salvation and one people, the body of Christ. The state of Israel hates our Lord and His Word, and her survival is not the credibility test of that Word. Remember.