

Between Restoration & Liberation:
Theopolitical Contributions & Responses to U.S. Foreign Policy in Israel/Palestine

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With its introduction of the “Roadmap” for peace in the Middle East in April 2003,¹ the administration of President George W. Bush took what was widely perceived as a bold but naïve step toward resolving what many believe to be the most intractable problem of modern history. Official responses to the peace plan were supportive, and the governments of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority assented to its terms. In the months following its introduction, however, implementation of the Roadmap has been troubled by both Palestinian and Israeli violence as well as continued efforts by the government of Israel to maintain its ongoing operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (hereafter, OPT). Almost from its genesis, the Roadmap was threatened by sporadic violence and institutional noncompliance. Palestinian difficulties in implementing the terms of the Roadmap were epitomized in Abu Mazen’s fitful efforts to negotiate a ceasefire with the three major organizations of Palestinian militants; Israel’s difficulties centered around its reluctant removal of several settler outposts and its insistence on the continued construction of its security barrier within the OPT. While the US has repeatedly condemned Palestinian noncompliance with its plan, Israeli noncompliance with the Roadmap has met with little disapproval and no reprimand.

The Roadmap faced domestic difficulties as well. Evangelical leaders such as Gary Bauer and Pat Robertson denounced the Roadmap as yet another land for peace deal that would fail for two reasons: a) the Palestinians are not capable of peaceful coexistence, and b) dividing the land of Greater Israel (the land stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River) is impossible since God has been given it to the Jews as a sign of God’s faithfulness. The latter concern was of far greater importance. American evangelical Christians and their Jewish counterparts—both American and Israeli—engaged in relentless lobbying efforts urging the Bush Administration to withdraw its plan. Their efforts were widely reported as evidence of a theopolitical perspective among the majority of American evangelical Christians, a perspective informed by what has come to be called “Christian Zionism.”

This paper will explore the theological perspectives that inform the special relationship between the US and Israel and theological interest in the relationship’s conservation or modification. Attention will be given Christian Zionism and its relation to perspectives expressed by the American Jewish community, neoconservative policymakers and commentators, American evangelicals and mainline Christian groups. Since Christian Zionism is not merely a

¹ The full name of the peace plan was “A Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.”

political perspective but is, instead, theopolitical, an effort will be made to explore its engagement with other theological perspectives on Israel/Palestine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The paper closes with an evaluation and theopolitical critique of Christian Zionism and reflections on the relation of religion to state power. One note: I have included two appendices of historical information important for understanding the political and economic context of this conversation. Appendix One contains background on the Roadmap, including efforts toward its implementation and/or contravention. Appendix Two is an historical account of the economic relationship between the US and Israel.

American Evangelicals and Israel

That the United States would show deference to the will of Israel in high-profile matters such as implementation of the Roadmap is no longer a surprise. The special relationship between the US and Israel has been strong, in both material and sentiment, since the genesis of the state. With the Truman Doctrine—conceived within the bosom of the Cold War—the US shifted from an isolationist power fighting wars of containment to being an internationalist power supporting “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures” (when, it must be added, the goals of those peoples match their own).² While, as Israeli historian and journalist Tom Segev notes, Israel has always conceived of itself as a Western state, tensions arose between the choice of either Communism or liberal democracy. With significant US courting, Israel chose the latter; concern for supporting Israel as the lone democracy in the region resonates to this day.³ During the Cold War, Russian threats to Israel augmented the lesser danger of the state’s more immediate neighbors. This amplified danger focused US attention on Israel’s proximity to Middle East oil reserves. While it has been argued that Israel is too far away from the Persian Gulf to make any military contribution to the security of its flow of oil, Israel proved during the Gulf War its willingness to make strategic contributions to US concerns.⁴ Perhaps most important—and an analogue to Truman’s worries regarding Greek nationalism—is Israel’s readiness to serve US interests by counteracting nationalist movements in its Arab neighborhood.⁵ Israel has thus far been able to convince the US that a strong Israeli presence in the region is a *Metzia* (bargain)⁶ for its primary sponsor.

The US willingness to support Israel has been explained from a variety of perspectives, from thinly veiled anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish power in the form of a formidable pro-Israeli lobby (along with more balanced critiques of those lobbies) to more salient investigations of

² The doctrine was announced during Truman’s address to a joint session of Congress on 12 March 1947.

³ Tom Segev, *Elvis in Jerusalem: Post-Zionism and the Americanization of Israel*, trans. Haim Watzmann (New York: Owl Books, 2003).

⁴ See Karen L. Puschel, *US-Israeli Strategic Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Era: An American Perspective* (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Post, 1992).

⁵ On this matter, see “Issues Arising Out of the Situation in the Near East” (29 July 1958), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960*, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1993), XII:119: “if we choose to combat radical Arab nationalism and to hold Persian Gulf oil by force if necessary, a logical corollary would be to support Israel as the only strong pro-West power left in the Near East.”

⁶ As stated by Senator Rudy Boschwitz (R-MN), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s Subcommittee on the Middle East (12 December 1982). Cited in Nimrod Novik, *The United States and Israel: Domestic Determinants of a Changing US Commitment* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986), 71.

Israel's strategic benefit to American aims in the region. Indeed, US interest in Israel cannot be explained solely by the efforts of a pro-Israel lobby in the halls of Congress. As Kenneth Wald states in concurrence with Leo Ribuffo, foreign policies advocated by ethnic groups succeed “only to the extent that they had allies outside their own communities, could frame their policy in terms that resonated with American values, and, perhaps most importantly, offered plans consistent with American national interest as perceived by the president and public opinion.”⁷ While Israel has succeeded on all counts, the willingness of George H.W. Bush to confront blatant Israeli disregard for international conventions—coinciding with the apparent end of the Cold War—proves the dominance of the final criterion. In the next sections, we will explore the political alliance forged between American Evangelical Christians and Israeli politicians and lobbyists. This exploration will take account of the wavering American Jewish unanimity in support of Israel prior to the Second Intifada and the dramatic strengthening of US-Israeli relations following 11 September 2001 and the ensuing War on Terror.

The American Jewish Community

The support for Israel personified in the politically active and highly vocal American Jewish community has proven to be a crucial domestic component of US support for Israel. This support has been embodied in an array of political action committees, with the most important of these being the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which proudly calls itself “America’s Pro-Israel Lobby.” Nimrod Novik, who served as foreign policy adviser to Shimon Peres, observed in 1986 that “The more unanimous the [American Jewish] community is in its support for a given Israeli position, the more likely it is to mobilize effectively its political resources in order to try and prevent American policymakers from undermining that position.”

Unanimity—especially on the matter of supporting Israeli policy—can no longer be expected from the American Jewish community. Prior to the Second Intifada and Sharon’s ascendancy to Prime Minister in 2000, uncritical support for Israel continued to decline among the community; increased room was afforded for voices of dissent critical of Israeli state policies—especially as they impacted the OPT—as such support became a lesser determinant of Jewishness. Once a unifying symbol, the state of Israel had become a potentially divisive issue that threatened to fragment the American Jewish community. This new reality had far-reaching implications for Israel’s approach to Israeli-US relations, both for the amount of philanthropic funds funneled directly to the dependent state and for lobbying efforts in US policy-making institutions: “A most important instrument in American Jewish efforts to secure US support for Israel has been the promotion of the idea of the two-dimensional link between the US and Israel: first, the cultural-ideological-moral affinity; second, Israel’s potential and actual contribution to American interests.”⁸ As the cultural-ideological-moral affinity seemed to erode even within the community itself, American Jewish lobbying efforts focused on the latter concern, as discussed

⁷ Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and the Politics of the United States*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 152.

⁸ Novik, 71. See Steven T. Rosenthal, *Irreconcilable Differences?: The Waning of the American Jewish Love Affair with Israel* (Hanover, NJ: Brandeis University Press, 2001). While not yet easily received on a popular level, Jewish voices like those of Marc H. Ellis and Norman G. Finkelstein are now given wider hearing.

above. Development of this ‘affinity’ on the American popular level was left to American Evangelical Christians.

Evangelicals, the Mainline and Israel

After his discussion of the potential instability of the American Jewish community, Novik considers what may be gained from Israel’s courting of American evangelical Christians. Israel’s relationship with the Evangelical community had taken on a new earnestness in the late 1970s, leading to the defeat of President Carter. As the political concerns of the American Jewish community shifted toward national security and the safety of Israel, they joined political forces with groups such as Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority. In this 1986 study, however, Novik cautioned that the influence of the Christian Right seemed to be waning and that Israel might consider tempering its investment in their efforts. By that time, however, the relationship was established, a fact that has continued to serve Israel into the present.

Donald Wagner observes that “Christian fascination with ‘Israel’ and its prophetic role at the end of history has been an important but consistently minor theme in Christianity since the days of Jesus and the early Church.”⁹ Questions regarding the character of this “Israel”—Did the Church replace Israel when it received its promises? Did the promises refer to material or spiritual benefits?—surrounded the Christian eschatological investigations. In response to modernity, the Christian community produced a variety of responses, among them a particular approach to the Scriptures’ “dispensationalist premillennialism.” Wagner traces the development of this hermeneutic through the figures of Thomas Brightman, Henry Finch and Louis Way to its systematization in the work of John Nelson Darby and C.I. Scofield. The theological scheme that developed had at its center a regressive understanding of human history, a perspective diametrically opposed to the Enlightenment’s faith in human progress. Their literal reading of Scripture led dispensationalists to assert that history was divided into distinct eras (dispensations) characterized by how God deals with distinct human groups. When “the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21.24, NRSV), Jesus, the Christ, will return to finally defeat the powers of evil, both human and supernatural, and rescue his Church from history.

Already in the mid-19th century, this theology and its interest in “the restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Palestine”¹⁰ made its way into practical politics. Through the well-connected efforts of William Blackstone—who organized the first Zionist lobbying effort in the US—and Lord Shaftesbury—who is credited, among other things, with providing the inspiration for the Zionist phrase, “a land of no people for a people with no land”¹¹—British imperialism was given an eschatological significance that would later fuel the efforts of Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Lord Arthur Balfour. The theological justification for efforts in support of the Zionist cause was to be found in Genesis 12.3: “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (NRSV).

⁹ Donald Wagner, “Reagan and Begin, Bibi and Jerry: The Theopolitical Alliance of the Likud Party with the American Christian ‘Right’,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 20:4 (Fall 1998), 34. A more thorough account of this history is contained in Timothy Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend,” *Christianity Today* (hereafter, *CT*) 42:11 (5 October 1998):38–49.

¹⁰ Advertisement in the *London Times* (4 November 1840), cited in Wagner, “Reagan and Begin,” 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.* His phrase, from an 1839 essay, read “a people with no country for a country of no people.”

Disseminated through prophecy conferences and educational institutions such as Moody Bible Institute, this theology has proven its endurance among North American Christians: “According to a study published in 1987, 57 percent of American Protestants and 35 percent of American Catholics responded positively to the statement that founding the of the State of Israel in 1948 was the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy that the Jews should be restored to their own land.”¹² With Israel’s declaration of independence, many evangelicals anticipated that Jesus would soon return. Still, there were problems. Many evangelicals (not to mention many Israelis and other Jews) were concerned that Israel had not claimed the whole of biblical Israel. With its alleviation of this concern, the Six Day War of 1967 was a turning point in evangelical confidence in Israel; with its conquest of “Judea and Samaria,” Israel had finally claimed its birthright. The most significant aspect of this swift victory, however, was that Jerusalem was firmly in Jewish hands. The next month, the editor of the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* (*CT*) offered this reflection: “That for the first time in more than 2,000 years Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews gives a student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible.” The pages of *CT* marveled at Israel’s military prowess and assured the world that Israel’s wars—defensive or offensive—were God’s will.¹³

Until this point, Israel had enjoyed broad support among all Christian groups in the US. The support of Israel expressed consistently by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—who with Paul Tillich, among others, in 1942 organized the Christian Council on Palestine—is indicative of this commitment. Still, the political realities of Israel’s founding and subsequent expansion were troubling to many Christian groups, especially as they came together in the World Council of Churches (WCC). Mainline Christian groups that do not accept the dispensationalist approach to Scripture but instead seek to implement an ethical approach to Christian witness in the world have since the mid-1960s become increasingly vocal with their criticisms of Israeli policy. The WCC, for instance, has sought to assert the parity of all sides in the conflict as a constructive foundation for peacemaking efforts. Such a theopolitical perspective has not wielded much political influence, a possible result of the mainline Christian shift from direct political involvement to advocacy and social service roles. While mainline denominations were shifting their political lens toward addressing systemic injustice, the populace of the United States—including the majority of mainline church membership—was shifting the opposite direction. And while mainline denominations began to exit the political stage, evangelicals gladly stepped up to take their place.

Evangelicals Go Mainstream

While rooted in theological commitments that stretch to before the beginnings of Zionism itself, one can argue that the alliance of Israel and American Evangelicals is primarily a late Cold War phenomenon. This context is evident in dispensationalist literature. The theological

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether, *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 82.

¹³ L. Nelson Bell, “Unfolding Destiny,” *CT* 11:21 (21 July 1967), 28. An editorial one month earlier carried this title: “War Sweeps the Bible Lands: Frantic Nations Forget that the Prophetic Vision of World Peace is Messianic,” *CT* 9:19 (23 June 1967). There, it is noted that UN concerns are marginal compared to God’s prophetic timetable.

interpretations of political events popularized by Hal Lindsay in the multiple printings of his *The Late Great Planet Earth* or the first chapters of the likewise popular *Left Behind* books penned by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins—both books and their respective successors identify Russia and China as the primary threats to Israel’s existence and the instigators of Armageddon—continue on in televangelists like Jack Van Impe, John Hagee and many others.¹⁴

Even as its influence on domestic policymaking waned through the 1990s, perspectives put forth by the Christian Right on foreign affairs have gained currency. With this political shift, more and more evangelicals are coming to self-identity as Christian Zionists, an anachronistic term reminiscent of the much earlier nationalist theology of British Israelism. As noted above, the popular dissemination of this theopolitical perspective has contributed to the shape of American religiosity. Walking into their worship space, for instance, the 4000 congregants in Faith Bible Chapel of Arvada, Colorado, are greeted by an Israeli flag flying side-by-side with a Christian one. Cheryl Morrison, the church’s Israel Outreach Director, works in an office decorated with “framed posters of Israeli military tanks, Apache attack helicopters and Israeli Defense Forces.” In the same state, Israeli tourism officials, hoping to shore up their flagging industry, have tapped a Colorado Springs-based marketing firm to attract tourists to the *Intifada*-ridden country. The marketing solution is to create “spiritual ‘SWAT’ teams” of Christian Zionists to experience a peaceful Israel free of conflict. “These are people who are already wired to love and protect Israel,” said Butch Maltby, director of the marketing firm. “This is classic grass-roots marketing.... If the model works here, we plan to implement it in all cities with populations over 500,000.”¹⁵

The world of television preachers and colloquial Christianity—while seemingly quite far from the hallowed halls of Congress—is dominated by what Paul Merkley has labeled “patriotic conservatism.” As he states, “It is a fact of great significance that the television evangelists are, at the same time, strong on patriotic national assertion, suspicious of internationalism and especially of UN-sponsored efforts, and faithful towards Israel.”¹⁶ The simplistic, Manichean worldview that provided a foundation of popular support for the Cold War was seized upon by Israel’s supporters to assert its importance for US interests. To say that Israeli leaders were interested in working closely with a community that was incorporating this perspective into its most basic theological identity is perhaps an understatement.

The alliance between Israel and America’s most visible evangelical leaders has been a matter of public display since the 1980s. This representative publicness is manifested annually during the Jewish holiday of *Sukkot* (known in English as the Festival of Tabernacles), where, as David Aikman reported in 1995, “Since 1981 every Israeli prime minister has made an annual political pilgrimage to receive the blessings—and the often noisy prayers—of 4,000 Christians apparently eager to endorse almost everything Israel does. Whether for Begin, Shamir, Peres, or

¹⁴ For Jack Van Impe, see <www.jvim.com>; for John Hagee, see <www.jhm.org>. An important television clearinghouse for dispensationalist teaching is the Trinity Broadcasting Network (<www.tbn.org>), which hosts programs from Hal Lindsay, Zola Levitt, and others.

¹⁵ Brent Boyer, “Arvada Church Champions Jewish Cause: Christian Zionists Back Jewish People,” *Denver Post*, 22 November 2002, and Lou Gonzales, “Marketing Team Reaches Out to Christian Zionists,” (*Colorado Springs Gazette*, 6 March 2002.

¹⁶ Paul Charles Merkley, *Christian Attitudes towards the State of Israel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 200.

Rabin, standing ovations have been given every time, a pleasant contrast to the often cacophonous greetings the leaders receive during Knesset debates.”¹⁷ The only exception came in 1999 when Ehud Barak did not address the gathering, much to the chagrin of the event’s organizers. Former Prime Minister Netanyahu and Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmer were more than willing, however, to correct the oversight.¹⁸ Likud efforts to establish and strengthen ties with American evangelicals were inaugurated with Menachim Begin’s well-documented relationship with Jerry Falwell.¹⁹ After roughly 25 years of evangelical reassertion in the American political landscape, its most conspicuous contribution to American public life (at least in the amount of money appropriated to the cause) has been unwavering support for the state of Israel.

9/11 and the Evangelical/Neoconservative Blend

With the dissipation of the Manichean dualism that had characterized the Cold War, both the worldview of the televangelists and Israel’s strategic value were open for question and critique. On 11 September 2001, however, a seemingly cosmic dualism was reintroduced into the American perspective. While some had entertained the idea that democratic capitalism’s struggle against challenging forces had ended, others sensed in 9/11 proof for Samuel P. Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations thesis: not only does the struggle continue, it is indeed with representatives of Islam. Forthwith, Israel was provided an opportunity to reassert itself as a strategic partner long combating the terrorism with which the US had been unexpectedly acquainted and practitioners of patriotic conservatism were provided with a new threat against which to preach.

The War on Terror instituted after 9/11—beginning in Afghanistan and continuing, thus far, in the largely unilateral US action in Iraq—demonstrates a policy shift reflecting a post-9/11 national ethos. With the release of a new national security doctrine one year later, this shift was institutionalized. The most controversial component of the statement dealt with preemptive strikes: “While the United States will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defense by acting preemptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country.” The policy thus adopted Israeli policies and practices criticized previously by US administrations. Domestically, the drama of this policy shift had been preempted by swift passage of the USA PATRIOT Act on 25 October 2001. Some have referred to these movements as the Israelization of American policy.²⁰

¹⁷ David Aikman, “Christians in Zion,” *The American Spectator* 28 (December 1995): 64.

¹⁸ Matt Rees, “Christian Zionists scorn Barak for refusing to address gathering,” (Edinburgh) *The Scotsman*, 29 September 1999, 12.

¹⁹ See Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill, 1986), esp. 74–76, 171–173, 191. Referencing Novik and Halsell, Charles Smith notes that “how Menachim Begin used his ties to Falwell to lobby Reagan foreshadows Binyamin Netanyahu’s use of Falwell to lobby Congress against Bill Clinton after 1996” (*Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 4th ed. [Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001], 387).

²⁰ “The National Security Strategy of the United States,” *New York Times* (20 Sept. 2002). On the USA PATRIOT Act, see C. William Michaels, *No Greater Threat: America After September 11 and the Rise of the National Security State* (New York: Algora, 2002). The ‘national security state’ status toward which the US is moving is seen by Michaels as descriptive of the state of Israel.

These shifts in American policy were not native with President Bush but were called forth by events beyond his control and the staff with which he had surrounded himself. While during his presidential campaign Bush had advocated a “humble” foreign policy, theories of free trade no longer provided a satisfactory foundation for security. The thoroughly interventionist US foreign policy that arose after 9/11 was quickly identified as the product of neoconservative thinkers within the Bush Administration. The neoconservative approach to foreign policy advocated ideological, economic and military intervention in nations deemed problematic for American security concerns. Key representatives of the neoconservative persuasion have long argued that Israel’s security was crucial for American interests.

Media coverage regarding the transformation of American foreign policy after 9/11 tended to focus on outing the “neocons” within the Bush Administration and explaining the ideology’s contributions to the new position, often with conspiratorial undertones.²¹ While it is legitimately pointed out that several high-ranking members of the Bush Administration are intimately associated with pro-Israel think-tanks and lobbying groups, one common but untoward component of this discussion has been a preoccupation with the “cabal” of Jewish interests that supposedly dominates US policy.²² All of this conspiratorial speculation led Irving Kristol, who accepts responsibility for being “the ‘godfather’ of all those neocons” to explain in an August 2003 *Weekly Standard* article the roots of this ideology. Not a “movement” but a “persuasion,” neoconservative ideas have taken root among disaffected and disappointed liberals (many formerly dedicated Marxists and Trotskyites) who now trust tax cuts to stimulate the economy and distrust the “welfare state.” Kristol outlines a series of theses regarding neoconservative attitudes toward US foreign policy, the most important being “the ability [of statesmen] to distinguish friends from enemies” and the conviction that “national interest” includes “ideological interests in addition to more material concerns.” Thus, just as “it was in our national interest to come to the defense of France and Britain in World War II ... we feel it necessary to defend Israel today, when its survival is threatened. No complicated geopolitical calculations of national interest are necessary.” The equally uncritical celebration of America’s military strength and support for Israel as an embattled democracy have, when blended with a lament for the “steady decline in our democratic culture,” made for an easy alliance with those who Kristol calls “religious traditionalists.”²³ On the issue of Israel, the alliance was ready-made.

The focus on Israel inherent to neoconservative foreign policy encountered no resistance from President Bush. In 1998, as primary campaigning got underway, Bush took his first trip to Israel. The journey included a helicopter tour guided by Ariel Sharon. During the first year of his term, Bush had taken a hands-off approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a tack that in the

²¹ See Robert J. Lieber, “The Neoconservative-Conspiracy Theory: Pure Myth,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49:34 (2 May 2003):14–15. For a critical analysis of neoconservative contributions to post-9/11 US policy, see Joel Beinin, “Pro-Israel Hawks and the Second Gulf War,” *Middle East Report Online*, 6 April 2003.

²² Vice President R. Cheney and Undersecretary of Defense D. Feith have served on the board of JINSA (Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs) while Cheney, Defense Secretary D. Rumsfeld and Deputy Defense Secretary P. Wolfowitz are affiliated with PNAC (Project for a New American Century) founded and chaired by *Weekly Standard* editor William Kristol. The neoconservative relationship with Israeli politics has been intimate.

²³ Irving Kristol, “The Neoconservative Persuasion,” *Weekly Standard*, 25 August 2003. This ideology, when paired with Jewish state power in Israel, may have far-reaching implications for Jewish political identity. See Ian Buruma, “Annie Hall Get Your Gun: How Woody Allen turned into John Wayne and changed the face of American conservatism,” *The Guardian*, 17 September 2002.

end benefited his Likud friend. Critics did not fail to note that in situations like the beginnings of the al-Aqsa Intifada, US silence indicates complicity with the status quo, even when Israeli actions conflict with stated US policy. When the Bush Administration made its first foray into peacemaking with the Roadmap, it was done as a component of the larger War on Terror and, with the US refusal to speak with Arafat, included a radical intervention in the internal politics of the Palestinian people. While worrisome to some, the religious rhetoric and moral clarity with which President Bush has approached these challenges has further facilitated the partnership of neoconservatives and evangelicals in this post-9/11 world, especially around the issue of Israel.²⁴

The political tenor set by the executive branch was intensified in Congress as 9/11 revived the moral and even religious foundations of some members' political agendas. This is especially true regarding the matter of US support for Israel. On 4 December 2001, for instance, the two issues—reaction to 9/11 and support for Israel's military actions—came together in a speech delivered on the Senate floor by Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Two days before, a suicide bombing in Jerusalem had invited an overwhelming military reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The day of Inhofe's speech, the IDF peppered Yasser Arafat's Ramallah compound with rockets, narrowly missing the Palestinian president and evoking harsh criticism from members of the Sharon government.

Stating that he is a “born-again Christian” who has “accepted Jesus Christ as [his] Lord and Savior,” Inhofe asserts that 9/11 did not portend “a political war” but was, instead, a “satanically inspired attack against America created by demonic powers through the perverted minds of terrorists.” The most common question in those days was ‘Why?’ Inhofe offers an answer:

Why did they single us out? America was attacked because of our system of values. . . . It is not just because we are Israel's best friend. We are Israel's best friend in the world because of the character we have as a nation. We came under attack and we are Israel's best friend. One of the reasons God has blessed our country is because we have honored his people. Genesis 12:3 says: I will bless them who bless you. I will curse him who curses you. This is God talking about Israel.

For Inhofe, US support of Israel in all it decides to do is unassailable on all grounds. To his satisfaction, he offers proof to this end: “I will discuss seven things I consider to be indisputable and incontrovertible evidence and grounds to Israel's right to the land. You have heard this before, but it has never been in the RECORD.” The seventh point is the most salient:

[This] is the most important reason: Because God said so. . . . In Gen. 13:14–17, the Bible says: “The Lord said to Abram, ‘Lift up now your eyes, and look from the place where you are northward, and southward, and eastward and westward: for all the land which you see, to you will I give it, and to your seed forever. . . . Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it to thee.’”

Inhofe then offers an interpretation of this passage:

That is God talking. The Bible says that Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar before the Lord. Hebron is in the West Bank. It is at

²⁴ Derek H. Davis, “Thoughts on the Separation of Church and State under the Administration of President George W. Bush,” *Journal of Church and State* 45:2 (Spring 2003):229–235.

this place where God appeared to Abram and said, “I am giving you *this* land,” the *West Bank*. This is not a political battle at all. It is a contest over whether or not the word of God is true.

This speech from Sen. Inhofe on the Senate floor is surprising in its candid use of theological content to support US foreign policy.²⁵

Speaking to Israeli lawmakers in the Knesset building on 30 July 2003, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX) echoed many elements of Inhofe’s speech in the Senate. After six days in Israel, DeLay’s speech was reported around the world, mostly for his self-identification at the end of his open comments: “Even now, I am filled with a gratitude and humility I cannot express; I stand before you today, in solidarity, as an Israeli of the heart.” DeLay went on to speak of the strategic and spiritual bond between the US and Israel:

The solidarity between the United States and Israel is deeper than the various interests we share. It goes to the very nature of man, to the endowment of our God-given rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It is the universal solidarity of freedom. It transcends geography, culture and generations. It is the solidarity of all people—in all times—who dream of and sacrifice for liberty.

DeLay, understanding the context of his speech to be “a great global conflict against evil,” continued by framing Israel as an “endangered democracy” threatened by “terrifying predators.” Drawing from biblical imagery, DeLay assured the nation-state, “We hear your voice cry out in the desert, and we will never leave your side.” The fight against terrorism is a mission from God to be achieved with or without broad international support:

Freedom and terrorism will struggle—good and evil—until the battle is resolved. These are the terms Providence has put before the United States, Israel, and the rest of the civilized world. They are stark, and they are final. Those who call this world-view “simplistic” are more than welcome to share their “sophisticated” theories at any number of international debating clubs. But while they do, free nations of courage will fight and win this war. Israel’s liberation from Palestinian terror is an essential component of that victory.

DeLay outlined the justification for this policy of near-cosmic warfare in neoconservative terms.

The United States does not seek conflict. We are a peaceful people whose military strength has been consciously built to deter aggression so that we might live in peace. Ideally—and I believe, eventually—we will live in peace, with friendly democracies in every corner of the earth, committed to justice and human rights, “with malice toward none and charity for all.”

His concluding expression of hope was that, “One day . . . free men the world over—whether of the cross, the crescent, or the Star of David—will stand with Israel in defiance of evil.”²⁶

Much more than policy statements from President Bush, these expressions from high-ranking members of the United States Congress demonstrate the currency of both Christian

²⁵ James M. Inhofe, “Senate Floor Statement of Senator Inhofe: America’s Stake in Israel’s War on Terrorism,” 4 December 2001.

²⁶ Tom DeLay, “Be Not Afraid,” 30 July 2003. In February of that year—the day the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated on reentry with Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon aboard—DeLay expressed an even more profound self-identification with Israel, if not Judaism, by reciting, in Hebrew, the last lines of the *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead.

Zionist and neoconservative perspectives—as well as the peculiar blend between the two in response to the tragic events of 9/11—as fixtures of the American political landscape. In these speeches, we see the Clash of Civilizations perspective manifested in the service of practical politics. Indeed, we see evidence for Kathleen Christison’s observation that a fundamental component of US policy in Israel/Palestine is the presumption of Palestinian immorality, a presumption that encourages policymakers and others to approach the matter as “a zero-sum equation in which support for Israel precluded support for any aspect of the Palestinian position.”²⁷ The presumptions of Israel’s innocent righteousness and Palestinians’ collective immorality have been conflated with a general suspicion of Islam exacerbated by 9/11. The blend of all these perspectives has emboldened Israel’s efforts to contravene international opinion and law regarding its activities in the OPT. In the next section, I will explore debates within the wider Christian community concerning US political support for Israel.

Christians Approaching Zion

Christians are not of one mind when engaging the political and religious issues raised by engagement with Israel and its founding ideology, Zionism. As noted above, mainline Christian support for Israel waned following the 1967 war, precisely the event that solidified American Jewish and American evangelical fervor. This erosion was institutionalized in positions adopted by the World Council of Churches (WCC), a political move understood by evangelicals to prove the group’s disregard for biblical teaching in its response to political realities. The WCC, founded in 1948 (the same year as Israel’s declared independence) has developed strong ties with the Middle East Council of Churches (the MECC, founded in 1974), a relationship that began with the Near East Christian Council (NECC, founded in 1956). Middle Eastern Christianity consists of a vast array of Christian communities; these councils were first and foremost efforts to provide a foundation for ecumenical cooperation. With the advent of the State of Israel and the occupations of 1967, however, the organizations’ efforts were increasingly spent on political matters. In the zero-sum equation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, WCC sympathy for MECC perspectives has angered many evangelicals supportive of Israel’s aims and means. Evangelical and Christian Zionist perspectives have been closer to long-term US policy in the region.

Christian Zionists — Perspectives and Organizations

Christian Zionist and, by popular extension, evangelical Christian opposition to the Roadmap to peace proposed by the Bush Administration was strong. The eagerness of the Bush Administration to court evangelical opinion was manifested in a secret 14 July 2003 briefing. Called by the White House Office of Public Liaison “at the request of a close friend of Sharon, Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein of Chicago”—founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews and described as “the Israeli government’s key liaison to evangelical Christian groups—the meeting was attended by about 40 evangelical leaders—featured a briefing by national security adviser Condoleezza Rice. Despite this intense but secret effort, one church representative for a

²⁷ Kathleen Christison, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on US Middle East Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 92–93.

group “with strong links to evangelicals and Jewish conservatives” said it was unsuccessful: “The meeting was an attempt to sell us the peace plan, and it failed.”²⁸

Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcast News (CBN), heavily reported Christian Zionist opposition to the Roadmap. In an October 2003 story posted on the CBN website, the news service reported that objection to the plan from “believing Jews and Christians” is “based on the Bible.” Difficulties in implementing the Roadmap are blamed solely on the Palestinians: “This summer, the Road Map virtually imploded under the weight of more deadly suicide bombings, the resignation of Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, and Yasser Arafat’s refusal to give up power.” Reporting the perspective that “The only ... legitimate Road Map is a Road Map of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (in reference to the so-called ‘Road of the Patriarchs’ through biblical Samaria), the story uncritically accepts the assertion that “The Road Map sets up a current day drama between the ancient covenants and modern day diplomacy.” In June of the same year, CBN reported on a purported link between US efforts at peacemaking and natural disasters. Prophecy aficionado Bill Koenig characterized the coincidence of “the early stages of the Road Map peace process, weather catastrophe and recent violence in Israel,” as “warning signals, ... warning judgements [*sic*] to America that this is My covenant land and it’s not to be traded for promises of peace and security. This land is not to be parceled.”²⁹

The Christian Zionist movement does not rely only on a few lesser-known pamphleteers to communicate its perspective to the public sphere. Instead, many organizations, some of them quite major, have arisen, each with the mission of both the theology and politics of Christian Zionism. Due to the grassroots character of many of these organizations, as noted above, the network—made up of individuals, congregations, political action committees and humanitarian organizations—is vast. Among the major organizations are Bridges for Peace, Christian Friends for Israeli Communities and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews. Among the largest and perhaps most influential of these organizations is the International Christian Embassy (ICEJ). Although the ‘embassy’ has no diplomatic standing, it nevertheless shapes both theology and policy. The 1996 Third International Christian Zionist Congress, hosted by the ICEJ, was attended by over 1500 people from 40 countries.³⁰

Heebie-Jeebies?: Suspicion and Defense in the Jewish Community

Despite their ability to marshal support for the state of Israel, Christian Zionists still have not been able to fully convince the Jewish community of their purposes, even when protecting the state of Israel is a stated concern. Many Jews are wary of wedding themselves to the political power of American evangelical Christians. Robert O. Freedman, professor of political science at Baltimore Hebrew University, offers this perspective: “Once you get in bed with them you are, to a certain extent, subscribing to their view of what America ought to be. And that, in my view, is not in the best interests of the Jewish people.” Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, concurs: “To associate Israel with more extremist religious

²⁸ Douglas Turner, “‘Christian Zionists’ Resist Bush on Mideast Peace,” *Buffalo News*, 17 August 2003.

²⁹ Chris Mitchell, “The Spiritual Road Map to Middle East Peace,” CBN online, 3 October 2003. Jennifer James, “Acts of God: America’s Warning Not to Divide Israel,” CBN online, 26 June 2003.

³⁰ For an apologetic look at the politics and theology of the ICEJ, see Merkley, 170–179.

and political views may jeopardize the allegiance of mainstream Americans. That would be dangerous.”³¹

American Jewish suspicion of the Christian Right (though not directly addressing evangelical support for Israel) informed a substantial 1996 volume published by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), *The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance & Pluralism in America*. The book is primarily concerned with American Christian understandings of separation between Church and State—traditionally, this principle has been valued highly among American Jews. In his introduction to the book, David Cantor describes the religious right as “an exclusionist religious movement [that] has attempted to restore what it perceives as the ruins of a Christian nation by seeking more closely to unite its version of Christianity with state power.” In addition to more common elements of American evangelicalism, special attention is given to the more obscure element of (Christian) Reconstructionist thought. The critique of evangelical Christians contained in this ADL volume was not news to Jewry, American or otherwise. The relationship between Israel and American evangelicals has long been understood as a marriage of convenience. As Lenny Davis, former researcher for AIPAC, once stated: “Sure, these guys give me the heebie-jeebies. But until I see Jesus coming over the hill, I’m in favor of all the friends Israel can get.”³²

Predictably, a defense of the Christian Right from a Jewish perspective was not long in coming. The ADL book was released in July of 1994; in September, Midge Decter submitted a critical review and rebuttal in *Commentary*, a major journal for Jewish neoconservative thought. Decter’s analysis is especially disapproving of the book’s tactic of employing guilt by association, especially in its vilification of Pat Robertson. Seeking to diminish the focus on anti-Judaic sentiment among evangelical Christians, she writes:

No doubt people hostile to the Jews exist here and there among conservative Christians. But so do people hostile to the Jews exist among liberal Christians and among the fiercest secularists as well. The question, then, is why an organization long regarded as expert in the study of anti-Semitism should have singled out the conservative Christians for opprobrium—especially when, as a group, they have been perhaps the most outspoken friends of Israel in this country.

Decter concludes that the ADL, in the guise of defending pluralism, has “chosen to join hands with ... the liberal Left” and its presumed domination of American political life and has, therefore, engaged in “the one bigotry that seems to be acceptable these days—bigotry against conservative Christians.”³³

In a *First Things* article of the next year, Decter diagnosed Christian liberals with “that age-old Hebraic malady that the Lord once diagnosed as stiffness of the neck.” Why, she asks “do the Christians not celebrate the salvation of Jerusalem made possible by the Israeli military victory in 1967? ... The answer is that the evangelicals do indeed celebrate, both the return of the Jews to the holy land and their rescue of old Jerusalem. But others, many, many others, do not-

³¹ Jeffery L. Sheler, “Odd Bedfellows,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 12 August 2002, 34–35.

³² Cited in Merkley, 204.

³³ David Cantor, *The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance & Pluralism in America* (New York: ADL, 1994), 1. Midge Decter, “The ADL vs. the ‘Religious Right,’” *Commentary*, September 1994, 47.

for reasons that, no matter how often they are articulated, simply make no sense to me.”³⁴ Decter consigns Christian critique of Israel (and, by extension, critique of Christian Zionists and American foreign policy in the region) to irrationality. Decter and her ideological companions have constructed for themselves a thought-world in which critique of its assumptions “simply make[s] no sense.”

The charges of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism are commonly levied against those who speak critically of Israeli policies or American financial support of the state. A recent cover story in *U.S. News & World Report* asserted that critiques of Israel often mask a latent anti-Semitism:

To complain that such portrayals are unfair and illogical is not to dismiss all criticism of the Israeli government as anti-Semitic. A democracy must welcome critics, and Israel surely has its critics in spades—just look at the spirited Israeli press.... But for many, recent criticism of Israel has become so perverse, so persistent, so divorced from reality that it can be seen only as emotional anti-Semitism hiding behind the insidious political mask of anti-Zionism.³⁵

While Zuckerman’s examples of political criticism gone awry—especially in Europe and the Middle East—are matters of concern, the fact is that any criticism of Israel, no matter how warranted, is viewed with immediate suspicion. Criticisms framed in religious terminology are often dismissed out of hand—or, if framed in Christian or Islamic terminology, labeled as anti-Semitic—even as religious justifications for Israel’s policies and activities are embraced. While in reasoned discourse the leap to charges of anti-Semitism is recognized by many to be merely hyperbolic, such charges—or even a sensitive fear of such charges—serve to silence dissent.

It is with trepidation, therefore, that the voices of liberal Christian groups critical of Israel and its American political and Christian Zionist supporters are raised. Indeed, in comparison to those with whom they disagree, their voice is quite small. While engaging in some grassroots political efforts, these groups focus on either non-violent direct action in the CPT (Christian Peacemaker Teams) or on lobbying efforts in governmental or denominational bodies (Churches for Middle East Peace). One important development in the mainline churches has been the establishment of direct relationships between American denominations and their Palestinian counterparts. Particularly strong is the relationship between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan (ELCJ), which has congregations in Amman, Jordan, and the West Bank. These relationships have necessarily introduced into American denominations a theopolitical perspective that critically engages American policy toward Israel and the OPT rather than merely edifying the post-1967 status quo.

Christian Zionist Critique and Colonization of the Mainline

³⁴ Midge Decter, “A Jew in Anti-Christian America,” *First Things*, October 1995, 25–31. The omitted phrases in this paragraph are worth reading and were edited only for concern of space.

³⁵ Mortimer B. Zuckerman, “Graffiti On History’s Walls,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 3 November 2003. The issue’s cover read “The New Anti-Semitism.” A group of recent books supports Zuckerman’s thesis: see especially Phyllis Chesler, *The New Anti-Semitism: The Current Crisis and What We Must Do About It* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Gabriel Schoenfeld, *The Return of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Encounter, 2003), based on Schoenfeld’s essays for *Commentary* magazine.

Mainline Christian reluctance to endorse US foreign policy toward Israel—a reluctance based on ecumenical relationships and a theological commitment to social and political justice—has met with some challenge from evangelical and Christian Zionist writers. In this presumably zero-sum context, most recognition of a competing perspective is most often simplistically polemical. Some writers, however, seek to critically engage their interlocutors. Paul Charles Merkley—a Canadian historical scholar who identifies as a Christian Zionist and therefore favors a “Restorationist” perspective on the relation of Jews to the modern state of Israel—provides a mix of these two approaches in his book, *Christian Attitudes towards the State of Israel*. A follow-up to his *The Politics of Christian Zionism, 1891–1948* (1998), this impressive book treats the dual concern of diffusing stereotypes surrounding evangelical Christians and their support of Israel and criticizing mainline Christians for their abandonment of the Zionist cause.³⁶ My reading here will focus on his treatment of the latter.

Merkley proudly asserts that the “whole constituency of Christian pro-Zionists is ... many times larger than the membership lists of the Christian Zionist organizations and should be numbered in the tens of millions.” As discussed above, this popular support can be attributed to television evangelists and their compelling (for American audiences, at least) brand of patriotic conservatism. Beyond differing approaches to biblical texts, disagreements between liberal and conservative approaches to Israel can be seen as manifestations of a clash of historical narratives. Merkley observes that Israel’s “dramatic enlargement” since 14 May 1948 came with an enlarged “sphere of responsibility in what ... she called the ‘Administered Territory’” (Judea and Samaria). While “Liberal historians and ecumenical churchmen tell the story of Israel’s expanding sphere of action in the same language that is used for the wars of Napoleon or Nebuchadnezzar,” he notes that “Christian Zionists prefer the vocabulary of self-defence and national security that the Israeli government itself employs.”

Merkley offers a less than original analysis of why liberal Christians choose to approach the state of Israel in a manner markedly different from his own. Following arguments like Zuckerman’s above, Merkley states that adhering to “the ‘Anti-Zionist’ side gives one plenty of company among progressive people, allowing one to use the noble-sounding rhetoric that surfaces easily when one speaks of ‘the oppressed.’” Of course, for Merkley, all of this rhetoric is fully disingenuous: “It serves as the perfect cover for anti-Semitism—all the more perfect for the fact that many Jews themselves employ it.” Merkley lets this last incongruous comment go by without further reflection. Liberal Christians have all too easily allowed themselves to be taken in by this pro-Palestinian political perspective. This is so, Merkley believes, because “the liberal-ecumenical attitude” is “not grounded in a transcendent theology” and thus “shifted when the political scenery shifted.” Merkley sees liberal attention to the plight of Palestinians as a product of “1960s ... disdain for ‘the establishment’” and a “disposition to patronize” that leads to alignment with “the generalized cause of the ‘oppressed’ everywhere, capable of serving the ingrained need of liberals to condescend.”³⁷

³⁶ A helpful review of Merkley’s treatment of the Roman Catholic approach to the state of Israel is provided by Eugene J. Fisher, review of *Christian Attitudes Towards the State of Israel*, by Paul Charles Merkley, *First Things*, February 2002, 62–66.

³⁷ Merkley, 200; 201; 216; 215.

That liberal Christians are politically gullible, Merkley believes, has compromised their theology. In Palestine, this compromise is due to the disingenuous and heretical innovations of indigenous theologians, especially Naim Ateek, Elias Chacour, Mitri Raheb and Munib Younan. While Merkley wishes to draw a sharp distinction between the Churches of the East and Churches of the West, he notes that on the matter of the state of Israel the distinction “is now of virtually no significance,” a fact he attributes to the fact that “local leaders of the Churches of the West are for the most part no longer Europeans but Arabs” who no longer see themselves “as defenders ... of what used to be called ‘Christendom.’” Politically, he accuses these non-European Christians of engaging in a systematic disinformation campaign concerning the decline in the Christian population in Israel and the OPT, putting forth “testimonies [that] are never challenged in mainline Christian circles.” For Merkley, however, theological integrity is ostensibly more important than political clarity. To this end, he rejects out of hand Palestinian contextual theology (liberation theology) for two reasons. First, it is brazenly political, working toward Palestinian national liberation. Second, he charges that Palestinian contextual theology, to the extent that it rejects Zionist (both Jewish and Christian) readings of the Hebrew Scriptures, “Openly embrac[es] the doctrine of Marcion.” As he states, “Palestinian contextual theology displays its *repudiation* of the doctrine of God’s election of the Jews—the keystone of Christian theory of history since the mid-second century, when the Church formally denounced as heresy the doctrines of Marcion, which proposed the rejection of all Jewish Scripture.” Thus, when pastors such as Raheb observe that since the Hebrew Scriptures have been used “largely as a Zionist text” they have “become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians”—thus tragically alienating his people from the bulk of their Scriptural canon—Merkley labels him a heretic. He assumes that association with such reckless theological methods has corrupted liberal Western Christians. As anti-Zionists, liberal Christians and the groups with which they choose to identify are both theological and political opponents. He closes the book with this comment: “It is simply too soon to know whether the work done by forces dedicated to Jewish-Christian reconciliation ... will stand against the flanking effort of the neo-Marcionists, who heart is in the different work of accomodating [*sic*] the secular liberals, the Churches of the East, and the Muslims.”³⁸

While Merkley would argue that through relationships with the Church of the East, the mainline has been colonized by a foreign theological perspective, the widespread popularity of Christian pro-Zionist (if not Christian Zionist) perspectives in the mainline can likewise be seen as colonization. In the mainline churches, the pervasiveness of this theopolitical perspective has led to denominational leaders being criticized for their openness to relationships with Palestinian Christians and their Muslim neighbors. One example of such intra-denominational struggle in the American church is to be found among United Methodists. Since 2001, Mark Tooley, director of the United Methodist (UM) committee of the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), has been reporting and critically commenting on the activities of six UM missionaries in the Middle East supported by the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM). Tooley is a former CIA analyst and serves on the board of Good News, a UM evangelical renewal movement. While not adopting a Christian Zionist approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, IRDS’s reports demonstrate a commitment to political realism and a strong affinity with American policy in the region.

³⁸ Ibid., 73; 55–59; 76–77; 220. It must be stated that the concern expressed by Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, is pastoral, not political—though the two, especially for Lutherans, can never fully be separated.

The bulk of Tooley's criticisms toward UM missionaries in the Middle East has been directed toward Rev. Sandra K. Olewine, who, until recently, served as United Methodist Liaison in Jerusalem through the International Center of Bethlehem—an outreach of the ELCJ's Christmas Lutheran Church. In April of 2001, Tooley patronized “the same simplistic lens” through which Olewine and her colleagues view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Criticizing a presentation by Olewine to the GBGM, Tooley characterized the missionaries as speaking only of “oppressed Palestinians seeking to liberate their own land from an imperialist occupier” while not acknowledging “the national security reasons for Israel's reluctance to accede to all Palestinian demands.” Like Merkley, Tooley dismisses the work done by UM missionaries as corrupted by liberationist perspectives. In one report, he uncharitably compares their work to that done by politically controversial missionaries in Nicaragua; in another, liberation theology is maligned as exclusively “looking for a political salvation” and saddling the UM missionaries with a “worldview [that] divides the world neatly between oppressors and the oppressed.... Israel bad, Palestinians good, is their summary of a Middle East situation that is a great deal more complicated than that.” The latest major report from the IRD on UM missionaries in the West Bank concludes that they “are not agents of reconciliation in a tumultuous region,” but are, instead, “polemicists for one side, the Palestinian side, against the Israelis. Their contacts with Israelis seem to be largely restricted to left-wing activists who share their own political views.”³⁹

Neither Merkley nor Tooley allow for the possibility that Christians who disagree with them do so from legitimate grounds, theological or political. Merkley implies that liberals have been hoodwinked by Palestinian Christians; Tooley attributes their perspective to a persistent naïveté. Both are dismissive of liberation theology, demonstrating for both a lack of regard for the ability of Christianity (or, for that matter, Judaism or Islam) to provide a fundamental (prophetic) critique of politics and culture. Their conservative theology seeks to protect the political status quo as well as Christian doctrine. That politics rather than theology is the ground of this conservative perspective is evidenced by the dismissal of “left-wing” Israeli groups like Gush Shalom, B'Tselem, and Rabbis for Human Rights, doves who hope for Israel to live in peace with a peaceful Palestinian state at its side in opposition to hawks who favor efforts to defeat the hopes of Palestinian nationalism through a protracted war of attrition. No doubt, these doves are aware that the process of peacebuilding is “complicated.”⁴⁰ It is irresponsible to preclude or delimit the possibility of a livable, just peace on the grounds of either political or theological principle.

The Intra-Evangelical Intifada

That the Christian Zionists and their pro-Zionist evangelical constituency are not all that interested in constructive efforts toward building a just peace—even when such efforts are

³⁹ Mark Tooley, “UM Missionary Urges Solidarity With Palestinian ‘Liberation Movement,’” *UMAction*, 30 April 2001; Erik Nelson and Mark Tooley, “A One-Sided Explanation of Terror,” IRD online, 23 August 2001; Tooley, “UM Missionaries are Activists for the Palestinian Cause,” IRD online, 24 August 2002. See also Tooley, “Commentary: Methodist Missionary Berates America on 9-11 Anniversary,” IRD online, 12 September 2002.

⁴⁰ These complications are taken into account, for instance, in the ‘Geneva Accords’ released in October 2003, a thorough peace plan spearheaded by Yossi Beilin, Israeli MK (Member of Knesset).

articulated by the Bush Administration or tentatively assented to by a Likud-dominated Israeli government—has become a liability. While this approach to Israeli-Palestinian conflict has drawn condemnation from Palestinian Christians and their mainstream sympathizers,⁴¹ it is beginning to attract consistent criticism from American evangelicals. This critical evangelical perspective is summed up by Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary: “Evangelicals who are Christian Zionists want to see events unfold, but they aren’t so concerned about justice.”⁴²

Merkley explicates the theological ground for the sometimes blithe manner with which Christian Zionists approach temporal matters, including matters of justice. When engaging in political reasoning, “the Christian Zionist [takes] it as an article of faith to prefer the blessing of Israel above all passing things” since this preference “cannot ... ever be incompatible with the will of God”—even in relation to allegations of IDF human rights abuses or Mossad-assisted targeted assassinations. This theopolitical reasoning stems from the root of the historical situation: “the case for the Restoration of the Jews in the first place, even though ... manifestly defensible in terms of ‘justice,’ actually stood upon a firmer ground: namely, that it was predicted and ordained by Scripture. To have resisted it would have been sin, and in any case would be futile.”⁴³ The political manifestation of this theological reasoning is epitomized by John Hagee, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas. In February of 1998, Hagee announced that his congregation would be giving more than \$1 million toward Israel’s effort to resettle Jews from the former USSR in the OPT. When asked if he was comfortable with this effort possibly being illegal since it contradicts state US policy, Hagee, confident in his reading of biblical prophecy, replied: “I am a Bible scholar and theologian and from my perspective, the law of God transcends the law of the United States government and the U.S. State Department.” According to Hagee’s website, through ministries such as “Operation Exodus” and, now, “Exodus II,” his people have “donated in excess of \$3.7 million sponsoring the transportation expenses for over 6,000 people.”⁴⁴

Such reckless political reasoning has led some in the American evangelical community to distance themselves from the Christian Zionist perspective. One example of these criticisms came in 2002 after Jerry Falwell’s October 6 appearance on the CBS newsmagazine, *60 Minutes*. The interview gained wide notoriety for Falwell’s characterization of Muhammad, the founding prophet of Islam, as a terrorist. The *Baptist Standard* reported the discomfort regarding Falwell’s perspective expressed by both Bob Campbell, president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT), and Stephen Hatfield, chairman of the BGCT Administrative Committee:

Mr. Falwell’s desire to link present-day Middle East events to biblical prophecy represents only one possible interpretation of ‘last things,’” Campbell noted. “The blatant disregard of Arab nations is an extreme position that does not reflect genuine biblical scholarship and is more political than biblical. American foreign policy cannot be based on just one biblical interpretation of ‘last things’ that may, in fact, be the wrong interpretation of the Scriptures.

⁴¹ Munib Younan, Bishop of the ELCJ, has called Christian Zionism a heresy for this very reason. See Ann E. Hafften, “Challenge the Implications of ‘Christian Zionism,’” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 3:2 (February 2003).

⁴² Cited by Malcolm Foster, “Christian Zionists Feel the Heat for Fighting Peace: Extremists Wield Considerable Power within Republican Party,” (Middle East & North Africa) *The Daily Star*, 26 July 2003, 3.

⁴³ Merkley, 218; 217–218.

⁴⁴ Cited in Wagner, 46. The website is at <<http://www.jhm.org/exodus2.asp>>, accessed 1 November 2003.

The story also reported the perspective of Ellis Orozco, who served as chairman of the BGCT Strategic Planning Committee and currently is on the Administrative Committee. “As Christians, we should speak out against violence and those who enact it or support it. Whether it is an Islamic state, Israel, or even our own government involved in the violence, it is wrong,” he stated. “We would be better friends to Israel if we followed Jesus’ example and opposed them when they are wrong.”⁴⁵

Systematic critiques by evangelicals of Christian Zionist perspectives have not been common. This project has been undertaken by both Don Wagner and Gary Burge, scholars teaching in evangelical schools. Wagner is director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at North Park University in Chicago and Burge is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, also in Illinois. Both are active in Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, a Christian advocacy network promoting understanding and partnerships between Arab and Western churches. They have encountered sometimes stiff resistance to their work. Merkley offers several critical assessments of their latest writings, citing them as examples of “Evangelical Anti-Zionism,” and they are constantly assaulted with easy charges of anti-Semitism. Another important book-length treatment of the matter comes in the form of a veritable sourcebook of texts, theological interpretations, political perspectives and proposed solutions offered in *Whose Promised Land?* from Colin Chapman, lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Near East School of Theology, Beirut. As evangelical scholars sensitive to the theological and Scriptural expectations of their larger community, Chapman, Wagner and Burge have served to widen the conversation and challenge the stereotype that, politically at least, evangelicals are merely a ready constituency for Christian Zionist approaches to the state of Israel.⁴⁶

This wider conversation has been documented in the pages of the world’s most important evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*. From its founding through the 1967 reflections noted above, *CT* evidenced the easy relationship between evangelicals in general and Christian Zionists in particular. The magazine has run pieces advocating a balanced view of the conflict through rejecting an essentialized view of Arabs and, in particular, Palestinian Christians,⁴⁷ coverage complimented by Timothy Weber’s masterful “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend.” However, with the Bush Administration’s release of the Roadmap in 2003, *CT* began to include perspectives in its pages quite at odds with Christian Zionists, in what may be interpreted as an effort to distance themselves from a group that had for too long claimed evangelicals as a theopolitical constituency.

⁴⁵ Ken Camp and Becky Bridges, “Falwell’s Theology Shaped by Politics, BGCT Leaders Say,” *Baptist Standard*, 14 October 2002.

⁴⁶ See Gary M. Burge, *Who Are God’s People in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993) and *Whose Land? Whose Promise?: What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003); Donald E. Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon: A Call to Partnership for Middle Eastern and Western Christians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995) and *Dying in the Land of Promise: Palestine and Palestinian Christianity from Pentecost to 2000*, 2nd ed. (London: Melisende, 2003), and Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?: The Continuing Crisis Over Israel and Palestine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

⁴⁷ See, for instance, D. Neff, “Love Thy (Arab) Neighbor,” *CT*, 22 October 1990, 22; and Elaine Ruth Fletcher, “Between the Temple Mount and a Hard Place: Palestinian Christians Want Both Peace in Their Villages and Justice for Their Muslim Brothers,” *CT*, 4 December 2000, 66.

In April of 2003, Mark Harlan, who taught at Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary in Amman, offered thoughts on a “third theological path through the Israeli-Palestinian thicket” based on the conditionality of Israel’s covenant with God. By considering God’s demands of justice, Harlan felt that he was able to develop a “more balanced theology,” one that allows him to “take seriously both the biblical teaching about Israel’s special place in God’s unfolding purpose and the cries of injustice by Palestinians.” June 2003 saw the online publication of a thorough interpretation of polling results collected by *CT* regarding the theopolitical perspectives of American evangelicals. The polling, along with subsequent interviews with evangelical leaders, showed a marked diversity of opinion among the evangelical community, including many strong articulations of what Merkley would identify as anti-Zionist perspectives. A distillation of this interpretive essay was the foundation of an editorial in *CT*’s August 2003 issue, written against ubiquitous news stories reporting almost monolithic evangelical resistance to the Roadmap. Conscious of the community’s past, the editorial argued that there now is “no monolith” of evangelical opinion concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: “at no time in the past 50 years has there been as broad a spectrum of evangelical opinion on this issue as there is today. And this fact should free the Bush administration from vague fears of evangelical voting-booth backlash.” Stating, among other things, that “heavy-handed military approaches to security—though occasionally necessary—can never be a solution” and that “peace is not a zero-sum game,” the editorial informed the Bush Administration that “evangelicals form no ideological bloc” and, more importantly, that “Today’s evangelical public cares deeply not only about security and safety for all in the region, but also about the health and well-being of all its people.”⁴⁸

In books, journal articles, magazine editorials and grassroots organizations, some American evangelical Christians are challenging the calculated exploitation of their community by Israeli politicians and those who have become their friends. In the same way American Jewish unanimity on the Israeli policies of occupation had waned prior to the second *Intifada* (lit. “shaking off”), American evangelicals are extricating themselves from a long-time association with Likud. As they continue to be exposed to non-Likud perspectives that seek peace for all peoples in the region—whether from Palestinian Christians and Muslims or Israelis and American Jews (left-wing, doves and others) who grieve over the content and character of modern Israel—that process of extrication will continue. The “cultural-ideological-moral affinity”⁴⁹ with Israel expressed by Christian Zionists has, after 9/11, gained political currency. That, however, it had come to be generally assumed that American evangelicals automatically, uncritically and monolithically accepted the Christian Zionist version of that affinity caught the community by surprise. The evangelical community seems now to realize the implications of being associated with an ideological theology that, in the name of God, despises efforts at peacemaking; this long-time association must itself be “shaken off.”

Concluding Thoughts

⁴⁸ Mark Harlan, “A Middle Way in the Middle East: A Third Theological Path through the Israeli-Palestinian Thicket,” *CT*, April 2003, 84; Todd Hertz, “Opinion Roundup: *The Evangelical View of Israel?*,” *CT* online, week of 9 June 2003; *CT* Editorial, “Roadblocks and Voting Blocs: Today’s Evangelicals are Committed to Peace—Not Just Security—for Israel,” *CT*, August 2003, 32.

⁴⁹ Novik, 71. See note 6 above.

As these words are written in late 2003, the Roadmap to Peace in the Middle East has failed. The powerbrokers of neither Palestine nor Israel have deigned to give up their enemies, their hatreds, their fears, and the violence, periodic and systemic, continues unabated. In this situation, Israel is clearly the party with the most to lose and, therefore, the most to gain from conserving the status quo. It is thus up to Israel to make the decision for peace, to refuse using Palestinian violence as a mere excuse for its own, to be content with relative power rather than demanding the domination and subjugation of the Palestinians. Israel, however, has not been encouraged toward this decision for peace. The Bush Administration demonstrated a profound reluctance to encourage or coerce Sharon's Israel to comply with the Roadmap. This reluctance may indeed have been the result of domestic political pressure rather than geopolitical strategies—mere politics, not only wisdom, is involved in framing policy decisions. If the American evangelical Christian community can begin to assert its independence from Christian Zionist colonization, such political calculations will bear less definitive results. If the perception of evangelical unanimity on politics surrounding the modern state of Israel begins to erode, the US, widely seen among both Israelis and Palestinians as the only entity with the power to encourage a resolution, may be freed so that peace will truly have a chance.

In the meantime, however, the Palestinians have been defeated. For Palestinians, the catastrophe experienced in 1948 (*al-Nakba*) and further consolidated in 1967 is now complete. That we are no longer discussing what the peace will look like but whether Palestinians will be allowed to live as citizens in a state they can call their own—discussing, truly, if there will be peace at all—shows the extent of their defeat. It is truly grievous that this shift in conversation—the move from at least an illusion of the possibility of peace to the rejection of peaceful coexistence as a possibility—has been edified not just with strategic and political arguments but with Christian theological contribution. With their decision to allow their construction of God's will to determine their action in the world, Christian Zionists have missed the prophetic forest for the apocalyptic underbrush.

Christian Zionism manifests the worst tendencies of both Zionism and western Christianity. Zionism is a multivalent subject, with a wide variety of manifestations and political ramifications. Harry Emerson Fosdick's prescient comments on Jewish nationalism still have relevance: "The situation still is loaded with dynamite," he wrote in 1927. "If the generous ideals of a moderate Zionism become dominant, coupling Arab and Jew alike in the plans for a rejuvenated Palestine, then there will be hope. But if a chauvinistic, arrogant, political Zionism obtains control, what started out as a fair dream of a better future for the Jews may easily become one of the greatest Jewish tragedies in history." Martin Buber, the great German Jewish theologian and philosopher, cautioned also against nationalism as an important but potentially dangerous force. "In an hour of crisis, true nationalism expresses the true self-awareness of a people, and translates it into action," he said to Twelfth Zionist Congress in 1921. "But when nationalism transgresses its lawful limits, when it tries to do more than overcome a deficiency, it becomes guilty of what has been called *hybris* [*sic*] in the lives of historical personalities; it crosses the holy border and becomes presumptuous."⁵⁰ In its presumption that law and ethic apply neither to the modern state of Israel nor to the support they provide, the chauvinism and

⁵⁰ Martin Buber, "Nationalism," in *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1948, 1963; reprint, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 221, 219.

hubris spoken of by Fosdick and Buber are hallmarks of the Christian Zionist approach to temporal matters. Christian Zionists have rarely deigned to explore the complexities of Zionism within the Jewish community, preferring instead to presume their agreement with “real” Jews.

The theopolitical outlook of Christian Zionism can be understood as a manifestation of western Christianity’s worst tendency: its claim of authority from the systematic application of objective principles. Theologically, the perspective seeks to engage temporal matters in a manner that is markedly a-historical, that is, not grounded in historical reality. While Merkley and others accuse liberal Christians of not taking the Bible seriously—the underlying reason, presumably the reason for their not taking Israel seriously and slipping into Marcionite heresy—their peculiar approach to the text—fundamentalist but with just one fundamental, Israel—is so a-historical it seems unaware of its own historically determined character. As with fundamentalists in general, the Christian Zionist claim to textual objectivity is undercut by its affinity with political whim; its theological tradition is thoroughly modern, as evidenced by the fact that it places as much faith in the modern notion of the nation-state as in the biblical prophecy supposed to predict its establishment. Ultimately, their claim of objectivity allows Christian Zionists to be indifferent to the human suffering supported by their theology.

If Palestinian suffering is one side of the Christian Zionist theological coin, the other consists of an abstracted, a-historical, highly sentimentalized and almost mythological philo-Semitic approach to Jews. While Merkley positively notes this “tradition of philo-Semitism that has always existed among evangelicals” manifested, for instance, in “the interest in Jewish language, history, and customs that flourishes in Baptist Sunday Schools” reflecting “a conviction of the special favour under which Jewish believers live,” Jews often still find themselves suspicious of their Christian pro-Zionist supporters. In a section titled “Jews as Cosmic Curiosities,” the ADL’s assessment of American evangelicals found them to possess a “fundamental ambivalence toward Jewish experience.” While evangelicals have publicly lamented Christian sins in the Holocaust, they have also steadfastly held to anti-Jewish stereotypes, even when stated favorably—“They are His [God’s] chosen people. Jews have a God-given ability to make money.... They control the media, they control this city.” With their often constant emphasis on Jewish difference, evangelicals often fail “to recognize the common humanity of Jews” and “tend, finally, to dehumanize Jews.” This positive, evangelical dehumanization of Jews is matched by the general dehumanization of Arabs and, in particular, Palestinians.⁵¹

The post-9/11 world is full of possibilities, many negative, some positive. We must continue to choose if we will listen to or vanquish those who speak with a different voice, those engaged in a different project. Politically, the initial choices have been made and the Other whom we have long feared has been punished for its vague infractions—the Clash of Civilizations we knew must soon come seems to have arrived. The occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the War on Terror, however, have been no mere military strikes; these are ideological occupations as well. The War on Terror has become the means of implementing the

⁵¹ Merkley, 214; Cantor, 71–73. On the dehumanization of Arabs, though in a different context, see Edward W. Said, “The Essential Terrorist,” in *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question*, ed. Edward W. Said and Christopher Hitchens (New York: Verso, 1988).

neoconservative mission of assimilating the Other into ourselves, of proselytizing South Asia and the Middle East with the doctrine of American values.

Since 9/11, Americans have been infused with a renewed sense of their own virtue, their own righteousness in this cause. Many Christians have allowed patriotic conservatism to again seep into the center of their theological self-identification. The rise of the Christian Right in the 1970s and '80s brought with it a new political rhetoric reminiscent of Machiavelli's advice to political leaders regarding the public display of their virtuous rule. As demonstrated by Tom DeLay and Jim Inhofe, 9/11 has reintroduced this rhetoric with a new urgency. Perhaps there is some sociological bond between America's civil religion and Zionism's hope of establishing a Jewish state. Perhaps American support for Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is a necessary historical analogue to our treatment of Native Americans. Perhaps there is a need for Christian Zionists—if indeed, as the ADL asserts, they are generally disrespectful of the separation of Church and State—to support Israel as a religiously-identified modern nation at least superficially resembling our own. As Christians, we must ask whether this mission of achieving security through diminishing difference—whether through forced transfer of populations or coerced assimilation—is our own. We must ask if it is allowable for western Christians to partner with others—the Churches of the East and, perhaps, Muslims—or if Christianity's primary mission is the defense of Christendom (defined geographically with the US at its center).

What is clear is that this perpetual war in Israel/Palestine must end. It benefits nobody. Nobody, that is, except politicians on all *sides* who can convince their constituents that the persons on the other side are vile, immoral cancers to be excised rather than persons with whom to speak and negotiate and, perhaps, discover. The cost of Israel's settlements in the OPT necessitates that American funds be used to sustain them, even if through the fungible gifts. As Israel experiences yet another economic crisis, the cost of the settlements has risen, or at least remained constant. Benjamin Netanyahu's goal of increased financial independence articulated to Congress in 1996 is now a distant memory. While this aid is ostensibly needed for Israel's security—and is ostensibly justified as a guarantee of American security—it is likely that the relationship between Israel's actions in the OPT have resulted in increased security threats for both Israel and the US. Those who profit from war are the ones who benefit from the continued protraction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This is the other side of the “complicated” foreign policy status quo advocated, for instance, by Mark Tooley.⁵²

It is compliance with power that leaches the prophetic from religious communities. The defining characteristic of American popular religion of the last two decades has been its close affinity with state power, an affinity that came to be critiqued from within in the late 1990s.⁵³ In many times and places, religion has become a tool to be cynically used in the self-preserving interests of state power. In the context of American evangelical and Christian Zionist support of Israel, this American religion has even received the special attention of *Israeli* politicians and lobbying groups. I submit that this is not the appropriate role for religion in the public sphere,

⁵² On the issues of Israeli independence and the potential antagonism of Israel's 'security' measures, see Stephen Zunes, *Tinderbox: US Foreign Policy and the Roots of Terrorism* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage, 2003), 152–157, 166–170.

⁵³ See Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

especially in relation to a region and people—Israel/Palestine, Israelis and Palestinians—that embody such profound and fundamental religious ramifications. The cynical use of religion is defeated by the prophetic critique of state power. This prophetic critique identifies religious rhetoric that seeks to preserve ideologies rather than express concern for *human beings*. It identifies and rejects religious perspectives that have no concern for *justice*—political, material justice—as they pursue an apocalyptic program. In its rejection of the cynical manipulation of religion, the prophetic seeks to understand the greater context of God’s will in the world, listening to those affected by political policies and, if they are persons of faith, allowing their theological reflections to expand/shape its own.

If we are to engage in a prophetic critique of state policy that takes into account the sufferings of our fellow human beings—in this case, both Palestinian and Israeli—we must develop a hermeneutic with values other than success and power. One has been developed; it is called liberation theology. Although its insistence on a view from below is patently biblical, Christian Zionists and many evangelicals fear even the mention of this theological method. They are so afraid of this supposedly simplistic and corrupt theological method that they dismiss any mention of it out of hand. To develop an American theology that responds to the needs of Israel/Palestine in a manner critical of US foreign policy, it is therefore necessary to work within the systems of thought American evangelicals have themselves produced. Mainline theologians can engage with evangelical theologians such as Wagner and Burge as both interlocutors and guides. It is also necessary to engage faithfully with contextual theologians operating from both Jewish and Palestinian perspectives, whether they be politically conservative or liberal, radical or moderate. A theopolitical perspective is inept if it fails to take into account the perspectives of those most directly affected by its implications. It is necessary to be biblical, to faithfully define a canon within the canon that provides a reasonable guide to praxis in this theopolitical matter. For Christians, perhaps this can be the hermeneutical key:

“Blessed are the peacemakers...”