

Marching to Zion: The evangelical-Jewish alliance

by [Donald E. Wagner](#) in the [June 28, 2003](#) issue

Yielding to increasing pressure to show the Arab and Islamic worlds (and much of Europe) that he is sensitive to the plight of the Palestinian people, President George W. Bush recently declared his commitment to implement a “road map” to an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Meanwhile, a powerful domestic countermovement capable of undermining the U.S. initiative is well under way. Rising opposition from the conservative Ariel Sharon-led Israeli government and its powerful U.S. lobby, the America-Israel Political Affairs Committee (AIPAC), was to be expected. But the most numerically significant opposition is coming from the Christian right, an important constituency for the president if he is to be reelected in 2004.

Republican election advisers undoubtedly are watching the Christian right carefully. An early April rally in Washington, D.C., organized by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews drew key Christian right leaders like Gary Bauer, president of America Values. Bauer told the crowd that “whoever sits in Washington and suggests to the people of Israel that they have to give up more land in exchange for peace, that is an obscenity.” Other key players convening the rally included the Christian Coalition and AIPAC. Major speakers such as the Israeli ambassador to the U.S., Daniel Ayalon, and pro-Israel Congressmen Eric Cantor (R., Va.) and Tom Lantos (D., Calif.) encouraged the predominantly evangelical Christian participants to campaign against any plan that would force Israel to abandon its settlements or relinquish land now under its control. Key provisions of the road map call for Israel to make concessions on both issues.

For the president, pushing for the implementation of the road map will require a careful balancing act. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, he has solidified political support from three important constituencies: neoconservative intellectuals, American Jews (including members of the influential pro-Israel lobby) and fundamentalist Christians, constituencies that find common ground in their vigorous support for Israel.

A decisive moment in the forging of this alliance occurred in April 2002, while the Israeli army was demolishing several cities and refugee camps in the West Bank following the dreadful Passover terrorist bombings. Under increasing international pressure, Bush repeatedly appealed to Sharon to withdraw from the West Bank city of Jenin. The pro-Israel lobby, in coordination with the Christian right, mobilized over 100,000 e-mail messages, calls and visits urging the president to avoid restraining Israel. The tactic worked. The president uttered not another word of criticism or caution, and Sharon continued the offensive. As Christian televangelist Jerry Falwell commented during an October interview on *60 Minutes*: "I think now we can count on President Bush to do the right thing for Israel every time."

Falwell spoke for a large number of Christian Zionists in the U.S., Christians who believe that the modern state of Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and so deserves unconditional political, financial and religious support. Christian Zionists work closely with religious and secular Jewish Zionist organizations and the Israeli government, particularly during periods when the more conservative Likud Party is in control of the Israeli Knesset (parliament). Though Falwell claims to be speaking for over 100 million Americans, the number is actually closer to 25 million. Mainstream evangelicals number between 75 and 100 million; fundamentalist and dispensationalist evangelicals, whom Falwell represents, between 20 and 25 million.

Christian Zionism grows out of a particular theological system called premillennial dispensationalism, which originated in early 19th-century England. The preaching and writings of a renegade Irish clergyman, John Nelson Darby, and a Scottish evangelist, Edward Irving, emphasized the literal and future fulfillment of such teachings as the Rapture, the rise of the Antichrist, the Battle of Armageddon, and the central role that a revived state of Israel would play during the end days. Darby and Irving argued that portions of the books of Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Revelation predict when Jesus will return and how the final battle of history will take place.

Darby brought these doctrines to the U.S. during eight missionary journeys. They captured the hearts and minds of those who attended Bible and prophecy conferences in the years after the Civil War. Darby's teachings were featured in the sermons of some of the great preachers of the 1880-1920 period: the evangelists Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday; major Presbyterian preachers such as James Brooks; Philadelphia radio preacher Harry B. Ironsides; and Cyrus I. Scofield. Scofield applied Darby's eschatology to his version of the scriptures and provided an outline

of premillennial dispensationalist notations on the text. The Scofield Bible (1909) gave dispensationalist teachings much of their prominence and popularity. It became the Bible version used by most evangelical and fundamentalist Christians for the next 60 years.

Christian Zionists insist that all of historic Palestine—including all the land west of the Jordan which was occupied by Israel after the 1967 war—must be under the control of the Jewish people, for they see that as one of the necessary stages prior to the second coming of Jesus. Among their other basis tenets:

- God's covenant with Israel is eternal, exclusive and will not be abrogated, according to Genesis 12:1-7; 15:4-7; 17:1-8; Leviticus 26:44-45; Deuteronomy 7:7-8.
- The Bible speaks of two distinct and parallel covenants, one between God and Israel, one between God and the church. The latter covenant is superseded by the covenant with Israel. The church is a "mere parenthesis" in God's plan and as such it will be removed from history during an event called the Rapture (1 Thess. 4: 13-17; 5: 1-11). At that point, Israel, the nation, will be restored as the primary instrument of God on earth.
- Genesis 12:3 ("I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you") should be interpreted literally—which leads to maximum political, economic, moral and spiritual support for the modern state of Israel and for all the Jewish people.
- Apocalyptic texts like the Book of Daniel, Zechariah 9-12, Ezekiel 37-8, I Thessalonians 4-5 and the Book of Revelation refer to literal and future events.
- The establishment of the state of Israel, the rebuilding of the Third Temple, the rise of the Antichrist and the buildup of armies poised to attack Israel are among the signs leading to the final eschatological battle and Jesus' return for his thousand-year reign. The movement looks for the escalating power of satanic forces aligned with the Antichrist that will do battle with Israel and its allies as the end draws near. Judgment will befall nations and individuals according to how they "bless Israel."

Christian Zionism has significant support within Protestant fundamentalism, including much of the Southern Baptist Convention and the charismatic, Pentecostal and independent churches. The movement can also be found in the evangelical wings of the mainline Protestant churches (Presbyterian, United Methodist and Lutheran) and to a lesser degree in Roman Catholicism. Its reach is broad, since

premillennialist dispensationalist themes are advanced through Christian television, radio and publishing. The National Religious Broadcasters organization, which controls almost 90 percent of religious radio and television in the U.S., is dominated by a Christian Zionist orientation.

The alliance of Christian Zionists and the pro-Israel lobby solidified during the Reagan administration, although it declined somewhat during the first Bush administration and the Clinton years. Clinton's Israeli ties were with the secular Labor Party, led by Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, not with the conservative Likud Party. Through this alliance Clinton embraced the Oslo peace accords, which were opposed by Likud and the Christian Zionists because the accords called for reductions, however modest, in the expansion of Jewish settlements and asked that Israel withdraw from a significant portion of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

Shortly after Rabin's assassination, Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister. Long a favorite of Christian Zionists, he convened the Israel Christian Advocacy Council, inviting 17 U.S. Christian fundamentalists to Israel for a tour of the Holy Land and a conference that produced a statement that resembled the Likud platform with biblical footnotes. The declaration included a blanket rejection of any outside pressure on Israel to abandon the settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. The Christian group supported a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty rather than a Jerusalem shared by Palestinians and Israelis.

After they returned to the U.S., members of the Israel Christian Advocacy Council launched a campaign, "Christians Call for a United Jerusalem," with full-page advertisements in major newspapers and Christian journals. The advertisement carried several of the familiar Christian Zionist and Likud Zionist themes, including the claim that "Jerusalem has been the spiritual and political capital of only the Jewish people for 3,000 years." Citing Genesis 12:17, Leviticus 26:44-45 and Deuteronomy 7:7-8, the ad stated that "Israel's biblical claim to the land" was "an eternal covenant from God." Among the signers were Pat Robertson of CBN; Ralph Reed, then director of the Christian Coalition; Jerry Falwell; Brandt Gustafson, president of the National Religious Broadcasters; Don Argue, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; and Ed McAteer of the Religious Roundtable, one of the first Christian Zionist organizations in North America.

The ad campaign was a direct response to a campaign by mainline Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic churches, launched in April 1997, for “a shared Jerusalem.” The United Jerusalem campaign claimed that the Christian Zionists and fundamentalists spoke for all evangelicals in North America, stating that “the signatories and their organizations reach more than 100 million Christian evangelicals weekly.” These inflated numbers were meant to impress members of Congress, the media, and any evangelicals who took a different view.

In the late 1990s donations to Israel and to the Jewish National Fund declined because of the tensions between Orthodox Jews in Israel and Reform and Conservative Jews in the U.S. The loss of funding caused the Likud to turn to Christian Zionists for assistance, an appeal that met with a quick response. Additional support came through a campaign led by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, headed by a former Anti-Defamation League employee, the Orthodox rabbi Yechiel Eckstein. In 1997 this campaign claimed that it raised over \$5 million from fundamentalist Christians. John Hagee’s Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, presented Eckstein with more than \$1 million—funds for resettling Jews from the Soviet Union in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

The Christian fundamentalist and Christian Zionist worldview converges with the agenda of neoconservatives like William Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*; syndicated journalists William Safire and Charles Krauthammer; and the chief advisers in the Bush White House—Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith and Elliott Abrams. Many of these figures used to work with pro-Israel think tanks such as AIPAC; MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute); JINSA (Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs); and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Perle narrowly escaped conviction for trading intelligence secrets with Israel in the late 1970s, and Abrams was convicted (and pardoned by Reagan) in the Iran-Israel-contra weapons and financial scandal.

The neo-conservatives’ quest for U.S. domination of the oil fields in the Middle East and of military and economic geopolitics in that region aligns neatly with the views of Harvard scholar Samuel P. Huntington, whose “clash of civilizations” theory divides the world into the West vs. the Rest. In the Huntington scenario, Islam is the force most hostile to U.S. interests—a point of view that fits well with the “evil empire” rhetoric and the Antichrist scenarios found among the Christian Zionists. The “clash of civilizations” rhetoric often takes on theological overtones, as it did in the president’s 2002 and 2003 State of the Union addresses.

The advisers around Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney are driving their views home. Anatol Lieven, writing recently in the *London Review of Books*, points to a 1996 policy paper "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," by Perle and Douglas Feith, which advised Netanyahu to abandon the Oslo peace process and return to military repression of the Palestinians. The policy statement was developed in an Israeli think tank, the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies. The document seems to have played a large part in shaping the Bush administration's strategy on Iraq, and perhaps for redrawing Middle East borders according to the Likud vision.

Rumsfeld's support of Israel's illegal settlements, which he views as Israel's "right" for having conquered the Palestinian territories, indicates that he agrees with Perle and Feith. Few have mentioned that Rumsfeld's position violates existing U.S. policy, let alone international law and the international consensus on the issue. Republican Dick Armey, former House majority leader, agrees, and even advocates ethnic cleansing ("transfer") in Palestine.

Israel's leading voice for "transfer," Tourism Minister Benny Elon, recently met with several members of the House and Senate, including Armey and Lindsey Graham (R., S.C.) to advocate transferring Palestinians to Jordan. While Elon's views are linked with the radical fringe in Israel, his "transfer" concept is gaining support among Christian Zionist legislators and key spokesmen of the Christian right. Some Israeli analysts speculate that the purpose of Elon's visit was to urge Israel's "friends" in the Christian right and on Capitol Hill to tell the president not to pressure Israel to surrender land and settlements to a future Palestinian state. *Newsweek's* June 2 edition reported that in mid-May, just prior to Elon's visit, several Israeli officials contacted Bauer to rally the Christian right in opposition to the "road map."

The dominance of Christian right, Christian Zionist and Likud policies in the Bush administration reflects political realities. In 1987 polls indicated that the Christian right represented 26 percent of the total membership of the Republican Party. By 1999 that number had increased to 33 percent and was rising. The influence of pro-Israel groups and Christian Zionists in such vital swing states as Texas, California and all-important Florida may well have been the deciding factor for Bush in the 2000 election. Bush is very aware that he owes a political debt to this voting bloc.

The May 2002 "Washington Rally for Israel," which drew, according to some accounts, well over 100,000 people to the Washington Mall, illustrates the influence

of these forces. An impressive lineup of U.S. politicians was joined by leading voices from the Christian right, Likud and mainstream American Jewish organizations. The list included Netanyahu; Wolfowitz; Holocaust writer Elie Wiesel; New York Governor George Pataki; former New York Mayor Rudolf Giuliani; U.S. Senators Arlen Specter (R., Pa.) and Barbara Mikulski (D., Md.), and leading members of the House such as Armey (R., Tex.) and Richard Gephardt (D., Mo.).

However, the loudest cheers at the rally went not to these political leaders but to a voice relatively unknown to the secular media, Christian radio personality Janet Parshall, host of the nationally syndicated *Janet Parshall's America*. Parshall drew a deafening ovation when she proclaimed: "I stand before you today representing the National Religious Broadcasters. . . . We represent millions of Christian broadcasters in this country. We stand with you now and forever. . . . I am here to tell you today, we Christians and Jews together will not labor any less in our support for Israel. We will never limp, we will never wimp, we will never vacillate in our support of Israel."

The cozy partnership contains many contradictions, not the least of which is that within the Christian premillennial dispensationalist scenario, Jews ultimately have two options: either convert to Christianity or be incinerated at Armageddon. Israeli author Gershon Gorenberg (*The End of Days*) notes that dispensationalism is essentially a four-act play, "where we as Jews disappear in the fourth act, just prior to the return of Jesus." Further, anti-Semitism is often just beneath the surface among Christian Zionists and fundamentalists. Just two years ago Jerry Falwell claimed that "God told him" that the Antichrist is a Jew living in Romania—a statement for which he later profusely apologized. And the Christian right's agenda includes the creation of a "Christian America."

Despite these contradictions, not only AIPAC but mainstream Jewish organizations such as the Council of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations and the Anti-Defamation League/Bnai-Brith have allied themselves with Christian Zionist organizations such as the Christian Coalition, Religious Roundtable and the 700 Club. Surprisingly, many progressive Reform Rabbis have expressed public support for the Christian Zionists and the Christian right, knowing full well that the Christian right's theological and political agendas are contrary to the Reform Jewish community's longstanding progressive stance on civil liberties and human rights.

I once asked Israel's director of religious communities if he was aware of the implications of the alliance with fundamentalist Christians, particularly in light of

their history of anti-Semitism, their dedication to the Christianizing of America, and the “convert or fry” Armageddon scenarios. His response was: “Of course we know all this, but we will take support wherever we can get it, and their numbers are significant. We do keep them on a short leash, however.” At the April rally Ambassador Ayalon told the crowd, “We share the same belief in God and we share the same destiny”—a destiny that appears to be crafted along the lines of the Likud Party platform.

The inevitable clash between Likud/Christian Zionist ideology and the promise of the road map inevitably will come to the fore as the 2004 presidential election campaign heats up. Mitri Raheb, the Palestinian pastor of Bethlehem’s Christmas Lutheran Church, fears that if the pro-Israel voices prevail, the “road map” will turn into a “road trap” for Palestinians and for those Israelis committed to a two-state solution.

Muslims and other non-Jewish religious minorities in the U.S. have no standing with the Christian right; indeed, Christian Zionists are openly hostile toward Islam. Though an evangelical-Islamic dialogue has begun, it is too new to begin to counter the voices of outspoken Christian right leaders such as Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who have consistently portrayed Islam as an evil force that will align itself with the Antichrist to attack Israel, leading to the Battle of Armageddon.

This doctrine fits well with the Bush “axis of evil” concept, which can readily be applied to any nation in which Muslims are the majority. Now that Afghanistan and Iraq are occupied by the U.S., neoconservatives, Israeli politicians and the Christian right seem to be targeting Iran, Syria and possibly Saudi Arabia. In a revealing remark in London in December 2002, Sharon noted that once the U.S. and its allies dispose of Saddam Hussein and Iraq, Iran will be next on the list. Will such views dominate U.S. foreign policy? Powell’s speech to the AIPAC convention on March 30 included a warning to Iran and Syria—an indication Sharon’s vision is alive in U.S. policy.

The Christian Zionist distortions of historic evangelical and orthodox theology must be debated and confronted primarily by evangelicals but also by mainline Protestants, whose churches sometimes absorb these doctrines. Christian Zionist and dispensationalist thinking appears to be growing in influence, especially in the Bible Belt and pockets of the West Coast and rural America. As it spreads it will dominate more and more of our culture and thus exert a growing influence on

politics. Christian and Jewish theologians need to attend to the deep inroads made by millennial theology and its political alliances.

The biblical hermeneutic of Christian Zionism distorts biblical texts by reading them out of their canonical and historical context, making them seem more like such fictional works as the “Left Behind” series than the whole Word of God. The Christian Zionist worldview elevates Israel to a political entity not accountable for keeping Torah or obeying the norms of international law. In its justification of Israel’s illegal program of land confiscation, demolition of homes, targeted assassinations and continued transfer of Palestinians from their homeland, the Christian right and revisionist Zionist ideology encourage the breaking of the Ten Commandments and the Levitical codes. Christian Zionists have traded the mantle of the biblical prophets for an idolatry of militarism and the nation state.

An additional task for Christians is to make a closer examination of ecclesiology. Christian Zionism is grounded in a reductionist ecclesiology in which the state is elevated above the church. Such a view is inconsistent with the New Testament and traditional Christian theology. Darby’s doctrine that the church is a “mere parenthesis” enables Christians to minimize the role of the global church and to ignore or openly despise Palestinian Christians.

If present trends continue, the Palestinian Christian community, which claims a historic continuity dating back to the first disciples, will disappear from the Holy Land, leaving behind nothing but museums or shells of churches. Palestinian Christians are fleeing their homeland not because of Islamic fundamentalism, as many Israelis and Christian Zionists would have us believe, but because their lives, livelihoods, families and future are doomed by the continued Israeli occupation. In providing political and economic support for Israeli militancy against Palestinian Christians and Muslims, Christian Zionists are aiding the collapse of Christianity in the Holy Land.