

Credit due

Christian Zionism and the Balfour Declaration

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A BRITISH flag at an exhibit focusing on the First World War. (Reuters)

Christian Zionism and the Balfour Declaration

• BY ELI KAVON

writes that, "Until the late nineteenth century, most plans for a Jewish entity in Palestine were Christian. These plans were predicated on the perception that geographical Palestine was the ancient homeland that 'belonged' to Jews. This perception, rooted in a biblical worldview, influenced wide sectors of Christendom. It was a pre-modern perception that persists into modernity and it continues to influence many Christians to this day, especially, but not exclusively, in the United States."

It should come as no surprise that Christian Zionists in England had great influence on the issue of the Balfour Declaration. According to Goldman, British foreign secretary Lord Arthur James Balfour's "religious beliefs influenced his political decisions, particularly on the question of a Jewish return to Palestine, which he felt would be the fulfillment of biblical prophecy." The declaration from Balfour, delivered to Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild, titular president of the British Zionist Federation, was as much a religious document as a political one. "The establishment in Palestine for a national home for the Jewish people" represented the Christian convictions of a messianic reality. The Balfour Declaration was not simply a document of international diplomacy

and big-power recognition of Jewish aspirations.

I would like to focus on one of the earliest advocates of a Jewish return to the Land of Israel. (There is an impressive list of Christian individuals and movements – in Joseph Adler's *Restoring the Jews to their Homeland* (1997) – that were the harbinger of Lord Balfour and the support for Israel among American Evangelicals in our own day.)

Holger Paulli (1644-1714) is an early Christian Zionist whose life was cloaked in mystery and eccentricity. After studying theology he made a fortune from the West Indies slave trade. He underwent a mystical experience as a younger man and proclaimed himself King of the Jews. His ultimate goal was to convert all Jews to Christianity. Then he would lead "his people" to the Land of Israel, ushering the messianic advent.

Paulli was prolific. Long before Herzl's diplomatic efforts and his meetings with European leaders to promote Zionism, the Dane Paulli was sending tracts with his ideas to King William III of England and the dauphin of France. He predicted the rebuilding of Jerusalem would take place in 1720. His one condition for this return was that all the Jews be baptized. His downfall was his return to Denmark in 1706. The Danish

authorities would not allow this would-be messiah to arouse anger among Copenhagen's populace and this early Christian Zionist was never heard from again.

Many Jews today are suspicious of the zeal of American Evangelicals for the State of Israel. While Christians today are not as insistent as Holger Paulli was on conversion, there remains a residue of doubt. What was Lord Balfour promoting in his public declaration? Was his belief in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy based on the idea that all Jews would be baptized once they reached the Land of Israel?

My gut and my study of history say no when it comes to the situation today. While there are no doubt Protestants who see Zionism as an ushering in of the Second Coming, we should not reject all Christians who are zealous in their support of Israel. I believe that there is genuine excitement among Christian supporters of Israel – the people of the Hebrew Bible are walking again in the footsteps of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Judah Maccabee. To have freedom of religion and walk where Jesus walked inspires these supporters. Whatever Lord Balfour's motives, his actions enabled Jews to enter the family of nations and return to build up and grow Israel as it is today.

