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Pastoral Insights

The Christian Vision

Alongside Theodor Herzl in his quest to establish a Jewish state in the ancestral home of the Jewish people was a Christian Anglican minister who was Chaplain to the British Embassy in Vienna. His name was William Hechler, and in many respects he was as 'Zionist' as Herzl himself.

Hechler was by no means the first 'Christian Zionist'. In Britain the expectation of the restoration of the Jewish people to their ancient Promised Land had started with the Puritans in the 17th Century, followed by the evangelical revivalists of the 18th and 19th Centuries. Almost every Christian leader one could name from that era—among them the Wesley brothers, William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon, Robert Murray McCheyne, Lord Shaftesbury, Bishop J C Ryle and C H Spurgeon—held this belief. Christians in those days were looking to and longing for the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with a passion that is rarely seen in the Church today.

They also understood from the Bible that before the Lord could return, the Jewish people had to return to the land of Israel, and they began to pray for that restoration in anticipation of the Lord's return. I believe that the Balfour Declaration was God's answer to those prayers, which were entirely in line with His purposes.

The Balfour Declaration

These days, most non-Christians (and, sadly, many who call themselves Christians too) would describe such belief as fanaticism, even criminal. They would blame the Balfour Declaration on nothing more than British imperialism. To be sure, British geo-political interests did play a part in the issuing of the Balfour Declaration. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob used that too!

At the time, the members of the War Cabinet sat down in Whitehall on 31 October 1917 to determine the final wording of the statement of policy that became known as the Balfour Declaration, the British Government was in

...in 1920 the Lord did a remarkable thing. He enshrined that ancient 'title deed' into international law in the modern era.

no position to implement it. All of Palestine—as the area was then known—and beyond was firmly in the control of the Ottoman Turkish empire, which was fiercely opposed to the idea of Jewish self-determination, let alone the restoration of their national home.

Unknown to the War Cabinet, at the very time they were meeting in Whitehall, the Allied forces had captured



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Beersheba. This first crucial victory on the Eastern front opened the way for the conquest of Jerusalem and eventually the collapse of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. Was the timing of this decisive victory on the battlefield mere coincidence, or was it the sovereign hand of God? Two days after the War Cabinet meeting, a letter from Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour was conveyed to Lord Rothschild. Simultaneously, news of the victory at Beersheba reached London. The date was 2 November 1917.

A Positive Response and a Pledge

A number of church leaders responded favourably to the Balfour Declaration, including three Roman Catholic bishops and fourteen Anglican bishops. The then-Bishop of Lincoln wrote: "What lover of Holy Scripture and what friend of freedom can help rejoicing at the prospect of

the Hebrew people returning to their own land again? God speed them!"⁴

Jan Christian Smuts was one of the ten men at that momentous War Cabinet meeting on 31 October 1917. He was also one of the authors of the Covenant of the League of Nations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. He said of the Balfour Declaration: "Christians who had

received the leadership of the Prince of Peace from the Jewish nation were now in a position to make some small return for those priceless blessings, and to restore Israel to the ancient glorious homeland."⁵

He went on to say that it was "A debt of honour which must be discharged in full at all costs and in all circumstances."⁶

References

1. Opening address by Chaim Weizmann to the Zionist Congress, London, 7 July 1920
2. Interview with Dr Cynthia Day Wallace, *Whose Land? Part 1*, produced by Hugh Kitson.
3. Address to the Zionist Congress, London, July 1920.
4. Quoted from an interview with the late Right Reverend John Taylor, former Bishop of St Albans, reading from *A Survey of Christian Opinion* published by the Zionist Organisation in 1918. *The Destiny of Britain*, produced by Hugh Kitson.
5. Quoted from an interview with Dr Paul R Wilkinson (author *Understanding Christian Zionism*) in *The Destiny of Britain*, produced by Hugh Kitson.
6. Ibid

Hugh Kitson is a documentary filmmaker who has made many films about Israel. His films about the British Mandate for Palestine include "The Forsaken Promise"—a three-part series (Hatikvah Film Trust 2006) and "Whose Land?" Part One, presented by Colonel Richard Kemp (Title Deed Media 2017)—see www.whoseland.tv. Part Two is still in production.

This article is the first in a six-part series exploring the significance of the British Mandate for Palestine for today. Part 2, "The Paris Peace Conference of 1919," will follow.