

Christian Zionism and Islamic Eschatology

John W. Swails III, Ph.D.

Christians who support the state of Israel are widely known as Christian Zionists and are becoming aware that their stand for the tiny state is not universally admired. Among those in disagreement are other Christians who ascribe to what is called “Replacement Theology.” This doctrine maintains that all the Biblical promises to Israel and the covenants of God with Israel have been negated because of their unbelief and now those promises and covenants have passed from physical Israel to the Church, the spiritual body of Christ. Those holding that view contend that the Biblical texts with the promises cannot be taken literally, so anyone holding this view has to accept or insert or assume that those blessings have passed to the Church. That means supporting modern Israel is, at best, irrelevant; at worst, a tragic misunderstanding of Scripture with catastrophic consequences in the Middle East.

In addition to these, individuals with strong pro-Arab sentiments also are hostile to those standing in support of Israel. This list is a long one, including many, perhaps most, of the media, and also the majority of academics. The hatred of Israel in colleges and universities has reached truly epidemic proportions and the expression of these anti-Israel sentiments in the academy has reached a record level of vitriol. To this depressing list of those opposing Christian Zionists now must be added a previously unidentified group: those in the Muslim world who write and preach on the end of the world.

Just as we in the West have preachers who focus on the end of the age, so too in Islam writers and preachers hold forth on eschatology and the final battle between their

Mahdi and the Antichrist. In their effort to prepare their adherents for the last days, these preachers have envisaged scenarios in which the final victory of Islam is illustrated and the actors in the conflict are defined.

In his recently (2011) translated book, *Apocalypse In Islam*, Jean-Pierre Filiu gives an overview of this type of literature. He reports a startling observation. His study of apocalyptic dialogue in the Muslim world before the US invasion of Iraq is markedly different from what follows. In his study, he noted the dramatic changes in the hierarchy of the enemies of Islam. Prior to the invasion, the possible portrayals of the end of the world were developed, in Filiu's words, as an "anti-Semitic species of fiction" because they presented Israel and the "international Jewish conspiracy" as the key and most dangerous enemy to be faced. This was reflected in all writers and across the Middle East. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the preaching of Muslim apocalyptic doctrine changed, becoming more colorful. In an attempt to explain the present world situation to their readers, new connections were made and the focus of attention was altered to new enemies in such a way that it turned into "an irrational technique for making sense of a world in which hostile and infidel forces ran wild" (p. 121).

In this new frame of reference, the depiction of their main enemy veered away from the traditional specters of Israel and the Jews to a new and unexpected force. "The characterization of the invasion [of Iraq] as a new crusade met with practically unanimous approval in circles where Christian Zionism was perceived to be a far more formidable enemy than Israel by itself." A new species of actor had appeared and was predicted to be operating in conjunction with Israel and the Jews in the end. This appreciation is so widespread across the Middle East that it raises questions.

The extraordinary outbreak of violence against Christians in the Middle East may be related to this new viewpoint. Mass murder in Iraq, burning of churches with the congregants inside; Coptic Christians being murdered on the street in Egypt; Christian boys and girls being raped in Pakistan; these are just a few examples.

As far as the world scene is concerned, the scenarios of the end days began to spotlight the outlook that there is a pre-positioning of forces for the expected assault by the Antichrist on the Mahdi between Khurasan (eastern Iran and Afghanistan) and Greater Syria. This same forecast has appeared in various places in the Middle East and has wide acceptance and support. Recognizing this puts the situation in Iran and Syria in a different, even apocalyptic, perspective.

More specifically, in Egypt, a book from the author Shaykh Safar al-Hawali targets “Christian Zionism, the most dangerous of all contemporary movements for humanity [for] it has managed to control the minds of the a third of the population of the most powerful nation in the world...” One of the six principles that he suggests is guiding Christian Zionism is the belief that God will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse it. It is not indicated if he recognizes this is from the Bible. (p. 107) According to another author: “Jewish and Christian Zionists are presently working hand in hand” to help the Antichrist. Another writer joins in to oppose “worldwide Zionist Christianity” that among other evils helped Ethiopian Jews return to Israel through the Sudan. They all agree that the foundational belief to the Christian Zionists is that the Jewish state is the “key to the permanence of America.” (94-5)

Several points are clear and consistent. One, the strength of the movement known as Christian Zionism is perceived by a variety of sources in the Middle East as powerful--

more so than Israel itself--and is regarded there as evil. Two, major efforts are being urged by apocalyptic writers to combat this influence and discredit the Christian Zionist leaders, several of whom are named and condemned for specific statements supporting Israel. Three, in the minds of those writing on the Islamic apocalypse and the public reading and following these authors, there is no disconnect between Israel and Christians in the U.S. who support her. This seems to be a very important point for remembering. A final note, Christians who support Israel have to be aware that end-times writers in the Islamic world perceive their views as wicked and have to be opposed. More to the point, they invest such Christians with more influence and power than most of the Christians themselves have any idea of. Most of the Christians who support Israel see themselves in a much different light—just plain, ordinary folks standing up for the people of the Lord. The startlingly alternate perception of Christian Zionism by apocalyptic preachers in the Middle East may cause these Christians to re-examine themselves.

In military history, new weapons are more appreciated by those upon whom they were employed, than by those who developed them. Consider the British innovation of the tank in World War I. After the war, they did not really expand their invention or tactics using it. The Germans upon whom it was used were aware of its potential to a much greater degree and took the tank to become the centerpiece of its military.

So Christian Zionists are perceived in the Muslim world as more powerful than the Christians themselves appreciate. A genuine reflection on the status of their influence and ability is called for and a stand against discouragement for those who support Israel. Also Christians need to remember that this presentation of their danger to Muslim end-time viewpoints is leading many in that world to commit to oppose Christian Zionism.

It might be useful for Christian Zionists to remember that many Muslims are trained in the use and implementation of curses against enemies. This is a spiritual issue of some weight and needs to be taken into consideration in prayer and discussion.

People are known by their friends and also by their enemies. The fact that Christian Zionists are being vilified by Muslim end-time preachers is a good sign, one for which Christian Zionists need to praise God, and at the same time, pray with new dedication for Christians in the Middle East.