

# The Origins of Christian Zionism

Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland

Donald M. Lewis

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The Origins of Christian Zionism, Donald M. Lewis's study of Lord Shaftesbury - Victorian England's greatest humanitarian and most prominent Christian Zionist - examines why British evangelicals became fascinated with the Jews and how this impacted Jewish identity, transformed Jewish-Christian relations, and changed the course of world history.

In this study of Lord Shaftesbury - Victorian England's greatest humanitarian and most prominent Christian Zionist - Donald M. Lewis examines why British evangelicals became fascinated with the Jews and how they promoted a "teaching of esteem" that countered a "teaching of contempt." Evangelicals militated for the restoration of Jews to Palestine by lobbying the British cabinet on foreign policy decisions. Professing their love for the Jews, they effectively reshaped the image of the Jew in conversionist literature, gave sacrificially to convert them to Christianity, and worked with German Pietists to create a joint Anglican-Lutheran bishopric in Jerusalem, the center (in their minds) of world Jewry. Evangelical identity evolved during this process and had an impact on Jewish identity, transforming Jewish-Christian relations. It also changed the course of world history by creating a climate of opinion in the United Kingdom in favor of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which pledged British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The movement also bequeathed a fascination with Christian Zionism to American evangelicals that still influences global politics.

#### **About the author**

Donald M. Lewis is an historian specializing in the study of Evangelical Christianity. He holds a doctorate from the University of Oxford and currently is professor of Church History at Regent College, a graduate school of Christian Studies affiliated with the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada. His first book *Lighten Their Darkness: the Evangelical Mission to Working-Class London, 1828-1860* (Greenwood Press, 1985; republished in 2001 by Paternoster) is a ground-breaking work that focuses on popular religion in the Victorian slums. He worked for ten years as the editor of the two-volume *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995 republished in 2005 by Hendrickson). In addition he is the editor of several collections including the award-winning *Christianity Reborn: the Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). His most recent work is *The Origins of Christian Zionism: Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Professor Lewis is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in England.

#### **Introduction**

The [Balfour] declaration was the product of neither military nor diplomatic interests but of prejudice, faith, and sleight of hand.'

Tom Segev

## **Amazon reviews**

**illuminating**, February 8, 2012

This review is from: *The Origins of Christian Zionism: Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland* (Hardcover)

*The Origins of Christian Zionism* is a book of cultural history about the rise of evangelical interest in the Jews and in returning the Jewish people to Palestine. The subject is of eminent relevance to contemporary Middle Eastern and world affairs, of course, and Donald Lewis begins by asking how the British government came to adopt the famous Balfour Declaration, in 1917. Focusing in large part on the role of the English philanthropist and social reformer Lord Shaftesbury, the book seeks to show how, in the nineteenth century, a large swath of British opinion came to conceive of itself as chosen to act as protector for the original Biblical people.

Lewis thus shows how Protestant philo-Semitism had roots in seventeenth-century Calvinism and, in parallel, in Prussian Pietism. He argues that, notwithstanding their aim to convert the Jews to Christianity, Christian Zionists were respectful, even admiring of the Jews. And the book suggests that philo-Semitism was part of a Protestant identity as the representative of the one true religion, having originated in Bible reading and the rediscovery of the Old Testament. Though early nineteenth-century Christian Zionism had a strong prophetic, pre-millenarian side, the movement had amazingly wide popular appeal and resonance. The London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, founded in 1810, remained well-funded throughout the nineteenth century. It became prominent in lobbying the British government for establishing a consulate in Jerusalem, which it did in 1838, then for building an Anglican church there and founding an Anglican-Lutheran bishopric in the 1840s. Its goal was the return of the Jews to Palestine, which was to be followed by their conversion to Christianity, and this to bring about the Second Coming. It published journals such as *Jewish Intelligence* (you have to love the title). The movement was to a large extent mainstream, moreover, Anglican not nonconformist and encompassing post as well as pre-millenarian evangelicals. Through Shaftesbury and others, it was politically very well connected.

Lewis's book is meticulously researched but plainly told and accessible and even entertaining in the quirkiness of the beliefs it describes. This is cultural history at its best, and it happens to concern a highly relevant topic.

**The Anglicans had it Right!**, June 6, 2011

It is seldom that one thinks of the "pre-Zionist Zionists." But that many of the British Anglican evangelicals were just that comes as a shock to most. Dr. Lewis documents the amazing 19th century thread of history and thought that brought the Jewish people civil rights in European countries for the first time and laid the practical foundation for the restoration of Jews to their ancestral homeland, Israel, in the next century. What motivated these biblically-oriented Christians were the Scriptures themselves - passages which had either been overlooked for centuries or had been misinterpreted to fit the prevalent theology which declared that The Church had replaced Israel and thus there was no longer a place for the Jews in God's economy and plan. The earliest organization among the Anglicans promoting the spiritual restoration of the Jews, The Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, or The London Jews' Society as it came to be known, was founded in 1809. Lord Ashley, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, Lewis's central "character," served as president of the Society for 40 years. He was also Britain's most prominent social reformer of his generation.

Additionally, Lewis repairs several of Barbara Tuchman's statements which have stood re this era, the Jewish people and English evangelicals since publication of her *BIBLE AND THE SWORD* in 1956.

Lewis examines old and new material of the period to turn out a history that will stand. His research confirms that without men like Shaftesbury in the 19th century, the Balfour Declaration and the State of Israel would never have happened in the 20th.

**Lewis' book is an excellent look at the uncharted historical territory between Zionist Christian Evangelicals and Zionist Jews**, June 6, 2011

Many versions of the historical origins of the Israeli state virtually jump from ancient Israel to Theodore Herzl, followed by WWI and the Balfour Declaration under the British Mandate, followed by accounts of the wisdom and bravery of Modern Israelis to finally establish Israel in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust. Such accounts do not do justice to the integral part politically engaged Christian evangelicals have played in establishing a Jewish state in Palestine. Many Jewish historians simply do not understand the inner complexities of (the philosemitic wing of) Evangelical piety and eschatology, and Evangelicals often do not have a good handle on Jewish culture and history. Thus, the two pass each other in the night, and each story is incomplete without the other.

Thus, Don Lewis' new book *The Origins of Christian Zionism: Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland* is a welcome addition to the conversation over the origins of the Israeli state and the ongoing relationship between a largely irreligious Israeli state, and a very religious Evangelical Christian base, largely now in America though originating in Europe. In particular, Lewis wants to discover why during a half century, 1790-1840, did the British public move from a complete disinterest in the Jews to supporting their establishment of a homeland with all the political power of the crown.

Lewis shows that there are in actuality two Christian strains which contributed to early Christian philosemitism: German Pietism and British Puritanism which coalesced from the 17th to the 19th century. Thus, long before the irreligious Herzl and the other early Zionists had it in mind to establish a Jewish state (somewhere, possibly in Africa, Palestine or elsewhere), there were pious Christians who had come out of the Reformation with a passion and license to now read the Scriptures for themselves. What they found there were many seemingly explicit promises regarding the Jewish people that were yet unfulfilled. Thus, those Evangelicals who had long been declared anathema by the Catholic church were now seeking a new identity marker and found it in their identification with the Jewish people and their role in being active players in the unfolding drama of world history (the 17th century Philip Jakob Spener believed the Jews to be "God's timepiece"). Armed with both passion for Scriptural fulfillment and political power, British Evangelicals (especially Lord Shaftesbury, whom Lewis spends a large amount of time on) began to search world events for opportunities to make small but constant steps towards establishing Israel back in the land. Along with their hopes that the Jews would become Christians either before or after they were resettled in Palestine, many Evangelicals believed that the nation that helped the Jews would also be blessed by God. Lewis shows that early on, it was actually British

Calvinists (rather than Arminians), who utilized their theology of election to legitimate this action: God had elected certain nations for certain purposes; Israel had been called to provide the way for the Messiah (Jesus Christ), and nations like Britain were intended to provide the building blocks for Christ's return, primarily the establishment of the Jewish people in their own land.

Thus, long before it even appeared a possibility, Lord Shaftesbury (the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, also known as Anthony Ashley Cooper), a prominent member of the British Parliament, and others worked to evangelize Jews and also to help them emigrate into the land. Meanwhile, most European Jews had established a good life in Europe. Many had become successful in trades, business and finance, and the thought of starting over in some backwater corner of the world was not at all attractive to them. Lewis notes that the one member of Lloyd George's War Cabinet who opposed the Balfour Declaration was Jewish! Likewise, many European Jews did not have the religious impulse to seek a return to the land. However, with the escalation of oppression, especially in Eastern Europe, many Jews came to believe that they would not be safe without their own country and utilized the assistance of Evangelicals in relocating.

Shaftesbury died in 1885, and he would not see the turns of world history which would make a Jewish state possible, namely two world wars. However, it was largely the philosemitism which he worked to institutionalize which would be manifested in the public sentiment favoring a Jewish state after WWI, when the Zionists would become organized, financed, and militarily capable of establishing the basic framework for a new state. This sentiment continued into the 20th century with the likes of Lord Balfour (of course), Winston Churchill, and Woodrow Wilson (among others).

More than ever, the small land of Israel/Palestine is the most precious real-estate on the planet, affecting innumerable aspects of political, military and economic ventures of the world powers. Domestically, the violence on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is replete with narratives recounting the same events from very different perspectives, which in turn, result in very different conclusions. Every retelling of these national histories has a polemical function, legitimating one contemporary political power over another, and it is very difficult to get a good view of what has really happened and who were the minds behind it. This contemporary context of propaganda and rhetoric is what makes Lewis' book is so important. Not only does the book recount an area of scholarship that is murky to both Jewish historians and Evangelicals, but Lewis also engages the history in a fair way, staying away from the historical propaganda which characterizes revisionist histories of the era. Lewis is primarily concerned with the colorful historical characters themselves and how they acted consistently out of their religious worldviews. Though Lewis does not give his own perspective on Zionism, as a Christian myself, his account has helped me see that (what I would deem to be) faulty Christian theology can have real-world negative consequences for many years to come (e.g. injustice for the Palestinian people), even as Evangelical s had the best intentions of helping the Jewish people and serving God.

In one respect, the book is just an interesting and engaging read. But this book should also be a very important starting point for years to come for historians as well as concerned people who watch the news from Israel/Palestine and simply want to know: how did we get here? There can be no progress in Israel/Palestine unless we go back and acknowledge the common history in fair and honest ways. Lewis does this very well.

#### **An important analysis of the roots of Christian Zionism, May 25, 2011**

In light of the gravity of Zionism, it is surprising that little attention has been payed to it in the academic world. Lewis's book then, represents an important foray into an underdeveloped area of study.

The book is helpful in connecting the dots between the social force of British Evangelicalism in the nineteenth century and the events leading up to the Balfour Declaration. Lewis succeeds in showing just how unprecedented, and thus remarkable nearly every part of the process leading up to the Declaration was (which in turn helped prepare the ground for an Israeli state).

Question: "What is Zionism / Christian Zionism?". Answer: Zionism, simply a political movement at its inception, has today become more of an ideology than anything else. Zionism is an international movement for the return of the Jewish people to Zion, the land of Israel, while exercising the right to retain authority of government over the state of Israel, which was promised to them in the Hebrew Scriptures. The roots for Zionism lie in Genesis chapters 12 and 15, in which God makes a covenant with Abraham promising him that his descendants would inherit the land between Egypt and th Christian Zionism is a belief among some Christians that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 were in accordance with Bible prophecy. The term began to be used in the mid-20th century, superseding Christian Restorationism. However, Christian advocacy grew after the Protestant Reformation in support of the restoration of the Jews and has its roots "in seventeenth century England". Contemporary Israeli historian Anita Shapira suggests that