

Book Review – A History of Zionism

Zionism is a political movement originally intended to establish a homeland for the Jews in Palestine, the historical home of the Israelites. *A History of Zionism, From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel*, is a comprehensive history of the Zionist movement from its origin to its culmination. Its author, Walter Laqueur, is an American Jewish historian and founding editor of the *Journal of Contemporary History*. He also chaired the Research Council for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, and has authored over 25 works on European and Jewish history. As such, he is eminently qualified to write a definitive single volume history of Zionism.

The Tanakh, what Christians would know as the Old Testament, identifies the Israelites as the Chosen People of God. The New Testament records that the religious leaders of the Jews, the descendants of the Israelites, instigated the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jewish culture is distinct from every other culture in the world. Thus, they have been the object of discrimination and persecution for two millennia; far out of proportion to their number. As the Jewish farmer and lead character Teyve says in *Fiddler on the Roof*, “I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can't You choose someone else?”

Since the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) and the subsequent suppression of the final Jewish Bar Kokhba revolt (AD 132-136), the Jews have been a people without a country. They have tried to assimilate wherever they have gone, whether Europe, Africa, or Asia. Though they have had some success, anti-Semitism has never been far away. From the Claudian expulsion of the Jews from Rome (AD 45) to the Ferdinandian expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492) to the Holocaust (1941-1945), the Jews have suffered terribly at the hands of those who had recently been their friends and countrymen.

Laqueur begins his book with a survey of Jewish life at the beginning of the 19th century. He notes that there were about 2.5 million Jews in the world at the time, and 90% of them lived in Europe.¹ Medieval Jews lived primarily in Western Europe, but by the 1800s most had migrated east. Life seemed to be improving for these children of Abraham, as by the mid-1800s, most nations had granted Jews full citizenship and legal rights. Simultaneously, however, Jews were abandoning their culture and religion and the question “what is a Jew” came to the fore. Inter-marriage with Gentiles and conversion to Christianity was common, and many Jews felt that within a few generations the Jewish people would cease to exist. Assimilation was working, but at the expense of losing the nation.

The 1880s and 1890s saw a series of anti-Semitic pogroms that fractured the faith of many European assimilationists and gave birth to the Zionist movement. Zionists believed that all efforts of assimilation would ultimately prove futile, and therefore the Jewish people had to have a nation-state of their own. The idea of Jews returning to the Promised Land had been around for centuries, and by 1882 about 24,000 Jews lived in Palestine.² Aided in part by the Zionist movement, that number increased to 85,000 by 1914.

The founder of Zionism was Theodor Herzl, who convened the first Zionist congress in Basel, Switzerland in 1897. He believed in a political Zionism and lobbied both the Ottoman Empire and the British Empire ceaselessly to give the Jews a toe hold in the Holy Land. Another group of Zionists wanted to focus on buying land, immigration, and settlement to build Israel. Some Zionists would have been content to establish the Jewish homeland in Argentina or Uganda, but Herzl and his cadre realized that such a plan would never work; it was Palestine or bust. By the second Zionist congress in 1898, 117 Zionist groups had grown to 913.³ Herzl never got the major diplomatic victory that he craved, but died 3 July 1904 at the age of 44.

British Zionists supported the United Kingdom and German Zionists supported the Reich in World War I. Jews in Palestine felt gradually increasing pressure from the local Arabs and the overbearing Turkish government. Some were expelled and some joined the British forces. On 2 Nov 1917, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George and Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour released the Balfour Declaration, suggesting that the British Crown recognized the

¹ A History of Zionism, From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel, 4

² A History of Zionism, From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel, 41

³ A History of Zionism, From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel, 109

right of the Jews to have a state of their own. The end of the war ushered in a time of celebration and excess in the 1920s for the Zionist movement. The League of Nations granted a mandate to Britain to rule the Holy Land.

A perpetual problem for the Jews trying to emigrate to Palestine was that the land was not empty; Arabs had lived there for centuries. Jewish settlers bought vast quantities of land from local Arabs, established themselves and then hired the former Arab owners to work in their fields. Despite Jewish rhetoric, the Arabs saw clearly that an ethnic and religious struggle for the Land was developing. Arab political opposition solidified against the Jews, and terrorist attacks between Jews and Arabs occurred. Arab hostility escalated throughout the 1930s and 1940s, to the point where they rejected even a two-state solution. Any future nation in Palestine would be governed by Arabs with the Jews as a Dhimmi population.

Politically, Ashkenazi Jews tended to be Socialist or even Communist, and Jews such as Marx and Trotsky played major roles in the turmoil that was early 20th century Europe. Religiously, many Jews were atheists. Neither socialism nor atheism endeared the migrating Hebrews to their conservative Arab Muslim neighbors, exacerbating the friction.

The second great leader of the Zionist movement was Chaim Weizmann. A chemist by profession, Weizmann invented a process to efficiently make acetone at just a time that the British needed acetone for the war effort. By 1920 he had assumed leadership of the World Zionist Organization, and he served that group in various capacities for decades. During his tenure, the anti-Jewish pogroms of Josef Stalin and the Holocaust of Adolph Hitler slaughtered over six million Jews in Europe. Despite the infamous White Paper of 1939, in which Britain essentially refuted the Balfour Declaration, Weizmann encouraged Jewish development of Israel.

The end of World War II brought the beginning to the United Nations and the end to the British Mandate over Palestine. After losing mountains of treasure and oceans of blood, the British had no stomach to fight for any part of their once-vast Empire. In 1947, the UN voted to partition the Holy Land into parts held by Jews and parts held by Arabs. and Weizmann became its first president. Arab guerillas and Jewish militia fought on the streets and on 14 May 1948, the State of Israel was born. Arab armies from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan immediately invaded the fledgling state but were beaten. Chaim Weizmann became the first President of Israel.

Walter Laqueur's book, *A History of Zionism, From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel*, is authoritative and well written. It is very long, however, and moves slowly. It is a good book for a person with interest in the subject, but too much for a novice-level overview. Historians may like it, but pastors interested in the subject can find briefer and still accurate tomes elsewhere.

Questions

1. What is the proper response of a Christian to Zionism today?
2. What is the proper position of believers in Christ on issues affecting Israel together?
3. How can we introduce such people to the grace of our Lord?