

Jimmy Carter's Book: An Israeli View

The Wall Street Journal, December 26, 2006

Several prominent scholars have taken issue with Jimmy Carter's book "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid," cataloguing its historical inaccuracies and lamenting its lack of balance. The journalist Jeffrey Goldberg also critiqued the book's theological purpose, which, he asserted, was to "convince American Evangelicals to reconsider their support for Israel."

Mr. Carter indeed seems to have a religious problem with the Jewish state. His book bewails the fact that Israel is not the reincarnation of ancient Judea but a modern, largely temporal democracy. "I had long taught lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures," he recalls telling Prime Minister Golda Meir during his first tour through the country. "A common historical pattern was that Israel was punished whenever the leaders turned away from devout worship of God. I asked if she was concerned about the secular nature of the Labor government."

He complains about the fact that the kibbutz synagogue he enters is nearly empty on the sabbath and that the Bibles presented to Israeli soldiers "was one of the few indications of a religious commitment that I observed during our visit." But he also reproves contemporary Israelis for allegedly mistreating the Samaritans -- "the same complaint heard by Jesus almost two thousand years earlier" -- and for pilfering water from the Jordan River, "where . . . Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist."

Disturbed by secular Laborites, he is further unnerved by religiously minded Israelis who seek to fulfill the biblical injunction to settle the entire Land of Israel. There are "two Israels," Mr. Carter concludes, one which embodies the "the ancient culture of the Jewish people, defined by the Hebrew Scriptures," and the other in "the occupied Palestinian territories," which refuses to "respect the basic human rights of the citizens."

Whether in its secular and/or observant manifestations, Israel clearly discomfits Mr. Carter, a man who, even as president, considered himself in "full-time Christian service." Yet, in revealing his unease with the idea of Jewish statehood, Mr. Carter sets himself apart from many U.S. presidents before and after him, as well as from nearly 400 years of American Christian thought.

* * *

Generations of Christians in this country, representing a variety of dominations, laymen and clergy alike, have embraced the concept of renewed Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. The passion was already evident in 1620 when William Bradford alighted on Plymouth Rock and exclaimed, "Come, let us declare the word of God in Zion." Bradford was a leader of the Puritans, dissenting Protestants who, in their search for an unsullied religion and the strength to resist state oppression, turned to the Old Testament. There, they found a God who spoke directly to his people, who promised to deliver them from bondage and return them to their ancestral homeland. Appropriating this narrative, the Puritans fashioned themselves as the New Jews and America as their New Promised Land. They gave their children Hebrew names -- David, Benjamin, Sarah, Rebecca -- and called over 1,000 of their towns after Biblical places, including Bethlehem, Bethel and, of course, New Canaan.

Identifying with the Jews, a great many colonists endorsed the notion of restoring Palestine to Jewish control. Elias Boudinot, president of the Continental Congress, predicted that the Jews, "however scattered . . . are to be recovered by the mighty power of God, and restored to their beloved . . . Palestine." John Adams imagined "a hundred thousand Israelites" marching triumphantly into Palestine. "I really wish the Jews in Judea an independent nation," he wrote. During the Revolution, the association between America's struggle for independence and the Jews' struggle for repatriation

was illustrated by the proposed Great Seal designed by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, showing Moses leading the Children of Israel toward the Holy Land.

Restorationism became a major theme in antebellum religious thought and a mainstay of the Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian churches. In his 1844 bestseller, "The Valley of the Vision," New York University Bible scholar George Bush -- a forebear of two presidents of the same name -- called on the U.S. to devote its economic and military might toward recreating a Jewish polity in Palestine. But merely envisioning such a state was insufficient for some Americans, who, in the decades before the Civil War, left home to build colonies in Palestine. Each of these settlements had the same goal: to teach the Jews, long disenfranchised from the land, to farm and so enable them to establish a modern agrarian society. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln said that "restoring the Jews to their homeland is a noble dream shared by many Americans," and that the U.S. could work to realize that goal once the Union prevailed.

Nineteenth-century restorationism reached its fullest expression in an 1891 petition submitted by Midwestern magnate William Blackstone to President Benjamin Harrison. The Blackstone Memorial, as it was called, urged the president to convene an international conference to discuss ways of reviving Jewish dominion in Palestine. Among the memorial's 400 signatories were some of America's most preeminent figures, including John D. Rockefeller, J. Pierpont Morgan, Charles Scribner and William McKinley. By the century's turn, those advocating restored Jewish sovereignty in Palestine had begun calling themselves Zionists, though the vast majority of the movement's members remained Christian rather than Jewish. "It seems to me that it is entirely proper to start a Zionist State around Jerusalem," wrote Teddy Roosevelt, "and [that] the Jews be given control of Palestine."

Such sentiments played a crucial role in gaining international recognition for Zionist claims to Palestine during World War I, when the British government sought American approval for designating that area as the Jewish national home. Though his closest counselors warned him against endorsing the move, Woodrow Wilson, the son and grandson of Presbyterian preachers, rejected their advice. "To think that I the son of the manse [parsonage] should be able to help restore the Holy Land to its people," he explained. With Wilson's imprimatur, Britain issued the declaration that became the basis of its League of Nations mandate in Palestine, and as the precursor to the 1947 U.N. Partition Resolution creating the Jewish state.

The question of whether or not to recognize that state fell to Harry S. Truman. Raised in a Baptist household where he learned much of the Bible by heart, Truman had been a member of the pro-Zionist American Christian Palestine Committee and an advocate of the right of Jews -- particularly Holocaust survivors -- to immigrate to Palestine. He was naturally inclined to acknowledge the nascent state but encountered fervid opposition from the entire foreign policy establishment. If America sided with the Zionists, officials in the State and Defense Departments cautioned, the Arabs would cut off oil supplies to the West, undermine America's economy and expose Europe to Soviet invasion. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops would have to be sent to Palestine to save its Jews from massacre.

Truman listened carefully to these warnings and then, at 6:11 on the evening of May 14, he announced that the U.S. would be the first nation to recognize the newly-declared State of Israel. While the decision may have stemmed in part from domestic political considerations, it is difficult to conceive that any politician, much less one of Truman's character, would have risked global catastrophe by recognizing a frail and miniscule country. More likely, the dramatic *démarche* reflected Truman's religious background and his commitment to the restorationist creed. Introduced a few weeks later to an American Jewish delegation as the president who had helped create Israel, Truman took umbrage and snapped, "What you mean 'helped create'? I am Cyrus" -- a reference to the Persian king who returned the Jews from exile -- "I am Cyrus!"

Since 1948, some administrations (Eisenhower, Bush Sr.) have been less ardent in their attachment to Israel, and others (Kennedy, Nixon) more so. Throughout the last 60 years, though, the U.S. has never wavered in its concern for Israel's survival and its support for the Jewish people's right to

statehood. While U.S.-Israel ties are no doubt strengthened by common bonds of democracy and Western culture, religion remains an integral component in that relationship. We know that Lyndon Johnson's Baptist grandfather told him to "take care of the Jews, God's chosen people," and that Bill Clinton's pastor, on his deathbed, made the future president promise never to abandon the Jewish state. We know how faith has impacted the policies of George W. Bush, who is perhaps the most pro-Israel president in history.

In his apparent attempt to make American Christians rethink their affection for Israel, Jimmy Carter is clearly departing from time-honored practice. This has not been the legacy of evangelicals alone, but of many religious denominations in the U.S., and not solely the conviction of Mr. Bush, but of generations of American leaders. In the controversial title of his book, Mr. Carter implicitly denounces Israel for its separatist policies, but, by doing so, he isolates himself from centuries of American tradition.

Presented with permission of author.