

“The Shining City Upon the Hill:”  
Christian Zionism and the Politics of Woodrow Wilson & Harry S. Truman

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Since the Republican primaries in 2015, it has become commonplace for American evangelicals to compare President Donald J. Trump to the Biblical King Cyrus. In the Bible, the Persian emperor is appointed by God to fulfill his divine will, freeing the Jewish people held captive in Babylon and rebuilding the holy city of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Just as Cyrus was anointed by God to accomplish his divine will on Earth, so do American evangelicals perceive President Trump to be similarly anointed by God to, as prominent evangelical speaker and author Lance Wallnau stated, “restore the crumbling walls that separate us from cultural collapse.”<sup>2</sup> President Trump himself is not influenced by Christian Zionism, and therefore it is easy to attribute this association of him with a Biblical king to a small but vocal group of fundamentalist evangelical Christians who support him. However, the reality is that this connection of American politics to Biblical destiny is indicative of a more pervasive and widespread belief system.<sup>3</sup> This belief system is known today as Christian Zionism.

Just as evangelicals currently see President Trump as the man divinely instituted to the presidency to “restore the crumbling walls that separate us from cultural collapse,” so did certain evangelical Protestant presidents perceive their role to be one of fulfilling God’s plan for humanity. Such is the case with President Woodrow Wilson and President Harry Truman in the aftermaths of the two World Wars. Each of these presidents, influenced by their own beliefs in Christian Zionism, perceived their duty as president to be one of divine appointment, that they had been chosen by God to restore his chosen people to the Holy Land and propel the world into the new millennium. Within their addresses and speeches to the American public, their personal writings, and the first-hand accounts from those who worked closely with them, Wilson and

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 45:1, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Stewart, “Why Trump Reigns as King Cyrus,” *New York Times*, Dec. 31, 2018, accessed Oct. 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/opinion/trump-evangelicals-cyrus-king.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Miano, “Mainstream Christian Zionism,” in *Prophetic Voices on Middle East Peace: A Jewish, Christian, and Humanist Primer on Colonialism, Zionism, and Nationalism in the Middle East*, ed. Thomas E. Phillips, Peter J. Miano, Jason Mitchell, 163-186 (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2016), 165.

Truman displayed their Christian Zionist beliefs, connecting their personal religious views to their political duties as President of the United States. Christian Zionism, with its theological foundation of dispensationalism and its connection to American manifest destiny, served as a driving force in the policy decisions of President Woodrow Wilson and President Harry Truman immediately following the two World Wars.

Since its introduction to America in the mid-nineteenth century, Christian Zionism has created a situation in which politics and religion intersect and collide in complicated ways. The theological foundation of Christian Zionism has permeated American religious, cultural, and political life in numerous ways, from integrating into America's existing evangelical Protestant tradition to supporting the belief in America's divinely granted manifest destiny. By the twentieth century, Christian Zionism became so ingrained in American political life that it even affected America's highest positions of leadership, creating circumstances in which policy decisions were directly influenced and driven by the personal religious beliefs of political leaders. In fact, the emphasis on interweaving theology and politics allows for religiously devout individuals occupying the highest political offices in the United States, including the presidency, to use their position as political leaders to further their religious agenda.

Christian Zionism, because of its heavy focus on Biblical literalism and fundamentalism, is generally associated with Christians from the "Christian right." These Christian Zionists are the easiest to identify because they are often the most vocal and most visible in displaying their opinions.<sup>4</sup> However, for scholars like Peter J. Miano and Rosemary Radford Reuther, associating Christian Zionism exclusively with fundamentalist and conservative Christians is dangerous as it ignores the fact that the majority of Christian Zionists belong to mainstream branches of

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<sup>4</sup> Miano, "Mainstream Christian Zionism," 171.

Christianity.<sup>5</sup> As Miano points out, Christianity as a religious tradition, whether mainstream or not, both directly and indirectly engages in promoting the Zionist narrative in some capacity.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, as Reuther discusses, Christian Zionism so deeply entwined with Western Christian imperialism towards the Middle East and America's self-identification as a nation blessed by God that it has pervaded even the most liberal of Protestant denominations.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, neither Woodrow Wilson nor Harry S. Truman belonged to "fringe" Christian denominations: Wilson was a Presbyterian and Truman was a Baptist, yet both of them became dedicated to the Christian Zionist cause through their mainstream Protestant religious beliefs.

Similarly, there is a propensity to dismiss those who believe in Biblical literalism or Fundamentalist Christianity as unintelligent and uneducated. This is certainly true in the case of Harry S. Truman. As Gary Scott Smith points out, scholars often cite Truman's religious rhetoric and biblically influenced approach to public policy as crude, misguided, and simplistic.<sup>8</sup> That and his vulgar mouth and brash nature got him branded as an unintelligent religious fanatic.<sup>9</sup> In reality, Truman was an incredibly well-read and intelligent man. Scholars like Paul C. Merkley discuss how he regularly read a wide range of newly published books from academic historians, including biographies, narrative histories, and American political and military histories.<sup>10</sup> Truman's interpretation of the Bible might have been a fundamentalist one, but he genuinely believed that it was the correct interpretation based on his extensive study and reading on the topic and this interpretation served as the foundation for his policies and decisions as president.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Miano, "Mainstream Christian Zionism," 164; Rosemary Radford Reuther, "Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches," in *Comprehending Christian Zionism: Perspectives in Comparison*, ed. Göran Gunner and Robert O. Smith, 179-190 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 179.

<sup>6</sup> Miano, "Mainstream Christian Zionism," 172.

<sup>7</sup> Reuther, "Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches," 179.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Scott Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office: The Religious Lives of American Presidents* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2015), 230.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 229.

<sup>10</sup> Paul C. Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism, 1891-1948* (London, England: Routledge, 1998), 165.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 229.

Moreover, Truman was essentially an outsider to America's political scene when he became President of the United States; he was born, raised, and lived his entire adult life in Missouri before becoming a Missouri State Senator. His lack of college education, his Midwestern background, his brash nature, and his use of religious rhetoric set him apart from his elite East Coast counterparts, in particular the staff, cabinet members, and advisors he inherited from President Roosevelt when he died. For Truman, being a political outsider meant that it was his duty as President of the United States to lead the country into a new political age free of corruption, complacency, and elitism, part of which included restoring the Jewish people to the Holy Land. Contrastingly, Wilson was also a political outsider with no elite East Coast heritage, but he did not face the same ostracization that Truman did as President of the United States because of his educational background and career path. Wilson was educated at Princeton and Johns Hopkins, taught at numerous East Coast colleges and universities, became the President of Princeton University, and eventually was the Governor of New Jersey before becoming President of the United States. He was well-established within the elite atmosphere of the East Coast and America's political scene and he was able to mask his Southern background much more easily than Truman due to his educational training and professional life. However, this assimilation into America's elite East Coast society and political scene did not alter Wilson's religious beliefs, as indicated by his actions as president to help restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land.

Recognizing these three points – that Christian Zionism is not exclusively associated with the “Christian right,” that adherence to Biblical literalism and Fundamentalist Christianity does not inherently mean one is unintelligent or uneducated, and that their respective statuses as non-East Coast political outsiders influenced Wilson and Truman to take actions to help restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land – is imperative for understanding the influence Christian

Zionism has had in American politics. Both Woodrow Wilson and Harry S. Truman were members of mainstream Protestant Christian denominations, and they were both intelligent, well-read men. And yet, they both strongly believed in the Christian Zionist cause and perpetuated it throughout their respective tenures as President of the United States. Clearly, Christian Zionism is more than just a political movement belonging to a specific sector of the “Christian right.” It is something that encompasses mainstream American Protestant theological beliefs, American patriotism and national pride, and American national politics, influencing those in even the highest of governmental offices.

Christian Zionism, simply defined, is the belief held by Christians that the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land is in accordance with Biblical prophecy.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Jewish Zionists called for the restoration of the Jewish people in the Holy Land and the establishment of a Jewish homeland for nationalistic and political reasons, Christian Zionists are more religiously motivated. They see the establishment of a Jewish homeland as a necessary step in God’s plan for the salvation of humanity, one which will fulfill Biblical prophecy and allow Jesus Christ to return to Earth and save the true believers.<sup>13</sup> Christian Zionism originated in England in the seventeenth century, and prior to the development of the modern Jewish Zionist movement, it was known as Christian Restorationism. For the British, restoring the Jewish people to the Holy Land was tied to imperial motivations and to their desire to create a Christian empire in the Middle East under their patronage.<sup>14</sup> English Puritans identified Britain as an elect nation, one chosen by God to fulfill his will on Earth.<sup>15</sup> Since Biblical Israel had previously held this position as God’s elect nation, the British saw themselves as spiritual descendants of the Israelites and

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<sup>12</sup> John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 107.

<sup>13</sup> Miano, “Mainstream Christian Zionism,” 164.

<sup>14</sup> Reuther, “Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches,” 180.

<sup>15</sup> Reuther, “Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches,” 180.

believed it was their divinely given right to help establish God's Kingdom here on Earth.<sup>16</sup> This belief intensified with the development of dispensationalism in the 1830s by a group known as the Plymouth Brethren. The Plymouth Brethren was a group of individuals who broke from the Church of England over a list of grievances which has since been lost.<sup>17</sup> This group was deeply interested in Biblical prophecy and believed that the Bible pointed to future events scheduled to take place prior to Christ's return to Earth.<sup>18</sup> John Nelson Darby, a member of the Plymouth Brethren, was the group's most gifted Bible teacher and introduced new elements of Biblical interpretation that sought to present the complexities and contradictions of the Bible as coherent and consistent revelations to God's plan for humanity.<sup>19</sup>

While Christian advocacy for the restoration of the Jewish people to the Holy Land was an established theological belief system, it gained political traction with the rise of Jewish nationalism. In the mid-nineteenth century, Jews in Europe began assimilating and adapting to the dominant cultures of their countries in an attempt to fight antisemitism.<sup>20</sup> However, towards the end of the century, a new wave of antisemitism swept over Europe and Jews began to call into question their assimilationist sentiments and tactics.<sup>21</sup> The late nineteenth century saw the rise of various nationalist movements, from ethnic nationalism to cultural nationalism, and for the European Jews facing conflict in their home countries, their Jewish identity became the foundation for their own form of nationalism.<sup>22</sup> With the publication of *Der Judenstaat*, a pamphlet written in 1896 by a Jewish Austro-Hungarian journalist named Theodor Herzl, the

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<sup>16</sup> Reuther, "Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches," 181.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 97.

<sup>22</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 97.

modern Zionist movement was born.<sup>23</sup> In *Der Judenstaat*, Herzl argues that, for the safety of the Jewish people and to prevent worsening antisemitism, an independent Jewish state must be created. For the global Jewish community, the rise of Zionism signaled a desire to mobilize and fight against anti-Jewish sentiments. However, for Christian Zionists, the rise of Zionism was a sign from God that the time for fulfilling his theological timeline had come.

The theological foundation of Christian Zionism, known as dispensationalism, is steeped in Biblical literalism, prophetic interpretation, and belief in the apocalypse. It is a form of premillennial futurism, an end-times view of Christianity that unflinchingly interprets portions of certain books, specifically the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, as the events scheduled to take place before Christ's return.<sup>24</sup> Dispensationalism combines the eschatological view that fulfilling Biblical prophecy necessitates Jesus' Second Coming with dispensationalism's specific theological perception of time.<sup>25</sup> It states that all of history can be divided into dispensations; according to C.I. Scofield, a prominent American dispensationalist and author of the popular *Scofield Reference Bible*, a dispensation is "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."<sup>26</sup> During each dispensation, God shares a specific revelation of divine will or a distinctive administrative principle, and humanity is responsible for following that will or principle.<sup>27</sup> Christian Zionists believe that God reveals his plan for humanity subtly; God expects that humanity will recognize the signs He is presenting to them and will act upon them to fulfill His will.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally, dispensationalists

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<sup>23</sup> Paul C. Merkley, "Zionists and Christian Restorationists," *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 3 (1993): 94.

<sup>24</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, 132.

<sup>26</sup> C.I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Sean Durbin, "Walking in the Mantle of Esther: "Political" Action as "Religious" Practice," in *Comprehending Christian Zionism: Perspectives in Comparison*, ed. Göran Gunner and Robert O. Smith, 85-124 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 93.



believe that there are anywhere from three to eight dispensations, depending on how they interpret Biblical history. However, regardless of how many disputed dispensations there are, dispensationalists believe overwhelmingly that we as a human race are currently living in the last dispensation of the Book of Revelation.<sup>29</sup>

To dispensationalists, the Bible is meant to be interpreted literally, particularly in regards to its prophetic revelations.<sup>30</sup> Dispensationalists view the Old and New Testament prophecies in which Jesus' return is foretold as literal indications as to what must happen in order to catalyze his Second Coming.<sup>31</sup> The Bible, therefore, serves as a text "progressive revelation" wherein people can understand the flow and development of God's ways in the world over time through studying it.<sup>32</sup> The strongest focus of dispensationalists in regards to fulfilling Biblical prophecy is the return of the Jewish people to the Holy Land. Dispensationalists believe that the Jewish people are God's chosen people, and through his solemn covenants with them, God attempted to enact his godly plan for his earthly people.<sup>33</sup> For example, with the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3 God promises to bless Abraham and all his descendants in return for Abraham's unconditional faith in God's power, whereas with the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:16 God establishes David and his descendants as the kings of Israel and promises that the restoration of Israel will occur with the coming of one of David's descendants, the Messiah.<sup>34</sup> However, dispensationalists, like many Christians, believe that the Jewish people failed to follow God's will when they rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah.<sup>35</sup> This rejection of Jesus as the Messiah effectively suspended the prophetic timeline within the Bible, and it is only with the return of the

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<sup>29</sup> Rammy M. Haija, "The Armageddon Lobby: Dispensationalist Christian Zionism and the Shaping of US Policy Towards Israel-Palestine," *Holy Land Studies* 5, no. 1 (2006): 80.

<sup>30</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, 132.

<sup>32</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 21, 96.

<sup>34</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 97.

Jewish people to the Holy Land that the prophetic timeline will resume and Jesus can return.<sup>36</sup> The Christian Church, according to dispensationalists, was created by God during this time of suspended prophecy to help continue God's work on Earth, namely returning the Jewish people to the Holy Land and restoring the prophetic timeline.<sup>37</sup> The Jewish people, therefore become integral figures in fulfilling Biblical prophecy, as their sacred covenants with God signal their status as his chosen people and their return to the Holy Land is necessary in order to catalyze Jesus Christ's return to Earth.

Understanding the theology of dispensationalism is important to understanding the complex relationship between the dispensationalist religious theology and the political elements of the Christian Zionist movement. Dispensationalism is the religious foundation for Christian Zionism, and Christian Zionism gives dispensationalist theology relevance as it serves as the political movement that satisfies the theological timeline dictated in dispensationalist doctrine.<sup>38</sup> Dispensationalism can stand on its own as a religious belief system, as evident in the centuries between the Protestant Reformation and the development of modern Jewish Zionism in which dispensationalists called for the restoration of the Jewish people in the Holy Land. However, Christian Zionism as a political movement provides a necessary contextualization that connects Biblical prophecy with current socio-political situations.<sup>39</sup> To dispensationalists, the mobilization of Jewish people through the Zionist movement was one of God's signs signaling what he expected humanity to accomplish in this dispensation, and Christian Zionism became the political vehicle through which dispensationalists could accomplish this divine mission. Thus, politics became reconstituted as a form of religious practice, allowing dispensationalists to

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<sup>36</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 97.

<sup>38</sup> Haija, "The Armageddon Lobby," 93; Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, 138.

<sup>39</sup> Durbin, "Walking in the Mantle of Esther," 93.

spread their beliefs and accomplish God's will through political activism and action, and Wilson and Truman both exemplify this.<sup>40</sup>

Woodrow Wilson's personal religious beliefs strongly influenced his politics during his tenure as President of the United States. He was brought up in a strong Presbyterian household, and was descended from a long line of scholars and Presbyterian preachers.<sup>41</sup> Wilson's father, a Presbyterian minister, believed in the power of education, raising his children in a pious and bookish home with an emphasis on the learning of theology, moral philosophy, literature, and the sciences.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Wilson became powerfully devoted to religion beginning at a young age, reading the Bible every day and being active in his church.<sup>43</sup> It is this devotion to religion and strong educational background in theology, philosophy, and literature that helped drive Wilson's dedication to the Christian Zionist movement. According to Dr. Cary T. Grayson, Wilson's close friend, political advisor, and personal physician, Wilson's religious convictions directly influenced how he governed as President of the United States. In a statement written the day Wilson died in 1924, Grayson stated that:

Wilson did not parade his religion. He lived it...[He] conceived the Christian Life as a process and development of character in accordance with the teachings of Christ...he understood personal religion as a matter of the heart but tempered by reflection and judgement and fixed purpose...The bulk of Mr. Wilson's Christianity was in practice -- not talk.<sup>44</sup>

Wilson's actions as president and the decisions he made, for both domestic and foreign policy, were affected by his personal religious beliefs, as he saw political action to be a truer form of Christianity than just practicing the religion in a church.

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<sup>40</sup> Durbin, "Walking in the Mantle of Esther," 110.

<sup>41</sup> Lawrence Davidson, "Christian Zionism as a Representation of American Manifest Destiny," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 163; Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 79.

<sup>42</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 79.

<sup>43</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> Cary T. Grayson, "The Religion of Woodrow Wilson," February 3, 1924, 13, 16, 20, <http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/22351>.

As president, Wilson relied on God's power and guidance, as well as his belief in the Bible as the word of God. In a 1918 letter responding to Thomas F. Logan, a constituent expressing fear after progressives and Democrats lost their political seats in the midterm election, Wilson wrote that,

I am of course disturbed by the result of Tuesday's elections, because they create obstacles to the settlement of many difficult questions which throng so on every side, but I have an implicit faith in Divine Providence and I am sure that by one means or another the great thing we have to do will work itself out.<sup>45</sup>

He believed that, despite all that happened, God had a plan for humanity and God would guide him as President of the United States. Wilson likewise saw the Bible as a source of inspiration and manifestation of God's power and guidance. In 1911, while he was the governor of New Jersey and was beginning to set the stage for his campaign for president, Wilson gave a speech in Denver, Colorado to celebrate the tercentenary celebration of the Bible being translated into English in which he connected political progress to the Bible as the word of God. He proclaimed, "Let no man suppose that progress can be divorced from religion, or that there is any other platform for the ministers of reform than the platform written in the utterances of our Lord and Savior."<sup>46</sup> For Wilson, political action was directly tied to religious devotion, and the Bible served as a manual of divine revelation upon which he could base his political policies.

Wilson likewise saw a direct correlation between religious faith and public morality. He perceived history to be a story of progress that leads to the betterment of society.<sup>47</sup> During World War I, one such way Wilson promoted this mentality was through his food rationing program. In his 1917 press release encouraging American citizens to ration their food to send to Europe,

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<sup>45</sup> Woodrow Wilson, Letter to Thomas F. Logan, November 8, 1918, <http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/27605>.

<sup>46</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "The Bible and Progress," Denver, CO, May 7, 1911, 7, <http://frontiers.loc.gov/service/gdc/scd0001/2012/20120129002bi/20120129002bi.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> Cara Lee Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest: Woodrow Wilson, Religion, and the New World Order* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2.

Wilson directly tied this act of public morality with religious actions like sacrifice and devotion, stating:

Our country...is blessed with an abundance of foodstuffs...To provide an adequate supply of food for both our own soldiers on the other side of the seas and for the civil populations and the armies of the Allies is one of our first and foremost obligations...The solution of our food problems, therefore, is dependent upon the individual service of every man, woman and child in the United States...We cannot accomplish our objects in this great way without sacrifice and devotion, and no direction can that sacrifice and devotion be shown more than by each home and public eating place in the country pledging its support to the Food Administration and complying with its requests.<sup>48</sup>

According to Wilson, because of its covenant-like relationship with God and the blessings He regularly bestows upon the nation, America is meant to fulfill its divinely ordained destiny through political action that promotes public morality and social justice.<sup>49</sup>

Like Wilson, Harry S. Truman's personal religious beliefs strongly influenced his politics during his tenure as President of the United States. As a child, Truman was raised in a deeply religious family that based their familial guidelines directly on Biblical scripture.<sup>50</sup> Like Wilson, Truman was educated beginning at an early age, and much of his educational upbringing revolved around his Baptist faith. He regularly recounted how that, by the age of fifteen, he had read the Bible in its entirety twelve times, that he "never cared much for fairy stories or Mother Goose" because the "stories in the Bible...were to [him] about real people, and [he] felt [he] knew some of them better than actual people [he] knew."<sup>51</sup> For Truman, the Bible was a source of strength, inspiration, and historical record.<sup>52</sup> Through his religious upbringing and reverence for the Bible, he formed most of his ideas about the world early on and believed that the stories in the Bible were meant to serve as records of the past and prophetic revelations about the

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<sup>48</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "Food Administration," Press Statement, October 27, 1917, <http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/34084>.

<sup>49</sup> Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 229.

<sup>51</sup> Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York: Berkeley, 1974), 31.

<sup>52</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 234.

future.<sup>53</sup> These religious convictions followed him throughout his life, even when he became President of the United States after Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945. Truman attributed much of his success in life and politics to God's power and will, stating,

Luck always seems to be with me in games of chance and in politics. No one was ever luckier than I've been since becoming the Chief Executive and Commander in Chief. Things have gone so well that I can't understand it -- except to attribute it to God. He guides me, I think.<sup>54</sup>

Truman saw his life as being guided by God's divine will, particularly in regard to his political career as a Missouri State Senator, the Vice President of the United States under Roosevelt, and the President of the United States.

Like Wilson, Truman saw a direct link between religious faith and public morality, and he strongly believed that Christians should live their faith through tangible action based on religious values and scripture.<sup>55</sup> He believed that Exodus 20 (the Ten Commandments) and Matthew 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount), were the best system of philosophy to adhere to as well as the most fundamentally sound moral code for public servants to base their policies on.<sup>56</sup> In his radio address during the 1949 nationwide, interfaith campaign, "Religion in American Life," Truman proclaimed that America must follow its religious convictions as a nation because:

[The] faith that inspires us to work for a world in which life will be more worthwhile -- a world of tolerance, unselfishness, and brotherhood -- a world that lives according to the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount...every problem in the world today could be solved if men would only live by the principles of the ancient prophets and the Sermon on the Mount...Religious faith and religious work must be our reliance as we strive to fulfill our destiny in the world.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 234.

<sup>54</sup> R.H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1980), 37-38.

<sup>55</sup> Merkle, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 160; Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 232.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 234.

<sup>57</sup> Harry Truman, "Radio Address as Part of the Program 'Religion in American Life,'" October 30, 1949, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/radio-address-part-the-program-religion-american-life>.

According to Truman, political decisions should be based on the transcendent moral standards written in Biblical scripture.<sup>58</sup> Just a few months later, in December of 1949 at a public unveiling of the memorial carillon at Arlington National Cemetery, Truman reiterates this link between religion and public morality. He proudly proclaimed, “We have created here a government dedicated to the dignity and the freedom of man. It is a government whose creed is derived from the word of God...As long as this Government remains rooted in the dignity of man and in his kinship with God, freedom will prevail.”<sup>59</sup> For Truman, America’s Christian heritage should be reflected in its politics, serving as the moral standard not only for citizens of the United States but citizens of the world.

Christian Zionism’s history in America reflects this belief held by both Wilson and Truman that America’s Christian heritage and religious values should be displayed in public political action. Moreover, it is an excellent example of how interconnected religion and politics are within America. While the belief that the restoration of the Jewish people to the Holy Land was necessary for the salvation of humanity had existed in America since the Puritans arrived in the seventeenth century, dispensationalism as a theological belief system was officially introduced to America in the 1870s when John Nelson Darby, its creator, visited America just after the Civil War.<sup>60</sup> Throughout the late nineteenth century, Darby visited America multiple times in hopes of sharing his dispensationalist teachings and gaining support for his Biblical theological framework.<sup>61</sup> However, initially, American reception to dispensationalism was negative. Many, particularly those in elite religious circles, saw it as a serious departure from

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<sup>58</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> Harry S. Truman, “Address at the Unveiling of a Memorial Carillon in Arlington National Cemetery,” Arlington, VA, December 21, 1949, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-unveiling-memorial-carillon-arlington-national-cemetery>.

<sup>60</sup> Reuther, “Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Churches,” 183; Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 26.

<sup>61</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 26.

traditional Biblical scholarship and historic interpretations of the Bible.<sup>62</sup> James H. Snowden, a priest and opponent of dispensationalism, voiced some of the issues American priests and religious scholars saw with dispensationalist theology, stating,

[Premillenarianism] violates the principle of historic interpretation by tearing passages out of their context and imposing on them meanings that they do not bear in their original connection...Premillenarians give a literal interpretation to all the Old Testament prophecies of the coming messianic kingdom, though this requires them to believe that the whole world (“all flesh”) shall go up to Jerusalem every week in the millennium...[It] is extremely selective in its treatment of Scripture. It picks out the passages that suit its theory and passes over what does not fit in with it.<sup>63</sup>

Despite these grievances with dispensationalism, it quickly became a prominent theological belief system in America, due in part to the socio-political circumstances surrounding its development in the United States.

Immediately following the Civil War, America’s religious institutions faced a period of conflict, realignment, reorganization, and aimlessness. The Civil War and its aftermath had shaken people’s faith in religion, just as it had shaken people’s faith in America’s democratic system.<sup>64</sup> The rise of urban living, massive influx of immigration from “ethnic” non-Protestant European countries like Italy and Ireland, and the country’s rapid industrialization likewise threatened America’s established evangelical Protestant Christian tradition, as did the introduction of concepts like the theory of evolution, comparative religion, and the higher criticism of the Bible.<sup>65</sup> In short, America’s evangelical Protestant communities were facing a crisis: should they attempt to redefine their belief systems in terms that are more compatible with the modern ways of thinking, or should they continue on with their faith as it’s been traditionally preached and practiced? Liberal evangelical Protestants chose to modernize, affirming the

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<sup>62</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon* 27.

<sup>63</sup> James H. Snowden, "Summary of Objections to Premillenarianism," *Biblical World* 53 (1919): 166

<sup>64</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 30.

<sup>65</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 30.



uniqueness of Jesus and the special nature of the Bible as a source of divine revelation while still allowing for scientific and academic scrutiny.<sup>66</sup>

For conservative evangelical Protestants, however, this modernization of faith stripped the spiritual power of Christ's message. Interpreting the Bible in a novel way to encompass modern issues like scientific inquiry and scholarly criticism to conservative evangelical Protestants rendered the Bible itself useless: if God's word as written in the Bible was incompatible with modern life, then the implication is that God is fallible and capable of making mistakes.<sup>67</sup> The literal interpretation the Bible and its meaning was of the utmost importance to establishing the supremacy of the Bible as God's word, and thus conservative evangelical Protestants saw their conflict with their liberal counterparts as a mission sent to them by God, one in which their task was to battle against the heretics attempting to alter God's mission.<sup>68</sup> To win this battle, mainstream conservative evangelical Protestants formed a trans-denominational coalition, one which included the previously ostracized dispensationalists.<sup>69</sup> Dispensationalists quickly became a dominant force in the leadership of this coalition, because their theology affirmed everything the mainstream conservative evangelical Protestants wished to affirm: the authority of the Bible and its centering in Christ, the absolute necessity of one's personal conversion to Christ, importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church and the individual believer, the justification by faith alone, and the final separation of all people for eternal life or damnation.<sup>70</sup> According to William Bell Riley, a Baptist preacher known as "The Grand Old Man of Fundamentalism," dispensationalism became "the sufficient if not solitary antidote to the present apostasy."<sup>71</sup> As a result, dispensationalist theology, specifically its focus on Biblical

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<sup>66</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon* 31.

<sup>68</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 32.

<sup>71</sup> William Bell Riley, *The Evolution of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1913), 5.

literalism and prophetic interpretation, began to insert itself into the dominant mainstream Christian denominations. This is certainly true for both the Presbyterian faith, of which Woodrow Wilson belonged, and the Baptist faith of Harry S. Truman. Its transition into the dominant mainstream theological belief system was fairly simple, mostly because dispensationalists meshed well with America's established religious and cultural identities, namely America's belief in its own manifest destiny.<sup>72</sup>

The concept of American manifest destiny emerged in the nineteenth century as America began establishing itself as an imperial power, both at home and abroad. John L. O'Sullivan, editor of *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, is often the person credited with coming up with defining the term in his 1839 piece "The great nation of futurity." According to O'Sullivan, "America is destined for better deeds...destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High -- the Sacred and the True."<sup>73</sup> America is "the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement" and it is its destiny as a nation to "establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man -- the immutable truth and beneficence of God" through its imperial endeavors.<sup>74</sup> This concept of American manifest destiny influenced the United States' political and cultural lives, but it also heavily influenced its religious life. America's belief in its own divinely ordained destiny is a major factor why dispensationalism, and later Christian Zionism, became so infused in American evangelical Protestant culture. Christian Zionists support Jewish restoration to the Holy Land almost by any means necessary, using parallel ideas of American patriotism and triumph as the framework with which to justify

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<sup>72</sup> Reuther, "Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches," 184.

<sup>73</sup> John L. O'Sullivan, "The great nation of futurity," *The United States Democratic Review* 6, no. 23 (1839): 427.

<sup>74</sup> O'Sullivan, "The great nation of futurity," 429-430.

America's support of the Jewish homeland.<sup>75</sup> Just as America believed their political destiny was divinely granted, so did they believe their religious destiny was divinely granted. Both Woodrow Wilson and Harry S. Truman believed that America's political manifest destiny was divinely ordained by God, and they regularly used religious rhetoric to express this belief.

Wilson's personal religious beliefs deeply influenced how he viewed America and its national destiny. Even before he was president, Wilson believed that America was divinely blessed by God to be the purveyor of his will on Earth. In 1911 at the aforementioned celebration for the English translation of the Bible in Denver, Wilson stated,

America is not ahead of other nations of the world because she is rich. Nothing makes America great except her thoughts, except her ideals, except her acceptance of those standards of judgement which are written large upon these pages of revelation. America has all along claimed the distinction of setting this example to the civilized world...America was born a Christian nation. America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.<sup>76</sup>

Wilson's belief in America's divinely ordained political destiny was only heightened during World War I. America's success in helping its European allies defeat their enemies was, according to Wilson, indicative of God's special relationship with America. In a press statement declaring a day of prayer in May of 1918, Wilson discussed that God's "blessings on our arms" will bring about a "speedy restoration of an honorable man and lasting peace to the nations of the earth."<sup>77</sup> Similar sentiments are seen in Wilson's press statement in November 1919 proclaiming a day of thanksgiving. Wilson states that:

The Season of the year has again arrived when the people of the United States are accustomed to unite in giving thanks to Almighty God for the blessings which He has conferred upon our country during the twelve months that have passed. A year ago our

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<sup>75</sup> Mae Elise Cannon, "Mischievous Making in Palestine: American Protestant Christian Attitudes toward the Holy Land, 1917-1949," in *Comprehending Christian Zionism: Perspectives in Comparison*, edited by Göran Gunner and Robert O. Smith, 231-255 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 236.

<sup>76</sup> Wilson, "The Bible and Progress," 5, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "Day of Prayer Declared," Press Statement, May 11, 1918, <http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/34288>.

people poured out their hearts in praise and thanksgiving that through divine aid the right was victorious and peace had come to nations which had so courageously struggled in defense of human liberty and justice...These great blessings...should arouse us to a fuller sense of our duty to ourselves and to mankind.<sup>78</sup>

To Wilson, American exceptionalism both prior to and after the war was the result of Providence, the creation of God's design to fulfill God's will.<sup>79</sup> He saw democracy as a form of government that is based on God's order and that reflects a social gospel that must be spread domestically and internationally.<sup>80</sup>

Wilson perceived the end of World War I to be America's opportunity to build its empire, exerting its influence internationally by supporting rebuilding nations and offering spiritual guidance.<sup>81</sup> In his 1920 State of the Union speech, Wilson expresses this, proclaiming,

I found my thought dominated by an immortal sentence of Abraham Lincoln's -- "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us dare to do our duty as we understand it"...I believe that I express the wish and purpose of every thoughtful American when I say that this sentence marks for us in the plainest manner the part we should play alike in the arrangement of our domestic affairs and in our exercise of influence upon the affairs of the world...[t]his is the mission upon which Democracy came into the world...This is the time of all others when Democracy should prove its purity and its spiritual power to prevail. It is surely the manifest destiny of the United States to lead in the attempt to make this spirit prevail.<sup>82</sup>

Not only was America's help necessary for helping the world to move on from the aftermaths of the Great War, but it was preordained according to its God-given political destiny that America and American ideals such as democracy would prevail.

Truman likewise believed the United States had a divinely ordained destiny, to serve as the creator of a free world and the protector of democracy.<sup>83</sup> To Truman, American democracy

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<sup>78</sup> Woodrow Wilson, "Thanksgiving Day Proclaimed," Press Statement, November 5, 1919, <http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/34322>.

<sup>79</sup> Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest*, 1.

<sup>82</sup> Woodrow Wilson, 8th State of the Union Message, December 7, 1920, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/state-of-the-union-address-109/>.

<sup>83</sup> Davidson, "Christian Zionism as a Representation of American Manifest Destiny," 163; Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 161.

was a spiritual force that rested in God and Christian moral principles, and the American creed is directly derived from the word of God.<sup>84</sup> During his address for the aforementioned 1949

“Religion in American Life” campaign, Truman stated that,

The United States has been a deeply religious Nation from its earliest beginnings...Building on this foundation of faith, the United States has grown from a small country in the wilderness to a position of great strength and great responsibility among the family of nations.<sup>85</sup>

This responsibility of the United States is gifted by God, just as God gifted responsibilities and obligations to the Biblical Israelites in his sacred covenants with them.<sup>86</sup> And just like Biblical Israel, America must follow God’s will and mission in order to fulfill their divine destiny.

Truman further expands on the divinely ordained responsibility and destiny of the United States in a speech given during a church cornerstone laying in Washington D.C. in April of 1951:

Considering all the advantages that God has given us as a nation and all the mercies that He has shown to us from our very beginnings, we ought to ask ourselves whether we today are worthy of all that He has done for us. We ought to ask ourselves whether we, as a people, are doing our part; whether we are carrying out our moral obligations. I do not think that anyone can study the history of this Nation of ours -- study it deeply and earnestly -- without becoming convinced that divine providence has played a great part in it. I have the feeling that God has created us and brought us to our present position of power and strength for some great purpose. And up to now we have been shirking it. Now we are assuming it, and now we must carry it through.<sup>87</sup>

Thus, the fulfillment of God’s plan for humanity on Earth is directly tied to America’s God-given political destiny.

Truman additionally called upon the established identification of the United States with Biblical Israel to further support his claims of America’s divinely ordained destiny. In September

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<sup>84</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 241.

<sup>85</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Radio Address as Part of the Program 'Religion in American Life.'"

<sup>86</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 240.

<sup>87</sup> Harry Truman, "Address at the Cornerstone Laying of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church," Washington, D.C., April 3, 1951,

<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/68/address-cornerstone-laying-new-york-avenue-presbyterian-church>.

of 1951 in his address to the Washington Pilgrimage of American Churchmen in Washington D.C., he stated that,

We cannot be satisfied with things as they are. We must always be striving to live up to our beliefs and to make things better in accordance with the divine commandments. The people of Israel, you will remember, did not, because of their covenant with God, have an easier time than other nations. Their standards were higher than those of other nations and the judgement upon them and their shortcomings was more terrible. A religious heritage, such as ours, is not a comfortable thing to live with. It does not mean that we are more virtuous than other people. Instead, it means that we have less excuse for doing the wrong thing -- because we are taught right from wrong.<sup>88</sup>

To Truman, America like Biblical Israel has a special covenant with God, and this relationship meant America was not only blessed by God but the nation also has a moral imperative to follow God's will and spread his teachings.<sup>89</sup> In particular, Truman stressed this moral imperative in regards to America's spreading of democratic values, which he saw as a blessing from God, internationally through its foreign policy. In 1952, at a celebration for the cornerstone laying of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, Truman spoke to this:

Democracy is first and foremost a spiritual force. It is built upon a spiritual basis -- and on a belief in God and an observance of moral principles...In foreign affairs...the churches should hold up the standard and point the way. The only hope of mankind for enduring peace lies in the realm of the spiritual. The teachings of the Christian faith recognize the worth of every human soul before Almighty God...We must try to find ways to carry these spiritual concepts into the field of world relations...we are all our brothers' keepers.<sup>90</sup>

Truman believed that the United States was destined by God to bring world peace because of its democratic values based on its Christian heritage.<sup>91</sup>

For American Christian Zionists, no singular event signaled the time to fulfill their national destiny and God's will like World War I. The United States officially entered the war in

<sup>88</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Address to the Washington Pilgrimage of American Churchmen," Washington D.C., September 28, 1951, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-washington-pilgrimage-american-churchmen>.

<sup>89</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 240.

<sup>90</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Remarks in Alexandria, VA., at the Cornerstone Laying of the Westminster Presbyterian Church," Alexandria, VA, November 23, 1952, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-alexandria-va-the-cornerstone-laying-the-westminster-presbyterian-church>.

<sup>91</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 151.

April of 1917, and Americans saw their entrance as a major turning point in the war. More specifically, however, American Christian Zionists saw the subsequent victories in the Middle East after their entrance to the war as indicative of America's divine political destiny in fulfilling God's will. Only six months after America entered the war, British forces invaded Palestine, which caused the Ottomans to surrender the holy city of Jerusalem to the British.<sup>92</sup> With the Biblical land of milk and honey and the "shining city upon the hill" finally returned to a Christian empire after centuries under control of the Muslims, the goal of restoring the Jewish people to the Holy Land finally seemed achievable.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, with the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in November of 1917, the British Empire officially proclaimed their dedication to creating a Jewish homeland in Palestine, that "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object."<sup>94</sup>

To American Christian Zionists, particularly those in the US government, this declaration was a major step in the right direction. Speaker of the House Champ Clark, in an official statement on Christmas Eve in 1917 just a month or so after the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, stated that,

So far as war operations are concerned, the one thing that pleases most people most is the capture of Jerusalem, "The Holy City." That rejoices the hearts of Jews and Christians. Whatever else results from this bloody and titanic struggle, Jerusalem will never again be dominated by the Turks. After these hundreds of years the dream of Peter the Hermit, Richard Coeur de Lion and their fellow crusaders is an accomplished fact; and good people everywhere rejoice with exceeding great joy.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 109.

<sup>93</sup> Lawrence Davidson, "The Past as Prelude: Zionism and the Betrayal of American Democratic Principles, 1917-1948," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 31, no. 3 (2002): 21.

<sup>94</sup> Arthur Balfour, Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, November 2, 1917, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/balfour.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/balfour.asp).

<sup>95</sup> "Christmas Greetings from Officials; Wilson Looks Forward to Peace; Jerusalem Joy to Speaker Clark: "what is Life without Liberty?" Asks Daniels -- Pan-American Sentiment from Naon -- Selectives' Best Gift to Country is Prompt Response to Questionnaire, Says Crowder." *The Washington Post*, Dec. 24, 1917, 4.

The fall of the Ottoman Empire coinciding with the Balfour Declaration was a sign for American Christian Zionists that their time to restore the Biblical prophetic timeline.<sup>96</sup> With Palestine and Jerusalem finally back in control of a Christian nation and with America proving itself a major global power, there seemed to be nothing stopping America from using its divinely-granted political superiority to restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land. Such was the opinion of many prominent politicians influenced by Christian Zionism, including President Woodrow Wilson.

Specifically in regards to the restoration of the Jewish people to the Holy Land, Wilson saw everything happening at the end of World War I, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire in Holy Land to the Balfour Declaration to America's ability to turn the tide of the war, as a sign that the time for America to fulfill God's divine will had finally come. However, the Holy Land was still under control of European imperial powers, specifically Britain and France, under the mandate system.<sup>97</sup> This prevented the United States from directly helping the Jewish people return to Jerusalem, as allowing the Jewish people to create their own nation-state ran somewhat counter to the British and French mandate system, which essentially was another form of European imperialism.<sup>98</sup> Wilson, dedicated to his mission to, as his close advisor Rabbi Stephen Wise recounted in his autobiography, "help restore the Holy Land to its people..." decided to work with the European powers instead of fight against them.<sup>99</sup>

To Wilson, the most efficient way to ensure the Jewish people would be restored to the Holy Land was to ensure that larger, more powerful nations could not interfere with the affairs of the Jewish state. Wilson recognized that the conflict of World War I was caused, at least in part, by larger empires interfering with the wellbeing of small nations and ethnic groups. When the

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<sup>96</sup> Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon*, 111.

<sup>97</sup> Davidson, "The Past as Prelude," 23.

<sup>98</sup> Davidson, "The Past as Prelude," 23.

<sup>99</sup> Stephen Wise, *Challenging Years* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1949), 186-187.



war began in 1914, Wilson confided in his friend Dr. Greyson that he believed, “patriotism must no longer be a cloak for depredations on smaller nations...that between the nations there must be a solemn league and covenant pledging all to the protection of the just rights of each and every one.”<sup>100</sup> The only way for the Jewish people to successfully be restored to the Holy Land and bring about Christ’s return was for them to be independent and establish themselves as an autonomous nation-state through self-determination. However, Wilson additionally recognized that because of Britain and France’s influence in the region and America’s still-burgeoning influence as a global power, he would not be able to single handedly restore the Jewish people.<sup>101</sup>

Wilson’s compromise to give America the opportunity to fulfill its divinely ordained destiny and help restore the Jews while still allowing European empires to keep their mandates was to create the League of Nations. In his 1919 speech explaining and defending the League of Nations, commonly referred to as the “Pueblo Speech” for it was given in Pueblo, Colorado, Wilson outlined exactly what the League hoped to accomplish in terms of allowing groups like the Jewish people to establish themselves. He stated,

[These treaties] are based upon the purpose to see that every government dealt with in this great settlement is put in the hands of the people and taken out of the hands of coteries and of sovereigns who had no right to rule over the people. It is a people’s treaty, that accomplishes by a great sweep of practical justice the liberation of men who never could have liberated themselves, and the power of the most powerful nations has been devoted not to their aggrandizement but to the liberation of people whom they could have put under their control if they had chosen to do so...That is the fundamental principle of this great settlement.<sup>102</sup>

Powerful nations like Britain, France, and America, thus, could use their influence to not rule smaller nations or ethnic groups, but to help them realize their full potential as governing bodies.

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<sup>100</sup> Grayson, “The Religion of Woodrow Wilson,” 25-26.

<sup>101</sup> Davidson, “The Past as Prelude,” 24.

<sup>102</sup> Woodrow Wilson, “The Pueblo Speech,” Pueblo, CO, September 25, 1919, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/wilson-the-pueblo-speech-speech-text/>.

For the Jewish people, this meant the support from the British under the Balfour Declaration could finally be acted upon through Wilson's creation of the League of Nations. The League was built upon American ideals and democratic values, declares Wilson later in the speech:

[T]he principle that America has always fought for, namely, the equality of self-governing peoples...Let us accept what America has always fought for, and accept it with pride that America showed the way and made the proposal. I do not mean that America made the proposal in this particular instance; I mean that the principle was an American principle, proposed by America.<sup>103</sup>

It was through this intergovernmental organization, since Wilson based the League of Nations' principles upon American ideals and convinced the other world powers to agree to its stipulations and join, that he hoped to help restore the Jewish people to the homeland. The various treaty agreements every nation must adhere to are even referred to as "covenants," furthering Wilson's plan for fulfilling America's divine destiny by tying the relationship between large and small nations a covenantal one.<sup>104</sup>

Unfortunately for Wilson and his Christian Zionist aims, his plan to have America lead the world in the League of Nations and restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land failed. He presented the treaty to the Senate on July 10, 1919 in an address to the chamber; the Foreign Relations Committee then held public hearings from July 31 to September 12.<sup>105</sup> The Senate began to consider the treaty on September 16, but by November 15 they voted to invoke cloture and cut off the debate. The Senate eventually voted on the treaty to join the League of Nations on March 19, 1920, falling short of the necessary two-thirds majority to win by just seven votes; thus, Wilson could not join the organization he himself created to establish America as a global power and help restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, Wilson suffered a stroke in October of 1919, effectively incapacitating him and preventing him from doing many of

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<sup>103</sup> Wilson, "The Pueblo Speech."

<sup>104</sup> Wilson, "The Pueblo Speech."

<sup>105</sup> Davidson, "The Past as Prelude," 23-24.

<sup>106</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 98.

his presidential duties, including continuing to fight for the League of Nations. Dr. Grayson, his friend, close advisor, and personal physician discussed the toll working on the League of Nations took on Wilson in the statement he wrote the day Wilson died in 1924, stating,

As his physician I did all I could to persuade him to spare himself...but the sense of duty was stronger in him than the sense of self-preservation...During the struggle over the League of Nations and while he was a bed-ridden invalid, his fighting instinct remained as strong as ever, and he struggled to have his way, which he was convinced was the right way. He was still the fighting Christian. He believed that God would overrule all things for good.<sup>107</sup>

Wilson, between his illness, his presidential term coming to an end, and the United States' decision to not join the League of Nations, was unable to accomplish his Christian Zionist aims as president.

While America as a nation was dedicated to the Christian Zionist movement during the Wilson Administration, that support faltered once Wilson left office in 1921, gradually decreasing throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>108</sup> This occurred for a number of reasons. First, the political scene after Wilson left office changed dramatically. The three presidents after Wilson, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover, all pursued “unilateral internationalism” foreign policies; they refused to participate in the League of Nations or any other collaborative responsibility and specifically designed their foreign policies to focus on international economic opportunities for the United States.<sup>109</sup> With Wilson out of office, the Christian Zionists had lost their most powerful political supporter and it became difficult to justify America's involvement in helping to restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land when America wasn't involved in international politics or the League of Nations.<sup>110</sup> Second, a new wave of antisemitism occurred in the 1920s due to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the association

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<sup>107</sup> Grayson, “The Religion of Woodrow Wilson,” 27-28.

<sup>108</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 98, 114.

<sup>109</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 98.

<sup>110</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 114.

of Jews with ethnic nationalism movements like the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, and the perpetuation of antisemitic stereotypes in major newspaper publications throughout the United States. This new wave of antisemitism caused the more liberal evangelical Protestants who originally embraced Wilson's Christian Zionist policies and the Jewish Zionist movement to revoke their support.<sup>111</sup> Third, in addition to the new wave of antisemitism, in the 1920s there was a corresponding rise in Christian fundamentalism and Biblical literalism. Since Christian Fundamentalists still viewed the restoration of the Jewish people to the Holy Land as integral to fulfilling Biblical prophecy regardless of any widespread antisemitism, this meant that the only Christians still speaking zealously about establishing a Jewish homeland were increasingly fringe conservative Christians with relatively little political power.<sup>112</sup> These three aspects together contributed to the faltering support of Americans to the Christian Zionist movement.

Just as World War I signaled a major turning point for Christian Zionism, so too was World War II a generation later. The failure of the League of Nations to keep international peace and America proving once again that it was a powerful global entity only fortified the belief American Christian Zionists had of their own national superiority over other nations, particularly Britain and France.<sup>113</sup> With the Holy Land once again in chaos after the war due to the fights in the Middle Eastern theater against fascist Italy, the United States believed that an independent Jewish state would provide some much needed stability in the region by allowing the Jewish people to return to the region gifted to them by God.<sup>114</sup> But perhaps the most compelling reason for the Christian Zionists to once again begin petitioning for the restoration of the Jews was the Holocaust. With the slaughter of six million Jews, it became imperative for the Christian Zionists

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<sup>111</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 114.

<sup>112</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 114.

<sup>113</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 98.

<sup>114</sup> Reuther, "Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches," 184-185.

to help the Jewish people establish their own independent nation so the end-times prophecy in the Book of Revelation could be fulfilled before any more harm came to God's chosen people.<sup>115</sup>

Compared to Wilson, Truman was much more vocal about his religious opinions and beliefs, particularly in regard to his interest in restoring the Jewish people to the Holy Land. In Merle Miller's interviews with President Truman, from which an oral biography was published in 1974, Truman reflected,

One of [my appointments]...was with Rabbi Wise. I saw him late that morning, and I was looking forward to it because I knew he wanted to talk about Palestine, and that is one part of the world that has always interested me, partly because of its Biblical background, of course...it wasn't just the Biblical part about Palestine that interested me. The whole history of that area of the world is just about the most complicated and most interesting of any area anywhere, and I have always made a careful study of it.<sup>116</sup>

Truman was not only religiously interested in subjects dealing with Palestine, the Middle East, and the Holy Land, but he was also incredibly educated in the history and politics of the region as well as Biblical scholarship and study.<sup>117</sup> He believed this combination of religious interest and historical, political, and philosophical education made him an expert.<sup>118</sup> Not only did he believe himself an expert, but he believed himself to be a modern incarnation of Cyrus, the Persian king who freed the Jews from Babylon.<sup>119</sup> In November 1953 on a visit to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, when introduced to the crowd as the man who "helped create the State of Israel," Truman replied: "What do you mean, 'helped to create?'" I am Cyrus."<sup>120</sup> To Truman, he was called by God to restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land through his position as President of the United States.

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<sup>115</sup> Mearsheimer and Walt, *The Israel Lobby*, 107; Reuther, "Christian Zionism and Mainline Western Christian Churches," 185.

<sup>116</sup> Miller, *Plain Speaking*, 30-31, 32.

<sup>117</sup> Davidson, "Christian Zionism as a Representation of American Manifest Destiny," 163.

<sup>118</sup> Davidson, "Christian Zionism as a Representation of American Manifest Destiny," 163.

<sup>119</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 166.

<sup>120</sup> Paul C. Merkley, *American Presidents, Religion, and Israel: The Heirs of Cyrus* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), vii.

Truman, long before he became president, had his mind made up about using his platform as an American politician to help restore the Jewish people to the Holy Land. During his time as a Missouri Senator from 1934 to 1945, Truman was a member of the American Palestine Committee, along with two-thirds of the American Senate.<sup>121</sup> The precursor to the American Christian Palestine Committee, this committee was a political lobby group founded to influence American foreign policy towards the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine.<sup>122</sup> In an address to Congress in 1939, Truman publicly denounced Britain for going back on the promise it made in the Balfour Declaration to help create an independent Jewish state in Palestine. He stated that, “[t]he British government has used its diplomatic umbrella again, this time on Palestine. It has made a scrap of paper out of Lord Balfour’s promise to the Jews. It has just added another to the long list of surrenders to Axis powers.”<sup>123</sup> Additionally, though President Franklin Roosevelt made the decision not to establish an independent Jewish state until after an Allied victory occurred, Truman continued his vocal and outspoken support for Christian Zionism after he became Vice President in 1945.<sup>124</sup>

Regarding his Christian Zionist actions as president, Truman fortunately had the benefit of historical hindsight. Truman saw Wilson as a Cyrus-figure, an inspiration and presidential predecessor in terms of implementing Christian Zionist policies towards restoring the Jewish people to the Holy Land.<sup>125</sup> However, while Truman took inspiration from Wilson’s actions as President of the United States, he recognized that ultimately Wilson failed to achieve his Christian Zionist objective during his presidency.<sup>126</sup> He expressed this sentiment in a speech he gave in June of 1949 at the dedication of the World War Memorial Park in Little Rock, Arkansas:

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<sup>121</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 156.

<sup>122</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 156.

<sup>123</sup> Harry S. Truman, Congressional Record, 76 Cong., 1st sess., 1939, Vol. 84, pt. 13, Appendix, 2231.

<sup>124</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 157.

<sup>125</sup> Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 166.

<sup>126</sup> Merkley, *American Presidents, Religion, and Israel*, viii.

We entered the First World War to restore peace and to preserve human freedom; but when that war was finished, we turned aside from the task we had begun. We turned our backs upon the League of Nations... We ignored the economic problems of the world... We let our domestic affairs fall into the hands of selfish interests. We failed to join with others to take the steps which might have prevented a second world war... This time we are fully aware of the mistakes that were made in the past. We are on guard against the indifference and isolationism which can only lead to the tragedy of war... We have assumed the responsibility which I believe God intended this great Republic to assume.<sup>127</sup>

Thoroughly convinced that Wilson's failure indicated that he was the true American Cyrus, Truman was determined to do everything he could to ensure that he restored the Jewish people to the Holy Land by avoiding Wilson's mistakes.

The plan for partitioning Palestine was passed by the United Nations General Assembly on November 29, 1947 and six months later, on May 14, 1948, Israel's provisional government declared the creation of the State of Israel.<sup>128</sup> That same day, President Truman officially recognized the State of Israel, stating in a press release:

This Government has been informed that a Jewish state has been proclaimed in Palestine, and recognition has been requested by the provisional Government thereof. The United States recognizes the provisional government as the de facto authority of the new State of Israel.<sup>129</sup>

Prior to this statement of recognition, Truman was warned by members of the State Department that the United States should stay neutral.<sup>130</sup> In fact, the State Department had been trying to convince Truman that America should stay as neutral as possible since he became president after Franklin Roosevelt's death in April of 1945. Within the first three weeks of his presidency, Truman was contacted by Secretary of State Edward Stettinius and the Under Secretary of State

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<sup>127</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Address in Little Rock at the Dedication of the World War Memorial Park," Little Rock, AR, June 11, 1949,

<https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/120/address-little-rock-dedication-world-war-memorial-park>.

<sup>128</sup> Cannon, "Mischief Making in Palestine," 233.

<sup>129</sup> Harry S. Truman, "Recognition of Israel," Press Release, May 14, 1948, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/draft-recognition-israel>.

<sup>130</sup> Davidson, "The Past as Prelude," 33.

Joseph Grew, both of whom implored the new president to not take drastic action in Palestine with regards to establishing a Jewish state.<sup>131</sup>

Truman resented that other American government bureaucrats, whom he regularly referred to as the “striped pants boys,” did not seem to recognize the importance of restoring the Jewish people to the Holy Land.<sup>132</sup> To Truman, America aiding in the restoration of the Jewish people encompassed America’s political manifest destiny in bringing about world peace, its obligation as a Christian nation to follow God’s will, and fulfilled Biblical prophecy.<sup>133</sup> While his advisors and other government officials might have claimed to be experts in United States-Palestine foreign policy issues, Truman believed that his knowledge of the Bible and his religious beliefs was more legitimate.<sup>134</sup> In his interviews with Merle Miller and in his own memoir, Truman expressed this frustration. To Miller, while reflecting on a conversation he had with Rabbi Wise about his dedication to establishing a Jewish state, he proclaimed:

[A]s far as I was concerned, the United States would do all that it could to help the Jews set up a homeland. I didn’t tell him that I’d already had a communication from some of the “striped pants” boys warning me...in effect telling me to watch my step, that I didn’t really understand what was going on over there and that I ought to leave it to the experts.<sup>135</sup>

In his own memoir, Truman discusses that he “familiarized [himself] with the history of the question of a Jewish homeland and the position of the British and the Arabs.”<sup>136</sup> He even admitted to reading the “views and attitudes assumed by the ‘striped pants boys’ in the State Department.”<sup>137</sup> But ultimately, his religious convictions proved stronger than the advice and

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<sup>131</sup> Edward Stettinius, Letter to President Harry S. Truman, April 18, 1945, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/edward-stettinius-harry-s-truman>; Joseph Grew, Memorandum to President Harry S. Truman, May 1, 1945, 2, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/research-files/joseph-grew-harry-s-truman?documentid=NA&pagenumber=2>.

<sup>132</sup> Merkle, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, 167.

<sup>133</sup> Smith, *Religion in the Oval Office*, 152.

<sup>134</sup> Davidson, “The Past as Prelude,” 33.

<sup>135</sup> Miller, *Plain Speaking*, 33.

<sup>136</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs* (Garden City, NY: Double Day, 1955-1956), vol. I, 84.

<sup>137</sup> Truman, *Memoirs*, 1:84.



expertise from the State Department and other officials. Truman genuinely believed that restoring the Jewish people to the Holy Land was the crusade he was destined to lead as President of the United States, and he was willing to ignore the advice of his advisors and other government officials in order to make it happen.

For both Woodrow Wilson and Harry S. Truman, their Christian faith and belief in Christian Zionism informed their understanding of politics and America's role as a global power in the aftermath of international conflict. They saw America as the nation manifestly destined to lead the world into peace and prosperity after the chaos of the two World Wars, and it was their duty as the most powerful men in the United States to help make that happen. However, the historical contexts in which Wilson and Truman found themselves during their respective tenures as President of the United States greatly affected their ability to achieve their goals. For Wilson in the aftermath of the "Great War," the first major global conflict on a massive scale, he thought the best way for America to lead the world into peace and prosperity would be through the League of Nations. With the European colonial powers still a global force with strongholds in the Middle East, Wilson recognized that the only way for America to effectively help the Jewish people return to the Holy Land would be through its participation in an international organization of his own creation. Unfortunately for Wilson, he overestimated his own government's desire to become involved in international affairs and its desire to listen to a president nearing the end of his second term. Moreover, Wilson's own failing health at the end of his presidency prevented him from advocating and lobbying more heavily for the League of Nations, and when he left office the American government reverted to its pre-war self-isolationist tendencies.

For Truman, the socio-political circumstances after World War II were in his favor, thus allowing him to achieve his Christian Zionist goals as President of the United States. The

aftermath of World War II saw the world in an incredibly different place than at the end of World War I, one in which European colonial powers were effectively disbanded and the mass genocide of Holocaust proved the necessity of a secure homeland for the Jewish people. Moreover, with the benefit of historical hindsight, Truman could follow the example of Wilson's precedent while altering his behavior to avoid making the same mistakes Wilson made as president. Truman saw the difficulty Wilson had with getting the entirety of the American government to support his desire to help the Jewish people, so he decided to take matters into his own hands without asking for support in the first place. Truman believed that he became president through the grace of God and to second-guess his position of power by referring to advisors, cabinet members, the Senate, or the State Department is to second-guess God's will.

Woodrow Wilson and Harry S. Truman were able to use their position as President of the United States to perpetuate their Christian Zionist agenda, but they were by no means the only ones in Washington D.C., or the entire nation for that matter, who believed America's political destiny was tied to the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Nor has such a connection between American politics and Biblical prophecy ceased to exist since they left office. Even today, in seemingly far less dire circumstances than helping to rebuild the world after a massive global conflict, this connection of American politics to Biblical destiny remains. Invocations of religious rhetoric to establish, justify, and defend America's national political destiny are used with some regularity, as evidenced by the propensity of American evangelicals to refer to President Trump as King Cyrus. And even today, such intertwining of religion and politics is not exclusive to a small, fringe group of Christian conservatives. According to the Pew Research Center, in the 2020 presidential election 78% of white evangelical Protestants, who make up nearly 25% of the vote nationwide, voted for President Trump and continue to elevate him to the

status of a Biblical ruler.<sup>138</sup> There is a sustained connection between American politics and Biblical prophecy, and such a connection continues to influence American life even today.

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<sup>138</sup> Gregory A. Smith, "White Christians continue to favor Trump over Biden, but support has slipped," *Pew Research Center*, Oct. 13, 2020, accessed Nov. 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/13/white-christians-continue-to-favor-trump-over-biden-but-support-has-slipped/>.

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