

Book Review

Stephen Spector.

Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism
Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2009. 338 pp. \$29.95
ISBN-13: 978-0-19-536802-4.

Reviewed by, Richard Flashman (M.Div, D.Min)
Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Talbot School of Theology,
& Feinberg Center for Messianic Jewish Studies



Stephen Spector is a professor of English at Stony Brook University. In addition to *Evangelicals and Israel* (2008) he is the author of *Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews* (2005) and most recently *May I Quote You On That?: A Guide to Grammar and Usage* (2015). Although Jewish, Spector is no stranger to the New Testament or Christianity as he has spent his career studying and teaching both. Spector's nuanced treatment of the book's topic provides a significant witness to his understanding of the New Testament and conservative Christian beliefs. In addition, he seems to have invested a great deal of time and energy interacting with both leaders and members of evangelical and Christian Zionist movements for a sustained period of time across the opinion spectrum. His subsequent realization of the complexity of motivations surrounding evangelical support for Israel is further evidence of the author's intellectual honesty and competency for writing this comprehensive account of evangelical support for the Jewish people and the nation of Israel.

Spector comes at this issue from a secular Jewish perspective. His interest is academic and reflects a genuine desire to help the Jewish community in America understand the nuance and complexities of evangelical support. In doing this he conveys an insider's understanding

of Jewish sensibilities on the topic and a certain Jewish bemusement over exuberant evangelical expressions of worship and friendship.

Spector's book is an extensive and thoughtful search for the motivation behind, what is to Spector, the surprising American evangelical support for the state of Israel and its warm feelings for the Jewish people. He points out that there is great suspicion in the Jewish community towards evangelicals and their support for Israel. It is hard for them to get past their deep political differences on domestic issues; their fear of the loss of acceptance and opportunity that a more Christianized society might bring; and for many Jews, the belief that down deep evangelical Christians, in the end, expect Jewish people to convert or die based on popular Christian eschatological expectations (viii). This is why when Jewish people are asked to rate their feelings "temperature" toward evangelicals from 0°– 100°, they average in at a very brisk 24 degrees fahrenheit.

But the opposite is true of evangelicals. Their average feelings "temperature" toward Jewish people comes in at a very comfortable 68° with 75% of evangelicals expressing favorable or very favorable attitudes towards the Jewish people. These feelings have only grown stronger over the last forty years (viii). Yet, Jewish people see evangelicals as second only to Muslims in their anti-Semitism (viii).

What is one to make of this unrequited love? Spector spends much of his book trying to get

to the bottom of this disconnect. In the process he examines Christian Zionism. He does this by trying to explain and define Christian Zionism through his often humorous (from a Jewish perspective) personal experience of it at their gatherings. He introduces some of the major Christian Zionist groups and leaders and attempts to get a handle on their core beliefs. These core beliefs include the restoration of national Israel, aversions to replacement theology, and a view of the end-times which sees a great time of suffering for Israel and the world, followed by the return of Jesus to rescue Israel and establish his 1000 year reign from Jerusalem over the whole earth. He then goes into the particulars, identifying and describing the variety and complexity of motivations surrounding Christian Zionism. These include the promise of blessing in the Abrahamic Covenant for all who bless the Jewish people; Israel as God's prophetic clock and proof of his faithfulness to his word; the warning of God's judgment (curses) on those who seek to oppose or harm the Jewish people; genuine love and gratitude toward Biblical Jewish faith as the root and foundation of their own faith; deep remorse over past so-called Christian anti-Semitism; and a genuine appreciation for a brave frontline ally (which acts as a bulwark) in the war against radical Islamic terrorism.

Spector then attempts to educate his non-evangelical reader on the historical theology of evangelicalism which helps Spector and the reader to understand the significant diversity of thought, paths to faith, social and political convictions, and beliefs about the relationship between the church, Israel, and the Jewish people.

Spector then devotes two chapters to unpacking the Christian Zionist perceptions and relationship to the Arab and Muslim

world. Spector points to a strong belief among Christian Zionists that trading land for peace with the Palestinian Arabs will never work, that the Arab Muslims are implacable enemies of the Jewish people and will not rest until the Jewish state ceases to exist. Democracy is not the answer for the Palestinians because they will just vote in hate groups like Hamas as they did in 2006. For Christian Zionists, it is all part of the greater war with radical Islam. Once the "Saturday people" are defeated they will be coming for the "Sunday people." For many Christian Zionists, the conflict with radical Islam is an existential threat to their freedom and security and constitutes nothing less than a new (Third?) World War (69). Christian Zionists are thus convinced that radical Islam cannot be appeased, and rather, must be defeated. For their part, many Arab Muslims with the opposite and opposing perspective feel the same way toward Israel and the decadent Christian west.

In chapter five Spector delves into the theological roots of the antipathy between Christian Zionists and Islam. For many this is a clash between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Allah. Spector points out that evangelicals have a very low view of Islam (82). To them, according to the Koran, Islam is not a religion of peace. It has never gone through a reformation and thus the only true expression of Islam is its fundamental version (88).

Spector then goes into the history of the conflict between Christianity and Islam, including their many significant theological differences and their deep seated animosity toward each other. Spector brings out that both Christian Zionists and many Muslims have a sort of mirror image eschatology, in which a world in conflict and chaos is brought to the brink of destruction only to be rescued by each faith's version of a Savior. In fact, both sides

accuse each other of trying to advance their eschatological agendas in precisely the same ways (109).

Having described Christian Zionist positions in great detail Spector examines the criticism of the movement which he says comes down to four principle charges:

1. They want Jews to return to Israel in order to speed up their deaths, mass conversion, and the return of Jesus to set up his millennial kingdom.
2. Evangelicals just want to convert Jews.
3. Christian Zionism is a distortion of true Christianity which seeks justice for all the oppressed (in this case, the Palestinians).
4. "Evangelical Zionists are allied with right-wing of Israeli politicians in opposing the exchange of land for peace," which according to many on the center-left "poses a greater danger to the Jewish state than terrorism does" (111).

Spector examines each of these charges in detail and gives the defenders of Christian Zionism an opportunity to refute them. He then spends his seventh chapter looking into the fourth charge, tracing the alliance of Christian Zionists to the political right in Israel. What the Israeli right have come to recognize as a key alliance, the left in both Israel and the U.S. have come to distrust and view as dangerous (148).

In chapter eight Spector takes on the charge that evangelical support for Israel is grounded in tragic, dispensational end-time scenarios for the Jewish people. He shows that while such a scenario exists, it is by and large not the great

evangelical motivation for supporting Israel and most Jewish leaders are not bothered by it. Rather they appreciate evangelical support whatever the motivation. Spector cites the common joke told in mostly Jewish circles: If Messiah comes and says "Hello, nice to see you again," Jews will need to repent. If he says, "Nice to meet you" then it will be the Christians who will have to apologize to the Jews. For most Jewish leaders, Christian support trumps even some of the strange (in their eyes) reasons for that support. Many Christian leaders concede that the state of Israel will lead to the Second Coming of the Messiah Jesus, but this is not the prime motivation for their support for Israel, and warn detractors not to confuse this belief for a motive (179).

In Spector's ninth chapter he seeks to get to the bottom of the evangelical motivation for supporting Israel. In particular: Do evangelicals, at least in significant part, support Israel to hasten the Second Coming of the Messiah Jesus and its troubling scenario, from the Jewish point of view, of convert or die? In the end, says Spector, the answer to their question cannot be fully discerned because there are so many and varied motivations at work. Yet Spector asserts that millions of Christians believe that through Israel's rebirth in 1948, the prophetic clock has resumed its ticking, and Christian support for the Jewish state, in all its various forms, can be used of God to hasten Jesus' return (200).

The remainder of Spector's book has to do with President George W. Bush and the events, politics, and policies of his administration vis-à-vis the Jewish state, terrorism, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict.

Interestingly, Spector ends his volume with an end-time scenario quote from no lesser light than Hal Lindsey of *Late Great Planet Earth* fame. He quotes Lindsey declaring that

soon “God will liberate his people Israel and bring a remnant to true faith in His Messiah” (253). A re-statement of the very same painful eschatological scenario that so many Jews suspect motivates evangelical support for Israel.

Spector’s purpose for writing *Evangelicals and Israel* seems to be driven by a genuine desire to understand the phenomena of conservative Christian (evangelical) support for the state of Israel and its warm feelings toward the Jewish people. As he makes clear in the preface, many Jewish people are skeptical of evangelicals and their motives for such support. Historically, the Jewish experience with conservative Christianity has not been a good one. Most of the anti-Semitism, persecution, pogroms, inquisition, and atrocities perpetuated against European Jewry has come from the right wing precincts of European society often instigated by so called Christians. Jews have a right to be concerned about right of center nationalistic movements which are often driven by religious (conservative Christian) interests. Jewish memories are long and hard to shake.

The bottom line is that Jewish people do not trust conservative Christians and their motives. One gets the sense that Spector himself does not know if this is justified or not when it comes to evangelical support for Israel, and genuinely wants to discover their motivations and report his findings. That being said, there does seem to be a part of Spector that wants to debunk the half truths, stereotypes, simplistic analysis, and myths associated with the topic. He is careful to dig deep and not settle for superficial answers. This rigorous search for the truth gives the reader a sense that Spector thinks the high level of Jewish mistrust for evangelical support is not entirely called for. One senses he would like to see a warming of attitudes toward evangelicals especially from the American Jewish side. (148)

In the end, Spector seems to sympathize with those who say “So what?” (158-161) So what if some Christians are motivated by distasteful (to Jewish sensibilities) eschatological expectations? Israel and the Jewish people need friends. There are worse motivations than sincerely held faith convictions about how history is going to unfold. As long as the support and warmth come without strings attached, who cares why it comes? (160)

So, is Spector successful in reducing Jewish suspicions of evangelical support for Israel and warm feelings toward the Jewish people? To some degree, it seems he is. Just by demonstrating how complex and varied the issue really is, a fair-minded Jewish person would have to concede that there are a number of evangelical motivations that are quite inoffensive to them. These would include Christian recognition of God’s covenant love for and faithfulness to Israel, based on the Abrahamic promises, as well as the Christian desire to reflect that same covenant love and faithfulness in their own lives. In other words, these Christians want to get on what they perceive to be the side of God. (188)

That being said, one would have to imagine many readers being unpersuaded by Spector’s in- depth analysis because no final definitive answer to evangelical motivation emerges. In addition, at least some of the motivations Spector does uncover would reinforce some negative Jewish narratives (e.g. the evangelical desire to see Jewish people believe in Jesus as their Messiah; the dispensational end times belief that Israel will go through a very difficult time before they are rescued by their Messiah, etc.).

Spector’s strengths are as an investigator. He digs down deep to understand the motivations, positions, and practices he observes using

a wide variety of means and sources. He is always looking to get at the facts and opposing positions and ideas.

Spector makes a valuable contribution to the topic. He provides a variety of perspectives - Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and secular. He then goes inside these groups to discern the variety of opinions and sub-groups that exist, and then to hear what people in these various groups are communicating to their most ardent and committed supporters.

Spector shows that even within particular sub-groups of a movement there are significant differences (e.g. different beliefs and points of emphasis that exist among evangelical dispensationalists). At the very least, the careful reader should come to appreciate the nuances and complexities of the topic.

On the other hand, Spector never fully answers the question about the motivation of the majority of Christian Zionists. In particular, what percentage support Israel in order to hasten a painful dispensationalist end times scenario? Spector cannot say, mostly because to do so scientifically is nearly impossible (188). But since dispensationalists compose only 2.5% of the American adult population he speculates that the number cannot be that high (188).

In addition, Spector does not examine the Jewish stereotype of dispensational pre-millennialism except for a brief rebuttal. It would have been helpful to have challenged the Jewish understanding of "convert or die." Without question, no lover of Israel or the Jewish people wants them to suffer or die. While Spector does quote a few Christians on the topic, it is mostly in passing. Dispensational pre-millennialists mainly report their understanding of what they read in Scripture. It may be true that what they read and report is unpleasant for just about everybody (not just the Jewish people), but that

does not mean they want that unpleasantness to occur. The suffering of any person at any time is a great tragedy to most Christians. But that does not mean they can ignore it either. That would be decidedly unloving. Christians believe they have received both good news and bad news from God. To withhold either of those messages would be the most unloving, uncaring thing they could do. It would be indifference of a diabolical kind. It would have been helpful if Spector could have shared this Christian perspective with his Jewish readers.

Spector's book is a great lesson in cross-cultural understanding. It issues a cautionary note to anyone tempted to stereotype or generalize about the thinking, beliefs, and motivations of another group. Would that all who consider themselves to be fair-minded, take the time and care to truly understand the actions and practices of others as Spector has done with the Christian Zionist movement. I know that this reviewer plans to apply that lesson to his work going forward.

Overall, I would recommend the first nine chapters of this book to anyone interested in the topic. I do not think chapters ten and eleven on Christian Zionist influence on the Bush administration policies are worth the read. Their content is dated and easily extracted from other more expert sources.

But the first nine chapters are unique in their insight into the topic, giving the reader, especially the Jewish reader, a balanced, perspective-broadening experience, which they might find difficult to get elsewhere on the topic of Christian Zionism.

