

HAPPY BIRTHDAY ISRAEL

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

"Then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever."

—Jeremiah 7:7

On May 14, 2008, God's nation Israel, in its modern incarnation, turned sixty years old. I want to wish the Jewish state, "Happy Birthday," as do most of you. It has been a glorious beginning with the founding and development of the nation until around the 1980s when things have seemed to regress since then. At age sixty, Israel appears to be on the precipice with multiplied dangers all around her.

If one looks at her circumstances merely from a secular geopolitical perspective, then there really is no basis for hope in the long run. The Muslim world appears to be growing stronger every day and with their dogged determination to cast Israel into the sea, it appears that eventually they will succeed. The only bright spot for Israel is the fact that she has been in similar situations in the past and has always managed to survive. Of course, Israel has come this far in history because of God's care and guidance on her behalf and, based upon the Bible, the future holds the same hope. God has often worked in history to use an individual as the means for Israel's deliverance. A famous illustration is seen in Esther. But God has also used Gentiles. Cyrus is said by Isaiah to have been God's servant to bring a remnant back to the land after the Babylonian captivity (Isa. 44:28).

On Israel's birthday, as we look back on the founding of the nation and reflect, we see that God used key Gentiles to help establish the modern state of Israel. President Harry S. Truman (1884–1972) appears to have been a modern Cyrus who played a pivotal role in the birth of Israel sixty years ago.

HARRY TRUMAN'S CHRISTIANITY

Truman grew up in Missouri in a devout Christian home. When Harry was born his parents were attending a Southern Baptist church that both sets of grandparents help establish in Grandview. "His father, John Anderson Truman was also a strong Baptist. Both his father and mother, Martha, raised him in the conventional Baptist tradition."¹ However, when Harry was six they moved to Independence and they attended the First Presbyterian church at Lexington and Pleasant every Sunday until Harry was 16. When Harry turned 18 and moved to Kansas City, he joined the Baptist church by baptism and remained a Southern Baptist the rest of his life. Truman said, "I'm a Baptist because I think that sect gives the common man the shortest and most direct approach to God."²

While growing up, Truman read the Bible through four times by the age of 14. "From Sunday School and his own reading of the Bible, he knew many Biblical passages by heart and could quote many Bible verses at random."³ Young Harry was an avid reader and remained so throughout his entire life. The Truman family owned a set of *Great Men and Famous Women*, edited by Charles Francis Horne. "According to Truman's daughter, Margaret, the book Truman preferred most after Horne's biographies was the Bible. There is even an indication that Truman considered entering the ministry for a time."⁴ Every indication reveals that Harry and his sister Mary were very active in the church throughout their late teens and early 20s.

What about Truman's Christian beliefs? "Truman had little interest in theological issues, although he had an almost fundamentalist reverence for the Bible."⁵ Blending Truman's great interest in history and the Bible, he once stated the following about the United States:

Divine Providence has played a great part in our history. I have the feeling that God has created us and brought us to our present position of power and strength for some great purpose.

It is not given to us to know fully what that purpose is, but I think we may be sure of one thing, and that is that our country is intended to do all it can, in cooperating with other nations to help create peace and preserve peace in the world. It is given to defend the spiritual values—the moral code—against the vast forces of evil that seek to destroy them.⁶

"While premillennial eschatology dominated the Southern Baptist denomination, the church into which Truman was born and to which he returned when he was eighteen," observes Saddington, "Truman never expressed his acceptance of premillennialism. It is even doubtful that he ever adequately understood it."⁷ Truman's Christian focus was on the ethics of everyday living and tended to shy away from theological systems. Truman's Christian Zionism was a combination of his attraction to the people of the Bible (the Jews) that grew out of his familiarity of biblical details with humanitarian concern for a persecuted people. "The stories of the Bible," said Truman, "were to me stories about real people, and I felt I knew some of them better than *actual* people I knew."⁸ His Christian Zionist beliefs were well developed and deeply rooted long before he became President of the United States. Presidential Counsel Clark Clifford described Truman's

own reading of ancient history and the Bible made him a supporter of the idea of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, even when others who were sympathetic to the plight of the Jews were talking of sending them to places like Brazil. He did not need to be convinced by Zionists. . . . All in all, he believed that the surviving Jews deserved some place that was historically their own. I remember him talking once about the problem of repatriating displaced persons. "Every one else who's been dragged away from his country has someplace to get back to," he said. "But the Jews have no place to go."⁹

RECOGNITION OF ISRAEL

Truman's Christian Zionism came into play during two of the greatest decisions that he would have to make during his Presidency: First, how should the U. S. vote on the partition of Israel, which would result in the creation of the new Jewish state, during the United Nations vote in late November of 1947? Second, should the U. S. diplomatically recognize the newly formed nation when David Ben-Gurion declared the birth of Israel on May 14, 1948?

On both issues, virtually all of Truman's personal advisors, the State Department and the military establishment were opposed to him. Saddington notes:

Truman's most trusted foreign policy advisers, almost to a man, were dead-set against the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The president

faced the formidable front of General Marshall, Under Secretary of State Robert Lovett, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, Policy Planning Staff's George Kennan, State Department Counsel Charles Bohlen, and Marshall's successor as secretary, Dean Acheson. Loy Henderson, director of NEA, who arrived at the State Department just three days after FDR's death, also opposed the Zionist aims. William Yale, also at the State Department, said that the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine would be "a major blunder in statesmanship." When Secretary Forrestal reminded the president of the critical need for Saudi Arabian oil in the event of war, Truman said he would handle the situation in light of justice, not oil.¹⁰

Truman dealt with both issues by applying his "the buck stops here" approach with tough, responsible decisions. "Truman instructed the American delegate at the U. N., Herschel Johnson, to announce U. S.'s endorsement of the UNSCOP partition plan on 11 October 1947."¹¹ Then, seventeen minutes after David Ben-Gurion's declaration of the new state of Israel, a cable was sent to Israel and a message went to the press from the White House announcing the following:

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.¹²

"As a student of the Bible," surmises Clark Clifford, "he believed in the historic justification for a Jewish homeland, and it was a conviction with him that the Balfour Declaration of 1917 constituted a solemn promise that fulfilled the age-old hope and dream of the Jewish people."¹³ David Ice concludes that, "the most important reason, was Truman's strong Protestant upbringing."¹⁴

CONCLUSION

After his presidency, longtime Jewish friend Eddie Jacobson introduced Truman to a group of professors by saying, "This is the man who helped create the state of Israel," but Truman corrected him: "What do you mean 'helped to create'? I am Cyrus. I am Cyrus."¹⁵ Perhaps this is the main reason why God's providence placed him into the presidency when He did. Many who have sifted through the data are confident that had Franklin Roosevelt remained President, he would *not* have made the same decisions that were handed down by Truman.¹⁶ It appears to my evangelical mind that God raised-up Truman and put him in the White House for the purpose of providing a key human agent that He used, as He did Cyrus centuries ago, to restore Israel to her land. Who will He use in the future? Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ James A. Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics: A History of Christian Zionism in the Anglo-American Experience, 1800-1948," PhD Dissertation at Bowling Green State University, 1996, p. 362.

² Paul C. Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism: 1891-1948* (London, Frank Cass, 1998), p. 160.

³ Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," p. 363.

⁴ Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," p. 363.

⁵ Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, p. 161.

⁶ Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, pp. 162–63.

⁷ Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," p. 364.

⁸ Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, p. 159.

⁹ Cited in Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," pp. 372–73.

¹⁰ Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," p. 436.

¹¹ Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," p. 448.

¹² Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, p. 190.

¹³ Cited in Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," p. 464.

¹⁴ David Ice, "Harry S. Truman and America's Recognition of Israel in 1948," (Unpublished paper presented to the History Department at Liberty University, December 2007), p. 7.

¹⁵ Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, p. 191.

¹⁶ See Saddington, "Prophecy and Politics," pp. 347–54; Merkley, *Politics of Christian Zionism*, pp. 149–54; John Goodall Snetsinger, "Truman and The Creation of Israel," (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1969); Earl Dean Huff, "Zionist Influences Upon U. S. Foreign Policy: A Study of American Policy Toward The Middle East From The Time of The Struggle For Israel to The Sinai Conflict," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Idaho, 1971).