

WILLIAM BLACKSTONE AND AMERICAN CHRISTIAN ZIONISM
Tom's Perspectives
by Thomas Ice

Benjamin Netanyahu in his book, *A Place Among The nations: Israel and the World*, recognizes American William Eugene Blackstone (1841–1935) as one of the most outstanding examples of a Christian Zionist. Netanyahu notes that such Christian activity antedates the modern Zionist movement by at least half a century.¹ (Actually, Christian Zionism dates back to the late 1500s in England.)² Early Christian Zionists were known as restorationists, since they desired a restoration of the Jews to Israel. The name of William Blackstone is highly esteemed by Jewish Zionist since the modern state of Israel named a forest after Blackstone in recognition of his early attempts to influence others to reconstitute the nation of Israel.

BLACKSTONE'S BEGINNINGS

Blackstone was born in Adams, New York in 1841 and reared in a pious Methodist home, where he became a Christian at age 11.³ When he married he moved to Oak Park, Illinois in the Chicago area and became a very successful businessman as a real estate magnate. "In 1878, he attended the Niagara Conference, dedicated to the Jews' return to Palestine, and merged a diehard restorationist."⁴ Even though he was Methodist, he had become motivated by his dispensational view of Bible prophecy to work for the reestablishment of national Israel. "Blackstone became a close associate of premillennialist leaders such as D. L. Moody, James H. Brookes, and Horatio Spafford, who eventually founded the American colony in Jerusalem."⁵

Blackstone, a tireless, self-taught student of Bible and theology, continued to develop his interest in what the Bible teaches about Israel. Like many Christians with similar interests, this lead to attempts to evangelize Jewish people with the gospel. He founded in 1887 the Chicago Hebrew Mission for the evangelization of the Jews, which is still active. Blackstone combined his pro-Zionist stance with continual efforts throughout his life to win Jewish people to Christ.

Blackstone wrote the best-selling book *Jesus Is Coming* in 1908, which sold over a million copies in three editions and was "translated into thirty-six languages."⁶ "Probably no dispensational Bible teacher of his time had a larger popular audience."⁷ Blackstone was the Hal Lindsey of his day.

BLACKSTONE'S CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Even though widely known throughout evangelicalism for a number of things, Blackstone is best known for his tireless work on behalf of reestablishing the Jewish nation in Israel. Clearly Blackstone was the leading Christian Zionist of his day. Timothy Weber says of Blackstone and dispensationalism the following:

Most dispensationalists were satisfied to be mere observers of the Zionist movement. They watched and analyzed it. They spoke out in favor of it. But seldom did they become politically involved to promote its goals. There is one exception to the general pattern, however, in the person of William E. Blackstone, one of the most popular dispensational writers of his time.⁸

Concerning the restoration of the Jews to their homeland, Blackstone said in his book: "But, perhaps, you say: 'I don't believe the Israelites are to be restored to Canaan,

and Jerusalem rebuilt.' Dear reader! have you read the declarations of God's word about it? Surely nothing is more plainly stated in the Scriptures."⁹ He then proceeds to list almost 14 pages of virtually nothing but Scriptural citations supporting his belief. Then he concludes: "We might fill a book with comments upon how Israel shall be restored, but all we have desired to do was to show that it is an incontrovertible fact of prophecy, and that it is intimately connected with our Lord's appearing, and this we trust will have satisfactorily accomplished."¹⁰

By 1891, Blackstone the activist had obtained the signatures of 413 prominent Americans and sent this document to President Benjamin Harrison advocating the resettlement of persecuted Jews in Russia to a new homeland in what was then called Palestine.¹¹ Part of the petition read as follows:

Why not give Palestine back to them again? According to God's distribution of nations it is their home—an inalienable possession from which they were expelled by force. Under their cultivation it was a remarkably fruitful land, sustaining millions of Israelites, who industriously tilled its hillsides and valleys. They were agriculturists and producers as well as a nation of great commercial importance—the center of civilization and religion. . . .

We believe this is an appropriate time for all nations, and especially the Christian nations of Europe, to show kindness to Israel. A million of exiles, by their terrible suffering are piteously appealing to our sympathy, justice, and humanity. Let us now restore to them the land of which they were so cruelly despoiled by our Roman ancestors.¹²

"Some '2,000,000' Russian Jews, Blackstone explained, were 'piteously appealing to our sympathy, justice, and humanity,' and desperate for shelter in Palestine."¹³ Carl Ehle tells us about the signers as follows:

Among the 413 signers listed by their cities—Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington—were the opinion makers of the day: the editors and/or publishers of the leading newspapers and religious periodicals (at least ninety-three newspapers in all), the mayors of Chicago, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, as well as other officials, leading churchmen and rabbis, outstanding businessmen, and in Washington, Speaker of the House of Representatives, T. B. Reed, Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Robert R. Hitt, and William McKinley, of Ohio, who later became president.¹⁴

"Though the memorial got plenty of press coverage, President Harrison and Secretary Blaine virtually ignored the document, and the little diplomatic notice it received faded quickly,"¹⁵ notes Webber. Even though it accomplished little politically, Blackstone's petition was said to have had a galvanizing impact upon Americans as a whole. The petition received widespread coverage in newspapers and generated a great amount of discussion and acceptance. It sparked great interest among the Jews as a whole.¹⁶ Blackstone wanted the president to call an international conference of leaders, primarily European, to use their influence to establish the new Jewish state. Blackstone reasoned: "Not . . . since the days of Cyrus, King of Persia, has there been

offered to any mortal such a privileged opportunity to further the purposes of God concerning His ancient people."¹⁷

In 1916 Blackstone made a similar appeal to President Woodrow Wilson, a Presbyterian minister's son who became a Christian Zionist, which influenced his acceptance of the Balfour Declaration of 1917.¹⁸ The later resolution was virtually the same as the previous one. Oren concludes, "As often happened in America's Middle Eastern experience, one man's faith proved to be another's fantasy, while policy was determined by power."¹⁹

JEWISH RELATIONSHIPS

Even though Blackstone worked tirelessly as a Christian Zionist, he never lost his zeal for evangelization of the Jews. "In 1890, he organized and chaired the first conference between Christians and Jews in Chicago."²⁰ In our own day these are somewhat common, but in Blackstone's day such a gathering was unheard of. Blackstone used the occasion to promote the restoration of the Jews to Israel and also included some reasons why Jesus was the Messiah. Jewish "Zionists liked and trusted Blackstone"²¹ even though he often attempted to evangelize them. Typical of his evangelistic efforts throughout his life are seen at "a 1918 Zionist mass meeting in Los Angeles, Blackstone had the chutzpah to give an altar call"²² in which he invited his Jewish audience of hundreds to come forward and accept Jesus as their Messiah. In spite of such efforts, he was still very much loved in the Jewish community.

Blackstone wanted to leave an evangelistic legacy for the Jewish people so that he could have a part in their salvation after the rapture. He produced and distributed material that would explain to the Jews how to get saved after the rapture.²³ At one point, Blackstone even had hundreds of Hebrew New Testaments printed up and taken to Petra and stored there so that the Jewish remnant would know how to get saved during the tribulation.

CONCLUSION

It is not surprising to learn that a "1918 Zionist Conference in Philadelphia acclaimed Blackstone a 'Father of Zionism,' and in 1956, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of Blackstone's memorial to President Harrison, the citizens of the state of Israel dedicated a forest in his honor."²⁴ Blackstone spent the rest of his life working for his beloved cause until his death in 1935. While he was thrilled with the developments of the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and the British Mandate after World War I, he died disappointed that Israel had not yet become a nation. However, his dream did take place thirteen years later. William Blackstone is an inspiration and model for Christians today of one who strongly supports Israel while at the same time attempting to win Jewish people to Christ. Maranatha!

¹ Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place Among The nations: Israel and the World* (New York: Bantam, 1993), p. 16.

² For an overview of the entire history of Christian Zionism see Thomas Ice, "Lovers of Zion: A History of Christian Zionism" at the following internet address: www.pre-trib.org/article-view.php?id=295.

³ Timothy P. Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon: How Evangelical Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 102.

⁴ Michael B. Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 278.

⁵ Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon*, p. 102

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- ⁶ Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, p. 278.
- ⁷ Weber, *Road to Armageddon*, p. 103.
- ⁸ Weber, *Road to Armageddon*, p. 102.
- ⁹ William E. Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming*, 3rd edition (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1932), p. 162.
- ¹⁰ Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming*, p. 176.
- ¹¹ Carl F. Ehle, Jr., "Prolegomena to Christian Zionism in America: The Views of Increase Mather and William E. Blackstone Concerning the Doctrine of the Restoration of Israel," Ph.D. Dissertation at New York University, 1977, pp. 240–44.
- ¹² Ehle, "Prolegomena," pp. 241–42.
- ¹³ Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, p. 278.
- ¹⁴ Ehle, "Prolegomena," pp. 242–43.
- ¹⁵ Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon*, p. 105.
- ¹⁶ Ehle, "Prolegomena," p. 243.
- ¹⁷ Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, p. 278.
- ¹⁸ Ehle, "Prolegomena," pp. 290–93.
- ¹⁹ Oren, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, p. 279.
- ²⁰ Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon*, p. 103.
- ²¹ Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon*, p. 106.
- ²² Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon*, p. 112.
- ²³ Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon*, p. 105.
- ²⁴ Weber, *On The Road to Armageddon*, p. 106.