

Evangelical Theology Drives American Attitudes toward Israel and Middle East

When Ed McAteer watches current events unfold in the Middle East, he sees the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

These things must come to pass, he believes, in order for Jesus to return and bring world history to its end. That's why he was saddened but not surprised when the United Nations recently voted against Israel, in his opinion, on a resolution on the Middle East conflict.

"When the nations gather against Israel, I believe at that time the Scriptures will be fulfilled," said the retired sales executive who now devotes himself full time to conservative Christian causes.

McAteer may be Israel's No. 1 supporter among evangelical Christians. He hosts an annual prayer breakfast for Israel attended by both Jewish and evangelical Christian leaders. He recently chaired an international committee that created sufficient public pressure to stop the construction of a mosque near Christian holy sites in Nazareth.

From his Memphis, Tenn., home, McAteer frequently speaks by phone with key Israeli leaders who seek his counsel or support.

Ed McAteer loves Israel.

But he loves Israel because he believes the Bible tells him to. He often cites God's promise to Abraham, "I will bless them who bless you and curse them who curse you."

From the perspective of this Baptist layman, the mandate to support Israel

without equivocation runs all the way from Genesis to Revelation.

Although more articulate and passionate about the subject than most other American evangelicals, McAteer represents a stream of theological and political thought that has driven United States policy toward Israel for more than 50 years.

“No one in the U.S. outdoes fundamentalists in their support of Israel, not even American Jews,” said Tim Weber, a Christian historian and dean at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Illinois.

“Since Menachem Begin, all Israeli leaders have seen American fundamentalists as important shapers of American foreign policy toward Israel. What many people do not understand is that most fundamentalists support Israel because they believe it will play a key role in events leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.”

While this theological view of the end-times-known as premillennial dispensationalism-is not the majority view among Christians worldwide or even nationwide, it strongly shapes Americans’ views of Israel, Weber said. “The influence of such ideas extends way beyond the tight community that nurtures and studies them.

“The dispensationalist scenario is imbedded in the fundamentalist subculture, has much greater influence in the more expansive world of American evangelicalism and even reaches into the larger secular population. These ideas matter, and not just for those who believe and understand them.”

Need proof? Look at book publishers’ bestseller lists, where the “Left Behind” series has held sway for months.

To date, the nine-book series has sold more than 50 million copies. In 2001, the latest installment, “Desecration,” beat out John Grisham for top annual sales of hardback fiction, with 2.9 million copies sold.

The eighth book in the Left Behind series, “The Mark,” was the No. 2 bestseller in

2000, and the seventh book, "Assassins," was No. 3 in 1999.

These books are fictionalized accounts built out of a dispensationalist view of the end times. And more significantly than most people realize, this worldview impacts American thought on Israel, Weber contends.

Dispensationalism, articulated as a distinct theology by John Nelson Darby about 1830, teaches that shortly before the return of Christ, the nations will gather for war in the Middle East against a restored Jewish state.

Weber explains: "Dispensationalists patch together prophecies in Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation and predict that a northern confederacy made up of Russia and her allies will join forces with kings of the South, usually identified as an Arab/Muslim coalition, to launch a sneak attack to annihilate Israel once and for all. Though Israel's doom seems certain, God intervenes and destroys the invaders."

But that's still not the end. "Relieved but still shaky, the Jews then make a security pact with the charismatic, peace-promising leader of a 10-nation European confederation, a revived Roman Empire. After securing the peace of Jerusalem for three and a half years, this leader suddenly reveals himself to be the Anti-Christ. Working closely with a demonic false prophet, Anti-Christ enters the restored Jewish temple in Israel, demands to be worshipped as God and then launches a genocidal war against all who refuse to acknowledge him. In response, the kings of the East send a 200-million-man army to fight Anti-Christ's forces on the plains of Megiddo, northwest of Jerusalem. This is the battle of Armageddon.

"Before the armies can annihilate each other, Jesus Christ breaks out of the clouds with his warrior saints and destroys the assembled armies. The surviving Jews then acknowledge him as their Messiah, and King Jesus restores David's throne in Jerusalem, near the purified Jewish temple where priests perform the ancient blood sacrifices. Jesus reigns in peace and justice for a thousand years."

All this, however, hinges on restoring and preserving a Jewish state in Palestine.

McAteer agrees that the existence of Israel as a nation is “very important” to his view of Christian theology. “Jesus said when these things come to pass, lift up your head, your redemption draweth nigh.”

In the early days of dispensationalism, Christians were content to wait for the prophesied events to unfold on God’s own timetable. But since the late 19th century, some evangelicals have attempted to speed up the clock by ensuring certain things come to pass—specifically the restoration of a Jewish state.

One of the first advocates of this brand of Zionism was William Blackstone, an Illinois businessman who wrote the bestseller “Jesus is Coming” in 1878. “Blackstone did not want to wait around for a new Jewish state,” Weber explained. “He did what he could to make it happen.”

When the modern state of Israel finally was created in 1948, “dispensationalists hailed its founding as the most significant prophetic fulfillment of the age, the undeniable proof that they had read the Bible correctly,” Weber said.

Since 1948, dispensational theology has pushed for expansion of Israel’s borders on prophetic grounds.

“Dispensationalists understood the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not in terms of international law or the rights of self-determination, but as a modern expression of the ancient biblical rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael for their father Abraham’s birthright and blessing,” Weber said. “Thus dispensationalists did not see any way to reconcile the two warring parties.

“The divine die was cast. Jews win; Palestinians lose.”

Indicative of this view, McAteer believes there’s “no such thing as the land of Palestine. That’s something that’s been manufactured. That piece of geography was given by God to Israel.”

Where should the Palestinians go, then? Anywhere else in the Middle East, McAteer said, so long as they leave the Jewish nation alone. “The Arabs have 485

times as much land as do the Jews.”

This is where McAteer and others who are consistent in applying their theological beliefs to politics find discomfort with some of the Republican leaders they have helped elect.

When President George W. Bush indicates that perhaps Israel should give up some of its land and be more conciliatory toward the Palestinians, McAteer and company are not pleased.

“I’m not in lockstep with a number of my religious Christian brethren, even those in the Southern Baptist Convention in their endorsing and wrapping their arms around everything George W. Bush says about the Middle East,” McAteer explained. “One day, he says one thing; the next day, he says another.”

McAteer especially bristles at Bush taking a hard-line stance against terrorists attacking the United States but not against Palestinians, who he believes are terrorists attacking Israel.

“Find me one time in all this that Israel has initiated a conflict with the Palestinians,” he said. “I’m not saying everything Israel has done has been right, but they have not initiated the conflicts.”

But even so, the bottom line for him remains the Bible, not politics.

“I believe without any reservation whatsoever that every grain of sand on that piece of property called Israel belongs to the Jewish people. It’s not because I happen to think that. It’s not because history gives a picture of them being in and out of there. It’s because God gave it to them.”

By Mark Wingfield is managing editor of the [Baptist Standard](#), from which this article is reprinted with permission.