

PREMILLENNIALISM AND JEWISH EVANGELISM

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Recently on a national Christian radio talk show I was being interviewed about developments in Israel. Toward the end of the interview I fielded questions from callers. A couple of the callers were upset that the program was dealing with events in Israel and both said we should be out there evangelizing the unbelieving Jews instead of getting folks excited about the prophetic implications of current events in Israel. Preterist postmillennialist Gary North, speaking about premillennialists, expresses this view as follows:

Why spend money on evangelizing Israelis? It would be a waste of resources. This is why there are so few active fundamentalist ministries in Israel that target Jews. They target Arabs instead. Eschatologically speaking, the body of an Israeli must be preserved, for he may live long enough to go through the Great Tribulation. But his soul is expendable. This is why fundamentalists vocally support the nation of Israel, but then do very little to preach to Israelis the traditional Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Fundamentalists have a prophetic agenda for Israelis that does not involve at least two-thirds of the Israelis' souls. Israelis are members of the only group on earth that has an unofficial yet operational King's X against evangelism by fundamentalists, specifically so that God may preserve Israelis for the sake of the destruction of modern Israel in the Great Tribulation. The presence of Israel validates the hope of fundamentalists that Christians, and Christians alone, will get out of life alive.¹

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

In fact the primary evangelizers of Jewish people, wherever they have lived, has been fundamentalist premillennialists. One of the greatest times of Jewish conversion to Jesus as their Messiah was between the two world wars in Europe. Current head of Chosen People Ministry, Mitch Glaser, in his PhD dissertation on the subject says of this ingathering:

. . . regarding the numbers of Jews who were coming to the Lord in the 20th century. According to Levison's research, 97,000 Jews in Hungary alone accepted the Christian faith; in Vienna 17,000; in Poland 35,000; and in Bolshevik Russia 60,000 Jews became Christians. We also found Jews turning to Christ in Germany, Sweden and Denmark. Not a few have done likewise in Britain. In America, careful estimate places the number of Christians of the Jewish race at no less than 20,000.

Therefore, the number of Jews who became Christians during the first third of the 20th century may have been upwards of 230,000.²

The move of the Holy Spirit among the Jews in Hungary in the 1920s and 30s is especially amazing. It is estimated that over 10% of all the Jews in Hungary during this time trusted Jesus as their Messiah and were brought into the Christian Church. Glaser notes that the number during this time was 97,000 Jewish Christians at a time when there were 800,000 Jews in Hungary.³

Almost all of the Gentile and Jewish workers involved in Jewish evangelism were premillennial. This was an amazing ingathering of the Jewish remnant during the Church age between the two world wars. About a decade ago, on a trip to Israel, our group was assembled in front of Yad Vashem (the Holocaust memorial in West Jerusalem) as our guide spoke to us. Our Jewish guide, an Oxford graduate, who immigrated to Israel in 1945 after serving in the British Army during World War II, noted that about 250,000 of the 6.2 million Jews killed in the Holocaust were Hebrew Christians. Glaser notes that the Holocaust did much to virtually wipe out the Jewish Christian movement after the World War II. "This destruction of the Jewish Christian community in Europe had world-wide implications," notes Glaser, "as so many of the missionaries and leaders among the Jewish believers had come from this region. Essentially, an entire generation of young leaders was killed either in the War or in the death camps."⁴

AMERICAN OUTREACH

In the United States the issue is clear, almost all Jewish evangelism has been spearheaded by premillennialists. Yaakov Ariel, an Israeli Jewish scholar who is not a Christian has written a definitive work on the history of Jewish evangelism in America. Speaking of the late 1800s, Ariel said, "Almost all missions to the Jews in America during this period held to a premillennialist conviction that played a central part in their evangelization."⁵ American Christianity largely ignored Jewish evangelism until the 1880s. "American Protestants first began to evangelize Jews in 1816."⁶ Ariel notes that it was not until dispensational premillennialism began to penetrate the evangelical denominations of America that Jewish evangelism began in earnest. "The driving force for a strong movement of American Christians laboring at missionizing the Jews had been a new school of premillennialist hope: dispensationalism," declares Ariel.

What had begun about fifty years earlier in Great Britain was now beginning to launch with great enthusiasm in North America. "The early nineteenth century saw a dramatic rise in attempts to convert Jews in Britain, which was witnessing a strong evangelical and premillennialist resurgence, including hope for the national rejuvenation of the Jews."⁷ It is interesting, when both Britain and America were undergoing a strong surge of Bible-believing evangelicalism, both were accompanied by great growth of premillennialism, especially of the dispensational variety. Speaking of dispensational premillennialism, Ariel observed: "It meshed well with the fundamentalist view, which criticized the prevailing cultural trend in society, and offered an alternative philosophy of history to the liberal postmillennialist notions that prevailed in American Christianity at the time."⁸ Instead advocates like Gary North want us to return to a postmillennial version of Christianity that did almost nothing to evangelize Jews while distorting the record of premillennialists.

In the almost forty-five years that I have been involved in Christian ministry, I have observed generally a sincere Christian love by premillennialists of the Jewish people and a desire to lead them to Christ, rarely seen in non-premillennial evangelicals. Ariel claims: "For dispensationalists, 'witnessing' to the Jews was a manifestation of love and concern."⁹ Speaking of our premillennial theology, Ariel concludes:

The theological perception that motivated and guided the movement persisted throughout the decades with amazing consistency. Adhering to a biblical premillennialist understanding of the development of world history and the role of the Jews in the messianic age, missionaries carried out their

work with a special sense of mission. In their own eyes, they were propagating Christianity among God's chosen people, the historical nation of Israel.¹⁰

OUTREACH IN ISRAEL

Once again, North is wrong about premillennial outreach by premillennialists in today's Israel. In fact, "Contrary to all expectations, Christians were evangelizing in the Jewish state." Ariel tells us "American missionary endeavors in the Holy Land, motivated by a premillennialist messianic view of Jews and their role in history, began as early as the 1820s, when the first American missionaries arrived in what was then called Palestine."¹¹ In the late 1800s there was a renewed interest in evangelizing the Jews in Palestine because of the influence of "dispensational premillennialist beliefs."¹² North claims that premillennialists do not want to see Jews come to faith in Christ before the rapture. However, Ariel speaks of an American missionary to the Jews from about the 1930s to the 60s, William Hull, as "nourished by his dispensationalist understanding of the course of history. It was his duty, he believed, to save as many Jews as he could before the events of the End Times."¹³ This has been my uniform experience concerning premillennialists and Jewish evangelism in the present age.

North could not be more wrong about Jewish evangelism in Israel. Just the reverse is generally true about the great interest and efforts in Jewish evangelism in Israel. Most, if not all, major American Jewish evangelism ministries have missionaries in Israel today. Once again Ariel notes: "Influenced by a dispensational premillennialist outlook, they believed they were evangelizing in a country where the great drama of the End Times was about to unfold and among a people who they believed were destined to play a crucial role in that drama."¹⁴

CONCLUSION

It does matter what you believe about Bible prophecy and eschatology! Also, one's view of the future does impact your priorities in the present, if you are consistent in implementing your beliefs. Where are all of the postmillennial or preterist ministries that engage in Jewish evangelism today? I have never heard of any. If what North speculates in the above quote is true, wouldn't we expect at least one such organization since they are so concerned about Jewish evangelism in this present age. Instead, the actual facts of history belie North's embarrassing speculation about the way things should be, based upon the outworking of the logic of his theology. Instead, he just makes up a scenario based upon vain speculation. In fact, Israel is going to be the only nation in the history of the world that will be converted to Christ during the tribulation. This will not be the case for any Gentile nation. Israel will become the world's only "Christian nation" before the millennium begins and they will all be premillennialists. Also, the 144,000 Jewish evangelists during the tribulation will also be premillennialists (See Rev. 7:1-8; 14:1-5). As Paul says, "and thus all Israel will be saved," when "The Deliverer will come from Zion" (Rom. 11:26-27 quoting Isa. 27:9). Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Gary North, "The Unannounced Reason Behind American Fundamentalism's Support for the State of Israel" (LewRockwell.com, July 9, 2000).

² Mitchell Leslie Glaser, "A Survey of Missions to the Jews in Continental Europe 1900—1950," (PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, October 1998), pp. 408–09).

³ Glaser, "A Survey of Missions," p. 160.

⁴ Glaser, "A Survey of Missions," pp. 398–99.

⁵ Yaakov Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880–2000* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 140.

⁶ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 2.

⁷ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 9.

⁸ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, pp. 10–11.

⁹ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 289.

¹¹ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 143.

¹² Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 143.

¹³ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 157.

¹⁴ Ariel, *Evangelizing the Chosen People*, p. 164.