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Before Herzl, There Was Pastor Russell: A Neglected Chapter of Zionism

Years before Theodor Herzl proposed creating a Jewish state, Charles Taze Russell was traveling the world holding Jewish Mass Meetings, beginning in 1879, at which he urged Jews to find a national home in Eretz Israel.

“There are now in the world more than ten million Jews, about three-quarters of whom are in Russia, Poland, the Balkan States, and Turkey. If the movement toward Palestine should get the impulse that the Hirsch committee is able to give it, an imaginative person can conceive of the country’s doubling or trebling its Jewish population before the close of our century” – Zion’s Watch Tower 1892, Nov. 1, p.329.



Theodor Herzl published his pamphlet “Der Judenstaat” in 1896 and, two years later, organized the world’s First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. But in fact the notion of a Jewish state in Palestine had been making the rounds in European and American Christian circles, in various forms. One of its keenest proponents was a Christian preacher and Bible scholar named Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916).

The proposition boldly put forward by Pastor Russell contrasted with the position of many Christian churches at the time, where the feeling was that God’s covenant with the Jews had long since ended and they should convert to Christianity.

The prescient pastor predicted a massive exodus of Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe. Much as he predicted, by 1924 more than 3 million Jews had emigrated from Russia and Eastern Europe. Russell himself did not live long enough to see his prophecy made manifest, dying in 1916.

Russell’s legacy as an enthusiastic, non-proselytizing Zionist has been acknowledged by none other than the incumbent prime minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, who said, “A recognition of Pastor Russell’s important role as an early American Christian advocate of Zionism is long overdue.” The late Jeane Kirkpatrick, former the U.S. ambassador to the UN, called Russell a “neglected man and chapter in the history of Zionism.”

Who was this forgotten father of Zionism, and why would he promote Zionism in the first place?

In the aftermath of civil war

In the mid-19th century, when covered wagons still rolled across the open plains carrying settlers to remote sectors of America, when vast herds of buffalo still roamed the range, Charles Taze Russell was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania on February 16, 1852. He was the second son of Joseph L. and Ann Eliza Russell, both of Scottish-Irish descent.

Russell's mother died when he was nine years old. At 11, Charles entered a business partnership with his father, the youngster himself writing the articles of agreement under which their enterprise operated. At 15 he and his father were running a flourishing men's clothing chain with shops in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and more.

Russell's formative years were colored by the devastating Civil War that ravaged America from 1861 to 1865, followed by an era of rapid industrialization. In 1869 the first transcontinental railway was completed. Come the 1870's, electric light and the telephone came onto the scene. The electric streetcar would arrive in the 1880's, and by the century's end, a few automobiles would be noisily proclaiming their presence.

On the intellectual front, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, described in his 1859 book "On the Origin of Species," had for the first time seriously challenged the Roman Catholic Church's version of history, giving rise to spin-off churches and creeds.

TRANSCONTINENTAL TOUR of PASTOR RUSSELL & SPECIAL TRAIN of INTERNATIONAL BIBLE STUDENTS

1913

"If the Bible does teach that Eternal Torment is the fate of all except the Saved, it should be preached, yes, thousand weekly daily hourly. If it does not so teach the fact should be made known and the fact also disabusing God's holy name removed."

Pastor Russell

PASTOR RUSSELL of BROOKLYN (TABERNACLE), N. Y., preaches to eleven million people every week through the thousand leading newspapers of United States, Canada and Great Britain, which publish his Sunday sermons.

Are YOU reading them? If not, write for sample to the Brooklyn Tabernacle, 13 Hicks Street.

BE UP-TO-DATE!

C. Wells Eldred N.Y.

Going back to basics

This setting of breakneck development and intellectual progress is where Russell founded the Bible Student Association, which aspired to go back to basics by studying the Bible itself.

Soon a class for systematic Bible Study was formed in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and in 1879 Charles Taze Russell was elected its pastor. The movement founded “Zion’s Watch Tower”, the most widely circulated magazine in the world today,* according to Business Insider, with an average of 70 million copies a month in 334 languages. For comparison, National Geographic has a circulation of something over 6 million and is published in 25 different languages.

* In 1931 “Zion’s” was dropped from the name and shortened to: “The Watchtower.”

A few years later, in 1881, Russell was elected the first president of the Watchtower Society. Its purpose was to distribute his teachings in the form of tracts.

Russell was a prolific writer, and his major accomplishments include a six-volume series of systematic theology, “Studies in the Scriptures.” By 1909 this series was one of most widely circulated works in the world, surpassed only by the Bible and The Chinese Almanac.

His crowning achievement at that phase was “The Photo-Drama of Creation,” a groundbreaking innovation that combined sound and color in a motion picture for the first time in history. The film was, viewed by more than eight million people, an astronomical success in the terms of the times.

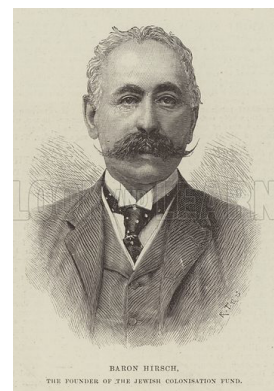
In 1909 Russell moved The Watch Tower Society Headquarters to 124 Columbia Heights in Brooklyn Heights. It would remain there until 2016, when Jared Kushner, son-in-law of U.S. President Donald Trump, bought the property.

Early advocate of Zionism

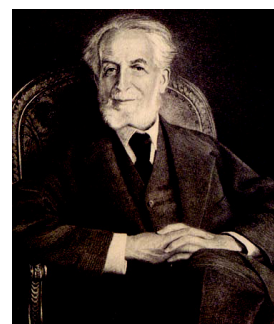
On August 18, 1891, now in Jerusalem, Russell wrote to the philanthropists Baron Maurice de Hirsch and Baron Edmond de Rothschild, or as he puts it “the two leading Hebrews of the world.” No less, he put forward a practical plan for Zionism.

It involved purchasing all government-owned land in Palestine, i.e., land not held by private owners, from the impoverished Ottoman Empire. Years later Herzl would make similar proposals. (A copy of the letter is published in “Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence”, December 1891, pp. 170-171.)

“As you will see from my books, we find the testimony of the prophets to be, that your nation will be greatly blessed and return to divine favor between now and the year 1915, A.D.,” Russell wrote. The persecutions that Jews were suffering in Russia were “a mark of divine favor rather than the reverse,” the pastor suggested - and it would only get worse because the Lord’s purpose was to drive the Jews “out of all lands whither he has scattered them.”



Baron Hirsch



Baron Edmond de Rothschild

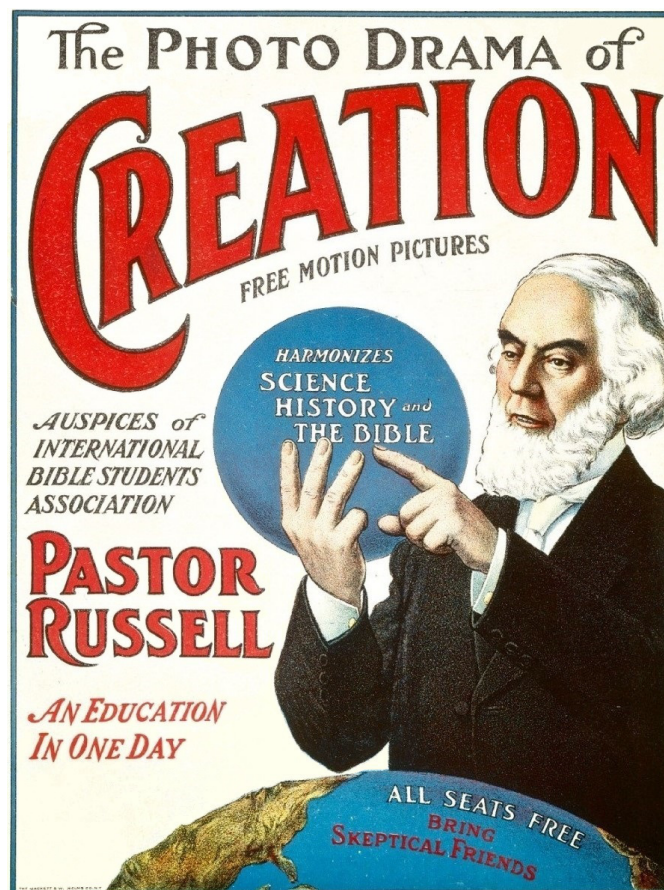
To where?

To Palestine, as apparently indicated by the prophet (Jeremiah 32:37-44; 33:6-22), Russell explained. Owning not an inch of that land, he had no vested interest, the pastor elaborated, and went on: “My suggestion is that the wealthy Hebrews purchase from Turkey, at a fair valuation, all of her property interest in these lands: i.a., all of the Government lands (lands not held by private owners), under the provision that Syria and Palestine shall be constituted a FREE STATE...”

In his letter, Russell delicately gibes at alternative “Jewish homeland” ideas touted at the time in places other than Israel, though Baron de Hirsch was actually involved in resettling Jews elsewhere: “But please note, my dear Sir, that the sacred Scriptures predict the return to Palestine, and not a further wandering to the ends of the earth—to America or elsewhere. And, therefore, it is my humble opinion that Israel will find no rest for the sole of his foot until he finds the land of promise; and I pray you, therefore, not to waste your efforts in assisting emigration elsewhere, but concentrate them in the direction where God has indicated success...”

We cannot know whether he even replied to Russell, let alone be influenced by him. But a month after Russell’s letter to the barons, on September 11th 1891, Baron Hirsch founded the Jewish Colonization Association to buy land, principally in North and South America but in Palestine too, where agricultural colonies could be established and resettled by Jews who were persecuted in Russia.

Meanwhile, the pastor’s message did not go unnoticed in the broader Jewish communities of the United States and Europe.



Russell's Yiddish newspaper

In 1910 Pastor Russell received a letter from a committee of Jewish leaders:

“Dear Sir: Your Sympathetic interest in the Jewish people for years past has not escaped our notice. Your denunciation of the atrocities perpetrated against our race in the name of Christianity has added to our conviction that you are a sincere friend,” wrote the committee members.

“Your discourse on “Jerusalem and Jewish Hopes” has struck a responsive chord in the hearts of many of our people. Still we doubted for a time if any Christian minister could really be interested in a Jew as a Jew and merely from a hope of proselyting him... You may well understand how surprised we are to find a Christian minister acknowledging that there are prophecies of the Bible still unfulfilled, which belong to the Jew and not to the Christian...

“These things, Pastor Russell, have led to the formation of a Jewish Mass Meeting Committee, which by this letter, request you to give a public discourse,” they concluded.

The pastor acceded and on October 9, 1910 gave a talk titled “Zionism in Prophecy” before an audience of about 4,000 Jews at the Hippodrome, New York’s largest and finest auditorium at the time.

As The New York American reported on that day, “The unusual spectacle of 4,000 Hebrews enthusiastically applauding a Gentile preacher, after having listened to a sermon he addressed to them concerning their own religion...where Pastor Russell, the famous head of the Brooklyn Tabernacle conducted a most unusual service. It was not long before all reserve, and all possible doubt of Pastor Russell’s entire sincerity and friendliness were worn away. Then the mention of the name of a great leader [Herzl] who, the speaker declared, had been raised by God for the cause—brought a burst of applause.”

Russell held similar mass meetings in Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Kansas City and Cincinnati. In England he addressed 4,600 Jews in London’s Royal Albert Hall, following which he appeared in Glasgow and Manchester, then gave talks in other European cities with large Jewish populations, including Vienna, Berlin, Krakow and Budapest.

Make no mistake, his speeches got a mixed reception. After Russell had left one meeting, three Jewish groups got into such a row that 46 policemen were called to disperse them. A Jewish rabbi in New York who fiercely opposed Russell influenced his associates in Austria-Hungary to resist plans for meetings addressing Jews.

However, the Herzl Year Book provides statistics of the printed preaching on the subject of Judaism and Zionism, which appeared in 107,000 copies of Anglo-Jewish newspapers and weeklies, and in 650,000 copies of the Yiddish Press. Russell even published a Yiddish-language paper of his own, *Die Shtimme* — “the voice”.



Pastor Russell holding a mass meeting with Jews at NY's Hippodrome theatre

Separate covenants

Why would a devout Christian minister invest so much in advocating the idea of a national homeland for the Jews?

In May 26, 1911, Jacob De Haas, editor of the Boston Jewish Advocate and a personal confidant of Herzl, published an article in the Jewish Advocate praising Russell as a “Philo-semite” with no desire to convert the Jews.

But question of Russell’s motivation doesn’t lead to philo-Semitism necessarily: rather it goes to the prophecies of restoration delivered to ancient Israel by prophets in the Bible (Jeremiah 30:18; 31-8-10; Amos 9:14,15; Romans 22:25,26).

“And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them” — Amos 9:14, for example

Russell was confident that these verses would be fulfilled and that God would restore the Jews to Palestine. In November 1892 he wrote in Zion’s Watch Tower: “There are now in the world more than ten million Jews, about three-quarters of whom are in Russia, Poland, the Balkan States, and Turkey. If the movement toward Palestine should get the impulse that the Hirsch committee is able to give it, an imaginative person can conceive of the country’s doubling or trebling its Jewish population before the close of our century, and of its having a larger Jewish population fifty years hence than it had in ancient times, when its census ran up to three millions. Should the restoration be accomplished, all hail to the New Jerusalem!”

He also believed that God had a separate covenant with the Jews and a different covenant with Christians, written in the Watch Tower, in January 1909, page 28:
“The more closely we investigate the New Covenant, the more we must be convinced of this fact—that it belongs to Israel alone.”

These were the sentiments on which Russell’s advocacy of Zionism was based. While he may not have lived to see the fulfillment of his wishes, his legacy continued.

He died in 1916. In 1925, his successor [succeeded by] Judge Joseph F. Rutherford wrote the book “Comfort for the Jews.” *

* In 1936 Rutherford reversed his position for supporting Israel.

Rutherford is rather more renowned for founding Jehovah’s Witnesses, a religious group that emerged from Russell’s Bible Student Movement. **

** The Bible Students continue to support Israel as in this article.

Before Russell, no Anglo-Jewish newspapers or Yiddish press had carried articles by a Christian minister. When he died on October 31, 1916, the Herzl Year Book observed:”Russell himself, according to the testimony of the American Jewish Press from the years 1910 to 1916, maintained excellent and friendly relations with the leaders of American Jewry to his last days.”

“Write Down the Vision and Make it Plain Upon Tables, That Everyone May Read it Fluently.” – HABAKKUK 2:2

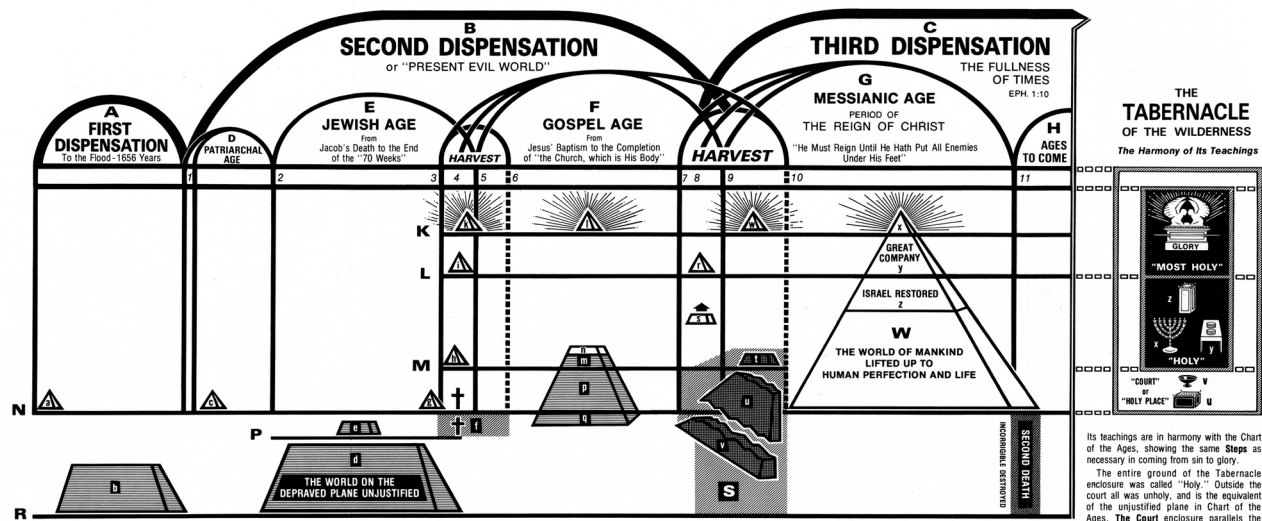


CHART OF THE AGES

ILLUSTRATING THE PLAN OF GOD FOR BRINGING MANY SONS TO GLORY, AND HIS PURPOSE—

“... In Regard to an Administration of the Fullness of the Appointed Times, to Re-unite All Things Under One Head, Even Under the Anointed One: the Things in Heaven and the Things on Earth — Under Him.” EPH. 1:10 (dag10)

THE TABERNACLE OF THE WILDERNESS
The Harmony of Its Teachings

Its teachings are in harmony with the Chart of the Ages, showing the same Steps as necessary in coming from sin to glory. The entire ground of the Tabernacle enclosure was called “Holy.” Outside the court all was unholy, and is the equivalent of the unjustified plane in Chart of the Ages. The Court enclosure parallels the justified or Perfect Human plane. The “Holy” represents the condition of consecrated Christians, Begotten of the Spirit. The Most Holy, beyond the second veil, represents the Perfect Spiritual condition when “we shall be like Him.” The glory plane is still further along the grand climax of hope — “Glorify, Honor and Immortality.”

Chart from Divine Plan of the Ages, Studies in Scriptures Vol 1, Pastor Russell