



Ariel Yaakov

Shabbat Shalom: Could you please describe for our readers your personal encounter, existentially and intellectually in regard to the Dispensationalist understanding of history's course and the Jewish role in it.



Prof. Ariel Yaakov is a graduate of the University of Chicago.

His doctoral dissertation has the title, "American Premillennialism and its Attitudes Towards the Jewish People, Judaism and Zionism." He spent many years in Jerusalem where he became acquainted with numerous groups and individuals who were waiting for the arrival of the Messiah. While Prof. Yaakov did not become convinced that the Messiah was to arrive soon, he has considered messianic ideas to be an important part of contemporary culture and a fascinating topic of study.

Prof. Yaakov is the author of two important books, *On Behalf of Israel: American Fundamentalist Attitudes Towards Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865-1945* and *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000*. At the time, Prof. Yaakov teaches in the Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Prof. Ariel Yaakov: I have first encountered Dispensationalist theology in Jerusalem of the 1960s-1970s, among missionaries, Messianic Jews, and American and European Evangelical Christians who had visited or settled in the city. I have studied the Dispensationalist premillennial messianic theology as part of my study of contemporary Christian interest in the Jewish people and the State of Israel. My conclusion has been, that while there are other schools of messianic thought, Dispensationalism has become, during the twentieth century, the most influential messianic conviction among English speaking Protestants. It has certainly had a profound effect on the manner in which many Evangelical Christians have viewed the birth of Israel and the role of Jews in history.

Shabbat Shalom: You have written two significant books: *On Behalf of Israel:*

American Fundamental Attitudes Towards Jews, Judaism, and Zionism, 1865-1945 and *Evangelizing the Chosen People: Missions to the Jews in America, 1880-2000*. Could you tell our readers what raised your interest to analyze the protestant missionary efforts directed towards the Jews and what are your conclusions on that matter?

Yaakov: Both books have looked at the manner the Christian Messianic faith, especially in its Dispensationalist form, has influenced Christian



Evangelical attitudes towards the Jewish people. I was interested in discovering the roots of Christian Evangelical interest in the Jews and Israel. The books reach similar conclusions. The messianic faith has shaped the attitudes of conservative Evangelical Christians towards the idea of Jewish restoration in Palestine, and has, at the same time, also motivated a large and aggressive missionary movement dedicated to evangelizing the Jews.

Shabbat Shalom: In your book *Evangelizing the Chosen People* you show that protestant missions to the Jews have their roots in Dispensationalism. Could you please elaborate on that matter.

Yaakov: The Dispensationalist faith regards the Jews as heirs and continuers of biblical Israel and the object of prophecies about a restored Davidic Kingdom during the Messianic age. Dispensationalists have rejected the traditional Christian claim, according to which the Church had replaced Israel and inherited God's promises to that nation. According to that school of biblical exegesis and Messianic hope the Jews are still God's chosen people and will resume their position as God's first nation when the Messiah comes again. This line of thinking stirred a renewed interest in the Jews, especially in the prospect of their national revival and restoration to Palestine, and their acceptance of the Christian faith. Those Christians who had accepted the Messianic faith in its Dispensationalist form have often become actively engaged in the fate of the Jews, trying to facilitate their return to Palestine, or to make Jews acquainted with the Christian faith.

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Shabbat Shalom: What specifically are the results of Dispensationalist theology in our days?

Yaakov: They are manifested in two ways: active and enthusiastic support for, or actual engagement in, the evangelization of Jews; and political and economic support for the State of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom: The impact of media evangelists as Pat Robertson and Hal Lindsey and books and films as *Left Behind* have popularized the theories of Dispensationalism in the United States. Could you explain to us these theories?

Yaakov: Dispensationalists believe that the current era in human history is coming to an end, or, in other words, the world as we know is about to end. They expect the apocalyptic times to begin at any moment. The arrival of the Messiah will take place in two installments: in the first Jesus will come for his saints, the true Christian believers. The second and final time, Jesus will come to earth with the true believers, to defeat Antichrist and establish the Kingdom of Christ on earth.

Shabbat Shalom: Why have these views become so popular?

Yaakov: Dispensationalism has become a popular faith because it is tied to a larger faith, namely conservative Evangelical Christianity. Evangelists have popularized the faith by tying it to a larger worldview: biblically oriented, and culturally conservative. It offers a reason and urgency to the need to undergo a conversion experience, be born again in Christ, and accept Jesus as a personal Savior. It also provides reassurance in an



uncertain world. It outlines history, past, present and future, and reassures Christian believers that their lifestyles are fine, their understanding of Scriptures correct, and no matter what happens, they will be saved and guaranteed eternal life.

Shabbat Shalom: What is the aim of the modern Dispensationalist understanding in your perspective? Does it really support Jewish-Christian relations or rather attempt to delegitimize and annihilate Judaism?

Yaakov: Dispensationalism has become the Evangelical philosophy of history, explaining the course and direction of human history as God's plans for humanity, as outlined in the Bible. It is not about the Jews, but rather intended for Christian believers. However, in its own way the Dispensationalist interpretation of history did bring conservative Evangelical Christians to warm up to the Jews.

Shabbat Shalom: How do Jewish people react to these theories, considering that they seem to imply sympathy towards Israel?

Yaakov: Some Jews, notably Israeli officials and leaders of American Jewish national organizations, embrace and encourage Evangelical Christian support for Israel. However, most Jews are unaware of the fact that the same people who support Israel politically, are also backing missions to the Jews. As a rule, Jews are unaware of the details of the Dispensationalist Messianic thought, and do not connect between Christian Messianism and missions to the Jews. Ironically, many of the Jewish friends of conservative Evangelicals are in the Jewish Orthodox camp. Jews who support liberal or left wing politics are suspicious of conservative Christians.

Shabbat Shalom: One of the arguments that has been used by Dispensationalists is the "miracle" of the creation of the State of Israel, that has led to the gathering of the Jews from all over the world. How would you respond to this argument? Are the biblical texts indeed referring to that modern event?

Yaakov: The Scriptures can be interpreted in multiple ways. I have no authority to pass judgment and tell which interpretations of biblical prophecies are correct and which are erroneous.

Dispensationalists have rejected the traditional Christian claim, according to which the Church had replaced Israel and inherited God's promises to that nation.

But there is no doubt that Dispensationalist Christians have pointed to the birth of the State of Israel, and the Six Day War as validating their reading and interpretation of

Scriptures. Something of a symbiosis developed between Dispensationalist Christians and Jews, each group supporting each other, at times unwittingly.

Shabbat Shalom: Dispensationalists argue that because Jews keep the Law and Christians have the Messiah, we have two different and irreconcilable dispensations. Wouldn't this difference rather testify complementarity and show the need for learning from each other?

Yaakov: Dispensationalists take an ambivalent view at Jews keeping the Law. On the one hand, traditional Jewish faith has kept the Jews waiting for the Messiah and ready to go back to their ancestral homeland. On the other hand, they have been frustrated with the Jewish unwillingness to recognize Jesus as their Lord and Savior. As a rule, Dispensationalists do not lend themselves to interfaith dialogue and insist that everyone has to accept Jesus as a personal savior in order to redeem themselves. In spite of that exclusivist view, many evangelical Christians have come to appre-



ciate the Jews for their special role in God's plans for humanity.

Shabbat Shalom: Dispensationalists imagine that the future of Israel and the Jews is not going to be pleasant, that they are still to suffer another Holocaust. Isn't such theory a dangerous one as it instills in the mind the anti-Semitic idea that the Jews are always bound to suffer under God's Judgment?

Yaakov: According to the Dispensationalist eschatological scheme all humanity, except those who have been born again and accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, will undergo a terrible period known as the Great Tribulation. For the Jews this period will be known as "the Time of Jacob's Trouble." At the end of this seven year period, Jesus will return to earth, crush Antichrist and establish his world kingdom. Those Jews who remain alive will recognize him as the Messiah and will assist him in the administration of his global rule. So the prospect for the Jews according to that faith is mixed, including elements of suffering and glory.

Shabbat Shalom: Someone said that Dispensationalism is another expression of traditional anti-Semitism? Could you comment on this statement?

Yaakov: That is unfair towards many Dispensationalists, who, in their own eyes, are friends to the Jews and seek to see the Jews redeemed and regain their ancient position as God's First Nation. Moving away from traditional anti Jewish stereotypes has been a long process, but one cannot label Dispensationalists as either anti-Semites, or philo-Semites.

