

## WILLIAM BLACKSTONE, DEFENDER OF THE JEWS

Palestine in 1920 was a desert wasteland in the hands of the unfriendly Turks—America held much greater promise than returning there. In fact, the Jews in the United States came to view America as their Promised Land. They were comfortable in America's graces and felt no need to seek peace elsewhere. This great sentiment was not without its repercussions, however. As the poor Jews of Europe flooded to America, it not so much answered "The Jewish Problem" as brought it to America. The United States felt it could not hold them all, and sought some other answer.

As a result, in 1921 Congress passed a quota targeting mostly Europeans who were unskilled workers. Another law was passed in 1921 that limited each country to sending the equivalent of only 3 percent of its nationals already living in America in 1910. This law limited immigration to 357,000 people. Three years later the Johnson-Reed Immigration Restriction of 1924 lowered this quota to 2 percent, while also lowering the base year to 1890—when only 150,000 people were allowed in. The government's restrictive immigration policy thus cut immigration from 800,000 in 1921 to 23,000 in 1933. Ellis Island's role quickly changed from a depot to a detention center. In 1915, Ellis Island admitted 178,000 immigrants; by 1919 that number fell to 26,000. Something would different would have to be done to solve the Jewish Problem in Europe rather than shipping Jews to the United States.

However, before any of this even really started, God had appointed someone to step forward with a solution—William Eugene Blackstone. Blackstone was born into a Methodist home in upstate New York in 1841, but followed his fortunes west to Oak Park, Illinois after the Civil War. Though he was not an ordained minister, but rather the founder of a construction and investment company, Blackstone was an ardent student of the Bible from his boyhood. In 1878, he published a book called *Jesus Is Coming*, which sold over a million copies (no small feat in a nation of only about fifty million—roughly a sixth of what America's population is today). While the book was offensive to many who had grown comfortable in their American Christianity and were content to live the American dream, it was welcomed by such men as Dwight L. Moody and Cyrus I. Scofield who appreciated his more literal interpretation of the scriptures and welcomed a more active and evangelical, missions-minded Christianity. It so touched the American conscience that it "in a large measure set the tone for this period of history."

Blackstone's book was so well documented that it was actually more scripture than commentary, listing hundreds of Bible passages for the reader to review on their own because of the limited space. It was a hard book for any true believer to ignore. Suddenly, once again, an American was becoming a beacon to the world pointing to Bible prophecy. The book was eventually translated into forty-eight languages, including Hebrew, and is still in print today.

Chapter fifteen of the book is titled simply, "Israel to Be Restored," and starts

with this passage:

Perhaps you say, “I don’t believe the Israelites are to be restored to Canaan, and Jerusalem to be rebuilt.”

Have you read the declarations in God’s Word about it? Surely nothing is more plainly stated in the Scriptures.

From here he goes on to list eighty-nine different Scripture passages that support this assertion. Later in the chapter he further states:

It would seem that such overwhelming testimony would convince every fair-minded reader that there is a glorious future restoration in store for Israel. . . .

I could fill a book with comments about how Israel will be restored, but all I 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.<sup>i</sup>

Perhaps Blackstone’s remarks seem somewhat overstated to us some six-and-a-half decades after the birth of Israel as a state, but to those of his time, some six-and-a-half decades before the event, the confidence of his statements was no less than prophetic. Few in America’s churches seemed to give any real credence to the possibility that the Jews would ever have their own land and state again, let alone in their ancient homeland with Jerusalem as their capital. For their part, the Jews overall had little interest in the idea themselves. By the outbreak of World War I, only about 20,000 of the 2.5 million Jews in the U.S. belonged to any type of Zionist organization. American Jews were quite happy where they were.

However, Blackstone looked upon Israel as “God’s sun-dial.” He even went so far as to say, “If anyone desires to know our place in God’s chronology, our position in the march of events, look at Israel.” For Blackstone, it was the next milestone to what for along the river of prophecy.

In what light did the American churches interpret the scriptures that Blackstone was quoting? How could they have missed the obviousness of these prophecies concerning the rebirth of Israel? They interpreted them as referring to “spiritual Israel”—as the Church of the modern day. Wisely, Blackstone had a few things to say about this as well—a subject that would touch on some of the darkest episodes for the descendants of Isaac in the next century. He saw quite plainly that Israel and the church were separate entities with separate futures as applied to their different covenants. God had not forsaken one for the other, but rather had a unique plan for each.

However, by replacing literal Israel in the Bible with the Church, Christians of the time no longer had to feel any responsibility to the Jews as God’s chosen people. This “Replacement Theology” would be exactly what would quiet the church in Germany

during World War II as the death camps sped into full swing. They had no obligation to the Jews. They were “suffering for their sins of rejection the Messiah.” It was as if Jesus’ death cut them free from these people rather than grafted them into their tree. However they saw it, this insidious virus—an invisible anti-Semitism—allowed the mainstream German Church to look the other way as the most horrific and ungodly things were done. As Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, wrote: “The gas chambers of Auschwitz were the ultimate consequence of the theory that man is nothing but the product of heredity and environment – or, as the Nazis liked to say, ‘of blood and soil.’ I am absolutely convinced that the gas chambers of Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek were ultimately prepared not in some ministry or other in Berlin, but rather at the desk and in the lecture halls of nihilistic scientists and philosophers.”

Blackstone’s words did not fall on deaf ears in the United States, however. As his popularity rose, so did his activity. In 1888, he and his daughter, Flora, visited Palestine, and concluded their trip in London. The trip took about a year.

When he returned, he was more zealous for the cause of reestablishing the state of Israel than ever before. Shortly after he returned, the burden of his heart was to initiate a conference between Jews and Christians to discuss this very topic. The “Conference on the Past, Present, and Future of Israel” took place November 24-25, 1890 at the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago. It was attended by some of the best-known Christian and Jewish Leaders. The assembly passed resolutions of sympathy for the oppressed Jews living in Russia, and copies were forwarded to the Czar and other world leaders. However, Blackstone knew that it was not enough to beg mercy from these leaders—the Jews needed a land to call their own within whose borders they could find peace and security. He wanted these world leaders to grant the Jews permission to return to Palestine and establish just such a state. Out of these meetings came the inspiration for the document that would eventually be known as “The Blackstone Memorial.”

On March 5, 1891, Secretary of State James G. Blaine introduced William Blackstone to President Benjamin Harrison. Blackstone personally handed the President his memorial, originally titled “Palestine for the Jews.” President Harrison seemed like a man who would favor Israel as well, since he chose Psalm 121:1-6 as the Scripture on which he would place his hand as he took the Oath of Office as the twenty-sixth President of the United States:

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.*

The first paragraph of Blackstone’s memorial began simply, “What shall be done for the Russian Jews?” and the second, “Why not give Palestine back to them again?” It was signed by 413 prominent Americans including John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, Cyrus McCormick, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, heads of several major

newspapers, the Speaker of the House among other members of congress, the mayors of Chicago and Philadelphia, and several other businessmen, ministers, and clergy. It called for a conference to discuss the possibilities of a Jewish homeland—a first step on the road to a Jewish state—and copies were also sent to the head of every European nation. The letter that accompanied his memorial ended with these words:

That there seem to be many evidences to show that we have reached the period in the great roll of the centuries, when the ever-living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is lifting up His hand to the Gentiles, (Isaiah 49:22) to bring His sons and His daughters from far, that he may plant them again in their own land, (Ezekiel 34, &c). Not for twenty-four centuries, 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.

May it be the high privilege of your Excellency, and the Honorable Secretary, to take a personal interest in this great matter, and secure through the Conference, a home for these wandering millions of Israel, and thereby receive to yourselves the promise of Him, who said to Abraham, “I will bless them that bless thee,” Genesis 12:3.

While most Americans have probably never heard of William E. Blackstone, the same could not have been said of American Presidents from Harrison through Truman. As Blackstone believed that the Church could well be raptured at any moment, he became increasingly preoccupied with “God’s sun-dial”—the Jewish people and their promised return to Palestine. He kept the issue before the eye of every U.S. Presidents until his death in 1935. Blackstone not only handed the memorial to Harrison, but would also see it presented to Presidents William McKinley, Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson—William McKinley even signed it. Blackstone’s words so saturated these Presidents, that in 1949, some fourteen years after Blackstone’s death, Harry Truman, who made the U.S. the first nation to recognize the newborn state of Israel, virtually quoted Blackstone’s letter. When he was introduced to some Jewish scholars that year as “the man who helped create the State of Israel,” Truman responded with, “What do you mean ‘helped create’? I am Cyrus, I am Cyrus!”

Blackstone’s memorial was written five years before the father of modern-day Zionism, Theodor Herzl, published his book, *The Jewish State* and founded the Zionist Movement. In fact, when Blackstone discovered that Herzl’s book was practical and political, not prophetic, he marked all the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning Israel’s rebirth in a Bible, and sent it to Herzl. Blackstone informed Herzl that his proposal to have the Jewish state in Argentina, Uganda, or any other country was unacceptable—it had to be in the promised land of Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital. Blackstone so greatly influenced Herzl that the Bible containing those marked prophecies is displayed in Herzl’s tomb in Israel today.

Because of his zeal, Blackstone is perhaps the most famous American in Israel today. While righteous gentiles such as Corrie ten Boom and Oskar Schindler have a tree

dedicated to them for saving lives in the Holocaust, Blackstone has a forest named after him and is mentioned in most textbooks discussing the history of Israel.

Despite his presence before these Presidents and his popularity, however, Blackstone would be to these Presidents what Moses was to Pharaoh—a voice calling from God, “Let My people go!”, but also one that—for the most part—would be unheeded. As Pharaoh vacillated in his decision to release the Jews to go to Canaan (ancient Palestine) after the plagues, so would the American Presidents. However, it was not God who hardened presidential hearts as He had done with Pharaoh; it would be the State Department.

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