



Reverend William Hechler

The Christian Minister who legitimized Zionism to the World.



Reverend William Hechler was the man Theodor Herzl called the “first Christian Zionist.” He was not the first Christian Zionist but he was the single individual that was most critical in giving Theodor Herzl and Zionism legitimacy.

Theodor Herzl is recognized as the founding father of modern Israel. Herzl was a society column writer, for the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse*, when he was sent to cover the infamous Dreyfus trial in Paris (1895). Dreyfus, a French military officer, had been accused of selling French military secrets to the Germans.

At first Herzl believed that Dreyfus might have been guilty. What transformed Herzl was not if Dreyfus was guilty or innocent but the realization that Dreyfus was being tried for being a Jew. He was not really being tried for anything he might have done.

He was a scapegoat for the French army. What troubled Herzl even more? France was the most progressive country advancing Jewish acceptance, toleration and equality. Herzl believed, as did most assimilated Jews, that the ages of anti-Semitic bigotry and hatred were finally passing to the garbage heap of history. In a short period of furious effort, Herzl collated his thoughts. They had been brewing for years inside him. He formed them into a solution for the “Jewish problem.” Herzl’s epiphany became a short book, *The Jewish State*. Herzl reasoned, if the Europeans did not want Jews amongst them, the solution was for the Jews who wished to, to return home, to return to Palestine.

Herzl had difficulty finding a publisher until a Christian agreed to print the book in Austria and Germany. The book, more of a booklet than a book, cre-

ated a minor stir amongst the Western Jewish world intent on assimilation. It caught the imagination of the Jews of Eastern Europe and Russia. It appealed to and also horrified Jews who became aware of it.

Reverend William Hechler was the Anglican minister to the British Embassy in Vienna, He was also an almost prophetic advocate of a very popular British religious view in the late 19th – Restorationism. Restorationists believe that the Restoration of the Jews to Palestine was foretold in the Bible and sought to support it.

Whether Hechler was given a copy of Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* in early March 1896, or came across it by accident, is unknown. Hechler's reaction to *Der Judenstaat* changed the course of history, of Zionism and Herzl's place in the story of the creation of modern Israel. Herzl recorded in his extensive personal diaries Hechler's next action.

March 10, 1896, Herzl recorded in his diary his "first" meeting with Reverend Hechler. "The Reverend William H. Hechler, chaplain to the British Embassy in Vienna, called on me.

"A likeable, sensitive man with the long grey beard of a prophet. He waxed enthusiastic over my solution. He, too, regard my movement as a "prophetic crisis" – one he foretold two years ago. For he had calculated in

accordance with a prophecy dating from Omar's reign (637-638) that after 42 prophetic months, that is, 1,260 years, Palestine would be restored to the Jews. This would make it 1897-1898.

Hechler declares my movement to be a "Biblical" one, even though I proceed rationally in all points.

*He wants to place my tract in the hands of some German princes. He used to be a tutor in the household of the Grand Duke of Baden, he knows the German Kaiser and thinks he can get me an audience."*¹

Less than a week later, Herzl went to see Hechler.

"Yesterday, Sunday afternoon, I visited the Reverend Hechler. Next to Colonel Goldsmid, he is the most unusual person I have met in this movement so far. He lives on the fourth floor; his windows overlook the Schillerplatz. Even while I was going up the stairs I heard the sound of an organ. The room which I entered was lined with books on every side, floor to ceiling.

Nothing but Bibles.

¹ The complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl, Edited by Raphael Patai, translated by Harry Zohn, Herzl Press, New York, 1960, pg. 312

A window of the very bright room was open, letting in the cool spring air, and Mr. Hechler showed me his Biblical treasures. Then he spread out before me his chart of comparative history, and finally a map of Palestine. It is a large military staff map in four sheets which, when laid out, covered the entire floor.

‘We have prepared the ground for you!’ Hechler said triumphantly....’

Herzl confesses in his diary his true motivation for coming to see Hechler.

‘Next we came to the heart of the business. I said to him: (Theodor Herzl to Reverend William Hechler) I must put myself into direct and publicly known relations with a responsible or non responsible rule – that is, with a minister of state or a prince.

Then the Jews will believe in me and follow me.

The most suitable personage would be the German Kaiser. But I must have help if I am to carry out the task. Hitherto I have had nothing but obstacles to combat, and they are eating my strength.’

Hechler excitedly declared, he can do that! He told Herzl he was ready to go to Berlin and speak with the Court Chaplain as well as with Prince Gunther and Prince Heinrich. Hechler not being a wealthy man

asked Herzl if he would be willing to give him the travel expenses.

“Of course I promised them to him at once. They will come to a few hundred guilders, certainly a considerable sacrifice in my circumstances. But I am willing to risk it on the prospect of speaking with the Kaiser.

... The question now is this: when he comes to Berlin, will they pat him on the shoulder ironically and say, “Hechler, old man, don’t let the Jew get you all steamed up?” Or will he stir them? In any case, I shall take the precaution of impressing upon him that he must not say he “came at Herzl’s behest.”

He is an improbable figure when looked at through the quizzical eyes of a Viennese Jewish journalist. But I have to imagine that those who are antithetical to us in every way view him quite differently. So I am sending him to Berlin with the mental reservation that I am not his dupe if he merely wants to take a trip at my expense.

To be sure, I think I detect from certain signs that he is a believer in the prophets. He said, for example, “I have only one scruple: namely, that we must not contribute anything to the fulfillment of the prophecy. But even this scruple is dispelled, for you began your work without me and would complete it without me.

On the other hand, if he only faked these signs which have made me believe in him, he will all the more be a fine instrument for my purposes.

He considers our departure for Jerusalem to be quite imminent and showed me the coat pocket in which he will carry his big map of Palestine when we shall be riding around the Holy Land together. That was his most ingenious and most convincing touch yesterday.”

Herzl had little but confused understandings of how the German Court worked. Herzl had no international recognition, or legitimacy, as the representative of the Jewish world. He had been rejected by the leaders of the Jewish world such as the Rothschilds and the Jewish religious establishment. He needed a world power to publically recognize him and his Zionist movement.

Hechler’s response to Herzl was simple, yes, he could do it. And he did.

Under Hechler’s tutelage and guidance, Herzl was introduced to the German Court and directly to the Kaiser. Herzl was then publically acknowledged by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, twice as the leader of world Zionism, once outside of present day Tel Aviv, and the second time in Jerusalem. It did not matter that the Kaiser had, in

reality, politically rejected Herzl and his Zionist ideas as not being of use to Germany. The world press saw Herzl legitimized. Jewry saw Herzl and Zionism legitimized by the great and powerful.

The correspondent for the London Daily Mail, the most widely circulated and influential newspaper in Great Britain at the time, wrote of Herzl’s public meeting with the Kaiser on the road to Jerusalem outside of Mikeh Israel, Oct. 30, 1898.

“I send you a brief account of one of the most interesting and at the same time most historic incidents it has ever been my fortune to witness in Palestine or elsewhere. On Friday last, 28th inst., at 8:30am, the pupils of Mikveh Israel, under their direct, M. Mayo, the teaching staff, and many of the administrators of the colonies of Baron Edmond de Rothschild, together with a large crowd of colonists, assembled by the triumphal arch, decorated with Turkish and German flags, and awaited the passage of William II en route for Jerusalem. In the group, to the surprise of everyone, was Dr. Theodor Herzl, who is known beforehand to every Jew.

....All this we saw in a coup d’oeil, as the scholars began to sing the German national hymn. We thought the

Imperial party would ride on, but the Emperor, wheeling round his white horse, approached the impassive figure of Dr. Herzl, who stood leaning against a plough, the symbol of our new life in Palestine. All eyes and ears were turned to the Emperor, who riding right up to Dr. Herzl, dropping his reins, extended both hands and shook Dr. Herzl's hands with great warmth, and asked him how he fared. 'Thank you,' replied Dr. Herzl, in a voice that reached the ears of all. The horse grew impatient, but the Emperor seized his rein with his left hand, and still continuing to press the right hand of Dr. Herzl, continued the conversation for some few minutes. No one heard what passed after the first courtesies.

...At length the conversation was over and we heard the Emperor's friendly 'Good day, doctor,' his face beaming with pleasure, and renewing the hand-clasp, he rode away. 'Hoch Kaiser Wilhelm' came from the hundreds of throats. But our voice, the voice of all those who had witnessed this most touching meeting, were husky and our eyes were filled with tears. In the minds of all these men, and children, this picture of an Emperor pressing the hands of one of the noblest of our race will live for many a day....The Jewish Question had long engaged the earnest attention of Europe's statesmen. Year by year, it has become more acute. If Dr. Herzl's forthcoming efforts are as successful as the former ones the long-sought solution is found.'³

3 (London) Daily Mail Friday November 18, 1898

The London Daily Mail carried the following story,

November 18, 1898.

An Eastern Surprise

Important Result of the Kaiser's Tour

Sultan and Emperor Agreed in Palestine

Benevolent Sanction Given to the Zionist Movement

One of the most important results, if not the most important, of the Kaiser's visit to Palestine is the immense impetus it has given to Zionism, the movement for the return of the Jews to Palestine. The gain to this cause is the greater since it is immediate, but perhaps more important still is the wide political influence which this Imperial action is like to have.

It has not been generally reported that when the Kaiser visited Constantinople Dr. Herzl, the head of the Zionist movement, was there; again when the Kaiser entered Jerusalem he found Dr. Herzl there. These were no mere coincidences, but the visible signs of accomplished facts.

At the end of last month the Sultan gave his first official to a Zionist deputation headed by Dr. Herzl who is no stranger to Abd-ul Hamid. Almost at the same time the Kaiser, who was in Constantinople, also received Dr. Herzl, and promised to receive a Jewish deputation in Palestine.

What happened at these conferences with the Sultan and the Kaiser may be inferred from subsequent events.

Dr. Herzl and his colleagues left for Palestine almost simultaneously with Kaiser Wilhelm and in spite of the prohibitions against the Jews in force at all ports of entry, they were allowed to land without any difficulty. When the Kaiser was on the road from Jaffa to Jerusalem he stayed for a moment at the Jewish agricultural colony of Mikveh Israel, the beautiful establishment founded by Charles Notter, and now supported by Baron Edmond de Rothschild. Here a triumphal arch was erected, and what took place on the Emperor's arrival is described in this morning's issue of the "Jewish World," the organ of the Zionists in England."

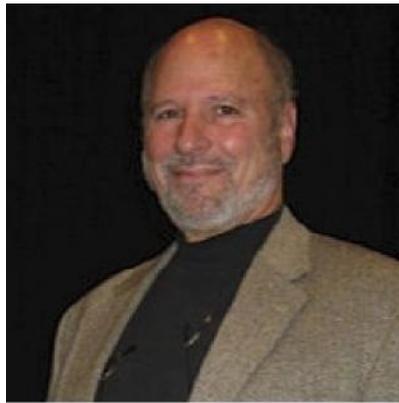
The Kaiser of Germany had officially, publically, recognized Theodor Herzl and Zionism. It did not matter that in private the Kaiser had rejected Herzl and Zionism. Around the world Herzl was recog-

nized as the leader of Zionism and the Jewish movement.

Hechler was successful even if in reality Herzl and Hechler had failed to gain the support of the Kaiser. The world perceived and the world press agreed that Herzl was legitimate.

The world press got it wrong. The Kaiser had kicked Herzl, Zionism and the Jews to the curb. It did not matter. By getting the story of Herzl and the German Kaiser wrong, they got it right.

Rev. William Hechler did what no Jew could do.



About the Author: Jerry Klinger

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Jerry Klinger is President and founder of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation. The Society has completed projects in 25 states and in four countries.

He was born in Washington, D C and is the son of Holocaust survivors. Jerry was Yeshivah educated and as a young man served in the Israeli army.

As an Associate member of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, in coordination with Chairman Warren Miller, built the Jewish Memorial at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. President Obama visited the site in 2009.

Jerry periodically writes for the Jerusalem Post Christian Edition. He is the author of over seventy

articles on American Jewish History and Christian Zionist history. Jerry speaks on Christian Zionism and other topics at Churches, schools and Synagogue communities around the U.S.

He is founder of *To Save A Life*, a charity focused on helping small Israeli and American charities. He is a past President of his Synagogue.

Jerry has a BA, and MA degrees from the University of Maryland. He did Doctoral work at the University of Maryland as well. He recently retired as a senior vice president with Merrill Lynch/ Bank of America. Jerry is married to the former Judith Rice. They have three sons, five grandchildren and a small Cockatzu dog named *Norman*.

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