

ORAL ROBERTS AND THE HEBREW BIBLE

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Abstract

Oral Roberts held a favorable view of Jewish people and viewed the restoration of the state of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This article recounts a key facet of the Jewish outreach of the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, the Hebrew Bible project. In collaboration with Myron Sackett, Oral Roberts sponsored the publication of a Hebrew Bible (Old and New Testaments) and distributed it in Israel and other countries. Roberts was motivated by a desire to play a major role in the conversion of the Jewish people in the last days. By means of exhaustive research of relevant source material housed in the Holy Spirit Research Center at Oral Roberts University, interviews with ORU professors, and relevant scholarly research and publications, the authors reconstructed the story of the Hebrew Bible project, analyzed the motivating factors that propelled it, and assessed the significance of dispensational accents in the eschatology of Oral Roberts.

Introduction

This article will recount a story known by relatively few in the Oral Roberts University (ORU) community.¹ The Hebrew Bible project was a key component of Oral Roberts' global vision. Of the seven world outreaches Roberts announced in 1955, he prioritized "a special work among the Jewish people."² The Jewish people and land of Israel had a treasured place in the heart of Oral Roberts. Between 1954 and 1969, he made five trips to Israel, filming holy sites, offering biblical commentary, and ministering with the World Action singers and gospel teams of Oral Roberts University.³ Roberts sponsored the distribution of over 100,000 Hebrew Bibles published by Evangeliiipress of Orebro, Sweden, under the aegis of the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association (OREA). In one instance, Oral and Evelyn Roberts presented a copy of the Hebrew Bible to former Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion. Roberts not only distributed Hebrew Bibles in Israel, but also had copper trunks with these Bibles buried in the caves of Petra and remote locations in Israel. Roberts' reasoning for burying the Bibles will be related below as we tell the story of the Hebrew Bible project and explain its relation to Roberts' trips to Israel and his views on eschatology.⁴

A close reading of Oral Roberts' early writings clearly shows that Israel had a special place in his heart. As with many evangelicals and Pentecostals of his day, Roberts attributed prime significance to the restoration of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In his famous "Fourth Man" sermon, Roberts asks, "Did you know that an entire nation is on the move across the face of the earth right now? Did you know that the Jews are returning to Palestine in unprecedented numbers?" He went on to say, "The Jews are returning in unbelief. They may not know it yet but they are returning according to God's timetable." For Roberts, "This is the first preliminary: the returning of the Jews. An unseen force is pulling them back to their ancestral home."⁵ One might ask if Oral Roberts could be considered a Christian Zionist. In his meticulous work, *The Origins of Christian Zionism*, Donald Lewis defines Christian Zionism as "the belief that the Jewish people were destined by God to have a national homeland in Palestine and that Christians were obliged

to use means to enable this to take place.”⁶ Based on the evidence presented below, we will let our readers decide for themselves if Oral Roberts can be classified as a Christian Zionist.

Hebrew Bible Project

Oral Roberts was predisposed to the Hebrew Bible project by his love for the Jews. Early in his adult life he sensed a call to ministry with Jewish people. He recalls, “I knew it in the fall of 1938 when I was just turning 21. At this time, I was in Texas to propose to Evelyn. There was something I had to tell her, but I didn’t know how to begin. The Lord has told me that someday I was to be a missionary to the Jews . . .”⁷ In his “Second Call to Action” of 1955 Roberts announced, “We are to do a special work among the Jewish people. I feel deeply that God is going to visit his ancient people soon, and that we are to have a definite part in this. This call has been on my life ever since God saved me and it must be fulfilled.”⁸ He continued, sizing up the importance of the Jewish outreach, “Now the biggest thing is the Jewish project. This is the big one. We feel the success of or failure of our ministry hinges on the Jewish work.” He announced, “We are going to print the Bible in Hebrew We are going to distribute the Bible among the Jews of the world, but principally in Israel. Dr. Myron Sackett has just joined forces with us. Brother Lester Sumrall is going to set up our national headquarter in Jerusalem. He’s going there to get workers and get these Bibles out. He’s going to preach and prepare the way for me to go in person to hold a meeting.” Roberts then went on to pinpoint his prime motivation, averring, “People, if you will bless the Jews, God will bless you. But if you curse them, you will be cursed. The Bible says it. History proves it. They are a wonderful people and I love them. I love them and make no apology for it.”⁹

The attitude Roberts espoused is known as philo-Semitism (love for the Jewish people), the opposite of anti-Semitism (hatred of Jewish people). Roberts was keenly aware that many Jews did not trust Christians due to Christian anti-Semitism and the Nazi Holocaust. They remember how Germany, a Christian nation, put so many of them death, concluding that this is evidence that “the Christians are

really Jew-killers.” Roberts countered by pointing out that during the Holocaust there were “Christian people who hid the Jews from the Germans. Corrie ten Boom, one of the great Christians of all time, hid Jews in her native land, Holland. Corrie ten Boom is just one of thousands of Christians who did this. All over the world today there are so-called Christians who hate the Jews and there are Christians who love the Jews. The Jews are caught in the middle.”¹⁰ Out of love for the Jewish people, Roberts opposed the longstanding supersessionist claim that the Church had replaced Israel as God’s chosen people. “God made His covenant with them and someday they will come back to that covenant, because God’s gifts and God’s callings are never recalled.”¹¹ He insisted that “God has not cast away his ancient people, rather He is preparing their hearts for the mass acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah at His second advent. The Jews will then believe in Jesus of Nazareth, the only way to salvation for Jew and Gentile alike.”¹² In the interest of evangelizing the Jewish people, Oral Roberts embraced the Hebrew Bible project.

Distribution of the Hebrew Bible in Israel did not originate with Oral Roberts. During the nineteenth century biblical scholars associated with the Christian mission to the Jews translated the Greek New Testament into Hebrew.¹³ The origins of Roberts’ Hebrew Bible project can be traced back to Florentius Hallzon (1886–1969), owner of *Evangelii*press in Orebro, Sweden, and publisher of *Hemmets Van*, a widely read Christian newspaper in Scandinavia. Hallzon contributed large sums to fund Jewish immigration to Israel and subsidized the publication of a Hebrew version of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, for distribution by mission organizations. The British and Foreign Bible Society in London also published Hebrew Bibles, but was not able to meet the growing demand after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. Hallzon’s *Evangelii*press met that need by printing 55,000 Hebrew Bibles in 1953 to be distributed for free in Israel.¹⁴ The primary contact for Hallzon in Israel was a Finnish Pentecostal, Kaarlo Syvanto, located in Tiberias. Syvanto obtained Hebrew Bibles from *Evangelii*press and in 1956 started giving them to Israeli public schools. During his forty years in Israel Syvanto was credited with distributing over 400,000 Hebrew Bibles. It was Syvanto who suggested to Myron

Sackett that he make an arrangement to procure Hebrew Bibles from Evangeliipress. Hallzon was glad to do so at a cost of two dollars apiece. Thus began the Hebrew Bible project, led by Sackett under the aegis of OREA.¹⁶

Myron Sackett, a close associate of Aimee Semple McPherson, superintendent of the International Foursquare Church, and founder of Christian Friends of Israel, joined the staff of OREA on April 1, 1954,¹⁷ serving until his death in August 1967.¹⁸ Oral Roberts had only a vague understanding of his call to minister to the Jewish people until he met Sackett and realized what could be done by OREA to fulfill that call.¹⁹ The first interaction between Oral Roberts and Myron Sackett occurred in 1953 when Mae Sackett, Myron's wife, received healing at an Oral Roberts Crusade in Sacramento, California.²⁰ A personal meeting was arranged through the mutual friendship of Bob DeWeese, Roberts' associate evangelist and Sackett's peer from Bible college.²¹ Moreover, Myron Sackett's ministry to the Jews began well before becoming involved with OREA. In 1945, he spoke with a Messianic Jew who believed that God had called Sackett to a ministry of Jewish evangelism. Subsequently Sackett received a "vision and burden for the salvation of the Jewish people."²² He then visited the land of Israel with some regularity. During his first visit to the newly formed state of Israel in 1949, Sackett's burden for Jewish evangelism increased measurably. As he walked the streets of Haifa, it "seemed almost to crush [him] to [his] knees."²³ After this experience, as Sackett was praying in his hotel room, he heard an audible voice saying, "Give my people my Word (the Bible) both Old and New Testaments printed in Hebrew."²⁴ Sackett was convinced that Bible distribution would be the most effective method of reaching the Jewish people with the Christian message. He promptly "organized the 'Christian Friends of Israel' in an effort to interest as many people as I could in a Hebrew Bible program for Israel."²⁵ Through this organization Sackett promoted his evangelistic ministry and published a magazine called *Christian Friends of Israel Messenger* after the merger with OREA.²⁶ Sackett discussed joining his ministry with Oral Roberts as soon as he discovered that Roberts also had a passion for the Jewish people. His affiliation with OREA was confirmed in a dream that "was so real I knew it was the Lord telling me to join

forces with Brother Roberts to take the gospel to the Jewish people and abundant life to the peoples of the world.”²⁷ In this dream Sackett saw himself driving his small car up into a large bus that Roberts was driving.²⁷ On April 1, 1954,²⁹ Myron Sackett officially “consolidated Christian Friends of Israel, Inc., with Healing Waters, Inc.”³⁰

Sackett was convinced that joining OREA had greatly increased his ability to reach the Jewish people. He stated, “Now, instead of reaching hundreds of people with this message of Jewish evangelism, I am reaching thousands. Instead of reaching scores of Jewish people with the gospel message, I am reaching hundreds.”³¹ Sackett recalled that he went from distributing hundreds of Hebrew Bibles to thousands, with so many requests coming in for Hebrew Bibles that “the regular printing houses could not supply Bibles fast enough to meet our needs.” Consequently, Sackett arranged for Evangelii Press in Orebro, Sweden, to be in charge of printing Bibles for distribution by OREA.³² As a result, many Jewish people received Hebrew Bibles and asked for follow-up from OREA. Sackett wrote, “When I tell them that I am working with Oral Roberts, the door is usually opened immediately, for they have seen him on television. They are interested and want to know more about this ministry.”³³ Although partnering with Oral Roberts undoubtedly helped Sackett reach more people with his message, his bold and tenacious efforts also deserve credit, as he stopped frequently “in the course of his travels for the Oral Roberts ministry” to “testify to the Jews” wherever he could.³⁴

Sackett served the Jewish outreach of OREA in many ways. He was responsible for the printing and placement of “more than one hundred thousand copies of the entire Bible in the Hebrew language throughout Israel and other nations where Jewish people were interested in having both Old and New Testaments.”³⁵ Oral Roberts himself estimated that OREA had placed “more than 150,000 Hebrew Bibles in Israel and the nations of the world.”³⁶ However, the goal that Oral Roberts and Myron Sackett originally set of distributing 500,000 Hebrew Bibles in Israel alone³⁷ was never reached. Sackett met with rabbis and Jewish leaders frequently on behalf of OREA.³⁸ Sackett was also Roberts’ personal guide for several of his trips to Israel, beginning in December 1953.³⁹ He also frequently wrote articles for OREA magazines, aggressively

promoted the Jewish outreach on his worldwide travels, and reported on Roberts' healing crusades and trips to Israel.

The Jewish outreach, including the Hebrew Bible project, was fourth on the list of OREA World Outreaches.⁴⁰ Oral Roberts himself heavily promoted the distribution of the Hebrew Bible, "asking his partners to give to sponsor a radio or television program, to buy a piece of essential equipment, or to provide Bibles for Jewish families."⁴¹ Hebrew Bibles were distributed free of charge to any who requested them, and thus they had a wide reach. Roberts recounted missionaries saying to him, "Brother Roberts, your Bibles are the only Bibles we can get to give out free. We got a few dozen to sell, but the people will not buy them."⁴² While this may have been indicative of a degree of apathy towards purchasing the Scriptures, Roberts viewed it as a "thrill" and a "challenge" that the outreach could increase interest in the Bible among the Jewish people.⁴³ The Hebrew Bibles were placed "as textbooks in Israeli schools" at the requests of administrators to be used for teaching Hebrew.⁴⁴ Not only was the Hebrew Bible used within Israeli schools, but supposedly it could also be used by "other Jews over the world" to learn Hebrew.⁴⁵ According to Roberts, the Hebrew Bibles were "printed in the pure Hebrew language and as such are welcomed by the Jews as reading and study material," to the extent that Roberts saw them "wherever" he went in the land of Israel.⁴⁶ When Sackett was in South America, he met many Jewish people who "all want to go home to Israel," and Sackett and his team prayed for them and gave them "Hebrew Bibles to take with them" to Israel.⁴⁷ They were given as gifts to Jewish leaders and rabbis. However, regardless of whether Jewish recipients requested a Hebrew Bible or it was given without prior request, Sackett was "sure that God has another reason for the Jewish people's reading the Bibles," and he operated on the assumption that "We put the Bible in their hands; they read it; the Holy Spirit does the work."⁴⁸ When OREA's Hebrew Bible was utilized in schools, the Old Testament was taught "in the rabbinical manner," but since there was no rabbinical method for the New Testament, everyone "read the New Testament together. Then everyone believes about it what he desires to believe."⁴⁹ Oral Roberts and Myron Sackett were particularly encouraged to discover that

Israeli students were “permitted to take their Bibles with them” after graduation, ostensibly having a lifelong effect.⁵⁰

Sackett’s death in August of 1967 prompted Oral Roberts to recount all that his friend had done for the Jewish people and the ministries of OREA. He was reminded of how “deeply moved” Sackett was at the founding of ORU, saying “he saw the potential of the University in the light of what the graduating students could do to further the Jewish Outreach and all of our outreaches.”⁵¹ On his next visit to Israel with ORU students, Roberts cherished memories of Sackett, stating, “Without the 15 years during which Dr. Myron Sackett and I worked in this land, beginning with the government leaders, the students could not have had this open door.”⁵² He shuddered at Sackett’s “foreboding” statement that his trip in the summer of 1966 “may be my last trip to Israel,” as it was.⁵³ Finally, Roberts asserted that he would “accelerate” the Hebrew Bible ministry and “head up the Jewish Outreach” himself, hoping that he would “return to Israel next summer to explore new ways for reaching the Jewish people with the Gospel.”⁵⁴ There is little mention of Sackett in OREA magazines or Roberts’ books after this article, and there is scant mention of the Hebrew Bible project. Roberts asserted, “We are continuing our ministry in Israel and it is beginning to get before the people.”⁵⁵ Sackett’s wife, Mae, continued to work with OREA, being a prayer partner for the Abundant Life Prayer Group.⁵⁶ Roberts believed that Myron Sackett was “looking down from Heaven” at both the “Hebrew ministry and the Abundant Life Prayer Group.”⁵⁷

As to the success of the Jewish outreach, Harrell concludes that “the objectives of Oral Roberts’ Israel outreach remained quite limited and only minimally successful.”⁵⁸ The impact of the Hebrew Bible project is difficult to ascertain. Longstanding ORU faculty members still have copies of the Hebrew Bible in their possession. When asked if they could confirm that the Hebrew Bible published by ORU was in fact placed in caves in Petra and remote locations in Israel or that these Bibles were located by anyone, they answered in the negative. Hence, the significance of the Hebrew Bible project probably pertains to the publicity it afforded to Oral Roberts and the mission of ORU and OREA. It is likely that the Jewish outreach resonated with evangelical

Christians worldwide who embraced pro-Israel sentiments, thereby raising the stature of Oral Roberts and his ministries. One could argue that Oral Roberts made a contribution to the growth of Christian Zionism worldwide. Given the global reach of Roberts' crusades, television and radio broadcasts, tape ministry, and publications, through which he promoted the Jewish Outreach and the Hebrew Bible project, Roberts may have played a notable role in the emergence of Christian Zionism as a transnational movement.⁵⁹

Motivating Factors

In the next section of the article, we discuss two motivating factors that propelled the Hebrew Bible project, namely, Oral Roberts' trips to Israel and his eschatology. Roberts' trips to Israel served as a focal point for the Hebrew Bible project. They also provided exhilarating religious experiences that Roberts would report with intense emotion. He wrote, "There is a feeling akin to awe that sweeps over me when I step on the soil of Israel."⁶⁰ Memories of these travels, recorded in magazines and books, display Roberts' affection for the Jewish people and the nation of Israel.

On his first trip in December 1953, Roberts "received a great new spiritual understanding of Jesus Christ and of his love for the people of the world."⁶¹ Consequently, he hatched plans for ministry in Israel, hoping to "come back to old Jerusalem to the Arab side as well as to the Israel side."⁶² He stated, "We hope to bring our big tent and I hope to have a great Holy Spirit outpouring. I hope to see a tremendous nation-wide healing campaign." Roberts envisioned "thousands of Jews and Arabs who are sick and who need to be saved and healed."⁶³ Parenthetically, we should note that Oral Roberts never brought his tent to Israel and did not hold a revival crusade in the region. After going into the Upper Room, the site that commemorates the New Testament Pentecost, and praying there, Roberts surmised, "We know something is happening to us. We have been in the upper room. We are now out of the upper room with fire in our souls."⁶⁴ This Upper Room experience so impressed Roberts that ten years later when on a trip around the world, he stopped in Jerusalem, again visiting the Upper Room "for

prayer and dedication” and to “pray for the partners of this ministry.”⁶⁵

Oral Roberts was proud of his knowledge of the land of Israel and professed great love for the Israeli people. On his second trip in 1955 Roberts filmed “three major television programs.”⁶⁶ On this trip he was privileged to “present Premier David Ben-Gurion a personally inscribed Hebrew Bible, with both the Old and New Testaments.”⁶⁷ According to Roberts’ recollection, he approached Ben Gurion with a Hebrew Bible and asked, “Would you accept this as a token of the love of the Christian people who also love Israel?” Ben Gurion replied, “Mr. Roberts, I would be very proud to have it.”⁶⁸ Roberts asserted that after leaving Israel, he “did not lose the spell that had fallen over [him].”⁶⁹ Indeed, Roberts’ feeling toward Israel significantly motivated his Jewish outreach work.

Perhaps the most significant of Oral Roberts’ trips to Israel took place in 1968 with the World Action Singers from ORU.⁷⁰ Roberts boasted that Israeli government officials met his entourage at the airport and “the press took pictures and the airport authorities got us quickly through customs without opening our bags (nearly every bag contained Hebrew Bibles!)”⁷¹ He remarked that Israel and Jerusalem were drastically different from when he first saw them, but even the fifth time seeing Jerusalem, he was astonished by the “quickenings” he felt as he observed “the fulfillment of prophecy.”⁷² On this trip, Evelyn Roberts stated she “always” cried in Jerusalem thinking about the Jewish people.⁷³ She was especially encouraged by the World Action Team’s visit because she trusted that “the Holy Spirit will help us to allow Jesus to shine through us as never before.”⁷⁴ Oral felt “an entirely different spirit” in Israel on this visit, his fifth time in the land, which he felt was being restored “as a direct result of prophecy.”⁷⁵ He was inspired by the daily “bitter cry” of the Jews at the Wailing Wall, “Come, Messiah. Come, Messiah.”⁷⁶ The World Action Team led an event on the Hebrew University campus. They also performed in Galilee and were so well-received that the tour guide office was “flooded with phone calls from people who had been there.”⁷⁷ The World Action Singers gave an encore performance to Israeli soldiers near the Syrian border, even though they had to be evacuated due to security concerns.⁷⁸ The highlight of the trip for Oral Roberts was the opportunity to go on Radio Israel. Roberts

claimed that he never expected in his “fondest hopes” to “include Radio Israel” on the trip, especially not “on the evening before their Sabbath (like our Saturday night in the U.S.) when the entire nation would be listening.”⁷⁹ He was especially ecstatic for the prime opportunity, “as president of a University, having a group of students with me,” to “give a nationwide witness to Israel.”⁸⁰

More than anything else, Oral Roberts’ motivation for the Hebrew Bible project was grounded in his eschatology. Harrell observes, as a “devout premillennialist,” Roberts felt that he was seeing Old Testament prophecy fulfilled in the “land where momentous happenings were about to begin, including the conversion of the Jewish nation to Christianity.”⁸¹ When Roberts was on the Mount of Olives in 1954, he was overcome with a premonition that “Jesus was coming soon.” Gripped by a sense of Christ’s soon coming, kneeling with tears streaming down his face, Roberts cried out to God, “Wait a little, Jesus, wait a little. Let me go back to America and warn the people of your soon coming. Give me and others a little more time to tell the people to get ready. Give us time to save souls and heal the sick. Give us a little more time, Jesus.”⁸² Speaking of the last days, Roberts opined, “I believe our Hebrew Bibles are a powerful witness for that day and a vital key to its glorious dawning.”⁸³

In his writings Roberts often delineated a dispensational scheme of events that would occur with Israel at center stage in the end times. He viewed the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel as a sign of the imminence of the end times. In *God’s Timetable for the End of Time*, he exclaimed, “Last, but by no means the least of the definite signs of the last days, is the return of the Jews to Palestine.”⁸⁴ Roberts believed, as did his fellow dispensationalists, that the return of the Jews would set in motion a series of apocalyptic events ending with the battle of Armageddon. In the intervening period it was thought that “with eyes opened the Jews will accept Jesus as Messiah.”⁸⁵ Roberts was convinced that “God’s time will arrive. And when it does, thousands of Jews will avidly read the Bibles which have remained unread in their homes. The Holy Spirit will then reveal Jesus to them as their true Messiah.”⁸⁶ The connection between the Hebrew Bible and the plight of the Jews during the tribulation period will be made apparent as we

follow the train of Roberts' thoughts. Roberts explains, "The 42 months of the Tribulation shall be a period of unparalleled suffering involving all nations of the earth, and especially Israel."⁸⁷ During this time, the Antichrist will rebuild the Jewish Temple on Mount Moriah and set up his image, which will have the capacity to speak, compelling the Jews to fall down and worship the Antichrist. To further the deception, the "False Prophet shall publish a new Bible" portraying the Antichrist as God and deceiving the Jewish people into acclaiming him as their Messiah.⁸⁸ However, they will come to their senses when they realize that the abomination of desolation has come upon them, as foretold by the prophet Daniel.⁸⁹ Then, Roberts predicts, "The fires of the Great Tribulation will break upon the Jews with intense fury. Neither man nor woman will be spared. Upon [their] refusal to worship the Antichrist, they shall be slaughtered like sheep with the exception of those fortunate enough to escape to the mountain fortresses."⁹⁰ Then God will do a mysterious work. He will open the eyes of his ancient people to see that Jesus is their Messiah. Roberts averred, "That is another reason why we have distributed more than 100,000 Bibles in the Holy Land. Driven, humiliated, persecuted, the Jewish people at last shall realize that true peace and real security are to be found in the Holy One of Israel, who 'came unto his own and his own received him not' In the caves and dens of the earth the Jewish people will realize that they have rejected their own beloved Messiah."⁹¹ At this very moment, Roberts predicts, Jesus Christ will reveal himself and all Israel will see whom they have pierced and they will be saved. Christ will come back to earth, landing on the Mount of Olives according to Zechariah's prophecy, and he will proceed to set up his kingdom over the whole earth.⁹²

In his commentary on Daniel and Revelation, Oral Roberts reiterated his reasoning for burying Hebrew Bibles in the caves of Petra and Israel: "In the dens of the earth the Jewish people will realize that they have rejected their own beloved Messiah."⁹³ During "the time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer 30:7), a popular dispensational theme, Roberts predicts, the Jews who refuse to worship the Antichrist will seek refuge by hiding in caves. He posed the question, "Did you know that in the almost impenetrable mountains of Petra just southeast of Jerusalem

there are thousands of Bibles in the Hebrew language encased in covers, hidden away in the various caves for that day when the Jewish people shall see that they have worshiped the wrong one, when they shall start reading the Bible—the New Testament—and see who the Messiah really is Then will every Israeli have his eyes opened. He will know that he has been deceived.”⁹⁴

Theological Implications

One could question the veracity of Roberts’ predictions concerning the end times. We will leave it to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. This much can be said: Oral Roberts viewed the Hebrew Bible project as crucial to the conversion of the Jews in the end times. We can commend Roberts for his confidence in the prescience of biblical prophecy. He deserves credit for avowing that God’s covenant relationship with his ancient people is unconditional, as Romans 11:2 affirms, “God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.” That Israel stands today confirms the big picture of Roberts’ prognostications. However, this is not all that should be said. Hence, we will take a closer look at two theological implications of the dispensational accents in the eschatology of Oral Roberts.

Many of the Pentecostal forebears of Oral Roberts uncritically embraced the dispensational hermeneutic formulated by John Nelson Darby and popularized by Cyrus I. Scofield.⁹⁵ The editors of several Pentecostal periodicals promoted the Scofield Reference Bible, even after it became apparent that the interpretive stance of its study notes was opposed to the distinctive Pentecostal emphasis on Spirit baptism with the accompaniment of speaking in tongues. To be fair, we acknowledge that dispensationalism provided early Pentecostals with a philosophy of history with which they could undergird the claim that their movement signified a new epoch in the history of Christianity.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, unintended implications followed from the Pentecostal appropriation of dispensationalism.

The first implication has to do with theological consistency. A central feature of Pentecostal and Charismatic theology is the belief that the outpouring of charismatic gifts represents the fulfillment

of the prophecy of the “latter rain” in Joel 2:23, 28. In opposition to this premise, dispensationalists held to the assumption that the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit did not continue after the apostolic age. According to Darby, a great parenthesis occurred in church history in the early second century, marking the termination of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit bestowed on the Day of Pentecost. Since dispensationalists believed that God himself had abolished the supernatural gifts, most of them regarded their purported reappearance in the twentieth century as a matter of human delusion at best, and Satanic counterfeit at worst. Hence, there was an inherent inconsistency between the basic tenets of dispensationalism and Pentecostal-Charismatic theology.⁹⁷

The second implication pertains to accuracy of Roberts’ predictions. Along with dispensationalists in general, Oral Roberts viewed the return of the Jews to Palestine as the hinge that would open the door for final redemption in the “kingdom age.” He viewed the Jews as “God’s timepiece” and construed the restoration of the state of Israel as a prophetic sign of the imminence of the second coming of Christ. Roberts understood certain select biblical passages to predict a fixed sequence of historical events that would culminate during the last days in the city of Jerusalem with the Jewish people converting to Jesus as their Messiah. This eschatological scenario colored his interpretation of current events transpiring in Palestine in the second half of the twentieth century. Oral Roberts believed that the immigration of Jewish people to Palestine was a sign of the imminence of the second coming of Christ and a signal that very soon a chain reaction would be activated leading to the war of Armageddon and the establishment of Christ’s millennial kingdom.

In retrospect, it is evident that image and reality parted company in the fine details of Oral Roberts’ prognostications. Assuredly, what he predicted concerning the mass conversion of the Jews has not happened. Furthermore, Roberts may have left a legacy that is an obstacle to peace in Israel/Palestine. By elevating the role of the Jews in their eschatological scenario, Roberts and other evangelical Christians in America blocked from their field of vision the rights of other peoples, Arab Muslims and Christians, who made up the majority of the

population of Palestine.⁹⁸ As a result, Oral Roberts' image of current events in Israel represented a skewed perspective rather than an accurate picture of Israel/Palestine as it is, the homeland of indigenous adherents of the Abrahamic faiths including Eastern Christians who since the Day of Pentecost have maintained a continuous presence in the Holy Land.

Conclusion

There is much to be learned from our telling of the story of Oral Roberts and the Hebrew Bible. Oral Roberts left a legacy of philo-Semitism, a love for God's ancient people. Early in his life he sensed a call to do a work among the Jewish people. To fulfill this calling, he included a Jewish outreach in his global vision and in collaboration with Myron Sackett promoted the publication and distribution of the Hebrew Bible. During his five trips to Israel Roberts confirmed his conviction that he had a role to play in the eschatological drama unfolding in current events. The commitment of Oral Roberts to stand with the people of Israel is commendable, even though his prediction concerning the conversion of the Jews by means of the Hebrew Bible has not yet measured up to the prophet's test of Deuteronomy 18:21–22.

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Notes

- 1 We are indebted to Kyle Hansen, whose 2015 ORU senior paper, “Oral Roberts and Israel: The Forgotten Story,” brought to our attention the story recounted in this article.
- 2 David Edwin Harrell, Jr., *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1985), 134–35, note 157.
- 3 Roberts filmed three television programs during a trip to Israel in 1954—“The Christmas Story,” “The Easter Story,” and “The Second Coming of Jesus.” G. H. Montgomery, “The March of Deliverance,” *America’s Healing Magazine*, February 1955, 4 (hereafter *AHM*). For video of Oral Roberts in Israel, see Oral Roberts, “Trip to the Holy Land with Oral Roberts and Other Testimonies” (2018), *Oral Roberts Collection*, 9, http://digitalshowcase.oru.edu/or_collection/9.
- 4 For autobiographical information on Oral Roberts, see Oral Roberts, *Oral Roberts’ Life Story as Told by Himself* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts, 1952); Oral Roberts, *The Call: An Autobiography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972); Oral Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry* (La Vergne, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998). For an objective biography, Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*. For a critical account of Oral Roberts, see Jerry Sholes, *Give Me That Prime-Time Religion: An Insider’s Report on the Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association* (Hawthorn Books, 1979). For OREA magazines, see *Healing Waters* (November 1947–August 1953); *America’s Healing Magazine* (September 1953–December 1955); *Healing* (January 1956–June 1956); and *Abundant Life* (July 1956–December 1991). For Oral Roberts’ eschatology, see Oral Roberts, *God’s Timetable for the End of Time* (Tulsa, OK: Heliotrope, 1969); Oral Roberts, *The Drama of the End-Time* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1963); Oral Roberts, *The Second Coming of Jesus: Sooner Than You Think* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts, 1995); Oral Roberts, *The Book of Daniel and the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ with Personal Commentary* (Tulsa, OK: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1968); Oral Roberts, *The New Testament Comes Alive*, 3 vols. (Nashville, TN: Parthenon Press, 1984).
- 5 Oral Roberts, *The Fourth Man and Other Famous Sermons* (Tulsa: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1958), 71.
- 6 Donald M. Lewis, *The Origins of Christian Zionism: Lord Shaftesbury and Evangelical Support for a Jewish Homeland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.
- 7 Oral Roberts, “Second Call to Action,” *AHM*, January 1955, 6.
- 8 Roberts, “Second Call to Action,” 7.
- 9 Oral Roberts, “You and I Together with God Can Change the World,” *AHM*, October 1955, 15.
- 10 Oral Roberts, *The New Testament Comes Alive, Vol. 2, Acts—Philemon* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1984), 204–5.
- 11 Roberts, *New Testament Comes Alive, Vol. 2, Acts—Philemon*, 207.
- 12 Oral Roberts, *God’s Timetable for the End of Time* (Tulsa: Heliotrope, 1969), 26.
- 13 Robert Lisle Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark* (Jerusalem: Dugith Publishers, 1969), 159.

14 More countries began to see the need for Hebrew Scriptures and the lack thereof in Israel. In 1953, the Million Testament Campaign, headquartered in Philadelphia and led by George T. B. Davis and his Jewish wife Rose, began to provide New Testaments in Hebrew and other languages to Jews in the Holy Land and to Jews throughout the world. Petra van der Zande, *From McComb to Jerusalem: Life Story of Irene (Shaloma) Levi* (Jerusalem: Tsur Tsina Publications, 2017), 74.

15 Myron Sackett was born on October 20, 1899, in Leechburg, Pennsylvania. As a young adult he experienced salvation and baptism in the Holy Spirit at an Assemblies of God church in Washington, D.C. Six months later he sensed a call to the ministry. In 1925 he met Aimee Semple McPherson in Rochester, New York, reporting later that she said, “Brother, come to California, I need you in my ministry.” In 1928 he married Francis Mae Sheerlein and in 1929 they moved to California and became active members of Angelus Temple and attended Life Bible College (LIFE = Lighthouse of International Foursquare Evangelism). After graduation Myron and Mae were both ordained as ministers of the International Foursquare Church. The Sacketts were close associates of Aimee McPherson, managing her crusades. In 1938 McPherson appointed Myron as superintendent of the California conference. McPherson passed away in September 1944 from a cerebral hemorrhage suffered during the night following a meeting held at the Foursquare Church in Oakland, California, at which the head pastors were Myron and Mae Sackett. Sackett went on to found Christian Friends of Israel and serve as an evangelist to the Jewish people for thirteen years, making several trips to Israel and distributing the Hebrew Bible to Israeli schools. “Testimony and Sermon of Dr. Sackett,” August 8, 1960, Transcript of Audio Tape #5072-71762/12, Holy Spirit Research Center, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK; “Interview of Francis Mae Sackett: Worker with Sister Aimee McPherson,” October 25, 1987, Transcript of Audio Tape #5226-86520/12, Holy Spirit Research Center, Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, OK.

16 Unto Kunnas, *Kaarlo Syväntö: Pioneer in Israel 1947–1998* (Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 20016), 105–6, 110–12, 118.

17 G. H. Montgomery, “Dr. Sackett Joins Oral Roberts’ Staff,” *AHM*, June 1955, 7. Montgomery gives April 1, 1955, as the date on which Sackett incorporated his ministry with OREA. Oral Roberts gives April 1, 1954, as the date in “How I Remember Myron Sackett,” *Abundant Life*, November 1967, 24 (hereafter *AL*).

18 Oral Roberts, “How I Remember Myron Sackett,” *AL*, November 1967, 23. Roberts states that Sackett “died in the early 1970s” in *Your Road to Recovery* (Nashville: Oliver-Nelson, 1986), 103.

19 It should be noted that Oral Roberts claimed to have “met with David Ben-Gurion twice, as well as the mayor of Jerusalem and other top officials in Israel. I had negotiated with them a way to get the complete Bible—both Old Testament and New Testament—into fairly wide circulation in Israel. They had agreed that if we printed the Bibles in Hebrew, they would put them in the libraries, schools, and other government places as a way of getting the people to relearn the Hebrew language. I dreamed of printing one hundred thousand copies of the Bible for Israel. Dr. Sackett had a similar dream.” Roberts, *Your Road to Recovery*, 103–4.

- 20 Myron Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews, God's Ancient People," *AL*, February 1962, 20.
- 21 Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews," 20.
- 22 Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews," 19.
- 23 Myron Sackett, "Can Israel Live Again?" *AL*, February 1958, 8.
- 24 Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews," 20.
- 25 Sackett, "Can Israel Live Again?" 9.
- 26 An advertisement for a February-March free copy of *Christian Friends of Israel Messenger* is found on p. 20 of the March 1956 issue of *Healing*.
- 27 Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews," 21.
- 28 Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews," 21.
- 29 Roberts, "How I Remember Myron Sackett," 24.
- 30 Myron Sackett, "Developments of the Israel Work," *Healing*, June 1956, 14.
- 31 Sackett, "Developments of the Israel Work," 14.
- 32 Sackett, "Can Israel Live Again?" 9.
- 33 Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews," 21.
- 34 William P. Sterne, "The People's Needs Are Met in 100 Ways and More!" *AL*, June 1960, 17.
- 35 Roberts, *Expect a Miracle: My Life and Ministry*, 150–51.
- 36 Oral Roberts, "22 Years Ago This Month It All Started," *AL*, May 1969, 7.
- 37 Roberts, "You and I Together with God Can Change the World," 16.
- 38 Myron Sackett, "My Call to Witness and Bring Deliverance to Jewish Rabbis," *AL*, September 1962, 17–19. See also Myron Sackett, "Some of My Experiences with Jewish Leaders," *AL*, December 1962, 20–23.
- 39 Oral Roberts, "My Trip to the Holy Land," *AHM*, March 1954, 2.
- 40 Oral Roberts, "Second Call to Action," *AHM*, January 1955, 7. For the OREA official start of the Hebrew Bible ministry, see "Fourth Phase of World Outreach Launched!" *AHM*, December 1955, 17.
- 41 Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 141.
- 42 Oral Roberts, "The Spell of Israel over Me!" *AL*, July 1959, 8.
- 43 Roberts, "The Spell of Israel over Me!" 8.
- 44 Oral Roberts, *How to Be Personally Prepared for the Second Coming of Christ* (Tulsa: Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association, 1967), 41.
- 45 Hilliard Griffin, "God Needs Us," *AL*, September 1959, 7.
- 46 Roberts, "The Spell of Israel over Me!" 8.
- 47 Myron Sackett, "Dr. Myron Sackett Encourages 'The Dispersed of Judah' in South America," *AL*, May 1958, 10.
- 48 Myron Sackett, "Hebrew Bibles Go to Eight Nations," *AL*, May 1957, 17.

- 49 Sackett, "My Call to Witness," 19.
- 50 Sackett, "My Call to Witness," 19.
- 51 Roberts, "How I Remember Myron Sackett," 25.
- 52 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 53.
- 53 Roberts, "How I Remember Myron Sackett," 25.
- 54 Roberts, "How I Remember Myron Sackett," 23
- 55 Oral Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action in London and Israel," *AL*, November 1968, 12.
- 56 Oral Roberts, "Mae Sackett Continues Husband's Soul-Winning Ministry," *AL*, November 1968, 14.
- 57 Roberts, "Mae Sackett Continues Husband's Soul-Winning Ministry," 14.
- 58 Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 137.
- 59 Faydra L. Shapiro, "Thank You Israel, for Supporting America: The Transnational Flow of Christian Zionist Resources," *Identities* 19:5 (1 September 2012), 619; Joseph Williams, "The Pentecostalization of Christian Zionism," *Church History* 84:1 (March 2015), 161.
- 60 Roberts, "The Spell of Israel over Me!" 3.
- 61 Sackett, "How We Are Taking Christ to the Jews," 21.
- 62 Roberts, "My Trip to the Holy Land," 13.
- 63 Roberts, "My Trip to the Holy Land," 16.
- 64 Roberts, "My Trip to the Holy Land," 17.
- 65 Oral Roberts, "The Growth of a Miracle," *AL*, February 1964, 6.
- 66 G. H. Montgomery, "The March of Deliverance," *AHM*, February 1955, 4.
- 67 Roberts, "How I Remember Myron Sackett," 24.
- 68 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 41.
- 69 Roberts, *The Drama of the End-Time*, 84.
- 70 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 6.
- 71 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 6.
- 72 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 6.
- 73 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 7.
- 74 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 7.
- 75 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 8.
- 76 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 8.
- 77 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 9.
- 78 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 10–11.
- 79 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 11.
- 80 Roberts, "God Opened the Doors for World Action," 11.

- 81 Harrell, *Oral Roberts: An American Life*, 136.
- 82 Oral Roberts, "The Burning Bush and the Pentecostal Fire," *AHM*, August 1954, 6.
- 83 Roberts, *The Drama of the End-Time*, 86.
- 84 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 23.
- 85 Roberts, *The Drama of the End-Time*, 11.
- 86 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 42–43.
- 87 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 77.
- 88 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 89.
- 89 Oral Roberts, *The New Testament Comes Alive: Vol. 1, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1984), 355.
- 90 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 89.
- 91 Roberts, *God's Timetable for the End of Time*, 90.
- 92 Roberts, *The New Testament Comes Alive: Vol. 1*, 355.
- 93 Roberts, *The Book of Daniel and the Book of the Revelation*, 110.
- 94 Roberts, *The Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation*, 112, 116.
- 95 Dispensationalism is so named because it generally divides history into a series of seven ages or dispensations. In each dispensation God offers prosperity to his people in return for obedience, or judgment in return for disobedience. Darby postulated that there were two divine plans revealed in Scripture. One plan was for the Jews, God's earthly people. The other plan was for Christian Church, God's heavenly people. God's plan for the Jews was revealed through a series of covenants with the nation of Israel, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah. But when the Jews rejected Jesus, interrupting the divine plan, God postponed the kingdom and temporarily removed his hand of blessing from the Jews. From that time on God's redemptive plan for the Jews was put on hold and would not be resumed until the second coming of Christ. Darby believed that the Jews were being punished by being persecuted throughout the world and that the biblical prophecies relating to the Jews would not be completely fulfilled until an indeterminate future time during the millennium. In the meantime, God implemented the second plan by creating a new chosen people, formed mainly of Gentiles, who made up the Church. According to Darby, the return of Christ would be delayed until the gospel is preached to every tribe, every people, and every nation in the world. Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 55; Peter E. Prosser, *Dispensationalist Eschatology and Its Influence on American and Religious Movements* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 255–58.
- 96 Peter Althouse, *Spirit of the Last Days: Pentecostal Eschatology in Conversation with Jurgen Moltmann* (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 17–19, 41–44; Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 52–57; Gerald T. Sheppard, "Pentecostals and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship," *Pneuma* 6:2 (Fall 1984), 9; Grant Wacker, "Playing for Keeps: The

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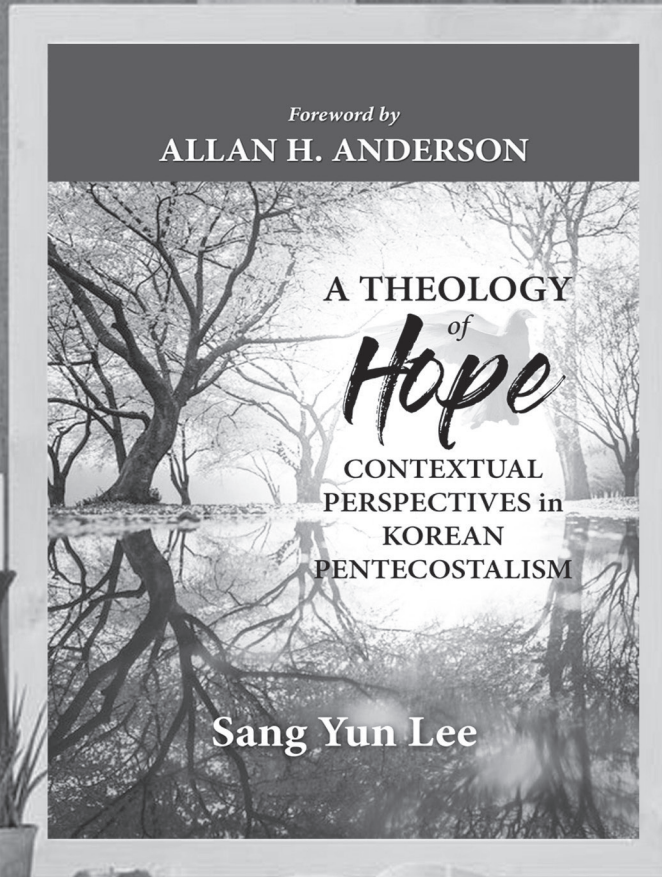
97 Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 145; Frank D. Macchia, “Pentecostal Theology,” in *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. Van Der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1138; Samuel Solivan, *The Spirit, Pathos and Liberation: Toward an Hispanic Pentecostal Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 43), 33.

98 Said Aburish, *The Forgotten Faithful: The Christians of the Holy Land* (London: Quartet Books, 1993), 3.

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