

# The Balfour Declaration and the ways of providence

## 1. Setting the scene

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*The re-establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was a striking fulfilment of prophecy in our own time. Israel's existence as a nation today, after nearly two thousand years of Jewish exile from the Land, may well have caused some of us to start reading our Bibles seriously. For this reason alone, an examination of some of the steps that led up to this momentous event is of considerable interest. One of the more important of those steps was the Balfour Declaration, issued ninety years ago this last November (2 November 1917).*

**A**RTHUR BALFOUR was British prime minister from 1902 to 1906 and foreign secretary during the latter part of the First World War. He had been brought up to know the Bible, and was particularly interested from childhood in the Jews, 'the People of the Book'. Apart from being prime minister (a post he held largely because his uncle, Lord Salisbury, had held it before), he was also an intellectual, having written works of philosophy and religion (for example, *Foundations of Belief*, written in 1895). Balfour was not really a politician (he could always see the other man's point of view!), and he lost the election of 1906 disastrously. He was, however, a statesman, and often had an incisive understanding of the issues of his day. These qualities kept him in or near high office for most of the rest of his life, irrespective of the colour of the governing party.

The path to the declaration really began during the election campaign of 1906, when Balfour requested an interview with a member of the Zionist movement in order to understand why it had rejected the offer of territory for the Jews in Uganda. It was characteristic of Balfour that the Jewish question should be so interesting to him at a time when the issues of winning an election should have been uppermost in his mind. The

Zionist he met was Chaim Weizmann. Before we consider Weizmann, we shall look at the Zionist movement.

### Zionism

Zionism was the aspiration of certain Jews to have their own state amongst the nations of the world. Whilst the ideas of Zionism had been around for a long time, they were only really clarified when Theodor Herzl burst on the scene of Zionism by writing a book, *Der Judenstaat (The Jewish State)*, in 1896. Herzl had seen the rise of anti-Semitism and realised that something must be done about it. He argued that the only way for Jews to become accepted in the world was for them to have their own state. They would then be able to shake off the picture of 'the wandering Jew' and become like all the other peoples of the world, with a nation and a land. Herzl quickly rose to become the leader of Zionism, and instituted the Zionist Congress, a yearly conference to which delegates from all over the world came to discuss, debate and plan the Jewish state.

It did not take too long for dissent to break out in this newly formed body. The problem was not the principal idea of a state for Jews, but where it should be located. Herzl was not particularly bothered where it should be. It did not really matter, he said, as long as it was in existence somewhere as soon as possible, and as long as Jews could emigrate there to live their lives in peace and prosperity away from poverty and persecution.

This did not go down well with the more traditional Jews (such as the Russian Jews), who would not settle for anywhere in the world apart from the land the Jews had inhabited in the times of the Bible: the land of Palestine. Weizmann, being an émigré from Russia, where persecution



**Arthur Balfour**

of Jews was becoming prominent, was a strong supporter of this view.

Herzl spent all his energies looking for a suitable location for this state. He would, of course, have preferred Palestine, but it was not available. The Turks were not prepared to give up the barren corner of their empire for this purpose. Although Herzl got encouraging noises from some of the powerful men of the world, like Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, nothing materialised. From the British he received more practical ideas, such as a few suggestions of far-flung parts of the British Empire (for example, Uganda) where Jews could settle. This debate came to a head at the seventh Zionist Congress at Basle in 1903. Although technically in the majority, Herzl realised the movement was split into two irreconcilable parts. He died the following year, not having seen his dream realised, but having risen to the position he did because it was part of a greater purpose.

### **Weizmann**

Chaim Weizmann was born in 1874 in the village of Motol, then in Russia. Although he personally

did not see a great deal of persecution (pogroms were common in many parts of the Jewish settled areas of Russia), he was fully aware of the restrictions placed on Jews, and soon became a leading member of the local Zionist organisation.

The Weizmanns were a talented family, and Chaim grew up to become a scientist. His studies took him to Germany and Switzerland, where he met Zionists from other countries. In 1904, the year of Herzl's death, he emigrated to Great Britain and settled in Manchester. He was attracted to Manchester because it was the centre of a large chemical industry and possessed a great university. Weizmann wrote: "I cannot help pausing on the curious way the strands of my life have been woven together". (Though Weizmann wondered at the way his life was woven together, we can see clearly the ways of providence at work.) He had been given an introduction to Professor Perkin of Victoria University, Manchester. Perkin was immediately attracted to Weizmann, because he was working in the field of dye chemistry in which his own father (William Henry Perkin, founder of the aniline dye industry) had worked. Weizmann settled down to his studies as an academic in the chemistry department.

At this time Weizmann became acquainted with Charles Dreyfus, who was chairman of the local Zionist group in Manchester, and also director of a local chemical firm (Clayton Aniline Works). Dreyfus found part-time work for Weizmann as an industrial chemist so that he could supplement his income. It is at this point that we can see the hand of providence at work. Dreyfus was also chairman of the local Conservative party, and became political agent for the local MP at the time of the general election. That MP was the prime minister, Arthur Balfour. So, when Balfour requested an interview with a Zionist, who better for Dreyfus to choose than his young friend Chaim Weizmann?

### **The first interview**

The meeting took place in the Queen's Hotel in Manchester, which was the headquarters of the Balfour campaign. The interview was only going to be for a few minutes, and neither man thought that much would come of it. However, it lasted for well over an hour, and transpired to be a turning point in history.

Balfour began by enquiring why the Zionists had rejected the Uganda offer, since the British Government had been so keen to do something to alleviate the misery of the Jews. Weizmann

pointed out that “nothing but a deep religious conviction expressed in modern political terms could keep the movement alive, and that had to be based on Palestine alone. Any deflection from Palestine was—well, a form of idolatry”. He added, “If Moses had come to the 6th Zionist Congress, when it was adopting the resolution in favour of the Commission for Uganda, he would surely have broken the tablets once again”.

Afraid that he was not getting through to Balfour, Weizmann added, “Supposing I was to offer you Paris instead of London, would you take it?”. Balfour replied, “But Dr. Weizmann, we have London”. “That is true”, retorted Weizmann, “but we had Jerusalem when London was a marsh”. This sunk in. Balfour asked if there were many Jews like Weizmann. He said, “I believe I speak

the mind of millions of Jews whom you will never see and who cannot speak for themselves”. Balfour said, “If that is so, you will one day be a force”. As the interview ended, Balfour remarked that the other Jews he had met were quite different. Weizmann replied, “Mr. Balfour, you meet the wrong kind of Jews”.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing was to come of this interview for over ten years, but a seed had been set in Balfour’s mind that was to lead to the document known as the Balfour Declaration.

[\(To be concluded\)](#)

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1. Details of the interview taken from Weizmann’s autobiography, *Trial and Error* (pp. 143-4), Hamish Hamilton, London, 1949.

## Your Letters



### Two classes of people in Revelation 7 and 14

Regarding the exchange of views under the above heading in the October issue ([p. 339](#)), there is a middle course to be taken between the two views, a course which gives due weight to the details actually recorded by John. There can be little question that John is describing in Revelation 7 two distinct groups of people. He almost seems to be at pains to do so, as I believe is demonstrated by the [table opposite](#) (which includes, but also expands on, the details convincingly highlighted by Sister Smith). John even uses the phrase “After this” (v. 9) to put the distinction between the two groups beyond doubt.

That said, there is no reason to assume from this that the 144,000 are natural Israel simply because the names of twelve tribes are used of them. Were we to press that idea too literally, we would create a problem for ourselves in excluding from salvation anyone from the tribe of Dan, whereas Samson (a Danite) appears in the list of the faithful in Hebrews 11. Revelation is *full* of language applied first to natural Israel in the Old Testament but then reused in a different context, which is in accordance with Brother Green’s comments. We see that the Mount Zion of 14:1 cannot be literal from the fact that the voice of the 144,000 stand-

ing there John somehow hears “from heaven” (14:2). This is therefore a symbolic Mount Zion. We would need to explore Old Testament passages to understand this symbol fully, but Psalm 87 is most helpful here; God regards His faithful people as having been born in Zion. John sees a vision of something very similar.

Similarly, there is no need to contrast those “redeemed from *the earth*” (v. 3) with those “redeemed from *among men*” (v. 4), since this is saying the same thing. Those “on earth” in Revelation are frequently contrasted with those “in heaven”, a phrase used to indicate people in a relationship with God; so when Revelation describes someone as being “from the earth” we are being told not so much where that person originated as the sort of person he or she is. We should therefore understand the group from which the 144,000 are redeemed as being those who never come to the Father. As another apostle puts it, they are “of the earth, earthy” (1 Cor. 15:47).

Where does this get us? In chapter 7 we have two separate groups of people, but which are both redeemed. This is where we need to pay attention to the details John gives us. We can easily work out who the 144,000 are, because when the trumpet judgements begin to be blown in chapters 8 and 9 a definite separation is made regarding them. We are told in 9:4 that the effects of the