

Reverend William Hechler, Theodore Herzl, and Zionism



After nearly two millennia in exile, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a new movement for Jewish sovereignty began to gain worldwide traction: Zionism. In 1896, Theodor Herzl's Zionist pamphlet, *The Jewish State*, laid out a vision that would eventually culminate in the rebirth of the state of Israel. Herzl believed he had an answer to the never-ending problem of anti-Semitism and persecution faced by Jewish people wherever they found themselves, throughout history: a safe haven for Jews in their ancient homeland, the land of Israel. Because of his tireless work, Zionism gained political legitimacy; and Herzl's friend, a pastor named Reverend Hechler, played an influential role in supporting Herzl's vision of a modern Jewish nation-state in the land of Israel.

Reverend William Henry Hechler, who was an Anglican clergyman with deeply rooted beliefs in the future restoration of the Jewish people, was already an avid Zionist involved in activism on behalf of the Jewish people before meeting Herzl. Having developed a love for the Jewish people early on in his life and career, Reverend Hechler took every chance he received to expand his knowledge of the Jews and what was then called Palestine. In 1881, in his position as the Metropolitan Secretary of the Church Pastoral Aid Society, Reverend Hechler visited Russia, Germany, and France, and investigated the situations of the Jews living there.



Reverend Hechler was particularly disgusted by the widespread pogroms in Russia.



Stopping in Constantinople, Reverend Hechler attempted to deliver a letter—against anti-Semitism, proposing that the Jews be permitted to return to Palestine with a state of their own— from the Queen of England to the Sultan of Turkey through the British Ambassador who refused to deliver it. At that time, Palestine was under Ottoman rule.

Three years later, in 1884, Reverend Hechler wrote a treatise entitled, "The Restoration of the Jews to Palestine" in which he

called for the Jews to return to Palestine. He advocated for the establishment of the state of Israel as the place promised by God to the Jewish people forever as their rightful homeland.

One day, in 1896, Reverend Hechler, who was a voracious reader, happened upon the recently published *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*) by Theodore Herzl. Herzl had been assigned to cover the 1894 trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus—a Jewish-French military officer wrongly convicted of selling France's military secrets to Germany.

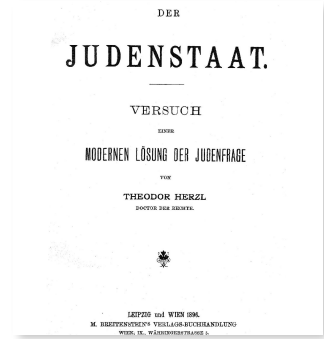




Dreyfus was chosen by authorities to take the fall for the act of treason solely because he was Jewish. As a result, Herzl had become convinced that the only way for the Jewish people to survive and ultimately thrive was to have a state of their own. He wrote:

“I believe that I understand Anti-Semitism, which is really a highly complex movement. I consider it from a Jewish standpoint, yet without fear or hatred...I think the Jewish question is no more a social than a religious one... It is a

national question, which can only be solved by making it a political world-question to be discussed and settled by the civilized nations of the world in council. We are a people—one people. We want to lay the foundation stone, for the house which will become the refuge of the Jewish nation. Zionism is the return to Judaism even before the return to the land of Israel.”



Reverend Hechler used his social connections to introduce Herzl to members of German royal society and the sultan of Turkey during the late 1800s and helped lift Herzl's idea of a Jewish national homeland from obscurity into the political discourse among world leaders. The meetings with world powers procured for Herzl by Reverend Hechler gave Zionism political legitimacy in the eyes of the world press. Throughout the years, Reverend Hechler also introduced Herzl to Christian clergymen and leaders, and Herzl later invited the Reverend to the First World Zionist Conference as “the first Christian Zionist.”

Theodore Herzl wrote that Reverend Hechler was a “likeable, sensitive man with the long grey beard of a prophet” and “the most unusual person I have met in this movement so far.” At the age of 44, Herzl died due to preexisting medical conditions in addition to being stressed and overworked. At his bedside the day before his death was Reverend Hechler. Herzl implored him: “Greet Palestine for me. I gave my heart's blood for my people.” Herzl also urged his fellow Zionists not



to forget the contribution Reverend Hechler made to the Zionist movement.



Today, due in large part to Reverend Hechler, Theodore Herzl is known as the father of modern Zionism. Together, he and Reverend Hechler birthed a movement that culminated in the rebirth of the State of Israel in 1948, a miracle in history accomplished by God through the vision and steadfast perseverance of a Jew and a Christian working shoulder-to-shoulder in pursuit of a single goal.