

# “Citizens of Heaven” versus “The Islamic Peril”: The Anti-Islamic Rhetoric of Orlando’s Holy Land Experience Since 9/11/01

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## **Abstract**

In early 2001, the Holy Land Experience (HLE) theme park opened in Orlando, Florida. Before 9/11, Islam was merely a shadowy figure at the HLE; after 9/11, however, the park has promoted a vision of Islam and Muslims that fosters hate among American Protestant visitors. This paper argues that the HLE is a site of extreme potential danger, for it espouses holy war and dissent between American Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

## **Introduction**

Orlando, Florida, is the most popular tourist destination on Earth, receiving over 50 million visitors each year. With so many American and foreign tourists lured to the middle of the Florida peninsula, many entrepreneurs have planned attractions designed to cash in on the tourist trade. Very few tourism projects, however, have been as controversial as the Holy Land Experience (HLE), which opened in early 2001. Embedded in an active

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Christian ministry dedicated to converting world Jewry to Christianity, the HLE – officially a non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) status – uses its theme park to promote the Christian gospel in an effort to win converts as well as financial and political supporters both for itself and its political agenda. A muddled mixture of historical revisionism and fanciful whimsy, the park serves as an American evangelical version of the actual Holy Land, currently configured as the Israeli state and the territories it occupies, and is decidedly un-Protestant.

The park, its supplementary literature, and its operatives in the United States and Israel not only engage in spreading the Christian gospel to convert more to their faith; they also promote the belief that world Jewry and the largely secular nation-state of Israel exist only to serve as proofs of Christian prophecy. In this way, the HLE asserts a posed philo-Semitism that, in fact, is highly anti-Semitic. It craves the negation of an independent Jewish religion and culture, and sits in anticipation of the destruction of all Jews who reject Christianity in the longed-for period of the End Times. Central to this, in the interim period before the assumed Second Coming, it works to actively destroy Palestinian aspirations for autonomy by spreading anti-Arab and anti-Islamic propaganda among its supporters in the name of supporting Israel. This effort increased dramatically after the 9/11 tragedy.

In the first months after the park's opening, visitors were not explicitly exposed to attitudes about Islam. But after 9/11, something changed. Until then no more than a shadowy figure in the HLE drama, the park soon began to use its activities and publications to promote a vision of Islam and Muslims that fosters hate among American Protestant visitors. Although the HLE theme park may appear innocuous or, at times, even silly to people outside the belief system, it is, in fact, a site of extreme potential danger due to its espousal of holy war and dissent between American Christians, Jews, and Muslims. What may appear to be just another simulacrum in the sea of Orlando's many simulacra is presented as an authentic portrait of the place it claims to replicate: a sacred space that must be protected from Islam's contaminating influence. Through its not-so-subtle anti-Islamic message, the HLE negates the existential claims of the vast majority of people living in the Middle East, shapes Israel according to how American evangelicals would like to see it, and reads all contemporary and historical events in the Middle East through Biblical prophecy.

## Experiencing the Holy Land Experience

The HLE's cosmology is familiar to those who study active and historical evangelical missions: At the end of time as we know it, all believers in the redemptive quality of Jesus as the Christ will be granted eternal life, while those who do not will be alienated from God for all perpetuity. Like millions of other American Christians, the HLE's founders believe that current events reveal signals for the fulfillment of prophecies made in the New Testament's Book of Revelation. The cryptic notions of the Rapture, Armageddon, the Millennium, and the End Times detailed in Christian scripture, which have been read through this lens for centuries, have had tremendous weight in the theology of many Protestant sects, particularly in the United States. Paul S. Boyer has written very eloquently about how this eschatology has been expanded upon and shaped by American and British theologians, such as John Darby, the nineteenth-century Briton who codified the foundations of modern premillennial dispensationalism, and Cyrus Scofield, who wove Darby's interpretations into his best-selling *Scofield's Reference Bible* in 1909.<sup>1</sup>

As it has been with many other groups, the return of Jews to the Holy Land of the Bible and a subsequent conversion of world Jewry to Christianity are fundamental to the HLE's way of recognizing the end of time. As a consequence, the establishment of Israel as a Jewish national state in 1948 is viewed as a symbol in God's ultimate plan and is a precursor to a series of events that will hasten the millennium. The HLE has approached this issue directly with vigor. Crucial to accelerating this conversion is an active mission to world Jewry, particularly to Jews already living in Israel. Known as Zion's Hope, it has several missionary operatives living in Israel, proselytizing to Jews, which is against Israeli law, in an effort to negate Judaism. The accounts of such missionaries as "Jacob in the Holy Land" and "David in Jerusalem" regularly appear in Zion's Hope literature.

Although Israel was largely founded on the Zionist principles of socialism and secularism, its existence has been heralded by many evangelicals as the beginning point of the Jews' return to the Holy Land, which is necessary for the Second Coming (of Jesus). Drawing on Hal Lindsey's *The Late, Great Planet Earth* movement of the 1970s and the mainstreaming of evangelicalism in the 1980s by the likes of Jerry Falwell and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Zion's Hope joined many other Christian organizations in the 1990s in promoting the marriage of Jewish tradition and support of Israel with Christian mission and prophecy. This came to a head recently in the

wake of 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and Great Britain. Now that the Soviet Union is no longer the primary enemy to be branded as the “Antichrist,” Islam and Muslims have been granted this unholy status in the ideology of millions.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is a fierce competition for followers and funds among the leaders of Christian movements committed to this worldview. Beyond the most famous names espousing versions of premillennial dispensationalism, such as Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, countless pastors are eager to make their names as important theologians who accurately read the signs pointing to the End Times. Zion’s Hope founder Marvin Rosenthal determined that his organization could make a unique mark on the crowded evangelical scene by establishing a Christian-themed amusement park in the center of Orlando’s I-4 entertainment and tourism corridor. The result, the HLE, has thus far attracted over 500,000 visitors.<sup>3</sup>

When the HLE was opened to the public on February 5, 2001, it attracted massive media attention throughout the world, and a large amount of that attention was focused on Rosenthal’s high profile desires to preach directly to Jews. Himself a Jewish convert to Christianity, Rosenthal founded Zion’s Hope in the late 1980s and remains its executive director. The park is a strange assemblage of Jerusalem landmarks completely out of scale to the real city, although both the management and many of the patrons insist on its “authenticity.” In this way, it draws on a long-standing tradition of virtual Christian pilgrimage to Holy Land exhibitions, stand-ins for those who either cannot or will not travel to Palestine.<sup>4</sup> By conflating ancient Biblical narrative and prophecy with contrived and expurgated versions of the genuine modern article, these exhibitions have been modeled in the image of what the believers creating them wish the Holy Land could be.

In the case of the HLE, Jerusalem becomes rather like a soundstage for the movie “Ben Hur,” with dramatic, epic music wafting from speakers hidden in species of flora mentioned in the Bible and the occasional Roman soldier walking around, interrogating tourists’ loyalty to the Roman state or the nature of photographic equipment. Most actors are dressed in a combination of loose-fitting, layered, linen robes and Naot-brand sandals<sup>5</sup> meant to represent Biblical-era dress in Palestine, and all employees greet patrons with “shalom” rather than “hello” or any other style of salutation, in an effort to at once mark the site as Jewish and assert a Christian alliance with the Israeli political cause.

With that first “shalom” heard upon entering into the HLE, patrons are crossing into a space both ancient and contemporary, a Jerusalem con-

trolled by Jews but imperiled by false political and spiritual counter-claims and on the verge of annihilation. The park constructs a dual temporal moment: The crucifixion of Jesus and his rejection as the Messiah by Jews signals Rome's destruction of their Temple and life in the Holy Land, and the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict signals that the final days of history have arrived and that the Second Coming is nigh.

The entrance to the park is an Ottoman-era gate modeled after the walls surrounding the Old City today. But inside, there is nothing to remind visitors of contemporary Jerusalem. Upon entering the compound, visitors first encounter a "Jerusalem street market," which is actually a gift-shop selling HLE souvenirs, a few products from Israel (such as Safed candles, Ahava Dead Sea cosmetics, and Palphiot tourism books), and American evangelical literature and multimedia products. There is also a "wilderness tabernacle" within a "Bedouin tent," which contains a multimedia and live-action presentation linking the ancient Jewish sacrificial system with the story of Jesus, as well as a recreation of the Garden Tomb.

This display depicts the site in Jerusalem's Shariah Nablus, outside the Damascus Gate, where nineteenth-century British Protestants decided that Jesus was buried and resurrected, in defiance of Orthodox and Catholic tradition marking the site at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Here there are a variety of events each day, including passion plays, lectures about Jesus' resurrection, and musical events. Each patron is encouraged to go inside the tomb and see a slab with an empty burial shroud and a plaque above it proclaiming: "He is not here, He is risen." Outside the tomb is a manger area with sheep, lambs, goats, and camels, and the occasional flock of doves swirling overhead, released to coincide with the dramatic climaxes of the musical events.

In a recreation of the Second Temple, which is really a movie theatre, patrons view the 25-minute "The Seed of Promise," a drama filmed on location in Israel that details the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the Second Coming. In front of the Temple is the "Plaza of the Nations," where dramatic 30-minute musical performances are held on such topics as how Jewish festivals are really cryptic messages proclaiming the truth of Jesus as the Messiah and reenactments of the Christmas story. The HLE also has an indoor worship area for scripture lessons and musical performances featuring Century, the house musical ensemble. The music they perform is in line with the contemporary Christian format and is a mixture of live and prerecorded music lip-synced by a carefully selected group of men and women representing the United States' many ethnic communi-

ties. When visitors get hungry, they can visit the Oasis Palms café, where such foods as “Goliath burgers,” “Persian pita wraps,” and “milk and honey ice cream” are sold.<sup>6</sup> They also can study a large and very inaccurate<sup>7</sup> model of Jerusalem in the year 66, which plays host to 30-minute lectures linking the city’s geography to Biblical prophecy and history.

The most recent HLE addition is the Scriptorium, an “early church Byzantine style” museum housing “the largest privately owned collection of biblical manuscripts and artifacts in the world.”<sup>8</sup> Opened in August 2002, this building plays host to a 55-minute-long multimedia presentation designed by the ITEC Entertainment Corporation. Billed as “one of the most culturally significant events in the history of Orlando,”<sup>9</sup> it traces the history of writing since the invention of cuneiform to the development of the Protestant interpretation of the Bible and the distribution of its message. This part of the park has spawned its own consumer-driven gift shop, complete with special Scriptorium-inspired Bibles as well as books about the making of the attraction, its artwork, and its artifacts. Since the park’s inauguration, a replica of the Qumran Caves has stood empty near the park’s entrance and is closed-off to visitors. No one at Zion’s Hope seems to know what it will house or when it will open, despite a sign proclaiming it as a future attraction.

As interesting as the above-mentioned attractions may be, equally compelling are those sites of the actual Jerusalem that are not represented in the park, *despite* its surrounding Ottoman-era wall: No Islamic artifacts are visible and, before 9/11, I did not witness any discussion about Islam or Muslims.<sup>10</sup> I do not feel that the absence of Islam was an oversight – quite the contrary. However, I find its absence striking in light of the HLE *after* 9/11, because Islam has come to play a prominent role in the rhetoric and cosmology of Zion’s Hope and has been subtly incorporated into the HLE’s presentations and performances. This new emphasis on Islam is still being worked out by the ideologues of Zion’s Hope, just as the story of 9/11’s impact is still a work in progress. However, the HLE’s political agenda is not only – and often not primarily – expressed in the park itself, but rather in the literature of Zion’s Hope and its political activism.

The theme park’s cosmology is mirrored by and expanded upon in the publication *Zion’s Fire*. These two elements cannot be separated, because each visitor has the opportunity to sign up for a free year-long subscription. Being on the mailing list also brings constant updates on HLE events as well as regular letters from Marvin Rosenthal that, addressed to “Dear Citizen of Heaven,” espouse a variety of religious and political agendas.

Indeed, if Rosenthal's cited statistics are accurate, Zion's Hope reaches out to large numbers in this way. Attendance at the park in December 2001 totaled 30,000 visitors,<sup>11</sup> compared with 275,000 visitors between February and October 2001,<sup>12</sup> and is now being hailed at over half a million.<sup>13</sup> Already by June 2001, subscriptions to the magazine numbered over 131,000,<sup>14</sup> and by the May/June 2002 issue, 186,000 copies were being printed.<sup>15</sup> When figures were released for May/June 2003, there was a slight decrease: only 171,583 copies had been printed. However, "paid and/or requested subscriptions" were reported to number 164,365, with 4,764 additional copies distributed through other free means.<sup>16</sup>

### **Islam and the Holy Land Experience after 9/11**

Before 9/11, Islam played a nebulous, back-seat role in the cosmology of *Zion's Fire*. A review of the pre-9/11 issues shows that the following themes were emphasized: stories of Jewish believers in Christianity in relation to the desire to see all of Israeli and world Jewry convert; explaining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of prophecy, declarations of the illegitimacy of Palestinian claims, and assertions that the peace process will fail due to Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Jewish messiah; travel accounts to locations in Israel and the Occupied Territories mentioned in the Bible; and how the HLE in Orlando will be/is used as a tool to spread the Gospel to the millions of tourists visiting the region each year, as well as the millions of central Floridians living in the region.

It was the HLE park itself that distinguished Zion's Hope from any number of other Christian groups obsessed with reading the signs for the forthcoming millennium from the news, and coming up with the same conclusions about Jews, Israel, and Palestinians mentioned above. One topic that was remarkably absent from most of the pre-9/11 issues was Islam and how it fit into the park's intricate cosmology, despite the fact that every issue of the magazine has a Middle East news section that often decries the anti-Israeli policies of such Muslim countries as Iran and Libya.

A major shift occurred, however, after the hijacking of the four doomed airliners on 9/11. In the earliest days after the attacks, HLE leaders were as befuddled as the rest of us about how to interpret and understand these events. The first word came in the form of a letter from Rosenthal dated October 8, reassuring HLE supporters that their faith was correct, while, at the same time, trying to undo the pro-Islamic public relations in which American politicians were engaging:

Believers should always strive to be good and courageous citizens of our country, but we must never forget that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. It is so important that we keep that perspective always before us. We are secure in our Savior. No other people can properly make that claim. ... To be sure, our war is with Islamic extremists and not moderate Muslims. However, at the same time, it should not be thought that Islam is an amicable and loving religion. At times, throughout history, they have conquered by the sword, treated women barbarically, and tolerated no religious dissent. In our proper desire to protect millions of Muslims in America who had no part in the terrorism, we must be careful that we do not overstate the case and give to the Islamic religion a status it most assuredly does not deserve. It is a religion opposed not only to Judaism, but also to Christianity. It is much of the Judeo/Christian culture of the West that it so vehemently hates. ... I believe that unless there is a recognition of our grievous national sin, a genuine repentance that brings us to our knees in shame before a holy God and a turning to the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, patriotism will dwindle, unity will unravel, and heroism will fade in the difficult days ahead.<sup>17</sup>

In this same letter, Rosenthal also told his followers that he was unsure if the events were a signal of the End Times.

By the November 2001 issue of *Zion's Fire*, however, there was no mystery for Rosenthal or his staff that 9/11 was a symbol of prophetic times ahead. The deliberate plane crashes in New York City, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania were, coupled with the rising violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories, dramatic evidence that the Second Coming is fast approaching. The magazine's cover boldly presented the Biblical Four Horses of the Apocalypse with the headline: "Where are we Prophetically?" Inside, the lead story, penned by Rosenthal, was entitled: "The Islamic Peril."<sup>18</sup> In this article, he used Biblical exegesis as well as historically inaccurate information to discredit not only Islam's validity – an issue that is irrelevant to my argument, for I am not interested in proving or disproving either Christianity or Islam – but also promoting a violent and inflammatory sentiment toward Muslims, and, ultimately, all people living in so-called "Third World" countries.

The article's primary argument was that Islam is really a bastardized version of the ancient Babylonian polytheism decried in Revelations 17:5 ("The mother of harlots and abominations of the Earth"), and that Islam is founded on anti-Semitism because the Jews of Madinah rejected Muhammad as a prophet and Ishmael as "the Seed of Promise."<sup>19</sup> Thus, Americans and other Christians must now engage in a holy war to prevent Islam from



"destroy[ing] Israel, Christianity, America, and the democratic free world – to bring us to our knees and replace our way of life with a fundamentalist Islamic world order."<sup>20</sup>

Rosenthal encouraged Americans to support the "War on Terrorism" efforts as well as a general war against Islam:

I must part company with our leaders who suggest we are not at war with Islam – only with the terrorists who have prostituted Islamic teaching. ... They need to be reminded that it is never right to do wrong to do right.<sup>21</sup>

Fundamental to victory, he claimed, is a recognition of this conflict's prophetic nature, as well as a firm commitment to Zion's Hope's version of Christianity. Rosenthal told his followers:

And most of all, we will not win this war unless there is a genuine, wide-spread, in-depth repentance of our national sin and a calling out to God for mercy, strength, and wisdom,<sup>22</sup>

and that the Four Horses of the Apocalypse could be readily seen in current events: War equals the "War on Terrorism," Pestilence equals Anthrax, Famine equals the famine in Afghanistan, and False Religion equals Islam.

Curiously, he also made it a point to divorce Islam from the Arab world, stating that Iraqis are not Arabs but "Babylonians," and that Egyptians are not Arabs but "Egyptians," in an effort to tie these two nations and their varying levels of anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric into Biblical prophecy as well.<sup>23</sup> Rosenthal assured his readers that it is normal for human beings to want their religion to rule the world, as Muslims like 'Usama bin Laden do, but that the only legitimate religion meant to rule the world is his own, Christianity. Thus, Muslims must be stopped. All of this was inextricably tied to the Israel-Palestine conflict, which, Rosenthal wrote, "is preeminently spiritual in nature."<sup>24</sup>

This is a point that Zion's Hope has made its mantra, easily accessible in CDs and videos sold at the HLE, such as the epic 6-hour series "The World in Conflict: The Truth about the Israeli-Palestinian Crisis." Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world, stripped of any historical legitimacy as residents of the region, have been linked to Biblical prophecies as the pawns of Satan. For example, in the May/June 2002 issue of *Zion's Fire*, the prophecies of Zechariah were interpreted in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an article with the potent title: "In the End: Israel Wins." In the September 2002 issue, Isaiah was reread in this light in an article entitled: "Future Israel: From Sorrow to Glory."

David Ettinger, the author of both pieces, explained to his readers that the Palestinian *intifada* – a term, incidentally, very rarely used by Zion’s Hope – against Israeli occupation is merely the first stage in the long process of destroying two-thirds of world Jewry in preparation for the End Times. Palestinians were compared to rabid animals in a dramatic act of dehumanization. Evoking Isaiah 35:9 (“No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there”<sup>25</sup>), Ettinger wrote:

During Isaiah’s day, Israel was filled with wild beasts and it was not unusual to be attacked by one while in the streets. ...Today, however, actual attacks by animals are rare. Nonetheless, if the reader would allow for a spiritual application to a literal verse, modern-day Israel has plenty of human predators of its own ...<sup>26</sup>

Even in the face of this pro-Israeli stance, however, contemporary Israeli secularism has been explained as part of God’s plan for the Jews in spite of themselves.<sup>27</sup> The terrorism against Israel that is decried so vehemently in the above passage is, nevertheless, a priceless part of the HLE cosmology. Ettinger wrote:

The gathering of the nations against Israel will result in tragedy as two-thirds of Israel’s population will be wiped out. However, this massive loss of life is for the purpose of refining the remaining third, which will then repent and turn its affections to God.<sup>28</sup>

At once, the HLE has managed to construct a worldview that associates Palestinians and Islam with terror of End Times proportions *and* replicate hundreds of years of Christian anti-Semitism that is explained and legitimated by theology.

Interestingly, Ettinger deflects this anti-Semitism by displacing it onto other groups. For instance, in an attack on a 2003 European Union poll that showed large numbers of Europeans believing that Israel was the primary national threat to international peace, Ettinger wrote:

On the surface ... anti-Semitism can always be suspected as the leading cause. Sadly, however, the reason for such EU gibberish is not anti-Semitism itself, but, rather, the cause for the anti-Semitism: Satan’s insatiable desire to wipe the Jewish nation off the face of the earth.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, he sees the Europeans as the unwitting victims of Satan as well, revealing much about his feelings toward the nations who rejected the call to

join the so-called "Coalition of the Willing" against Iraq in the winter of 2003:

Despite the fact that Israel's European opponents put on the face of compassion, saying they are only trying to protect the afflicted and outnumbered Palestinians, their real motives for siding with the Palestinians is their desire to tap into the vast resources of Arab oil. This is hardly a well-kept secret. However, what is a secret is the spiritual darkness that shrouds Europe. The world's hatred for Israel and the Jewish people is fueled by Satan. These spiritually stupefied Europeans – though claiming to be the bastions of sophistication – have absolutely no idea that they are mere pawns in Satan's diabolical chess game.<sup>30</sup>

With such thinking, Ettinger has condemned a generic category of "Europeans" for harboring a Satan-driven anti-Semitism. At the same time, he reified his own anti-Semitic desires to see the population of world Jewry dramatically reduced as a necessary precursor of the End Times, for the HLE's worldview is predicated on the destruction of world Jewry as a prerequisite for the fulfillment of prophecy.

Along with the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the perceived ideas about the roots of anti-Semitism, "Islamic terrorism" has become a popular theme for the HLE ideologues' interpretation of Christian prophecy. In "Where is God in the Face of Evil?"<sup>31</sup> Ettinger reread Psalms 10 to understand the events of 9/11. In this and many other articles distributed by the mission, the motivations of Zion's Hope are clearly revealed. First, Ettinger presented the Psalms 10:8: "He sitteth in the lurking places of the villages: in the secret places doth he murder the innocent: his eyes are privily set against the poor" (this is his given translation, from the King James' Bible).<sup>32</sup> Then he explained its contemporary significance thus:

... the wicked of this world hide in the shadows. They are hard to find as they skulk their ways through Third World nations scheming their sinister plans. Indeed, bin Laden's tentacles spread far and wide, primarily to some of the most obscure places on the globe. Consider the list of nations where bin Laden has had both a military and monetary impact: Algeria, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechniya [sic], Egypt, Eritrea, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, and Yemen. Though a few of these nations are well known and well visited, most of them are absolute enigmas to most of the western world. And yet, bin Laden and terrorists associated with him have made them their primary base of operations, havens where they may be "lurking" in "the secret places."<sup>33</sup>

In this dramatic passage, the so-called Third World was portrayed as the polar opposite of the West – dark, evil, perpetually alienated from Heaven, and completely unworthy of being known by the West and its inhabitants. Ironically, the fact that the attacks seem to have been planned in Germany and the United States goes unmentioned. Finally, he ended his article with a call of support for President George W. Bush’s policy against Afghanistan, going so far as to compare Bush’s actions to those of Isaiah:

Following the tragedy, President Bush declared that ‘this evil will not stand.’ The President was only echoing that which was written thousands of years ago by the prophet Isaiah.<sup>34</sup>

The post-9/11 prophetic exegesis promoted by the HLE sets out to remove Palestinians from their long-standing history in the Holy Land. For example, a November 2001 article entitled “Exploring Biblical Places: The West Bank and the Gaza Strip” by Bill Jones, another regular contributor to the *Zion’s Hope* literature,<sup>35</sup> explained to readers that the Palestinian cause is both contrary to Biblical prophecy and historically irrelevant. Jones wrote: “Never in history has there been a Palestinian state, culture, or language,”<sup>36</sup> and that the ability of Jewish settlers after World War II to transform the land into a productive place was a sign of God’s favor upon Israel.

Indeed, while many who deny the existence of the Palestinian people before Zionism cannot ignore such historical nationalist events as the Arab uprisings of the 1930s, Jones does. He wrote, ridiculously: “By the end of World War II, the land was largely vacant and unused. There were a few Jewish settlements and some nomadic Arab people there.”<sup>37</sup> With such statements, he not only negated Palestinian existence but also revealed a significant ignorance of Zionist history. Once again, Jews and Arabs alike are relevant only as characters in an eschatological drama played out for the benefit of the HLE and its ideology. Their complex histories are simplistically rewritten to fit the interpretations, even to a point of inanity.

Jones’ article was a segue to the next issue of *Zion’s Fire*, distributed in December 2001. The cover featured a map of the Middle East with the heading: “Islam and Israel in Conflict at the End of an Age.” This map associated contemporary Middle Eastern nations with Biblical locales and portrayed them as invading Israel.<sup>38</sup> In the cover article, Marvin Rosenthal argued that Israel’s existence shows the beginning of the fulfillment of prophecy, first manifested in the Zionist settlers’ ability to develop the land in a western style:

Through the centuries that followed [the Roman era], many powers claimed control of the land of Israel, among them the Byzantines, Muslims, Seljuks, Mamluks, Crusaders, Turks, and British. Most used the land for selfish purposes, taking from the land but never giving back. None of these nations took the land to their bosom and loved her. And just as sure as they came, with the passing of time, the land belched all of these conquerors out.<sup>39</sup>

The way in which 2,000 years of history in Palestine was portrayed in this passage – as subject to parasitical leadership – was met by a contrasting claim that belies the need for any leadership at all. Rosenthal claimed that, despite this cavalcade of conquests, the land was nearly empty throughout this 2,000-year period: "Only a handful of Bedouins and an occasional sickly village could be found throughout the length and breadth of the land,"<sup>40</sup> until Zionist settlement in the early twentieth century. Current tensions between Israel and its Muslim neighbors – the roots of which lie in Arab jealousy of Israel and anti-Semitism, as well God's punishment for the Jews who reject Jesus as their Messiah – will, inevitably, result in the surrounding countries invading Israel, a signal that the End Times are near. Rosenthal ended his discourse with a final rallying point for his readers: "Terrorists and Jihads notwithstanding, Islam will not conquer the world or defeat Israel. And the glory, which belongs to Christ and His heavenly Father alone, will not be given to Allah."<sup>41</sup>

Such ideas have come to full fruition in the wake of the conflict between the United States and Iraq. The October 2002 issue of *Zion's Fire* featured a photo of Baghdad, framed by a blood-red sky, with the headline: "Babylon: Nimrod, Nebuchadnezzar, Saddam Hussein" and the subtitle: "Do unfolding events in Iraq have direct prophetic implications?"<sup>42</sup> In this issue, Rosenthal explained that: "If the city of Jerusalem is the city of God, then the city of Babylon can properly be identified as the city of Satan."<sup>43</sup> Keeping this in mind, he interpreted the Old Testament's Book of Daniel, second chapter, in terms of modern Middle Eastern crises and came to the conclusion that Israel will soon be faced with invasion by a coalition of former empires that have challenged the Jews in the past: the Romans (now represented by the United Nations), the Greeks (now led by Syria), the Persians (currently known as Iran), and, most dangerous of all, the Babylonians, led by Saddam Hussein.<sup>44</sup>

This idea continues to be perpetuated, particularly in the marketing of a new two-cassette lecture by Rosenthal entitled: "Iraq, Saddam Hussein, and the Prophetic Word."<sup>45</sup> The great appeal of this tape lies in its declaration that

Hussein is “satanically-driven” and “counts Nebuchadnezzar as one of his heroes.”<sup>46</sup> Supporters who purchase it are instructed that Saddam Hussein and Iraq are “quite literally the source of all false religion (Revelations 17: 1-6), and the catalyst[s] for the movements toward a one-world government to be ruled by [the] Antichrist.”<sup>47</sup>

Even in the wake of the quick toppling of Saddam Hussein by the American/British invasion of March 2003, Rosenthal and *Zion’s Fire* continue to use political events in the Middle East as a launching pad for striking out against Muslims, portraying them as a constant, imminent threat to Israel and Christianity. The cover of the May/June 2003 issue of *Zion’s Fire* featured the bold headline: “Road Map to Peace or Highway to [the] Antichrist and War?” Behind these words was a collage featuring a map of the Middle East with a Star of David superimposed upon it and the city of Jerusalem marked in bold, along with pictures of American troops marching on the Iraqi portion of the map. At the bottom, tiny representations of the European Union flag, as well as those of the Arab nations and Iran, were placed together near a larger image of the UN’s symbol.<sup>48</sup>

In an interview published in this issue, Rosenthal at once lashed out at Islam, as a theological system, and Muslims throughout the world, including Orlando’s local Islamic community. Although claiming to distinguish between “extremist” Muslims and “peace-loving” ones, Rosenthal was clear about his attitude toward Islam and its adherents:

According to the clear teaching of the Islamic religion – and I’m concerned because politically the attempt is not to condemn the entire Islamic world, but to make a distinction between the extremists and peace-loving Islamic people – the reality is that there are tens-of-millions of fundamentalist Muslims in the world who, by virtue of their religion, have a hatred of the Jewish people. I would argue that this hatred goes all the way back to the beginning of Genesis, with Abraham and his sons, Isaac and Ishmael. It’s a deep-seated, widespread hatred. This hatred is spiritual in nature and stands in opposition to the true and living God and to His Son, the Lord Jesus. It is in opposition to God’s plan and program for redemption, which revolves around the Jewish people, who were the instrument to bring Christ to the world the first time, and it is to that people that He will come as King the second time.<sup>49</sup>

After dismissing the Jews’ existence as nothing more than the “instrument” for Jesus’ birth, and divorcing Islam completely from its shared prophetic tradition with Judaism and Christianity, Rosenthal demonstrated his hostility to “peace-loving” Muslims by launching into a diatribe against

the non-profit status of Orlando's local mosques. His rant conflated the entire Islamic world with an uncritical vision of the Saudi legal system:

The truth is that if a Christian goes to Saudi Arabia and gives out a tract, he can go to jail for a long time. Give out a Bible or print a Bible and you'll go to jail for a longer time. Try to buy property to build a church, and it will never happen. But the flip side of that is Muslims can come to America, buy property, and build Islamic mosques. I find it ironic that there are three Islamic mosques in the greater Orlando area that are religious, not-for-profit entities that don't have to pay property taxes. And here we are, Zion's Hope and The Holy Land Experience – a Christian, Bible-believing mission that clearly conforms to U.S. not-for-profit laws committed to sharing the Gospel of Christ – and we're in a court battle right now to appeal the property appraiser's attempt to revoke our existing property tax exemption.<sup>50</sup> So, Muslims can come here, build mosques and distribute literature, print the Koran, and propagate their faith, and be tax exempt, but we can't do any of that in the Islamic world. Talk about a level playing field, this is about as unlevel [*sic*] as you can get.<sup>51</sup>

This attack on his Muslim neighbors, which denounced the freedoms of religion and expression guaranteed by the American Constitution, was directly followed by Rosenthal's statement that Orlando's Muslims, along with millions of Muslims throughout the world and some European nations, are part of a larger Satanic, yet prophetic, plan of destruction:

... Much of Islam hates Israel in particular and the democracies of the West in general – the former because of the Old Testament, and the latter because of the New Testament. Islam's hatred of Israel and the West is spiritual in nature. I'm convinced that when you talk about the final attack against Israel and the end of the age, contrary to a lot of Bible teachers and theologians, I don't believe it's going to predominantly be an attack that comes from Rome or a revived Roman Empire. Rather, it's going to primarily be an Islamic coalition. Ezekiel 38 and 39 give us some of the nations involved. I think there may be an alliance between Islamic countries, some Western European nations like Germany and France, and Russia. It will be a uniting of the iron and clay depicted in the feet and toes of Daniel's image (Daniel, chapter 2) ... the "Road Map" [to Peace] will not achieve peace ... but a highway to [the] Antichrist and war.<sup>52</sup>

Rosenthal's disgust with the French and German decision not to support the American-led invasion of Iraq is apparent here, as it was in

Ettinger's attack on the EU cited above. Including Russia in this recipe for war harkens back to the cold war era, when such premillennial thinkers as Hal Lindsey saw the Soviet Union as the Antichrist. However, the most vitriolic of all post-9/11 discourse coming from the HLE's ideologues has been reserved for Islam and its adherents. Muslims have been elevated to the status of preeminent spiritual enemies for those Christians waiting for the End of Time, and all righteous Christians need to stop their advances.

Keeping Rosenthal's discourse in mind, I will now explain how these ideas have been incorporated into the HLE's activities as well as other events sponsored by Zion's Hope. In my four trips to the park since 9/11, I have seen employees draw connections between the terrorists who perpetrated the attacks and the Roman soldiers occupying Jerusalem who were responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. I also have witnessed the issues of terrorism and sin be brought up at the Wilderness Tabernacle as an example of Satan's acts, as well as the need to accept Jesus as a substitute for ancient Hebrew sacrifice as an atonement of sin against those acts. I have been surrounded by visitors who have been emotionally overcome by how "authentic" the place seems to them, in reference to their interpretations of the Bible and their assumptions about what the "real" Israel is like, and have heard people refer to Islam as the opposite of the HLE – evil, sinister, untrustworthy, and directed by Satan.

This idea is being promoted in traveling banquets, sponsored nationwide by Zion's Hope, that feature Rosenthal speaking on such subjects as "Terrorism, Israel, and the End of the Age"<sup>53</sup> and "Is War Coming to the Middle East?"<sup>54</sup> At these events, the HLE is presented as a location where Christians can join together and prepare for the holy war against Islam and its perceived destruction of the western way of life. This is also a prominent theme in HLE-sponsored vacations, such as the "Land and Sea Prophetic Bible Conference Cruise" to the Bahamas (November 2003)<sup>55</sup> and the scheduled "Journey to Jerusalem" tour of Israel (September 2004), which comes complete with "terrorism insurance" for wary pilgrims.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the HLE is a strange utopian refuge for some segments of the American population, a sacred space of pilgrimage where political and religious agendas can merge with social validation and authoritative guidance. But for those who stand outside its worldview, and particularly for those targeted by Zion's Hope for spiritual and political elimination, the HLE is intensely dystopic.



## Conclusion

So, why does any of this matter? Perhaps this is just a case of American civil liberties in action? Yes, in part, I do think that is exactly what the Holy Land Experience is, an example of the freedom of religion eagerly expressed by so many varied communities within the United States. This is true, even as the HLE condemns others for practicing their civil liberties around them. But I believe that the HLE's events and ideology are disconcerting, at best. The information about Israel, the Middle East conflict, and the historical and contemporary experience of Islam are highly distorted and spurious.

HLE writers are not only part of a long trend of eschatological speculation within Christianity that focuses on current events to interpret cryptic Biblical prophecy, but also use the language of a decadent and sinister East in the same way that nineteenth-century European imperialists did. This is being done in order to discount the attitudes and opinions of millions of Middle Easterners – Arabs, Israelis, Persians, Turks, and others – and without any sense of trying to dialogue with or understand their perspective. Since they root their racism in the language of religious prophecy, there is no way that people outside their belief system can confront this rhetoric and be taken seriously.

Moreover, each time that I have visited the HLE, I have met people who walked away feeling that the Middle East conflict, which appeared so confusing and chaotic in the sound-bites on CNN before they arrived, is now totally comprehensible and easily solvable, if only American Christians would interfere and force their solution upon the parties directly involved. I have even been told by more than a few patrons that the experience was equally as powerful to their faith as actual pilgrimages to the authentic Holy Land that they had made.

Although the HLE's impact remains a work in progress, I would like to reiterate that its message, especially since 9/11, has been clearly presented to park visitors as well as readers of *Zion's Fire* as:

1. The events of 9/11 were not just the work of some fanatics, but representative of most Muslims throughout the world, symbolic of their hatred for "our" way of life: democracy and Christianity;
2. The Middle East is a sinister, satanic region, embodied by the despotism of Saddam Hussein and the terrorist activities of 'Usama bin Laden;
3. The Palestinian people do not exist and therefore do not deserve a state;

4. Israel and the Arab nations are fighting because of the Jews' rejection of Jesus as their Messiah; but, paradoxically, the nation of Israel and any violence against it are signs that the Final Days are near; and
5. The events of 9/11 demonstrate that Christians must fight a new holy war against Islam, a bastardized version of ancient Babylonian polytheism with no relation to either Judaism or Christianity.

The potential ramifications of such messages, distributed in the context of an amusement park, should be frightening to those who struggle to understand the historical roots of the Middle Eastern conflict, who seek to educate others about these roots, and who strive to build an American society that is pluralistic and tolerant of all belief systems.

## Notes

1. See Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).
2. An excellent article concerning American evangelicals and their fears about the Middle East and Biblical prophecy is Paul S. Boyer's "John Darby Meets Saddam Hussein: Foreign Policy and Bible Prophecy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 February 2003, B10-B11.
3. This is the number commonly cited by HLE founder Marvin Rosenthal. See, for example, a letter by him to followers dated 23 September 2002.
4. See, for example, Burke O. Long, *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models, and Fantasy Travels* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).
5. Naots are Israeli-made sandals that are often referred to as "the Israeli Birkenstocks."
6. At one point, the café featured "the Holy Land Sampler," the only vegetarian option on the menu and the only food of discernable Middle Eastern origin. This platter consisted of hummus, falafel, tabouleh, and mini-pitas. However, it seems to have disappeared sometime in 2002. The menu changes at the café and current menus may be viewed at <http://holylandexperience.com/map/index.html>. In a letter to subscribers of Zion's Fire dated 27 June 2003, Marv Rosenthal quoted from a comment that he claims to have received from a visitor about the restaurant: "... Being a family of six, we don't often eat out. We found your restaurant, Oasis Palms Café, to be the best eatery we have ever enjoyed! We each enjoyed different foods, and were amused by the names like 'Goliath Burger.' It really was a 'giant' of a burger."
7. The model is usually presented with a 30-minute explanatory lecture by Tom Ellenburg, a member of the Zion's Hope Executive Committee, which now

can be purchased as the video "Jerusalem at the Time of Christ" for \$22.95. According to Ellenburg, the model was constructed by volunteers over the course of a year, with supplies purchased at Home Depot using donated funds. The model presents the city as well-ordered, with a significant distance between houses and with the Temple as a centerpiece, juxtaposed with Roman garrisons and villas. Ellenburg continually stresses how "accurate" and "authentic" the model is, explaining that they chose the year 66 because it was the year in which Jerusalem was at its largest and most densely populated before the Romans destroyed it in 70. He then goes on to say, nonsensically, that actually the city was so densely populated that all of the buildings touched, and that you could walk from one side to the other on rooftops without any struggle. However, the HLE decided to make the model with large spaces between the city "so that you [the guests] could see how the people really lived." Heard by the author during the lecture presentation on 25 August 2001.

8. Marvin J. Rosenthal, "The Miracle Goes On," *Zion's Fire*, March/April 2000, 5.
9. Website for Holy Land Experience, 19 October 2002. [http://holylandexperience.com/calendar/images/B\\_Script\\_TOP.gif](http://holylandexperience.com/calendar/images/B_Script_TOP.gif).
10. I visited the park on 25 August 2001; and have since returned on 12 December 2001; 13 March 2002; 9 May 2002; and 13 October 2002.
11. Letter from Marvin J. Rosenthal to the Zion's Hope mailing list, dated 23 January 2002.
12. *Ibid.*, dated 9 November 2001.
13. See, for example, the advertisement for the video "Jerusalem at the Time of Christ," *Zion's Fire*, September 2002, 3. A letter to the *Zion's Fire* mailing list from Marvin Rosenthal, dated 4 December 2002, also claimed a readership for *Zion's Fire* "of about one half million." In another letter to sponsors, dated 27 June 2003, he stated at one point that "we are hosting about a quarter-of-a-million visitors a year," whereas at another point, he wrote: "In excess of 175,000 guests annually sit under the teaching of our pastoral staff." See pages 5 and 6, respectively.
14. Marvin J. Rosenthal, "What's Happening at the Holy Land Experience," *Zion's Fire*, July-August 2001, 7.
15. See the "Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation" statistics published in *Zion's Fire*, November/December 2002, 23. Note that in a letter to supporters dated 4 December 2002, Rosenthal claimed that, "Subscribers to our magazine, *Zion's Fire*, skyrocketed to 196,000" in 2002.
16. See "Statement of Ownership," November/December 2003, 23.
17. Letter from Rosenthal to the Zion's Hope mailing list, dated 8 October 2001. In a letter dated 7 October 2002, he marked the anniversary of 9/11 with the following: "And there still remains the desperate need for Americans to acknowledge our personal and national sin. Prayer, church attendance, and an interest in spiritual matters increased across the nation for a few months

following September 11, but it was like a river ‘a hundred miles wide and a quarter of an inch deep.’ With little depth, it did not last.”

18. Marvin J. Rosenthal, “The Islamic Peril,” *Zion’s Fire*, November 2001, 4-7.
19. *Ibid.*, 4.
20. *Ibid.*, 6.
21. *Ibid.*, 5.
22. *Ibid.*, 6.
23. This, despite the fact that it is common for such HLE officials as Rosenthal to refer to Iranians as “Arabs.” See, for example, David Ettinger, “Road Map to Peace, or Highway to Antichrist and War? An Interview with Marvin J. Rosenthal,” *Zion’s Fire*, May/June 2003. Available online at: [www.zions-fire.org/articles/roadmap\\_to\\_peace.html](http://www.zions-fire.org/articles/roadmap_to_peace.html)
24. Rosenthal, “The Islamic Peril,” 4.
25. David Ettinger, “Future Israel: From Sorrow to Glory,” *Zion’s Fire*, September 2002, 12.
26. *Ibid.*
27. David Ettinger, “In the End: Israel Wins,” *Zion’s Fire*, May/June 2002, 10.
28. *Ibid.*, 10.
29. David Ettinger, “EU Joins Those Who Demonize Israel,” *Zion’s Fire*, November/December 2003, 22.
30. *Ibid.*
31. David Ettinger, “Where is God in the Face of Evil?” *Zion’s Fire*, November 2001, 10-14.
32. *Ibid.*, 12.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 14.
35. Bill Jones, “Exploring Biblical Places: The West Bank and the Gaza Strip,” *Zion’s Fire*, November 2001, 20-21.
36. *Ibid.*, 20.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Gomer (West Turkey), Togarman (East Turkey), Magog (former USSR), Persia (Iran), Cush (Ethiopia), Punt (Libya). See the cover of *Zion’s Fire*, December 2001.
39. Marvin J. Rosenthal, “Islam and Israel in Conflict at the End of the Age,” *Zion’s Fire*, December 2001, 4.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, 6.
42. See the cover of *Zion’s Fire*, October 2002.
43. Marvin J. Rosenthal, “Babylon,” *Zion’s Fire*, October 2002, 3.
44. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
45. These tapes are available together from Zion’s Hope for \$12.95 and, as of spring 2003, were being given away to subscribers of *Zion’s Fire* when they renewed for 2 years.

46. This is from a circular advertisement received in the mail by *Zion's Fire* subscribers in March 2003.
47. Letter to supporters by Marvin J. Rosenthal, dated 1 March 2003.
48. See the cover of *Zion's Fire*, May/June 2003.
49. "Road Map to Peace or Highway to Antichrist and War? An Interview with Marv Rosenthal," *Zion's Fire*, May/June 2003, 5.
50. The HLE is currently at the losing end of a battle with Orange County, Florida, over whether or not it has to pay property taxes. The county says yes, it must pay such taxes just as all other theme parks must pay, but the HLE is claiming a tax-free status because it is registered as a religious institution. So far, the HLE must, in the words of the Orlando Sentinel, "render unto Caesar." However, the battle appears far from over. During my last trip to the HLE, for example, I noticed that the park was not collecting sales taxes on any products.
51. "Road Map to Peace," 7.
52. Ibid.
53. Title of a banquet lecture held in Indialantic, Florida, on 26 January 2002, at the Melbourne Beach Hilton Hotel.
54. Title of a banquet lecture held at the above-cited hotel on 25 January 2003.
55. This is from a circular advertisement sent through the mail to members of the Zion's Hope mailing list in August 2003.
56. Advertised online as of 12 March 2004, at [www.zionshope.org/tour/](http://www.zionshope.org/tour/). The advertisement reads: "NEW: Terrorism Insurance – The travel insurance policy also includes cancellation due to acts of terrorism within 30 days prior to the scheduled departure date occurring in any of the cities listed in the itinerary. A complete explanation of coverage, along with forms that you must fill out, will be sent once you register."