Ezra Taft Benson and the State of Israel: A Mormon American Leader's Support for the Jewish State

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Abstract

Within the emergent study of the complex relations between the State of Israel and American Christianity is a little-known story of a Mormon-American leader whose friendship with the nascent Jewish State spanned nearly five decades. Ezra Taft Benson, apostle in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly referred to as Mormons) from 1943-1994, also served as Secretary of Agriculture in President Dwight D. Eisenhower's cabinet from 1953-1961. During that time, and thereafter, he proclaimed his assurance, both to his Mormon followers and to the world, of the State of Israel's miraculous fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Likewise, through his political leadership he created lasting friendships with early Israeli leaders, particularly David Ben Gurion. His interest in the fate of the Jewish people was relatively representative of his Latter-day Saint heritage, but his relationship with Israeli leaders, as well as his consistently zealous message of religious-based support for the State of Israel, made him distinctive among both religious and political leaders of his day.
Table of Contents

Introduction – 1

Chapter 1: Mormon Background – 3

Chapter 2: Benson's Religious Leadership and Israel – 20

Chapter 3: Benson and Israel in the Political Arena – 41

Epilogue – 71

Appendix – 73

Bibliography – 78
Introduction

My interest in Jews and the State of Israel grew almost imperceptibly throughout my life, until I enrolled in a semester study abroad at the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. I was fascinated by everything I saw and learned in Israel, but I was not fully aware to what extent my experiences growing up a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had influenced my perceptions. My family is not particularly connected to the Near East, nor does it hold any important political or religious standing in the Church. But from my Latter-day Saint culture and heritage I gained a sincere interest in the Jewish people and their destiny as God's Covenant people. By the time I left Israel after my semester studying there, I knew it would be a central aspect of my life from then on.

One of the people whose teachings most influenced my developing interest in Israel and the gathering of the Jews was the prophet Ezra Taft Benson, who was the first Church prophet I remember. I grew up hearing stories of his time as Secretary of Agriculture, and especially of his unfailing support for the State of Israel. But I had never come across any book or even article that described his relationship with the State in any detail. When I began to explore my own genesis in Near Eastern studies, I became curious about what experiences had been central to President Benson's views on the Jews and Israel. Yet, while his deep interest in the Jewish State is mentioned frequently in biographies and other publications about him, I could find nothing that expounded his
In researching Benson's relationship with the Jewish State, I found that he indeed did have a profound admiration and love for the Jewish people and their homeland, and that, like my own experience, his views were heavily influenced by the notions of previous leaders of the Church. Yet, he is unique in that, unlike any Latter-day Saint apostle or leader before him, he developed lasting friendships with various Israeli leaders, and his political position made him a highly visible emissary of Mormon goodwill toward their Jewish siblings in the House of Israel.

The following work attempts to illuminate the role that Benson played, and the singular relationship that allowed him to do so. My research was somewhat constrained by the fact that the Church history department would not release Benson's personal files that surely would have contributed additional insight. Given the controversial nature of Benson's strong anti-Communist stance, this is understandable, but I do hope to be granted further access and continue my research in the future. In any case, what I did find I display here, and hope it enlightens and fills, at least partially, the gap in scholarship that currently remains regarding the Latter-day Saint leader Ezra Taft Benson and his relationship with the State of Israel.
Chapter 1: Mormon Background

Outside of the Mormon world, the name Ezra Taft Benson probably no longer rings many bells. Half a century ago, however, Benson would have been a recognized name to anyone familiar with the White House, as he served for two terms as Secretary of Agriculture under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. He was a somewhat controversial leader and is generally remembered for his zealous antagonism toward any kind of socialist policies, including a determined dislike for Communism, an attitude that won him various friends and enemies in the political world. Yet in the religious world Benson is remembered much more for his work as an apostle in the Church of the Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as “Mormon”). For many members of the Church, Benson's legacy includes, among other things, his passionate support for the newly-created State of Israel. Yet, in contrast to his widely noted anti-Communist sentiments, Benson's relationship with Israel, while often mentioned in biographies and other writings about him, has remained largely unexamined.

This unique relationship developed in two ways: first, through Benson's religious background and perceptions that consistently equated the formation of the State of Israel as fulfillment of prophecy, which perceptions he likewise carried into his Church and political leadership; and second, through Benson's experiences as a member of Eisenhower's cabinet and his visits to Israel in that capacity. Benson was fond of his
friendships with various Israeli leaders, citing them often and frequently mentioning positive statements about the Church by prominent Jews and Israelis. One of his favorites was a comment made to him by David Ben Gurion, which Benson used to illustrate what he saw as a special relationship between Mormons and Jews, and particularly Israelis: “There are no people in the world who understand the Jews like the Mormons.”

Because of the obvious influence that Benson's religious heritage had on his views, his relationship with Jews and the State of Israel can only be understood by placing his views in that context. In order to do that, we must begin by looking back more than 100 years, to the roots of his Latter-day Saint heritage and to the early American Christian culture that influenced Mormon perspectives on Jews and Palestine. While various Christian sects have viewed the formation of a Jewish State in Palestine as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, the Mormon relationship with Jews and Israel has always been a unique one. Truman G. Madsen, notable Church scholar, calls the Mormon attitude toward Zionism “singular and refreshing.”¹ He characterizes that attitude in four aspects: their declaration of “physical continuity with Israel”; their “benign attitude toward Jewish dispersion” in contrast to the view, “often abetted by Christians, that it was solely and irreversibly Divine retribution”;² the Mormon assurance of “the continuance of Israel up to the end of history”; and finally the Mormon perception of “reliving the life of Israel in their own lives.”³ Larry Lefkowitz of The Jerusalem Post concludes that “the attitude of the Mormons, as a religious sect, has been in strong contrast to the official

² Contrast noted by Truman G. Madsen, Mormon Attitudes toward Zionism, 11.
³ D.W. Davies, “Israel, the Mormons and the Land,” Reflections on Mormonism, Truman G. Madsen, ed. (Salt Lake City: Publisher's Press, 1978), 82-93.
Indeed, Mormons generally feel a deep kinship for their “Jewish brothers,” a relationship that goes beyond mere tolerance or acceptance, to a collective concern for and even preoccupation with the well-being of Lord's covenant people.

**Early Teachings and Familial Bond**

Contemporary Mormon enthusiasm for the Jewish people is derived from the teachings of the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith, who has been called the “first religious Zionist.” Armand L. Mauss contrasts Mormon perceptions of Jewish identity with those of other Christian religions. The “particularly vicious and fatal forms of anti-Semitism in the history of Europe (and sometimes in America, as well),” he writes, “have their genesis in a religious ideology that defines Jews (at best) as apostate from the Abrahamic religion of the Bible or (at worst) as diabolical enemies to the true Christian religion.” In contrast, “Mormons typically understood the waywardness attributed to Jews in biblical and Christian writings as simply a normal and re-current human tendency.” Jews and Christians were no different in this sense. “If Jews and the rest of Israel had periodically been chastened for turning their backs on God,” Mauss explains, “so had the pre-Israelite biblical peoples in the times of Adam, Enoch, and Noah...[and] so had the Christian Gentiles themselves after the apostolic era.”

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4 Larry Lefkowitz, “Mormons' Kinship with the Jews,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 1975. (This article was found in the LDS Church History archives, but without complete publication information. I was unable to get into *The Jerusalem Post* archives previous to 1980, so I could not find the exact date of publication.)
7 Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 163.
Joseph Smith taught that Latter-day Saints were actually descendants of the Twelve Tribes of Israel – specifically the tribe of Ephraim, and as such shared “Israelite ancestry with the Jews.” This shared ancestry led to a spirit of brotherliness, at least from the Mormon perspective, and a sense of common purpose in the restoration prophesied anciently to come about in the latter days. According to Smith,

We [the house of Israel] are the favored people that God has made choice of to bring about the Latter-day glory; it is left for us to participate in and help to roll forward the Latter-day glory, “the dispensation of the fulness of times, when God will gather together all things that are in heaven, and all things that are upon the earth,” “even in one,” when the Saints of God will be gathered in one from every nation, and kindred, and people, and tongue, when the Jews will be gathered together into one.

Along with a sense of common ancestry and camaraderie, Smith taught that the gathering spoken of in the Bible was already underway, and the Latter-day Saints had a most important role in that gathering. The gathering would consist of two branches: the ancient kingdom of Judah, and the “lost” tribes of Israel. Judah would be gathered to Jerusalem, and the other tribes, led by Ephraim (Latter-day Saints), would gather to Zion, located in America. “The city of Zion spoken of by David,” he claimed, “will be built upon the land of America. . . But Judah shall obtain deliverance at Jerusalem.” The gathering was to consist not only of Latter-day Saints' gathering in the elect from among the “lost tribes” (i.e., conversion to the Mormon faith), but also a literal gathering of the Jews to Jerusalem, and a redemption of the land. Within this notion was the understanding that Jews were not, therefore, cut off from the ancient covenant. Their

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10 Mauss, *All Abraham's Children*, 164.
11 Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 17.
covenant relationship and promise of future redemption remained very much alive, and its realization would be part of the fulfillment of prophesy leading to the (second) coming of the Messiah. “No spiritual restoration of the people would be complete or successful if it did not include the return and reconstruction of the people in their own land.”

This expectation that a restoration includes a return of the Jews to Palestine is a distinctive component to Mormon theology, but it is also occasionally found in other American Christian traditions of the early nineteenth century. Napoleon’s appearance in Europe for instance was seen by certain groups as evidence of the imminent gathering foretold in the Old Testament.

Yet, the Mormon perception of the Jews' gathering was also unique in that for them it was part of a larger gathering, in which the Latter-day Saints claimed a very significant part. And even in the years since Joseph Smith's death the idea of gathering and the return of the Jews continued to animate Mormon theology. In fact, every Mormon prophet from Smith to the modern day has reiterated the Mormon covenantal relationship and its place in the fulfillment of prophecy. “Every sentiment and feeling,” Brigham Young wrote in 1853, “should be to cleanse the earth from wickedness, to purify the people, sanctify the nations, gather the nations of Israel home, redeem and build up Zion, redeem Jerusalem and gather the Jews there, and establish the reign and kingdom of God on earth.” Likewise, Orson Pratt, another contemporary of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, predicted the return of the Jews to the land of their fathers. “The Jews and the ten tribes shall return. . . Jerusalem will be redeemed from the hands of the

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13 Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 95-96.
14 Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 52.
Gentiles, and it will be again inhabited by the Jews as a nation.”¹¹⁵ More recently, LeGrand Richards, fellow apostle of the Church during Benson's time as Secretary of Agriculture, said in a letter, “There is no question but what the Lord is moving to return the Jews to their land of promise.” He continued, “that 'mystical force' [driving the Jews to Palestine] comes from the Lord for the accomplishment of His purposes.”¹¹⁶ Later Ezra Taft Benson, who would become the prophet and president of the Church from 1985-1994, would carry on that support of the Jewish State, and often commented on the fact that prophecy was being fulfilled in Palestine.

In order to understand the continuity of Benson's perspectives concerning the State of Israel with his Mormon background, and how it differs from other Christian notions, it is important to note various commonalities between the leaders and their teachings about the gathering of the Jews to Palestine. First is the fact that the gathering of the tribe of Judah is decidedly separate from the gathering that the Latter-day Saints themselves were participating in, and would not simply be a spiritual but a physical gathering. Brigham Young went so far as to specify that the restoration of the Jewish people would not come about through Mormon efforts at conversion: “Jerusalem is not to be redeemed by our going there and preaching to the inhabitants. It will be redeemed by the hand of the Almighty.”¹¹⁷ Likewise, Orson Hyde, early apostle of the Church, felt that the gathering would be accomplished by political means. He visited Palestine in 1841 to dedicate the land for the “gathering of the Jews” (Hyde's visit will be discussed at length later in this chapter), and in a letter to Parley P. Pratt later that year, he commented on the

¹¹⁵ Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 106.
¹¹⁶ LeGrand Richards, letter to Francis W. Kirkham, 31 January, 1958, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University Library (Provo, Utah).
¹¹⁷ Ricks, “From Joseph to Joseph”, 99.
future gathering. “It was by political power and influence that the Jewish nation was broken down, and her subjects dispersed abroad,” he noted, “and I will hazard the opinion that by political power and influence, they will be gathered and built up.”

Thus, the understanding that the Jews would be gathered to Palestine without Mormon intervention, but with Mormon awareness and support, and that it would be a physical, even political, gathering, pervaded Mormon doctrine.

Another recurring theme of interest among the earlier quotes is the notion of the “redemption” of the land, as well as the people. Far from being simply a gathering, the restoration of the Jews in Palestine represented an actual redemption of the land and people from the “gentiles.” This concept of redemption of the land played heavily in the beliefs embraced by Ezra Taft Benson regarding the formation of the State of Israel, along with the conviction that the political events that brought about that restoration and redemption were, in fact, fulfillment of prophecy, and evidence of the Lord's approval and involvement.

Yet not every view expressed by Mormon leadership was so entirely sympathetic to the Jewish situation. While remaining committed to the surety of the gathering of the Jews to Jerusalem, Orson Pratt also tended slightly to the old Christian notion of Jewish culpability for rejecting the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and thus the historic persecution by the nations must continue until they repented of that critical transgression. “If those Jews would repent and turn to be converted. . . they had a hope of having their sins blotted out. . . but until then they must remain in torment.”

Likewise, fourth prophet and president of the Church, Wilford Woodruff, highlighted the Jews' rejection of the Messiah as cause

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19 Glanz, *Jew and Mormon*, 78.
for their long suffering. Yet, he, like most leaders before and after him, also emphasized his love for the Jewish people. He observed the Jewish rejection of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, but he insisted, “I do not... wish to find fault with them. I have a great love for them as a people.”\textsuperscript{20} Note again the “love for [the Jewish] people,” and the apparent concern for their restoration within Mormon theology. This was not uncommon in other American Christian denominations, but “the great innovation of the Mormons was... their announcement that the return of the Jews was imminent and that this event would give the signal for the gathering of the Gentiles in the American Zion.”\textsuperscript{21}

That the gathering of both gentiles and Jews was and is of central importance in Latter-day Saint teachings finds ample evidence in both the history and rhetoric of Mormonism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As noted, Joseph Smith taught it plentifully. He again stressed its importance in 1836 when he said, “One of the most important points in the faith of the Church of the Latter-day Saints... is the gathering of Israel... That day is one, all important to all men.”\textsuperscript{22} Yet, Smith not only spoke eloquently about the imminent gathering. He also took measures to ensure its coming to fruition. In 1841 he sent a mission to Palestine with the express intent of dedicating the land for the restoration of the Jews, a mission he had spoken of some 10 years earlier in a blessing to the very Orson Hyde who would complete that mission. In 1831, Smith told Elder Hyde in that blessing, “In due time thou shalt go up to Jerusalem, the land of thy fathers, and be a watchman unto the House of Israel; and by thy hands shall the Most High do a great work, which shall prepare the way and greatly facilitate the gathering of

\textsuperscript{20} Glanz, \textit{Jew and Mormon}, 103.
\textsuperscript{21} Glanz, \textit{Jew and Mormon}, 103.
\textsuperscript{22} Ricks, “From Joseph to Joseph,” 97.
that people." In April, 1840, Elder Hyde was indeed commissioned by Joseph Smith to travel to Palestine to dedicate the land for the return of the Jewish people. “That the Prophet Joseph Smith was moved to send an emissary on such a mission in those days,” writes one Mormon scholar, “is of itself an astounding thing and clearly indicates the place of the Jews in the glorious work of the Restoration.”

It also indicates the apparent importance of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in helping to prepare the way for the restoration of the Jews. While, as Brigham Young pointed out, Latter-day Saints would not bring about that restoration through preaching to the Jews, their prayers and dedication missions would act as a catalyst in the long-awaited fulfillment of prophecy.

Orson Hyde did indeed travel to Palestine, and on Sunday, October 24, 1841, he climbed the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and offered the dedicatory prayer he had been commissioned to offer. This mission has become an event of legendary import in the history of Mormon perceptions regarding the gathering of Israel. Its significance is described in various sources, including a 1991 article by David Galbraith (first president of the BYU Jerusalem Center), where he explains that the prayer consisted of three major themes: 1. the gathering of Judah, 2. the building up of Jerusalem, and 3. the rearing of a temple. It is noteworthy that Hyde's prayer focused on two main elements that would become central to Mormon, and especially Benson's, support for the State of Israel: the gathering of the Jews, and building up of Jerusalem. While the Latter-day Saint sources

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23 History of the Church 4:375.
26 Mormons still anticipate the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, but as to the timing and means of
focus on both the fulfillment of prophecy that the mission represented, and the beginning of the literal gathering of the tribe of Judah, it can also be seen as “an official representation of Mormonism on behalf of the American people; they went to Palestine to show the whole world that the American people were ready to accept the old promise given to the Jews, and also to announce to the American people that the confirmation of its new Mormon faith was near.”

Mauss likewise emphasizes the validating nature of Hyde's mission, and the promise of the gathering of Israel in general, stating, “By highlighting the special importance of Israeliite identity for both Jews and Mormons as part of the divine plan for the last days, the Mormons enhanced their own legitimacy as a chosen people.”

The Mormon focus on the fulfillment of the ancient covenant of Abraham and Jacob elevated not only Jews' importance in God's plan, but also their own.

Whatever their reasons, the Mormons looked to the gathering of Israel, including Judah, with great eagerness. Even after Smith's death in 1844, this topic remained at the fore of doctrinal teachings. A year after the assassination of their prophet, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles issued a proclamation to the people and rulers of the world. It included, among other things, a call for the Jews to return to Palestine, and for the rest of the world to facilitate that return.

Mormons even viewed, and many still view, the later rise of Zionism as a result of Hyde's mission to Palestine. However, this perspective of Hyde's mission as a catalyst for the return of the Jews, and the conviction that Zionism's subsequent rise was at least in part a result of his dedication of the land, is an important

that fulfillment, no doctrine has been put forth. In any case, the rearing the a Temple in Jerusalem was not a theme touched on in Benson's writings and speeches.

Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 80.

Mauss, All Abraham's Children, 165.

Proclamation of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1845, Church History Library Archive, online: http://archive.org/details/proclamationoftw00unse.
component in tracing Ezra Taft Benson's enthusiastic support for the creation of the State of Israel, and of the Jewish people in general. He would hold to it ardently, even as he faced some political reticence among his peers in the White House.

Yet, Hyde's mission was not the only mission to the Holy Land. In 1872 another Mormon mission made its way to Palestine, with similar goals as Hyde's mission 30 years earlier. George A. Smith, leader of the group of missionaries, was instructed by Brigham Young on October 15, 1872, “. . . When you go to the Land of Palestine, we wish you to dedicate and consecrate that land to the Lord, that it may be blessed with fruitfulness, preparatory to the return of the Jews in fulfillment of prophecy, and the accomplishment of the purposes of our Heavenly Father.”

But Epperson describes the group more as “tourists”, visiting several sites throughout the region of Palestine, before arriving at the Mount of Olives on March 2, 1873, and dedicating the land once again so that “it may be blessed with fruitfulness, preparatory to the return of the Jews in fulfillment of prophecy.”

Epperson then describes a third set of Mormon missions to Palestine, in 1927 and 1933. The previous two missions had made not effort at conversion of the Jews in Palestine, but this third mission differed in that regard. This time the apostles “confirmed” the previous dedications, then felt that “the time appears to be ripe for proselytizing among the Jews.” But the missions bore little fruit, and the Church in subsequent generations made little effort to find converts among the Jewish people. The attitude seemed to return to a reflection of teachings by previous leaders such as Joseph

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30 As quoted in Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 82.
Smith and Brigham Young, as previously noted. Thus, Glanz appropriately remarks that within the Mormon church, known throughout much of the world for its aggressive missionary efforts, a mission to the Jews is non-existent.\(^{33}\) This appears to be at least in part a reflection of the notion that the Jews would not be converted to a belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah until His second coming. Yet it also is consistent with Church policy that it will not proselytize in countries in which missionary efforts are unwelcome.\(^ {34}\)

**Mormon Relations with the Jewish People**

As has been indicated, Mormon perceptions of the Jews and their imminent gathering are unique and ever-present in Mormon experience. This singular perspective, combined with the family ties that Mormons feel with Jews, have led to a somewhat distinctive relationship between the two peoples.

Indeed, all of the scholars on the Mormon-Jewish relationship seem to arrive at similar conclusions. “Mormons share with Jews the practice of distinguishing themselves from the 'other nations' or 'gentiles,’” notes one scholar.\(^ {35}\) Others, have noted the sense of fellowship Mormons feel toward Jews, with whom they feel a sense of camaraderie in suffering Christian rejection.\(^ {36}\) To be sure, the relationship has not always been entirely rosy or brotherly, especially on the part of orthodox Jews (which will be discussed later), and even among some Latter-day Saints, but overall the sentiment seems to be one of appreciation and concern for the welfare of the Jewish people.

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33 Glanz, *Jew and Mormon*, 94.
34 In order to ease tensions regarding the Brigham Young University Jerusalem Center being built on Mt. Scopus, Church leaders also signed a special contract with Israeli leaders in 1985 in which they promised that no student at the center would proselytize in Israel until the leaders formally allowed the Church to do so.
35 Seth Ward, *Covenant and Chosenness*, 12.
Again, within the history of this relationship, a few figures and places stand out for their distinction and import within Mormon lore. This may attributed in part to the views of Mormon leadership, begun by Joseph Smith and carried forward by Brigham Young and the rest of the presidents of the Church. But it is also found in one of the Latter-day Saint books of scripture, The Book of Mormon. Various passages remark on the Jews and their future affliction at the hands of Christians because of their rejection of the Messiah. One particular passage condemns the “gentile” treatment of the Jews, and reiterates their status as covenant people.

Oh ye Gentiles, have ye remembered the Jews, mine ancient covenant people? Nay; but ye have cursed them, and have hated them, and have not sought to recover them. But behold, I will return all these things upon your own heads; for I the Lord have not forgotten my people.  

Another passage counsels the reader to cease from “spurning” the Jews, and remember their covenant with the Lord.

Yea, and ye need not any longer hiss, nor spurn, nor make game of the Jews, nor any of the remnant of the house of Israel; for behold, the Lord remembereth his covenant unto them, and he will do unto them according to that which he hath sworn. Therefore ye need not suppose that ye can turn the right hand of the Lord unto the left, that he may not execute judgment unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the house of Israel.

Clearly much of Mormon understanding of the place of the Jewish people in fulfillment of prophecy lies firmly in their sacred scripture, as well as the continual teachings of their leaders.

We find this understanding reflected in the accounts of Mormons and their dealings with the Jewish people. During the 1873 mission to Palestine led by George A.

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37 Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 29:5.
38 Book of Mormon, 3 Nephi 29:8-9
Smith, the members of the group “emphasized the lofty aspects of Jewish religious community life.” Another prominent leader of the Mormon faith and member of the group in 1873, Heber C. Kimball, sent home poignant letters describing his impressions. Many of those impressions include encounters with Jewish people in Europe and elsewhere, and reflect his personal admiration for them. “They are the most spirited, ambitious and persevering people I ever saw. They believe the gathering of Israel... is near...” Other meetings described by the Mormon missionary group are similarly positive and enthusiastic about the Jewish people and their forthcoming gathering.

Brigham Young, close friend of Heber C. Kimball and second president of the Church, expressed his view on the subject of the Jewish people amongst the nations, contrasting them specifically with the Rhoma, or Gypsies: “The Jew is a worshiper of Jehovah – the Gritana, or Rhoma, knows him not...” Wilford Woodruff, fourth president of the Church, expounded on the Mormons' familial bond with the “Brother Jew.” “Whom do you call Gentiles?” he asked. “Every nation except the literal descendents of Israel. We, the Latter Day Saints, are Gentile, in other words, we have come from among the Gentile nations, though many of us may have the blood of Israel within our veins.”

This sense of kinship generally translated into positive relations between Mormons and Jews, as well as continued support for Jewish aspirations for their homeland. In a 1902 General Conference of the Church, Latter-day Saint historian and apostle Brigham H. Roberts spoke favorably and passionately about the emerging Zionist movement, and their recent meetings in Basle, Switzerland to move forward the return of

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39 Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 86.
40 As quoted in Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 87.
41 Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 86-88.
42 Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 62.
43 Glanz, Jew and Mormon, 64.
the Jewish people to Palestine.\textsuperscript{44} As previously noted, Mormons viewed this new Zionist movement as fulfillment of the dedication of Orson Hyde of the Holy Land for the gathering of the Jewish people. Mormons also fostered relations by attempting to become familiar with Jews and the Jewish faith. In 1870 Brigham Young arranged for the visit of Rabbi H. Z. Sneerson of Jerusalem from San Francisco to Salt Lake. His letter to the Rabbi is most telling.

\begin{flushright}
Salt Lake City, U.T., November, 1870
Rabbi H. Z. Sneersohn, San Francisco:
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Dear Sir – Your favor of 29\textsuperscript{th} ult. is to hand. In reply permit me to say it will afford our citizens much pleasure to have you address them in the Tabernacle on subjects of such deep and abiding interest to us all as the past history and present condition of God's covenant people Israel.

If possible please inform me, a day or two in advance of your coming, when you will be here, so that the people may be notified through the Press of your intended visit, and the Tabernacle be prepared for your lecture.

I remain, Dear Sir, Very Sincerely Yours,
In the Cause of Israel,
Brigham Young.\textsuperscript{45}

Another revealing passage comes from a volume written by I.J. Benjamin, \textit{Three Years in America}. As a Jewish world traveller, Benjamin wrote a chronicle of his time in America for his European fellows, describing life in the “New World.” In the second volume, he dedicated a chapter to his experience among the Mormons in Utah. He comments on various peculiarities of the people, but overall is favorable in his impressions. Having called upon, and being received that very evening by Brigham Young, the current prophet and president of the Church (1862), he describes Young as “very friendly and courteous, particularly to Hebrews who are called by the sect, 'brother

\textsuperscript{44} Brigham H. Roberts, General Conference, 1902, Church History Archives.
Benjamin further describes that a favorite theme of the prayers among the Latter-day Saints was “the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the restoration of Israel in connection with it.”

While Brigham Young and others made specific efforts at educating the Mormon people in Utah about “subjects of such deep and abiding interest to [them] all,” much of the Mormon-Jewish relationship developed more casually and locally, as Jews began migrating west and settling in Utah (and other western states), alongside Mormon communities. Benjamin briefly notes this in his travels, claiming that in Salt Lake City, there are “five Israelites here. Two of these have become Mormons. The other three are merchants and are doing very well.” Juanita Brooks further describes some of these relations and concludes that in Salt Lake City, the Mormon “capitol,” relations were friendly. She reports that the 1870 visit of Rabbi Sneersohn “drew a good audience,” and explains,

While individual Jews might criticize or work against the Mormons, or generally vote against them, there was never any bitterness. On the other hand, Mormon children heard the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with emphasis on Joseph who was sold into Egypt as their own lineal ancestor. . . Hebrew customs persisted as Mormon customs. . .

Interestingly, her description illustrates that Mormon customs and teachings emphasized Jewish themes, but, while the relationship remained “friendly,” Jews seemed far less engaged in the welfare of their Mormon counterparts.

Yet, the fact that the association remained friendly is remarkable and important, in a time when Jews suffered discrimination not only among their European neighbors, but

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47 I.J. Benjamin, *Three Years in America*, 225.
in much of America as well. Latter-day Saints, as in other respects, remained unique in this way. “There simply was not anti-Jewish conflict in Utah.”\textsuperscript{50} A quote by Heber J. Grant, seventh president of the Church, in 1921 is further evidence of the positive relations.

> There should be no ill will, and I am sure there is none, in the heart of any true Latter-day Saint, toward the Jewish people. . . AND let no Latter-day Saint be guilty of taking any part in the crusade against these people. I believe in no other part of the world there is as good a feeling in the hearts of mankind toward the Jewish people as among the Latter-day Saints.\textsuperscript{51}

From the Jewish perspective, a compelling testimony from Louis C. Zucker in 1981, might best summarize the goodwill between Mormons and Jews: “I have perceived no sign of anti-Semitism in any office, school or government, where I was known, and known to be a Jew. . . This may safely be said: there is probably no Christian-Gentile culture which is less disposed to anti-Semitism than the Mormon culture here in Zion.”\textsuperscript{52}

With this tradition behind him, Ezra Taft Benson, apostle of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and United States Secretary of Agriculture under President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961), became an ardent supporter of the State of Israel. His teachings and writings reflect his Mormon background, his visits to the Middle East manifest his favor of the Jewish State, and his personal and lasting friendships with various Jewish and Israeli leaders illustrate his firm commitment to the Jewish people and what he saw as their rightful restoration to their ancient land.

\textsuperscript{50} Glanz, \textit{Jew and Mormon}, 66.
\textsuperscript{51} Mauss, \textit{All Abraham's Children}, 191.
\textsuperscript{52} Mauss, \textit{All Abraham's Children}, 191.
Chapter 2: Benson's Religious Leadership and Israel

Writings by and about Ezra Taft Benson reveal his attitudes concerning Israel to be both a product of his Mormon heritage, as well as broader American-Christian and 1950s political sentiment. Yet they also reveal subtle evidences of a uniquely passionate attitude toward the Jewish State, and its place in world history and global politics.

Politically, Benson is best remembered as United States Secretary of Agriculture under President Dwight D. Eisenhower throughout most the 1950s. In this capacity, and even decades later, he is usually noted for his fervent dislike of what he saw as socialist policies in farming and government – a fervor that was likewise reflected in a deep mistrust and dislike for Communism. He, like much of America in the 1950s, was acutely wary of ideologies and people who might spread what he regarded as the great threat of Communism.53

Benson was indeed a crusader for the principles of freedom, as he saw them. Yet within his writings is also ample attestation of the importance of what he regarded as a wondrous fulfillment of ancient and modern prophecy: the gathering of the Jews to their ancient homeland. His political views in both respects are intertwined with his Latter-day Saint background and personal religious beliefs. In examining his attitudes on the newly-formed Jewish State, I have necessarily attempted to divide his writings and activities into chapters devoted separately to his religious and political work. Yet, while this division is necessary, it is also inherently problematic and not a division Benson himself

would have made. As is true of many religious public figures, attempts at disentangling
the complexity of religious beliefs and political action are at best tenuous, and at worst
risk misrepresenting the individual's legacy. Yet, I found this division to be the best way
to organize Benson's work. Because of the difficulties in making this separation, certain
cross-overs are unavoidable in order to be as complete and accurate as possible in the
representation.

Since much of Benson's political views grew out of his religious ones, I begin by
examining Benson's relationship with Israel from a religious perspective. It should be
noted that at the time that Eisenhower requested that Benson serve as the Secretary of
Agriculture, Benson had already served as an Apostle in the Church for nearly 10 years.
This is a highly public, important, and sacred calling, seen as directly given from God,
and one which designated him as one of 15 leaders of the Church worldwide, and a
“Special Witness” of Jesus Christ to the nations. Due to his commitment to his work in
the Church, Benson initially intended to decline President Eisenhower's request, but was
advised by the Prophet, David O. McKay, to serve his country if he felt it right, as
Benson could do much good. Thus, Ezra Taft Benson brought his family and his deeply-
held, and often controversial, political and religious beliefs to Washington.

While newspaper and other public accounts of Benson's activities as Secretary of
Agriculture abound, access to his personal writings was not granted me by the Church,
and thus my analysis is somewhat limited. Because of this, I have organized his religious
views around three addresses on Jews and Israel that Benson gave to large public

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54 Dew, Biography, 54.
audiences. The first, called, “Jews Return to Palestine and Fulfill Prophecy,” was for a General Conference of the LDS Church in April of 1950; the second was “an address to Mormons, Non-Mormons, and Jews at the Jubilee Auditorium” in Calgary, Alberta, Canada in May, 1976, entitled, “A Message to Judah from Joseph.” This address was subsequently repeated on various occasions at gatherings around the United States. Both messages exhibit his strong connections to his Mormon background, as well as his unique zeal for the Jewish people and their recently-established homeland. Another other of Benson's speeches, though not as public, was given in 1960 to a Stake Conference (large regional gathering of Church members) in Washington D.C. His remarks to the gathered Latter-day Saints in 1960 both supplement and support his views as portrayed in the other, larger addresses. After examining Benson's views from these three texts, the work of other scholars will help compare those views with other religious figures, as well as American Christian sentiment of Benson's time.

As was indicated in chapter one, Latter-day Saints have long held a singular perspective on Jews and Zionism. Like many Latter-day Saint leaders who went before him, Benson esteemed the Jewish people as brothers and sisters in the House of Israel. His 1976 address explains in great detail the basis of the special kinship that Mormons feel for Jews. “We are Joseph, your brothers,” he declares. “We claim kinship with you as descendants from our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We belong to the same

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55 Ezra Taft Benson, “Jews Return to Palestine and Fulfill Prophecy,” address to General Conference, April 8, 1950, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints history archive, Salt Lake City, Utah.
57 Ezra Taft Benson, Address at Stake Conference in Washington D.C., 1960, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints history archive, Salt Lake City, Utah.
58 Benson, “Message to Judah,” 4-5.
family. We, too, are the house of Israel.” Benson often spoke of the “divine destiny of
the Jewish race,” again evidenced in his 1976 address where he emphasizes not only
Mormon kinship with Jews, but also kindred doctrines between the two religions.

These doctrines, of course, include Mormon belief in the prophecies of the
scattering from and later gathering of the Jews to the land of Palestine. Quoting various
prophets from the Old Testament, Benson tells how the prophecies have been fulfilled
concerning the scattering of Israel – not just regarding the Tribe of Judah, but likewise
through the scattering of the other Tribes. He later comments on the suffering of the
Jewish people, and its part in the fulfillment of prophecy. He quotes Will Durant that “no
other people has ever known so long an exile, or so hard a fate,” and then recounts his
own experience witnessing the residual trauma of the Holocaust when he served as a
mission president in Europe in 1946 and visited the ruins of Jewish ghettos and the camps
of survivors. “I have been impressed to tears as I visited some of these wanderers, those
persecuted and driven sons of our Heavenly Father, my brethren Judah. Yes, the
prophecies regarding the dispersion and suffering of Judah have been fulfilled.” The
devastation he felt at what transpired against the Jews at the hands of the Nazi regime is a
theme that appears several times in his writing, and clearly affected both his personal
determination for a Jewish State and his political views that the Jewish people were
accomplishing miracles in Palestine, both relating to the prophesied gathering, and
causing the desert to “blossom as a rose.”

60 Dew, Biography, 434.
61 Benson, “Message to Judah,” 2.
Benson's sense of kinship for the Jews arose not only out of his empathy for their sad history, but also out of a conviction that Mormons had “cosuffered with them.” He briefly recounts the much shorter narrative of repeated expulsion and persecution of Mormons in the United States before they trekked west in search of deliverance. He even points out the similarities in topography between Palestine and the Great Basin in Utah, where the Saints settled. Yet, he quickly emphasizes that Mormon interest in Jews is not based solely on their cosuffering, but on their common heritage and destiny, which he reiterates often in his message. Summarizing his explanation of common suffering and heritage, Benson ends his message with an appeal to a passage from the Hebrew Bible, that “the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel.”

One aspect of his “Message to Judah” to which Benson devotes a great deal of time is the visit of Mormon Apostle Orson Hyde to Palestine in 1841. In fact, Benson recounted this visit on several other occasions as well, revealing it to be an event of central importance in his understanding of the gathering of the Jewish people to their homeland. His 1950 address to the entire membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also contains a lengthy reference to Hyde's mission, as do his 1960 Stake Conference remarks. In fact, all three texts contain many of the same elements. Despite 26 years separating the two major addresses, Benson's sentiments seem almost entirely unchanged, unlike many of his Christian counterparts whose support for the Jewish State increased dramatically after 1967. Israel's victory in the Six Day War

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64 Benson, “Message to Judah,” 2.
65 It is common for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to compare the Latter-day Saint exodus to Utah with the Israelite Exodus from Egypt – often citing not only their “Israelite” heritage, but also the similarity of the land in topography.
66 Benson, “Message to Judah,” 12; Jeremiah 3:18
convinced many Christians that God truly was with the Jews in Israel, and many Americans that Israel was a solid U.S. ally against encroaching Soviet power in the Middle East. Yet, Benson seems unaffected either by Israel's early socialist leanings, or by the 1967 War, and his messages remained remarkably similar, evidencing the continuity of his convictions and his efforts to disseminate them.

Yet, the two speeches bear some important differences as well, in both content and purpose. Elder Benson, as Apostle to the Church, in 1950, focuses on the Hyde's prophetic call to dedicate the land of Palestine for the return of the Jews. He includes within this explanation the story of another emissary to Palestine 30 years later (1873), George A. Smith, who likewise dedicated the land for the return of the Jewish people, and emphasizes the promise that “the barrenness and sterility of the land would be removed, that springs of water would burst forth, that the land would become fruitful again.”

This emphasis on the redemption of the land is another theme that reappears often in Benson's writings, especially as they relate to his work as Secretary of Agriculture.

As noted, Benson's emphasis here seems to be on fulfillment not just of ancient prophecy, but of modern prophecy as well. He explains Hyde's belief that Great Britain would play a prominent role in bringing the Jews back to their homeland, and then asserts, “Almost immediately following the visit of George A. Smith to this land, organizations began to come into existence, the purpose of which was to sponsor the

69 While this theme clearly references his religious views, it will be addressed more specifically in the following chapter.
return of the Jews to the land of Palestine.”\textsuperscript{70} Clearly Benson, like many of the Mormon leaders before him, was convinced of the role of Latter-day Saint involvement, though not through preaching in the land, in bringing about the fulfillment of the Biblical prophecies regarding the gathering of the Jews.

Benson's “Message to Judah” in 1976 includes many of the same elements – an explanation of Hyde's visit, reference to his prayer of dedication and a brief mention of the gathering that began relatively shortly after. Yet he entirely excludes Elder George A. Smith's visit in 1873, spending much more time quoting passages of the prayer that illuminate Mormon hope for a restoration of Jews to Palestine. Perhaps Benson's 1976 choice to include only Hyde's mission to dedicate Palestine was because of his emphasis on Mormon kinship with the Jews. Hyde, Benson pointed out to David Ben Gurion in 1964, was “of Jewish descent.”\textsuperscript{71} Overall, the emphasis is much less on fulfillment of Latter-day Saint prophecy than on evidence of fulfillment of ancient prophecy in general, and the accompanying Mormon approbation. Yet a further element of interest is the fact that Benson does not end there. Instead he tells how Levi Eshkol in 1960 asked to hear the Orson Hyde story, and that Ben Gurion in 1964 even requested that Benson send him all the information regarding the story so that he could include it in his history of the State of Israel.\textsuperscript{72} This is another aspect that Benson had brought up before, and which seems to hold great significance in his memory. He uses it here to further witness of “the

\textsuperscript{70} Benson, “Jews Return to Palestine,” 4
\textsuperscript{71} Ezra Taft Benson, Letter to David Ben Gurion, December 9, 1964, Ben Gurion Archives, (Sde Boker, Israel).
\textsuperscript{72} Benson, “Message to Judah,” 4.

Apparently Ben Gurion never finished this History; further research needs to be conducted to see whether he indeed had plans to include the Hyde story in his work.
sincerity of our declaration to you, 'Shalom Haverim,'” and affirm the awareness that Israeli leadership has had of the Mormon sense of fraternity.

Benson certainly told the account of Orson Hyde in Palestine on more than four occasions. I have been able to uncover only a few, but the two public references cited here give evidence for the varied opportunities Benson took to explain the Mormon friendship with Israel. In his 1960 Stake Conference address, Benson again seized the opportunity to emphasize Mormon relations with Israel and the Jewish people. This talk took place while Benson served as Secretary of Agriculture, and shortly after his second visit to Israel in that capacity. His words before the congregation appear to be largely unscripted, influenced by a song performed just prior to his rising to the pulpit. He mentions the song, “I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked,” and then embarks on several paragraphs of reminiscence of his time spent in the State of Israel. He speaks of the wonder of being in the Holy Land, where, he exclaims, “You can't be among those people without feeling their devotion, their dedication, their assurance that they are fulfilling prophecy – the prophecies of Isaiah, of Jeremiah, and other Old Testament prophets.” And, like the other two texts, he mentions the remarkable farming progress that Israelis seem to be making. “The hills long denuded of all vegetation, land that was desert, is now blossoming.”

In keeping with his custom of rehearsing the Orson Hyde story, Benson tells how he took every opportunity to acquaint Israelis with that event. Specifically, he mentions two occasions: with his tour guide from the Hebrew University, and later as a more

74 Benson, Stake Conference Address, 7-9.
75 Benson, Stake Conference Address, 8.
general mention of his efforts at spreading good will among Israelis for their Mormon supporters. He claims the tour guide wanted to know all about it, and wished Mormons would make his home their “headquarters.” Benson concludes that “no people are thought of more highly in Israel than we are.”

Later he explains,

Everywhere we had the glorious opportunity of talking about the Church, telling the story of Orson Hyde’s visit to Palestine and his dedication of that land – on the Mount of Olives in 1841. We told of the predictions that were made in that prayer and by this servant of God later, and the parts the nations in the free world would play, particularly Great Britain, in helping to open the way that the Jewish people might return to the land which had been promised to them.

This account, much like the other two messages expounding views on Israel through the Latter-day Saint lens, reiterates many of the most common themes of Benson's teachings regarding the gathering of the Jews. He revels in the assurance that prophecy is being fulfilled – both Biblical and modern prophecies regarding that gathering – and the part that Mormon leaders, particularly Orson Hyde, have played in that that fulfillment. It is a notion common within Mormon thought, and one which Benson alludes to here, as well as his 1950 General Conference address.

Another theme that Benson emphasizes in his Washington Stake Conference address (1960), which also reappears in his other religious reflections, is the uniqueness of the Latter-day Saints' understanding of the fulfillment of these gathering prophecies. “You hear people in the Christian world say, 'I wish we could live in a time when prophecies are being fulfilled, when miracles are being performed.” This, he insists, is

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77 Dew, Biography, 350.  
precisely what is happening, though “most of the world is oblivious to what is going on in the little country of Israel.” He continues, “This is an area, my brothers and sisters, where prophecies are being fulfilled right before our very eyes.” 79  Ten years earlier, in his 1950 General Conference address, he opened with a similar claim:

I should like to speak with reference to a rather miraculous drama that is taking place today before our very eyes. In large measure it is unobserved, particularly by spiritual leaders, and yet it has been predicted by prophets anciently thousands of years ago, and in modern times has been referred to frequently by Latter-day prophets during the past one hundred and twenty years. 80

Again, in his 1976 “Message to Judah,” he asserts that “since 1948, the people of the world have witnessed a marvelous drama taking place before their eyes; and yet it is a miracle that has gone rather unnoticed and unappreciated.” 81 Yet again the emphasis is in on the miraculous fulfillment of prophecy, along with Benson's perception that the miracle remains largely unobserved by the world, but uniquely understood by Latter-day Saints.

The messages are significant for their similarity in what Benson chose to emphasize and include from Hyde's prayer, as well as what he chose not to include. As noted in chapter one, the prayer focused on three major themes of Jewish restoration: gathering of the Jews to Palestine, the building up of Jerusalem, and the rearing of the Temple there. Benson's messages each note the miracle of the gathering taking place, and the building up of Jerusalem and the land, but do not even mention the rearing of the Temple. Perhaps, since the event had not yet taken place, Benson chose not to include it.

79 Benson, Stake Conference Address, 7.
Or perhaps it did not aid in his apparent goal of building camaraderie between Mormons and Jews, so it was less important. In any case, it is clear that Benson emphasized specific elements of Hyde's dedication, which, because they could be seen already in evidence, would serve to bolster his and other Church members' faith, and to build relations with his Jewish friends.

The continuity of Benson's message across two and a half decades, even regarding his choice of words (i.e. “miracle” and “miraculous”; “oblivious”, “unobserved”, “unnoticed”, etc.), is striking. His assurance that the Mormons see an important reality that the rest of the world does not is nothing new in Mormon theology, and can likewise be found in most religious theologies. What is worthy of note is his conviction that Mormons have played a unique and particular role in the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, indeed that Mormons themselves claim modern revelation similar to prophets of old. This is a notion singular to Latter-day Saint doctrine, and a point of contention with most of the Christian world to the present.

Benson, therefore, is partially correct when he professes that the “miracle” of the gathering of the Tribe of Judah goes on largely “unnoticed or unappreciated.” Most spiritual leaders, including Christian and even Jewish leaders, did not see the events through exactly the same prism as did Benson. Yet, he himself was acutely aware of Christian support, albeit somewhat ambivalent, of the Jewish State, and he took great pains to illustrate the similarities in Mormon perspectives with those of his Jewish “brothers.” Among Benson's files from his time as Secretary of Agriculture is a section entitled “Jewish Literature.”

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82 Ezra Taft Benson, Papers, 10:29, Eisenhower Presidential Library (Abilene, Kansas).
up largely of various Christian reports on the State of Israel, mostly from the year 1949, just after the Jewish State was born. It does include a 1951 pamphlet (on microfilm) from the American Zionist Council, “Israel and the Arab States: the Issues in Dispute,” and a lengthy article, “The Jerusalem Story,” published in 1949 in the magazine The Nation, which details the problems confronting the UN in establishing proprietorship over Jerusalem. Notably, the literature includes nothing from an Arab perspective on the Jewish State, an aspect of Benson's political views that will be discussed later.

What is relevant and interesting here is that the bulk of Benson's “Jewish Literature,” is actually Christian Zionist reports on the fledgling state. He was clearly aware of Christian (or certain Christian groups') appreciation for the miracles “taking place before their eyes.” Yet his impression was one of general disregard for those miracles among spiritual leaders. Perhaps this is due to the notion that the Mormon perspective, while shared by some Christian groups, was unique. In his 1976 message, Benson addresses this: “There were a number of Christian sects in the nineteenth century which held millennial views and saw the return of the Jews to their homeland as a 'sign of the times' which would precede the second advent of the Jesus Christ.” Yet, he stresses, “the Mormon interest was and is more than this. Our concern and interest is a kinship to our Jewish brothers.”

For Benson, then, Mormons boasted a singular relationship with the Jews.

His perception was likely also influenced by the apparent ambivalence in American opinions regarding a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine. Various studies have examined American attitudes, including and especially Christian attitudes,

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83 Benson, “Message to Judah,” 4-5.
about Jews and Israel, throughout the early days of the Yishuv (pre-state Jewish
community in Palestine) to the present, noting the changes in perspective occasioned by
World War II and the Holocaust. These studies reveal a great variance of opinion on the
Jewish question. Yet, when compared with Mormon viewpoints, especially those of Ezra
Taft Benson, the studies also reveal certain similarities between Latter-day Saint and
other Christian perceptions of Israel.

Michelle Mart, in an article that attempts to explain the changing Christian
relationship with Jews in 1950s America, illustrates some of the complexity within the
American-Christian community and how they viewed Israel. She notes how the threat of
Communism caused many American Christians who had previously distanced themselves
from Jews because of their refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah, now (especially after
1967) saw them as an ally in the fight against the spread of “godless Communism.”
Because of this perceived alliance with the Jewish people, many Americans began to look
more kindly on a Jewish State in their Biblical homeland. Other scholars explain that
for Americans Israel represented a solution to the Jewish problem of Europe, and for
many Christians, fulfillment of ancient prophecy. In the days leading up to World War
II, during the Yishuv in Palestine, the Pro-Palestine Federation of America, which
consisted of pro-Zionist Christian leaders, worked with Zionist groups to acquire
assistance for Palestinian Jews. Michael Oren describes how after World War II, as
Jews continued to languish in camps across Europe, American Christians “hound[ed]

86 Oren, Power Faith and Fantasy, 483.
87 Mart, “Christianization of Jews,” 116-119; see also Oren, Faith, Power and Fantasy, 488.
88 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 425.
Truman” for American support of the Jewish State, reminding him that “the title deeds”
granting the Jews ownership of Palestine were “still extant in millions of Bibles the world
around.”

American Christians were by no means homogeneous in their support for Israel,
especially prior to 1967. Yet support for the Jewish State had grown somewhat in the
1940s and 50s. Peter Grose reports that in 1944 only one-third of American Christians
were sympathetic to the Jewish State. The number actually dropped by February of 1948,
when half of Americans polled claimed “no opinion.” However, by March of 1948, 50
percent of Protestants and 44 percent of Catholics said they would support a Jewish state
“if Jews independently set up a Jewish state anyhow.”

Although public opinion was clearly shifting toward support for Israel, lingering
negative attitudes toward Jews remained somewhat problematic. The Vatican refused to
acknowledge the Jewish State for several years after its recognition by the UN. This was
for various reasons, not the least of which was the conviction that, because the Jews had
rejected Jesus as the Messiah, the Catholic Church had superseded the Jewish people in
their sacred Covenant, and thus Jews lost all claim to the covenantal land. Protestant
missionary groups also feared the repercussions of a Jewish state. Both Michael Oren

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89 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 488; see also Peter Grose, Israel in the Mind of America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 215; here both Oren and Grose quote Chicago's Moody Bible Institute.

90 It should be noted that political and economic concerns played a major role in American opinion regarding Israel, contributing greatly to the divergence of attitudes. I have chosen to address this in the next chapter, looking at Benson's political views in contrast with his contemporaries.

91 Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 262.

92 For more on Catholic supersessionism, see Anthony Kenny, Catholics, Jews, and the State of Israel, 1993.
and Peter Grose describe the frustrations that Protestant missionaries in Palestine faced as Zionists pushed forward for a Jewish homeland.93 “Everyone zealous for Christian missions,” explains a Presbyterian veteran of the faculty at the American University of Beirut, “must feel a veritable heartbreak for the way in which the hasty and ill-advised endorsement of the Zionist program by Congress has nullified the sacrificial labors of generations of missionaries and educators.”94

The central issue for these Protestant and Catholic groups was essentially Jewish rejection of Jesus as the Messiah,95 and especially for the Protestants, rejection of missionary labors to help correct that perceived fault. Per Osterbye in his book The Church in Israel (1970) condemns Israel for its anti-missionary attitude. Still, he explains that most people of Protestant faith believe that the formation of the State of Israel represents “a direct fulfillment of some Old Testament prophecies,” and concludes that “the Jews are still God's chosen people.”96 Yet, despite their belief in the Jews as God's chosen people, many Christians remained staunchly opposed to the Jewish State on the basis of the Christ issue. “The central question between Judaism and Christianity lies in their answer to the question: What do you think of Christ?” insists Millar Burrows of Yale University. “The present resurgence of Jewish nationalism is a repetition of the same fatal error that caused Israel's rejection of Jesus.”97

93 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy 428; Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 214.
94 Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 214.
95 Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 214.
96 Per Osterbye, The Church in Israel (Denmark: Vinderup Bogtrykkeri I/S 1970), 136.
97 Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 214.
In addition to contributing to persisting notions of anti-semitism, these attitudes complicated American sentiment regarding support for Israel. Still others recognized the role that Christian anti-semitism had played in setting the stage for the Holocaust, a realization that caused them to support the creation of a Jewish homeland to assuage their guilt. As Dorothy Thompson contends, “The salvation of the Jews must... come in part as an act of repentance from the Christian world.”

Nonetheless, America remained divided throughout the 1940s and 50s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt clung desperately to the American policy of neutrality in the conflict over a Jewish state in the Middle East, and even promised King ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia “never to assist the Jews at the Arabs' expense;” but his successor Harry Truman left notions of neutrality behind. Influenced both by various outspoken, pro-Israel Christian leaders, and by his own convictions, Truman threw his support in favor of Israel. On May 14, 1948, shortly after David Ben Gurion announced Israel's independence, the United States officially recognized “the provisional government as the de facto authority of the State of Israel.”

Clearly American sentiment of the 1940s and 50s regarding Israel vacillated and equivocated, even while a change was taking place in American society that linked Catholics, Protestants and Jews together in a common dislike of Communism.

However, the year 1967 saw American support for Israel begin to solidify. As noted, American political sentiment regarding Israel will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

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99 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 471.
100 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 483-84.
102 American political sentiment regarding Israel will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.
Israel's victory in the Six Day War with Egypt, Jordan and Syria for many evangelical Christians amounted to nothing less than divine intervention, hastening the coming of the messianic age. It also helped convince many Americans that they had substantial political grounds for support of Israel, as a powerful ally in the fight against Communism.104

While Christian and political sentiment on Israel's legitimacy in the Middle East remained mixed early on, then transformed into resounding support in 1967, Benson's attitude, as both a leader of the Church and a political figure, was favorable from the beginning. Without access to his personal thoughts, we can only guess that he was likewise supportive in the days of the Yishuv. As noted, his opinions are in large part a continuation of previous Mormon leaders who saw the gathering of the Jews in Palestine as fulfillment of prophecy. And as a prominent leader, and later prophet of the Church, his ideas were heard and widely accepted by members. His comments reveal his consistent and emphatic support of the Jewish State over the span of the almost three decades between his public remarks on the topic.

In many ways, Mormon perspectives reflect Christian notions regarding Jews in Palestine, but in others, they differ notably. Benson, like many of his Christian counterparts, focused on the fulfillment of prophecy that for him was represented in the formation of a Jewish homeland. Yet, as noted, he also consistently highlighted accompanying Mormon prophecy and the Latter-day Saint role in ushering in that fulfillment. Another excerpt from his 1950 message to members of the Church helps to illustrate the importance that this held in Benson's understanding. He quotes a long

104 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 527.
passage from the fourth prophet and president of the Church, Wilford Woodruff (1879), who, much like Benson, seemed to reach out in a spirit of brotherhood to Jews, and anxiously await, even expect, their restoration to their lands of inheritance. (Benson would likewise become the thirteenth prophet of the Church from 1985 until his death in May, 1994.) As various aspects of Woodruff’s quote are relevant for my analysis, I will copy the entire quote that Benson uses in his address.

. . . the Lord has decreed that the Jews should be gathered from all the Gentile nations where they have been driven, into their own land, in fulfillment of the words of Moses, their lawgiver. And this is the will of your great Elohim, O house of Judah, and whenever you shall be called upon to perform this work, the God of Israel will help you. You have a great future and destiny before you and you cannot avoid fulfilling it. You are the royal, chosen seed, and the God of your father's house has kept you distinct as a nation for eighteen hundred years, under all the oppression of the whole Gentile world. You may not wait until you believe on Jesus of Nazareth, but when you meet with Shiloh your king, you will know him; your destiny is marked out, you cannot avoid it.  

Benson goes on to explain how Woodruff made other prophecies regarding the Jewish desires and efforts to create their homeland, and that great suffering would be occasioned before it was actualized (no doubt Benson's mention of suffering refers to the devastation of the Holocaust, which Benson had witnessed firsthand just four years earlier). He also notes that Woodruff and Hyde both predicted Great Britain's involvement in preparing the way for the fulfillment of the gathering prophecy, themes we have seen previously.

Like many Christians, Benson (through his use of Woodruff’s quote) reiterates here that the Jews retain their covenantal status, but diverges sharply from the Protestant attitude portrayed earlier, wherein Jews must suffer because they refuse to accept Jesus as

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105 Prophet from 1889-1898
the Messiah. Indeed, both Benson and Woodruff seem to acknowledge that this will not happen until after the gathering prophecy is fulfilled. This is not to imply that Benson, or Mormons in general, had no intention of sharing his unique Christian faith with his Jewish brothers. Quite the contrary. He ends his message to the members of the LDS faith in 1950 with an assurance that Christ will appear to the Jews at the Mount of Olives, during their “last great struggle,” and fight their battle for them,\textsuperscript{107} and at that moment they “shall know that [He] is the Lord.”\textsuperscript{108} Likewise, in his message to the Jews in 1976, Benson ends with a testimony that Joseph Smith was a true prophet of God, and urges “all to give heed to the message given by God through him.”\textsuperscript{109} Thus while reaching out to Jews in brotherhood, and espousing views common to many Christians, he also shares his own understanding of the sense of fulfillment of prophecy relating to the Jews and their homeland. The difference is that Benson’s support of Israel and the Jewish people is not influenced by their acceptance or rejection of Jesus Christ.

Another aspect that contrasts with Benson’s perspective was the guilt many Christians felt at the horror of the Holocaust. While Benson felt keenly and personally its devastation, a point which he raises in all three of the talks discussed, and which appears in various other political documents, he clearly does not share in the guilt for its occurrence. Indeed, he remains distinctly separate from it. His biographer, Sheri Dew, notes that upon visiting the crematorium in Dachau in 1946, he wrote in his journal: “The scenes and statistics given made us shudder to realize how far men will go in evil and sin

\begin{itemize}
\item[107] Zechariah 14:1-21.
\item[108] Benson, “Jews Return to Palestine,” 5; see also Doctrine and Covenants 45:53.
\end{itemize}
when they discard the eternal truths of the gospel.”¹¹⁰ Benson, having been raised and remained an active member of a faith that had long supported Jews as the chosen people, felt deep sorrow for his Israelite family, but takes no blame upon himself for their terrible suffering.

In examining Ezra Taft Benson's views on Israel through a religious lens, we must conclude that those views are clearly affected by the Christian beliefs of his contemporaries, but are essentially the result of the traditional teachings of his Mormon faith. His professed and unequivocal kinship with the Jews, along with a confidence that their “old-new”¹¹¹ homeland was the fulfillment of both ancient and modern prophecy, make him both comparable to and yet distinctive among Christian leaders of the day. However, although Mormon, and specifically Benson's, perspectives may have echoed Christian sentiments, Latter-day Saints generally remained outside of the Protestant-Catholic-Jew ecumenism that prevailed in the 1950s. It is also interesting to note that Benson's professed kinship with the Jewish people, while certainly appreciated (as will be demonstrated in the subsequent chapter), was somewhat one-sided. But it never wavered.

Benson's doggedly religious approach to Israel accompanied him into his political work as well. As Secretary of Agriculture, his religious sense of purpose revealed itself in his combating what he saw as socialist government policies in farming. In Israel it was reflected in his comments and descriptions of his visits, and the unique delight he took in

¹¹⁰ Dew, Biography, 212.
¹¹¹ Term borrowed from Theodore Herzl, in the title of his book, Altneuland, 1902, which means “old-new land.”
those visits, as opposed to those of other countries. For Benson, Israel held a special place in his work as Secretary of Agriculture.
Chapter 3: Benson and Israel in the Political Arena

As a political figure, Ezra Taft Benson is most frequently cited in the pages of history for his work as Secretary of Agriculture, where he is remembered for his resolute opposition to Communist and Socialist policies in farming, as well as in government in general. His works leave ample fodder for discussion and scholarship in that realm. His relationship with Israel is less commonly mentioned, and outside of his legacy among members of the Mormon faith, it is virtually forgotten. Yet, within Benson's work in President Eisenhower's cabinet, and even his more general political views, examples of Benson's commitment to the Jewish State are not difficult to find.

As noted in Chapter Two, I have necessarily divided his work into religious and political sections to facilitate a more clear and organized examination of his views. This is especially important when looking at Benson in light of the political realities of the 1940s and 50s, and beyond. Although Benson's work as Secretary of Agriculture kept his focus generally on domestic issues, he participated in foreign trips in the second half of his first term, and again in his second term. The purpose of these trips varied, but frequently seemed to be to promote Public Law 480, which passed in 1954. This allowed for “government financing of sales of U.S. agricultural commodities to developing countries and private entities. . . on concessional credit terms.” In other words, developing countries whose domestic food supplies were insufficient, and that lacked the financial ability to purchase through “commercial channels,” would be able to purchase

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U.S. agricultural products on credit. Thus, in his capacity as Secretary of Agriculture, Benson made a number of trips to countries around the world, two of which carried him to Israel.

Again, as noted in Chapter Two, my analysis of Benson's political experience is limited because of the lack of access to Benson's personal record. Yet the public record is quite compelling and is the basis for my examination here. The documentation in this chapter is more diverse than for the previous chapter detailing his religious perspectives, and includes some of his own thoughts and public comments, illustrated mostly in newspapers and other articles, as well as some personal correspondence. In order to achieve a more thorough understanding of Benson's views, I begin with a study of the political views of contemporary U.S. leaders, and then contrast them with those of Benson. The record reveals that, while Benson faithfully represented his country's interests during his visits and in his public commentary, he also exhibited a strong partiality for the Jewish State, especially regarding its disputed place in the Middle East.

America's relationship with Israel remained ambivalent throughout the 1950s, and in the years leading up to Israel's establishment in 1948, American support of a Jewish state was anything but certain. After World War I, America clung to an international diplomatic policy of neutrality, especially where the Middle East was concerned. Professional diplomats of the 1920s particularly opposed Zionism, a dislike that Michael Oren attributes to Christian missionary efforts in the Middle East and their concern over Zionist disruption of their labors. President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed an assurance of American neutrality, but, like much of his country, seemed ambivalent about

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Zionist hopes for a Jewish state. He had promised King ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia “never to assist the Jews at the Arabs' expense,“ but later confided to his treasury secretary, Henry Morgenthau Jr., that many Palestinian Arabs had even “less right [in Palestine] than the Jews.” Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman, on the other hand, was unequivocally supportive of the creation of the Jewish State, even in opposition to several members of his cabinet. Oren describes the State Department as “hostile” to the Zionist enterprise, and in Truman's words, “more concerned about the Arab reaction than the suffering of the Jews.” Even the venerable George Marshall voiced opposition to the formation of a Jewish State in Palestine. Yet notwithstanding the opposition, and encouraged by Jewish and Christian supporters alike (see chapter 2), on May 14, 1948, President Truman officially recognized the government of the State of Israel.

Truman's positive view of a Jewish homeland in Palestine echoed that of many Americans as they gradually shifted from a Protestant, anti-semitic American view, to a more “ecumenical” Judeo-Christian identity. Peter Grose explains that Truman's decision was also affected by guilt over the Holocaust. He was not without concerns regarding the international political implications of American support of Israel, nor of the need for America to retain oil connections in the Middle East, but he remained committed to his May 14, 1948 decision.

114 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 471.
115 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 429.
116 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 440.
117 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 489.
119 Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 112; Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 484.
120 Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 244.
121 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 500; Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 244.
The American public, though divided, was largely supportive of Truman's acceptance of the Jewish State. As discussed briefly in chapter two, this support was rooted in various aspects of the circumstances of the late 1940s. Michelle Mart argues that beginning after World War II, Jews in the United States enjoyed much more acceptance than ever before. She attributes this phenomenon to three changes in American perceptions: post-war ecumenism, the looming threat of Communism, and the notion that the gathering of the Jews to Palestine, and the subsequent creation of the State of Israel, was a sign of the second coming of Jesus Christ as the Messiah.\textsuperscript{122} She explains that, although Protestant ideals remained at the forefront of American thought, “postwar dangers seemed so great [that] many Americans were motivated to seek religious alliances outside of the Protestant faith.”\textsuperscript{123} This resulted in a new “Protestant-Catholic-Jew” triad of religious identity that could serve to combat the rise of atheistic Communism in Europe. Many evangelicals “shift[ed] . . . the central Antichrist focus from Jews, modernism, or Catholicism, to communism.”\textsuperscript{124} They likewise saw the creation of a Jewish state as a sign that the end of days was near, and that the children of Abraham would have a significant role in that culmination.\textsuperscript{125} Thus, Jewish-Christian relations began to enjoy a new solidarity.

Oren emphasizes a different aspect of American endorsement of the Jewish in Palestine. He quotes Sol Bloom who sees the Yishuv, or pre-state Jewish community in Palestine, as “the reincarnation of the old American West, the embodiment of the

\textsuperscript{122} Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 109.  
\textsuperscript{123} Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 112.  
\textsuperscript{124} Robert Ellwood, as cited in Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 115.  
\textsuperscript{125} Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 115.
pioneering spirit.”126 He later asserts that “for nearly two hundred years, Americans had dreamed of transforming the Middle East into a reflection of their own United States—democratic, modern-minded, and free.”127 For many Americans the modern Jewish state represented precisely those values. Likewise, the media played a role in popularizing Israel in American society. In the dispute over who would control Jerusalem, the press emphasized the Jews' willingness to internationalize the Holy City, while at the same time highlighting Arab rejection of any sort of compromise.128 Keeping in line with American public opinion, both the Democrat and Republican platforms adopted pro-Zionist platforms by 1945, and both houses of Congress resolved that “Palestine must be 'open for the free entry of Jews' and the country 'reconstitute[d] . . . as a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth.'”129

This is not to imply that American was finally free from lingering anti-semitic sentiments, or that it wholeheartedly supported the Jewish state. On the contrary, American support for Israel was at best divided and uncertain, even after Holocaust. Notable American leaders such as Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin remained resolute and outspoken anti-semites.130 And while it is true that Americans felt some guilt over the fate of the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust,131 Grose reports that most Americans were “not particularly interested” in the Jews in Palestine.132 He quotes the British Embassy in 1947: “In the middle west there is some support by non-Jewish Americans for the Zionist cause because they do not want more Jews in the United

126 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 431.
127 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 474.
128 Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 118.
129 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 468.
130 Oren, Power, Faith and Fantasy, 426.
131 Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 207, 214.
132 Grose, Israel in the Mind of America, 213.
Indeed, a Gallup poll that year revealed that over 60 percent of Americans opposed any direct U.S. intervention to maintain order in Palestine, and 72 percent thought the U.N. should handle things. Americans agreed that the Jews needed some place to go, and around two-thirds supported the idea of a Jewish state, but the overall mood was certainly one of equivocation. This was complicated by the reality that American support of Israel in the Middle East made for difficult relations with Israel's important, oil-rich Arab neighbors.

Thus, when Dwight D. Eisenhower entered the White House in 1953, he immediately found himself caught between opposing aims in the Middle East. The difficulties posed by those opposing forces would distinguish Eisenhower's administration as one of attempted neutrality and manifest ambivalence regarding matters in the Middle East. Like much of the American populace, his Christian upbringing led him to view the Jews as God's chosen people, and Eisenhower was deeply affected by the atrocities he witnessed in Europe after World War II. After visiting some of the concentration camps and witnessing firsthand the Jewish suffering, he wrote to his wife Mamie, “I never dreamed that such cruelty, bestiality and savagery could really exist in this world! It was horrible.” General Eisenhower attempted to help alleviate some of that suffering by helping remaining Jews learn to farm on land requisitioned from the German people, and expanding educational and cultural programs in Hebrew in order to

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133 Grose, *Israel in the Mind of America*, 213.
prepare them for the transition from Europe to Palestine. Yet, as President, Eisenhower remained stubbornly neutral, at least from the Israeli perspective. Israelis rejoiced in the fact that Eisenhower's commitment to Israel's right to exist did not waver, but noted that the “special relationship” they had enjoyed with President Truman had been downgraded to a “friendly impartiality.”

This difference in attitude between Truman and Eisenhower can certainly be attributed to various factors, but two stand out in particular. The first is the contrast in the relationship between the State Department and the Executive. Eisenhower was much more closely linked with his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, than Truman had been with George C. Marshall or Dean Acheson. In fact, the pair is described as “two men who thought like one.” Dulles recognized the great strategic importance of the Middle East, not just for its access to oil, but for its political importance in keeping that oil out of the hands of the hated Soviets. The second is largely related to the first: Eisenhower's desire, like Dulles, to keep the Soviets out of the Middle East. Dulles and Eisenhower hoped to gain greater Arab cooperation against the Soviets by “publicly downplaying the relationship with the Jewish state while at the same time maintaining the moral commitment to [Israel's] existence.” This required a delicate balancing act that would mark much of Eisenhower's presidency. In the end, Eisenhower would remain loyal to Israel's existence. Indeed, although both men were infuriated at Israel, along

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139 Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 36.
140 Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel*, 22.
with Britain and France, for their collusion against Egypt in the 1956 Sinai Campaign, they never questioned Israel's legitimacy as a state.\textsuperscript{145}

Perhaps part of the reason the President was able to keep a low profile regarding Israel was because, by the early 1950s, Israel to a large extent had already faded from the American public awareness.\textsuperscript{146} Even in the years directly after World War II, American support for a Jewish state was only slightly greater than its opposition.\textsuperscript{147} In fact, other than Evangelical and Jewish support, the lack of opposition seemed to be the mood in the U.S. more than unwavering support.\textsuperscript{148} They agreed, like Truman, that the Jews of Europe needed somewhere to go,\textsuperscript{149} and two-thirds of Americans favored the formation of a Jewish state,\textsuperscript{150} but by the early and mid-1950s, other concerns filled the public agenda. Grose explains that the Korean War, combined with the looming threat of Communism in both the Soviet Union and China, “evoked much greater public passions.”\textsuperscript{151}

American support for Israel took an immediate downturn in the fall of 1956. That was when Britain, France, and Israel collud ed, as was later discovered, to invade Egypt's Sinai in an attempt to reclaim the Suez, end Nasser's defiant support of Algerian independence, and ease pressure from Egyptian fedayeen attacks on Israel from the unruly Sinai border, among various aims.\textsuperscript{152} As noted previously, President Eisenhower

\textsuperscript{145} Oren, \textit{Power, Faith and Fantasy}, 516.
\textsuperscript{146} Grose, \textit{Israel in the Mind of America}, 303.
\textsuperscript{147} Grose, \textit{Israel in the Mind of America}, chapter 11.
\textsuperscript{148} Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 119.
\textsuperscript{149} Oren, \textit{Power, Faith and Fantasy}, 483; Grose, \textit{Israel in the Mind of America}, 208.
\textsuperscript{150} Grose, \textit{Israel in the Mind of America}, 262.
\textsuperscript{151} Grose, \textit{Israel in the Mind of America}, 303.
\textsuperscript{152} For more explanation of the Sinai Campaign of 1956, see Michael B. Oren, “Secret Egypt-Israel Peace Initiatives Prior to the Suez Campaign,” \textit{Middle Eastern Studies}, Vol. 26, no. 3 (July, 1990), 351-370; and S. Ilan Troen, “The Protocol of Sèvres: British/French/Israeli Collusion against Egypt,” \textit{Israel
and Secretary Dulles were furious; in the American public, support for Israel declined sharply, a decline Israel simply couldn't afford.\textsuperscript{153}

That mood of disdain for Israeli aggression against Egypt was not to last long. As America struggled to find success against Communist forces in Vietnam and observed with great concern the increasing Soviet involvement with Egypt and the broader Middle East, support for Israel as a strategic island of pro-Western forces began to win out over frustration with the 1956 debacle. Egypt's ruler Nasser evicted from Sinai and the Gaza Strip the UN peacekeeping forces that had remained since the Suez Crisis a decade before, and made his intention clear to, as the Iraqi leader had put it, “wipe Israel off the face of the map.”\textsuperscript{154} Joining forces with Jordan and Syria, Egypt made preparations for war with Israel, confident of support from the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Israeli leadership, remembering American anger over 1956, remained unsure whether to preemptively strike or await attack.\textsuperscript{155} They chose to attack first, but this time, America looked much more favorably on the Israeli victory against its Arab neighbors, many seeing it as a proxy fight in their own Cold War with the Soviets.\textsuperscript{156} According to Oren, American support for Israel in 1967 had two major bases: the opinion of many evangelicals that Israel's victory in the Six-Day War was evidence of divine intervention, and thus that the messianic age was nigh at hand; and politically, the understanding of

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\textsuperscript{153} Grose, \textit{Israel in the Mind of America}, 304. \\
\textsuperscript{154} Oren, \textit{Power, Faith and Fantasy}, 525. \\
\textsuperscript{155} Oren, \textit{Power, Faith and Fantasy}, 525. \\
\textsuperscript{156} Oren, \textit{Power, Faith and Fantasy}, 527. 
\end{flushright}
many Americans that Israel was now, more than ever, “America's small but muscular cohort in the Cold War.”\textsuperscript{157}

While 1967 represented a shift in American public opinion in favor of Israel, for Ezra Taft Benson, we find no such transformation. As noted in chapter two, his rhetoric regarding his support for Israel remained largely unchanged from 1950 to 1976. His support revolved around the notion that the Jewish people were, and had always remained, God's chosen people, and that since Latter-day Saints shared in that appellation, Jews and Latter-day Saints were siblings in the House of Israel. Likewise, he, like his evangelical contemporaries, saw Israel's presence in the Middle East as fulfillment of prophecy, sanctioned by God, and confirmation of other Mormon prophecies regarding the gathering of the Jews in the last days. Little information is accessible regarding Benson's personal feelings about the Sinai Campaign of 1956, while he was in office, or the Six-Day War of 1967. While various remarks in newspaper articles and other public documents reveal his constant support of Israel, they do not comment on the events themselves. We can only surmise, therefore, that his feelings toward Israel changed little even through those pivotal events, and wonder about the deeper feelings he may have held regarding Israel's involvement in those decisive wars. In any case, his remarks at the 1960 Stake Conference in Washington, D.C., reveal his appreciation of Israel's relationship with the United States, and their promotion of “the principles of freedom and liberty.”\textsuperscript{158} True to his hope for the spread of (American) Democracy and the demise of Communism, Benson saw Israel as an important bastion of democratic principles in the Middle East.

\textsuperscript{157} Oren, \textit{Power, Faith and Fantasy}, 527.  
\textsuperscript{158} Benson, Stake Conference Address, 9.
Like President Eisenhower under whom he served, Ezra Taft Benson appears to have been greatly affected by his time in Europe the years immediately after World War II and the Holocaust. And like Eisenhower, he was appalled at the depravity he witnessed. Yet, unlike Eisenhower, Benson carried his experiences and convictions with him into his work as Secretary of Agriculture, remaining avidly supportive of the Jewish State.

In 1946 Elder Benson had been called to serve as a mission president in war-torn Europe, and spent nearly a year touring 13 countries, visiting with members of the Church, and establishing important connections through which the Church could send aid. His time in Europe allowed him to witness firsthand some of the devastation of the Holocaust, and it clearly left a heavy impression on his feelings about the need for a Jewish homeland. In both his 1950 message to the General Conference of the Church and his 1976 message about Mormon kinship with the Jews, Benson recounts his visit to the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland. In fact, the first paragraph of both accounts is exactly the same. The 1976 message then includes a more detailed narrative of the atrocities committed against the Jews in that ghetto, and subsequently returns to a repeat of the 1950 version. Likewise, in his biography by Sheri L. Dew, a few lines indicate the depth of his sorrow regarding what had happened to them. After visiting Dachau in 1946, Benson writes in his journal, “The scenes and statistics given made us shudder to realize how far men will go in evil and sin when they discard the eternal truths of the gospel.”

Not only did the experiences in Europe remain a part of Benson's awareness, but he used

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159 Dew, Biography, 212.
those experiences to give validity to his claim of friendship and kinship to the Jewish people.\textsuperscript{160}

Perhaps most revealing is Benson's conclusion that, more than just a homeland in any country where space existed, the Jews should be gathered to the land of their inheritance. In response to the notion that perhaps Jews could establish a homeland in South America, or some other such region, Benson reports in 1950:

We of course do not agree that some other more suitable place should be and will be found for the descendants of Judah. We believe in the over-ruling power of Providence in the affairs of men and nations. We believe that the Old Testament prophets clearly predicted the dispersion and scattering of Israel and the eventual gathering of Judah in the land given to their fathers.\textsuperscript{161}

He then explains later in his remarks that “the Lord had used, as a means of prodding the Jews and bringing about a fulfillment of this purposes, legalized persecution under the great and terrible Nazi program.”\textsuperscript{162} Benson not only felt great personal sorrow at the suffering of the Jewish people; his understanding of their persecution led him to see it as part of the fulfillment of prophecy, and part of the means to bring God's Chosen People back the land of their fathers. His political views would likewise be firmly planted in this understanding of the formation of the State of Israel as sanctioned by God, prophesied both anciently and in modern revelation, and his public comments reveal that tie to his religious convictions.

Benson's political record with Israel revolves generally around his time as Secretary of Agriculture. In that capacity, he visited Israel twice, as part of international

\textsuperscript{160} See chapter two and the explanation of Benson's claim of Latter-day Saint kinship with the Jewish people.  
\textsuperscript{161} Benson, “Jews Return to Palestine,” 2.  
\textsuperscript{162} Benson, “Jews Return to Palestine,” 4.
visits to promote Public Law 480. Despite his rather secular duty as a representative of United States Agricultural interests, his comments on Israel tend toward the religious, differing somewhat from his comments on the other countries he toured. In fact, although Israeli society of the 1950s focused on mostly nonreligious aspects of Jewish identity, Benson consistently drew attention to the religious aspects of both Israel's existence, and its leadership. Indeed, Mart explains that it was very clear that “modern Israel bore little relation to the biblical Jewish theocracy,” and that the religious tie to the Jewish State was often more evident in American Christian culture than in Israel itself. This inclination was certainly true for Secretary Benson. Many of Benson's statements return to the notion of the “miraculous drama” of Israel's formation. And Benson was quick to point out that even the early leaders, seen by many as “thoroughly modern 'European intellectuals and idealists,'” held religious feelings about their efforts to build a state for their people. In his 1976 message, Benson recounts a visit with Moshe Dayan during his 1960 trip to Israel, during which Dayan (also former Secretary of Agriculture) confided in Benson, “I'm not what people would call a spiritual man, but no one will ever convince me that there wasn't a higher power with us as we met the Egyptians down on the Sinai.” Then Benson tells about a later visit with David Ben Gurion, in 1964, with Benson this time acting as Apostle of the Church. Benson visited Ben Gurion in his Tel Aviv apartment, and at one point during the evening, he asked

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163 Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 115.
164 Benson, Sake Conference Address, 7.
166 Benson, “Message to Judah,” 2.
Benson, “I want you to pray to God that he'll spare me for a few more years. I'm writing a history of the Jewish people, and it will take time to finish it.”

As noted in chapter two, this tendency for Benson to align his religious and political views, and even to some degree project them onto others, was pronounced, but not unexpected. Nor was this aspect of his perspective entirely unique. In fact, it appears that he shared and perhaps even acquired some of his thinking from like-minded Christian organizations that sought to legitimize Israel's existence in the Christian mind. Among Benson's papers at the Eisenhower Presidential Library is a section entitled “Jewish Literature.” The name is a bit misleading, as it contains relatively little actual Jewish literature, and a great deal of Christian literature about the Jewish State. One booklet contains several articles from various American Christian leaders who traveled to Israel in 1949 and published their perceptions of the State, and its right to exist. Many of Benson's views, which will be explored subsequently, echo the sentiments expressed in this *Christian Report on Israel.* The articles feature such titles as, “This Have I Witnessed,” and “Religion in Israel,” and promote American Christian notions of Israel's creation and legitimacy, evidencing the emerging Judeo-Christian solidarity mentioned in chapter two. Mart explains that, while Israelis generally viewed themselves as “pragmatic moderns,” American Christians were entirely captivated by the religious

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168 Noted in chapter two
169 The title of the booklet is “A Christian Report on Israel.” However, publishing information is not included in the microfilm copy, so citation is a bit complicated. A brief search did not produce its source, but it can be found in Ezra Taft Benson, Papers, 10:29, “Jewish Literature,” Eisenhower Presidential Library (Abilene, Kansas).
170 This is, of course, not meant to downplay Israelis' belief in their divine right to the land, despite their secular leanings. I merely mean to emphasize the difference between Christian perceptions and the way most Israelis viewed themselves in the early days of the State.
heritage of the Jews, and the implications of a Jewish State.\textsuperscript{171} One article in the
\textit{Christian Report}, “Promise of the New Israel,” epitomizes the Christian viewpoint of
Israel as not only fulfillment of prophecy, but also led by inspired and religious leaders –
certainly an element of utmost concern as Americans anxiously observed signs of
spreading Communism. The author of the article, Spencer Irwin, notes that Israelis
“profess their belief in God, their acceptance of miracles. . . [and have been] restored to
their ancient land. . . which bore the first great truths.”\textsuperscript{172} He continues, “What the new
Israel is doing, to state it bluntly, is putting God into politics. The rest of the world, over-
confident, eschewing any consideration of great truths, finds its world tumbling about its
ears. Once again a way is being evolved on the sacred soil of the Near East.” Another
article, by John Paul Jones, called “By What Right,” examines the legitimacy of Israel's
entitlement to the land that so many people call holy and claim as their own. He
concludes that, because Judaism has always been tied to the land, unlike Islam and
Christianity, it has the greater claim. He says, “Judaism is different from either Islam or
Christianity in its relationship to Palestine. With Israel the central belief is in the divine
revelation of a way of life to be lived by people in \textit{community} . . . Separated from the land
of revelation after a thousand years, and scattered over the earth, the Jew has never
ceased to remember Zion save when he has lost or surrendered his religion.”

Various themes evoked in this booklet would be repeated again and again in
Benson's comments on the State of Israel, along with notions unique to his own religion,
such as the role of Latter-day Saint prophecy in bringing about the long-awaited

\textsuperscript{171} Mart, “Christianization of Israel and Jews,” 115-116.
\textsuperscript{172} \textit{A Christian Report on Israel} 39, from Ezra Taft Benson, Papers, 10:29, “Jewish Literature,”
Eisenhower Presidential Library (Abilene, Kansas).
gathering. Some of those themes include, as evidenced, rejection of Arab claims to the land, particularly Jerusalem, and unequivocal support of Israel both for its role in fulfilling prophecy, and the fact that it, by its very nature, seems to the writers to incorporate religion into politics.

Four years later, as Benson took up his post as Secretary of Agriculture, many of those same elements would find their way into his observations of the fledgling state. Especially interesting are his views as presented in his 1957 and 1960 trips to several countries worldwide in promotion of PL 480. His reports on his visits to the Middle East reveal a sharp contrast to his perceptions of Israel versus other Middle Eastern countries. It is unclear whether Benson himself wrote the report, or dictated the basic elements to his secretary; but at the very least these reports are a clear general reflection of his own sentiments. And his feelings seem to demonstrate, in comparison with those that he expressed for his time in Israel, a general tone of practicality and pragmatism. In reality, he spends relatively little time commenting on his visits to the Arab countries. When he does comment, he reports on the cities visited and on the country’s reception toward him and American agriculture (usually relating to Public Law 480). He is never disparaging to the leaders themselves, whom he simply reports as having met, but he is likewise more or less unenthusiastic.

Likewise his description of the people and cultures he encounters in his visits reveals him to be rather unimpressed. The most illustrative example is that of his 1957 report on Jordan. He notes the guard of Jordanian soldiers that met them at the embassy, as well as the frequent stops at military checkpoints, and comments briefly on the
problem of Palestinian refugees, which he estimates to be around 500,000. But the rest of his report focuses on what he sees as the primitiveness of the population and culture.

Jordan like other Middle Eastern Countries, is very backward, economically, and much of the population still lives about the same as for hundreds of years. Many people were observed to be living in caves and the donkey and camel are still used extensively as beasts of burden as in the time of Christ. In contrast, however, was the modern military equipment in evidence.\(^{173}\)

It is interesting that Benson notes the refugee problem and observes the “backward” nature of the Jordanian people, but says little about the potential of American aid, agricultural or otherwise, to help alleviate this difficult situation. The overall feeling is one of personal detachment.

Benson's comments and writings about Israel contrast sharply. They generally reveal an impression of progress and growth, reflected in both his work as Secretary of Agriculture and his more religious views of the State. Likewise, they indicate a personal connection with the State and its leadership that was clearly special and important to him. This is further evidenced in Benson's biography, which describes the 1957 trip to Israel, part of his international tour, as a “highlight” for Benson (while only two paragraphs in the biography are dedicated to a description of his visit to the 12 other countries visited during October, 1957, four paragraphs chronicle Benson's time in Israel).\(^{174}\) As noted previously, Benson's writings and speeches frequently mention his relationship with David Ben Gurion and other notable Israeli leaders such as Levi Eshkol and Moshe Dayan. He rehearses their interest in the story of Orson Hyde, particularly with David

\(^{173}\) Ezra Taft Benson, Papers, 6:8, “Reports on Foreign Trips,” Eisenhower Presidential Library (Abilene, Kansas).

\(^{174}\) Dew, Biography, 325.
Ben Gurion and Levi Eshkol, both of whom, he claims, requested to hear the story personally from Benson. The Secretary even sent the full copy of Hyde's dedicatory prayer on the Mount of Olives to Ben Gurion in 1964.¹⁷⁵

The Secretary seems to have truly cherished this relationship with “the Old Man.” He often speaks of it warmly and proudly, and they maintained contact throughout their lives, until the leader's death in 1973. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any documents relating to Benson's feelings at Ben Gurion's passing, but at Benson's first meeting with Ben Gurion, he was, Dew claims, “taken with Ben Gurion,” whom he considered an enlightened leader. He wrote in his journal, “He impressed me also as a man who has a clear insight into what Israel needs to do. He was not groping for answers... He was not afraid to oppose his own people, or his Cabinet, or anyone else... You knew exactly where you stood.”¹⁷⁶ A JTA newspaper article describing Benson's 1957 trip notes that Benson “lauded the ‘wonderful spirit’ shown by the wounded¹⁷⁷ Prime Minister.”¹⁷⁸ In a letter to a friend in 1961, as Benson was preparing to leave Washington, Benson again reflects on that relationship. This statement comes in response to an accusation in a California newspaper questioning Benson's time in Washington as manifesting elements of anti-semitism.¹⁷⁹ He dismisses the unfounded claim, referring to both the Church's affinity for the Jewish people, and his personal relationship with Israeli leaders as proof that anti-semitism has never been a part of Benson's leadership.

¹⁷⁵ A series of letters was exchanged between Benson and Ben Gurion which reveal that the Orson Hyde story was a topic of frequent interest between the two. More will be said later about these letters.
¹⁷⁶ As quoted in Dew 326
¹⁷⁷ Benson had met with Ben Gurion in the hospital, since the Prime Minister had recently been injured by a land mine explosion.
I consider President David Ben Gurion and members of his cabinet among my good friends, several of whom have said they have met no one who understands the Jewish people as I do. Of course, I have indicated that I am simply reflecting the feeling of the Church regarding the Jewish people.”

As Benson reiterates above, he indeed counted several Israeli leaders among his friends, and he never missed a chance to reaffirm that friendship. This is evidenced through letters and visits, and even in Benson's effort to attend a luncheon held in Ben Gurion's honor at the White House in March, 1960. Benson was “happy to renew [his] acquaintance with the Prime Minister as [he] had enjoyed [his] visit with him in his hospital room in Israel in the fall of 1957.”

In fact, the Secretary of Agriculture, and later Apostle, was able to “renew [his] acquaintance” with Ben Gurion on several occasions. A series of correspondence between the two, in the form of letters obtained from Ben Gurion's personal papers, demonstrates the longevity of their relationship, and the mutual esteem with which they regarded one another. The series comprises six letters from Benson to Ben Gurion, and six in return, beginning in early 1958 and end in 1968. An additional letter in 1970 is from Michael Ravid, Consul General in Los Angeles, expressing Benson's good wishes for the aging Ben Gurion. I was unable to ascertain whether more correspondence exists, but the remarks in these letters are very telling of the relationship between the two.

The letters reveal that Benson, as expected, shared his Mormon faith with the Prime Minister openly and often. In the first letter the Prime Minister thanks Benson for

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182 Ezra Taft Benson letters, Ben Gurion Archives (Sde Boker, Israel).
sending “two Mormon Books,” and responds that he is interested in Mormonism, as he is in all religion. The next letter comes in July, 1960, and is again a thank you to Benson for another book (clearly at least one note is missing in between, presumably included with Benson’s sending of the book). Both letters revolve around religious topics, as Benson apparently sent books expounding Mormon doctrine. In both instances, Ben Gurion gratefully receives the books, and counters with his own views on religion. The discussion was evidently openly religious, while remaining warm and cordial. In fact, the letters become increasingly personal and friendly throughout the years. In the July, 1960 letter from Ben Gurion, he adds at the end, “The brochure is all the more welcome when it is accompanied by such sincere words of friendship.” Two months later, in September, 1960, following Benson's second visit to Israel, he sent a letter to the Prime Minister thanking him for “a most enjoyable and, from our standpoint, profitable trip.” He then commends Ben Gurion on Israel's progress since 1957 (Benson's consistent praise for Israel's agricultural and economic achievements will be discussed later in this chapter), and ends by expressing “appreciation for [his] friendship, and kindest personal regards.”

The next letter does not appear until August, 1964, but displays many of the same themes, yet in a more personal and direct way. Benson is writing to Ben Gurion, this time a much more lengthy letter than any of the previous three. In it he explains that he read Ben Gurion's recent book, *Israel, Years of Challenge*, and exclaims that he “thrilled with it.” He continues, “You know of my interest in Israel and your people, and my desire to be helpful in any way possible.” He then explains that he is again working as a leader of the Church in several European countries, and as such hopes to find an opportunity to visit with his old friend in the near future (a hope he would fulfill later that
year). Ben Gurion's response in October, 1964, reveals that he is “delighted to have [Benson's] letter,” and requests Benson to visit him and his wife in their “desert.” Benson writes again to confirm his December 1-4 visit, and then again on December 8 to thank Ben Gurion for his cordial reception. He states, “It is always an inspiration to visit with you and your good wife.” This was apparently the visit in which Ben Gurion requested a copy of the Orson Hyde dedication (mentioned in chapter two and again earlier in this chapter), because Benson attached that copy with this letter. He explains:

I will also try to enclose with the shipment the account of Orson Hyde's visit to Palistine [sic] in 1841 under the direction of the Prophet Joseph Smith when he dedicated that land for the return of the Jews and uttered prophecies regarding the future of the Jewish people which are now being fulfilled.”

Unabashedly he again returns to the same theme of fulfilled Mormon prophecy, and then ends the letter with “prayerful good wishes to you and Mrs. Ben Gurion.” In the next letter, dated just one day later (December 9, 1964), Benson details two other items he is sending Ben Gurion. The first is entitled, “Judah Remembered,” a section from A Comprehensive History of the Church (presumably the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints); the second is A Documentary History of the Church, Period I. He then mentions another interesting aspect of the Hyde story: the fact that Elder Hyde was, according to his own record, “of Jewish extraction.” Benson ends with a hope that “the God of Heaven [may] continue to sustain and inspire you in your important responsibilities.” Ben Gurion's response is a short but grateful statement of appreciation for the manuscript.
Yet Ben Gurion’s next letter, dated January 8, 1965, is much more personal. He has apparently read Benson’s book *Crossfire – The Eight Years with Eisenhower*, and mentions that the history of the Church that Benson sent him “is highly instructive.” He then expresses, for the first time in any of the letters, a commonality in belief with Benson “that 'we are spiritual children of our Heavenly Father' and that 'we will be judged by our faith and good works.’” Whether he is quoting Benson or one of the sources of literature that Benson sent him, is unclear, but his change of tone to one more personal and sympathetic is most interesting. It reveals, perhaps, a slight shift in attitude. Up to this point, the relationship appears a bit more engaging on the side of Benson, who consistently shares his beliefs and “sincere friendship” with Ben Gurion and the Jewish people. Yet here, Ben Gurion expresses his own sense of unity with Benson's beliefs, while positing no contradiction as in previous discussions.

The next letter simply refers to the current political climate in the United States, and a hope that Benson will “like the elected President,” despite his failed support of Goldwater. The final letter between the two (although, as noted, more correspondence likely exists) is one of sympathy and condolences to Ben Gurion at the passing of his wife in 1968. Benson claims that she is someone he considers “a true friend,” and adds, “May I say. . . my brother, that I extend my love and sympathy and assure you, and I am sure you already realize, that life is eternal.” Benson's use of the term “brother” is striking and revealing of both his sentiments discussed earlier, the familial bond between Mormons and Jews, and, even more importantly, his deep and abiding affection for the Israeli leader. He reiterates that bond in the closing of the letter: “faithfully your friend.
and brother, Ezra Taft Benson.” Again, with this letter of sympathy, he also apparently sent some sort of literature, although the title is not mentioned.

The final letter comes, as mentioned, not from Benson or Ben Gurion, but from Michael Ravid, Consul General in Los Angeles, to Ben Gurion. Ravid apparently had visited Salt Lake City to discuss tourism to Israel. He mentions three distinct times that Benson spoke to him of his relationship with Ben Gurion, and asked to be remembered to him, giving the impression that Benson took great care to press this point upon the Consul General during his visit.

While none of the relationships with other Israeli leaders seem to evidence the same strength and, for Benson, at least, sense of satisfaction that the relationship with Ben Gurion evoked, they are still noteworthy as part of Benson's relationship with the Jews and the Jewish State. Benson mentions in his “Message to Judah from Joseph” that no visits in Israel had “been more impressive than the visits with David Ben Gurion, Levi Eshkol, and Moshe Dayan.”\(^\text{183}\) After his visit with President Ben-Zvi in 1960, Benson remarked, “It is my feeling that no people are thought of more highly in Israel than we are.”\(^\text{184}\) Benson also spoke warmly of his visits with Levi Eshkol and Moshe Dayan, and when in 1971 Dayan's wife visited Salt Lake City, Utah, she made a specific request to see “Elder and Sister Benson, long-time acquaintances.”\(^\text{185}\) In 1979 Benson again traveled in the Middle East as an Apostle. He had occasion to renew some of his acquaintances, among them Abba Eban, whom Benson had met years earlier in Washington while serving as Secretary of Agriculture. Eban is reported to have spoken

\(^{183}\) Benson, “Message to Judah,” 1.
\(^{184}\) From a letter from Benson to President of the Church, Joseph Fielding Smith, August 14, 1960. Cited in Dew, Biography, 350.
\(^{185}\) Dew, Biography, 419.
on this occasion with Shimon Peres about Benson. Peres remarked to Eban, in Hebrew, “Isn't he a great man?” to which Eban replied, “One of the greatest I have met in my time.”

During that same visit, Benson was able to meet with then Prime Minister Menachem Begin, who told him, “We respect your people very much. Your people have suffered much, and you have stood by your faith.”

Whether or not he had read Benson's 1976 “Message to Judah,” Begin seems to be echoing themes of Benson's own explanation regarding Mormon feeling toward the Jewish people. The notion of mutual suffering is one that Benson, as noted, cited often. But Benson's affinity toward the Jews was not simply limited to a sense of mutual suffering or kinship. He often manifested a true appreciation for the Jewish people, and he took various opportunities to praise them publicly. In July, 1959, Secretary Benson was asked to furnish an article for the publication *Synagogue Light*, in which he lavishly praises the contributions Jews have made to society throughout the centuries.

Our country owes much to the Jewish people for their contributions to education, art, and literature; to our national strength and liberty; and to our spiritual welfare.

Our nation is indebted to Jewry for the sustained influence that has given continuity to the development of western thought and belief since ancient times. The Jewish people have carried forward the torch of human dignity and enlightenment for many centuries. Our country and the free world continue to look to that light today.

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188 See chapter two.
189 Article found in Ezra Taft Benson Papers, 37:2, Eisenhower Presidential Library (Abilene, Kansas).
Earlier, in a 1955 article in JTA, Benson expresses similar sentiments. He felt “confident that in the State of Israel the Jews ‘might become a still greater and more powerful influence for good in the world.”¹⁹⁰ Another passage, this time from 1966, again demonstrates Benson’s devotion to the Jews. It appears as a letter to the *Jewish Society of Americanists*, a society apparently related to the John Birch Society.¹⁹¹ In it Benson expresses his “deep interest in, and admiration for, the Jewish people,” and recounts his visits to Israel both as Secretary of Agriculture and as Apostle of the Church. He again notes the Mormon interest in the Jewish people, and briefly recounts Hyde's dedication of Palestine, again mentioning Hyde's “Jewish extraction.” He likewise summarizes his relationship with Israeli leadership, specifically Ben Gurion and Eshkol, and wishes the Society well in their new organization.

All of these reveal Benson as an avid supporter of the Jewish State, but none so far have looked at Benson's relationship with Israel and its agriculture, a topic sure to be of keen interest to him. In fact, this is one of the most interesting aspects of Benson's legacy. His perception in this regard is clearly one of the land being reclaimed, and the desert blooming, echoing sentiments of early supporters of Israel from the American agricultural sphere, such as Elwood Mead and Dr. Walter Clay Lowdermilk. Both men had gained agricultural prominence during America's Great Depression, helping create the Tennessee Valley Authority (which provided power and flood control for seven states), and soil fertilization. They now used their expertise to help Israel irrigate and

¹⁹¹ Benson was particularly controversial both within the Church and without for his support of the John Birch Society, and I have guessed that it is largely for this reason that his personal papers and letters have been so restricted.
cultivate land for crops in the 1940s.\textsuperscript{192} Like Benson a decade later, Lowdermilk was particularly and passionately supportive of the emerging Jewish state, amidst a relatively hostile government (with the exception of Truman himself). He saw in the Jewish settlements “the most remarkable devotion to reclamation of land that [he had] seen in any country of the New or Old World,” and rejoiced in Zionist aspirations to restore the land to its biblical fertility.\textsuperscript{193}

Benson's rhetoric is similarly generous regarding Israel's increasing agricultural strength, and is perhaps the greatest evidence of the way his political perceptions reflected his religious ones. His support of Israel was not only founded on religious convictions, but was also reinforced as he witnessed the “desert bloom,” in further fulfillment of prophecy. Within his report on his November, 1957 trip as Agriculture Secretary is an intriguing comment. He says, “The Israelites are making remarkable progress in developing their resources” (italics added). His use of the term “Israelites” instead of Israelis is compelling, exhibiting his manifest view of Israel as modern fulfillment of ancient prophecy. The rest of his assessment is likewise significant. “There was sharp contrast between the economy and agriculture and that of Jordan and other Middle Eastern Countries. In Israel much is being done to develop the resources available.”\textsuperscript{194} As noted, this association of Israel with biblical import caused him to view Israel much more favorably than its Arab neighbors. Another quote earlier in the report again reveals Benson's contrasting views of Israel and other countries in the region, as he comments on the progress of the modern “Israelites.” “Tel Aviv appears to be a very

modern, bustling, progressive city. Israel is attempting to become the industrial center of the Middle East. The people appear to be extremely industrious and forward-looking.”

And finally, toward the end, he summarizes his impressions thus: “The continued progress in fulfilling the Biblical prophecy of making the desert bloom as the rose in Israel is remarkable.”

Yet Benson's agricultural praise wasn't limited to confidential presidential reports. In his 1960 Stake Conference address, he claims, “... It is a land promised to a certain segment of our Father's children. Those children are gathering there now in fulfillment of prophecy. The prophecies are being fulfilled before your very eyes. The hills long denuded of vegetation, land that was desert, is now blossoming.”

Likewise, in a 1958 article in JTA, the Secretary “Lauds Israel's Farming Progress.” He states, “It is abundantly evident that Israel is making outstanding progress in developing the country and lifting the living standards of its people through vigorous and imaginative development of its agricultural and industrial potentials through the democratic process.”

He continues, “Through determination and unrelenting labor, and under some great difficulties, the people of Israel are accomplishing big things.” Benson again reiterates his hopeful attitude toward Israel in a similar newspaper article in 1960, after his second visit to Israel. Here he calls Israel a “growing, dynamic” nation, and says it “must be visited to be fully believed and appreciated.” He adds further confirmation to this

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197 See chapter two for an explanation of “Stake Conference.”
198 Benson, Stake Conference Address, 8.
attitude in the *Synagogue Light* article already mentioned, in which he asserts, “It is natural that the people of Israel desire to expand agricultural output, and marvels have already been accomplished.” Later he continues, “Given an ample supply of sweet water and the power with which to pump it, Israel could materially expand her agricultural output. There is land available which could be made to bloom.” Thus, whether speaking to members of his own church, his cabinet and government, or the Jewish people at large, Benson's overriding themes are of support and certainty of the fulfillment of prophecy, even using biblical imagery as often as possible.

For their part, Jews and especially Israelis must have been at least marginally aware of Benson's interest. His visits to Israel as Secretary of Agriculture were anticipated in Israeli newspapers, where he was often billed as “Secretary Apostle Benson.”201 The Secretary himself told the President of the Church, David O. McKay, after his 1957 trip, that he and his family had been “effective ambassadors of good will” for the Church, as well as the United States.202 Indeed, in 1955 Benson had appeared “on the first of a new series of radio programs being broadcast over a local station with the cooperation of the American Zionist Council. Also present for the first program in the series, known as 'The Bible in Action,' was Abba Eban, Ambassador of Israel.”203 Benson's prominence in the Jewish/Israeli community was further strengthened decades later when Benson's “Message to Judah” was recognized in *The United Israel Bulletin.*204 Covering nearly a full page of broadsheet, the 1978 article outlines Benson's recent

204 “Ezra Taft Benson Stresses Close Affinity Between the Mormons and the Jewish People,” *United Israel Bulletin*, December 25, 1978. Obtained from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Archives (Salt Lake City, Utah).
speech in Calgary and subsequent locations, emphasizing that the Jews were “not alone.”

This of course came at a time when American support of Israel had begun to wane, finding itself replaced in many instances by greater interest in the plight of displaced Palestinians, or simply by a renewed fascination with the Middle East, akin to what Edward Said termed *Orientalism*.205

This apparent decrease in American support of Israel does not imply that America's government had by any means lessened its commitment to Israel. In 1973, after some initial reticence, the United States stepped in to provide urgently needed military supplies to Israel in the surprise Egyptian-Syrian attack known as the Yom Kippur War.206 All succeeding administrations likewise sustained American support for Israel.207 Despite Carter's frustrated efforts at peace, which often included criticism of Israel's settlement of the West Bank and Gaza, he remained a committed proponent of the Jewish State.208 Likewise, Evangelical Christians had by this time numerically surpassed the less sympathetic Protestants, and Restorationism once again began to take hold in the mind of American Christians, as did the perception of Islam as a “tool of the anti-Christ.”209

Benson's own rhetoric was never antagonistic to the Muslim religion or its people, but his unyielding support of Israel and insistence on its legitimate claim to the land never faltered. While Benson's rhetoric regarding Israel pre-dates much of the resurgence of pro-Israel sentiment that pulsated throughout the late 1960s and well into 70s in the

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United States, his views on Israel are remarkably similar. He, like his Evangelical counterparts, viewed the Jews as God's Chosen People, with an ancient and legitimate claim to the land, the validity of which could be seen through the miraculous transformation of the land under the Jewish hand. Despite the reticence of the cabinet within which he worked, he followed the path established by other zealous Christians and pro-Israel politicians before him.

Yet Benson is also somewhat unique, as much for his distinctive Mormon views, as well as in that his determined support seems to have changed little from before, during, and after his time in Washington. Ezra Taft Benson was and remained a loyal supporter of the Jewish State.
Epilogue

Although I have not chosen to include it in this thesis, mostly because I could obtain little evidence from which base any analysis, Benson's relations with Israel continued long past his 1976 “Message to Judah.” As the State of Israel became more established, and Benson rose to greater prominence in his Church leadership, his writings and remarks revolved less around the Jewish State, and more around pressing concerns among Church membership. However, his relationships with Israelis remained strong and his interest keen. He travelled to Israel again as apostle in 1979 to participate in the dedication of a park on the Mount of Olives memorializing Orson Hyde's 1841 dedication. In fact, the letter from Teddy Kollek, mayor of Jerusalem, informing the Church that it would be authorized to put up a plaque and complete a memorial garden in honor of Hyde, was sent directly to Benson. He had often suggested the idea of a commemorative garden, which the Church would gladly provide, to his Israeli friends. Benson was very pleased at its acceptance and “felt he had had a small hand in it.”

A few years later, when Brigham Young University, funded and operated by the Church, began to build its Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies on Mount Scopus, opposition raged among the Orthodox community. In order to diminish their opposition, Benson was again cited for his strong bond and respected name in Israel. In a radio broadcasted interview, Michael Shani, who had spent a year and a half in Utah (and

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210 The Hyde Memorial Garden stands on five acres of land on the Mount of Olives and is free and open to the public.
211 Dew, Biography, 433.
reminded the host that he had not become a Mormon during that time), insisted that the Mormons, instead of being feared, should be appreciated, and recalled Benson's early support for the emerging state. “The man who indeed developed [sic] and deepened the links of Israel with the U.S.A.,” he explained, “was the American Minister of Agriculture. . . Ezra Tapbenson [sic].” He continued, “Without his help I imagine that we would not [have] achieved the same goals in agriculture, of which today there is so much talk. One has to say that he did all this because of his faith as a Mormon.”

Benson's legacy as a Mormon leader and avid supporter of the State of Israel was undoubtedly an important element in the Israeli support that finally allowed BYU to complete its Jerusalem Center in 1988. And his influence has also been felt in myriad other, if unnamed, ways. Among the many important titles that Benson held throughout his distinguished life, that of a friend of the Jewish State was certainly among those that he held most dear.

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212 Michael Shani and Yoel Rappel, broadcast in the program Bikur Bait, Station B, 9:09 a.m., January 9, 1986.
Appendix: Text of Orson Hyde's Dedicatory Prayer

Prayer of Orson Hyde on the Mount of Olives

"O Thou! who art from everlasting to everlasting, eternally and unchangeably the same, even the God who rules in the heavens above, and controls the destinies of men on the earth, wilt Thou not condescend, through thine infinite goodness and royal favor, to listen to the prayer of Thy servant which he this day offers up unto Thee in the name of Thy holy child Jesus, upon this land, where the Son of Righteousness set in blood, and thine Anointed One expired.

"Be pleased, O Lord, to forgive all the follies, weaknesses, vanities, and sins of Thy servant, and strengthen him to resist all future temptations. Give him prudence and discernment that he may avoid the evil, and a heart to choose the good; give him fortitude to bear up under trying and adverse circumstances, and grace to endure all things for Thy name's sake, until the end shall come, when all the Saints shall rest in peace.

"Now, O Lord! Thy servant has been obedient to the heavenly vision which Thou gavest him in his native land; and under the shadow of Thine outstretched arm, he has safely arrived in this place to dedicate and consecrate this land unto Thee, for the gathering together of Judah's scattered remnants, according to the predictions of the holy Prophets - - for the building up of Jerusalem again after it has been trodden down by the Gentiles so long, and for rearing a Temple in honor of Thy name. Everlasting thanks be ascribed unto
Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast preserved Thy servant from the
dangers of the seas, and from the plague and pestilence which have caused the land to
mourn. The violence of man has also been restrained, and Thy providential care by night
and by day has been exercised over Thine unworthy servant. Accept, therefore, O Lord,
the tribute of a grateful heart for all past favors, and be pleased to continue Thy kindness
and mercy towards a needy worm of the dust.

"O Thou, Who didst covenant with Abraham, Thy friend, and who didst renew that
covenant with Isaac, and confirm the same with Jacob with an oath, that Thou wouldst
not only give them this land for an everlasting inheritance, but that Thou wouldst also
remember their seed forever. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have long since closed their eyes
in death, and made the grave their mansion. Their children are scattered and dispersed
abroad among the nations of the Gentiles like sheep that have no shepherd, and are still
looking forward for the fulfillment of those promises which Thou didst make concerning
them; and even this land, which once poured forth nature's richest bounty, and flowed, as
it were, with milk and honey, has, to a certain extent, been smitten with barrenness and
sterility since it drank from murderous hands the blood of Him who never sinned.

"Grant, therefore, O Lord, in the name of Thy well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to remove
the barrenness and sterility of this land, and let springs of living water break forth to
water its thirsty soil. Let the vine and olive produce in their strength, and the fig-tree
bloom and flourish. Let the land become abundantly fruitful when possessed by its
rightful heirs; let it again flow with plenty to feed the returning prodigals who come
home with a spirit of grace and supplication; upon it let the clouds distil virtue and
richness, and let the fields smile with plenty. Let the flocks and the herds greatly increase and multiply upon the mountains and the hills; and let Thy great kindness conquer and subdue the unbelief of Thy people. Do Thou take from them their stony heart, and give them a heart of flesh; and may the Sun of Thy favor dispel the cold mists of darkness which have beclouded their atmosphere. Incline them to gather in upon this land according to Thy word. Let them come like clouds and like doves to their windows. Let the large ships of the nations bring them from the distant isles; and let kings become their nursing fathers, and queens with motherly fondness wipe the tear of sorrow from their eye.

"Thou, O Lord, did once move upon the heart of Cyrus to show favor unto Jerusalem and her children. Do Thou now also be pleased to inspire the hearts of kings and the powers of the earth to look with a friendly eye towards this place, and with a desire to see Thy righteous purposes executed in relation thereto. Let them know that it is Thy good pleasure to restore the kingdom unto Israel -- raise up Jerusalem as its capital, and constitute her people a distinct nation and government, with David Thy servant, even a descendant from the loins of ancient David to be their king.

"Let that nation or that people who shall take an active part in behalf of Abraham's children, and in the raising up of Jerusalem, find favor in Thy sight. Let not their enemies prevail against them, neither let pestilence or famine overcome them, but let the glory of Israel overshadow them, and the power of the Highest protect them; while that nation or kingdom that will not serve Thee in this glorious work must perish, according to Thy word --- Yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted.
“Though Thy servant is now far from his home, and from the land bedewed with his earliest tear, yet he remembers, O Lord, his friend: who are there, and family, whom for Thy sake he has left. Though poverty and privation be our earthly lot, yet ah! do Thou richly endow us with an inheritance where moth and rust do not corrupt, and where thieves do not break through and steal.

“"The hands that have fed, clothed, or shown favor unto the family of Thy servant in his absence, or that shall hereafter do so, let them not lose their reward, but let a special blessing rest upon them, and in Thy kingdom let them have an inheritance when Thou shalt come to be glorified in this society.

“Do Thou also look with favor upon all those through whose liberality I have been enabled to come to this land; and in the day when Thou shalt reward all people according to their works, let these also not be passed by or forgotten, but in time let them be in readiness to enjoy the glory of those mansions which Jesus has gone to prepare. Particularly do Thou bless the stranger in Philadelphia, whom I never saw, but who sent me gold, with a request that I should pray for him in Jerusalem. Now, O Lord, let blessings come upon him from an unexpected quarter, and let his basket be filled, and his storehouse abound with plenty, and let not the good things of the earth be his only portion, but let him be found among those to whom it shall be said, ‘Thou hast been faithful over a few things, and I will make thee ruler over many.’

"O my Father in heaven! I now ask Thee in the name of Jesus to remember Zion, with all her Stakes, and with all her assemblies. She has been grievously afflicted and smitten; she
has mourned; she has wept; her enemies have triumphed, and have said, `Ah, where is thy God?' Her Priests and Prophets have groaned in chains and fetters within the gloomy walls of prisons, while many were slain, and now sleep in the arms of death. How long, O Lord, shall iniquity triumph, and sin go unpunished?

"Do Thou arise in the majesty of Thy strength, and make bare Thine arm in behalf of Thy people. Redress their wrongs, and turn their sorrow into joy. Pour the spirit of light and knowledge, grace and wisdom, into the hearts of her Prophets, and clothe her Priests with salvation. Let light and knowledge march forth through the empire of darkness, and may the honest in heart flow to their standard, and join in the march to go forth to meet the Bridegroom.

"Let a peculiar blessing rest upon the Presidency of Thy Church, for at them are the arrows of the enemy directed. Be Thou to them a sun and a shield, their strong tower and hiding place; and in the time of distress or danger be Thou near to deliver. Also the quorum of the Twelve, do Thou be pleased to stand by them for Thou knowest the obstacles which they have to encounter, the temptations to which they are exposed, and the privations which they must suffer. Give us, [the Twelve] therefore, strength according to our day, and help us to bear a faithful testimony of Jesus and His Gospel, to finish with fidelity and honor the work which Thou hast given us to do, and then give us a place in Thy glorious kingdom. And let this blessing rest upon every faithful officer and member in Thy Church. And all the glory and honor will we ascribe unto God and the Lamb forever and ever. Amen."
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