

SEGULA

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William Hechler

Dancing to Bar Yohai's Tomb
Controversy on Mount Meron



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in Jerusalem?
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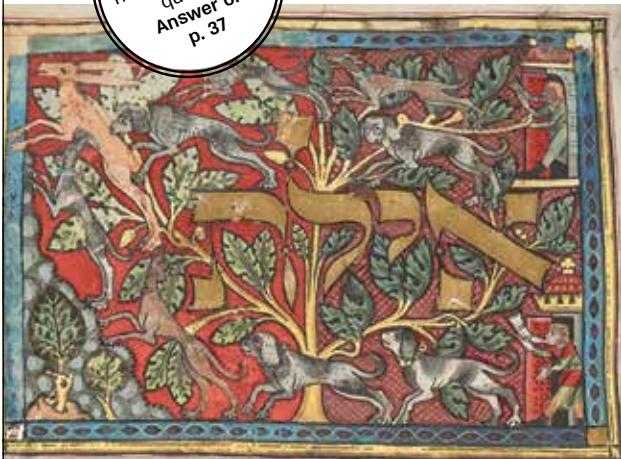


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 hunters and their
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Evangelical Prophet of Zion

Even before Herzl dreamed of a Jewish state, Evangelical minister William Hechler was meeting with pioneering Zionists in Odessa. Calculating that redemption would begin in 1897, the same year as the first Zionist Congress, Hechler lent a hand by arranging an audience for Herzl with Kaiser Wilhelm II. Who was the Zionist visionary's Christian sidekick, and what were his motives?

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Waiting for Elijah

Though mentioned nowhere in the haggadah, Elijah the prophet has his own cup at the Seder, we open the door for him, and he appears in many illustrated haggadot. How did Elijah become part of Passover? Medieval haggadot and responsa hold the key

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Dancing to Bar Yohai's Tomb

Since the Middle Ages, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai's grave on Mount Meron has attracted pilgrims – not necessarily with official approval. Subversive by nature, the Lag Ba-Omer celebrations marking the sage's passing have sometimes exacted a terrible price

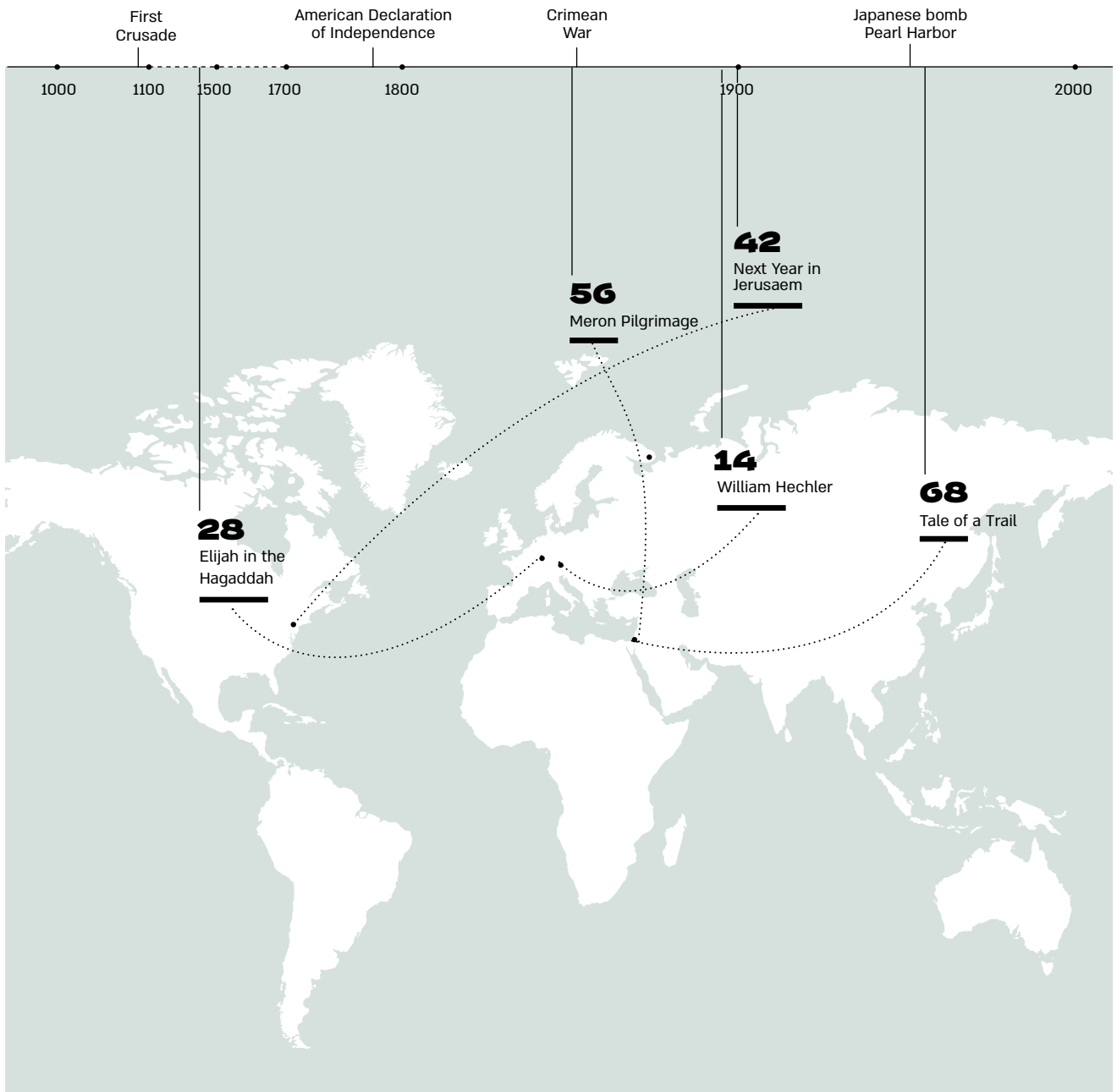
Dotan Goren

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Cover caption: Not Elijah, but inspired by the spirit of the Hebrew prophets. William Hechler in Arab dress while visiting the land of Israel

Photo: Imagno/Getty Images



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Evangelical Prophet of Zion

Who would have guessed that the man who crops up most frequently in Theodor Herzl's diaries was an Evangelical pastor? **William Hechler's** religious fervor led him to Zionism, which in turn inspired him to place his many illustrious connections at Herzl's disposal, putting the young movement on the map | **Yehuda Moraly**

William Hechler



William Hechler introduced Theodor Herzl to Grand Duke Frederick I of Baden, who granted him access to European heads of state

Courtesy of Disc-In Ltd. and Friends of Zion Museum

The duty of every Christian is to [...] LOVE THE JEWS [...] for they are *still beloved for their fathers' sakes* [...]. Blessed shall that nation be which *loves the Jews*; for God promised to Abraham and his children, "I will bless them that bless thee." (William Henry Hechler, "The Restoration of the Jews to Palestine," ch. 5)

This surprising passage was published in June 1882 in London's *Prophetic News and Israel's Watchman*, an Evangelical periodical. Having just met with Leon Pinsker and members of the BILU pioneer movement in Odessa, the author was far more aware of Zionism's movers and shakers than a certain Viennese journalist at the time. Yet the pastor who penned these lines moved in some of Europe's most aristocratic circles. His name was William Hechler, and his connections would prove nothing short of providential for Theodor Herzl.

From India to Africa

William Henry Hechler was born in 1845 in the Hindu holy city of Benares, India. His father, Dietrich Hechler, was an Anglican missionary originally from Germany. His mother, Englishwoman Catherine Palmer, died when he was only five. Educated in Germany, then London, William was fluent in eight languages apart from the English and German he'd learned from his parents.

Ordained by the Anglican church in 1869, Hechler enlisted in the German army during the Franco-Prussian War, serving as a chaplain and medic. In 1871, however, he accepted a missionary posting to British



Nigeria, where he was deputy headmaster of a Christian college in Lagos.

After recovering from malaria, Hechler traveled to Karlsruhe, Germany, to visit his father. Just then, Grand Duke Frederick I of Baden sought a tutor for his two children. Hechler got the job and won the duke's confidence. Frederick was simple and unassuming but well-connected, with distinguished relatives all over Europe.

Viennese Jews preferred their Austrian-Hungarian capital to Zionist daydreams. *View of Vienna from Belvedere Palace*, Bernardo Bellotto, mid-18th century
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Having met with Leon Pinsker and BILU pioneers in Odessa, Hechler was far more aware of Zionism's progress than Herzl



Through his wife Louise, daughter of German emperor William I, he was also related to Tsar Alexander II as well as British royalty.

Like any good Evangelical, Hechler lived in constant anticipation of the Second Coming. As opposed to Catholics, Evangelicals believe Jesus can't establish his heavenly kingdom on earth until the Jews return to their homeland. According to an ancient Christian tradition, Jerusalem was to be in the hands of the nations for 1,260 years. Hechler calculated this period not from the destruction of the Second Temple but from the Islamic conquest of the city in 637–38, so he expected the Jews to come back in 1897–98. The first attempts to establish Jewish colonies in the land of Israel, beginning with Petah Tikva and Rosh Pina in 1878, encouraged his theory.

Frederick I listened attentively to the young pastor's ideas, but in 1876 the grand duke's son and heir Ludwig died, and the family no longer needed a tutor.

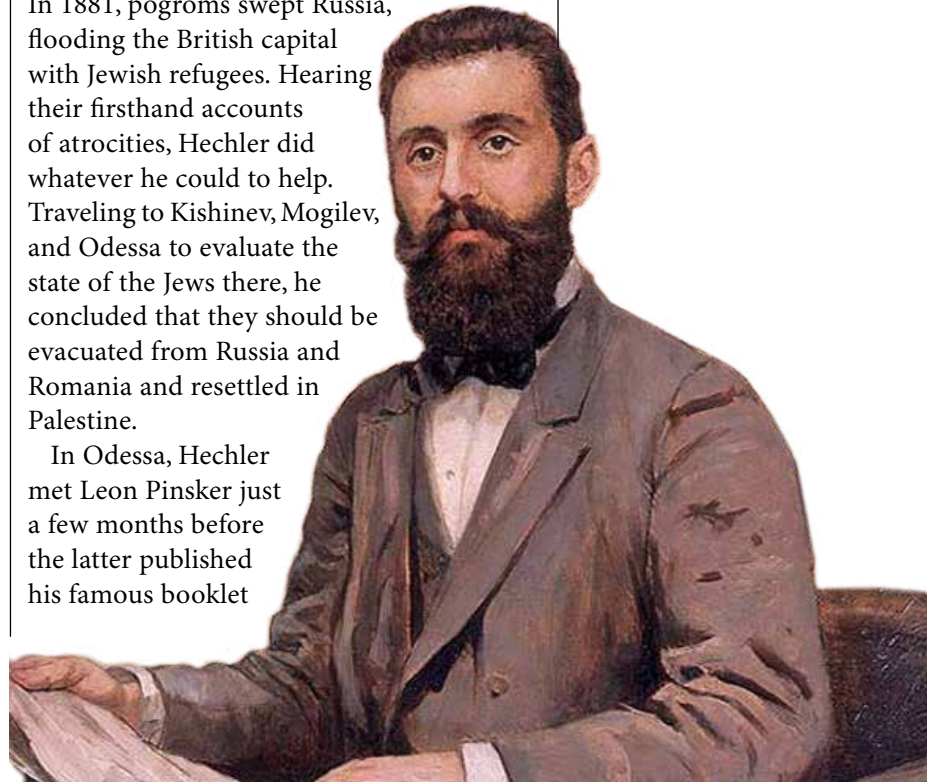


"The new grand duke of Baden! I'm his children's tutor!" Hechler in *Herzl*, a French graphic novel by Avraham Bliah, 2020

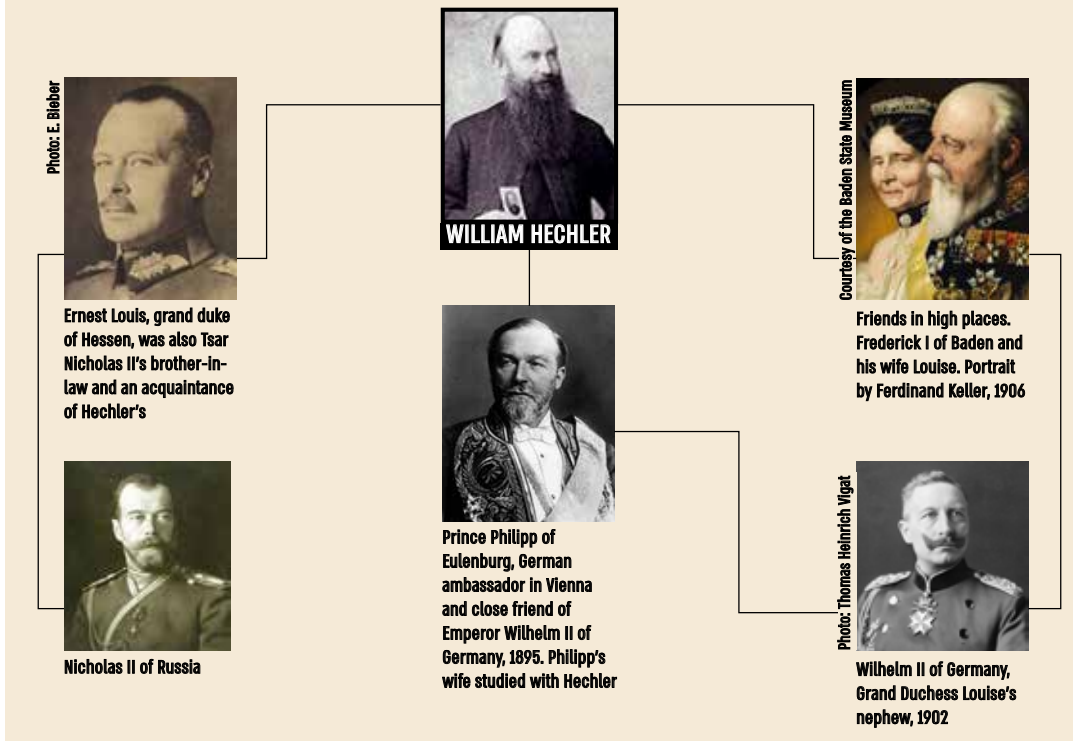
Not yet a celebrity but already a popular journalist and playwright. Herzl, portrait by Gustav Wertheimer, 1895

Moving to Ireland, Hechler married Henrietta Huggins. The couple had four children before separating, with William settling in London as secretary to the Evangelical Church Pastoral Aid Society. In 1881, pogroms swept Russia, flooding the British capital with Jewish refugees. Hearing their firsthand accounts of atrocities, Hechler did whatever he could to help. Traveling to Kishinev, Mogilev, and Odessa to evaluate the state of the Jews there, he concluded that they should be evacuated from Russia and Romania and resettled in Palestine.

In Odessa, Hechler met Leon Pinsker just a few months before the latter published his famous booklet



At the turn of the 20th century, monarchs' relationships with friends and family could make or break the fate of continents



“Auto-Emancipation.” For Pinsker, the land of Israel wasn’t the only valid refuge for his people, but Hechler claimed to have made him reconsider. The missionary also contacted the leadership of BILU, whose young Russian Jews (many of them students) were planning to emigrate to Palestine as pioneers.

In June 1882, Hechler published “The Restoration of the Jews to Palestine,” a pamphlet outlining his vision. It emphasized every Christian’s duty to pray daily for the prophesied redemption of Israel. The author argued against Catholic replacement theology, according to which Israel’s role in history was over inasmuch as the Jewish people had already returned from exile with Ezra and Nehemiah.

While most Anglican missionaries concentrated on converting Jews, William Hechler believed that task was best left to the Messiah once his flock was back in the Promised Land, bringing infinite blessing to the entire world. First, however, Hechler predicted great suffering for the Jewish

Appalled by Ukrainian refugees’ accounts of the pogroms of 1882, Hechler traveled to Ukraine to assess the situation himself

people. His final chapter, with which we opened, exhorted Christians to love Jews and warned against their persecution. Hechler's pamphlet was a call to action, inviting readers to contact him and help resettle the Jews in Palestine.

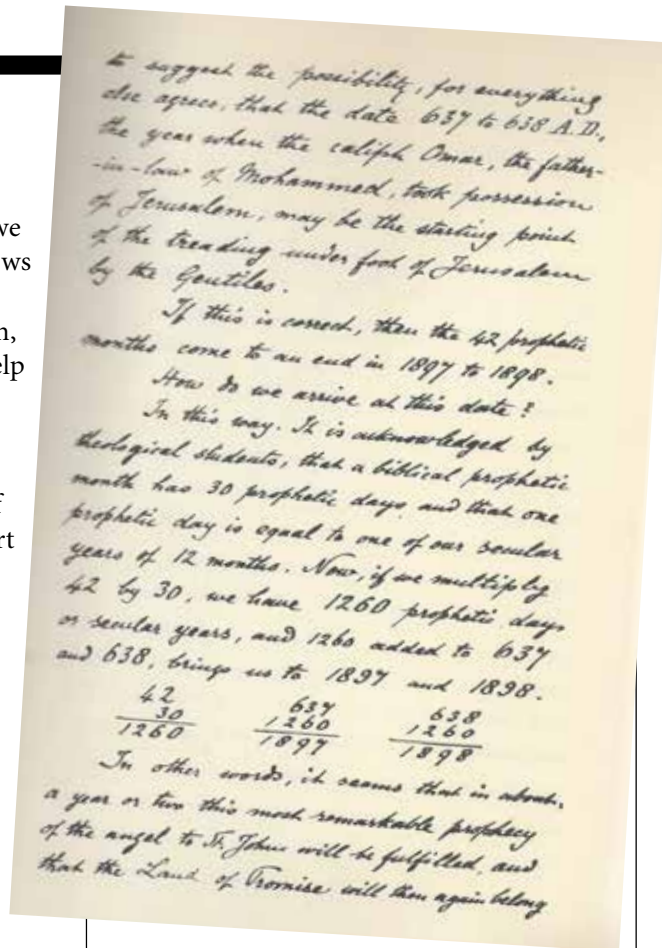
Meeting Herzl

That same year, the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem died, and Hechler set his heart on the post. To improve his chances, he published *The Jerusalem Bishopric* (1883), recounting the history of the city's Anglican-Lutheran church. In the end, Hechler was passed over, but his aunt (who worked in Buckingham Palace) found him an excellent alternative: a chaplaincy at the United Kingdom's embassy in Vienna. He held the job for fifteen years, until his retirement in 1910.

Unlike the miserable refugees Hechler had encountered in London, the Jews he came across in Vienna had no interest in moving to distant Palestine. With anti-Semitism on the rise, they dared not exacerbate it by envisioning another homeland.

Then in 1896, Hechler chanced upon a copy of Herzl's newly published *The Jewish State*. The minister read it with such excitement that he surprised Herzl at his office a few days later. Hechler offered to introduce the journalist to Frederick, grand duke of Baden.

The next Sunday, Herzl visited the pastor in his apartment, a virtual museum of biblical Israel, and Hechler played him a Zionist anthem he'd composed on the organ.



The two were soon fast friends. Hechler was impressed by Herzl's modesty, a stark contrast to the extravagance of other wealthy Jews he'd met, while Herzl wrote in his diary of the chaplain's sterling traits:

This man Hechler is, at all events, a peculiar and complex person. There is much pedantry, exaggerated humility, pious eye-rolling about him – but he also gives me excellent advice full of unmistakably genuine good will. He is at once clever and mystical, cunning and naive. In his dealings with me so far, he has supported me almost miraculously. His counsel and his precepts have been excellent to date,

Calculating redemption. Thirty prophetic days multiplied by 6 and 7 to produce a multiple of 1,260. In this letter to the grand duke, Hechler explains how he arrived at 1897–98 as the year of promised salvation



and unless it turns out later, somehow or other, that he is a double-dealer, I would want the Jews to show him a full measure of gratitude. (Theodor Herzl, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, ed. Raphael Patai, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Herzl Press, 1960], vol. 2, p. 342, entry dated April 26, 1883)

Hechler hoped Herzl would bring biblical prophecies to fruition, though the latter was probably unaware of them. Throwing himself into making the Viennese journalist's dreams of political Zionism come true, Hechler put his extensive aristocratic connections at Herzl's disposal.

Hechler's Rolodex

The promised interview with the grand duke was eventually arranged. Despite

initially ignoring Herzl's proffered handshake, Frederick listened to the Zionist dreamer for two and a half hours, then clasped his hand warmly and heaped praises and good wishes on his head.

Another contact from Hechler's tutoring days was Augusta Sandels, wife of the German ambassador in Vienna, Prince Philipp of Eulenburg. Hechler thought to use this acquaintance to organize an audience for Herzl with none other than Kaiser Wilhelm II, the ambassador's close friend.

On March 14, 1897, the chaplain announced to Herzl that he'd set up a meeting with Prince Philipp – quite an achievement given the ambassador's closeness to Count Arthur de Gobineau, whose theories of racial supremacy later influenced Wagner and Hitler. The diplomat admitted that he promoted Zionism mainly

Herzl and delegation sail to Jaffa, 1898

Photo: Israel National Photo Archive



to empty Europe of the Jews manipulating its finances. Nevertheless, he agreed to help secure an audience with Wilhelm.

Herzl convened the first Zionist Congress in Basel in August 1897 – the very year that, by Hechler’s calculation, was to usher in redemption. Some two hundred Jewish delegates gathered from all over the world, in addition to Christian observers, Hechler among them. Promoting the conference in Herzl’s Zionist paper, *Die Welt*, the chaplain gave an interview entitled “Sons of Abraham, Awaken!”

I believe as a Christian in this movement known as Zionism, since according to the Bible and its ancient prophets a Jewish state must arise in Palestine. (Claude Duvernoy, *The Prince and the Prophet* [1962], p. 70 [French])

Herzl addressed these “Zionist Christians,” as he called them, in his closing address. Afterward, he famously wrote in his diary:

Were I to sum up the Basel congress in a word – which I shall guard against pronouncing publicly – it would be this: In Basel I created the Jewish state. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in fifty years, everyone will perceive it. (Herzl, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 581, entry dated Sept. 3, 1897)

Hechler too hailed the congress as the birth of the Jewish state, writing to the grand duke of Baden:

It is wonderful how these Jews are unconsciously fulfilling the Scriptures concerning the events which the prophets do tell us are to lead us to the Lord’s Second Coming, and they are doing this just as unconsciously as their forefathers fulfilled God’s prophecies when Christ came the first time and lived in Jerusalem. [...] We are now

Going native, both to escape notice and to avoid being mistaken for one of Herzl’s Jewish delegates to the land of Israel. Hechler in keffiyeh, circa 1900

**Just a few days after
discovering Herzl’s Jewish
State in a bookshop,
Hechler knocked at the
author’s office door**

Hechler in *Altneuland*

In his futuristic novel of the Jewish state, Herzl modeled several characters on Hechler

Herzl's utopian novel, *Altneuland* (1902), is a classic roman à clef, a fictional work whose characters are thinly disguised real-life figures. The hero, idealistic Viennese lawyer Friedrich Loewenberg, is Herzl himself. Other personalities in the plot reflect leading Zionists as well as some of the movement's most prominent opponents.

The central section describes a Seder in the new Jewish homeland with guests representing all the country's various populations. One attendee, Reverend William Hopkins of Jerusalem's Anglican Church, is generally thought to be based on Hechler. However, a more central character with no clear equivalent among Herzl's acquaintances bears a distinct resemblance to the author's closest and most distinguished gentile friend.

Kingscourt, the millionaire who sets the entire narrative in motion, wishes to retire from the rigors of human society. He asks Loewenberg to join him on his travels to an isolated island in the Pacific. En route, they pass through the "old land of the Jews," which Herzl romanticizes even as he's alienated by its filth. Twenty years later, passing through again on their way back to civilization, the two men are overwhelmed to find the land transformed into a modern Jewish utopia.

Like Hechler, Kingscourt holds dual British and German citizenship. Like both Hechler and Herzl, he's lonely. Aristocratic and royally connected (as hinted by his name), this non-Jew paradoxically becomes good friends with a Jew.

In addition to these biographical similarities, many of Kingscourt's eccentricities recall Hechler's. Just as Hechler was blessed with an infectious enthusiasm, Kingscourt is absurdly excitable, giving rise to many of the novel's comic moments.

Though a fictional character, he seems to owe much to Hechler, who was among Herzl's closest colleagues in advancing the Zionist dream.

seeing the stirring of the bones in Ezekiel's valley. [...] One of the rabbis at Basel told me that he, as a Reformed [*sic*] Rabbi, had left out the prayer in the synagogue "Next year in Jerusalem!" and now he is going to pray it again. (Hermann and Bessi Ellern, eds., *Herzl, Hechler, the Grand Duke of Baden and the German Emperor: 1896–1904* [Tel Aviv, 1961], pp. 44–45)

The Catholic Church took an altogether opposing view. The day after the assembly, the Vatican expressly objected to Jewish intentions to "seize" Jerusalem's holy sites.

In Search of the Ark

In late 1898, Wilhelm II was planning a state visit to the Holy Land to dedicate Jerusalem's Protestant Church of the Redeemer and advance German interests in the Middle East as the Ottoman grip on the region weakened. Hechler used his influence to add another item to the agenda.

Great public relations. Though Herzl met Wilhelm II at the Mikveh Israel agricultural school (now part of Holon), the photo opportunity was missed. The iconic image below is based on a photomontage. Bronze recreation by Motti Mizrahi, erected at Mikveh Israel in 2012

Photo: Dr. Avishai Teicher, Pikiwiki



Swedish Bible scholar Henning Melander had written in *Die Welt* that the Ark of the Covenant may have been hidden in the Dead Sea area at the end of the First Temple era. Hechler therefore endeavored to persuade the kaiser, through his close correspondent the grand duke of Baden, to request that the Ottoman sultan concede the Dead Sea and its environs to the Germans. The German delegation could then seek the lost ark and its contents, the stone tablets of the law.

A few months before Wilhelm set out for Ottoman Palestine, Frederick penned a long letter to his nephew the kaiser on the subject. Wilhelm replied enthusiastically not only about the quest for the ark, but also about the proposed resettlement of the Jews in the land of Israel. Like his friend Philipp of Eulenburg, the kaiser saw Zionism as a golden opportunity to rid himself of his Jewish subjects, whether businessmen, poverty-stricken refugees, or socialist troublemakers, and replied to his uncle that this was a chance not to be missed.

In Vienna, Philipp conveyed that Wilhelm would be pleased to meet Herzl in the Holy Land. After that meeting, Herzl recorded in his diary:

As a reward for his past management, Hechler gets his travelling expenses to Palestine – 1000 gilders, to start with. He is such a good old soul, modest and humble. He did not even ask for it. It does my heart good to make the old man's secret wish come true. (Herzl, *Diaries*, vol. 2, p. 665, entry dated September 16, 1898)

“It is wonderful to see how these Jews are unconsciously fulfilling the Scriptures which are to lead us to the Lord’s Second Coming”



Herzl personally paid Hechler's way just as he'd defrayed the cost of the chaplain's previous trips on behalf of the Zionist cause.

While in the land of Israel, Hechler adopted Arab dress, not only to protect himself from the sun and distinguish himself from the Jewish members of Herzl's delegation, but also to remain unnoticed as he wandered around the Dead Sea in search of the ark.

Despite Herzl's efforts, Wilhelm II withdrew his support for Jewish settlement

Draft of the grand duke of Baden's letter to the tsar concerning Herzl and his Zionist efforts, and portrait of Nicholas II by Earnest Lipgart, 1897



after discovering that Abdul Hamid II firmly opposed the sale of real estate to non-Muslims.

From a diplomatic point of view, Herzl's audience with the German ruler achieved nothing, but as a public relations exercise it was a resounding success. The meeting between the Jewish journalist and the emperor largely dispelled the Jewish world's skepticism about political Zionism. Herzl recorded in his diary that both times he'd come face to face with the kaiser – at the Mikveh Israel agricultural school and in Jerusalem – it was Hechler who'd gotten him past Wilhelm's entourage.

Continental Connections

When one door closed in Berlin, another opened in St. Petersburg, thanks once again to Hechler and a grand duke of his acquaintance. Hoping to get to Tsar Nicholas II through his brother-in-law, the grand duke of Hessen, Herzl asked his Evangelical friend to go to the Czech spa

of Marienbad, where the nobleman was vacationing, and urge him to take up the Zionist cause. The grand duke of Baden also sent Nicholas an encouraging letter on the subject. The tsar wrote back at Christmas in 1899:

The theory of Zionism could certainly be an important factor in developing the internal tranquility of Europe, but for my part, I doubt that any practical application of the theory could be possible even in the distant future. (Ellern, *Herzl, Hechler*, pp. 79–80)

Herzl never managed to meet the tsar.

Before the fourth Zionist Congress, held in London in 1900, Herzl requested that Hechler introduce him to Edward Prince of Wales, heir to the British throne. Although nothing came of this ambition, Hechler did arrange for Herzl to meet several British bishops, eliciting an uncomplimentary comparison in Herzl's diary:

Often estranged from wife and family, Herzl in his study in Vienna with his children, Pauline, Trudy, and Hans, 1897. Facing page: Hechler with his progeny

On Saturday I sent Hechler to the Bishop of Ripon, a friend of the King's, in order to get me an audience with the King. Good Bishop Bramley Moore also thought this would raise my prestige. I would ask the King to tell his big Jews that they could help me without prejudice to their English patriotism.

On this occasion Hechler told me that after the first time that I had called on Bramley Moore, the latter had immediately gone to the nearby Irvingite Church with him. There Bramley Moore had put on his bishop's vestments and said: Now let



For Hechler, World War I destroyed the aristocratic world he'd manipulated so well

us pray to God and ask him [*sic*] what our duty is. Good Hechler wept as he told me this and I too was very touched. These simple Christian hearts are much better than our Jewish clerics who think of their wedding fees from rich Jews. (Herzl, *Diaries*, vol. 3, p. 1161, entry dated June 17, 1901)

From the moment of their acquaintance, Hechler had been eager for Herzl to improve his English in order to converse with England's many philo-Semites. The Anglo-Jewish community also proved to be fertile ground for Zionist activities with the founding of the Maccabeans, a Zionist club.

Last Words

Hechler was in his eighties when interviewed for a book commemorating the 20th anniversary of Theodor Herzl's death. Looking back twenty-five years to Herzl's final hours, Hechler wrote:

I was with him at the beginning of his dreams, and I was with him almost at the last moment of his earthly life. On Saturday, July 2, 1904, I sat at his bedside, in his home at Edlach, on the Semmering mountains. I

comforted him in his sickness, and I recalled the days when we had traveled together to Palestine, six years before, filled with hope and certain of early success.

I told him what his own medical adviser had said to me: that he might go again with me to the Holy Land, and look again with me on Jerusalem. The sea journey would restore him to his strength and enable him to continue his labors.

But he seems to have known that there was no hope for him. He placed his right hand on his heart, and holding my right hand in his left hand, he said: "Greet everyone from me, and tell them I have given my lifeblood for my people." He turned from me, then, coughing, and bringing up blood. (William Hechler, "The First Disciple: The British Chaplain Who Aided Herzl in His Activities," in *Theodor Herzl: A Memorial* [1929], pp. 51–52)

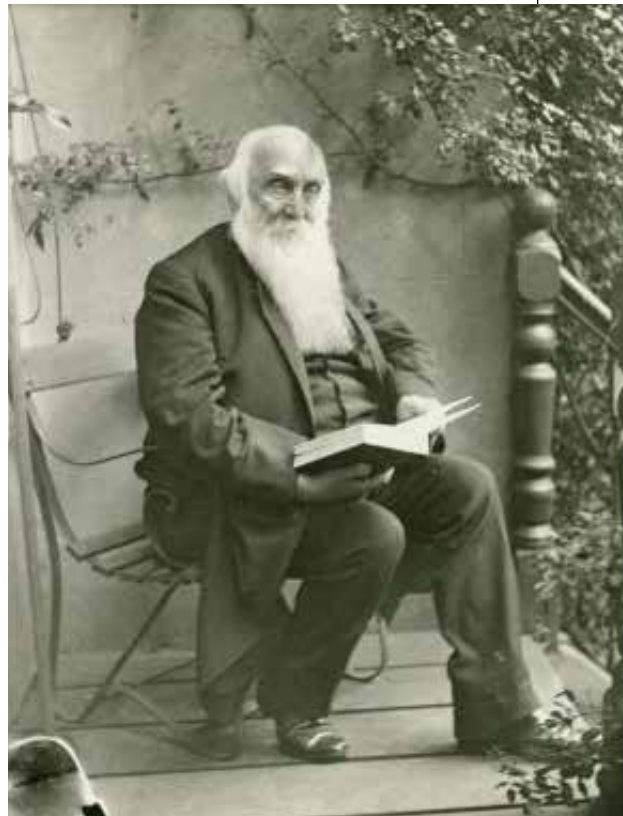
After Herzl's death in 1904, Hechler struggled. In 1907, his main access to the royal families of Europe ended with the death of his close friend Frederick of Baden. Retiring in 1910, the chaplain left Vienna for London. With the outbreak of World War I, however, he found himself torn between dual loyalties as a holder of both British and German citizenship. He chose Britain but viewed the entire war as a breakdown of the European aristocracy he'd skillfully navigated – and to some extent, manipulated.

Toward the end of his life, Hechler seems to have been lonely. His estranged wife, Henrietta, spent many years in a psychiatric institution, and his children lived far away.

When his eldest daughter, Amy, turned Catholic and became a nun, he disinherited her. As Amy told a clerk from the Zionist Archives, Hechler had been little more than a stranger to his children, and she didn't even have his photograph.

The man who'd rubbed shoulders with royalty was reduced to serving as a hospital chaplain, his meager income supplemented by a monthly stipend from the Jewish Agency in London. Hechler reportedly donned a rabbi's long, black frock and black skullcap and often dined at one or another Jewish family's Sabbath table.

Chaplain to the poor and Friday night dinner guest. Hechler in London in his final years





After Herzl's death, the Zionist movement discarded Hechler, and he was shunned by Jews and Christians alike

Yet William Hechler remained a sincere Evangelical, and some even blamed him when Herzl's son, Hans, converted to Christianity and joined an Evangelical church.

After Herzl's death, no one – Jewish or Christian – had much time for Hechler, especially in Zionist circles.

The Balfour Declaration must have delighted him, but a mass migration of Jews to the land of Israel – such as he and Herzl had envisaged – remained a dream. Disappointed by Jewish disinterest in returning to Zion, Hechler died in 1931 at age eighty-six, feeling that Zionism had failed. Only relatively recent efforts by Herzl devotee Jerry Klinger and David Pileggi, rector of the Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, have located his grave. A new headstone was erected in 2011, crediting the cleric who'd done so much for the Zionist movement.

Herzl and Hechler somewhat complemented one another, making them a formidable team. But they were also similar. Both men were isolated by unsuccessful marriages. Both were visionaries not entirely connected to the here and now, perhaps even a little unbalanced. Both cherished

aristocratic values, lived well, and cared little about their own finances.

Hechler's Zionist treatise shows him to have been a man of action more than of letters. He got things done, and he deepened Herzl's political vision by connecting it with biblical prophecies – of which Herzl's own rudimentary Jewish education had left him unaware. Hechler breathed the spirit of the prophets into Herzl's plan for a Jewish state when most rabbis violently opposed it and couldn't see beyond its risks. The cooperation between Herzl and Hechler could even serve as a model for Jews and Christians working together to create a better world. □

Further reading:

Theodor Herzl, *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, ed. Raphael Patai, trans. Harry Zohn, 5 vols. (New York: Herzl Press, 1960); Hermann and Bessi Ellern, eds., *Herzl, Hechler, the Grand Duke of Baden and the German Emperor: 1896–1904* (Tel Aviv: Goldberg Press, 1961); Claude Duvernoy, *The Prince and the Prophet* (Glorious Church Fellowship, 2003).



Prof. Yehuda Moraly is an emeritus professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of *Dream Projects in Theatre, Novels and Films* (2021) and other works

Belatedly fulfilling Herzl's wish that Jews thank Hechler. The pastor's refurbished tombstone in London

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