

Arno C. Gaebelein

by Timothy Demy

For more than half a century evangelist, author, journalist, and Bible expositor Arno C. Gaebelein passionately proclaimed the prophetic truths of the Bible and daily lived with the hope of their fulfillment. With a ministry that bridged two centuries and endured two world wars, Gaebelein never doubted the relevance of the study of prophecy for spiritual growth and for interaction with the chaos of culture. In the midst of the thundering storms of World War I, he encouraged Christians not to despair, for the trials of this world would one day give way to the triumph of Christ. In 1915 he wrote:

The Lord Jesus Christ is coming back! He may be here at any moment! He may come today! Now this is not a foolish assertion that He *will* come today. Nor is it the setting of a specific time for Him to come, which would be equally foolish and wrong; yet many do it. It is the sober statement of a fact, to arouse souls from their carelessness and indifference, and point them to the clear testimony of God's only Word that the Lord Jesus is coming again, and *may* be here today (*Meat in Due Season*, 64).

EARLY YEARS OF MINISTRY

Born in Germany on August 27, 1861, A. C. Gaebelein emigrated to the United States in 1879 to avoid compulsory military service and to experience the adventure of travel. He settled in Lawrence, Massachusetts, among other Germans immigrants and went to work in a local mill. He soon began attending worship services at a German Methodist fellowship and in 1881 became an assistant to the pastor of a German Methodist congregation in New York City. In 1881, Gaebelein became a supply preacher in a mission in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and in 1882 he was assigned to a congregation in Baltimore. Although he had no college or seminary training, Gaebelein was a devout student and fervently studied and mastered Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and Arabic.

In 1884 Gaebelein was ordained as a deacon and moved to Harlem, New York. There he met and married Emma Grimm in 1885. He was ordained as an elder in 1886, and shortly thereafter, when his infant daughter died, he began a period of intense spiritual reflection and contemplated entering missions. He moved to a congregation in Hoboken, New Jersey in 1887, where Samuel Goldstein, a converted Jewish parishioner, encouraged him to look to evangelistic opportunities among local Jewish immigrants. Gaebelein began to preach in a Jewish mission and developed a passion for Jewish evangelism. This new work forced him to reevaluate his views on prophecy, and he became an ardent premillennialist. He immersed himself in Jewish culture and Hebrew and was soon writing religious literature in Yiddish and Hebrew. In 1891, Gaebelein requested that his denomination appoint him to work full-time among Jewish immigrants, and in 1893 he began publication of *Tiqweth Israel--The Hope of Israel Monthly*.

Gaebelein was soon joined in his work by Ernst F. Stroeter, a college professor from Colorado, and in 1894 they began publication of English and German editions of the journal *Our Hope*. Devoted to reports on the work of The Hope of Israel Mission as well as the study of prophecy, the journal did much to advance evangelistic and social work among the Jewish people. Edited initially by Stroeter, and by Gaebelein after 1896, *Our Hope* provided conservative Christians world-wide information sympathetic to Zionism, Jewish affairs, and prophetic studies. Historian David Rausch noted: "*Our Hope*, was a key periodical in the fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century, through this periodical, Gaebelein brought the teaching of biblical prophecy to the forefront of the movement and coupled it to in-depth, scholarly biblical studies" (*Arno C. Gaebelein*, 19). The journal continued publication until 1958, when it merged with *Eternity*.

In his early ministry to immigrants, Gaebelein coordinated a broad-based work of social and evangelistic outreach that included distribution of food and clothing, operation of a

dispensary, sewing classes, and relief funds for Jews in Europe. He also spoke fluent Yiddish, traveled to Russia and Europe to view Jewish conditions first-hand. He wrote of these years, ". . . I was obliged to do something for the relief of the great suffering among the poor Jews. It appeared to me a grand opportunity to show to them the practical side of Christianity" (*Half a Century*, 35). Branches of The Hope of Israel Mission were eventually established in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis.

BIBLE EXPOSITOR AND AUTHOR

Toward the turn of the century, focus began to shift from Jewish evangelism to a Bible teaching and conference ministry. He had become a in 1887, after reading a French book, *La Future D'Israel* by Pasteur Guers. Through contacts with men such as James H. Brookes, James M. Gray, and C. I. Scofield, Gaebelien began to write and speak extensively on prophecy. When Brookes died in 1897, *Our Hope* came to be seen as the ideological successor to Brooks' *The Truth*, and it became an instrument for proclaiming nation-wide. Gaebelien believed that Israel was the key not only to biblical prophecy, but to all history, and he sought to understand current events through careful teaching and application of prophecy.

In the years between 1900 and 1915, reputation as a Bible teacher and his prominence grew significantly. In 1901 he began the annual Sea Cliff Bible Conference on Long Island. It was there that C. I. Scofield first mentioned his desire to publish a study Bible and asked for Gaebelien's assistance in the project. Both men were fervent dispensationalists, and Scofield asked Gaebelien to provide the prophetic portions of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. So great was his admiration of Gaebelien, that Scofield wrote him saying, "By all means follow your own views of prophetic analysis. I sit at your feet when it comes to prophecy and congratulate in advance the future readers of the Reference Bible on having in their hands a safe, clear, sane guide through what to most is a labyrinth" (*Half a Century*, 94).

The events and tragedy of World War I troubled Gaebelien, and he was saddened to see the progress of Zionism slowed by the war. He cautioned his readers not to identify the war as Armageddon and exhorted them to trust God and turn to the Bible for comfort and guidance. He closely watched the events of the war and when Jerusalem was captured by British forces, he claimed it as the most significant event of 1917.

In the years after the war, Gaebelien became a vocal and prolific defender of fundamentalism, inerrancy, and premillennialism. He engaged critics from the pulpit and in print and always did so with a firm but irenic spirit. In 1922, Wheaton College conferred upon him an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree. Politically conservative, he saw a great threat in Communism, and it is in his responses to it, as well as some of his statements on conspiracy theories, that he has been criticized. In 1933, he published his thirty-eighth volume, *Conflict of the Ages*. Controversial to some, the book portrayed all of human history as conflict between God and Satan, and as obedience and disobedience to the will of God. In it he addressed current events and focused especially on the threat of Communism.

HOLOCAUST YEARS

In the 1930s, the dangers of Communism gave way to the threat of Nazism, which Gaebelien abhorred. In 1937 he sailed to Germany to witness first-hand the Nazi regime, and he denounced it continuously in the pages of *Our Hope*. Both before and during World War II he meticulously documented and published accounts of Nazi atrocities to the Jews. While many American religious leaders denied or ignored contemporary reports of extermination, Gaebelien repeatedly reported Jewish conditions. In 1939, E. Schuyler English became Associate Editor of *Our Hope*, relieving Gaebelien, now 80, of some of the editorial burdens. However, as he had done in World War I, Gaebelien closely followed the events of World War II.

In 1944 and 1945, Gaebelin rejoiced in Hitler's demise but was greatly grieved over the Holocaust. While he saw the end of the war, he did not live to see either the return of the Jews to Israel or the return of Jesus Christ in the rapture, as had been his hope. He died in his home on Christmas Day, 1945. In 1942, Gaebelin had written a letter to English to be published in case he died before the Lord's return. In it he proclaimed his lifelong faith and hope: "Only He knows the exact time when the crowning event in the history of the Church, the gathering of the saints of God to meet Him in the air will take place. Perhaps in His infinite mercy He may still tarry to add more members to His Body, His own fullness, which filleth all in all" (quoted in *Arno C. Gaebelin*, 182).

PROPHETIC HOPE

Throughout his ministry Gaebelin shunned prophetic date-setting and those who practiced it, arguing that our hope and interest must not be in the Antichrist but, rather, in Jesus Christ. With the storm clouds of war gathering once again in 1939, Gaebelin wrote words that applied not only to his readers then, but to us as well:

We look at the approaching storm precipitating all into an abyss of hopelessness. We look again and see a marvelous sunrise. The Morningstar appears, the herald of the Day and the Sun in all His glory. *Even so Come, Thou Hope of the hopeless, Thou Hope of Israel, Thou Hope of the World, all Nations, and Creation. Even so, Come Lord Jesus* (quoted in *Arno C. Gaebelin*, 150).

Bibliography

- Gaebelin**, Arno C. *Half a Century: The Autobiography of a Servant*. New York: Our Hope, 1930.
- _____. *Meat in Due Season*. By the Author, n.d.
- Rausch**, David A. *Arno C. Gaebelin 1861-1945: Irenic Fundamentalist and Scholar*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1983.