

Israel and Palestine: Where is God in the conflict?

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This is an abbreviated version of the full text of Rev Colin Chapman's paper, which is also available as part of this edition of Encounters.

Introduction

This paper is about the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Let me begin by suggesting three reasons why we should be interested in this subject.

1. It is often described as one of the most long-standing, complex and bitter conflicts in the world, and it has profound implications for the peace of the Middle East and the whole world.
2. It raises huge questions about how we should interpret the Bible and understand history as it is unfolding before our eyes today.
3. It concerns our mission to the world, and especially to the Jewish people and the Muslim world. It is therefore very appropriate that we should be looking at this subject in *Encounters*.

1. WHAT IS THE CONFLICT ALL ABOUT?

a. Three ingredients

At the risk of oversimplification I would suggest that there are at least three major ingredients in this conflict:

1. *A clash of nationalisms with two peoples claiming the same land for different reasons.* Jewish nationalism and Palestinian nationalism have been developing side by side. Jewish nationalism did not create Palestinian nationalism, but it has certainly stimulated it.
2. *The religious dimension.* While we know that scripture and history are the foundation of the Jewish claim to the land, it is not always recognised that scripture and history are also part of the basis for the Islamic claim to the land. These theological and historical claims made by Jews and Muslims have been complicated by the development of fundamentalisms in all three religions, and it is important that we recognise the role played by fundamentalisms *in all three faiths* – Jewish, Christian and Islamic. We also need to recognise the diversity of views about the role of Islam. Some say that the basic problem is Islam itself which cannot accept Israel, and that the root of the problem is religious. I personally would argue that the root of the problem is dispossession and that the religious dimension is secondary. Even if the Islamic dimension is becoming more and more significant, it is still not the fundamental issue.
3. *The involvement of world powers.* The creation of Israel is seen by Palestinians and the Muslim world as the last example of Western imperialism – a Jewish state established in the heartlands of Islam with the support of the West. It is therefore seen as a cancerous growth, a foreign body, a transplant that does not belong in the region. For a time Israel was caught

up in the struggle between the two great powers in the Cold War. Now its alliance with the US, the only superpower, makes it a vital element in the US's ambitions to reshape the whole of the Middle East according to its own interests and maintain its world-wide hegemony.

Essentially the conflict is about possession of the land. Israel traces its association with the land right back to Abraham, while the Palestinians point out that there has been almost 1300 years of Islamic rule. Jewish settlement since 1880 and the creation of a Jewish state in 1948 have made it inevitable that these rival claims should come into sharp conflict. In particular Israel is occupying territory, the West Bank and Gaza, which both sides claim is central to their viability as a people in the land. If there is going to be peace in future some difficult choices will have to be made.

b. What are the options?

Israel has only four options:

1. *Create a single Jewish state, annexing West Bank and Gaza.* However, with the higher birth-rate in the Arab community, in a few years' time there would be an Arab majority, which, if the state were to remain democratic, would eventually take over power.
2. *Create a single secular state, including West Bank and Gaza, giving all Palestinian Arabs a vote.* Most Israelis could not accept this option because it would mean that the state would cease to be a Jewish state.
3. *Crush and/or deport the Palestinians ("transfer").* To the Palestinians it looks as if this is part of what Israel has been trying to do recently: destroying the economy and making life unbearable, in the hope that as many as possible will leave the country.
4. *Allow the creation of a Palestinian state side by side with Israel (the two-state solution).*

The Palestinians face four crucial choices:

1. *Are they going to continue to resort to violence (a widely accepted tactic amongst Palestinians at present) or give up violence and rely on negotiation?*
2. *Will they adopt an 'all-or-nothing' approach in negotiations or will they be willing to compromise?*
3. *Will they accept the existence of Israel or try to destroy it?*
4. *If and when they do create a Palestinian state, will it be an Islamic state or a secular state?*

The world community has to choose between these two basic approaches:

1. *Will it allow Israel to use its dominant position to impose its will on the Palestinians?*
2. *Will it challenge both sides equally and force them to negotiate on the basis of international law?*

c. What are the chances for peace at the present time?

In recent weeks the US Administration has begun to get more involved in the peace-process, and we have seen on TV the handshake between Abbas and Sharon at Sharm el-Sheikh. While I feel some optimism, it has to be a very cautious optimism – for five main reasons:

1. The Palestinians are still, as it were, on probation. If Hamas and the other Islamic movements do not see any tangible improvement and cannot see any light at the end of the tunnel, they will probably want to return to violence.
2. Sharon remains in the driving seat. His promise of disengagement from the Gaza Strip appears to be very generous. But it will leave Gaza as a huge prison, because Israel will still control all the borders and all the natural resources. And the disengagement is already being used to strengthen Sharon's claim to hold on to as many as possible of the Jewish settlements on the West Bank.
3. George Bush and the neo-cons in his administration are totally committed to the support of Israel. They have the strong support of the powerful Jewish lobby combined with the Christian Right.
4. The longer final negotiations are postponed, the more facts can be created on the ground. Israel already seems to be saying, 'After all this time, you can't expect us to surrender everything that we have built on the West Bank! You can't unscramble an egg!'
5. The question of Israel and Palestine cannot be separated from everything else in the Middle East. What happens in Israel/Palestine affects every other country in the region. The problems in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran are all interconnected. US policy towards Israel is inextricably connected with its policies in the whole of the region which are aimed at the support of Israel and the safeguarding of oil supplies.

I would have to say, therefore, that everything seems to depend - humanly speaking - on the amount of pressure that the US is willing to exert on Sharon. Enormous pressure is already being exerted on the Palestinians. What is needed now is pressure that forces Israel as much as the Palestinians to negotiate a final solution - as soon as possible and on the basis of international law. The framework for a solution is already there in the Road Map, which is sponsored by the US, the UN, the EU and Russia.

2. HOW DO WE WORK OUT A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE CONFLICT?

I suggest that we need to start by recognising that we are dealing with two basic approaches and that there is a huge divide between them. We are not talking about two positions on a spectrum. There is a very major gulf that separates these two outlooks. Everyone of us is on one side or the other.

a. Restorationism & Dispensationalism

These approaches are not identical, although as we shall see, they share the same starting point. Restorationism is the view that believes that the Restoration of Jews to the land is part of God's plan for the Jewish people because it represents the fulfilment of OT promises and prophecies. Dispensationalism is the system developed in the 19th century by J.N. Darby, which takes Restorationism as its starting point, and by using Rev 20 and many other OT

and NT passages constructs a whole prophetic scheme, with history divided into seven dispensations and a detailed account of events leading up to the second coming.

The starting point of both can be summed up as follows:

The promise about the land in the Abrahamic covenant still stands and must be interpreted literally. The Jewish people therefore have a special God-given right to the land today. OT prophecies of return and restoration were fulfilled in a limited way in the return from Exile, but have been fulfilled *once again* in the recent return of Jews to the land and the establishment of the state of Israel. These events are to be seen not only as signs of the faithfulness of God to the Jewish people but as fulfilments of OT promises and prophecies, and also as significant signs pointing to the imminence of the Second Coming.

If this is our starting point, this will inevitably give us the basic clue as to what God is doing in and through recent history in the land: he is bringing his Chosen People back to the land to bless them, and all these events are part of the build-up to a final conflict and the second coming. This theology therefore provides the basic points of reference for interpreting the conflict. David Torrance, for example, outlines his understanding of what God is doing in this way: 'God uses sinful Israel as representative of all the sinful states of the world, that through them he might demonstrate his power to the world and show that all nations are sinful and accountable to God ...God is using tiny, unbelieving, sinful Israel to challenge spiritually the whole of Islam and to challenge the world as he seeks to bring us to that day when every people and nation will bow the knee and confess that Jesus is Lord'.

b. Covenant Theology.

The basic emphasis here is that there is only one covenant of grace, with Christ at the centre. Its starting point can be summarised in this way:

The Abrahamic covenant and all OT promises and prophecies have to be interpreted in the light of the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus; the OT must be read through the spectacles of the NT. Because OT promises and prophecies have been fulfilled in the coming of the kingdom in Jesus, the return of Jews to the land and the establishment of the state of Israel have no special theological significance.

These two approaches are fundamentally different; I do not think one can 'pick and mix'. Any other views put forward by evangelical Christians will probably be variations of one position or the other.

I have two major problems with Restorationism and Dispensationalism. Firstly I believe that they misunderstand the way the NT interprets the OT. And secondly, they lead in practice to a very one-sided approach to the conflict, and seem to support what many would perceive to be a fundamental injustice. I have laid out my own understanding of the Scriptural basis for Covenant Theology in the longer version of this article and will here only deal with the main objections to that position.

c. Objections to this aspect of Covenant Theology

1. *'This is spiritualizing the OT; the land means the land and cannot and must not be spiritualised.'* David Torrance, for example, writes: 'The Gospel witnessed to in the New as well as in the OT has a physical and material dimension in space and time and does have a literal fulfilment in Christ'. I am not at all comfortable with the word 'spiritualise'. But if this is

how the NT writers interpret these major themes in the OT, I feel obliged to follow their interpretation. The key question always is: how did Jesus and his disciples interpret the key OT ideas? In response to Torrance I would ask: in what sense could Christians say that the Temple, the priesthood and the sacrificial system still have, for Christians today, 'a physical dimension in space and time' and 'a literal fulfilment in Christ'?

2. *'Why can't we have it both ways?'* Two years ago I had a long e-mail correspondence with R.T Kendall, formerly of Westminster Chapel, London. He was generally convinced by the argument of *Whose Promised Land?*, but wrote: 'Is there nothing whatever in the Bible that makes Israel becoming a nation in 1948 a fulfilment of some prophetic expectation?' My answer is that we need to understand three different kinds of fulfilment (in the original context, in the first coming of Christ and the second coming); and only then, when we have exhausted these should we go on to ask about the fulfilment in contemporary history. But if, as Luke believes, 'the redemption of Jerusalem' has been carried out in Christ, it is inconceivable for me as a Christian to speak of Jews regaining sovereignty over Jerusalem in terms of 'the redemption of Jerusalem'. And if Ezekiel's visions of a new temple are not architect's blueprints of a restored temple, but are looking forward to the incarnation, it is impossible to relate them *both* to the incarnation *and* to the rebuilding of a literal Temple in Jerusalem.

3. *'This is Replacement Theology'*. I and others are frequently accused of teaching Replacement Theology or Supersessionism – the idea that the Church has taken the place of Israel. My answer is that this is most emphatically *not* what I am speaking about. I would point out that one of Paul's main aims in writing Romans 9 – 11 is to correct attitudes of pride and arrogance that are creeping into gentile churches, based on the idea that 'God has finished with the Jewish people'. Paul argues that God has *not* finished with the Jewish people; the covenant promises are still theirs; but their fulfilment for Jews can be experienced only in and through acknowledgment of Jesus as Messiah, and unbelieving Jews are, in Paul's words, 'broken off because of unbelief' (11:20).

If I cannot accept Restorationism or Dispensationalism and its interpretation of the conflict, and if I am generally convinced by Covenant Theology, the task of discerning the hand of God in this conflict is going to be very much harder. I believe in the second coming, but do not believe that the Bible gives us detailed predictions about events leading up to it. Jesus said, 'There will be signs ... but you don't know the day or hour ...' So I suggest that books like Revelation and Zechariah do not give us a kind of 'video of the future'; they are not 'history written in advance.'

Here there may be a parallel between the way scripture prepared for the *first* coming of Christ, and the way it prepares for the *second* coming. Before the coming of Christ, no-one, however intelligent or spiritual, could have worked out from the prophets the whole sequence of the life of Jesus: he will be born in Bethlehem, live in Nazareth, die and be raised on the third day ... It was only when Jesus came and interpreted who he was and what he was doing in the light of scripture that people could begin to understand. In the same way, I do not believe that any Christian believer or scholar today, however sound, however clever and intelligent, however spiritual, is able to work out from scripture how the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is going to develop, and tell us in detail the whole scenario of events leading up to the second coming.

This must mean that if we are to make sense of the conflict, we need to be guided by general principles based on scripture. And these seem to me to be the most fundamental:

1. God's concern for justice.
2. God's compassion for the weak, the oppressed and the suffering
3. God's desire that every human being has an opportunity to know Christ – including Jews, Muslims and everyone in the world.

3. WHAT SHOULD WE BE PRAYING FOR?

As I pray about the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, I am praying 'your kingdom come, your will be done ...' I am trying to co-operate with God in getting his will done in his world. And here are the ten main items on my prayer list:

1. *I pray that God will comfort all who are bereaved and suffering.* Whose side is God one? He is on the side of the oppressed; he is the protector of the widow and the orphan. In Isaiah 63:9 we read that 'In all their affliction he (Yahweh) was afflicted ...'

2. *I pray for Christian communities in Israel and Palestine and the rest of the Middle East.* I pray for Jewish believers, Messianic believers in around 200 different congregations in Israel. I think of the Christian communities in Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq which are suffering from serious haemorrhaging because of all the Christians who are leaving to emigrate to the West. And I pray for Christian institutions and mission agencies of different kinds, like Elias Chacour and his university in Galilee, the Bible Lands Society, the Bethlehem Bible College, SAT-7 and Middle East Media, the Bible Societies and Open Doors.

3. *I pray for an end of violence.* I pray especially that Palestinians will come to their senses and realise that their violence has been counterproductive and has seriously weakened their cause.

4. *I pray that Israel will give up its dreams of 'the Greater Israel' and realise that it has to negotiate on the basis of the 1967 borders.* The only way for Israel to feel secure is to make peace with the Arabs in general and the Palestinians in particular, most of whom are probably willing to accept the state of Israel within its 1967 borders.

5. *I pray for the creation of a Palestinian state.* This is not ideal in many ways. But in the circumstances, I suspect that it is the only viable solution at the present time.

6. *I pray for every attempt to bring reconciliation between Jews and Arabs.* I think for example of a group of bereaved families from both sides meeting from time to time in a hotel in Jerusalem. I think of *Musalaha* and its ministry of bringing Jewish and Arab believers together. I pray for courageous organisations like Women in Black and Rabbis Against House Demolitions, and for all the many Jews who are supporting the Palestinians on the West Bank, protecting them from harassment by the Jewish settlers who are stealing their land and preventing them from harvesting their grapes and olives.

7. *I pray for stronger pressure from the US on Israel.* Humanly speaking this is one of the major keys to the resolution of the conflict. The framework for a resolution of the conflict is already there in the Quartet's Road Map for Peace. But it will only be implemented if the US is willing to use its weight and authority to put sufficient pressure on Sharon and his administration.

8. *I pray for a major change of heart among Christians – especially evangelical Christians in the US.* I personally feel an acute sense of shame and embarrassment that they form the

largest lobby that has been supporting the very one-sided policies of the administration in recent years. If there was a major re-think in the American public over Vietnam; if there was a major change of heart in South Africa and the rest of the world over apartheid, is it not possible that there could be a similar change of heart over this conflict?

9. *I pray that Jerusalem will be a place where Jews, Christians and Muslims can worship in their holy places and meet each other.* For this to happen, Israel has to give up its claim to exclusive sovereignty over Jerusalem, and has to be persuaded to share sovereignty over the city – and especially the Old City – with the Palestinians. Marc Ellis, an American Jewish rabbi describes his vision of what Jerusalem could be for Jews, Christians and Muslims: ‘If Jerusalem is seen as the “broken middle” of Israel/Palestine – to be fully shared among Jews and Palestinians – and if citizenship rather than religion or ethnic identity is the path of a shared life and responsibility, then Jerusalem can indeed become a beacon of hope for Jews and Palestinians in the twenty-first century ... the place that Jews and Palestinians can meet in their suffering and brokenness’. This is a vision worth praying for!

10. *I pray for Christians in their proclamation of the gospel.* I long that individual Jews and Muslims will come to faith in Jesus and that disciples of Jesus in all communities will be channels of his peace and reconciling love.

We have tried to understand what the conflict is all about, how the Bible might help us to understand it, and how we might be co-operating with God in prayer and action. In this conflict - perhaps more so than in any other conflict - peace and justice are intertwined. The Psalmist links righteousness/justice and peace together when he speaks of the time when ‘righteousness and peace kiss each other’ (Psalm 85:10). And James links righteousness/justice with peace in these words: ‘The wisdom from above is in the first place pure; and then peace-loving, considerate, and open to reason; it is straightforward and sincere, rich in mercy and in the kindly deeds that are its fruit. **True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seeds sown in a spirit of peace**’ (James 3:17-18 (NEB)).

The full version of this paper includes references and bibliography.

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