

# Israel and Palestine: Where is God in the conflict?

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*An abbreviated version of this paper 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*.

Before we get into the subject, however, I need to explain how I came to be involved in these issues. My first degree from St Andrews University was in Greek and Hebrew. So apart from the study of the Bible, I first developed an interest in the Middle East through the study of Judaism and Jewish history. The year I graduated (before the war of 1967), I spent a month in Jordan and then a month in Israel, where I travelled round the whole country and visited a number of kibbutzim. I had no idea at that stage that I would later be working in the Arab world. When I offered to CMS for overseas work, I was hoping that I would go to India, where I was born, but was told that I had no chance of getting a visa, and was asked to go to Cairo instead.

I very quickly realised what a major issue the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is for everyone in the Middle East. I think I really began to understand what the Palestinian cause is about through my wife, Anne, who, before we were married, worked in Jordan at a Palestinian refugee centre run by the Middle East Council of Churches and had been caught up in Black September and the Jordanian civil war in September 1970.

Later, in 1976, when we were refugees from the civil war in Lebanon and living for a time in England, I wrote an article for *Crusade* giving my own understanding of the conflict and challenging the popular view that recent history in the Middle East should be seen as the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. For several months afterwards there were angry letters criticising what I had written, and I determined to do more homework on the history of the conflict and on biblical interpretation. The result of this process was a book, *Whose Promised Land?*, which was written when we were in Beirut and published in 1983. It has been through several revisions, the most recent in 2002.

The first third of the book tries to explain the origins and all the different stages of the conflict up to the present day. The middle third of the book traces the theme of the land right through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, challenging dispensational views and suggesting other ways of using the Bible to understand the conflict. The last part tries to address some of the issues today, like the crisis for Zionism, Islam and Zionism, Christian Zionism and the power equation in the world today.

If the book has been a help to some, I am very aware that others have disagreed strongly with my approach. David Torrance, for example, speaks of the book as ‘an important, thought-provoking book, which continues to exercise an unhappy political, biblical and theological influence’<sup>1</sup>. Melanie Phillips has described the book as ‘a poisonous travesty which uses theology to de-legitimise Israel, adding that ‘this book will influence not just anti-Israel but anti-Jewish feeling’<sup>2</sup>.

I continue to be interested in the subject because I believe that Christians, and especially evangelical Christians, have an enormous responsibility for the way the conflict has developed and continues to develop, but also have a great potential as peacemakers.

Some of my readers may disagree strongly with what I am going to say. But if you do, I hope that you will at least understand how I have arrived at my position, that we can debate the issues, and that by the end you will still accept me as a born-again, Bible-believing Christian.

But where do we begin? I want first of all to look at the history and politics. After that I want to summarise the two main approaches adopted by Christians and explain in more detail the one that I find more convincing. Only then can I go on to give my own understanding of how God might be at work in this conflict.

Some may be surprised that I do not want to begin with the Bible. Many Christians would say, ‘Let’s start with scripture. Let’s get our theology right first, and then see how to apply it in the world.’ The problem I find, however, is that those who are most insistent on starting with the Bible are thinking of one particular way of interpreting scripture and one particular kind of eschatology, and want to fit their interpretation of history into this. For this reason I prefer to start with the history and politics and then turn to the Bible. I want to try to work out what the conflict is all about *at an ordinary human level* before turning to the Bible to see if it gives us a divine viewpoint on the conflict.

## **1. WHAT IS THE CONFLICT ALL ABOUT?**

Let me try to do the impossible and give a brief survey of the background to the present conflict, attempting to explain the nature of the conflict.

### **a. The history of the conflict**

Abraham lived in the land sometime between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. Joshua conquered the land in around 1240 BC, and David established his kingdom in about 1,000 BC. The kingdom was divided into two, and the kingdom based in Jerusalem came to an end in 586 with the Babylonian Exile. Although a remnant of the Jews returned 50 years later, from now on the land came under one empire after another – Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman – except for some short periods when they were able to regain sovereignty for a few years. Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD and in 135 the Jews were expelled from Jerusalem. A number of Jewish communities were established in Galilee and on the coast, and these continued right through the centuries until they were strengthened by the arrival of the new Zionist immigrants at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Arab and Islamic rule over the land began with the conquest under the caliph Umar in 638. Arabs, Muslims and Palestinians today, therefore, point out that the country has been under Islamic rule from 638 to 1918 except for the 100 years of Crusader rule. This means almost

1300 years of Islamic rule, 900 of them under Arabs and 400 under the Turks. The Palestinians (both Muslim and Christian) think of themselves, therefore, as the descendants of people who have been living in the land for many centuries, no doubt with a mixture of Canaanite, Jewish, Arab and Crusader blood.

1880 is a very important date since it was in the ensuing decade that more and more Jewish immigrants started coming from Europe, seeking a haven from anti-semitic persecution in Europe. It is important to recognise that at this time the Jews were about 5% of the total population of Palestine, and Arabs were the remaining 95%. At first the Arabs did not see the new immigrants as a threat. But when they saw the number of Jewish immigrants increasing, and began to understand that these Jews wanted not only to establish a Jewish homeland, but to become the majority and to create a Jewish state, they inevitably became more anxious and violent towards the Jews.

In the Balfour Declaration Britain in 1917 declared its support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland, provided that 'nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine'. At the same time, however, Britain was trying to enlist the support of the Arabs against the Turks by promising that they could set up sovereign, independent Arab states after the war. We also have to point out that the Declaration had less to do with generosity towards the Jews than with Britain's imperial ambitions. Britain wanted to have a friendly power on the banks of the Suez Canal in order to protect its lines of communication with India and the East. Arthur Koestler described the Declaration as 'a document in which one nation solemnly promises a second nation the country of a third nation.' After the end of the first World War Britain was given the Mandate for Palestine.

As immigration continued for several decades, violent conflict between the two communities became inevitable. There were serious clashes, for example, in 1928, and a major Arab Revolt in 1936. During the Second World War more and more immigrants poured into the country because of the Holocaust. When violence increased against the British and between the two communities, Britain realised that it could not continue the Mandate, and handed the problem over to the United Nations, who in 1947 put forward their Partition Plan. According to this plan the Jews, who were 31% of the population and owned only 6% of the land, were given 52% of the land, while the Palestinians, who were 69%, were given 48%. When Britain withdrew in May 1948, the Jews went ahead with their plans to establish a Jewish state. The Arabs were angry, however, because they felt that the division of the land was unfair, and that the partition was being forced on them without consultation. They therefore tried to destroy the Jewish state before it could be established, but were soundly beaten in the process. When the fighting stopped, the armistice line in 1948 became the border of the Israeli state, giving them more land than they had been allocated in the UN Plan, and the West Bank was annexed by Jordan.

It is important for us today to recognise that the Palestinians could have had a Palestinian state in 1948; and if they had set one up then, it would have been very much larger than any Palestinian state which may be created in the next few years. It also needs to be acknowledged that in the period between '48 and '49 around 750,000 Palestinians left or were driven from their homes in a process of what we today would call 'ethnic cleansing'. Both Arab and Israeli Jewish historians have documented the way in which this was carried out<sup>3</sup>, and around 3.5 million Palestinians in different countries of the Middle East are still registered with the UN as refugees.

The next significant date was June 1967, when Israeli provocation and Arab brinkmanship led to a war that neither side wanted or planned for. Israel took the initiative with a preemptive attack and soundly defeated the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian armies. In the

process they took over the whole of the West Bank including East Jerusalem, Sinai, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. The UN Security Council Resolution 242 in November '67 was based on the principle of 'the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war', and required 'withdrawal of Israeli forces from territories of recent conflict'. But Israel has refused to comply with this resolution arguing, for example, 'We didn't start the war. We can't withdraw until there is a comprehensive peace with all the Arabs; and the pre-1967 borders are indefensible.'

The PLO was founded in 1964, with Arafat taking over the leadership in 1968. Its aims and tactics have evolved considerably since then; sometimes it has resorted to violence and terrorism and sometimes to diplomacy.

In the October/Yom Kippur War in 1973 Egyptian forces advanced across the Suez Canal, but were soon driven back by Israeli forces. The psychological effect of the initial victory, however, enabled Sadat to make his historic visit to Jerusalem in 1977, and at Camp David in 1978 to make a separate peace with Israel, in which Israel agreed to withdraw from Sinai. In this way Israel succeeded in making peace with one of its neighbours and thus divided the Arab world.

The First Intifada of 1986 began as a spontaneous, non-violent protest against an illegal occupation – with boys throwing stones at the Israeli tanks. In the Gulf War in 1990 Arafat backed Saddam Hussein, and thereby did considerable damage to the Palestinian cause. George Bush Snr took advantage of the 'new world order' created after the Gulf War to bring about the Oslo Accords in 1993, with the famous handshake between Arafat and Rabin on the White House Lawn. Although this seemed at the time to be a major breakthrough, with hindsight we can recognise some of its weaknesses: there was no mechanism for monitoring the performance of both sides; many vital issues were not discussed and were merely postponed; and the Palestine Authority was put in the impossible position of having to restrain its extremists with weapons supplied by Israel.

It is now becoming clear that Barak's offer to Arafat at Camp David in July 2000 was not nearly as generous as he and the Americans have proclaimed it to be. The offer would have left most of the illegal Jewish settlements in Israel's hands and East Jerusalem would have remained under Israeli sovereignty. The Palestinian state would have looked like a piece of Dutch cheese, and the Palestinians would have been left with a series of Bantustans. Arafat knew that he could never have sold an agreement of this kind to the Palestinians<sup>4</sup>.

The Second Intifada was sparked off two months later in September 2000 by Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount surrounded by 1,000 soldiers and police. The violence since then has claimed over 1,000 Israeli lives, and over 4,000 Palestinian lives, with thousands more on both sides injured. Arafat no doubt hoped that violence against Israeli targets would bring Sharon to the negotiating table. This proved to be a disastrous miscalculation on Arafat's part, since the suicide bombings have actually played into Sharon's hands, giving him the justification for occupying major parts of the West Bank, brutally suppressing terrorists, setting up a net-work of checkpoints right across the West Bank, and more recently building the so-called Security Fence or Barrier. The Palestinians argue that the route of the barrier, which cuts into Palestinian land in many places, demonstrates that Israel is using security as a pretext for grabbing more land and creating facts on the ground. This complaint was upheld by the International Court of Justice at the Hague in March '04.

## **b. What are the options?**

Israel has only four options:

1. *Create a single Jewish state, annexing West Bank and Gaza.* 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, especially since the beginning of the Second Intifada: 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 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.

#### **d. What is the nature of the conflict?**

There is always the danger of reductionism – when we reduce something that is very complex and suggest that it is 'nothing but ...' At the risk of oversimplification, however, 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<sup>5</sup>. 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.

These seem to me to be the three basic ingredients of the conflict. Although they are all inevitably interconnected, I believe it helps to try to separate them in this way, and not to reduce the conflict to only one factor. What we have, therefore, is a conflict of *two nationalisms* claiming *the same land*, with the two main parties strongly motivated by their *religion*, and one of them (the Jews) supported by many Christians. And this conflict has been caught up in *the power game between the nations*. When I used to try to explain the Lebanese civil war to people in this country, I used to use this illustration: imagine that you're playing a game of chess with another person. But then you gradually become aware that the chess board on which you're playing is part of a much bigger chess board on which other people – several other parties in fact – are playing their own game of chess with their opponents. So you don't always have the freedom to move your pieces as you want, and other people can move *your* pieces to further their own game plan. No wonder it's often so hard to understand what's going on!

This, then, is an attempt to understand, on a very human level, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. We now go on to ask what light scripture might be able to shed on the conflict.

## **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 19<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>6</sup>.

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 understand 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'<sup>7</sup>.

## **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. But instead of attempting to refute Restorationism and Dispensationalism point by point, I want to outline what I see as the only convincing alternative.

## **c. 10 themes of Covenant Theology**

These ten themes are summarised briefly, along with some of the main texts related to them.

1. *The covenant promise to Abraham about the land is unconditional. But the promise about the land needs to be seen as one strand of the covenant and interpreted alongside the promises about the nation, the covenant relationship and blessing for all peoples of the world. A Christian interpretation of the land promise must therefore be closely related to the interpretation of the other three promises.*

Genesis 12:1-3; 15:17-21; 17:1-8 'the whole land of Canaan ... as an everlasting possession ...'

What we have here is a kind of 'package deal'; all of the four strands hang together. We shall see shortly how Christians interpret the last three strands in the light of Christ. As Christians we have no reason to put the land promise in a different category, insisting that only the land promise must be interpreted literally

2. *Continued possession of the land is conditional. Disobedience to the law of the covenant means that the people forfeit the right to live in the land and will be expelled from the land.*

Deuteronomy 4:25-27; 29:22-28	'if ... you will quickly perish from the land ... the Lord will scatter...'
Leviticus 18:25	'the land vomited out its inhabitants'
2 Kings 24:20	'in the end he thrust them from his presence ...'

Although the original promise to Abraham was unconditional, the Children of Israel can only continue to enjoy the land and live in it if they are obedient to the covenant. They cannot have the land without the covenant of which it is a part.

3. *The Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem are signs of God living among his people.*

Exodus 25:8; 40:34-35	'a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them ... the glory of the Lord ...'
1 Kings 8:27-30	'this place of which you said, "My name shall be there ..." '
Deuteronomy 12:4-11	'the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name ...'
1 Chronicles 23:25	'the Lord, the God of Israel ... has come to dwell in Jerusalem for ever ...'

If we insist on taking Gen 17 literally, insisting that the descendants of Abraham have a divine right to the land for ever, how do we understand this verse about God coming to dwell in Jerusalem 'for ever'? As Christians we would want to say that the Tabernacle and the Temple are part of God's way of preparing his people for the incarnation. How can we insist on taking the land theme literally, but giving a spiritual interpretation to the Temple promise?

4. *The promise of restoration to the land is conditional on repentance. Because there is some kind of repentance during the Exile, God brings the people back to the land in faithfulness to his promise.*

Deuteronomy 30:1-5	'when you and your children return to the Lord, the Lord will gather you ...'
Nehemiah 1:4-11	'I confess the sins we Israelites ... have committed against you ...'
Daniel 9:1-19	'we have sinned and done wrong ...'

God says through Moses and the prophets: 'If you're disobedient, I will kick you out of the land into exile; but if in your exile you repent, I will bring you back to the land.' We see in Nehemiah and Daniel two examples of people who express genuine repentance on behalf of the people. When God brings them back to the land, therefore, he is doing so in faithfulness to the terms of the covenant,

5. *Prophecies of a return to the land are linked with spiritual renewal of the nation and God's plans for the nations. Since these prophetic dreams were fulfilled in a very limited way after the return from Exile, the people continued to look forward to a future national and spiritual restoration.*

In Ezekiel 36 – 37, for example, there are at least eleven different themes that are repeated over and over again: 'I will cleanse you. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. I will put my spirit in you. You will be my people and I will be your God. I will multiply your grain. Then the nations will know ... I will make them one nation. They will have one king ... my servant David ... for ever ... one shepherd. I will make an everlasting covenant of peace. I will put my sanctuary among them for ever.'

6. *The covenant, the torah, the land and the Temple were fundamental themes in Judaism at the time of Christ. Jews looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who would enable the Jews to drive out the Romans and establish an independent Jewish state in the land, so that the Jews could obey the torah in the land.*

Luke 2:25-26; 2:36-38    'the consolation of Israel ... the redemption of Jerusalem'  
Acts 1:6                    'is this the time when you are to establish once again the sovereignty of Israel?'

This is how the Jewish people felt at the time of Jesus. This was the mind-set of the disciples, and this is the world-view that is reflected in the gospels. These expressions in Luke and Acts all point to the same set of hopes held by the Jewish people at the time.

7. *Jesus had little or nothing to say about the land. The reason for this silence is not that Jesus took traditional Jewish hopes for granted and affirmed them, but that all these hopes are now to be understood in the context of the coming of the kingdom of God in and through Jesus.*

Mark 1:15                    'The time has come ... the kingdom of God is near ...'  
Matthew 5:5                'the meek shall inherit *the land*' (cf Psalm 37:11)  
Luke 4:17-21; 7:21-23    the Exile is over ... (cf Isaiah 35; 61:1-2)  
Luke 21:20-28             'Jerusalem will be trampled on ... you will see the Son of Man ...'

Matthew 5:5 seems to be the only clear reference to the land in the teaching of Jesus. But it is not an accident that Jesus has so little to say about the land, because the land is now being understood in the context of the kingdom of God. Tom Wright has shown that when Jesus quotes verses from Isaiah which were originally about the return from Exile, he is saying in effect, 'A new return from Exile is taking place; and all the blessings associated with return are now being offered in a new way.'

8. *The disciples began with typical Jewish ideas about the land and the kingdom of God, but the teaching of Jesus in the period between the resurrection and the ascension gave them a new understanding of the kingdom. There is nothing in the NT to suggest that they continued to look forward to the establishment of a Jewish state or to the rebuilding of the Temple as part of God plan.*

Luke 24:13-27            'we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel ... "you fools ..." ...' (ie 'the redemption has been completed but not in the way you expected')  
Acts 1:1-8                ' ... it is not for you to know ... But you will receive power ...'

These two crucial passages mark the turning point for the disciples. *Before* this they are thinking like first century Jews; *after* this they are beginning to think as Jewish followers of the Messiah, who have grasped a new understanding of the kingdom of God. In Acts 1:7-8, rather than accepting the idea implied in the question of the disciples (that the Jews will one day regain sovereignty over Jerusalem and the land), Jesus seems to challenge the idea and offers in its place a new understanding of the kingdom of God: it is not material and physical; it is not just for the Jews but for people of all races; and it is not tied to the land, because the message about Jesus will be taken to the ends of the earth.

9. *NT writers continued to use OT terminology about the land and the Temple, but re-interpreted them in different ways in the light of the incarnation. This therefore is not an argument from silence.*

1 Peter 1:3-5	'new birth ... into <i>an inheritance</i> ... kept in heaven ...'
Acts 20:32	'the word of his grace, which can ... give you <i>an inheritance</i> ...'
Romans 4:13	'the promise that he would <i>inherit</i> the world ( <i>kosmos</i> ) ...'
Hebrews 4; 11:9-16; 12:18-24	'we who have believed enter that rest ... a better country - a heavenly one'
John 1:14; 2:19-22; 4:21-24	'the temple of his body'; Jesus has taken the place of the Temple

The temple is a major theme running through John's gospel. For John everything that the Temple stood for has been fulfilled in Christ. John is saying, 'We have seen the glory of God – not in a restored Temple in Jerusalem, but on the face of Jesus.'

10. *The church is not 'the new Israel', but is Israel renewed and restored.*

John 15:1-8	'I am the true vine ... you are the branches ...' (cf Psalm 80:8-18)
Romans 9-11	Gentile believers in Jesus are grafted into the olive tree of Israel
Ephesians 2:15	'his purpose was to create in himself one new man out of two (one new humanity)'
1 Peter 2:9-10	'you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation ...'

Since in the OT Israel is 'the vine', when Jesus says 'I am the true vine' he is saying in effect, 'I *am* Israel; I *represent* Israel.' Paul's argument in Romans is that gentile believers are grafted into Israel. In 1 Peter Jewish and gentile believers are given titles that are reserved in the OT only for the Jews. The church should never be described as 'the new Israel'.

#### **d. Objections to this statement 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'<sup>8</sup>(8). 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 don't 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 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 on? 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<sup>9</sup>. 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)).

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> David Torrance, Review of *Whose Promised Land?* In *Shalom* magazine, November 2002
- <sup>2</sup> Melanie Phillips, on line seminar at the Centre for Jewish and Christians Relations, Cambridge, 14 May, 2002
- <sup>3</sup> See for example, Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881 – 1999*, Murray, 2000; *The Birth of the Palestine Refugee Problem Revisited*, Cambridge University Press, 2004
- <sup>4</sup> See Tanya Reinhard, *Israel/Palestine: How to End the War of 1948*, Seven Stories Press, 2002, pages 30 – 41
- <sup>5</sup> See Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?*, 6.4. Zionism and Islam, pp 289-298
- <sup>6</sup> See Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-Map to Armageddon?*, IVO, 2004
- <sup>7</sup> David Torrance, Review of *Whose Promised Land?*
- <sup>8</sup> David Torrance, Review of *Whose Promised Land?*
- <sup>9</sup> Marc H.Ellis, *O, Jerusalem* See chapter 3: 'Jerusalem and the broken middle'.

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