

THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT: A CHRISTIAN VIEW.

Alex Reichel

“For anyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away”. Jesus of Nazareth.

This famous saying of Jesus was given to his close followers who could hear what he was saying and apply it to themselves. Others who were following him about could not take in what he was saying. Given that his crowds were Jews, the saying is an obvious reference to the Jewish Law with its centrepiece the Ten Words or Decalogue. Those of good will who took their peace and enlightenment from the Law would go on to its fulfilment in Him. Those of ill-will, the ones who would eventually yell for his blood when their hegemony was threatened, would lose the Law entirely and allow it to pass into obsolescence. And not only the Law but its sacred centre, the Temple!

I contend that this can give us a realistic grasp on the Israel-Palestine conflict (and also the conflict in Iraq to which it is clearly linked).

Israel is an overwhelmingly secular state. The majority no longer believe in God. As one cynical Palestinian told me: “They don’t believe in God any more but, my God, they do believe in the Promised Land”. However, all is not lost! There is a very significant minority who are of great goodwill. I believe them to be much in need of our prayer support. They are the true heirs of our overwhelming sympathy for the survivors of that diabolical violence; the Holocaust.

I think first of those academics who maintain their links with Palestinian academics in the freemasonry of scholarship; the philosopher at the Hebrew University who told me of the thousand signatures he had obtained for “Peace Now”. I think of those of the Hasidic branch of Judaism in New York who march at the head of demonstrations for Palestine. They are convinced that no Jew should return to Palestine until the *Messiah* comes to lead them, and then with methods of great peace. I think of the *kibbutz*, “Neue Shalom” composed of Jews and Moslems living together. There are the dozens of small non-government groups which are dedicated to fostering reconciliation. There are the conscientious objectors in the Israeli armed forces who cannot abide the killing of defenceless Arabs by American tanks and Apache helicopters. When the presumed sins of the Palestinians’ fathers are visited upon his sons and daughters they want out. There are the Women in Black and those like them who can see that the Palestinians are suffering for the anti-Semitic sins of Western European countries, France, Germany and England; not forgetting the United States. There are those who foster cultural interchange, like Daniel Barenboim with his remarkable concert in Ramallah. Music speaks all languages and such

cultural expression in the world generally stops us from killing one another. There are the Kabbalists, who meditate daily on *hesed* or loving-kindness. There are the Completed Jews, Jews for Jesus, who know that the *Messiah* has already come but they are not *olim* in the State of Israel. Mordecai Vanunu who spilled the beans on Israeli Weapons of Mass Destruction was one of these. In my book all of these are *tzaddik*, the righteous ones.

This list can never be complete without mentioning Yitshak Rabin who was assassinated after a Peace Rally by a member of the pseudo-religious right wing who use G-d for their own violent land-grabbing ends. Rabin had just finished singing a folk song dedicated to the futility of guns. He said:

“Violence erodes the basis of Israeli democracy; it must be condemned and isolated”.

His mantle seems to have been passed on to Shimon Peres.

On the Palestinian side there are still those who hope for reconciliation between Jew and Arab, following the astounding example of Elias Chacour, a Melkite priest whose book “Blood Brothers” is inspirational. Chacour had monitored the arrival of the Zionists from the beginning and his family suffered miserably at their hands. He has never lost hope of a return to the pre-Zionist days when Jew and Arab lived harmoniously, even though in adjoining villages. The whole issue of separation has to go. If Christians can live quite happily in a multicultural society, why can't the Jews? What are they frightened of? Surely not of losing faith! The myths sustaining this stance have long gone into obsolescence as many modern Jewish writers have shown, eg. Chaim Potok, Saul Bellow, Thomas Kolsky etc.

All of which brings me to the Zionists. They came to Palestine carrying guns! They came to push out the rightful owners by force, supported by American money, because the Americans did not want them in America. Many of the Jewish refugees wanted to go to America but were sidelined into Zionism.

The Zionist movement had begun much earlier in 1896 with the publication of “Der Jurgensstaat” by Theodore Herzl. This was inspired by the shameful “Affaire Dreyfus” in France. With the slogan: “A land without people for a people without land”, Herzl's followers cast hopeful eyes on Palestine. They seemed unaware of its million Arabs who saw it as their homeland. I am reminded of Golda Meir's contemptuous remark somewhat later: “Palestinians, who are they?”

Up till 1917 Palestine had been occupied for 200 years by the Ottoman Turks. It was reclaimed for the Palestinians by the Australian Light Horse under General Allenby together with an Arab force under the command of Laurence of Arabia. British authorities had promised the Palestinians independence under King Feisal. Subsequent behaviour by Britain disgusted Laurence who had an intimate knowledge of Arab culture. He understood their propensity for guerrilla warfare which he fostered. If George Bush had any knowledge of this he would not have crowed with delight as his army reached Baghdad. Come in sucker! What Laurence taught is now being lived out before our eyes:

“But suppose we were an influence, an idea, a thing invulnerable, intangible, without front or back, drifting like a gas.....we might be like a vapour, blowing

where it listed. Our kingdom lay in each man's mind, and as we wanted nothing material to live on, so perhaps we offered nothing material to the killing".

Nothing material, except one's own body, is the obvious response to screaming injustice and humiliation. There is also nothing to lose. One does not need organisations with demonised names. It is in every man's mind, even those who can see some benefit in the Peace process. Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, the architect of "Hamas", recently murdered by Israel, has said:

"Palestine was occupied before for two hundred years. We can wait again at least that long".

(Interview with Mark Juergensmeyer, 1998)

In October, 1917, the British Cabinet, ignoring completely the Australian and Arab victory, got the British Foreign Secretary A. J. Balfour to write to Lord Rothschild, a leader of British Jewry. It told him that Cabinet had agreed that U.K. supported Zionist plans for a Jewish national home in Palestine, though nothing should be done which might prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing communities there. It was a declaration of sympathy and clearly did not speak of a projected state. Significantly, the move was opposed by the one Jewish member of Cabinet who could see that anti-Semitism was at work and the move would foster further outbreaks of anti-Semitism.

In 1922, The League of Nations recognised the Arab and Australian victory over the Turks but, inconsistently, placed the area under a British Mandate which remained until the Second World War was over. In the meantime Zionist migration to Palestine continued, although restricted by British policy. There were minor skirmishes and resentments mainly due to the acquisition of land and the Zionists eventually found British rule intolerable. There is evidence that the British military treated the migrants with disdain. The ire of the "young turks" of the *kibbutzim* was aroused and various Zionist terror groups sprang up. After their attacks on the Allenby Bridge and other buildings the British rounded up and arrested 2,500 Jews on the so-called Black Sabbath. Further reprisals were set in motion, culminating in the infamous bombing of the King David Hotel on 22nd July, 1946. The King David Hotel was the headquarters of the British Military Command and the Secretariat of the Government of Palestine. About 20 members of Menahem Begin's Irgun, dressed as Arabs, entered the Hotel and placed within it milk churns full of explosives. Ninety one people were killed. British resolve was considerably weakened by this, and also by the cost of World War II. The Zionists had proved that terrorism works!

In 1947 a resolution of the United Nations foreshadowed the formation of a Zionist State. On the very day on which the British Mandate over Palestine expired, May 14, 1948, The Jewish Peoples Council declared the establishment of the State of Israel. There was not an Arab in sight.

The new state was recognised by the United States of America one hour later. Thus humiliated by The Great Satan and abandoned by the whole world, the Palestinians nurse a deep heart pain. A massive 54% of Palestinian land was given to the Zionists even though they owned only 7% of it.

Ironically, the charter of the new state claimed that..."it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions. It will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations". In the same document we read: "We appeal--in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months---to the Arab inhabitants...".

The reasons for this onslaught, if one could call it that, are not hard to find. The experience of Elias Chacour's family in the village of Biram in Galilee is typical of what happened to fertile Palestinian land even before the establishment of the State of Israel.

In 1947 Zionist soldiers came to Biram bearing guns. By trickery they got the trusting inhabitants to move out of the village for several days since an evil band was about to attack them. While they were living in the woods, the soldiers trashed their houses and rendered them uninhabitable. They found shelter in the adjoining village of Gish which was very cramped but some space was found. Young Elias, while playing ball behind the village noticed a strange smell and what looked like a hand emerging from the ground. The men of the village came and two dozen bodies were discovered in shallow graves. It seems the men had resisted their invaders. Later, trucks were brought in and all the men were loaded onto the trucks and shipped south, where they were dumped across the border. The father Chacour and his eldest sons decided to walk home which they achieved after several weeks, mostly walking at night. They were so emaciated that their family could hardly recognise them. By this time the Chacour orchard had been taken over and a new owner installed. Since the new owner knew nothing of farming, the elder Chacour was offered a job in the orchard which he himself had planted and whose trees he lovingly attended. Humiliation!

This pattern was repeated village after village. Thousands were uprooted, living in the hills and wastelands. Through May, June and July, 1948, about a million Palestinians were driven out of this so-called democracy. There are other eye-witness accounts by independent observers of similar massacres., eg. Deir Yassin village near Jerusalem.

A huge number of Palestinians live in refugee camps as a result of dispossession. These even extend into Lebanon. The Israeli Army Minister at the time of Israel's invasion of Lebanon is not free of responsibility for the massacres at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps. Massive quantities of ordnance are still being blasted into refugee camps regarded by the present regime as hotbeds of terrorism. As always, one person's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Israeli soldiers now treat the Palestinians with utter contempt for their persons and domestic privacy. Humiliation!

One wonders what happened to Zechariah 4:6:

"This is the word of YHWH with regard to Zerubbabel, "Not by might and not by power, but by my spirit ,says YHWH Sabaoth. This mountain shall be removed.....".

What indeed happened to Micah 6:8:

“What is good He has explained to you ,man; this is what YHWH asks of you: only this, to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your G-d”.

In fact one is compelled to ask, “What happened to the entire prophetic tradition?”. It was this tradition which began the revelation of G-d’s preference for the victims of violence and blood sacrifice; an unveiling completely revealed, made explicit, by the aftermath of Christ’s Crucifixion.

Perhaps we should look to another part of the Jewish brotherhood for present day prophecy, a significant part which sees Zionism as the enemy of the Judaic spirit. These orthodox Jews demonstrate outside the United Nations building in New York calling for a peaceful dismantling of the Zionist State of Israel. The “Neturei Karta” carry placards saying: “Israel is a cancer for Jews”, “Palestine belongs to the Palestinians”, “Zionism is the main cause of anti-Semitism throughout the World”.

It is this last claim which is most instructive; the claim that the State of Israel feeds on anti-Semitism even to the extent of

fostering anti-Semitism outside Israel in an attempt to attract more citizens to come to Israel. I have found two sources for the following account:

When the Palestinians were pushed out of their properties in 1948, the then Israeli leader, Ben Gurion, was faced with the problem of finding Jews to farm the thousands of acres of land taken over by migrants who knew nothing of farming. He looked to “oriental “ Jews living in nearby Iraq. In 1949-1950 fear was stirred up in this population of Jews, including bombs being planted in Baghdad synagogues. Many “oriental” Jews were convinced to migrate.

Even today, when synagogues are bombed in London, or elsewhere, the invitation to come to Israel is heard from Ariel Sharon’s successors.

In this world of double standards, hidden agendas and wheels within wheels, the elaboration of truth is clearly hazardous. In these circumstances one can only rely on personal experience.

I lived for a time in the “occupied territories” during the previous *intifada* . This was a harrowing time for Arab residents in the Old City and East Jerusalem generally, with Israeli jets and helicopters making almost continuous noise; Israeli soldiers with menacing arms, patrolling, it seemed, everywhere. In moving around the Old City one often copped a dose of tear gas used to break up even small gatherings of Palestinians. There were nightly arrests of young men followed by the wailing of Palestinian women ‘weeping for their children’. On one Saturday afternoon I was walking with my wife on one of the narrow back streets in the Arab quarter when suddenly a patrol of about a dozen Israeli soldiers burst around a corner, gas masks on and guns at the ready. We yelled and cowered against the wall. They ran past us for about 100 yards where they stopped in front of an Arab dwelling which contained 14 refugees and two babies. They kicked the door down and threw in tear gas bombs. On the streets later we learned that the two babies had been sent to the gas chamber! It is strange that recently an Israeli cabinet minister, criticising destruction of homes in Gaza , said that it reminded him of the sufferings of his mother in the Holocaust. He was blackballed for having the temerity to suggest this parallel. But is a slow holocaust somehow different in principle from the mass Holocaust.

During my stay Israeli soldiers with a bulldozer rolled four Arab youths into a ditch and buried them alive. For this minor sin they were given just seven weeks in jail, a fact which the "Jerusalem Post" reported in the small print.

Imagine that you are a schoolchild and you left happily from mum and dad in the morning to go to school. On coming home you find that your house has been bulldozed by the occupation forces and your parents have been taken away to refugee camp. I spoke to some Palestinians, now adult, who had this experience. This was also the trauma of Dr. Rantisi's childhood. Children have long memories.

When Ariel Sharon was Army Minister, he purchased a house in the Arab quarter of Old Jerusalem. The house extended like a bridge over a street which led to the Arab markets near the Damascus Gate. Sharon placed a seven branched candleabra on this bridge, a symbol which has been emblematic of Judaism since Titus carried one to Rome from the Temple he destroyed in AD70. Sharon placed six armed soldiers to guard this symbol day and night. Little Arab boys throw stones at the soldiers. After Friday prayers in Al Asqa Mosque the Moslems in their thousands have to pass under this symbol on their way to the markets and the Damascus Gate exit. Humiliation!

It was Ariel Sharon, of course, the most hated man in Palestine, who ignited the present prolonged *intifada* by going with his bodyguard onto the third most holy site in Islam; the Golden Mosque on Mt. Moriah, the ancient Temple site. It is quite obvious that he shares the hopes of the most fundamentalist Zionists for complete control of the territory mapped out in the Book of Joshua. I went in search of one of the Eastern markers of this territory, Beth Hogla or Ein Hogla. I found there an Israeli Army camp. Sharon again! There are some Zionists (even in Sydney) who envisage the elimination of all Palestinians by pushing them over the border into Jordan or Lebanon. After all they are only Arabs!

The realities are that a programme like this would have to involve total genocide or imprisonment behind a wall and starving them to death. This would also be the total end of Zionist sympathy. Palestinians really are Palestinians and peace is not possible without the free return of refugees to their lands.

It seems patently obvious that the State of Israel has not been faithful to its founding document; it has not honoured the United Nations Charter, and has been contemptuous of the Mosaic Law which has always been the definitive of the sons of Abraham.

Surely the long term solution is for the UN to dismantle the State it allowed for; for America to butt out, and for fundamentalist Zionists (and fundamentalist Southern Baptists in George Bush territory) to study their scriptures a little more carefully.

30/6/2004.

Postscript:

Since this paper was written some time ago I am aware that there may be a few remarks out of date. I follow the events in Palestine and

Israel closely since it is quite obvious that this issue is the lynch pin in world peace.

The conflict between Fateh and Hamas is a conflict over the methods for achieving victory, not over the ultimate aim for justice. Being a Christian I am on the side of non-violence. This apocalyptic vision is a concomitant of the Cross of Jesus as the revelation of the hidden structures of violence and of their ultimate demise