

A PASTORAL EXPLANATION OF THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE SITUATION

Rev. Nathan Leslie

Fifteen years ago, while I was a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, a group of us took a trip with the World Mission Initiative to Israel/Palestine with our then-professor, Rev. Dr. Craig Barnes. While there was a lot of sightseeing among the holy land sites, offering fantastic insight into the world of the Bible, I gained insight into another situation I never realized I would be getting: into the longstanding violence turned modern crisis between Israel and Palestine. I learned a great deal about the nuances of the whole dilemma. Because of the current situation, our recent sermon series, and the numerous questions I've been asked about it, I wanted to offer some insight. However, I found myself having to do some research because it had been awhile and found myself missing some gaps in knowledge. So let me attempt to explain this as best, and as balanced, as I can.

JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY: *How do we relate to the Jewish faith and people?*

As we know, the Jewish people trace their lineage (geologically and spiritually) back to Abraham the patriarch, to whom God promised numerous descendants and the ownership of the "Holy Land" for all time. God chose Abraham and his descendants as bearers of God's promise to redeem the whole world, and though they were not inherently special nor had they done nothing to deserve God's favor, we affirm that God loved them and made them God's own people. God cared for and sustained this people, promising them a land to celebrate God's goodness, and promised them an unending kingdom under a ruler who would come from the line of David.

For Christians, this promise is considered fully realized in Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian Jew whom we Christians declare to be both Messiah and Lord, as well as fully God and fully human. Still, though we disagree with Rabbinic Judaism on this important fact, we nevertheless worship the God of our Lord Jesus, who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: the God of Israel. This is evidenced by the fact that the first followers of Jesus continued to worship God among their Jewish brothers and sisters in the synagogue. Only after internal disputes about the inclusion of Gentiles and external persecution of both Jews and Christians were Christians forced to fully separate out on their own.

However, while the story of Israel continues to be accepted as our own, "...we can never lay exclusive claim to being God's people, as though we had replaced those to whom the covenant, the law, and the promises belong. We affirm that God has not rejected his people the Jews. The Lord does not take back his promises" (1977 Declaration of Faith of the PCUS). Thus, as Paul argues, the covenant relationship between God and the people Israel remains, stating that "God has not rejected Israel, that God still loves Israel, and that God is their hope, "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). There remains, therefore, a continuity between the descendants of Abraham, the Jewish people of Jesus' day, and the Jewish community of our own day. "We Christians have often rejected Jews throughout our history with shameful prejudice and cruelty. God calls us to dialogue and cooperation that do not ignore our real disagreements, yet proceed in mutual respect and love. We are bound together with them in the single story of those chosen to serve and proclaim the living God." (1977 Declaration of Faith)

HOW WE GET FROM THE ISRAEL OF THE BIBLE TO MODERN ISRAEL?

Though Israel as a modern nation-state is really only 75 years old, its existence is thousands of years in the making. In the time of the King Saul (c. 1000 BCE), the area of modern Israel-Palestine was first united under a non-theocratic government, which then divided into two Kingdoms after the reign of Solomon. The Assyrians conquered the northern Kingdom in 722 BCE and the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 BCE. On both occasions, many Jewish people fled to other parts of the known world, a scattering known in Hebrew as the *Diaspora*.

Though Jerusalem and the temple were reestablished after the exile (c. 500 BCE), it remained under Persian rule. It was then conquered by Alexander the Great, and was under Greek rule for several centuries. The

Greeks called this region "Palestine" as a Greek translation of the word "Philistine," a people who lived historically and specifically in the region known as Gaza.

The Greeks were notoriously oppressive to their Jewish clients. This led to a revolution under the Hasmonean dynasty beginning with Judas Maccabaeus. From this, they maintained some sense of independence around the year 140 BCE. The Romans took over ruling what was then known as "Judea" as a client state in the year 63 BCE, where they still had client kings but under the ultimate authority of the appointed Roman governor. From the beginning, the Judean people lived with animosity toward the Romans because of their oppression through taxation and military oversight; this was the context in which Jesus lived among us, and the church was born. Finally, when the Jewish rulers tried to throw off Roman rule in 66 CE, there was a siege of Jerusalem, leading to its destruction in 70 CE.

After this, many of the Jewish people of the region were again scattered around the known world, and many joined with established *Diaspora* communities. Still, there were some Jewish communities which remained afterward in Judea under Roman occupation. As Christianity grew and dominated the Roman empire, these same communities faced persecution from the church and Christians as a whole. Many more fled to diaspora communities outside of Israel-Palestine, although a small minority remained. The land was off and on occupied by Christian and Islamic kingdoms and nations, but the inhabitants were always a mix of Jewish, Muslim (Arab), and Christian (Jewish or Arab by background) people.

Jewish communities in Europe were also often persecuted by Christian empires, kingdoms and peoples throughout the centuries. It is unfortunate that for much of our history, Christianity has taught that the church "supersedes" of Israel as the inheritors of a new covenant in Jesus. Further, it has been taught that since Jewish people did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, they have abandoned the covenant, and great animosity toward them ensued. Because European Jews often lived in isolated communities ("Ghettos") as a result, and did not assimilate to the surrounding culture, Jewish people were considered a "problem" in Europe. There are no shortage of great Christian teachers, such as the beloved Martin Luther, who though pious in many ways was wrongly antagonistic and condemning toward Jewish people and Judaism as a whole. This is no doubt connected to the German nationalism which culminated in the Nazi regime of the 1930's and 40's, and led to the mass genocide of Jewish people during the Holocaust.

Yet even before that, in the late 1800's, there were new waves of antisemitism, alongside a period of transformation in the Jewish communities called Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment. As a result, several movements collectively called Zionism initially emerged in Central and Eastern Europe. The goal of these Zionist movements was to "ingather" the scattered Jewish community throughout the world and settle them in their historic homeland with a new sense of sovereignty and freedom from persecution. Jewish people began realizing this hope, and started returning to the Holy Land in the late 1800's. As a result, Jewish settlements swelled.

As with anything, European support of this came from mixed motives. While there were those who recognized the value and need for this sovereignty and sought to help, others saw this as an (ultimately anti-semitic) answer to what had been unfortunately labeled as the "Jewish Problem." British military power and influence on a global scale became a major catalyst for this movement, which from a political perspective, served their goals of levying political power in the wider "Middle Eastern" region.

When major world powers were drawn into World War I, the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire eventually fell to Great Britain, who then gained control over this area. Given its interests in this area, in 1917, Great Britain passed the Balfour Act which officially created the idea of a new Jewish homeland, with the goal being the eventual creation of a sovereign nation-state in the region. In 1922 the League of Nations (precursor to the United Nations) awarded Britain an international mandate to administer the region known as Palestine during the post-war deal-making, which led to a re-drawing the map of the Middle East into what was called "Mandatory Palestine." The Balfour Act also served a political goal, gaining Jewish political support for the military efforts in World War I.

But these moves, and the eventual establishment of a sovereign nation-state called Israel in May 1948 meant forcing the people who still lived there to be subject to a Jewish majority government. War immediately broke out when five Arab nations invaded territory in the former Palestinian mandate. According to the US Department of State, though the United Nations brokered two cease-fires during the conflict, fighting continued into 1949. Israel and the Arab states did not reach any formal armistice agreements until February. Under separate agreements between Israel and the neighboring states of Egypt, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Syria, these bordering nations agreed to formal armistice lines. Israel gained some territory formerly granted to Palestinian Arabs under the United Nations resolution in 1947. Egypt and Jordan retained control over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank respectively.

But what resulted was similar political situation for the Palestinians that Jewish settlers came to Israel to escape: it forced those Palestinians who have had rights to Israeli land for centuries to surrender their homes, lands and livelihoods to make room for Jewish settlements and Jewish government. As a result, many were forced into the areas of the West Bank and Gaza. Refugee camps emerged to handle the influx of displaced Palestinians. As a result, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (formerly headed by Yassir Arafat) was created in 1964, along with its dominating Fatah party, seeking to re-establish a sovereign Arab state over the entire territory, which meant advocating for the elimination of the State of Israel. I'm oversimplifying for space, but hostilities continued to intensify up to and following the Six Day War in June of 1967, where Israel began its military occupation of Palestinian territories: the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, the Siani Peninsula, and the West Bank (including Jerusalem, which was originally left as international territory). Although these areas are internationally recognized as separate from Israel, they are occupied by the Israeli government, and perhaps this act, more than any other, skyrocketed Palestinian retribution towards Israel.

Beginning with the First Intifada uprising in 1987, another resistance organization among Palestinians arose called Hamas, governing the Gaza Strip and eventually gaining power in other parts of the area occupied by Israel in 1967. While there have been many attempts at peace, including the Oslo accords of 1993 to rectify this situation, a Second Intifada emerged from 2000-2005. In response, Israel built a wall on the pre-1967 boundaries, claiming it to be a necessary security barrier against ongoing Palestinian political uprisings and violence. But Palestinians describe it as an element of racial segregation and a representation of Israeli apartheid. Passing through this wall requires passing through checkpoints where armed guards interrogate your coming and going. I could tell you lots of first-hand stories of how this has harmed the innocent people of Palestine, including Christians.

Speaking of which, oppressive practices and its consequences of crushing hardships from the Israeli occupation has, according to the PC(USA)'s website, contributed to a large exodus of Christians from Palestine. In 1920, about a tenth of the Palestinian population was Christian, but now estimates place the Christian population at around 1 percent. Despite declining numbers, the Christians of Palestine contribute a significant voice to the cause of reconciliation and peace in the Middle East.

HOW DO THESE THINGS ALL CONNECT?

The national and political realization of a modern Israel was grounded in the sacred tradition, but were deepened by their exile and suffering in places where the Jewish people had no real representation or sovereignty. It was also deepened by their persecution, culminating in the ethnic genocide known as the Holocaust; and, ultimately in the modern struggle for sovereignty in relationship to the Palestinian peoples who also hold this space as their homeland.

Yet, in so doing, a whole set of human rights issues were created for another set of people; and by international justification for this, it allows those formerly persecuted to become a persecutor. On the flip side, there is equally no justification for those oppressed to retaliate with violence against anyone, especially innocent people.

HOW MIGHT WE RESPOND?

It helps first and foremost to keep in mind that we can support both Israelis and Palestinians while being critical of acts of violence and discrimination toward one another. We can also do this without resorting to the antisemitism so embedded in our history. We can also support the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign state within secure, internationally recognized borders and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, including the right to the establishment of a neighboring independent, sovereign state toward the end of establishing a just and durable peace. However, given the complex circumstances and history that led to this moment, and the blood that has been spilled for centuries, nothing will be solved with a simple solution. It also will not be solved by taking a particular side without fully recognizing the other, for the end result is the dehumanization and delegitimization of some group of people who have a right to both.

It also helps to have a correct theological perspective on our relationship to Israel (as a people and as a nation), and to Palestine (as a nation and a people, which includes both Christians and Muslims). It also helps us to have a healthy (and humble) understanding of our own national involvement in this situation, as well as a recognition that often U.S. foreign policy has taken a politically beneficial decision, defending one side over the other for political gain, rather than the one which is truly just and right. We are not alone in this historically; but we also must be humble enough to recognize we will never force a solution, but rather we are to support the parties involved to work for reconciliation and peace. We are to support those who suffer on all sides, and work for justice, peace and reconciliation. In fact, this is something to which God has constantly called Jews and Christians alike, not only in our shared Scriptures, but the New Testament as well.

Given this overall framework, there is a statement called "In Our Time" written by the Presbytery of Chicago and the Jewish community in metropolitan Chicago, which offers some very helpful conclusions for us Presbyterian Christians, stating we can:

- Fully engage in public witness, discourse and action with regards to matters such as self-determination, human rights, reconciliation, justice and peace, related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict;
- Affirm the aspirations for, and the right to, self-determination by both Israelis and Palestinians;
- Affirm the necessity of human and civil rights afforded to all Arab and other minorities in the state of Israel, and to Jewish and other minorities in a future state of Palestine and other Arab countries;
- Actively work on behalf of Israelis and Palestinians, and a just and peaceful future for both, without compromising our relationship to each people.

I encourage you to explore the work our Christian brothers and sisters are doing in this region. These would include PC(USA) co-worker Doug Dicks (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/missionconnections/doug-dicks/>), Bright Stars of Bethlehem (<https://www.brightstarsbethlehem.com/>), and the Israel Palestine Mission Network (PCUSA) <https://www.theipmn.org/>.

But most of all, I encourage us to pray a phrase that has been on my mind since this recent escalation of violence began: "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:6). Let us pray for a cease-fire, for recognition of all underlying causes and issues, for a mutual recognition of both sides right to exist and govern,

And so I close with a prayer from Teri McDowell Ott, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*: *Eternal God, You know our history of complicated conflicts, tense polarization, and situations so politicized that we are afraid to say or pray anything. Yet we know you grieve the violence of war and condemn acts of terrorism. We know you grieve the historical suffering of Jews and Palestinians. May our prayers for peace be uttered out loud for all to hear; our prayers for diplomacy, and for difficult, yet faithful conversation to resume. God, we groan in grief over the news of this war in Israel and Gaza. Pave a path toward peace in this age-old, tragic conflict. Protect the innocent wherever bombs of destruction fall. Be with those who are captured and the families of those who are captured. Offer a way out for those who are trapped. Awaken us to our common humanity, our common human needs no matter the walls we build. Amen.*