

## Middle East Politics

By Colin Chapman

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There can't be many issues in the world today where the way we interpret *the Bible* has such a direct bearing on the way we understand *international politics*! Israel / Palestine is not just the land of the Bible, but has become the context of a very bitter and violent conflict. The way we interpret the Bible's teaching about the future is likely to affect the way we think about the politics of the Middle East. This article is intended to summarise some of the issues of interpretation and theology that Christians have seen in this conflict, and present them for those who may have encountered some of the positions described, but be unaware of the range of thought and belief here.

### **Bible and Theology**

These are some of the key texts that we have to deal with:

- *Genesis 12:1-3 and 17:1-8* contain the promise about the gift of the land to Abraham and his descendants. It comes in the context of the covenant made with Abraham and includes also promises about the nation, the covenant relationship and blessing for all peoples of the world. The crucial question is whether the promise about the land is still valid today or whether it has been fulfilled in the coming of the kingdom of God through Jesus.
- *The books of the prophets* are full of prophecies about a return of Jewish exiles to the land after the Babylonian Exile, which began to take place from 536BC. Some Christians believe that these same promises about a return to the land have been fulfilled *again* in the recent return of Jews. Others believe that Jesus spoke about his work as bringing about not only a new Exodus but also a new return from spiritual exile, and that these prophecies do not therefore apply today.

- *Luke 21:24* is important for some who say it predicts that Jerusalem will one day come back again under Jewish sovereignty. Others would say that, like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus speaks of judgement on Jerusalem; but unlike them he does *not* predict a return to the land. The main emphasis in Jesus' words is on the coming of the kingdom through the Son of Man – something present as well as future.

- In *Acts 1:1-8* the disciples ask about the return of Jewish sovereignty in the land: 'is this the time at which you are to restore the sovereignty to Israel?' (1:8). Some believe that Jesus doesn't rule this out, and that this is what happened when the state of Israel was established in 1948. Others would say that Jesus is trying to correct the very nationalistic thinking of the disciples and give them a view of the kingdom of God which is not tied to the land or the Jewish people but includes people of all races.

- In *Romans 9 – 11* Paul speaks about the place of the Jewish people in God's plan. Some lay much emphasis on the sentence 'and so all Israel shall be saved' (11:26). While Paul says that the Jews are 'loved on account of the patriarchs' (11:28), he also says that when they do not believe in Jesus as Messiah they are 'broken off because of unbelief' (11:20). While looking forward to a better future for the Jews, their salvation must be tied up with Christ, and there is no suggestion that a return to the land or the establishment of a state would have any significance for the salvation of the Jews.

- In *Revelation 20:1-10* John describes his vision of the 'millennium', that is, a period of 1,000 years, in which Christ reigns. There are basically three main approaches to understanding this difficult idea. The *post-millennial* position is that the millennium is a time during which the gospel spreads all over the world. The Second Coming of Christ will come *after* this period of increasing progress. The *pre-millennial* position is that the Second Coming will be *before* the millennium. The Coming of Christ ushers in a literal period of 1,000 years during which Christ will rule the world from Jerusalem. The *amillennial* position is that the millennium is not to be understood as a literal period of 1,000 years but as a symbol for the reign of Christ that has already begun through his death and resurrection.

### **Responses to biblical texts**

If we try to bring together the different approaches to these issues of biblical interpretation and eschatology, there are two main starting points which influence Christians in the way they think about the question of Israel and Palestine, which is at the heart of the politics of the Middle East today, and there is a fundamental division between the two approaches.

(a) The *Restorationist* approach says that, because of God's promise to Abraham, the Jews have a divine right to the land for all time. The prophecies about the return to the land have been fulfilled *a second time* in the recent return of Jews to Palestine. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 therefore is an important sign, pointing to the imminence of the Second Coming of Christ. Related to this is the *Dispensational* approach, following the teaching of John Nelson Darby, the Scofield Reference Bible and many others, which adopts the same Restorationist starting point, but teaches in addition that the Bible gives clear predictions about the events that are to unfold in the near future. These include the Rapture (when believers are suddenly taken up to heaven), the Tribulation, and then a literal battle of Armageddon, which will be fought in Israel/Palestine and will usher in the Second Coming. This viewpoint is reflected in the popular 'Left Behind' series of novels. Christians following the Restorationist or Dispensational approach tend to sympathise more with Israel than the Palestinians.

(b) According to *Covenant Theology*, the Old Testament promises about the land and the prophecies about a return to the land have found their deepest and final fulfilment in the coming of the kingdom of God through Jesus. The question of who has a right to the land of Palestine is therefore more about human rights than theology or biblical interpretation.

### **History and politics**

How then do we relate our understanding of the Bible's teaching about the future to what is happening in the Middle East today? Christians need to make sure that their interpretation of the Bible really does help them to understand the history and politics of the region, and to develop attitudes that express real compassion

and a concern for justice. These, therefore, are some of the most important questions we need to ask:

*- How should we understand the creation of the modern Middle East?*

The Middle East as we know it today was created by the Western powers over the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Western powers carved up the whole region, creating new states, and in the process sowed many of the seeds of the various conflicts that we have seen in Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and Iraq. The legacy left behind by the Western powers hasn't always been good, and for many reasons they have continued to interfere in the region ever since.

*- How did the state of Israel come into existence?*

The Jews in Palestine were only 5% of the total population when anti-semitism in Europe led to Jewish immigration and the Zionist vision of a Jewish homeland or state. Britain, through the Balfour Declaration and its Mandate over Palestine, created the context in which a Jewish state could develop. The Palestinians resisted what was happening because they didn't want to lose all their land to the Jews or to be outnumbered and overpowered by them. 700,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes in 1948 – 1949 in a process that we today would call 'ethnic cleansing' and has created the problem of the Palestinian refugees. The Palestinians and the Arab states tried but failed to destroy the Jewish state.

*- What's the root of the problem between Israel and the Palestinians?*

The Palestinians have been protesting about Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza since 1967, which they (and most nations of the world) still regard as illegal. Israel was required by the UN to withdraw from occupied territories in 1967, but has not only refused to do so, but also built (illegal) settlements on these territories. Most Palestinian simply want to have a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza, but feel that Israel wants to prevent this or to make any Palestinian state as small, divided and powerless as possible.

*- How important is Islam and the Islamic dimension of the conflict?*

Some would say that Islam is the root of the problem since Muslims simply won't accept the existence of Israel. Others would say that Palestinians have turned to radical Islam largely out of despair, having been let down so badly by others.

Islam provides them with religious reasons for fighting, but the basic problem is political rather than religious.

- *Why is it so difficult to make peace?*

Israel has won every war since 1948 and therefore has the upper hand, supported by the US, the only super-power in the world today. The Palestinians are weaker in every sense, and have resorted to violence and made many mistakes which have not helped their cause. The fundamentalism of Jewish settlers on the West Bank and Israel's tough approach have encouraged Islamic fundamentalism. The various peace processes haven't succeeded, partly because both sides have gone back on their promises, and partly because there hasn't been enough help from outside to monitor the process. It seems that humanly speaking the only hope for resolution of the conflict would be through strong, even-handed pressure from outside on both sides that is based on international law.

While some Christians believe that the Bible gives us a kind of 'history in advance', others say that the Bible doesn't provide a detailed scenario of how events will unfold in the Middle East. If we take seriously the words of Jesus that 'no one knows about that day or hour' (Mark 13:32), we must be ready for the Second Coming whenever it may take place. But at the present time, as we watch events unfolding in the Middle East, disciples of Jesus ought to be hungering and thirsting after justice/righteousness and striving to be peacemakers (Matt 5:6,9).

#### **Further reading**

Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians are not being told about Israel and the Palestinians*, Paternoster, 2003

Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?*, Lion, 2002; *Whose Holy City?*

*Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Lion, 2004

Avi Shlaim, *War and Peace in the Middle East: A Concise History*, Penguin, 1995