

## THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE BIBLE

Reflections on the Crises in the Middle East and the Plan of God Revealed in the Scriptures  
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The complicated troubles in the Middle East raise all kinds of questions for Christians, especially those living in the West. While it would take a good deal of time to address each and every one of them in detail, it is important to keep some very basic things in mind. This paper<sup>1</sup> will focus primarily on the subjects of the Jews and the Arabs, and the Land, especially in connection with the Palestinian cause, not only because Islamic people constantly list this as one of their main causes, but also because it has been an ongoing problem for some time, much longer than the last fifty years.

People in Christianity have a number of differing views on these issues. The evangelical Christians for the most part take a more pro-Israeli stance in the conflict for any of a number of reasons: biblically because of the relation of Israel to the biblical line to Jesus and prophecy, emotionally because of the holocaust and the constant effort by other nations to deny Israel's right to exist, and practically because the Arab world is so foreign and troubling to them, and terrorism seems to them to be connected to the troubling Arab world. Mainstream denominational Christianity is likely to be ambivalent towards Israel and may even be pro-Arab for a number reasons: theologically because they like to focus their attention on needy people, especially in the third world, biblically because they have replaced Israel with the Church in their thinking about the text, and emotionally because there is a carry-over of anti-Semitism that has plagued the history of the Church from the Fathers to today. (I am speaking in very general descriptions here, I need to say; the issues are complex and open to many views).

In the land itself there are major disagreements. There are Jewish people who are atheists and really do not care about Jerusalem or biblical promises; there are the very religious ultra-orthodox people who do not believe that the modern state of Israel is legitimate because Messiah has not yet come; and there are militant Jewish settlers who believe the land is their land and they should not wait for God to give it to them. To them their settlements are permanent and there will be no Palestinian takeover. A large number of secular and religious Jews just want to live in peace. And there are a growing number of Messianic Jews (they do not like to use the word "Christian" for obvious reasons), although the exact numbers are not certain.

On the Arab side there are militant groups who do not want Israel to exist, leaders and educators who do not even refer to Israel, teach their children to despise Israelis and the west that supports Israel, and often support acts of violence. The official Palestinian position has not changed: there is no place for Israel on their future map. But there are many ordinary Arabs who simply want recognition and freedom to be out from under Israel's control. And then there are Arabs who are Israeli citizens, and in the past have even served in the Israeli army (but they are turning more and more against Israel). And we must not forget the large number of Arabs who are Christian, usually Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Anglican (although their numbers are dwindling as they move to the United States). The situation in the land is not at all as simple as the news media would imply.

In spite of the cycle of violence and the rhetoric, the Jews and the Palestinians are going to have to find a way to live together in that land because they simply have no place else to go—no one wants them, and they do not want to be anywhere else. And they both have claims to the land. The first step to any solution will have to guarantee security and recognition to Israelis and respect and recognition to the Palestinians. Then they will be ready to consider other things. But they have not been able to get to the first step yet. Many strategists have concluded that nothing will be achieved without strong pressure on both sides by



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<sup>1</sup> This is essentially the introduction and conclusion to a 59 page paper which is more comprehensive.

other countries (which has not happened yet) and some kind of international security force to maintain the integrity of agreements (which is not acceptable to either side). The problem, of course, runs to different ideologies and traditions that have centuries of animosity behind them.

So in these reflections I will consider some very basic things about the land, the people, and the situation in general, and try to clarify something of the biblical teaching on the matter. It is an area in which almost everything that is said will be controversial. And so I would hope that these comments will be useful as people study and come to their own conclusions. People may certainly have their own ideas about many of these matters, but they must be sure that they have a clear understanding of what the issues are, biblical and otherwise. I do not have the answer for the Middle East—there may not be an answer, other than cultivating an uneasy co-habitation in a troubled land. I am only interested in laying out some of the facts and figures that will help people understand more the reasons behind the turmoil and the difficulties to be overcome. Politicians and preachers make it sound so easy—“Why don’t the Arabs do this?” or “Why doesn’t Israel just do that?” Perhaps if they lived in the Arab world, or the Israeli world, for a while, they might understand more.

The Christians, especially Bible-believing Christians, need to have a better understanding of the history of the tensions in the region, and must take a realistic and just position. The Christian worldview must be focused on the kingdom of our Lord, and not only on political earthly strategies. Christians must champion justice and righteousness for all people, as they make it their goal to bring all of them, Jews and Arabs alike, into the kingdom. To take one side, and not care about the other (whether as liberals who are pro-Arab and anti-Semitic, or conservatives who are pro-Israelies and anti-Arab) is the wrong approach to any progress in the land. And to take such a position based on a shallow reading of Scripture (again on neither side) is to lean on a bruised reed.

But everyone is going to have to realize that there is no easy and quick solution to the problems of the Middle East, problems that have been festering for hundreds of years. A military attack on a country in the region may seem to delight some people, but quickly they will turn on the invading infidels—after all, these are Islamic lands. And any kind of political control, or influence in the region will be met with violent opposition for the same reason. And Christian witness in an Islamic land is bound to bring even greater persecution than before. What is difficult for the west to understand is the complete double standard to be found here: Islamic “mission” to turn other countries into Islamic states must not be opposed, or it will bring calls for holy war against the oppressing nations. There is no listening to reason or factual history. As far as the Arabs are concerned, there never was an Old Testament Israel, for the Jews are Europeans who have invaded their land to take it over. It is a struggle with ideology that makes all communication difficult. And it is because of that struggle over truth that calls for prayer for the problems, a Christian witness that extols love and grace, and personal (and hopefully) international dealings that are just and fair.

Christians today need to exhibit the love and the grace of God to all people in the world. If they show an unwarranted partiality in the Middle East, they will get nowhere for the cause of Christ. They have to be clear that God has a glorious plan that will solve all problems we face, but the fulfillment will come when Christ returns, and we are all changed.

But apart from faith in Jesus Christ there is no share in that world to come. Does Judaism have its own covenant and therefore no need of Christ? Certainly not. Is Allah the same God as the Father of our Lord Jesus. Well, the word Allah means God, and so could be used to refer to the one true and living God. But if that God took on human form and entered into this world to die for the sins of the world, then to reject Jesus as Lord and Savior is to reject the one true God, the only hope of salvation. If, as Islam says, Jesus is a prophet, but not the divine Son of God, not the Savior, then we are all in our sins, and have no hope; and worse than that, we are all guilty of idolatry for worshiping a mere man. But as Paul affirms, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead; and when he comes in glory, everyone will see that he is our Lord and our God.