

Who Owns the Land?

The modern state of Israel is a mere tiny sliver of land, which seems to have almost nothing in common with its surrounding nations and their hostile armies - nothing except for an intense desire to occupy and control the same historic territory. Consequently, Israel, to state the obvious, has a major security problem.

By comparison with other states in the Middle East, Israel is a beacon of freedom and democracy. Virtually all the surrounding countries are one - party states or ruled by a dictator. Since its founding in 1948 Israel has been the focus of international disputes, disputes which have turned violent. The very mention of the state of Israel seems to evoke an emotional outburst. Hence, any statement one makes about it is apt to become controversial.

Do Israelis have the right to a state of their own? Who owns the land? One could also ask, "Can Israelis forget their Jewish history which links them to land of Israel despite two thousand years of dispersion? Should Israelis have a homeland where they can live without being discriminated against, without being subjected to either blatant or subtle anti-Semitism?" These are not abstract questions! They are raised within the context of the Holocaust, the greatest event in modern history affecting the Jewish people. How can anyone forget the death of six million people, almost one-third of the total population of world Jewry of some 18 million?

The Jews have suffered so severely in history. Our debt to them, therefore, is great. They need a place where they can feel secure and safe. How valid are the Israelis' claims to the land?

The Claims of Israel

1. **The need for a safe haven.** Many Jews returned to their ancient homeland to find a safe haven. When the Holocaust survivors settled in Israel, they were not ready to give it up again. Golda Meir (1898-1978), who was the Prime Minister of Israel for five years, declared, "We Jews have a secret weapon in our struggle with Arabs - we have no place to go." She had witnessed the brutal era of German Nazism. In her mind the state of Israel was the historical result of centuries of anti-Semitism. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon echoed Golda Meir's convictions when he said of the current war against the Palestinians, "This battle is a battle for survival of the Jewish people, for survival of the state of Israel."
2. **Their ancient and continuous residency in the land.** The Jewish claims are rooted in ancient history. They were in Palestine some two thousand years before the Arabs took it. The Bible tells us that the land of Canaan (Palestine) was conquered by Joshua (as commanded by God). The Jews always counted it as their native land and never relinquished their claim throughout their dispersion. The Arabs conquest of Palestine in 640 A.D. began a period of nearly thirteen centuries of Muslim rule. Arabic control ended when the Seljuk Turks took Jerusalem in 1071. Their rule came to an end after the British conquered the area in 1917. Before the British took control of Palestine, it is important to note that the right of Jews to return to live as a religious community in this

strip of land was accepted by all the successive Muslim rulers from the Muslim conquest right to end of the nineteenth century.

Throughout their centuries of dispersion the Jews longed for the restoration to the homeland from which had been convicted. Their longings were expressed in different ways and various movements within Jewry. For example, the 14th century *The Book of Zohar*, the sacred book of the Kabbalists, a Jewish mystical movement., describes for the Kabbalists the mystical significance of the land of Israel. It states, "Happy is he whose lot it is during his lifetime to live in the Holy Land for such a one draws down the dew from heaven upon the earth and whoever is attached to the Holy Land during his lifetime becomes attached ever afterwards to the heavenly Holy Land."

3. **The Balfour Declaration.** The 1917 Balfour Declaration, a British declaration of sympathy with Zionist aspirations, guaranteed the Jews a national home in Palestine. Naturally, it was welcomed with great enthusiasm by the Jewish community. A Jewish author comments that the British were not moved by altruistic motives. He said that Great Britain's War cabinet was interested in removing Palestine from the control of Turkey, which had sided with the Central Powers (a Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy between 1882- 1914), and by a desire to enlist the support of the American and Russian Jews for the Allied cause.
4. **Their appeal to the Abrahamic covenant.** Many Jews and Christians alike claim that the covenant God made with Abraham (Gen. 12:7, 13, 15;17:8) and the divine promise of the ancient land of Canaan to Abraham is unquestionably the basis for Israel's divine guarantee of the land Canaan and of her later claims to Palestine.
5. **Their attachment to Jerusalem.** For millions of Christians throughout the world as well as Muslims and Jews, Jerusalem continues to be the focus of religious inspiration and attachment. But the Jews consider the ancient city central to all their historical and religious traditions. During the centuries of dispersion they declared to each other, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Jerusalem and the Jewish people are intertwined. The Israelis, therefore, make a non-negotiable claim to the city of Jerusalem.

Prophecy Claims

When Israel declared its statehood in 1948, countless evangelicals rushed to their Bibles seeking an answer to the question of Israel and prophecy. On March 23, 1992, the headlines of the *Jerusalem Post* announced boldly, "American Evangelicals Pledge Support." The day before more than eight hundred American evangelicals attended the International Prayer Breakfast, "to pray for the peace of Jerusalem." But also in attendance were Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kolek, and Prime Minister Yitzhaq Shamir who spoke to the crowd and received three standing ovations.

Why are so many evangelicals such staunch supporters of Israel? Although they recognize that Israel is a state with a veneer of religious interests, the premillennial-dispensationalists branch of evangelicalism is convinced that no other land on the

planet is as important in terms of God's plan for the ages and salvation as this little country. No matter what happens militarily in the Middle East, therefore, its eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) demands a commitment to Israel. Dr. John F. Walvoord, one of the most influential dispensational theologians of the twentieth century, who advocates a pretribulational rapture, a literal thousand-year millennium, and a distinction between Israel and the church, author of the best-seller *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, believes that the promises of Abraham appropriately belong to the modern state of Israel today. He therefore proclaims that the rebirth of Israel as a state is a fulfilment of prophecy and a signal that the coming of Christ is near.

Hall Lindsay, who attended Dallas Theological Seminary, popularized dispensationalism. His, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970), which is a reading of contemporary news events through prophetic lenses, attracted millions of readers. For Lindsay the state of Israel is the key to the unfolding of Biblical prophecies. He declared, "With the Jewish nation reborn in the land of Palestine, ancient Jerusalem is once again under total Jewish control for the first time in 2600 years, and talk of rebuilding the great Temple, the most important prophetic sign of Jesus Christ's soon coming is before us."

Robert D. Allen, Professor of Bible Exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, says of Israel, "It was here He rose again, it was from here that He ascended to the Father, and it is here that one day He will return in great glory." And he adds that it "is the place where the people of God will enjoy the presence of God under the reign of God. Ultimately, the land of Israel is the center of the planet, the focal point of the universe - for the outworking of the purposes of God. Eretz Israel! The land of Israel is the enduring physical place for the outworking of God's plan."

The Plight of the Palestinians

Do evangelicals committed to dispensationalist/premillennial eschatology have room in their hearts not only for the suffering of the Jews but also of the Palestinian Christians? The dwindling Christian communities in the West Bank and Gaza are also victims of the conflict. Yet these Christians have often been ignored on tours of the Holy Land sponsored by certain evangelical organizations.

The plight of the Palestinians is complex. It is not simply a territorial dispute between two people. The solution is so elusive because the very existence of Israel on any Arab land is an affront to the followers of Muhammad. For example, the suicide bombers are not simply motivated by territorial ambitions. They are motivated by their Islamic faith.

There have been many opportunities for the Palestinians to have a state of their own. But each time they or their Arab supporters have refused to accept the reality of Israel as a state. When the U.N. voted to create Israel and a Palestinian state, the Arab nations rejected the vote. On the day when Israel declared its independence, the Arab League Secretary, General Azzam Pasha, declared "Jihad" or holy war. When the Arabs lost the war the Palestinians fell victim to propaganda campaigns telling them to flee. Many Arab countries affirmed the wisdom of flight on the assumption that everyone could return

home. The Palestinians became a political football. The Arab states identify them as cousins, yet none but Jordan was willing to harbour their refugees. Many of the homeless were forced to remain in squalid refugee camps. They used these refugees as pawns for their own anti-Israel policies. They rejected all Israel's offers to alleviate their wretched plight. Even proposals to build modern housing outside the camps were scorned.

Should Israel allow the return of all these refugees? To demand the return of refugees and their descendants to their former homes in Israel is unrealistic; it would mean the end of the Jewish state of Israel. The unfortunate refugees cannot go back. A home and a means to earn a living should be found in the Arab countries where they are camped. Should Israel return to its 1967 borders and allow the establishment of a Palestinian state? The question is: What if an independent Palestinian state was built, what guarantees would Israel have that such a nation would not be belligerent? Israel cannot afford to fight a war with armies massed in the mountains all around it.

The Claims of the Arabs

Palestine is an ancient word that has been used since Roman times to describe the land claimed by Israelis and Palestinians. And Palestinian has become the preferred name of the people who have their stake in the land.

1. **Their claim to long residency.** Muslim Arabs conquered Palestine since 638 A.D, and Arab groups have lived there ever since. When the British took the land from the Ottoman Turks, Arabs made up the overwhelming majority of the population. This long-term residency is the Palestinians' main claim to the land.
2. **Reparation for lost land.** The Palestinians are convinced that the Jewish "theft and rape" of their country in 1948 require reparation and restoration to the homeland.
3. **The Muslims' appeal to Abrahamic ancestry.** The Koran declares that "Abraham in truth was not a Jew; neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim... And We made covenant with Abraham and Ishmael" Muslim commentators assert that though the Jews were a chosen people, they "forfeited their rights to the land by having broken the covenant with God." In his book, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Who Owns the Land*, Stanley A. Ellisen quotes a Jordanian junior high school text which teaches that the Jews "lost religion and this world as well...at the hands of the righteous Muslims."
4. **Arabic claims to Jerusalem.** Jerusalem is regarded by the Muslims as one of Islam's three Holy Cities (third after Mecca and Medina). So sacred is the Arabic shrine of the Dome of the Rock, that it is venerated by Muslims internationally. No issue causes so much strife among Palestinian Muslims or central to their claim to the land as the maintaining of Jerusalem as their al-Quds - the Holy City of Islam.

In Search of a Solution

So who owns the land? "God's remarkable interest in the land of Israel/Palestine is easily explained," says Gary M. Burge, author of, *Who Are God's People In The Middle East? What Christians are not being told about Israel and the Palestinians.* " The Bible teaches

that the nation Israel does not own the land; God does." Israel is a tenant in the land, and not a landlord (Lev.25:23). "Therefore," says Burge, "humility and gratitude and caution should hallmark anyone's residence in the land."

The creation of the state of Israel was not welcomed by all Jews. Judah Lean Magnes (1877-1948), a leading Zionist and first president of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, dreamt of bringing Jews and Arabs together in a binational state in Palestine. But his dream died to reality. The Jews were also realistic about the militant opposition from the neighbouring Arab states to a homeland for Jews.

There was also a keen awareness for the need to protect the rights of non-Jewish citizens. Isaac Herzog, chief rabbi who held office at the time of the founding of the state of Israel said that, "until the Messiah comes, we have need of protection against a sea of foes...and there is also no doubt that they will not grant us a Jewish state unless we ordain the rights of minorities under the law and in the judicial system." Even in the post-1967 period some Jews displayed a realistic attitude toward the return of conquered territory. Ovadiah Yosef, the leading Sephardi rabbi, ruled that "it is no way a sacred duty to make war and risk lives in order to defend our retention of territories we have conquered in opposition to the view of the Gentiles...and therefore if it is possible for us to give back territories and so avoid the danger of war with our enemies, we must do so on the commandment to save life."

For the Jews around the world, the defense and support of Israel amid the ongoing threats, attacks by suicide bombers, and other hardships have become institutional activities. Furthermore, the state of Israel functions also as a symbol of ethnic Jewishness and a resource for sustaining Jewish identity for Jewish people around the world.

Conclusion

The question who owns the land is still a controversial one among evangelical Christians. But what-ever one's view on prophecy, the Israelis' right to a state should be guaranteed by their Arab neighbours and the Western powers. Palestinians also have their rights, which need protection, and needs that must be met. Stanley Ellisen, for example, a graduate of Dallas Theology Seminary and teacher of prophecy, supports the Israelis' claim to a state. But he also shows genuine respect for Palestinian rights. He concludes that Israel should be treated like any secular state in the world, giving it both security considerations and expecting from it appropriate human rights.

A homeland for the Jews nor an independent Palestinian state is the ultimate solution for the deep-seated problem of the world of Jewry and the Muslim/Palestinians. Salvation, to the glory of the Triune God, is what they stand in need of most of all, as does every human being on earth. All have sinned (Rom. 3:23). And "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved"(Rom.10:13).

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