

Biblical Theology and the Modern State of Israel¹

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If someone pressed us to identify a major conflict zone in the world today, the Middle East would likely top the list. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict especially has been a leading actor on the geopolitical stage for years, with rival powers and a cacophony of competing voices making this one of today's bitterest conflicts. Jews and Palestinians vie for power, land, and even the right to exist, while two religions make rival claims to the land, with Christians siding with one or other and shouting from the sidelines. Moreover, strategic geographical and geopolitical considerations (much like during Old Testament times) cause outsiders to intervene and exacerbate the crisis. Add to this rival political and religio-political ideologies played out through the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whether Zionist, Palestinian, or pan-Arab nationalisms, Marxist anti-imperialism, the view of Israel as a democratic oasis within an authoritarian desert, or Islamic anger at Israel's very existence on Muslim land.² In short, the conflict is bitter and immensely complex, and one could be forgiven for gloomily giving up and moving on.

Theology is (or should be) about applying biblical principles and providing concrete solutions to real-life situations. Whether soteriology, the Person of Christ, loving God and our neighbour, the Church's task, or Christian ethics, 'doing theology' is about *people*. In short, it is where "the rubber meets the road", unlike sterile 'ivory tower theology' which posits questions without supplying answers. Faith must be outworked (Mt 5:13-14, Jas 2:14ff), and increasingly Christians training for ministry are opting for those institutions which equip them to translate theology into real-life practical ministry.³ Our Christian worldview should be brought to bear on

¹ The original version of this paper was presented to a joint session of the Biblical Theology/Religion, Culture and Communication/Ethics and Social Theology groups on 5 July 2007 during the annual Tyndale Fellowship Study Groups Conference, Cambridge. Several useful comments made during the ensuing discussion are reflected here.

² Also known as a *waqf*, or bequest from Allah.

³ For a brief discussion of how academic theology must have a practical outworking if it is to be relevant in helping to train men and women for Christian service, consider Oliver Barclay (one-time General Secretary of UCCF), 'Where is Academic Theology Heading?', *Evangelicals Now* website (December 2006), <http://www.e-n.org.uk/3657-Where-is-Academic-Theology-heading.htm> (last accessed 4 July 2007).

pressing social and political issues, supplying imaginative solutions which do not merely echo secular partisan opinion. We preach transformation through Christ, but in postmodernism's marketplace of ideas Evangelicalism is increasingly vying to demonstrate how Christian values and solutions can also help transform communities and society as a whole.

Surely, then, the Middle East is a pressing issue Christians cannot ignore. It is also acutely important to Christians for other reasons. This is the land of the Bible, where Jesus trod. Jews and Christians both draw on the Old Testament, while Mosaic (rather than Rabbinic) Judaism underpins Christianity. Furthermore, the modern Jewish state calls itself 'Israel', a word appearing (or alluded to) in the Bible nearly 3000 times. Jesus and the apostles were Jewish, as was most of the early Church, which was headquartered in Jerusalem (the "city of peace" a major flashpoint in today's conflict). Yet it is also claimed this Jewish state mistreats Palestinians, failing to abide by the Mosaic Law and the ethical utterances of the prophets. Finally, the Palestinian population also includes Christians who are caught up in the conflict.

Thus, Christians cannot ignore this issue. Much of the present situation is so woven into the very historical, theological, and ethical fabric of Christianity that neutrality is simply not an option. We must move beyond rhetoric, propaganda, and myth and explore the issue objectively and honestly, shaking off our political cleavage and even denominational or theological presuppositions if necessary, to reach biblically viable conclusions on how to respond to the conflict.

Given the immensely complex nature of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, this paper's aims, which are two-fold, are modest: to move beyond biblical theology treatments which focus on the land⁴ and instead explore another biblical theme, the house of Israel; and to highlight several practical steps to help us approach this issue.

⁴ See especially Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2003), and also Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Oxford: Lion, 1983, 2002). Two useful systematic and historical theology treatments exploring Israel from a non-supercessionist perspective are Scott Bader-Sayer, *Church and Israel After Christendom* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1999), and R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: L Fortress Press, 1996).

1. THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL AS A BIBLICAL THEME

In the Old Testament the theme of Israel is so well developed we need hardly dwell on it here. Israel was God's chosen people, entrusted with a land to reside in and serve Him. Yet though the land certainly helped define Israel,⁵ land ownership *is but one dimension* of nationhood. After all, biblical Israel survived as a nation during exile and occupation. Today, despite the absence of a Kurdistan the Kurds claim nationhood, as do the Palestinians, even though an *exclusively* Palestinian national identity is a recent development and they do not control the land. So while the geographical dimension is important, nationhood comprises much more and such was the case for biblical Israel.

More important for Israel's identity was the religious dimension. She was chosen to be in a covenantal relationship with God, a national congregation⁶ and a nation of priests (Ex 19:6), unique in history because of her relationship with God (Deut 4:34, 2 Sam 7:23). Israel enjoyed a unique, dynamic relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and he who loved, guided, instructed, and disciplined her. Not only this, but as Pierre Grelot demonstrates eloquently, history is *central* to the Israelite religious experience.⁷ The historical dimension is a vital facet of nationhood. In Israel's case, however, history and religious self-consciousness were inextricably intertwined and indivisible, both central defining features of its national identity. This, in turn, shaped Israel's cultural identity, another aspect of nationhood.

Aside from these religious, historical, cultural, and geographical features, there is also an ethnic dimension to Israelite nationhood. Israel was to be a distinctly Jewish nation. Yet this did not preclude outsiders from joining the house of Israel.⁸ God loved and welcomed the alien into the house of Israel (Deut 10:18-19). Aliens were granted full rights and privileges, and strict instructions were laid down concerning their fair

⁵ Indeed, the bequest of the land remains a central tenet of Judaism to this day.

⁶ There are numerous references and allusions to the 'congregation of Israel' in the Old Testament.

⁷ Pierre Grelot, *The Language of Symbolism: Biblical Theology, Semantics, and Exegesis* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2006), 103ff.

⁸ As Matthew's genealogy notes, aliens such as Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth became not only full participant members of the congregation of Israel, but they are also listed as direct ancestors of the Jewish Messiah.

treatment.⁹ In fact, in God's eyes there was to be no difference between the alien and Israelite (Lev 24:22, Num 15:14-16).

Yet such inclusion within the house of Israel was dependent on various requirements and religious observances by the alien.¹⁰ In short, aliens who joined the congregation of Israel were to leave their people, nation, and religion and become, to all intents and purposes, an Israelite, as so eloquently expressed in those words of Ruth the Moabitess to her mother-in-law Naomi: "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16). Thus, pro-Palestinian Evangelical appeals to the Mosaic theme of treating the alien fairly to condemn modern Israel's relationship with Palestinians are theologically problematic, even one-sided, considering how any member of the house of Israel, whether Jew or alien, not abiding by the covenant was to be excommunicated (Num 15:30). Such arguments ignore the covenantal nature of alien inclusion within biblical Israel. They also gloss over how modern Israel's relationship with West Bank and Gazan Palestinians differs considerably from that with its 1.4 million Israeli Arabs, who may vote, form political parties, sit in the Knesset, lobby parliament, take their grievances to the Israeli courts, like the Haredi are exempt from compulsory military service, and so on. Clearly, then, at least some of the Mosaic instructions concerning the treatment of *sojourners* are evident in Israel today.¹¹

So ethnicity was an important dimension of Israelite nationhood. Retention of a distinct Jewishness, while also allowing aliens to join the national congregation, ensured biblical Israel retained its unique identity.¹²

⁹ Consider Lev 23:22, Num 35:15, Deut 10:19, 14:29, 24:17, 24:19-21, 26:13, 27:19, Ezek 22:7, and Jer 7:6.

¹⁰ For example, the alien was expected to observe certain religious and other laws (Ex 12:19, Lev 16:29, 17:12, 17:15, 18:26, 24:16, Num 19:10, Deut 26:11, 31:12, Ezek 47:23). Moreover, if he was to become a member of the congregation and participate in the Passover feast (a key aspect of being an Israelite), he was to be circumcised (Ex 12:48-9, Num 9:14). Certain religious observances were expected not just from the alien, but also the sojourner (Ex 12:45, 20:10, Deut 5:1).

¹¹ That is not to say all these rights are necessarily always exercised unfettered, though Israeli Arabs arguably face problems because some reject the legitimacy of their own state.

¹² Colin Chapman argues that a Jewish state is by its very nature racist, thus rendering modern Israel theologically problematic (pp 266-7). Yet today (much like in Old Testament times) Israel's Law of Return permits Jewish proselytes to make *aliyah* (emigrate to Israel). Moreover, citizenship is automatically extended to *non-Jewish* spouses, children, and grandchildren, while the inclusion of Ethiopian and Yemenite Jews demonstrates that Jewishness moves beyond ethnicity. For details of the Law of Return, visit the Jewish Agency for Israel website

When in the Bible Israel mingled *en masse* with outsiders, they are condemned because such activity diluted Israel's religious identity and enticed the nation to serve foreign gods (for example, Ezra 9:2).

In summary, then, ancient Israel's nationhood was defined by a unique relationship with God that shaped its very history, together with a cultural, geographical, and finally, an ethnic dimension (though the outsider who abided by the covenant was also welcomed). Thus, Israel practiced an integrationist rather than a multicultural model. During New Testament times, the nation exhibits these same traits. The Jews still regarded themselves as a nation,¹³ as does the apostle Paul.¹⁴ The religious dimension is strongly evident, as is Israel's ethnicity (Acts 7:19).

At this stage we must consider two questions. First, are these features of nationhood present within the modern state of Israel? Even a superficial perusal indicates this is so. Despite being a secular nation, Judaism underpins much of Israeli society. This tension between the secular and sacred (much like the Fatah-Hamas schism) has resulted in no written Israeli constitution. Religious parties are often kingmakers in Israeli politics, securing special laws (much to the annoyance of secular Jews) which exempt Haredi men from military service and finance their studies at *yeshiva*.¹⁵ There is no civil marriage in Israel. Meanwhile, Jerusalem is deeply conservative and religious, unlike hedonist Tel Aviv. In the Haredi *Meah Sharim* neighbourhood you drive a car on the Sabbath or bare your arms and legs at your peril. Much of the settler activity is driven by ultra-orthodoxy. Even non-fundamentalist Jews follow dietary laws, celebrate the Sabbath, and draw strongly on their religious heritage and biblical history. Despite its cosmopolitan nature, Israel projects a strongly Jewish identity, while proselytisation is rare and conversion to Judaism difficult. Indeed, the return of Palestinian refugees is such a sensitive subject precisely because it threatens to dilute the Jewish state.¹⁶

(<http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Aliyah/Aliyah+Info/The+Law+of+Return/The+Law+of+Return.htm>, last accessed 16 July 2007).

¹³ For example, Lk 7:5, 23:2, Jn 11:48, 50, Acts 10:22.

¹⁴ Acts 24:2, 17, 26:4, 28:19.

¹⁵ Religious schools for the study of the Torah and Talmud.

¹⁶ As does Israeli Arab demographics, much like the higher Catholic birth rates compared with those of the Protestant community in Northern Ireland.

So despite secularism, atheism, and behaviour from some quarters that flouts the Mosaic Law, nonetheless the country exhibits the features of biblical nationhood. Surely, this zeal for the religion, history, traditions, and God of biblical Israel suggests to a degree how we as Christians should view the modern state of Israel, or rather, a large segment of it. This leads us to the second question: what biblical evidence is there to indicate Israel still retains a special and unique place in God's eyes, both before *and after* Christ instituted a new covenant?

Jesus' ministry amazed the people (Mt 7:28) and his miracles caused them to glorify the God of Israel (Mt 15:31, Jn 12:13). He told the Syro-Phoenician woman he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 15:24), instructing his disciples to do likewise (Mt 10:5-6). Jesus also expressed great love and tenderness towards Jerusalem (Mt 23:37, Lk 13:34). Meanwhile Yahweh is known as the Lord God of Israel (eg Lk 1:68), Jesus is the consolation of Israel (Lk 2:25), and Simeon refers to him as the glory of God's people Israel (Lk 2:32). Given this ministry to and love for Israel it is arguably a hermeneutical stretch always to spiritualise or allegorise the term "Israel",¹⁷ as well as theologically problematic to dismiss the house of Israel as somehow no longer important to God after many centuries of loving and caring for her prior to New Testament times. More problematic is the suggestion that somehow Israel has been (almost begrudgingly) attached to a Gentile Church, almost as an afterthought, when in fact Paul declares that it was *Gentiles* who were separated from the commonwealth of Israel and afar from God (Eph 2:12-13), and that God broke off some of the branches of unbelieving Israel so that we, a wild olive, might be grafted in and become partakers of the rich olive tree (Rom 11:17). The root supports us, not the other way around (Rom 11:18). That there are apostles to both Jew and Gentile in the book of Acts suggests Israel has not been dispossessed of her heritage.¹⁸

¹⁷ Arguably, the word 'Israel' in the New Testament (with the possible exception of the first reference to Israel in Rom 9:6, and the 'the Israel of God' in Gal 6:16 of the false Judaisers) nearly *always* denotes an ethnic entity. Surely, then, the onus is with those who believe so to demonstrate how the New Testament use of the word 'Israel' has shifted from an ethnic to an allegorised definition, rather than the other way around.

¹⁸ Pierre Grelot makes a similar point in *Language of Symbolism*, 142.

Paul has a great deal to say about Israel. We know at times he observed Israelite religious traditions (Acts 24:17, 26:4). While he states there is no difference between those Jews and Gentiles who are *already* in Christ Jesus,¹⁹ nonetheless Paul regularly differentiates between Jew and Gentile, whether stating (and demonstrating) that the Gospel is to be taken to the Jew first (eg Rom 1:16), declaring that the Jew will suffer tribulation first (Rom 2:9), and even wishing it were possible for him to be cut off from Christ for the sake of his Jewish kinsmen (Rom 9:1-3). Romans 9-11 is a major passage for consideration.²⁰ In the first five verses of this text Paul appeals to the religious, historical, cultural, and ethnic dimensions of Israelite nationhood discussed above, and later explicitly refers to the Israelite nation (Rom 10:19). Thus, this passage relates to the election of a *nation* (expressed through Jacob over Esau, the father of the Edomites) rather than *individuals*. Paul maintains God has not rejected his people (Rom 11:1), that only unproductive branches are stripped off to make way for outsiders to be grafted in. So whereas as replacement theology claims the Church *replaces* Israel, the Church in fact is *joined* to Israel. Paul then warns the transplanted branches not to become arrogant, saying God is quite capable of removing them and re-grafting the old branches.

The thrust of Paul's entire argument is found at the end of Romans 11, where he discusses how Israel has been used to bring salvation to the world (thus echoing Old Testament passages alluding to universalism²¹). He explains how salvation, which emanates from Jew to Gentile, will one day return to the Jew (Rom 11:28-36 cf. vs 11-12). Paul even indicates when this will happen, when the "fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom 11:25). At that stage "all Israel shall be saved",²² a reference to Isaiah 59:20. Interestingly, the very next verse in Isaiah declares that God's covenant with ethnic Israel is forever, while Paul also goes on several verses

¹⁹ See Rom 10:12, 1 Cor 12:13, Gal 3:28, and Col 3:11.

²⁰ Rom 9:1-5 clearly indicates Paul is referring to ethnic, rather than a spiritualised Israel here, and even Colin Chapman accepts that most of this passage relates to the Jewish people (*Whose Promised Land?* 245).

²¹ i.e. the diametric opposite of particularism, rather than that theological concept of universalism which holds to the view that everyone shall be saved.

²² Verse 26. See also Acts 13:23.

later to explain how, in the context of Israel, the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:29).

This theme of Israel abiding forever is echoed several times in the Bible. They include Jeremiah 31, well known for its reference to a new covenant in verses 31-34. But we hear considerably less about the verses which follow, where God declares that Israel will never cease to be a nation before him (31:35-37). Are we to allegorise every reference to an everlasting Israel? More importantly, if Isaiah was bringing a message of hope to a literal nation at an actual time, an esoteric allegorised message would have offered little by way of comfort to the original listeners and readers.²³

Eschatologically, too, the Bible has much to say about Israel. The focus of discussion here is not popular interpretations that seek to marry prophecy with present world events. Such an approach is often speculative, even sensational, aimed more at selling books than anything else. But in reacting against such extremes, some Evangelicals go too far the other way, throwing out the eschatological baby with the dispensational bathwater. After all, Heilsgechichte (salvation history) covers the *whole* of human existence, and if the Church has no overriding eschatological hope to draw upon, what is the point? That is *not* to ignore other core themes brought about and concluded through Christ's work (whether, for example, redemptive or ecclesiological). Yet the eschatological culmination of the age, including its personal and cosmic ramifications, and the promise of spending eternity with Christ are absolutely vital and central aspects of his message and mission. Eschatology represents the conclusive outworking of salvation history, marking the stage when history ends and eternity begins. Thus the Gospels present the Kingdom of God as realised *and* eschatological, inaugurated but *not yet* fulfilled.²⁴ Even Albert Schweitzer pointed out how Jesus' message

²³ Without doubt hermeneutics is crucial to this debate, with pro-Palestinian Evangelicals drawing strongly on an allegorical approach (for example, Chapman cites Philo of Alexandria during his discussion of the land, 142-3), and pro-Israel Christian Zionists favouring a strongly literal interpretation. Without due care and hermeneutical consistency such a reading of Scripture can become overly literal (for example, the New Jerusalem of Rev 21:2 means so much more than the restoration of the earthly city of Jerusalem), yet conversely supercessionists must take care not simply to go the other way to defend an *a priori* view of what constitutes Israel in the New Testament.

²⁴ The debate among biblical scholars concerning the timing of the kingdom is well known. Passages which clearly portray the eschatological aspect of the Kingdom of God include Mt 13:47-50, 25:1 (during Jesus' eschatological discourse), Lk 22:16,-18, Rev 11:15, 12:10.

was ultimately and thoroughly eschatological (even if he believed Jesus was wrong).

The house of Israel features strongly in this eschatological scheme. In Romans 11:25-6 (cf Isa 59:20-1) Paul declares all Israel shall be saved. That this event occurs "after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" indicates he has an eschatological event in mind. This juxtaposition of Israel's eschatological salvation, their washing and cleansing (of sin), and the giving of God's spirit to his chosen people is a theme taken up in Zechariah's eschatological discourse (12:10, 13:1 cf Ezekiel 18:31, 36:26-7, see also Isa 44:1-3, Jn 3:5).²⁵

Zechariah 12, a clearly eschatological passage, speaks of armies congregating upon Jerusalem and Israel for battle, echoing the final battle described in Revelation. The prophet Joel, too, describes such a battle and the very close linguistic similarities between Joel and Revelation 9 is not lost on Bible scholars. So either the author of Revelation merely copies Joel and reports a past prophecy *ex eventu*, or else both are referring to a future event, a catastrophe to befall Israel. In fact, Joel takes a contemporary catastrophe (the plague of locusts which destroys the land) and projects it far into the eschatological future, detailing not only an invading army's invasion of Israel, but how through God's intervention Israel shall be saved physically and spiritually (thus bringing us full circle back to Romans 11:25-6). The central theme in Joel is the "day of the Lord", a well known apocalyptic phrase cited six times in this short book. Yet again this event juxtaposes Israel's eschatological salvation, her cleansing from sin, and the pouring out of God's spirit upon her.

Granted, Peter draws on Joel 2 to explain the outpouring of God's spirit in Acts 2. But the apocalyptic scenario set out by Joel (wonders in the sky, blood, fire, smoke, darkness, moon likened to blood) is not present in the manner described in Revelation. As both books are eschatological, the outpouring is likely two-fold, or takes place in two stages: Pentecost and an

²⁵ The 'heart of stone' detailed in Ezekiel is likely an allusion to the tablets of stone that contained the Law, symbols of the old covenant replaced with a new covenant with the house of Israel (cf Jer 31:31-37) at the time of her eschatological salvation. Another passage worth considering here, apparently in an eschatological context, is Zech 8:23.

end-times washing of Israel's sin and regeneration through God's Spirit.²⁶ Immediately before his reference to the outpouring of God's Spirit, Joel likens spiritual blessing to the Holy Land's two rainy seasons (the former and latter rain). If Pentecost is the first, God's eschatological salvation of Israel ("when they shall look upon him who they have pierced", Zech 12:10) is the second.

Isaiah presents two visions of the Messiah: Suffering Servant and Conquering King. Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom in microcosm, but various Messianic passages in Isaiah indicate a literal kingdom established on earth. One of Jesus' titles is the King of Israel.²⁷ (It was even nailed to his cross.) That he will establish a literal, earthly kingdom is somewhat more inspiring than him simply being king of our hearts. If we take Isaiah's Conquering King motif seriously, then Jesus' teaching of the eschatological inauguration of His Kingdom must surely have a literal, eschatological outworking, so that the Son of David takes His throne over the house of Israel and the world. It certainly explains better those eschatological passages concerning his reign from Jerusalem and the mountain of the Lord (eg Micah 4:1-4). It also demonstrates that while the land may not necessarily be an issue now, eschatologically-speaking it returns to centre stage.²⁸

Lest one is uncomfortable with the notion of partial, two-fold, or multiple fulfilments of prophecy, the Bible is full of this phenomenon, whether the sign of a maiden with child (Isa 7:14 cf Mt 1:23), God calling His son out of Egypt (Hos 11:1 cf Mt 2:15), or the abomination that makes desolate. This latter example again has an eschatological fulfilment. In intertestamental times Antiochus IV Epiphanes slaughtered a pig to Zeus in the Temple, leading to the Maccabean revolt. Later, Pompey and Titus also defiled the Temple. Yet Jesus also refers to it in an eschatological context.²⁹

²⁶ Interestingly, those present at Pentecost were all local and diaspora Jews and proselytes.

²⁷ Mt 2:2, 27:11, Jn 1:49, 12:13.

²⁸ Bearing in mind Paul's reference to the "full number of the Gentiles" coming in, Lk 21:24 echoes a similar phrase in an eschatological context, at which time the land again takes centre stage and comes back under Jewish control. Such an interpretation, however, suggests we are in the last days now (a view strongly held by many Christian Zionists). The problem with such an interpretation, though, is that taken to its logical extreme the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled, the last Gentile has been saved already.

²⁹ In fact, much like Joel, Jesus' great eschatological discourse in Matthew 24-5 takes a (near) contemporary event (the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70) and projects it into the eschatological future to

Moreover, if one really wanted to be controversial you might claim the Dome on the Rock is such an abomination. After all, on the very hill where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac (and all the theology that goes with that), and where Jesus' ancestor David bought the Temple Mount from Ornan the Jebusite, stands a Dome within which is permanently inscribed, "The Sonship of Jesus and the Trinity are false", and "It is not fitting that God should beget or father a child".³⁰ Such statements put the Danish cartoon protests in a new context, yet of course our way is to turn the other cheek.

Clearly, Jesus supersedes the old covenant, the New Testament shifts its focus away from the land for now to a worldwide community of Christian believers, while for the time being the Kingdom has been inaugurated in our hearts.³¹ But the salvation story does not end there. The eschatological culmination of the age is a biblical theology theme which is *widely* represented throughout both Testaments. Another is the house of Israel. Moreover, in the Bible so often both are presented as going hand in hand. Thus, Israel merits closer attention as a biblical theme, not least because Paul says we as a wild olive tree have been grafted into it (even if the cultivated olive tree does not yet know it). At that time when ethnic Israel receives her eschatological salvation, then (and only then) will *all* of Israel (i.e. the cultivated and grafted in olive tree)³² have been saved. So given the strong representation of Israel as a biblical theme, this inevitably has some bearing on how we view the modern state Israel. After all, as noted earlier 'Israel' in the New Testament is nearly always used in an ethnic context.

That is not to say everyone descended of Israel is of the house of Israel (Rom 9:6-7). Israel is a *corporate* entity, and individuals cannot claim special status simply because they are Jews. Neither should we assume there is no need to share the Gospel with Jews. Quite the contrary. Paul's method was always to visit the synagogues and preach to the Jew first, and extreme

describe a catastrophe to befall the Jewish people (Mt 24:16-20). It is immediately after these events that Jesus describes the glorious return of the Son of Man (24:29-31).

³⁰ Moshe Sharon, 'Islam on the Temple Mount', *Biblical Archaeological Review* 32 no 4 (July-August 2006), 42, 45.

³¹ Views expressed strongly and articulately by the likes of Gary Burge, Colin Chapman, and N.T. Wright.

³² The olive tree minus the unbelieving branches which have been stripped off and replaced with the wild olive, thus resulting in the true Israel of God, cf Gal 6:16.

Christian Zionist groups who refuse to do so (usually for political reason) blatantly ignore Acts of the Apostles and Paul's ministry. Neither can we say with certainty that the current state of Israel is necessarily fulfilled prophecy. The speed and manner of its inception, its survival against the odds, and other recent historical events may lead some Christians to reach such a conclusion. But unless one maintains categorically that we are indeed in the last days, biblically-speaking one cannot declare with certainty that modern Israel represents fulfilled prophecy. (Conversely, neither can supercessionists maintain the opposite view.) One can only make a case for ethnic Israel's eschatological salvation, nothing more. As such, Christian Zionists should not regard their support for Israel as essential for God to fulfil biblical prophecy.³³ He does not require our help to carry out his plans, as if the fulfilment of prophecy is somehow anthropo-dependant (though listening to some Christian Zionists one might be forgiven for thinking so).

2. A PRACTICAL RESPONSE TO THE PRESENT CONFLICT

Having explored the biblical theme of Israel and argued this should have at least some bearing on how we view the modern state of Israel, it is worth exploring briefly a practical Christian response to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the realities on the ground. After all, this is a complex issue which raises many questions for Christians. For example, what should our response be to the conflicting stories we hear from Jew, Christian, and Arab? How do we reconcile our common Judaeo-Christian history and values with the situation some Palestinian Christians find themselves in? For that matter, is Palestinian liberation theology wise, even theologically viable, given that some Palestinian Christians have come close to understanding (if not condoning) suicide bombings on the basis of Samson's last act in the temple of Dagon. Yet how realistic is it to "turn the other cheek"? Finally, there is a prominent Muslim element in this conflict that demands a Christian response. These are just some of the pressing issues this conflict raises which demand a practical response from Christians.

³³ Stephen Sizer echoes this point in *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: IVP, 2004).

First, in a conflict where every act, word, or nuance is seized upon, it is important to spend some time researching the history of the conflict and learn the facts. The present conflict did not begin with the First or Second Intifadas, Yom Kippur (1973), or even the 1967 Six-Day War. In the wake of the Holocaust which nearly completely decimated European Jewry, in 1947 the UN agreed a partition plan to create two nations, one Arab, the other Jewish. Had the U.S. and U.K., together with other countries, willingly opened their doors to the European refugees escaping Nazism the situation in the Middle East would likely be quite different today. But we can go further back still, to the Arab-Jewish tensions of 1920s and 1930s British-controlled Palestine (large part fuelled by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, a sympathiser of Adolf Hitler),³⁴ or the British government's irreconcilable promises made to both the Jewish and Arab populations. In short, this is a complex issue which cannot be understood without exploring its history in some depth.

A case in point is the issue of land ownership. It is easy to reduce the conflict today to one where one particular side has stolen land from the other. Indeed, the West Bank is presently under occupation (which many Israelis oppose), but much of the land within Israel's internationally-recognised borders was actually purchased in the 1920s and 1930s, sometimes for highly inflated prices.³⁵ Today Haredi Jews are buying up Arab homes on the Ophel Ridge (the original City of David south of the Temple Mount and overlooking the Kidron Valley to the East) at above-market prices in order to secure a Jewish presence on a ridge of major historical, political, and religious significance for Jews. Conversely, the Jordanian government is buying up as much land and property as possible to retain its influence in the sensitive Temple Mount vicinity.³⁶ Thus, beyond the emotive language and propaganda not everything is as it seems. There are realities on the ground that must be understood before we engage in any theological treatment of

³⁴ Martin Gilbert discusses at length the role the Grand Mufti in *Jerusalem in the Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 1996).

³⁵ For example, see Martin Gilbert, *The Routledge Atlas of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2002), 12. Colin Chapman also discusses in some detail how early Zionists purchased land from absentee Arab landlords (*Whose Promised Land?* 59-61).

³⁶ Aaron Klein, 'Jordan secretly buying land accessing Temple Mount', *World Net Daily* (3 July 2007), available online at http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=56483 (last accessed 14 July 2007).

the conflict, and Christians do well not to rush to judgment or speak hastily without having moved beyond the rhetoric and ascertained the facts (Prov 29:20, Jas 1:19-20).

Consider, for example, Ariel Sharon's plan for withdrawal from Gaza. In light of the intensification of rocket attacks from a recently-unoccupied Gaza on Israeli towns such as Sderot, together with the recent Palestinian civil war and Hamas' seizure of Gaza, Sharon's withdrawal plan now appears to have been a strategic miscalculation. Also, by returning land for peace Israel has rarely reaped a peace dividend (the return of Sinai to Egypt being a notable exception), with extremism intensifying (notably after the return of Southern Lebanon and Gaza). Yet leaving these political realities aside, the fact remains that in biblical times present-day Gaza covered, in large part, the territory of the Philistines (from where the word 'Palestine' originates), which was hardly of major theological significance. Nonetheless, Christian Zionists vociferously excoriated Ariel Sharon for his Gaza withdrawal precisely on theological grounds. Moreover, as noted earlier, land is but one dimension of nationhood, and just as biblical Israel existed under Babylonian exile, or Persian, Greek, and Roman occupation, so today giving up some land for peace is arguably not necessarily theologically problematic, even if the present volatile climate might make it politically unrealistic. The fact is, there are realities on the ground that simply cannot be ignored by either side. Israel has no intention of modifying its harsh stance as long as it faces a very real security threat. Neither are the Palestinians going to go away or renounce their claims to statehood. When responding to this issue, pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian Christians have no choice but to accept and respond to these realities.

Second, if the Bible prohibits false witness, demands justice, and even highlights the importance of measuring with properly calibrated scales (Lev 19:36, Am 8:5, Mic 6:11), then surely even-handedness is an essential biblical principle when exploring this conflict. That is not to say Christians cannot take sides, but rather, our treatment of *all* the issues must be fair and balanced. For example, though Palestine was a desolate backwater when the first Zionists arrived in the 1880s and 1890s, nonetheless the fact remains it was *not* an empty land. Though immigration statistics in this

regard are notoriously sketchy and unreliable, there is an argument to be made concerning how Zionist economic success encouraged not only an influx of Jews to Palestine in the early twentieth century, but also *Arab* immigrants from other parts of the Arab world. But once again, the fact remains that the land was not empty when the first Zionists emigrated to the Holy Land, and as both populations grew it was inevitable that one would be pushed to one side.

Neither can we justify an "Israel right or wrong" mentality, as some Christians seek to do. Israel sinned even in biblical times, so to ignore her present injustices and sinful behaviour is theologically problematic. There seems little doubt that an aggressive Israeli military doctrine (which owes something to U.S. military doctrine and methods) has often resulted in what is euphemistically termed 'collateral damage'. It is one thing to highlight Israeli actions over security concerns, but quite another to ignore her errors of judgement (or the activities of some 'bad apples' within the army, much like troops anywhere else), though we should differentiate between deliberate harshness and the inevitable *Realpolitik* Israel practices (which a liberal West no longer has the stomach for). It should be noted that Israeli ruthlessness is born out of an obsession with security, which even much of the world recognises.

Conversely, Israel has faced an existential threat since her inception. Even within hours of declaring statehood she was attacked by the armies of five neighbouring Arab nations. Today Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad openly and regularly calls for Israel's annihilation, as do extremist organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Yet too often, many people (including some pro-Palestinian Christians) insist on exacting a higher standard from Israel than, for example, China, Zimbabwe, the architects of Darfur, and some of the authoritarian Arab nations. After all, Israel is a democratic country which extends more rights to its Arab Israeli citizens than some autocratic Arab countries. Moreover, Israel has withdrawn from Gaza, is in negotiation with Syria about the Golan Heights,³⁷ and is keen for a partial withdrawal of the

³⁷ For example, see Charles Levinson, 'Israel Offers the Golan Heights to Syria', *Daily Telegraph* (9 June 2007). Available online at

West Bank. Meanwhile many Palestinians are frustrated with their leaders and simply want to get on with their lives.³⁸ Thus, we do well as Christians to explore this issue objectively and even-handedly, getting beyond the rhetoric to uncover and consider the underlying facts on both sides.

This leads to a third point: Christians should set their *own* agenda for the treatment of this issue, rather than be influenced by the intellectual left, U.S. foreign policy, or propaganda from one side or the other. Listening to some of them, one could be forgiven for almost believing that many Christian Zionists sit in the Knesset, belong to the Haredi community, or work closely with the U.S. Department of State. For that matter, some pro-Palestinian Christians appear as apologists for Arab nationalism, and even Islam. A minority of Palestinian Christians, too, have arguably been influenced by the Palestinian political agenda, rather than a Christian worldview. How else does one explain how a minority vocally denounce Israel and highlight their own plight, yet rarely speak out against genuine massacres of Christians in parts of Indonesia, Pakistan, or other Muslim nations? Or why is Palestinian Muslim economic targeting of Christian business, together with physical abuse of Christians in the Palestinian territories by Muslim extremists, glossed over?³⁹ That many Palestinian Christians refuse to embrace a liberation theology agenda and denounce Israel, choosing instead to turn the other cheek in the face of Muslim persecution or Israeli heavy-handedness indicates that these Christians, at least, have not permitted outsiders to influence or dictate the agenda. After all, to do so is to espouse worldliness in the truest sense of the world, that is, to take upon oneself the world's values and agenda and permit them to shape one's Christian worldview.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml;jsessionid=22ER41BYJP1ANQFIQMGCFFGAVCBQUIV0?xml=/news/2007/06/09/wmid109.xml> (last accessed 3 July 2007).

³⁸ Several years ago an Arab Jerusalemite taxi driver I was in conversation with brought up the issue of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's substantial peace offer. He was at a loss to understand why Yasir Arafat had turned it down, going on to express resentment against Palestinian leaders for not making peace with the Israelis so that everyone in the region could get on with improving their life and economic wellbeing. I have heard such sentiment echoed several times among everyday Palestinians.

³⁹ For a discussion, see Daniel Pipes, 'Disappearing Christians in the Middle East', *Middle East Quarterly* (Winter 2001). The entire issue of this journal, which is devoted to Christianity in the Middle East, is available online at <http://www.meforum.org/meq/issues/200101>. See also Elizabeth Day, 'O Muslim Town of Bethlehem', *Daily Mail*, 16 December 2006, and Tim Butcher, 'Why Bethlehem's Christians Are Still Voting With Their Feet', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 December 2006.

The psalmist instructs his audience to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Ps 122:6), while Jesus expressed great love and tenderness for the house of Israel, even likening his love for Jerusalem to a hen gathering her chicks under her wings.⁴⁰ Conversely, Psalm 83:3-4 states: "They lay crafty plans against your people; they consult together against those you protect. They say, 'Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered more'" (NRSV). As in the psalmist's day, Israel today faces a very real existential threat from Islamist Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah (and to a lesser extent Syria), who regard the annihilation of Israel as a long-term historic and religious duty.⁴¹ Christians clearly must pray for fellow believers living in the Holy Land, so that through their actions and witness both Jews and Arabs might know Christ. Not only that, but if indeed the house of Israel still retains a special place in God's heart and plans, then as the Israeli-Palestinian situation shifts from a purely political to a religio-political Islamist conflict that threatens Israel's very existence, then surely Christians must resist that threat.

⁴⁰ Mt 23:37, Lk 13:34.

⁴¹ Last year, I listened to a Hamas spokesman as he likened the current conflict to the Crusades, declaring that although it took several hundred years to remove the Crusaders, they succeeded in time, just as they would with the annihilation of Israel one day.