

# *The Middle East Dilemma: A Personal Reflection*

ANDREW KIRK

## **Introduction**

There can be no place on earth which provides such a complex and paradoxical set of issues as the small strip of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Almost every question is a matter of intense dispute. By what right does any particular people inhabit any part of the land? What should the land be called, Israel, Felistin (Palestine), or something else? Should the area be divided into separate states according to ethnic and religious affiliation or should there be one multi-cultural, pluralist community? How does the history of past generations affect the rights of their descendants today? What responsibilities, if any, do other peoples (including the Christian community) have to seek a just and enduring resolution to the relentless conflict of the last forty years?

If answers to these questions (and a host of others) were obvious and could be agreed upon by all parties, the dilemma would be solved, the dispute dissipated and the conflict at an end. Solutions, however, are manifestly not self-evident. Or, if they are, only one side in the controversy appears to recognize them.

The contention is rooted in a mixture of historical, cultural, theological, political and social motifs which have become so intertwined that it is beyond the wit of most to disentangle them. I cannot claim any special ability to do so. I am no more than an average observer of the situation who, like countless others, is tempted to simplify the problems in the hope that in some way the human communities involved can learn to live again in charity with one another. The privilege of having been able to travel widely and become involved in debates elsewhere on social and political matters from a Christian point of view may possibly bring another perspective to the issues.

It would be gratifying to think that this perspective might possibly produce a fresh insight or two. At least I hope that these reflections may rise above the world of clichés and platitudes. With such a brief exposure to the situation, however, it is probably naive to believe that they will offer anything more than a fairly pedestrian view of affairs.

It is hard not to take sides in the various aspects of the conflict. I have not tried, therefore, to avoid expressing certain convictions. My intention is to

be provocative without being unnecessarily polemical, and certainly not insensitive. I realize that some opinions may not be popular in certain circles. All I ask is magnanimous listening and argumentation, even when I challenge cherished assumptions.

The topics I wish to cover have enormous practical, human ramifications. They also have deep theological, or sometimes pseudo-theological, foundations. I do not intend to separate the practical from the theological, or *vice-versa*. Such a process would inhibit any genuine understanding of Middle East life. However, I believe it is necessary to challenge some of the ways in which practice and theory are being put together. There is too much of what might be called the mystification of certain elements of historical and ethnic consciousness. The path to lasting peace with justice through reconciliation might be made easier if some of the special pleading was dismantled.

### 1 The Existence of Israel

I fully accept that, because of international commitments and the sacrifice of generations of Jews in building for themselves a homeland, the State of Israel must be allowed to survive. This assumption implies that no outside force should be allowed to harass and subvert it in the expectation that one day it will be defeated in military combat and the Jewish population compelled to leave.

This conviction in no way implies that the Israeli State should be wholly Jewish (as, I believe, many Jews would prefer), nor that any particular boundaries should be internationally recognized (least of all those that presently exist as a result of war and occupation). It does not foreclose the issue as to whether separate nations should exist alongside each other, each welcoming and protecting minorities in their midst, or whether one genuinely multi-cultural (ethnically and religiously) community can be formed within the boundaries of a single state. The latter may be the ideal; though the former seems the only realistic possibility. Genuine peace can only come, if a substantial variety of options are thrown into the negotiating process. What is implied is the right of Jewish people to live in the land without any fear of victimization or threat of annihilation.

However, admission of the right of Jews to remain in Palestine if they wish, and the full protection which that implies, does not necessarily mean that the creation of a Jewish homeland was a wise and noble event. I personally believe (and, of course, it is easy to be clever with hindsight) that it has proved to be a major tragedy, not only for the Palestinians who have suffered untold injustices and deprivations, but also for the Jews. The following are the main reasons, in my view, for sustaining this opinion.

#### *a The State of Israel Emphasizes Jewish Exclusivism in Place of a Universal Mission*

From the beginning of their existence the Jewish people have received a commission to be a 'blessing to the nations' (Gen. 12:2; 18:18; 22:18). It is

difficult to see how they can be 'a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth' (Isa. 49:6), if they are located geographically in one place. Diaspora is surely the ultimate calling of Judaism (in its own terms) for the sake of the world.

In the early and middle years of the Zionist drive to reclaim the land, this was the persistent view of Reformed Judaism. It was one response to the reality of 'Emancipation' (the exodus from, or return from exile in, the ghettos of Europe in the nineteenth century). Urged on, perhaps, by the extreme optimism of the 'new-age' mentality of the enlightenment many Jews believed that they had a genuine future in the increasingly 'enlightened' societies of the West. They were called to testify there to the existence of the righteous and compassionate God, demonstrated both by their own remarkable survival and by the uniqueness of the law as a way of life.

However, being a blessing by witnessing to the goodness and faithfulness of God has been a tough assignment. The gradual end to restrictions circumscribing their life led the Jews into the beginning of a severe identity-crisis which continues to this day. Whilst confined in the ghettos it was easier to know who one was. In one sense identity was defined by being a specifically persecuted minority. Jews were scandalously categorized as the enemies of humanity. They survived by both absorbing and purging themselves of such a perfidious lie. However, more open and less aggressive societies have tended to dilute this strong sense of belonging to a people, and made testimony to God's protecting power more difficult to substantiate.

A further factor has been the rise in the Western nations of a secular consensus. Dow Marmor admits that the Jew by and large, has entered into Western mass culture without having wrestled with it.<sup>1</sup> This means that his hold on the reality of the transcendent God in an age which no longer recognizes 'the sacred canopy' (Peter Berger) is much more tenuous. However, Judaism without a living faith in God could hardly be a blessing to the nations.

Religious tolerance has meant relativizing the claim to truth. Marmor seems to reflect this attitude when he says that 'Reform liberalism based on the notion of a mission to the Gentiles, is a manifestation of a sense of superiority no less objectionable than the one propounded by Orthodoxy'.<sup>2</sup> However, rightly understood, mission is not the result of an arrogant claim to be more enlightened or more faithful to God (though Marmor comes close to this when he says that 'it was . . . really Israel that chose God and in this way was chosen by Him'<sup>3</sup>), but springs from a sense of indebtedness. Mission is the stewardship of a message of grace. So, in terms of their own tradition, Jews continue to possess a responsibility to share with the world the transforming reality of existence with God. If the

1 Dow Marmor, *Beyond Survival*, DLT, London 1982, *passim*.

2 *Ibid.*, p 176.

3 *Ibid.*, p 177.

ideal is for all of them to return to Israel,<sup>1</sup> how can they demonstrate among the nations the benefits of living according to God's law?

Two major arguments have been used to counter this appeal to universalism against the Zionist dream of a re-established Jewish nation: one is theological, the other historical. In the first place, as Fishman states<sup>2</sup> in the original covenantal design of Jewish 'peoplehood' Israel is conceived first, and foremost, as a nation. Its task was to generate sanctity among its members and become a collective model for humankind. A necessary condition for the achievement of both is a Jewish state developing its full national culture in its own land. In other words, Judaism is a light to the nations as a sovereign state rather than as a people in dispersion. In the second place, there is the overwhelming fact of the holocaust. The vast majority of Jews would say that, whatever the niceties of the universalistic ideal, they must have a homeland to which they can go in case an intolerable pressure mounts against them once more. Auschwitz has for all time, transmuted Zionism from a (romantic) aspiration into an imperative for survival. In my next two arguments for believing the State of Israel to be a Jewish tragedy I will attempt to respond to these powerful justifications for its existence.

#### *b Religious Faith Cannot Be Identified with the Exercise of Political Power*

To say that Israel's calling is to embody, as a sovereign political entity, the demands of a holy God is an attractive ideal. It seems to follow closely the pattern of biblical Israel. The purpose of the Hebrew people's liberation from Egypt was to establish them as a 'Kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod. 19:6; Num. 14:12; Deut. 26:19). The code-book of the covenant was intended to regulate national life according to God's laws. The prophetic vision speaks of other nations coming to Israel to learn how to order their affairs according to the law of the Lord (Zech. 8:20-23; Isa. 2:3; 60:3-4; 51:4).

Moreover it could well be argued that religious conviction without a concrete application in political and social life is in danger of being an individualistic and spiritualizing escapism from the real world. I think two responses can be made to this convincing way of thinking. Firstly, there is the evidence of history. Wherever a people have tried to continue the exercise of government with strong religious convictions, the high-calling of faith has been compromised. There has never been an exception to this

---

1 'If we accept the promise that God speaks to the Jewish people through history, then the message of the last century is clear: "Jews go Home! You have no future as a people in the *Galut*. Providence has made it possible for you to re-establish yourselves as a nation in your historic Eretz Yisrael - go up and take possession"'. Irving I. Stone, 'Historical Imperative' *The Jerusalem Post*, 13 January 1986, p 8.

2 'Let the Real Israel Stand Up: Its Where the Jewish Heart Beats', *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 December, 1985.

rule. Inevitably and systematically belief has been used to legitimize the existing political order.

The attempt to unify political power and faith has outstandingly failed three times for the Jews: the exile of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, from which no Jew ever returned; the exile of Judah to Babylon from which only some of the people returned after seventy years, and the dismantling of all remnants of national life after the Bar Kochba revolt against the Romans in 135 AD. Present day Israel, as we shall see later, is no exception. Only an extremely myopic person could detect signs of the fulfilling of Fishman's ideal vision in the present clamourings of the Jewish orthodoxy within the political life of Israel.

In this sense the modern State of Israel is a backward-looking utopia. It is condemned, as is an Islamic Republic and as was Constantinianism in Europe, to repeat the corrupting process of power in high places. It is almost self-evident that those nations which have sought to identify religious belief with national and ethnic aspirations have been the most intolerant and violent (Northern Ireland, the Lebanon, South Africa, Iran). The Jews have themselves suffered from various forms of Caesaro-Papism, of which the most devastating and horrific was that of the Third Reich.

Secondly, and this in part explains the failure of the model historically, neither the Jews nor any other people were expected to live out the high demands of God's law as the usual kind of national entity. In three important respects Israel was told it might not be a nation like the other nations surrounding it (Deut. 17:16-17): it should not establish a large army, it should not enter into any military or political alliances and it should not allow wealth to be the reward for political administration. Nevertheless, it did demand to be a nation like all others (1 Sam. 8:5). The reason was explicit: it could not sustain the pressure of hostile forces arranged against it without having a permanent defence infrastructure capable of meeting and repulsing the threats. However, it was precisely in this demand that Israel ceased to be a nation with a special calling and purpose (1 Sam. 10:19). In other words the apparent impossibility of remaining an integral people who could survive in a hostile environment made its major vocation null and void. *Realpolitik* overwhelmed its collective trust in God for protection. The consequence of being a nation like any other was its disappearance as a nation.

Long before Bar Kochba, the Jews had lived a diaspora existence. Indeed, for Jeremiah, this was far from being the opposite of an ideal (Jer. 29:4-9); though it is true he did also promise a return to the land. However, life in the land was intimately linked to the call for a national righteousness which Israel (like any other people) has never been able to fulfil. Modern Israel is no exception. It is no more a model to the nations than some others, and in any case it is racked by dissension over its nature as a state. Should it be, as the original Zionist thinking envisioned, just one more modern state? In which case, the religious argument against the diaspora evaporates. Or

does it pretend to be a unique experiment in nationhood? In which case, real life tells against it, for Israel behaves little differently from other modern states. By linking a state with a national religion, Judaism as a whole will inevitably be judged by the politics of Israel. It can claim no exception from this dilemma.

*c A Jewish Homeland Has Not Ended the Blight of Anti-Semitism. It Has Simply Shifted It Geographically*

The appalling fact of genocide is deemed an unanswerable argument for the Jews to have their own place. In 1945 it must have been enormously compelling, forty years on it looks much less so. Many events and further reflection have modified this seemingly irresistible logic.

Firstly, the deep sense of guilt which the attempted extermination of Jews in central Europe engendered in the post-war European communities has now all but disappeared. Those who were eighteen in 1945 are now nearly sixty. The generation who might be held to have some responsibility for the brutal slaughter have either died or passed into retirement. The time will soon come when the last Nazi involved in the process of death will have passed to the grave. Consciousness of anti-Semitism cannot be kept alive amongst today's generations by appeal to the gas-chambers. Nor can the holocaust play the role of validating all Israel's internal and external policies. Israel's part in encouraging, or at least allowing, the appalling massacres at the refugee camps in Beirut in September 1982 has removed from Jewish moral credibility its appeal to its own past suffering. As one Jewish survivor of Auschwitz put it in an article in the *Guardian* shortly afterwards, Jewish people having for so many centuries suffered persecution and intimidation, find it uncommonly hard to recognize that they too can inflict pain on others. It is perhaps a curious paradox that some Jews, who for so long have been wickedly exploited as scape-goats for others' crimes and mismanagement, should now use their past suffering as an escape from facing their present guilt. Modern generations of people in the West become incensed when the holocaust continues to be used as a means of claiming innocence or special treatment. This means that each alleged case of anti-Semitism must be treated on its merits, and not manipulated to gain sympathy for whatever the State of Israel does to defend its integrity.

Secondly, the memory (*Yad Vashem* - 'a place and a name') of extermination camps ought to be used by the international community for another purpose: that of anticipating and preventing other holocausts, either threatened or actual. Since the early 1940s, there have been a number of holocausts in which thousands, or even millions of people have been systematically liquidated for political, ideological or racial reasons. Some have hit the headlines, like the atrocities of Idi Amin in Uganda, or the 20,000 or so people who disappeared in Argentina between 1976 and 1982. Others have been largely ignored: the three million slaughtered in Kampuchea in the late 1970s, the pogrom carried out by Indonesian govern-

ment forces against those who resisted their invasion of Irian Jaya and East Timor, or the 548 extra-judicial executions which happened in Guatemala between January and June 1985. In some of these cases Jews may have been victims. However, since 1945, taken on a world-wide basis, large-scale atrocities committed against human beings with total disregard for the value of their lives have not been directed against Jews as such. This means that the past devastation wreaked by anti-Semitism has now to be put in a wider context.

Thirdly, there is another reason why anti-Semitism should be seen from a longer perspective. Historically, not all persecution of Jews has necessarily had overt anti-Semitic overtones. Indeed, some historians believe that anti-Semitism (by which we mean a systematic and irrational antipathy towards Jews based on ethnic prejudice) is a peculiarly modern invention. Theodor Herzl once said that 'anti-Semitism is a consequence of the emancipation of the Jews'. Part of the reason may be that once allowed tentatively into the mainstream of life, they had both gifts and experience which enabled them to benefit from the new capitalist economic system quicker than any other group. This apparently exceptional ability to rise to the top of the system provoked among many the absurd assumption that they had modern nations by the throat. As in all forms of racial hostility, irrational fear provoked rumours and lies about Jews as a group.

At least some of the persecution of Jews down the centuries, arbitrary and unacceptable though it was, had more to do with their minority status in the uniform culture imposed by the Holy Roman Empire than with their Jewishness. It may be that the charge of deicide was a later justification in their case for a persecution which, initially at least, was directed against all groups which refused to integrate into the *Corpus Christianum*. Because the Jews insistently rejected incorporation into the one whole Christian Society, they were deemed to be in a special sense accursed of God. The reason found for this was the murder of God's Son. Other groups, which also refused to conform to the religious and political consensus (the Cathari, Waldensians, Lollards and Hussites) were treated no more leniently. Indeed heresy within the Church, or treason against God, was counted as the most heinous of all crimes. That ruthless organ of extermination, the Inquisition, was turned principally against those claiming to be Christians. In the Spanish 'Indies' hundreds of thousands of native people were killed for refusing baptism. After the Reformation and until the early nineteenth century, minority Christian groups continued to be persecuted and deprived of all civil rights by both Catholic and Protestant nations. They did not fit into society. Because they broke the unity of the nation, they were considered dangerously subversive, a potent threat to the stability of the commonwealth. Nonconformity struggled hard for the right of freedom of conscience. Eventually their protests led to the repeal of all legislation against dissidents, a move from which Jews also benefited.

This short survey of hostile activity towards the Jews, as one strand in a persistent history of attempts to eliminate the outsider and intruder, is

designed to caution against the use of anti-Semitism as a trump card in support of the actual state of Israel. Deep sympathy towards the plight of the Continental European Jew at the end of the war against Nazism, and the consequent belief that those who could not be easily accommodated elsewhere should have a refuge in Palestine, quickly turned into a smouldering resentment and anger at the way it was accomplished. The systematic dispossession of their land, through terror and force, from the UN Partition Plan of November 1947 until the present day, has led Palestinians to treat Jews as implacable enemies. Where before Arabs and Jews lived together in reasonable harmony, now there is an overwhelming distrust, bitterness and desire for revenge which can only be fully appreciated by listening to Palestinians tell the story of their loss of land, livelihood and dignity.

The existence and policies of Israel have also in other parts of the world increased anti-Jewish sentiments. In many Arab countries the state of Israel has caused the very anti-Semitism it was designed in part to alleviate. The creeping annexation of the West Bank area through settlement colonization has had the same effect on those who refuse to agree that it is justified for reasons of security.

It is now agreed by many Israelis that another holocaust is a possibility, not in West Europe, nor even in Russia, but on the streets of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa. As the Granada TV production, 'The Longest War', put it, Israel is a 'State of Insecurity'. In the Middle East, given the small expanse of territory and the ever-increasing sophistication of modern weaponry, Israel has no secure borders until she does her utmost to lessen the impassioned hostility of all her neighbours (including Egypt).

*d A Jewish State in the Middle East is Both an Anomaly and Unsustainable*

Apart from the traumatic dispute over the land, the presence again of Jews after 1,800 years in Palestine appears to many outside observers as a classical case of cultural misfit. It is like a transplanted organ which the rest of the body rejects. Israel is seen by many Arabs not only as having expansionist ideas, a not very veiled desire to move its borders ever further out (witnessed to by the annexation of the Golan Heights in 1981, the declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 1979 and the Knesset's reiterated affirmation that the Jewish settlements on the West Bank would never be dismantled), but also as being a foreign agency for Western interests in the area.

Israel has been built largely through the efforts and drive of Jews from Western nations who had already imbibed the values of Western liberal capitalism. The nation's technical achievements in agriculture and certain industries has been outstanding. They have tended to come, however, with that same savour of effortless cultural superiority which has accompanied the Western colonial enterprise across the world. For both Christian and Muslim Arabs, with their own distinguished and long-standing cultures, this generalized attitude of hardly-concealed disparagement is intolerable. It makes the building of communal relationships extremely difficult.



The often-praised accomplishments of Jews in settling and moulding the land, producing a relatively sophisticated infrastructure and diversity of industrial plant, has to be seen in the context of the massive aid it receives from the USA. In fact for many years Israel's economy has been in an extremely precarious state. It is dependent on the country continuing to receive economic funding from the USA (currently 46 per cent of the entire US Overseas aid budget goes to this one nation). A vast amount of this aid is spent on maintaining its military superiority over its neighbours. 'In the 1986 fiscal year legislation Israel is stated to receive \$1.8 billion in total foreign military sales grants'.<sup>1</sup>

Many Jews will openly admit that Israel is a client state of the USA. But this breeds further deep insecurity. At present there is fierce controversy raging over the continuing development by Israel of its own fighter aircraft, the Lavi. The costs are astronomical, and even though 'The American administration has picked up the entire annual Israeli development tab of \$250 million . . . there are those who fear that American policy could change, leaving Israel with an incomplete white elephant and *not enough aid money* to purchase a last-minute alternative'.<sup>2</sup>

Economically Israel is caught in a vicious circle. As Nahum Goldmann says, its constant readiness for military activity in a 'no peace, no war' situation is ruinous of its economy, policy and culture.<sup>3</sup>

However, without the real or imagined constant threat of aggression against its existence, the aid would not be forthcoming. While I was there, real concern was being shown by the substantial drop in numbers of tourists coming (particularly from the USA) as a result of the airport massacres in Rome and Vienna at the end of December, 1985. Terrorism, stimulated by the total non-resolution of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, barbaric though it is, has struck a substantial blow against Israel's vulnerable economy.

A further worry must be the accession of Spain to the European Common Market. With a similar climate to that of Israel it grows many of the same agricultural products. The preferential trade treatment Spain will now receive will enormously disadvantage Israel in its bid to continue to keep markets open for its own goods. In one Kibbutz which specializes in growing roses for the Dutch and German markets, I was told that Dutch people have now set up rose farms in Spain able to undercut the prices they will be forced to set in Israel.

The combination of these four arguments leads me to conclude that, despite the propaganda and the conventional wisdom, Jews have a much brighter future in open democratic societies than they have in their own homeland.

---

1 *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 January 1986.

2 *Ibid.* (my italics).

3 Nahum Goldmann, *The Jewish Paradox*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1978, p 71.

This might not be true if they were able to secure a genuinely lasting settlement of the forty year conflict with the Palestinian people. Sadly, I found people on all sides almost totally sceptical and pessimistic about any such possibility.

It would be ridiculously naive to imagine that Israelis will emigrate in large droves from their country, however much the logic of history might counsel it,<sup>1</sup> for their attachment to the 'Promised' Land has an emotional, even mystical quality which goes beyond the purely calculating and pragmatic.<sup>2</sup> The continuing tragedy of the Middle East is largely sustained by this ineffable and sacred kinship with the land. To this subject, and particularly its theological significance, we now turn.

## 2 The Land

There seem to be at least three powerful reasons why Jews feel so deeply attached to a plot of real estate at the Eastern end of the Mediterranean. Historically, since the advent of Zionism in the first decades of the nineteenth century, they arose in this order: a place of refuge from persecution and discrimination, a land transformed by the perspiring dedication of the pioneers and, of course, a location rendered special by biblical promise and archeological discovery.

Nothing comparable to the Jews 'return' to the land of their ancestors after 1,800 years has ever happened before. Even though, in my estimation, a sad misfortune, it has a number of remarkable features: The extraordinary Balfour Declaration of 1917, which seemed incompatible with contemporaneous promises made to the Arab inhabitants of Palestine; the notably successful illegal immigration of thousands of Jews during the British Mandate and the quite bizarre manoeuvrings which led to the UN Partition vote of November 1947. The Jews certainly seem to be where they are against all the odds. The often astonishing circumstances which led to the creation of the state of Israel have provoked a number of Jews and Christians to interpret the overcoming of so many obstacles as directly due to God's intervention.

- 
- 1 There has been, nevertheless, more emigration than immigration over the last few years (even a large percentage of Russian 'refuseniks', when they eventually secure permission to leave Russia, settle in the West rather than Israel). Underpopulation is another factor in Israel's economic instability.
  - 2 Wherever Jews decide to settle in the future, Western nations might do well to tighten their anti-racist legislation by incorporating particularly heavy penalties against proven anti-Semitism, thus giving Jews a greater sense of security in making their home in these countries.

And yet, there is so much to be said on the other side. In one sense, right from the beginning of the Zionist dream the creation of a Jewish homeland was built on the double falsehood contained in the famous words of Herzl that there is 'a people without a land and a land without a people.'<sup>1</sup> Both sides of this equation are unsustainable.

### *A People without a Land?*

That Jews did not have a land rests on several assumptions. The statement presumes that collectively they were a people who had a right to come together from among the nations to form themselves into a political entity. It also presumes that they had a right to political self-determination in a geographical location they controlled. It presumes furthermore that the situation of diaspora was abnormal, and political hegemony normal. Each of these assumptions can and has been challenged. They have much more to do with the resolute stirrings of ethnic nationalism in nineteenth century Europe than with any conceivable absolute rights. For any group of people to claim direct descent from the inhabitants of a land after 1,800 years and, as a result, the right to return there would, if universalized, produce total chaos in the present world. Even claims going back a few hundred years (black slaves forcibly deported to the Caribbean, USA and Brazil, for example) would seem wholly incongruous today. The truth is that no other ethnic minority group (if that is what the Jews are) gained for themselves their own nation. Serbs, Croats, Slovaks, Catalans, Basques, Welsh, Flemish and others have all formed part of multi-ethnic states. What, then, makes the Jews so special?

Long before the final dispersion of Jews from Palestine in 135 AD, there were numerous colonies of Jews living in the diaspora all around the Mediterranean and beyond. Does one presume that they lived outside *Eretz Yisrael*, because they were physically prevented from settling there? Apparently diaspora was then quite an acceptable way of being a Jew as long as pilgrimage to Jerusalem was possible. If one allows that Abraham was the 'father' of the Jewish people, and that he lived approximately in 1700 BC then the Jews have been in 'diaspora' well over half their existence (400 years in Egypt, 70 years in Babylon and 1,800 years since Bar Kokhba). Moreover, more than two-thirds of all living Jews continue to live in the diaspora. Admittedly, a number of these (most particularly in the Soviet Union) are constrained against their will to remain where they are. However, even if they were allowed to leave, there is no compelling reason to think they would all automatically settle in Israel. Moreover, from a theological point of view, Jews would remain more faithful to their calling to be a blessing to the nations by grasping the opportunities which are theirs in many parts of the world today (Jeremiah's counsel to the exiles in Babylon - Jeremiah 29:4-9 - is a charter for ethnic fulfilment).

---

1 Cf. Goldmann, *op. cit.*, p 88.

*A Land without a People?*

That the Land did not have a people is a manifest absurdity. It has never been more than a crude piece of propaganda. It rests on two arguments: Firstly, that the people who actually did live in Palestine had only migrated there a few decades before Jews began to return; secondly, that they had no aspirations to form themselves into a separate nation.

The first argument has been given a modicum of credibility in a recently published book<sup>1</sup> where Joan Peters argues that 'the Palestinians' never were in fact a real people with a real history in Palestine. They were immigrants who had inhabited the land only recently, and not from 'time immemorial'. The logical conclusion of the book is that the refugee problem created by the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 is not real, for they were never displaced from territory they could claim as their own on the basis of persistent occupation. Though received with approbation in much of the US press, Peters's book has uniformly been condemned in the British press as a catena of factual distortions, the manipulation of data and the ignoring of contrary-evidence, all wholly unworthy of a book purporting to be scholarly. Albert Hourani of Oxford University dismisses it as 'a ludicrous and worthless book'.<sup>2</sup> Even more damaging, the book was given scant regard in the Israeli press. According to Edward Said of Columbia University the reviewer in *Davar* noted that most of Peters' evidence was based on Israeli *hasbara* (propaganda), so discredited that Israeli government officials no longer use it.<sup>3</sup>

The truth is that at the moment of the Balfour Declaration there were approximately nine times as many Arabs living in Palestine as Jews (a fact which makes Balfour's famous reference to the rights of 'existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine' extremely tendentious). In 1922, 700,000 lived there. This had risen to 850,000 in 1931 and 1,300,000 in 1947.<sup>4</sup> Hardly a land without a people!

As far as the emergence of national identity is concerned, this began in the nineteenth century when the expansionist policies of Western nations in the Balkans put intolerable pressure on the old Ottoman Empire. Until that time the Turks discouraged regional loyalties. Nationalism was strengthened, however, by the general rediscovery of Arabic culture, and by the armed involvement of Arabs alongside the British in the military defeat of the Turks in 1917. It became crystallized by the perceived threat of Zionist aspirations both in the creeping colonization of the land and in the promise of a homeland.<sup>5</sup> As has often been pointed out the Pales-

- 1 Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab Jewish Conflict Over Palestine*, Harper & Row, New York 1984.
- 2 *Observer*, 5 March, 1985.
- 3 Article in *The Nation*, 19 October 1985.
- 4 The present estimate is of about 4 million Palestinians living in refugee camps, the occupied territories, Jordan and the diaspora.
- 5 Cf. D. Gilmour, *Dispossessed: The Ordeal of The Palestinians*, Sphere Books, London 1984, ch. 2.

tinians' resolve to secure their own state is the mirror-image of the Jews own nationalistic desire, and comes to haunt the latter with their own dream.

#### *A Prophesied Return?*

The final argument for a return to the land was not advanced strongly by the first generations of Zionists. It came initially from groups of evangelical Christians (like Lord Shaftesbury) who interpreted certain biblical prophecies to imply that in the last days God would gather together his people, the Jews, from the places where he had scattered them and bring them back to the land he had once promised them.

The Zionist vision of a homeland for Jews to be both a sanctuary from oppression and a space to create a new chapter of their history as an alternative to assimilation coincided quite remarkably (some would say miraculously) with the rise of a theological scheme known as Dispensationalism. The latter had, as one of its cardinal tenets, the belief that God worked out his purposes for the world according to a series of epochs or dispensations. After the coming of Jesus Christ, world history would be divided into two main periods: The gathering in of disciples from the Gentile nations (referred to in Mat. 24:14) and an unprecedented turning of Jews to Jesus as their Messiah immediately before the final judgment. Prior to this period of conversion, and partly the cause of it, would occur the massive return of Jews to the Promised Land.

Though rejected by the vast majority of biblical scholars (evangelical and otherwise), this scheme has strongly influenced the writings and policies of particular sectors of the churches, especially in the USA. Amongst other things it has added to the powerful Jewish lobby in the United States of America a numerically strong Christian grouping, in full support of Israel's existence, whose theological stance has in many ways been in tune with the mind-set of the present and previous incumbents of the White House.

According to this way of reading the Bible, the right of Jews to repossess Israel rests on the literal fulfilment of biblical prophecy. The evidence is two-fold: there is the original promise to Abraham that his seed would possess the land in perpetuity, and there are the numerous passages in the prophets (eg Isa. 60, 61) which speak of a glorious, future restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land. The interpretation looks most attractive, for it appears so straightforward. Those who dispute a biblical basis for the present state of Israel seem to be evading the plain meaning of the text by cunning strategies and with devious motives. And yet, the issue is not settled by stating that the establishment of a national homeland for Jews within the ancient boundaries given to the Hebrew people some 3,500 years ago is a literal fulfilment of prophecy.

Were this matter simply an in-house dispute about biblical exegesis among different groups of Christians it might be dismissed as episodic and incidental. However, because modern Israel as a nation-state has adopted a

policy to the disadvantage of thousands of Arab Christian believers (among others), based on an interpretation of its identity which now relies heavily on the appropriation of the language of biblical promise, the rights and wrongs of certain ways of interpreting Scripture cannot be ignored.

I want to give, therefore, some reasons for rejecting the belief that the return of Jews to the Holy Land is evidence for the specific fulfilment of those Old Testament promises which have to do with a future possession of the land.

The land, in biblical thought, belongs unquestionably to God. There is no question, therefore, of any people or nation having any absolute claim upon any portion of it. There is no divine right to settle. The land (from the Nile to the Euphrates) was promised to Abraham by God as a gift of grace (Gen. 15:18; 17:1, 8). It came as an integral part of a series of promises: I will make an everlasting covenant to be your God; I will make you into a great nation, and all people on earth will be blessed through you. In interpreting these unprecedented promises, it is important to see how they were fulfilled. It is illegitimate to understand them in a wholly literal way and then conclude that they still await an exact fulfilment at some future date. Each promise has *already* been fulfilled to Abraham's descendants. The question is who are they?

The words added to the promise on two occasions, 'for ever,' 'an everlasting possession' (Gen. 13:15; 17:8), have aroused deep interest. Is this not proof that Abraham's descendants through Isaac would have an eternal right to the land? However, two observations help to put the promise in a wider context. Firstly, the usage seems to be of 'intensive' rather than of unlimited time. The reality of the promise and the trustworthiness of the promises are being emphasized. Hence, on other occasions the promises, 'for ever,' 'evermore,' 'everlasting,' clearly do not have a timeless quality about them (cf. Lev. 25:46; 1 Sam. 2:30; 2 Sam. 7:29; 1 Kngs. 9:3; 1 Chr. 17:14; Isa. 34:10). Though the same qualification is added in each instance, a clear distinction is made between different gifts or institutions which God provides for his people. On one side, there is the covenant, the law, God's word, his salvation, justice and holiness. They are all eternal. On the other side, there is the priesthood, the temple, the monarchy, slavery, and the land. Each of these is also given 'eternally,' and yet each was also taken away.

Secondly the promises of the land are conditional on keeping the terms of the covenant. This is particularly clear in Deuteronomy. If the people make graven images, worship other gods, commit immoral acts or fail to establish justice for the poor, then the Lord will scatter his people among the nations (Deut. 4:25-26; 8:19-20; 15:10-11; 30:17-18). The other nations are driven out of the land because of their wickedness. However, Israel can easily suffer the same fate as well, for it is a stubborn people (Deut. 9:4-6).

The announcement by the prophets of an exile beyond the borders of the Promised Land is of a piece with the conditional nature of God's prom-

ises. Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (Deut. 27:12ff.) stand as a permanent memorial of God's blessing and God's curse. They are linked to the choice between life and death (Deut. 30:17-20). Disobedience is a choice for death, for it is the choice of homelessness.

The gift of the land was for a purpose. To claim it presumptuously as an eternal right, even when the purpose was being openly flouted implied an attempt to manipulate God, turning him into a tribal deity. The prophets spoke against such effrontery in the most forceful terms. God's people were not to rely on seemingly unshakeable institutions, neither the temple nor the land were sacrosanct. What God had given he could take away (Jer. 7:5-15; 9:13-16; Mic. 2:4).

The Exile marks a landmark in the history of the Israelites for a number of reasons. Though they were promised a return to Zion, and Jeremiah bought a plot of land as a sign and seal that God would make good his word, they were also encouraged to involve themselves thoroughly in the life of the nation to which they had been sent. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles is the first indication that the diaspora is not an unmitigated disaster, and that to remain as God's people it is not absolutely necessary to live within the land. Those who returned were only a portion of those who had gone. A sizeable group of Jews remained behind in Babylon. The land they returned to was far less in extent than that reigned over by Josiah, some one hundred years earlier. Indeed, the extent of *Eretz Yisrael* at this time may have been little more than the hill country around Jerusalem, perhaps as far south as Hebron and north to the region of Samaria. Finally, accompanying the Exile and Restoration, is the promise of a new covenant, through which God promises to write his laws upon the hearts of his people, enabling them to keep his laws through the gift of his Spirit.

When we begin reading the New Testament we seem to be breathing a totally different atmosphere. The promises of the land are only touched on in three brief historical reminiscences (Acts 7:4-5, 45; 13:19; Heb. 11:9). When Paul mentions the privileges enjoyed by his people (Rom. 9:1-5), he does not explicitly mention the land at all. *There is not a single, even vague hint that prophetic promises of a restoration of the physical descendants of Abraham to the Promised Land might take place at a future date.* The New Testament is totally silent about those texts in the Old Testament which some Christian exegetes see being fulfilled in the present state of Israel. There is a deafening silence, as significant as that which surrounds the word 'priest' (never in the New Testament applied to only one ministerial group in the church).

When the hope of being allowed to dwell securely in the land was so potent a force in the Old Testament, such a void in the New Testament surely demands an explanation. The only one which does justice to the evidence is that the promise of the land has been fulfilled, it no longer applies. The only possible reference to the promise of the land on the lips of Jesus is in the Beatitudes, 'blessed are the meek for they will inherit the

land (earth).’ As all good cross-reference Bibles will show, the saying is an echo of Psalm 37:11, ‘The meek shall possess the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.’ Elsewhere in the same Psalm it is said that ‘Those who wait for the Lord,’ ‘Those blessed by the Lord,’ ‘The righteous will possess the land’. In these texts we begin to see who are Abraham’s descendants, those who will inherit the land for ever. They are the righteous, humble poor. What they will inherit is not the physical, literal land of Palestine, but the feast of God’s Kingdom. Like exiles returning from the four corners of the globe, many will come from North, South, East and West and dine with the Patriarchs (Luke 13:28-30).

Those who inherit the promises are not only of Israel: ‘the sons of the Kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness . . .’; ‘. . . he will let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons . . . therefore I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it’ (Mat. 21:41, 43).

The clearest reference to the fulfilment of the promise of the land in the Kingdom comes in Jesus’ reply to the significantly obtuse question put to him by His disciples subsequent to the resurrection: ‘Lord will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?’ (Acts 1:6). The question reflects the Jewish belief of the time that the advent of the Messiah will bring with it a restoration of the land to the sovereignty of the Jewish people. It assumes the same conviction shared by those who look today for a literal fulfilment of prophecy, namely that God has yet a special purpose for the Jewish people on their own. Indeed, these same people would separate Acts 1:7 and 8 completely, thus divorcing Acts 1:8 from the disciples’ question, rather than making the statement about a universal mission an answer to it. The majority of commentators, however, understand the statement about the coming of the Holy Spirit and a universal witness to Jesus as an interpretation of the meaning of the Kingdom. The Kingdom, when it does come, will not be a national state given over to one particular people, but a universal community. *The idea of the land being restored to the Jewish people can only arise where the full significance of Jesus’ universal mission is not understood.*

If any doubt remained then the warnings about the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the structures and institutions of nationhood should indicate that with the coming of Jesus, God was doing a new thing. Israel’s redemption is secured not in the restoration of its former glory, but in the recognition that the universal promises to Abraham are now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The temple will be destroyed, but Jesus’ resurrected body is the new temple. The Levitical priesthood will end, but Jesus is a priest for ever. The land will be taken away, but those who enter the new age of the Spirit by faith in Jesus will now be a holy nation, God’s own people. All God’s promises are in principle already fulfilled in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). There is, therefore, no parallel set of promises which by-pass the first coming of Christ, only to be fulfilled at his second coming.



Nevertheless, some would argue that one verse at least points conclusively to a repossession of the land (or at least Jerusalem) by the Jews: 'Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled' (Luke 21:24). However, such an interpretation is only demanded if one assumes what the verse is designed to prove, namely that Jews will repossess the holy city. But that is to argue in a circle. 'Until' need not mean any more than that Jerusalem will be plundered until such time as the Gentiles decide they have completed their purposes. That Jesus is referring to the sacking of Jerusalem in 70AD seems obvious from the statement in Luke 21:32, 'This generation will not pass away till all has taken place'. The actual grammar of the sentence requires no additional fulfilment at some later date.

### 3 The People of God

Discussion of the land cannot be separated from the debate about the Jews and God's special calling of a people for his own possession. This is a deeply emotive question for it touches on both the Jewish sense of self-identity and on the nature and purpose of the church in God's plan of salvation. In the last resort one's views on Israel's existence and return to the land will be strongly influenced by one's convictions about the composition of the community of God's people. Though this issue is rooted in the interpretation of theological texts, it has many contemporary practical consequences.

Three main views have been taken by Christians regarding the question whether the Jews continue in some sense to be God's people. There are those who accept that God relates to Jews and Gentiles on the basis of two different but complementary covenants. A second group believe that physical Israel still has a special place in God's plan of salvation, though this can only be realized when Jews turn to Jesus Christ. A third group believes that with the coming of Christ a new phase in the history of salvation has been inaugurated, in which peoplehood has become universal, no longer ethnically specific. I want to argue the case for this third view, but at the same time present the other two positions, as fairly as possible.

#### *Two Parallel Covenants?*

A number of basic affirmations are made to demonstrate that the Jews are still a covenant people. God's covenant with Israel is eternal, it cannot be revoked (Rom. 11:2, 28-29). The covenant established at Sinai, therefore, is valid. At the time of Christ there were two interlocking traditions within Judaism – the 'rabbinic,' based on faithful observance of the *halakha*, (the legal requirements of the divine law) and the 'eschatological', which fervently looked for the coming of the Messiah as fulfilment of the covenant with David. The community which wrote the New Testament was one interpretation of this latter tradition.

However, according to some theologians, in identifying Jesus of Nazareth with the Messiah of the end times they went too far. Jesus could not have been the Messiah, because the promised Kingdom did not arrive

with him, except in an anticipatory way. The early church, therefore, created a false absolutism out of their belief in Jesus. Instead of being content with seeing themselves as one development of first century Judaism, they pretended to represent the total fulfilment of all the divine promises to Israel. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether this claim to bring the promises belonging to the end of history into present time was illegitimate. It has led, she asserts, to credal totalitarianism and ecclesiastical, political imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, in taking over so completely the eschatological tradition of Judaism, the early Church failed to do justice to faith as obedience to God's law. Paul, in particular, allowed his polemic against the 'judaizers' to become a polemic against the whole synagogue tradition in Judaism, making a split inevitable. Jesus' own position was not a rejection of torah, only a relativizing of traditions which blocked the authentic observation of the precepts. His call to repentance was in preparation for the coming Kingdom of God. It was a call to *return* to the practice of torah so that God's reign could be established. Jesus' preaching focused mainly on the profoundest salvific intentions of the law and a deepening of Israel's experience of God as Father.

The break with Judaism came after 70AD, when both religious traditions, in need of discovering their own identity did so in mutual isolation and antagonism. It was after this time that Christianity increasingly developed into a hellenistic interpretation of the Christ-event.

Those who argue along these lines tend to see Christian faith as valid only for Gentiles. The Church has taken over the universal elements of the biblical message and become a witness to the one God among all nations. This, however, does not invalidate the continuing role of the Jews as an expression of corporate faith in God. Their vocation is to work out faith in God in terms of a national entity, a task which in the nature of the case the church cannot do. Moreover, as Jurgen Moltmann emphasizes,<sup>2</sup> the continuing existence of Israel, as a community of hope, shows the Church that the redemption of the world is still to come. It is a constant reminder to the Church that it needs to repent of any trace of triumphalism.

### *A Special Place for the Jews?*

The second group we have identified also believe that God's election of the Jews means that they still have a particular calling to fulfil in salvation history. Unlike the first group, they do not see this as referring to the present moment, but to the time immediately prior to Christ's second coming. Paul's remarks at the end of Romans 11 are interpreted to mean that there will be a significant turning of Jews to Jesus the Messiah at that time. Then, the Jews will take a foremost part in the missionary outreach of the

---

1 Cf. J. T. Pawlikowski, *What are They Saying about Christian-Jewish Relations?* Paulist Press, New York 1980, pp 46-47.

2 *Ibid.*, p 53.

Church to the rest of the world so that Christ's saying, 'This gospel of the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations', may be finally fulfilled. 'And then the end will come'.

However, according to this scheme of things, the Jews should not be left in the belief that fulfilment of their covenanted obligations is their path to salvation. God has always accepted people into fellowship with himself on the basis of grace and faith. Since the coming of Christ, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, for access to the one Father is for both through faith alone in Jesus Christ. As a result, patient witness to Jews of salvation in Christ is an obligation laid upon the Christian church.

Those who hold to a special place for Jews in God's future purposes are usually pro-Zionists. Clearly their understanding of Scripture requires the survival of Jews as a special community. They tend to interpret this survival as being linked to the possession of a homeland. So, they accept the notion people/land as still significant for Jews. Naturally, they see the evangelism of Jews as completing, rather than negating Judaism. But the connection between the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness and the revival of the Jews is part of an essential theological package.

#### *One New Humanity in Place of the Two*

The two preceding interpretations of Judaism are forcefully present in Israel amongst those Christians (mainly from the West) who are engaged in dialogue and/or evangelism among Jews. By the same token they are almost uniformly rejected by Arab Christians who start from quite different theological premises.

The debate is about the current understanding of the Bible. It has to do, therefore, with principles of interpretation in the light of the Jewish-Arab dispute. In my judgment the two positions outlined above spring from an ill-conceived hermeneutical procedure. In the first case, extra-biblical factors are allowed to determine what is read out of Scripture. In the second case there is an over-reliance on one single passage as a key to interpreting God's future.

Listening to Western Christians, who admirably see their vocation as building bridges of friendship and understanding with Jews in order to try to interpret afresh Jewish-Christian relations, one receives the distinct impression that historical event is given precedence over theological texts. What I mean is that the Christian view of Judaism is determined by certain incontrovertible facts of the last 2,000 years. These facts are: a veiled anti-Semitism in certain parts of the New Testament; the exclusion and anathematizing of Jews from the covenant of grace with the dangerous charge of 'deicide'; the systematic persecution of Jews by Christians down the ages; the monumental crisis of the holocaust; the existence of the State of Israel and the failure of the Church to embody to any significant degree the reality of the Kingdom. These significant historical realities are made into the factors which determine what conclusions Christians may legitimately deduce from the Scriptures. Thus, for example, in spite of the

fact that Jews were objects of the early Church's evangelistic task, today mission to Jews is inadmissible, because of 'the sacred importance of Jewish survival'.<sup>1</sup>

The second group of interpreters hang too much on a few verses in Romans 11, which they treat as a self-sufficient and self-explanatory statement of Paul's view of the continuing place of his people in God's plan of salvation. In seeking to show that the Jews in relation to their ethnic existence no longer have a distinct role in salvation history since the coming of Christ, I will begin with an examination of Romans 11.

In Romans 9-11 Paul turns to the problem posed by his people's general attitude of unbelief towards Jesus Christ. The problem, central to salvation history, is, has not God's word failed? Such an idea is unthinkable. Paul argues that there is no essential difference between the difficulty the Jews have in accepting Christ as the culmination of the covenants, law and promises and the unbelief and stubbornness they have shown throughout their history. God's word, therefore, is fulfilled through faithful Israel, 'a remnant, chosen by grace' (Rom. 11:5). This remnant is the real Israel, 'not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel . . . not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants' (Rom. 9:6-7).<sup>2</sup>

From this principle Paul derives another similar one: 'This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of promise are reckoned as descendants' (Rom. 9:8). By comparing this verse with Romans 2:28-29, one can see that Paul is not talking only about Abraham's seed through Isaac, but of all physical descendants of the patriarchs - 'he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly . . . He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal'.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, God's purposes begin in election (Rom. 9:11) and are fulfilled in all those who share, not Abraham's flesh, but his faith (cf. Gal. 3:7; Rom. 4:11, 14, 16). God's word has not failed, for it is fulfilled in all who believe that God's promises find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ, Jew and Gentile, alike.

The people of God, then, are those who have received mercy (Rom. 9:15, 23). It is formed by both Jews and Gentiles and is in continuity with the remnant within historical Israel (Rom. 9:27; 11:5).

Israel's problem (and this makes the two covenant theory impossible to countenance from the perspective of the apostolic interpretation of Christ) has been its assertion that recognition by God can be achieved through obedience to the law (Rom. 9:32). But zealous observance of their religion

- 
- 1 Pawlikowski, *op. cit.*, p 67. The Christian Kibbutz, Nes Ammim, has renounced mission in principle and in practice. However, this stance causes considerable tension within the community.
  - 2 Compare Gal. 3:29. 'If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring'; Gal. 4:28, 'We, brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise'.
  - 3 Compare Gal. 6:15; Phil. 3.3.

does not bring salvation. Religious observance – the attempt to establish a righteous life – is one thing; salvation – accepting God's free gift of forgiveness and new life, and demonstrating this in a transformed existence – is something wholly different. If salvation comes through keeping the Torah, then we would have to do it without a single failure (Rom. 10:5). The law, however, cannot deal with the problem of failure. When it comes to salvation, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. Each equally needs to call on the Lord for mercy (Rom. 10:12-13). The preaching of grace and faith is a great scandal to the religious mind, for it is inevitably a negative judgment on the religious person's observance and traditions.

God's Word has not failed for the Gentiles have come to acknowledge its truth and their acceptance of the Jewish Messiah is designed now to provoke the Jews into belief (Rom. 10:19; 11:11, 14).

This is the overall context for interpreting chapter 11. We must avoid seeming to make Paul's argument here contradict what he says earlier, or in other places. We should not treat it as a theological discussion complete in itself.

Unbelief on Israel's part is *not* a sign that God has abandoned them, 'or that they are now a cursed people.' Paul himself is proof of God's continuing concern. There is no incompatibility between being an Israelite and a believer in Jesus. However, to ask whether God has rejected the Jews is *not* the same question as asking whether he still has a special purpose for them. Paul does not hint at such a possibility. The Jew, like the Gentile, is part of the entire human race, whose representative head is Jesus Christ. With regard to salvation Jews have both an advantage (Rom. 9:4-5) and a disadvantage (Rom. 10:2-3).

The crux of Paul's argument, which also gives a framework for understanding the dilemma, Israel-Church, comes in Romans 11:17ff. He uses the analogy of the root, trunk and branches of the olive tree. The branches represent both Jews and Gentiles – the one natural, the other wild and grafted in. The olive tree represents God's dealings with Israel, it is the covenanted history of the people of faith. From God's action in history spring first Jews, then Gentiles. They remain either in the one covenant relationship with God or they are cut off on the sole grounds of belief or unbelief: *unbelief* – Jews (Rom. 11:20), Gentiles (22); *belief* – Jews (23), Gentiles (20).

There are not two separate covenants nor two separate bodies, for the Jews do not continue as a separate olive tree. They are grafted back in to the one and only tree (Rom. 11:23, 24). In the light of this clear principle, the famous words 'all Israel' must refer to the whole olive tree, Jew and Gentile together truly descended from Abraham. We may note that Paul says that '... so all Israel will be saved,' not '... then ...', as if he hinted at a future event when the physical descendants of Abraham would turn to Christ in an unprecedented way.

God's faithfulness to His word is maintained by the principles of election (Rom. 9; 11:28), the remnant (11:5) and mercy (11:31). The natural

descendants of Abraham cannot presume upon it. Nor dare the Gentiles boast, because the Jews fail to believe (such presumption has been the bane of Jewish-Christian relations on both sides). The foundation of Paul's theology in these chapters is God's calling and mercy and the invitation to faith. These (not the eternal existence of the Jews as a people or nation) are irrevocable, for God does not change his nature. It is the thought of God's mercy which evokes the doxology at the end.

Paul's argument, using the olive-tree metaphor, is developed and deepened in his reflections on the meaning of the Gospel in Ephesians 2 and 3. It has been suggested that Paul (in Rom. 9-11), never came to a final conclusion about the position of Jew and Gentile in salvation history, hence the ending, 'how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!' Even if not, his theology of the church in Ephesians is a complete answer. This fact has often been ignored in the controversy raging over Romans 11.

Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to illustrate what has happened to Jew and Gentile as a result of Christ's death and resurrection. They have become 'members of the same body' (Eph. 3:6), by being reconciled 'in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end' (Eph. 2:16). The Gentiles have been incorporated into the fellowship of promise, the commonwealth of Israel (2:12). They have been brought near to God in the blood of Christ (2:13). But their reconciliation to God has not happened in isolation. It has effected a simultaneous reconciliation with the Jewish people. Not, however, in such a way that, although they no longer live in hostility there are still two separate bodies, living their own independent existence. The peace that Jesus has achieved has also brought into being a new creation. 'One new man in place of the two' (RSV), 'Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one . . . , so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself' (NEB).<sup>1</sup>

It is vitally important to capture the revolutionary claims of Paul's vision of the salvific work of Christ. The reconciliation does not bring two parties into the same room, so that they may settle their differences, pledge themselves to live in peace together, and then go their separate ways. That is more or less the belief of those who propose two separate covenants or even of those who suggest two separate approaches to God within one covenant. It is the assumption undergirding much Jewish-Christian dialogue. According to Paul's understanding of Christ's self-sacrifice, the reconciliation leads to a new kind of body, in which all human relations are being transformed (Col. 3:10-15).

---

1 I take the reference to 'abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances' (Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14) to mean observation of the law as a way of reconciliation and a path to righteousness. Righteousness by obedience to the law is futile, because it brings a sense of guilt to those conscious of failure. Paul, on the other hand, is not arguing that the crucifixion annulled the Mosaic covenant which required a life of righteousness based on God's revealed will (cf. Eph. 2:8-10).

Now, the point is that this new creation is the Gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ is that Jew and Gentile have been brought together to participate in one new community. This is 'The mystery of Christ . . . now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit' (Eph. 3:6) 'Of this gospel I was made a minister' (Eph. 3:7). The new community is not a consequence of the gospel, or simply the messenger of the gospel, it is the gospel.

According to the same argument, Jews cannot have some separate place in God's future plans, for the assembly of believers in Jesus Christ is God's future, it is *now* the community of the end times. The meaning of God's election of Israel, of his promises to Abraham, of his requirement that his people should be a light to the nations is that a new kind of humanity which would end all forms of ethnic segregation and exclusiveness, be created. This is the one and only plan which God has had 'hidden for ages, but now made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places' (Eph. 3:10). The Church is the first-fruits and sign of the reconciliation of all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20). *It would seem, therefore, impossible to accord to the Jews a special status as the people of God (either in the present or the future) without denying the heart of the Gospel, which is the springboard of hope in a tragically divided world.*

However, something went disastrously wrong in the later history of the Church with Paul's superlative vision. Basically, the Church inverted the order by which the two communities came together. The apostolic teaching is that Jesus Christ is of Israel, and the Gentiles have to find him there. Later Jesus Christ was 'hijacked' by the Gentiles and the Jews had to come into a hellenistic milieu to find him there. Even worse, as Fr Daniel graphically put it,<sup>1</sup> the Jews were locked out of the Church and the key thrown away. But this was a judgment on the Church, for in one sense it was the Jews, because of the Gentiles' arrogance and insensitivity, who locked the door from the outside and walked away.

In conclusion, it is necessary to emphasize what Paul's theology of the Church does *not* mean. Firstly, it does not mean that Gentiles have become 'the new people' of God. The Israel of God is that body of faith in existence since Abraham in which Gentiles have now been incorporated through Christ. Secondly, it does not mean that Jews who believe in Jesus have to abandon their whole cultural heritage. On the contrary, Christian faith is an extension, or fresh interpretation, of what it meant to be Jewish in the first century. If it had not been for the excessive Hellenisation and Romanisation of the church from the third and fourth centuries onwards, the essentially Jewish roots of 'the Way' would have remained. Rabbinic Judaism, then, instead of defining Judaism for all time would have been simply another interpretation or tradition. Thirdly, it does not mean that Jews collectively can be held responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, and therefore remain for ever outside of God's mercy. Such a view is a direct

---

1 In personal conversation.

denial of the Gospel of incorporation into the body of Christ. It is also as irrational as saying that Christians in general were responsible for the Nazi holocaust. No! Rightly understanding the Pauline vision of incorporation into Christ, enables one to understand not only the true position of Jew and Gentile in God's purposes but also places the whole Middle East dilemma in a new perspective. It is from this perspective that Christians both inside and outside Palestine/Israel should review their responsibility to seek to bring justice and heal wounds.

### Conclusion

The implications of the arguments I have been putting forward have, I believe, practical consequences for Christians both in Israel, the West Bank, and Britain. All along I have been expressing personal opinions, which I offer very tentatively. Because the whole area of discussion is so problematic, I would welcome critical observation in the hope that a truly Christian response to the tragic dilemma afflicting the land of Palestine may arise amongst us.

#### *a Anti-Semitism*

I have little doubt that some of my comments will be conceived by some people to be anti-Semitic. Those of us who have not suffered racial abuse cannot really appreciate what it feels like to be the direct object of the deeply irrational and odious prejudice of others. Therefore we should not be surprised or hurt, if we are accused, in a way we think unfair, of harbouring anti-Semitic sentiments.

In particular, arguments which oppose the ideal of a separate state for Jews (anti-Zionism) are interpreted by most Jews as a subtle and rather insidious form of anti-Semitism. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, Israel is the Jews' own answer to what Kenneth Cragg calls 'psychic Judeophobia'.<sup>1</sup> No-one else has a right to question their belief that this is the only way to regain their dignity as a people. Questioning Israel is taken to be a denial of the Jewish right to survive in the way they deem most fitting. Therefore, it is a form of anti-Semitism.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, nationhood is for Jews an integral part of their self-identity as a people. To be fully Jews they need to be able to express their culture and history within a national context over which they have full control. Again, forfeiture of this right is considered a denial of ethnic self-fulfilment, and therefore racist.

These are compelling arguments, given the generalized contempt heaped upon Jews in many parts of the world. In the last resort, however, they are specious and, importantly, counter-productive from a Jewish point of view. I have already argued that theologically faith cannot easily be matched up with the daily exercise of political power. It is dangerous for both to identify a state with a religious tradition. History, too, is against the

---

1 *This Year in Jerusalem*, DLT, London 1982, p 17.

2 Cf. Marmur, *op. cit.*, p 43.



necessity of a Jewish state. In one sense, if Jews had created their own nation in a virtually uninhabited and politically uncontroversial corner of the globe (say Patagonia), the present discussion would probably not have arisen. However, the manner in which Israel was created not only puts a question mark against Zionism, it positively counters it.

Nahum Goldmann stated that the Jewish homeland is necessary to safeguard values of concern to all humanity, and that Israel constitutes the sole means of enabling Jewish people to continue their contribution to civilization.<sup>1</sup> However, these are reasons which non-Jews have a right to determine. And the conclusion that many come to is that Israel behaves no differently from any other nation. Perhaps in some respects better, but in others worse. Israeli Jews often complain that their nation is judged from outside by standards far higher than those applied to any other. In part that may be so, but it is only because the expectations accorded to Zionism, and therefore part of its legitimation, were themselves so high. Zionism is a faded dream, a purpose invested with extraordinary hopes which has gone sadly wrong. One can sense that conclusion on all sides in talking to people in Israel. It is an enormous pity, therefore, that Jewish people all over the world have to be identified with Zionism. It could well be argued, simply from observation, that pro-Zionism often fans the flames of anti-Semitism. Conversely, to be anti-Zionist is, in the present circumstances, to be pro-Semitic, (of both Semitic people living in the area).

There is a deeper aspect to this whole agonizing history. It concerns the complex notion that the Jews are a special people amongst the nations. Again, theologically I have argued strongly that such a view is based on a failure to grasp the full significance of Jesus Christ's ministry of reconciliation. The apostolic testimony in the New Testament ought to be decisive for Christians. Naturally, one would not expect Jews to accept the interpretation given there of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of the whole ancient faith of Israel. Therefore, the conviction that the Jews are in no more of a special relationship with God than any other people, because God's covenant has now been ratified for all peoples in the death and resurrection of Jesus, may be taken simply as the reiteration of the Church's excuse for being hostile to Jews. Some have even gone as far as to describe the Christian conviction about the present position of Jews as a kind of Oedipus complex, in which the offspring wishes to eliminate the parent.

I would strongly contest the assumption that the consequences of the Christian view of fulfilment (or completion) of the promises to the Jews are necessarily anti-Semitic, though I would accept that in practice the Church has all too frequently interpreted them in this way. On the contrary, the Christian gospel ought to have the effect of lifting from the Jews a great burden – that of having to live up to the claims for chosenness. Dow Marmur says that 'on the whole, Jews have been embarrassed by the notion of

---

1 Ibid., Goldmann, op. cit., p 198.

choseness and have preferred to say as little as possible about it . . .'<sup>1</sup> However, he links the belief to Jewish survival, and therefore defends it against those (both Jews and Gentiles) who 'regard it as legitimate to refute the doctrine:' ' . . . by regarding Jews like any other people, I have suggested, the existence and future of Judaism becomes irrelevant and unimportant.'<sup>2</sup>

Contained in these words there is a fundamental illogicality, which by constant repetition, has contributed enormously to anti-Semitic feeling. They fail to draw a basic distinction (which is far more than merely semantic) between being a 'special' people and a 'chosen' people. Jews, *like any other people*, are special. They are unique. They have an enormously rich history, cultural tradition, and body of theological and spiritual reflection which makes them a distinct people. But, then, so do many other peoples. They are unlike other peoples in that their history and cultural formation is different. They are like all other people in that they do not now possess any special relationship to history not shared by others. It really is, by implication, a slur on other ethnic groups to suggest that the existence of Judaism is irrelevant unless choseness is conceded to them. What would the Aymaras, Xhosa, Tamils and countless thousands of others say to that? Jewishness continues by right as part of the enormously rich mosaic of cultural and racial diversity by which the world is made up. I cannot see why it should be any more likely to disappear than that of other cultures, most of which do not find expression in a homogeneous society. Many ethnic groups in Latin America have survived the most horrific attempts to decimate them, every bit as gruesome as the persecution unleashed against Jews down the ages.

We constantly return to this fundamental issue: why should Jews so frequently give the impression of being a special case? This is the root of most of their troubles. Kenneth Cragg has reflected deeply on this matter, not desiring to score easy debating points against Jews, but because he is genuinely perplexed as to why the wounds of Jews are so often self-inflicted. 'It is no coincidence,' he says 'that the most insistently self-exempted people in the world have been the most consistently isolated or rejected . . . The result, tragically, is that mankind reciprocates the exceptionalism in exceptional enmity. This is anti-Semitism.'<sup>3</sup>

Part of the persistent tragedy are those Christian traditions which go on insisting that Jews as such are uniquely included in God's present and future purposes. The belief perpetuates a myth which causes Jews untold and unnecessary damage. It is as if one defined anti-Semitism as 'holding the conviction that the Jews are a special people and then abusing them for being so.' Christians might make their most significant contribution to the abatement of anti-Semitism by resolutely giving to the Jews the only

---

1 Op. cit., p 175.

2 Ibid., p 176.

3 Op. cit., pp 159-160.

dignity and respect which they should have by right, that of being an integral part of the human race. For, as Cragg says, 'the Zionist State, despite its newness as a fresh departure, reproduces the ancient dilemma of Jewish history - how to belong to mankind.'<sup>1</sup> As the State of Israel is conceived today (and projected into the future), that sums up the essence of the Middle East dilemma. Let not Christians be guilty of fuelling the fire by the kind of reverse discrimination which only exacerbates anti-Jewish feeling.

At the same time, the Christians, because of past so-called Christian attitudes to Jews, bear a special responsibility to be alert to every manifestation of anti-Semitism as a particular kind of racism. In one discussion with a senior Jewish leader I was suggesting that open, aggressive anti-Semitic demonstrations were rare in West Europe today, and that therefore it would be much safer for Jews to live there, when possible, than in Israel. His perfectly legitimate reply was 'where are the Christians when Jewish synagogues are attacked? Are they prepared to stand alongside Jews in mounting a guard in times of threat? If they were, we would be more inclined to accept your view.' At the end of the day, this may well be by far the most significant contribution to the debate over anti-Semitism. Will we take the point?

#### b *Sharing the Gospel with Jews*

In spite of the traumatic experience which Jews have undergone at the hand of Christians, and in spite of the need of great circumspection in practice, the obligation to tell all people that Jesus Christ is good news is not limited in the case of Jews. Once one admits the overwhelming force of the New Testament interpretation of the Christ-event that there can be no separate covenant between God and the Jewish people (or any other people), then Jews are offered the same terms of salvation as everyone else. As David Maria Jaeger says, 'It is the very work of Christ which contradicts the one essential tenet of Judaism, namely that Torah obedience at its very best (cf. Rom. 10:2 with Phil. 3:6) is a necessary and sufficient condition of salvation . . .'<sup>2</sup>

A moratorium on evangelism would be an illegitimate response to the way Christians have scandalously libelled the integrity of Jewish belief in the past. The attitudes taken have had little or nothing to do with the Spirit of Christ, for genuine evangelism can be carried out only by those deeply conscious of the reality of God's unmerited grace. Therefore, not to proclaim the real meaning of the Jew, Jesus, in the Spirit of Jesus obscures and denies the one message that could bring genuine healing.

---

1 *Ibid.*, p 158.

2 'Towards Redefining Our Mission - with Respect to the Jewish People' in *Let Jews and Arabs Hear His Voice*, United Christian Council in Israel, 1981, p 39.

Nevertheless one can appreciate that Jews may well react nervously when they hear mention of evangelism. Too often it has brought with it a strong sense of superiority and the denigration of Jewish life and traditions, perhaps with a too aggressive approach to belief and conversion. Therefore, it seems to me that at least two considerations are vital if in the evangelistic task the means are going to reflect the ends.

Firstly, Jews should not be given the impression that conversion and baptism imply a change of religion. Gentiles sometimes seem to suggest that God has switched the covenant from unbelieving Jews to believing Gentiles. This mistaken idea is further confused by erroneously saying that the Church is the new Israel of God. On the contrary, the privileges of the covenant with Israel have been extended to include Gentiles. Jew and Gentile alike are invited to believe that all God's promises have been implemented by Jesus of Nazareth. The demands of the law have also been fulfilled by him, so that now all may obey its legitimate requirements (Rom. 8:1-4). So, a Jew in believing in Jesus is, in one sense discovering the real meaning of being himself or herself. The Church is not a new Israel, but an enlarged Israel. I believe that this conviction will mean that, as far as the present state of Israel is concerned, Christians will press for a policy of religious freedom which allows that commitment to Jesus is a legitimate interpretation of being a Jew. The reality ought to be that, by becoming a Christian, one does not cease to be a Jew, either ethnically, culturally or religiously (any more than a Kikuyu ceases being Kikuyu by becoming a Christian).

Secondly, wherever possible Jewish Christian believers, joined to Hebrew congregations, will be the spear-head, though not exclusive agent, of evangelism among their fellow Jews. They will probably bear a further particular responsibility in helping the rest of the Church discover both its Jewish roots and the richness of much in the Jewish tradition: 'a noble system of religious belief and practice containing much worthy of admiration and emulation, offering hitherto little known treasures of religious thought and spiritual doctrine to be reverently explored.'<sup>1</sup>

I am confident that evangelism carried on in this kind of sensitive and appropriate way reflects a proper indebtedness to the Jewish heritage.

**The Revd J. Andrew Kirk** is Theologian Missioner of the Church Missionary Society.

---

1 Ibid.