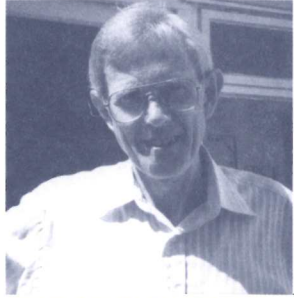


APOCALYPSE NOW IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE?

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AFTER THE SUICIDE BOMBS AND THE ISRAELI ASSASSINATION OF A MODERATE HAMAS LEADER IN MID-AUGUST IT IS HARD TO FEEL ANY OPTIMISM ABOUT THE PEACE PROCESS. The Road Map seems dead, and it looks as if we are heading for an intensification of the violence on both sides. Since the Book of Revelation speaks about a “last great battle” and locates it in the very land where this conflict is being played out, are we watching the build-up to a very literal Armageddon?

New Testament scholars remind us that the Book of Revelation is full of symbols that need to be decoded.¹ Biblical apocalyptic writing cannot be interpreted literally and should not be turned into a kind of “video of the future”. So instead of joining hands with between thirty- and seventy-million Christians in the USA who, for biblical and theological reasons, support Zionism and Israel in a rather uncritical way, it might be better to stand back and try to analyse the reasons for the recent escalation of the conflict.

It is easy, of course, to put most of the blame on the Palestinians. After agreeing to the Road Map and a temporary ceasefire, the Islamists of Hamas have sent their suicide bombers in once again to blow up innocent civilians on buses. Doesn't this show that the Palestinians are again shooting themselves in the foot? Having gained much of the moral high ground after so many years of conflict, are they not in danger of losing the sympathy of many all over the world who have recognised the basic justice of their cause? Perhaps the terrorists are doing exactly what Sharon expected (and perhaps even wanted?) them to do, and are, therefore, playing into the hands of the present Israeli government and giving it all the justification it needs to continue its hard-line policies.

Another way to interpret what is happening, however, is to say that while the Road Map may have seemed to be the only way forward, its basic weaknesses, which were pointed out by many from the beginning, are now being exposed for all to see. By focusing on the immediate problem of violence, it failed to recognise that the fundamental problem is not terrorism but the continued illegal occupation of the West Bank. The Road Map effectively put the Palestinians on probation while allowing Israel to go ahead with many of its plans for the West Bank. The Palestine Authority was put in the impossible position of having to crack down on militants, but without the reward of substantial concessions from Israel to reassure the Palestinians that their legitimate demands might be met. While holding out the hope of creating some kind of Palestinian state,

it postponed discussion of most of the crucial issues – the borders of the Palestinian state, the status of Jerusalem and the return of refugees. And the mechanism for monitoring violations of the agreement on both sides was hopelessly inadequate, with no effective arbitrator who could call them to account and apply sanctions.

The building of the monstrous 25 feet high wall on the West Bank at a cost of many billions of US dollars is one more example of the Israelis using security as a pretext for creating facts on the ground in such a way as to pre-empt discussion and ensure that any Palestinian entity which might eventually be created will be as small, as impotent and as meaningless as possible. In a recent letter to *The Times*, Sir Patrick Wright, a former British ambassador in Syria, questioned how anyone could ever think of this wall as a “good fence”, since it “transgresses the neighbour's property by as much as several miles in depth; cuts off the neighbour from his livelihood; encompasses settlements planted illegally on the neighbour's land; and undermines the neighbour's aspirations for a viable, independent state”.²

Could it not be argued that the building of this wall, combined with the targeted assassinations, the confiscation of land, the uprooting of olive groves, the demolition of houses and the constant harassment and humiliation of old and young at checkpoints amounts to a kind of violence that is just as reprehensible as the more obvious terrorism of Palestinian suicide bombers?

Some explain the escalation of the conflict by saying that religion has taken over from politics because it's all to do with Islam and its opposition to the Jewish people and the state of Israel. David Torrance, for example, argues that, “however important the political crisis in the Middle East is, the conflict is primarily religious and it is the religious dimension which has made it so difficult”.³ But if we try to understand the Israeli–Palestinian conflict *in its own terms*, it makes more sense to say that the religious dimension is secondary to the political. What we have witnessed since the 1980s is not a conflict between two religions but a conflict between two peoples who lay claim to the same piece of land – but for different reasons.

The basic problem, therefore, is not about religion but about dispossession. The Palestinians feel that their land has been taken over by people who have a historic connection with the land but have come in from outside in order to create a safe haven for themselves. Because the majority of the Palestinians happen to be Muslims,

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Islam has naturally given them a clear ideology to undergird their struggle. But if they had had a different culture or religion, they would no doubt have been just as angry and resentful because of the injustices that they had suffered. Most Christians have identified with the aspirations of the Palestinian movement, and the growth of Islamism in this context has been recent and gradual. Since Hamas did not come into existence until 1987, one could argue that its creation and growth has been, to a large extent, the product of despair. When Palestinian Muslims feel that they have been let down by their own leaders, by fellow Arabs and Muslims, and by the rest of the world, where else do they have to turn but to Islam for inspiration to continue their resistance to injustice?

At the present time, Palestinian Islamists may have good reasons for believing that the Israelis only signed up to the Road Map because of public pressure from the US and private assurances of sympathy with their reservations. To the Palestinian Islamists, the Palestinian Authority seems either incompetent, corrupt or colluding with the Israelis. They have little respect for George Bush and doubt if he actually understands what the conflict is all about. He and his Administration have seemed to be a soft touch to Sharon and to previous Israeli prime ministers who have learned how to manipulate American government policy and public opinion with the help of the Jewish and Christian lobbies.

Israel/Palestine needs also to be seen in the context of the war against Iraq. We all know that the declared reason for invading Iraq was to rid the region of the threat of weapons of mass destruction and to liberate the Iraqis from a despotic and cruel regime. But while these have been accepted by many as compelling reasons *when taken on their own*, much of the world outside America believes that the underlying aims of the invasion had to do with controlling supplies of oil and restructuring of the whole region according to the interests of the USA and Israel. Having learned the idea of pre-emptive attacks from Israel, which has engaged in them for decades, soldiers from America, Britain and other countries now find themselves in the same position as the Israelis in southern Lebanon after their invasion in 1982 until the withdrawal in 2001 and on the West Bank since the Intifada of 2001. The dream of bringing democracy to Iraq and the surrounding region, and thus supporting Israel, may prove to be harder to realise than Americans first thought.

If an analysis of this kind is anywhere near the mark, is there any hope for a resolution of the conflict? Those of us who watch from the sidelines can do little more than express our opinions about how the different parties involved might respond to what is happening. So this is my own "wish list" of attitudes that I think need to be changed and things that need to be done to give peace a chance.

1. *If only* the USA could recognise that, having become the single superpower and having appointed itself as the policeman of the world, it has got itself into an impossible position over this particular conflict. It is now the *only* power in the world that can put enough pressure on *both sides* to bring them together. At the same time, however, its one-sided support for one side over the last 25 years makes it impossible for it to act as an honest broker.

2. *If only* the EU could speak with a stronger and more united voice in order to challenge and even counteract the bias of the USA and to put effective pressure – moral, political and economic – on both Israelis and Palestinians. Tony Blair has undoubtedly exercised a moderating influence on George Bush, and without his quiet diplomacy behind the scenes, American policy might have been even more unilateral than it has been. But other countries in Europe need to be involved in this process.

3. *If only* moderate Muslims could dissociate themselves more clearly from the Islamists who are using their religion for political ends. When religious leaders use Islamic scripture and tradition to promise immediate entrance to paradise for suicide bombers, it takes a great deal of courage for other Muslims to challenge this way of interpreting traditional ideas about martyrdom. Moderate Muslims need all the support they can get from non-Muslims.

4. *If only* moderate Jews – both within and outside Israel – could channel their disappointment (and even sometimes their shame and disgust) over the policies and actions of the present Israeli government into the democratic processes. Many of them believe that the root cause of the recent escalation of the conflict is continued occupation of the West Bank, and that Israel should have withdrawn long ago, as they were required to do by UN resolutions. The protests that have been expressed by Jews of all kinds represent a major ray of hope, but need to be translated into convincing political programmes that can inspire confidence and win elections.⁴

NOTES

1. See, for example, Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

2. Letters to the Editor, *The Times*, 29 August 2003.

3. In a review of my *Whose Promised Land?* See also another review by David Torrance on www.apologetics.fsnet.co.uk/chapman-torrance.htm.

4. For one powerful and courageous expression of this view from a committed and practising Jew, see Marc Ellis, *Israel and Palestine Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

5. This challenge to the approach of Christian Zionism together with an alternative biblical interpretation is developed in my *Whose Promised Land?* (fourth revised edition; Oxford/Grand Rapids: Lion/Baker Book House, 2002).

► 5. *If only* the Christian Zionists, not only in America but all over the world, could see how their biblical interpretation and their theology work out in practice in the lives of Palestinians. And if only they could see that their crusade on behalf of Israel creates an enormous stumbling block to the gospel in the minds of Muslims all over the world. There are *other ways* of interpreting the biblical promises and prophecies which accept the full authority of Scripture but read everything in the Hebrew Bible in the light of Jesus and point to a much more even-handed approach to the conflict.⁵

Articulating these five wishes in this way may sound like whistling in the dark. But it helps me to know how to pray intelligently about what seems to be the slippery slope that is leading to an abyss, and reminds me that it is not just *them* that have to change but *me and us*. There needs to be progress on all these fronts if there is to be any hope of peace and reconciliation.

The Bible that I read does not paint a detailed scenario of the major events that will have to take place in this land before the end of the world, as we know it. It teaches me to show the utmost respect to the Jewish people who believe that God gave them a very special role to play in the world. It teaches me to show the same kind of respect to Muslims whose scripture, tradition and history give them a different set of reasons for attaching great importance to the same piece of land. And it reminds me that it is wrong to covet or to steal my neighbour's land or anything that belongs to him or her.

But it also teaches me to be passionate about issues of justice and to hunger and thirst to see justice done – both for myself and for others.

The teaching and example of Jesus point to a distinctive way of responding to injustice and overcoming evil with good. And since he speaks of a special blessing attached to the work of peacemakers, people of all faiths should be praying, “Lord, make us instruments of your peace ...”. A literal Armageddon is not inevitable! ■