

What's It All About?

Thoughts on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

David Epstein

What should Messianic Jewish leaders be discussing with the Christian church about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? This strategic question reflects a growing worldwide concern in light of the gathering storm of Islamic radicalism. The recent terror attacks in Paris highlight this sense of urgency. All roads eventually lead to this central conflict between Isaac and Ishmael –the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Recently, I preached a series of messages entitled “*No Justice-No Peace?*” in response to the racial and social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri and New York City. The search for justice and peace (peace on earth good will toward men) is a noble effort - but it is not enough! It's necessary but not sufficient. The foundation of genuine justice and peace is truth and freedom. “*You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. And if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed.*” Therefore: no truth, no freedom – no freedom, no justice – no justice, no peace.

That's why Darrell Bock's conclusion that reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict must be led by Israeli believers in Yeshua and Palestinian believers in Jesus is so powerful. Reconciliation must start there first, because they are free in Christ and empowered to pursue justice and peace.

But there's an elephant in the room – radical Islamic terrorism dedicated to the destruction of Israel and the murder of Jews. If Islamic terrorists laid down their weapons right now and acknowledged Israel's right to exist there would be peace and a Palestinian state. If Israel disarmed, the Jews would be dead and Israel would cease to exist.

John Bernis has done an outstanding job in considering this issue objectively and in articulating the major arguments used to cast Israel as the violent, immoral bad guy. His treatment of the BDS Movement, Palestinian Christians, Christian Zionism, Replacement Theology and Moral Equivalence is insightful and compelling. He is also right that Israel is not totally innocent and cannot be approved *carte blanche*, right or wrong. It is also true that God did promise the land to Israel irrevocably and that spiritual warfare is indeed the invisible conflict behind this holy war for the Promised Land.

For me, his most interesting point was made in his conclusion. Bernis contends that Israel's critics inhabit a post-modern world of naturalism and moral nihilism, rejecting absolute truth and values. They consider a biblical, theistic world view as an exercise in insanity. For the sake of argument, assuming Israel's critics are correct in their Darwinian world view, the following conclusions must be accepted:

1. No matter how allegedly evil and unjust Israel is, no moral criticism is valid, because in a godless, naturalistic world only “might makes right,” only the strong survive and the weak are

dead. So any moral criticism, even of Israel, is absurd, irrational and unscientific. Therefore, hypothetically, nuke them all! Holocaust survivors are now morally free to unleash a new holocaust on their enemies! Why not?

2. Therefore, in this naturalistic context, Israel's supporters can proclaim: "It *is* Israel right or wrong." (Since there is no right or wrong.) Israel can no longer be wrong – ever. Welcome to our brave new world. Welcome to the amoral, brave new Middle East where Israel finally has a level playing field!
3. Therefore, in this scenario – If God didn't give the Jews the land – who cares? They have it now and possession is 90% of the law. And they have nukes. And nukes trump the law.
4. Even if you reject the biblical view of spiritual warfare, with angels and demons, in a naturalistic system /worldview you still have "spiritual" warfare: in this case, you have the Israeli *spirit* of shalom, democracy, inclusion, tolerance, creativity, brotherhood, justice and life – in conflict with the radical Islamic *spirit* of war, totalitarianism, exclusion, intolerance, terrorism, hatred, injustice and death.

But of course, I emphatically and totally reject this false naturalistic worldview and hypothetical scenario – so let's get back to reality and truth and a biblical worldview. What do I personally share with my people concerning the Israeli/Palestinian conflict? I talk to them about love, hate, war and peace, people, friends and destiny. So what's it all about?

It's about love. It's about God's love for Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims, Isaac and Ishmael. As Evangelicals, we know that God loves the Jews, that they are the chosen people of God, the people of the covenant and we have the privilege and responsibility to share God's love with them - but it is vital to understand that God loves the Arabs, too, and also offers them forgiveness and hope in Jesus Christ. Sadly, this great truth is not always welcomed in the church – particularly in the age of terror.

But God does love the Arabs (the descendants of Ishmael) too! Abraham was Ishmael's father, and he cared for him. Ishmael is not the son of the covenant, but he is loved by Abraham, his earthly father, and by his heavenly Father also:

I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation – but my covenant I will establish with Isaac. (Genesis 17:20-21)

In Genesis 21, we have the story of how Abraham and Sarah had cast Hagar and Ishmael out a second time. Ishmael was a teenager at that point, and was dying of thirst in the wilderness with Hagar nearby.

Does God really care about a boy who is not the child of the covenant? Does he really care about an Egyptian woman – a single mom – a slave?

“Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. *God was with the boy as he grew up.* (Genesis 21:18-20)

Therefore, as Christians, we must love the Jews and Arabs alike – just like Jesus.

It’s about hate. Radical Islam, at its root, is a deadly plague. Hate and murder are the poisonous byproducts of a diseased spirituality, morality and ideology.

In Islamic terrorism today:

- There is the conviction that Islam is supreme and destined to world dominance through jihad for Allah’s glory.
- There is an intense hatred of Israel and the Jews and a total commitment to their utter destruction.
- There is a willful corruption of the history of Israel and the Middle East.
- There is the brutal use of the Palestinians as political pawns.
- There is the grotesque offering of their own children as “*martyrs*” and homicide/suicide bombers.¹

This hate must be combated by every means possible: militarily, politically, economically, educationally and ultimately spiritually – with the love, power and truth of the gospel.

It’s about war and peace. It’s about the Israelis, most of the time, seeking peace with the Palestinians – and it’s about the Arabs/Palestinians, pretty much all of the time, waging war against Israel and seeking her destruction.

Since 1948, Arab nations have started every war with Israel: in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973 and numerous Intifadas. They have also rejected every peace treaty. So much for a viable peace partner!

Israel became a nation in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II. In the greatest conflict in the history of mankind, in which 50 million people died, out of the ashes of the Holocaust - Israel was reborn as a nation! The UN played a significant role in devising a two-state solution which respected the national aspirations of both Jews and Palestinians. The Jewish people would receive a homeland called Israel; and the Palestinians would receive a homeland called Palestine. It would also establish Jerusalem as an international city, with two capitals. It was a noble effort. But on the very day that Israel became an independent nation – *on that very day* – the military forces of six Arab nations attacked Israel immediately. From the north came Syria and Lebanon – from the east came Iraq and Jordan – from the south came Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The UN had a plan, but there weren’t enough statesmen, there weren’t enough leaders to actually implement the plan. But God says – my Messiah is coming and my plan will succeed where all others have failed.

¹ Dave Epstein, *A Time for Hope* (ANM), pg. 90.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-7)

Peace in the Middle East will only come from the God of Peace and His Son Jesus Christ, who loves the Jews and the Arabs, who loves Abraham and Sarah, and also loves Hagar and Ishmael.

It's about people. It is personal – it's not just business. Mosab Yousef is a believer in Jesus Christ, who grew up in Hamas, the terrorist organization, the son of the co-founder of the movement, who is presently in an Israeli prison. It was the passage in Matthew 5:43-45 that God used to change Mosab's heart:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

The message of forgiveness, of loving your enemies and blessing them was the exact opposite of everything he had ever known and been taught. He said concerning Jesus and His message, "This is the one I have been looking for all my life." Mosab has become a bold, articulate and faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

In May of 2010 in New York City, I had the privilege of hearing Mosab Yousef in person. In his message he made a number of comments about the God of Islam - all of which powerfully illustrate that the God of the Bible is not the God of Islam. Mosab said the following:

1. When interacting with Muslims, don't make it a religious war – Muslims against Christians. Make it an ideological war: Christianity's God of love vs. Islam's God of hate.
2. Allah hates the Jews. The Koran refers to them as the offspring of pigs and monkeys. Because they occupied Palestinian land and tortured me personally, I also hated the Jews and wanted to kill them to serve Allah.
3. The value system of the Middle East is based upon shame and honor – not right and wrong. As a Muslim I also had to deal with Allah, who is the God of shame, guilt and fear. The answer to Allah is the (Christian) God of grace, love and freedom.
4. (Islamic) Terrorists are deceived. They are the victims of their own God. The problem is not Muslims, but Islam. The problem is Islam's ideology, God, prophet, and book.
5. If Muslims follow the example of Mohammad – they will all be terrorists!

Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God! As you can imagine, Mosab Yousef's life is now threatened on a regular basis. This courageous young man continues to trust God and serve as an instrument of his peace and reconciliation.

Mosab's testimony is powerful:

Manipulated by lies and driven by racism, hatred and revenge, I was on my way to being one of those people (who hurt other people). Then in 1999, I encountered the only true God. He is the Father whose love is beyond expression, yet shown in the sacrifice of His only Son on a cross to atone for the world's sins. He is the God who, three days later, demonstrated His power and righteousness by raising Jesus from the dead. He is the God who not only commands me to love and forgive my enemies as He has loved and forgiven me, but empowers me to do so.

Truth and forgiveness are the only solution for the Middle East. The challenge, especially between Israelis and Palestinians, is not to **find** the solution. The challenge is be the first courageous enough to **embrace** it.²

It's about friends. The Palestinians have many and Israel has almost none. Over the past few years, I have met regularly with a small group of evangelical leaders and some of New York City's most influential rabbis. One reason the Jewish leaders originally agreed to the dialogue was because of their curiosity about the evangelicals, who, although they long for the rabbis to embrace Jesus as their Messiah, also stand with Israel and the Jewish people in a time of increasing worldwide anti-Semitism. In one meeting as we discussed the world community's accelerating attack on Israel, I said, "Israel and the Jewish people have only two friends left in the world – the United States and the evangelical church. Much of the world hates you, and no one else supports you – not the Arabs, the Catholic Church, the liberal protestant church and the National and World Council of Churches, the European Union and certainly not the United Nations, which is virulently anti-Israel and anti-America. You have two friends left and the Bible says that one day '**all the nations of the earth**' will attack Israel (Zech. 12:3) – and this will include the United States – we are already seeing an erosion of American support under the Obama administration." It was very quiet in the room - but no one seemed to disagree.³

It's about destiny. The prophets have spoken: a kingdom of peace and love is coming. God's love has guaranteed a future of hope and peace for Israelis and Palestinians alike in the Messiah Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ will return and establish his kingdom and remake the world the way it was created and redeemed to be! The prophet Isaiah was given a vision of this awesome Messianic kingdom:

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He (*the Messiah Jesus*) will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD." (Isaiah 2:2-5)

² Mosab Yousef, *Son of Hamas* (Tyndale House/Saltriver), pg. 250-251.

³ Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser, *The People, The Land, And The Future of Israel* (Kregel Publications), pg.292.

Right now I am preaching a series of messages from Ephesians chapter 2 entitled, “*Can’t We all Just Get Along.*” The answer is no, yes, and maybe - it depends. In ourselves, the answer is no. In Christ, the answer is yes. He is our peace. He is the peacemaker. He is the preacher of peace. In the church, the answer is maybe, it depends. Will we celebrate equality, submit to authority, and pursue maturity? It can start with Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians. It can start here.

Even so, come Lord Jesus. Soli Deo Gloria!