

TWO PERSPECTIVES: A NEW TESTAMENT CONTEXT -

By Bassam M. Madany

In the closing months of 1987, the people of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip rose up against Israeli occupation. This uprising, or *intifada* as it is known in Arabic, has become familiar to us as we watch the news on our TV screens. Stone-throwing Arab youths are pursued by Israeli soldiers using rubber bullets and sometimes live ammunition. Every day two or three Palestinians are killed and several more wounded. Hundreds of young men, some of them Christian, have been arrested and sent to prison camps in the Negev.

I don't think it's exaggeration to say that most evangelicals in the West have been pro-Israel. They believe that the Bible teaches the rebirth of a Jewish state in the Holy Land. They equate the emergence of Israel with a fulfilment of prophecy.

The *intifada*, however, is causing many an evangelical to re-examine his or her views about the Palestine-Israel problem. Is it really of the essence of the Christian faith to believe in the physical restoration of Israel? My concern, as a Mideastern Christian, is to plead for an open-minded approach to this question based on a New Testament perspective.

For example, we may examine Romans 9-11, a passage that deals specifically with the root cause of the Jews' negative attitude toward Jesus as the Messiah, as well as their eventual conversion. Paul does not link that event to a future establishment of a Jewish commonwealth in Palestine.

Likewise, in the Letter to the Hebrews, the land no longer has the special significance it had during Old Testament times. Already Abraham, anticipating the New Testament era, was "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10 NIV). An over-emphasis on the importance of the land, from a redemptive point of view, tends to minimize the finality and the uniqueness of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The early church, in setting forth the basics of the faith, affirmed the doctrine of the physical second coming of Christ, the general resurrection of the dead, and the judgment. It did not bind Christians to a specific belief in a restore Israel. This approach, based on a New Testament understanding of the entire biblical revelation, was continued in the various creedal formulations of the Reformation era such as the Westminster Catechisms and Confession of Faith.

How then are we to understand the birth of Israel? It was the direct result of the persecution of the Jews in Eastern Europe during the 19th century. The rise of anti-Semitism in Western Europe, especially in France, gave more impetus in the Zionist movement which sought to establish a national home for the Jews in Palestine. The emergence of the Nazi movement in Germany and its persecution of the Jews accelerated the migration of European Jews to Palestine. This land had been under the dominion of

the Turks for 400 years. The British took over Palestine in 1918, at the close of World War I, and administered it for 30 years. When the United Nations decided in 1947 to partition Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish states, the Arabs refused the plan, but the Jewish population accepted it. Thus Israel was born at midnight on May 14, 1948.

Since that date, the region has never known peace. Several wars have taken place between Israel and its Arab neighbors. But the intifada marks the first time that the Arab population living under Israeli occupation has risen up in active resistance and in a relentless quest for freedom and independence.

The difficulty in finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli problem has been that each side has denied the claims of the opposing side of the conflict. Unfortunately, many Israelis base their right to establish their own state in Palestine on the dubious claim that it was a land without a people and thus must make room for a people without a land.

But Palestine has never been without a people. With the exception of the period of the Crusades in the Middle Ages, the Holy Land has been continually inhabited by an Arabic-speaking majority, both Muslim and Christian, since the middle of the seventh century. Israelis cannot ignore the rights of the Arabs without ignoring not only international law, but the very teachings of their Old Testament. "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says:...If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood...then I will let you live in this place...." (Jeremiah 7:3,5-7 NIV)

Western Christians have shown a great interest in the welfare of Israel as a haven for persecuted Jews, but it should not follow that they give her a carte blanche to trample over the rights of Palestinians. Christians may never proceed on the assumption that to be exclusively pro-Israel is a mark of doctrinal orthodoxy. In this New Testament age, God has no favorite nations or races. Nor does he delight in the emergence of any theocracy.

Practically, this means that Bible-believing Christians living within democratic regimes should work hard for a just solution of the Arab-Israeli problem. Let's place it on the agenda of our academic and ecclesiastical discussions for the 90's. And through our representatives in government, let us call for the implementation of the principle of justice to prevail for the benefit of all the people of the Holy Land. We must call for an international guarantee for the co-existence of two independent political entities in Palestine: the Israeli state and the Palestinian state. Only in this way, can we act out our truly evangelical beliefs and at the same time spare our world a major conflagration in the Middle East.