



Centre Stage: Jerusalem or Jesus?

by Peter Walker

'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!

Would that you knew today the things that belong to your peace!'

(Jesus in Luke 19:41, the week before his death)

'This is the most holy land'

(Yigal Amir, in the *Washington Post*,

five months before his assassination of Yitzhak Rabin)

Summary

In the light of Old Testament history and prophecy many would argue that Jerusalem continues to have a central role within God's purposes today. Yet the New Testament offers a radically new perspective on the city, pointing to Christ as the true temple and the one in whom the promises of restoration were fulfilled. Jesus himself predicts the imminent end of the temple. The consequences of this biblical teaching prove to be far-reaching—both for the church's mission in the world and for religious and political issues in Jerusalem today.

Introduction

During 1996 there are celebrations in Jerusalem to mark the three-thousandth anniversary of David's founding of his capital city. Depending on the results of the Israeli elections in May, there may also be discussions this summer between Israel and the Palestinians on the political status of Jerusalem as part of the current Peace Process.

For Christians the issue of Jerusalem raises many questions. How does our faith in Christ affect our attitude to this unique city? What precisely is the significance of Jerusalem in God's purposes? Should the events of 1948 (the birth of the state of Israel) and 1967 (the unification of Jerusalem under Jewish rule) be seen as instances of fulfilled prophecy? How much should we support Israel or Zionism? Does it matter to us as Christians who controls Jerusalem? How should we 'pray for Jerusalem' (Psalm 122:8)?

Christian opinion has become polarised, and sympathy with either the Jewish or Arab situation can colour our responses to the scriptures. Yet, although biblical passages may be distorted in this debate, the Bible must remain the normative foundation. How are we to understand Jerusalem today in the light of biblical teaching?

Jerusalem is undoubtedly sacred in the OT period. Unlike any other city, God endorsed David's choice of Jerusalem and established Solomon's temple as the place where 'his name dwelt' (e.g. 1 Kings 8:29); Mount Zion, the mountain on which the temple was built, became a symbol of God's dwelling amongst his people.

This was affirmed by Jesus: Jerusalem was 'the city of the great King' (Matthew 5:35) and the temple was truly God's 'house' (Mark 11:17; John 2:16). Speaking to the Samaritan woman he affirmed Jerusalem's centrality (John 4:22); yet he also said, 'a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem' (v. 21). What precisely was the nature of the change he foresaw? Was Jesus simply making a positive point (that God's Spirit would be known everywhere)? Or was he also making a negative point, namely that Jerusalem's previously unique role had now ceased? This paper argues that the coming of Jesus did indeed significantly change the status of Jerusalem.

From the Old to the New: the Example of the Temple

Any interpretation of the Bible has to discern the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Those who affirm the Bible's unity and coherence acknowledge that there are certain dramatic shifts between the Testaments. For example, the 'people of God' is no longer defined ethnically but through faith in Jesus, Israel's Messiah, thus opening the

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door to Gentile believers (Acts 10; Galatians 3:28). Jerusalem needs to be seen in this category: there *is* an element of discontinuity between Old and New Testaments. As a result, OT material on this theme can only be rightly understood when read through the lens of the New.

The clearest example of this is the temple. In Hebrews the temple is only an 'illustration' (9:9) or a 'copy and shadow' (8:5) of the reality now found in Christ and of the access into God's presence now made possible through his sacrificial death (9:28; 10:10, 19-20). Yet this inevitably means that the Jerusalem temple, as an integral part of the 'first covenant' (8:7), has lost its previous status (9:8) and will 'soon disappear' (8:13).¹

Other NT writers also re-evaluate the temple. John teaches that Jesus is the true 'tabernacle' or 'temple' (John 1:14; 2:21). Paul goes further, identifying Christian believers as God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:19). In Revelation the 'New Jerusalem' has no temple 'because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple' (Revelation 21:22). The reference to the 'river of the water of life' (Revelation 22:1-2) indicates that the author is re-working the prophecy of Ezekiel (chapter 40ff) which had spoken of a renewed temple, seemingly in Jerusalem. The Seer, however, understands this to be a reference to the New Jerusalem and to the Lamb who is its temple (cf. also John 7:37-9). The NT writers were thus not expecting some 'end-time' temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem, for Jesus was now that temple.

Jesus claimed to be 'greater than the temple' (Matthew 12:6) and in cleansing the temple was probably signalling its imminent end. He certainly predicts this (e.g. Luke 19:43; Mark 14:58). Thus, although the temple's destruction in AD 70 was a tragic event, Christians were not unduly disturbed by this, for they had been prepared by Jesus' teaching.

Whether then the temple is thought of as the place which embodied God's presence on earth or as the place of sacrifice, the New Testament affirms that both aspects have been fulfilled in Jesus: his death is the true sacrifice and his person the true *locus* of God's dwelling. By extension Christian believers too may be seen as a temple. A temple in Jerusalem is therefore no longer necessary, for God's eternal purposes have now been revealed in Christ. Yet if this is the case for the temple, which constituted the central, sacred part of Jerusalem, what about Jerusalem itself (the city considered *apart* from the temple)? Might not that too need to be viewed in a new light?

Jerusalem in the New Testament

(i) The Evidence

'The present city of Jerusalem... is in slavery with her children' (Galatians 4:25). This startling statement suggests that Paul would have answered the above question in the affirmative. For a Jew of Paul's background to speak thus of Judaism's 'mother city' testifies to a radical shift in perspective. For Christians the focus is now to be upon 'the Jerusalem that is above... , and *she* is our mother' (Galatians 4:26). This proves to be an opening salvo of a re-evaluation of Jerusalem which is found in all the NT writers.

In Mark's gospel (as in Matthew and John) the centrality of Jerusalem is offset by an emphasis on Galilee (including the appearance of the risen Jesus there) which underlines the outgoing nature of the gospel, no longer confined to Jerusalem. In John, Jerusalem is presented as no different from 'the world', the place where Jesus is rejected by 'his own' (cf. 1:10-11). Matthew, with innate loyalty to Judaism, refers to Jerusalem as the 'holy city' (4:5; 27:53), but this description includes a dose of savage irony. In his version of the

wedding banquet those who murder the king's servants are punished with the burning of 'their city' (22:7). 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem', says Jesus, 'you who kill the prophets...' (23:37ff). The supposedly 'holy city' has proved itself to be quite the opposite.

Of all the Evangelists Luke brings the theme of Jerusalem's fate most centrally into his narrative. Indeed the structure of Luke-Acts is based on Jesus' going up to Jerusalem (Luke), followed by the apostles' going out from Jerusalem 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts). Comparatively early within his gospel, Jesus 'sets his face towards Jerusalem' (9:51), 'for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!' (13:33). Jerusalem proves to be the place which 'did not recognise the time of God's coming' and which therefore in the future would experience divine judgement (19:41-44; cf. 21:20-24; 23:28-31).

After the Resurrection the disciples witnessed in Jerusalem, but soon many of them were 'dispersed' by persecution (8:1). Those associated with James who felt called to remain there (signifying that faith in Jesus as Messiah was not marginal to Judaism) found themselves in an increasingly difficult situation (Acts 15:5; 21:20ff). After his description of Paul's going up (like Jesus) to Jerusalem and experiencing rejection, Luke's narrative turns away from the city. Paul's journey to Rome thus signals a shift in God's purposes away from Jerusalem and into the wider imperial world. Jerusalem has now had its day.

The author of Hebrews similarly reflects on Jesus' being rejected by Jerusalem 'outside the city gate' (13:12) and, like Paul, focuses his readers' attention on the 'heavenly Jerusalem' (12:22). This, not the earthly Jerusalem, is to be central to their identity: 'let us go out to him *outside* the camp... For here we have no enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come' (13:13-14). The book of Revelation sets the seal on this re-evaluation of Jerusalem by seeing the city 'where the Lord was crucified' as no better than the 'great city' of Rome and worthy of 'being called Sodom and Egypt' (11:8). Christians are to focus not on the earthly Jerusalem, but on the 'Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God' (21:2, 10; cf. 3:12).

The above evidence, albeit briefly stated, thus confirms that Jesus' words in John 4 (outlined above) most probably include a negative conclusion concerning Jerusalem. Just as the temple needed to be seen in a new light after the coming of Jesus (John 2), so did the *city* of Jerusalem (John 4).

(ii) The Reasons

What caused these predominantly Jewish writers to make such an about-turn on this previously central concept of Jerusalem? Supremely it was their conviction about Jesus. If Jesus was Israel's Messiah, indeed God's 'Son', then his rejection by Jerusalem, the supposed 'city of God', was no small matter. When Jerusalem then confirmed this negative response to Jesus in its attitude towards his followers, the stage was set for a Christian critique of Jerusalem.

This critique goes back to Jesus himself who gave a prophetic warning of the city's destiny. Jesus' critique may well, like Jeremiah's (Matthew 16:14), have included an indictment of contemporary practice in the city. Luke suggests that there was an inherent clash between Jesus and Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the place where opposition to Jesus reached its climax, not least because Jesus was claiming to assume the role that previously Jerusalem had thought was distinctively her own—the place of God's presence. Jesus came embodying a counter-system, and people were forced to make a choice. Now that Jesus had come, Jerusalem could never be the same again.

The rapid spread of the gospel message would have contributed further to this playing down of Jerusalem's significance. God's purposes had evidently now broken out from the particular to the universal. If Jewish particularities such as circumcision were no longer essential for Gentile Christians, then the specificity of Jerusalem was likewise undercut. Moreover, the new awareness of spiritual realities would have made it easier for Christians to focus on the spiritual Jerusalem and 'things above' (cf. Colossians 3:1-2). Christian interest in the earthly Jerusalem thus began to wane. Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 then confirmed this process. Yet the causes of this critique preceded that event. The church had already learnt from its master that it lived in a new age—'the time of the new order' (Hebrews 9:10).

(iii) Conclusions

The New Testament therefore witnesses to a shift in attitude towards Jerusalem. Whilst affirming the special nature of Jerusalem's past, it denied its continuing role in the present. The city had now lost its strictly sacred status. This was chiefly because of God's eternal purposes now revealed in Jesus. Yet there was also a sense of God's judgement upon the city—not least because of its response to Jesus.

The fate of Jerusalem thus had a message for all people. First, it demonstrated how God could take away a divine gift. Jeremiah (chapter 7) had foreseen how Jerusalem and its temple could paradoxically become an idol, a bastion against God, leading inexorably to God's judgement (as previously with Shiloh: v.12). The pattern had now been repeated, but this time there was no promise of restoration. As Augustine said in another context, 'the corruption of the best is the worst'. Jerusalem, for all its divine pedigree had now been removed.

Secondly, the fall of Jerusalem gave a foretaste of what awaited the whole world. This link between the fates of Jerusalem and the world at the 'end of the age' is seen most clearly in the Apocalyptic Discourse (Mark 13) where Jesus' prediction of the former becomes entwined with his teaching about the latter. Such a consideration would have made Jerusalem's history relevant to all NT readers. It would undercut any incipient Gentile pride. It would also indicate what lay in store for those who had not taken refuge in Jesus, the one who had already borne in his own body the judgement which he had predicted was awaiting Jerusalem. The Resurrection of Jesus was the promise of a way through that judgement. It also spelt the end of Jerusalem's significance. From that day forwards, the divine focus was upon Jesus, not Jerusalem.

Alternative Christian Approaches

Jerusalem, however, exerts a perennial fascination upon the religious spirit. It is very alluring, and easily becomes entwined with people's fundamental convictions and identity. Within the Christian church this has been justified in two quite distinct ways.

On the one hand, from the time of Constantine onwards (AD 325) Christians emphasized again Jerusalem's holiness through focusing in a sacramental way on the holy places of the Incarnation. This has characterised the approach to Jerusalem of the historic churches ever since. Historical association is powerful, and the belief that the Incarnation occurred in one specific locality a potent belief. Yet few today would wish to give a theological defence of the Crusades—the extreme end-result of such thinking. Instead John's gospel presents Jesus himself as the ultimate 'holy place' where we encounter God, and access to him is fully possible by the Spirit.¹ There is therefore a limit to how much one may legitimately emphasize Jerusalem on

this score. We do not deny that the city has a unique place in Christian memory, but we question whether this can become the basis for ascribing to the city an explicitly *theological* status, as somehow central within God's purposes today.

On the other hand, in the modern period many Christians have adhered to some form of Zionism—the belief that Zion/Jerusalem and the Land continue to be central in God's purpose and that it is appropriate for them to be in Jewish hands. The above presentation, they would say, emphasizes discontinuity too much at the expense of continuity. Does not the Old Testament plainly indicate that Jerusalem will retain a sacred role in God's purposes for all time (see e.g. Isaiah 2:2-3; 60ff; Zechariah 12-14)? Are there not NT verses which indicate a distinctive role for Jerusalem, perhaps at the 'end-time' (see Romans 11:26; Luke 21:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:4; Revelation 20:9)? Such questions require some further comment.

Zionism and Jerusalem

Detailed treatment of these four NT texts can be found in several recent books.² Motyer, for example, argues that Paul's (significantly adapted) quotation in Romans 11:26 of Isaiah 59:20 ('the deliverer will come *from Zion*') refers not to Christ's *second* coming from Jerusalem but rather to his *first*—when, as foreseen by Isaiah, the gospel would go out to the 'Gentiles' (v. 25) 'from Zion' (cf. Isaiah 2:3). Paul was not saying anything about the role of Zion in the future, only that the gospel had come 'from Zion'. This one text cannot therefore be used as the basis for constructing an end-times scenario of Israel's conversion in or near Jerusalem. The other three verses similarly offer fragile foundation for the massive construction built upon them. It is too easy for Jesus' plain warnings against end-time speculation (Mark 13:32-7) to be disregarded in the desire for prophetic certainty about the future.

On the former question (concerning OT references to Jerusalem) it is imperative that the Old is read in the light of the New. Some significant points on this are made by Chris Wright. The specific call of Abraham (Genesis 12:2) must be seen as God's remedy for the sin of *all* humankind (Genesis 3-11): 'election involves use of particular means, but for a universal goal'. It is not therefore illegitimate to see a fulfilment in Christ of something which in the Old Testament was cast in a more physical and particular form: for the OT writers necessarily used physical terms which were familiar to their audiences, whilst at the same time investing those terms with a wider, more spiritual reference. Thus 'Jerusalem' in the later chapters of Isaiah signifies something more than the physical city, becoming a term for God's people in their eschatological fullness. There was an 'awareness that although the future had to be described in concepts drawn from Israel's historic nationhood, it would in fact ultimately transcend them'.

Wright then uses a telling example: a father who in 1890 had promised to give a horse to his infant son on his twenty-first birthday but who then gave him a car instead (because this had been invented in the meantime) might with good reason be annoyed if his son then asked for a horse as well!

1 See W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, California University Press, 1974, ch. 8, and R. Brown, *A Commentary on John's Gospel*, Doubleday, 1970.
2 S. Motyer, *Israel in the Plan of God*, IVP, 1989; C. Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?*, Lion, 1992; C.J.H. Wright, 'A Christian Approach to Old Testament Prophecy Concerning Israel', and N.T. Wright, 'Jerusalem in the New Testament', both in P.W.L. Walker (ed), *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, Paternoster/Baker, 1994.

'This surely is what literalistic and dispensationalist... treatments do when they argue that OT prophecies still await a literal fulfilment to match their original predictive form, when the New Testament actually declares such prophecies to have been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, even though in surprising ways.'

Of particular importance is the fact that the New Testament expressly deals with the issue of Israel's 'restoration'. Even though first-century Jews were in the Land there was a real sense that the OT prophecies had not been completely fulfilled and that Israel was still in exile (cf. Luke 2:25, 38). Different Jewish groups, such as the Zealots, sought to rectify this anomaly. The New Testament gives its own distinctive answer: Israel's destiny and promised restoration had been fulfilled in the death and Resurrection of her Messiah and in the outpouring of the Spirit. Thus in Luke 24 Jesus refers to his rising on the 'third day' as being 'written' in the scriptures (v. 46). Most probably this refers to Hosea 6:2, which had spoken of *Israel's* being 'revived' and 'restored'. Thus 'the resurrection of Christ is the resurrection of Israel of which the prophets spoke'.³ Meanwhile Jesus' earlier reference to many people 'coming from the east and the west' (Matthew 8:10-12) evokes passages (such as Isaiah 43:5-7; Psalm 107:2-3) which seemingly had referred to a future 'restoration' of Jewish people to the Land.

[Jesus, however,] took OT prophecies that had that connotation and applied them instead to the ingathering of the Christian community, even in this case, to the exclusion of some Jews.⁴

This would then explain why a key passage about restoration (Amos 9:11-12) was used by James to justify the gospel's going out to the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-21).

'The considered apostolic interpretation of events was that the inclusion of the Gentiles... was the necessary fulfilment of the prophesied restoration of Israel.'⁵

Thus, although faced with the same OT passages as we are today, NT writers did not reach a 'Zionist' conclusion. Instead they reached a distinctively Christian conclusion which affirmed the faithfulness of God to his ancient promises and saw these as now fulfilled, even if in an unexpected way, in the coming of Jesus and the Spirit. Biblical Christians today need to follow their lead. To do otherwise (either denying this fulfilment in Jesus, or seeking for a further, more literalistic fulfilment) belittles and misconstrues the greatness of what God has done in Jesus and is ultimately derogatory to the person of Jesus and his uniqueness.

Moreover, it runs counter to the teaching of Jesus himself, who despite his natural identification with the aspirations of his own people, consistently refused to endorse interpretations which led to an exclusive nationalism or a belief in God's purposes being supremely fulfilled in a politically independent Jewish state. Why was it that Jesus was opposed to the emerging Zealot movement and those who wished for a more politically active Messiah? Was it just a disagreement over method (pacifism, not armed resistance) or of timing (as some would interpret Acts 1:6-8)? Or was it, rather, a fundamental critique of the movement's idolatry and its whole hermeneutical framework which did not allow that God was fulfilling his ancient promises *in Jesus himself*? In his role both as

Messiah and as the one in whom Israel was restored, Jesus was thus giving a radical new twist to the story of Israel, confounding the biblical expectations of his contemporaries.

Zionist Christians tend to ignore this NT teaching on restoration (as well as central claims such as the true 'children of Abraham' being those who have faith in Jesus: Romans 4; Galatians 3). In part this is caused by the desire to draw alongside modern Judaism—especially in the light of the racial anti-Semitism which, despite the Jewishness of Jesus, has too frequently entered Christian tradition in disgraceful ways. Yet in seeking to witness to Jesus as Israel's Messiah and in the name of loving identification, is there never a danger that Christians will go too far in endorsing readings of the Old Testament which ignore the teaching of the New?

With regard to Jerusalem, it is thus hard to see how Christians can share Jewish affection for the city without some major qualifications. Likewise, while some Jewish people might be interested in the rebuilding of the temple, it is quite bizarre that Christians should be supporting them. Does the *Christian Bible* really require a rebuilt temple or give Jewish people a divine charter of ownership over Jerusalem? For ethical and historical reasons one may have great sympathy with Zionism and the Jewish desire for a homeland at a political level; yet surely at the *theological* level Christians must be pointing beyond Jerusalem to the reality of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Despite the temptation to have it both ways, elevating the importance of Jerusalem may serve, albeit unintentionally, to detract from the significance of Jesus. If, as suggested above, there is an inherent clash in the gospels between Jesus and Jerusalem it may indeed be impossible to promote both claims simultaneously.

Indeed, is this not precisely the Christian's responsibility, to emphasize that Jesus is greater than Jerusalem? Moreover, could not the realisation that the political possession of Jerusalem does not provide the longed-for solution to the deep questions of Jewish identity become the means by which Jewish people are opened up to him who alone *does* provide that solution? God may indeed still have loving purposes towards the Jewish people, but who is to say that his chosen means of revealing that love must be Zionism's success, rather than its failure? For the Hebrew prophets only ever envisaged a return to the land as an outer sign of the more important return of the people to their God, and in the light of the New Testament that means *to Jesus*. Could not God then be desiring to show the fragility and self-contradiction of a Zionism which has largely been quite secular and which still ignores the Messiah? The twentieth-century return to the Land would then have been within God's providential purposes, but precisely because only so could it be known, not just in theory but in personal experience, that the Land was no longer the answer. As in the first century so now, Jewish identity can only find its resolution in the Messiah, not in the Land or in Jerusalem.

Practical Implications for Jerusalem

Thus in the light of the New Testament some questions may legitimately be raised about the centrality which is given to Jerusalem by so many people. Precisely because of this over-emphasis the city today has become a political battle-ground, fuelled by religious convictions. In such heightened circumstances has not the time come for the many competing voices which enthuse over Jerusalem to hear again the central message of the New Testament? In Jesus the 'glory has departed' (cf. Ezekiel 11:23 with Luke 24:50-51; 1 Samuel 4:21). How much of Jerusalem's painful history is a desire to possess something of the divine which is no longer there?

3 C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, Nisbet & Co., 1952, p103.

4 R.T. France, 'Old Testament prophecy and the future of Israel', *Tyndale Bulletin* 26, Cambridge, 1975, p73.

5 C.J.H. Wright, *op. cit.*, 16.

Such a stance might seem to encourage a disengagement from concern for Jerusalem, or in a diplomatic context to be self-defeating. Yet, rightly understood, it leads to a proper engagement and a way forward for a creative peace. For if, despite its special historical associations, Jerusalem has no *theological* status today which sets it apart from any other city, then the normative pattern of God's will as revealed in the scriptures must apply in Jerusalem just as much as anywhere else. There are, as it were, no special rules for Jerusalem. The value of this insight can be seen in three areas.

(i) Christians in Jerusalem

As in any other place God's purposes are focused on Jesus and the Spirit. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity and its evangelistic consequences cannot be set aside for the sake of Jerusalem. Yet in practice this is hard. The tiny Christian community is surrounded by two larger communities, both of which for centuries have denied what Christians claim took place in first-century Jerusalem: the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Not surprisingly alternative theologies have been developed, be they of an interfaith variety, or of a two-covenant kind (where God has a separate covenant with Judaism, independent of faith in Messiah Jesus). Such theologies, convenient in the short-term, subvert the church's obedience to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). Jerusalem cannot demand this sacrifice, or be allowed to quell again the testimony of Jesus. Real support and prayerful understanding needs therefore to be shown to the city's tiny and struggling Christian community as it seeks to uphold the name of him who once was crucified there.

Secondly, Jesus' desire that his followers be united (John 17:21) cannot be dismissed as inapplicable in Jerusalem. This speaks not only to the (increasingly healthy) relationships between the many historic churches all represented in the city, but also in a particular way to the divide between Jewish and Arab believers. Though the city's recent history has tended to re-erect it, the 'dividing-wall of hostility' between Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14) was actually broken in Jerusalem at the Cross. The increased number of Messianic Jews in the city (c.2-3,000) compared to the sadly decreasing number of Palestinian Christians (c.10,000) means that in years to come Jerusalem could witness in a unique way to the overcoming of this ancient division, and open up a whole new episode in the church's history in Jerusalem.

Yet, at least till recently, the political division between Jew and Arab has made this nigh impossible. Moreover, given their vulnerability, both sides have tended to make common cause with their respective majority communities (with Arab Christians endorsing Muslim political agendas for Jerusalem, and Jewish believers endorsing Israel's). Not only is this process in itself fraught with danger, but it results in an inevitable collision. Our argument for the theological priority of Jesus over Jerusalem then becomes crucial. To focus on Jerusalem, rather than on Jesus, can only divide the body of Christ.

If reconciliation and unity in Christ (Ephesians 1:10; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18) still stands as God's purpose for the world and therefore for Jerusalem, it may be that, despite all the continued obstacles, the body of Christ in Jerusalem has a particular calling to act as 'leaven'. Could it be that God has brought back into such close proximity within Jerusalem those who through history have often been bitter enemies precisely in order to reveal that unity which alone can be found in Jesus?⁶

(ii) Biblical Ethics in Jerusalem

As in any other place God intends that people should 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God' (Micah 6:8). Again, Jerusalem is not so sacred as to be exempt. Yet for many centuries Jerusalem has encouraged in each of the faiths a Crusader spirit, which in the name of holiness leads to its precise opposite. The belief that Jerusalem is 'holy to God' becomes a mandate to possess it 'in his name' and then to be aggressive to any opponents. Paradoxically, treating Jerusalem as specially 'holy' can thus lead instead to its desecration.

This belief in the inherent holiness of the Land (and of Jerusalem) led to Yitzhak Rabin's assassination. Once a person's construction of God's agenda has become merged with their own, then the unethical becomes seemingly legitimate: murder, terrorism, the demonising of those who oppose a particular nationalism (labelled as 'Zionist' or 'Philistine'), or the appropriation of land. Palestinians, for example, thus have good reason to believe that the same logic is undergirding the current government policy which denies access to Jerusalem for the vast majority of West Bank residents (such that Christians whose families have lived for 600 years in Bethlehem cannot visit Jerusalem, only five miles away).

Similar reasoning is at work amongst those Christians whose convictions about the holiness of Jerusalem and the Land are based on interpreting OT prophecy without adequate New Testament control. Prophetic interpretation becomes the basis for a political programme, which too easily becomes unethical, ignoring the humanity of those who live there. Our thesis is that a responsible reading of the Bible does not encourage such interpretations. Yet even if, contrary to our argument, there are prophecies which do await a literal fulfilment in Jerusalem, such a prophetic end could never justify unethical means. If it could, then by the same reasoning Judas Iscariot would have to be reinstated as a hero! So too would Rabin's assassin, Yigal Amir.

Those who major on the OT predictive prophecies about Zion should remember that it was precisely the ignoring of ethical considerations under a subterfuge of sanctity which fuelled the prophets' fury; for we will all be judged, not for the rightness of our theology about Jerusalem, but rather for the 'fruit of our lives' (Matthew 7:15-23).

Instead, the true prophetic vision which should fire Christian imagination—in Jerusalem as indeed throughout the world—is that of the 'heavenly, New Jerusalem', causing us to create societies which anticipate the healing and renewal which one day God will bring to pass. 'Yet what better place to do this,' asks Tom Wright, 'than in the old city of peace, Jerusalem?' Whereas the supposed sacredness of Jerusalem may blind people to their ethical responsibilities in the city, this simple acknowledgement (that Jerusalem played a key role in the biblical story) should have the opposite effect. For here, above all, it would be ironic if the biblical message went unheeded, but so appropriate if it was obeyed. 'Righteousness exalts a nation' (Proverbs 14:34).

(iii) Jerusalem and the Church

How then can the worldwide church give expression to its indebtedness to Jerusalem without falling into the dangers associated with either the Crusades or extreme Zionism? What response appropriately reflects the priority we should give to Jesus Christ?

First and foremost, we need to express a greater solidarity with the city's indigenous Christian communities (both Palestinian and Jewish). That such communities even exist is a surprise to many in

6 These issues are discussed further in my chapter in *JPPPG*, 'Jerusalem and the Church's Challenge' (see footnote 2).

the West—not least because each year myriad Christian tourists are whisked through the country under the auspices of non-Christian guides. Focus on the ancient stones blinds them to the ‘living stones’ (1 Peter 2:5)—their fellow-believers. God indeed has a temple in Jerusalem today, but it is not a physical one.

Secondly, whilst being as sympathetic as possible, we must not too simplistically endorse either Islamic or Jewish theologies and agendas. Some Christian support of the Palestinian cause is no longer distinctively Christian; likewise some manifestations of Christian support for Israel. Why are we left undisturbed by the fact that some Jewish Christians are prevented from becoming Israeli citizens and that the Palestinian Christian community is haemorrhaging into non-existence through emigration? Who do we really think are God’s people in the Middle East? The Christian community in Jerusalem (Jew and Gentile) may be tiny and often pressurized to endorse alternative agendas, but the worldwide church with its enormous influence need not be so coerced and could strengthen the indigenous church in its distinctive witness.

In particular, Christian supporters of Israel need to be aware of the consequences of their theology. That which may make them feel better in the comfort of their Western homes (with their particular interpretation of Scripture and their sense of involvement with God’s purposes both being affirmed) may lead to suffering on the ground. As one Arab pastor put it, ‘it is hard to be told that for the return of my Lord Jesus to take place, I must first be expelled from my ancestral home’.

More questions therefore need to be asked in the church about Christian Zionism—at least in its more extreme forms. What are its real, unspoken reasons for supporting Israel? How truly can it claim the high ground of renouncing anti-Semitism, or is it showing a greater interest in the end-times than a genuine, compassionate concern for the Jewish people themselves? Is some such form of Zionism the only way in which Christians can express their eternal debt to Judaism and their special bond of affection for Jewish people? And how does it affect the church’s relationship with Islam? Above all, in what ways does Christian Zionist theology serve to promote the gospel, or does Christ’s death and resurrection somehow get marginalised in the heady atmosphere of eschatology? Is

there not a danger that focusing on Jerusalem and Israel weakens concern for the worldwide church, financially impoverishes its mission, and effectively detracts from the significance of Jesus?

Beyond Jerusalem 3,000: Jesus 2,000!

The great achievements of the Peace Process have changed much. Not least they have brought into focus for many the fact that the goal of a ‘greater Israel’ cannot so easily be achieved. As a result, some Jewish rabbis are speaking of ‘post-Zionism’, the frank acceptance that this dream will not be fulfilled. Meanwhile the Palestinian dream of a larger homeland has also tacitly been laid aside. Both sides are coming to terms with the collapse of cherished ideals. Will a similar pragmatism prevail at the imminent talks about Jerusalem, that city which some have likened to the heart which is shared by two Siamese twins? Can the city be shared, or will the respective idolizations of Jerusalem prove too strong for any compromise—such that one of the twins has to die?

Yet in this painful situation, where ideals are having to be surrendered, one wonders if the God of surprises might not be mysteriously at work. Might those who have set their heart too intently on Jerusalem now come to see him who is truly on ‘centre stage’? Nearly 2,000 years ago God did something in Jerusalem which affected it forever: ‘See, I lay in *Zion* a stone that causes men to stumble’ (Isaiah 28:16 in Romans 10:33). Jerusalem’s subsequent history witnesses to the continuation of that stumbling. Yet perhaps the time approaches when people in Jerusalem will at last stumble upon the truth, and find him who, when other alternatives have failed, can alone be the city’s true peace (Luke 19:41-44).

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