

# The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Reconsidered<sup>1</sup>

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## I. CONTEXT

FOR MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS, the conflict between Palestinian Arab nationalism and Jewish Zionism has been one of the most protracted and seemingly irreconcilable conflicts in the world. Most people have difficulties discussing this conflict in a detached or academic way because it is so fraught with emotion and consequence.

This conflict has caught the world's attention precisely because it centers on a land that is holy to three of the world's great religions: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The ancient connection placed by all three religions on Jerusalem, in particular, is a complicating and exacerbating issue to the political dimensions of the conflict. Muslims have a special connection to Jerusalem since it was the place of the *Mi'raj* where the prophet Muhammad ascended to the throne of God. It is also the location of the Haram al-Sharif, the third holiest site in all Islam, behind Mecca and Medina. Jerusalem is significant to Jews because it houses the Western Wall of the destroyed Second Temple, which was in turn built on the ruins of the Temple of Solomon. This wall is often regarded as the most holy place in Judaism. Jerusalem is significant to Christians, of course, because it is so central to Jesus' mortal ministry and crucifixion. It has particular significance to Latter-day Saints because it will be the site of a great latter-day temple to be constructed before the second coming of Christ.

The conflict is also emotional because we associate it with images of persecuted Jews escaping the horrors and butchery of the German Holocaust and other forms of anti-Semitism. The conflict likewise conjures up images of millions of Palestinians who have been displaced from their homeland and have become refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, or other neighboring Arab countries. In

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1. An earlier draft of this paper was delivered at a conference of the Thirteenth Annual Conference of the International Society, David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies, Brigham Young University, August 19, 2002.

light of the horrors of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, one might wonder why Western society has found a way to absolve those sins at the cost of Palestinian lives and why this is deemed the fault of the Palestinians. We can also ask with equal poignancy: Does not Israel have a right to live in peace and security, as we see Israeli civilians murdered and maimed by the carnage of Palestinian suicide bombers? While we feel empathy for Israeli victims, we also see broadcasts of Israeli soldiers shooting young Palestinians and Israeli tanks plowing down Palestinian homes. This is a very difficult issue, which eludes any easy solutions or analysis, but which deserves greater understanding and discourse.

Both Israelis and Palestinians have valid and legitimate claim to the same land, and both can and have laid claim to victimhood. Both have resorted to aimless and indiscriminate terrorism in the absolute certainty of their own moral rightness. Although we in the West usually associate terrorism with violence perpetrated by Palestinians, and terror carried out by individuals or small groups, we must keep in mind that state violence carried out by Israel (while seen as carrying more legitimacy) can often be defined as terrorism by other means.

## II. HOW LATTER-DAY SAINTS MIGHT VIEW THIS CONFLICT

How might we as Latter-day Saints view this conflict, given what we know about prophecy and modern day revelation? Where should our sympathies lie, particularly with our understanding of prophecy that Judah's scattered remnants shall return to the "land of their inheritance, which is the land of Jerusalem" (3 Nephi 20:29)? Are not the immigration of hundreds of thousands of the Jews to Palestine, beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the establishment of the Israeli state in May 1948, direct fulfillment of prophecy? If so, shouldn't we as Latter-day Saints somehow lend at least our moral support to the government of Israel and its policies because it is the closest approximation we currently have for the political embodiment of God's chosen people?

I hear this argument often in my discussions with students or others who have a particular interpretation of scripture. Latter-day Saints are not unique in their sympathies toward Israel. Most Christian Americans share a transcendental affinity toward Israel and a sense of a sacred responsibility to protect and preserve Israel. Some (including some policy makers) have a serious concern that, by abdicating our responsibility to defend Israel, America risks the withdrawal of divine providence. As evidence of the pervasive Christian Zionist ethic in the U.S., we need only remember the more than \$3 billion a year in U.S. military and economic aid that goes to Israel.

Let me deconstruct this argument and provide, perhaps, an alternative way of looking at the issue as Latter-day Saints. First, let us turn the discussion back to the prophet Abraham, from whom both Palestinians and Israelis claim lineage. In the Old Testament, God established an everlasting covenant with Abra-

ham and his "seed. . . in their generations" involving certain priesthood blessings as well as a certain piece of real estate, that of "all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17: 8). The land of Canaan stretches west of the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea—part of modern Israel. These blessings were intended for *all* the descendents and covenant people of Abraham, not a particular line of Abraham's descendents, although Isaac and Jacob (i.e., Israel) have been explicitly identified as inheritors. That which constitutes a "covenant people" (those who have access to the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant) is contingent upon righteousness and the keeping of God's commandments. The Lord says in 2 Nephi 30:2, "For behold, I say unto you that as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off; for the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son, who is the holy one of Israel."

In other words, eligibility for covenant blessings is less about family lineage and more about righteousness. So, are the Jews then, as descendents of Isaac, God's covenant people? They could be, but not necessarily. Are Palestinians, as descendents of Ishmael, God's covenant people? They could be, but not necessarily. Are Latter-day Saints, as descendents of Jacob, God's covenant people? We could be, but not necessarily. The answer to these questions depends on a variety of factors, not the least of which is the purity of our hearts. The promise to the progeny of Abraham for land inheritance has always been contingent upon spiritual righteousness. Thus, both Palestinians *and* Israelis have legitimate spiritual and transcendent claim to the land of Canaan, but only if they keep the commandments of God. Neither has exclusive title to the land, particularly if they are disobedient. Indeed, the scriptures indicate that this land shall be rightfully occupied by *more than one people*. The prophet Ezekiel said:

And it shall come to pass, that ye shall divide [the land] by lot for an inheritance unto you, and to the strangers that sojourn among you, which shall beget children among you: and they shall be unto you as born in the country among the children of Israel; *they shall have inheritance* with you among the tribes of Israel. (Ezek. 47:22)

So, what are we to make of the remarkable—even miraculous—return of Jews to Palestine over the past 120 years? Is this not a realization of prophecy? The scriptures clearly indicate that the Lord *himself* will gather his people back to the land of their inheritance. Could the Zionist ideology of the late nineteenth century (which was largely a secular, socialist, nationalist movement) and its subsequent brutal military occupation be the chosen apparatus of God for the return of his people? I have always been troubled as a Latter-day Saint with the incongruous notion of the Lord guiding one particular group of his children in subjugating and abusing another group of his children, particularly in light of the commandment to "renounce war and proclaim peace" (D&C 98:16-17). The establishment of the state of Israel and its bloody wake are historical facts, to be sure. Yet to witness the founding and expansion of the Israeli state at the ex-

pense of so much Palestinian suffering gives me deep moral pause. Is God responsible for the prolonged adversity, humiliation, and suffering arising from the austere political and economic conditions of the Palestinians? Is he responsible for their hunger, illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, hopelessness and their despair? Fortunately, nothing in the scriptures holds us to an image of a God who orders the establishment of one political entity at the expense of another people.

It can be argued, I think persuasively, through the Book of Mormon that the gathering of Judah to their land of inheritance as prophesied by Zechariah (2:12; 8:7-8), Ezekiel (11:17; 28:25; 36:24), Isaiah (11:12), Jeremiah (16:14-15; 30:3), and others is largely yet to come. While we might interpret the current state of Israel and the Jewish immigration as what Dan Peterson calls a "preparatory gathering," he also notes that "it does not seem to meet the Book of Mormon's requirements for the 'gathering' in the full sense of the word."<sup>2</sup> This opens the possibility that this precursor gathering may not necessarily have been led by the Lord, but perhaps by well meaning men. Dan Peterson distinguishes between political Israel and spiritual Israel, between the nation-state of Israel and the Israel established for the eternal purposes of God, and, he asserts, they are not one and the same.<sup>3</sup> Even the apostle Paul indicates "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6).

We must remember that the covenant of the Lord to his people is always contingent upon righteousness, as outlined in 1 Nephi 19:15:

Nevertheless, when that day cometh, saith the prophet, that they (the Jews) no more turn aside their hearts against the Holy One of Israel, then will He remember the covenants which he made to their fathers.

So, when will this gathering occur? The scriptures provide some insight into the particular timing of the gathering.

Wherefore, after they (the Jews) are driven to and fro, for thus saith the angel, many shall be afflicted in the flesh and shall not be suffered to perish because of the prayers of the faithful; they shall be scattered, and smitten, and hated; nevertheless, the lord will be merciful unto them, that *when they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer*, they shall be gathered together again to the lands of their inheritance. (2 Nephi 6:11; see also 2 Nephi 22:12; 2 Nephi 10:7)

Furthermore,

And I will remember the covenant which I have covenanted with them that I would

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2. Daniel C. Peterson, *Abraham Divided: An LDS Perspective on the Middle East* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992), 356.

3. *Ibid.*, 364.

gather them together in mine own due time, that I would give unto them again the land of their fathers for their inheritance, which is the land of Jerusalem, which is the promised land unto them forever, saith the Father. And it shall come to pass that the time cometh, when the fullness of my gospel shall be preached unto them; And they shall believe in me, that I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and shall pray unto the Father in my name. Then shall their watchman lift up their voice, and with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye. *Then will the Father gather them together again*, and give unto them Jerusalem for the land of their inheritance. (3 Nephi 20:29-33, emphasis added; see also 21:23-28)

So, while a return of the Jews to the land of Jerusalem is a literal fact, apparently it will occur sometime in the future and only after they are brought to the knowledge of Christ, which of course, has not yet occurred. Indeed, it may not fully occur until after the Savior comes again. When the Lord returns, the land of Palestine will be inhabited by Jews who have *not yet* been converted to Christ:

And then shall the Lord set his foot upon this mount, and it shall cleave in twain and the earth shall tremble, and reel to and fro, and the heavens shall shake. . . . And then shall the Jews look upon me and say: What are these wounds in thine hands and in thy feet? Then shall they know that I am the Lord; for I will say unto them: These wounds are the wounds with which I was wounded in the house of my friends. I am he who was lifted up. I am Jesus that was crucified. I am the Son of God. And then shall they weep because of their iniquities; then shall they lament because they persecuted their king. ( D&C 45:48, 51-53; see also Zechariah 14:3-5 and 13: 6)

3 Nephi 21 speaks plainly of a particular sequence of events as "a sign, that ye may know *the time* when these things shall be about to take place—that I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, my people." First, the gospel shall come forth "from the Gentiles" (v. 6), and "a new city will be built, called the New Jerusalem" (v. 23), "*then* shall the work commence with the Father among all nations in the preparing the way whereby his people may be gathered home to the land of their inheritance" (v. 28). Apparently, the time spoken of—when God himself will do the gathering—is sometime yet in the future.

What should we make of the current political Israel? Should we have no empathy and compassion for the terrible and horrific conditions which spawned the establishment of the State of Israel? I believe we should. Does this mean we can justify anti-Israeli sentiments? No, I believe we should have sympathy for Israel, just as we should for any peoples who have suffered so unjustly and so cruelly at the hands of their fellow man. However, we also have a responsibility to see the government of Israel and its policies for what they are: an earthly nation-state struggling as all nation-states do for power, security, and autonomy, and not as a divinely ordained or guided political entity. As such, we should be very circumspect about how and in what form we provide financial or political

support for Israel and not exempt them from the same accountability we demand of ourselves and other nations when it comes to human rights and international law. We should work to actively publish peace and preserve the dignity and survival of Israelis and Palestinians alike. The Lord, as always, will accomplish his ends in spite of the foibles and evils of men and women, but I do not believe he inspires evil to accomplish those ends. It is seductive to take sides in this emotional issue, which seems so significant, but this is a temptation we as Latter-day Saints must resist. Taking sides in this conflict is not compulsory; indeed, by doing so we lose any moral high ground we may have to bring understanding to both sides. Elder Howard W. Hunter, in a 1979 speech entitled "All are Alike unto God," cited the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as an example of exclusiveness that we as Latter-day Saints must avoid:

Both the Jews and the Arabs are children of our Father. They are both children of promise, and as a church we do not take sides. We have love for and interest in each. The purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to bring about love, unity, and brotherhood of the highest order. . . . [T]o our kinsman of Abraham, we say: We are your brethren—we look upon no nation or nationality as second-class citizens.<sup>4</sup>

Many argue that armed and bloody conflict is inevitable in that part of the world, so why should we bother getting involved? While this may be regrettably true, we must take care to avoid reducing the current conflict to a religious one between Muslims and Jews or Muslims and Christians. This conflict is not about differences in theology; it is a modern politico-national struggle between two peoples making claim to the same piece of ground. Is the great and final conflict of Armageddon a religious conflict between members of different faiths? The apocalyptic literature of Jews, Christians, and Muslims share important characteristics in this regard. All three faiths believe there will be an imminent cosmic conflict between God's chosen seed and forces of evil. All three believe the world will conspire against them individually, and it will appear that they are on the very verge of annihilation. All three believe that, at the very moment it appears they will be destroyed, they will be saved by a messianic figure, *mahdi*, who will preserve them and fight their battles for them.<sup>5</sup> Could it be that all three are right? Is it possible that the world will continue to become more polarized, not along religious or even political lines, but between the believers in God and the godless? That perhaps the righteous spoken of in this great and final conflict are true and righteous believers of *all* religious denominations,

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4. Howard W. Hunter, "All Are Alike Unto God," BYU Fireside, February 4, 1979.

5. In the predominant Suni Muslim tradition that figure is Jesus Christ, sof of Mary. See Muhammad ibn 'Ahd Allah al-Kisa'i, *Gisas al-Anbiya'* (Tales of the Prophets), Trans. Wheeler M. Thackston Jr. (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1997) 334, 335; See also *Sahih Muslim*, trans. 'Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, 4 (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, n.d.), 1501-1503.

who are bound by their common belief in God and who are compelled to bear one another's burdens because in order to secure their common survival as they come under attack by the wicked? Zion, after all, is defined in D&C 97:21 as "the pure in heart." It is also prophesied, "all that fight against Zion shall be destroyed" (1 Nephi 22:14). Thus, in that final and terrible moment, we as Latter-day Saints may come together with the pure in heart, regardless of their religious affiliation, and together we will see with perfect clarity the true brotherhood of man as we kneel at the Savior's feet and he declares, "I am he who was lifted up. I am Jesus that was crucified. I am the Son of God" (D&C 45:53). That will be a great day, a day to finally herald a healing and everlasting peace to a land and a world rife with conflict.

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