

Israel, Jews, and Judaism

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by Arch B. Taylor, Jr.

Guests attending the American Jewish Committee's 2006 centennial celebration got a shock from a panelist on their Symposium on the Jewish Future. Israeli novelist A. B. Yehoshua declared that only Israel, not Judaism, could ensure the survival of the Jewish people. Yehoshua implied that one could claim true Jewish identity only by living in Israel, speaking Hebrew, and participating in life in the land. Jews living elsewhere are only “playing with Jewishness.” Yehoshua is a self-proclaimed non-religious Jew.

Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of the *New Republic*, spoke for the majority who disagreed with Yehoshua. “There is Jewish religion, Jewish culture, Jewish literature, texts that have been with us for 3,000 years. Why do you insist on narrowing it down to Israeliness?”

Jews themselves don't agree on what constitutes Jewishness, and certainly the state of Israel complicates the question. But more, Jewish Israel in the Arab and Muslim Near East raises questions for non-Jews as well. As a gentile Christian, I have some knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and appreciation for the monotheistic faith growing out of the Bible, first confessed by Jews and then by Christians and Muslims. I applauded the establishment of Israel, I deplore the suicide bombings and other terrorist acts of Palestinians against Israeli civilians, and I strongly disagree with those who wish to "drive Israel into the sea." Still, I cannot agree with unconditional support of Israel.

Both Jews and Gentiles should take care to distinguish between the modern Jewish state of Israel, the Israel of the Bible, Judaism as the original monotheistic faith, and the people generally known as Jews. They are not identical, although complexly intertwined. In this essay I express my deeply and prayerfully considered views on Israel's place among these entities, and I hope I may be of help to readers. Further, I welcome responses and comments.

In particular, I address Christian brothers and sisters who support Israel despite violations of international law, defiance of numerous resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, and imposition of intolerable social and economic conditions upon Palestinians. Christian Zionists, particularly Dispensationalists, adopt a literalistic interpretation of the Bible, including the return of Jews to the Holy Land, building a Third Temple, and the return of Christ to set up a kingdom in Jerusalem. Based on texts in Genesis, they agree with Jews who insist God gave the land to Abra-

ham and his descendants for eternal possession. To them, these verses override two thousand years of history during which Jews lived dispersed throughout the world, while only a tiny minority actually lived “in the land.” Since Israel won control of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza in the 1967 War, Christian Zionists have anticipated rebuilding the Jerusalem temple, a condition they consider necessary for Christ’s return. They would destroy the Dome of the Rock and all vestiges of Islam to build the temple. Can they do that without setting off a “battle of Armageddon”— World War III? Is that, perhaps, what they want?

People who express skepticism or indifference to such dire possibilities evidently don’t realize the extent to which US policy over the past few decades, and especially that of President George W. Bush, is under the influence of Christian Zionists and the Israel Lobby. Conservative Christians await the destruction of Jews who fail to accept Christ as Messiah, while the Lobby hopes for ultimate triumph of Israel over all foes. These two groups, though having vastly different expectations, advocate the preservation of Israel as a Jewish state, regardless how horribly this causes Palestinians to suffer.

The malign reality of US policy became clear when Mr. Bush and Congress refused to recognize the Palestinians’ choice of Hamas political leadership in March 2006 democratic elections. Branding Hamas a terrorist organization for participating in attacks on Israeli civilians, the US has not objected as Israel withholds approximately fifty million dollars monthly in taxes rightly belonging to the Palestinian Authority, which Israel collects and controls. Under threat

of retaliation from the US, other governments and humanitarian organizations cut their aid to Palestinians, resulting in severe shortages of food and basic medical supplies and a near breakdown of the entire Palestinian economy.

Hamas' electoral triumph stemmed in part from Palestinians' anger at US support for Israel and the Palestinian Authority Fatah faction's corruption, failure to provide necessary services for the people, and weakness toward Israel. Hamas was effectively making up for Fatah's failures.

In early summer 2006, after Israel massacred a Palestinian family on a Gaza beach, Hamas militants killed two Israeli soldiers and captured a third. Israel retaliated by invading Gaza, killing and capturing Hamas members of the government, killing civilians, and destroying an electric power plant and water facilities serving hundreds of thousands. Soon after in the north, a similar cross-border conflict erupted when the Lebanese militant Islamic group Hezbollah killed several Israeli soldiers and captured two others. Israel unleashed full-scale warfare against Lebanon, destroying highways, Beirut airport, schools, hospitals, and killing many civilians. President Bush and Secretary of State Rice frustrated attempts from international agencies to negotiate an immediate ceasefire and actually approved sending fuel for Israeli planes and lethal cluster bombs that Israel dropped all over southern Lebanon. Even today leftover bomblets kill and maim civilians, many of them children.

Any Christian who takes biblical teachings seriously must strongly protest Israel's violation of the basic principles of justice taught in the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. Christians should also strongly oppose the

routine use of military force exercised against civilians by both sides, but by far more frequent and severe by Israel.

For centuries conservative Christians taught that God had rejected the Jews for breaking covenant and refusing to accept Jesus as Messiah; the Church now constituted the people of God, they claimed. But the return of Jews to Palestine, establishment of Israel, and victory in the 1967 War has given conservative Christians, especially Dispensationalists, new hope. They now acknowledge that God's covenant of election of the Jews is unconditional, and they need a powerful Israel controlling the land to enable God to accomplish the events of the end times as they anticipate them.

They overlook the biblical texts that make possession of the land conditioned upon obeying the covenant laws that God gave through Moses at Mount Sinai, a prominent theme in the book of Deuteronomy. At least thirteen passages link possession of the land with keeping the laws, statutes, and commandments of God. Five describe the consequences of disobedience, including natural calamities, defeat in battle, and finally expulsion from the land.

In historical fact, the Israelites transgressed the covenant. The state became corrupt; the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Religious and political authorities defied warnings from the prophets, and divine judgment fell. Assyria destroyed northern Israel in 721-20 BC and carried the people away, the so-called "ten lost tribes" of Israel. Babylon destroyed southern Judah between 597 and 586 BC, deporting the ruling class and wealthy families to Babylon. Many Judeans fled to Egypt then and later.

The author of Lamentations described in horrifying detail the desolation he (or she) witnessed, all ascribed to the LORD, in judgment on the people, their princes, their city, and their land. While complaining about the extreme severity of the punishments, the author could still confess: “The LORD is in the right” (1.18).

Deuteronomy 30.1-10 lists the conditions under which Israel may regain possession of the land: “Return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul” (30.2). In response to such repentance, the LORD would gather them from the ends of the earth back to the land. “Then you shall again obey the LORD, observing all his commandments” (30.8).

Modern Israel, a declared Jewish State, is by no means founded upon biblical religious principles. Most Israeli Jews are secular. Americans hail Israel as a democracy, yet it has no recognized borders and no constitution. Israel’s treatment of Arab Israelis has been compared to the US treatment of blacks under Jim Crow. If one should apply biblical texts in the way Christian Zionists do, one would have to admit that Israel is far from observing covenant law. Deuteronomy 16.19-20 states, “You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality . . . Justice and only justice you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” Injustice against Arabs, both citizens of Israel and especially those in the occupied territories, is ground for the most serious criticism leveled at modern Israel.

Justice for the Palestinians means fulfilling their rights to a viable, independent state, which Israel obstinately refuses

to do. Henry Siegman, head of the American Jewish Congress from 1978 to 1994, openly declares that the decades-long negotiations intended to achieve that goal have consistently failed because of “the consensus reached long ago by Israel’s decision-making elites that Israel will never allow the emergence of a Palestinian state which denies it effective military and economic control of the West Bank.” The title of Siegman’s article in the *London Review of Books* of August 2007 says it all: “The Great Middle East Peace Process Scam.” He says further, “Indeed, the term ‘Palestinian rights’ seems not to exist in Israel’s lexicon.”

Instead Israel encroaches increasingly into Palestinian territory, building a wall of separation declared illegal by the International Court of Justice. Israel divides Palestinian territory into separate sectors, building highways only Israelis can use, leaving Arabs imprisoned in isolated enclaves. Former President Jimmy Carter correctly calls this separation policy “apartheid” despite bitter denunciation directed against him for using that term. Israel has destroyed thousands of Palestinian homes and uprooted vineyards, citrus orchards, and almost one million olive trees, some of them centuries old, with American-made Caterpillar bulldozers. Deuteronomy 21:19 states: “If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an ax against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?”

A brief review of post-exilic biblical history makes it clear that without a sovereign political state, the people of God had a comparatively peaceful existence. Under the patronage of Persian King Cyrus and his successors, a minority of Jews returned to Palestine and with generous royal subsidy rebuilt the temple in 515 BC. Persia still ruled the Jews (keeping authority to appoint the High Priest and governor) but granted them a degree of self-governance and religious freedom.

A large community of Jews remained in Babylon, where teachers undertook to interpret and apply the Torah in light of being deprived of the temple and its sacrificial rituals. The compilation of their work comprises the Babylonian Talmud, which underlies much teaching and practice of modern Judaism. A large and relatively prosperous Jewish community in Egypt, again with royal subsidy, translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. The Jewish scholar Philo introduced Jewish history and thought to a broader audience using Greek language and philosophical concepts.

The Jerusalem community, numerically small in comparison, included the Zadokite High Priest, who came to have control over both the temple and the political structure responsible to their imperial overlords. Persian rule lasted approximately 300 years, leading to the hellenistic period following Alexander's conquest of Persia. Egypt and Syria vied to control Jerusalem, where the Jewish power structure often clashed over which side to favor. Eventually Syria prevailed and began promoting hellenistic culture, or Hellenism. Gradually Jerusalem's minority elite became increasingly hellenized, and candidates for the high priesthood paid large sums of money to procure the privilege.

King Antiochus IV tried to unify his Syrian realm by enforced hellenization, with complicity of the Jewish power structure. When Antiochus demanded worship of himself as divine and suppressed Jewish practices—circumcision, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath observance—the Hasmonean family of minor priests nicknamed Maccabees led a popular revolt. Against great odds Judas Maccabeus recaptured and purified the Temple in 165 BC, commemorated by the Jewish Hanukkah festival. After Antiochus IV died Syria restored religious recognition to Jews but retained power to appoint the high priest.

The Hasmonean family monopolized military and political power in Jerusalem and even gained the high priesthood, although they were not entitled to it by biblical law. Jewish power waxed as Syria's waned in face of Roman expansion toward the east. For about a century, with Roman acquiescence, Hasmoneans declared independence as the Kingdom of Judea. They succeeded in conquering territory that was roughly equal to that claimed for David. They forced Jewish practices on the Edomites. Internally, strife festered among Hasmonean factions, and Jewish historian Josephus recorded that Alexander Jannaeus crucified 800 of his opponents.

Fed up with Hasmonean corruption and civil strife, Rome withdrew its support of the Hasmoneans and appointed Edomite Herod (later called the Great) King of the Jews in 40 BC. Herod had to fight for his kingship, which he did with a ferocity that killed and enslaved thousands of Jews. Jews continued to yearn for independence. They rebelled against Roman occupation but also against the Jewish power elite who, as clients of Rome, got

prestige and wealth by exploiting their own people. In 70 AD the Romans destroyed the Temple, and after another revolt in 135 AD they expelled almost all Jews from Palestine.

The fall of the Hasmonean dynasty marked the third failed attempt of the chosen people of God to form a sovereign state like the nations of the world. One might conclude that the LORD, the God of Israel, did not intend for the people of the covenant to be a political state. A key text is 1 Samuel 8. When the people of God were settled as a loose confederation of tribes in the land of Canaan, their elders asked the prophet Samuel to appoint a king to govern them, “like other nations” (1 Sam 8.5). This request, evidence that they had rejected God’s sovereignty, displeased both prophet and deity. At the LORD’s command Samuel told the people the consequences of having a king. First the king would organize an army. He would draft their sons as commanders, soldiers, and armorers and their daughters to serve his royal establishment. He would take the best of their property and economic assets for his own partisans, and make the people, in effect, his slaves (1 Sam 8.11-18).

The people did not contest this description of a militarized society. They insisted: “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam 8.19b-20). At the very outset, contrary to the divine will for the people of God, they chose the way of “other nations” that involved militarization and warfare.

Saul, the first king, warred throughout his reign and died in battle. David, his successor, fought to gain the crown, engaged in defensive and offensive wars, and in old age fought two rebellions, one led by his son Absalom. A younger son, Solomon, gained the throne by a bloody coup. His regime was so oppressive that the kingdom split after he died. The people of God became two nations, Israel and Judah, and fought each other as often as they fought common enemies. Like other nations, they sometimes accomplished regime change by civil war. We noted above the tragic fate of Israel in 722-1 and Judah in 587-6 BC, which biblical writers confessed they deserved.

Some Christian Bibles include 1 and 2 Maccabees, which tell the thrilling story of the Jews' armed resistance to Syrian Antiochus' oppression, and modern Israelis recall the Maccabees' exploits with pride. However, after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, the rabbis who laid the foundations for what has become modern Judaism excluded Maccabees from their canon of Scripture. The rabbis included the book of Daniel, written about the time of the persecution by Antiochus, which expects divine deliverance "not by human hands" (Daniel 2.34, 45; 8.25), i.e., not by military force.

During the centuries from 586 BC to the end of World War II, the vast majority of Jews lived in Diaspora without state, temple, or sacrifice, but they remain nevertheless the people of God. Regrettably, Jews often suffered discrimination, segregation, persecution, and violence at the hands of Gentiles, Christians guilty of some of the most egregious assaults. Yet in some places and in some eras they enjoyed relative peace and prosperity and contributed richly to the

culture of their host countries and the larger world. The Bible expresses God's will that the scattered people some day be gathered in their homeland, that Jerusalem be rebuilt, and that people of every nation come to be taught by God, to "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isaiah 2.2-4).

With the fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I Jews began to contemplate gathering enough of their people in one place for self-government and self-protection. This is the Zionist movement, which author Jacqueline Rose calls "the legitimate desire of a persecuted people for a homeland" (*The Question of Zion*, Princeton University Press). Great Britain held a mandate over Palestine after World War I, and prominent British politicians responded receptively to appeals from Jews, allowing them to start the return. The mass destruction of Jews in the Holocaust stirred feelings of sympathy and guilt among leaders of the Western Powers after World War II, culminating in the United Nations decision to partition the land between Jews and Arabs. In 1948, Jews unilaterally declared foundation of the State of Israel.

Originally Zionism was more secular than religious. Zionists and other Jews had long debated the pros and cons of statehood. Chaim Weizmann, who became the first president, is typical of those demanding state sovereignty. Rose cites some of his writings (emphasis original): "Our relations to the other races and nations would become more *normal*." "We shall revert to *normal* . . . 'like unto all the nations.'" That normality necessitated armed forces. Practically all the earliest political leaders of Israel engaged in terrorist gang action against British and Arab civilians, and

later, military generals assumed the highest political positions. From the beginning they aimed to possess all the land.

Israeli historian Ilan Pappé writes that Jews rejected overtures from Arab states to negotiate the borders of the territories assigned by the UN to Jews and Arabs. Israelis were actually militarily superior to Arab forces in 1948 and prepared to attack. After unilaterally declaring independence, Israel set out to occupy as much territory as possible, destroying villages and massacring and driving out thousands of Palestinians whom they forced into refugee settlements abroad. (<http://www.labournet.net/world/0209/pappe1.html>; see also Pappé's book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*).

Al-Ahram Weekly Online reports how, in the early 1950s, Israel set about committing terrorist attacks against Palestinians, using the very tactics the German Police Battalion 101 had used against Polish Jews. Ariel Sharon was chief of the Israeli group, which even called itself "Unit 101"! ("The Roots of Sharon's Legacy" <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/779/re91.htm>). Given its own terrorist history, it is intolerable that Israel refuses to recognize Hamas as part of the Palestinians' political structure.

Israel has succeeded in portraying itself as the victim of Palestinian terrorists who have never served as a dependable entity with which to negotiate. "The Middle East peace process may well be the most spectacular deception in modern diplomatic history," writes Siegman. He quotes an official who says that the Israeli Defense Force is "carrying out an apartheid policy" designed to "formalize the de facto

cantonisation of the West Bank.” (<http://www.lrb.co.uk/contribhome.php?get=sieg01>)

Israel was born in war and has maintained wartime footing ever since, drafting even its young women for compulsory service. Israel has one of the most powerful military forces in the world, including unacknowledged nuclear weapons. Under the headline, “Eliyahu advocates carpet bombing Gaza,” the *Jerusalem Post*, May 30, 2007 reported: “Israel’s former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu ruled that there was absolutely no moral prohibition against the indiscriminate killing of civilians during a potential massive military offensive on Gaza aimed at stopping the rocket launchings.”

On the other side, many religious Jews strongly opposed the Zionist program. Rose tells how Martin Buber, a biblical scholar and historian of Jewish Hasidism, who exerted strong influence on me and other Christian students of the Bible, persistently advocated “one land for two peoples” living in peaceful coexistence. Early on Buber criticized Jewish nationalist ambitions. He noted that the ancient Hebrews did not succeed in becoming a “normal” nation, but commented, “Today, the Jews are succeeding at it to a terrifying degree.” Buber warned that injustices done the Arabs would have a negative effect on Israelis. Rose writes: “For Buber, the soul of the nation was forfeit from the day of its creation.”

Hans Kohn, Buber’s friend and follower, lamented the militarization of the state and warned against the gradual infiltration of religious zealotry, which would only make things worse. Today we witness the fulfillment of Kohn’s

foreboding, the vehement support of Jewish and Christian religious zealots, with U.S. helicopters, fighter planes, and missiles against Palestinians' homemade rockets and suicide bombs. Despite continually expanding control over territory and ever more stringent oppression of Palestinians, Israel has never succeeded in achieving security.

An organization of orthodox Jewish rabbis and their followers, Neturei Karta, vigorously condemn Zionism and deny legitimacy to the state of Israel for accepting military and diplomatic aid from other nations to form a political state in violation of the divine will expressed in Torah (<http://www.nkusa.org>). Other Jews besides such deeply religious ones seriously doubt the wisdom of American fellow-Jews' unquestioning support of Israel. Writing in *The Nation* for August 6, 2007, Norman Birnbaum urgently asks: "Is Israel Good for the Jews?" Inclining toward the negative Birnbaum writes: "American Jewry might serve Israel better by eschewing total identification with Israel to take a more reflective position. Jerusalem has changed hands tens of times since the Roman conquest. Israel's policies, combining brutality toward the Arabs with contempt for them, will bring, sooner rather than later, another change." http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060814/is_israel_good_for_the_jews)

Is the modern Israeli Jewish state destined to suffer the fate of the kingdoms of ancient Israel, Judah, and the Hasmoneans? Both religious and secular Jews warn of this possibility. One cannot banish fear of such a result if one takes seriously the character of the God of Israel as revealed in Torah and Prophets. God is Creator of all things. Every

human being bears the divine image. God's covenant of compassion with Noah embraces every living thing and the earth itself. Though God chose the Jews, the land belongs to God, not to humans. God loves the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger. God shows no partiality. Christians like me believe that God revealed through the Apostle Paul the divine purpose to allow Gentiles, through Christ, to enter into the blessings of the covenants without becoming Jews. Through Christ God wills the reconciliation of all, in heaven and on earth, in a covenant of peace.

Decades ago the Roman Catholic and the ecumenical protestant churches officially declared support for Israel, condemned Palestinian terrorist attacks, and called for establishment of a viable, independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. The Presbyterian Church (USA) at its 2004 biennial General Assembly affirmed previous resolutions but called for careful study concerning the possibility of phased divestment of church funds from companies profiting from Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The Israel Lobby (AIPAC) and some church members denounced this decision. The 2006 General Assembly adopted conciliatory language to mollify the critics of the divestment action but nevertheless instructed its Committee on Mission Responsibility through Investment to continue the process of study and negotiation already begun.

The United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Church endorsed the Presbyterian initiative on divestment, as did Jewish organizations such as Tikkun and Jewish Voice for Peace. Pro-Israel groups call these Christians anti-Semitic and the Jews self-haters, but the

reality is quite the opposite. Jews and Christians who take seriously the biblical principles of divine justice believe that Israel's hope for survival depends on moving speedily toward ending the occupation and working diligently to enable establishment of the Palestinian state. Israeli violence against Palestinians only provokes violence in return in a spiral toward mutual destruction.

True friends of Israel and the Palestinians can only view with despair the latest US proposal to increase arms exports to Israel over the next decade. In view of my understanding of biblical instruction, I believe that Israel's trust in armed force to capture and hold more land and to try to ensure security is a form of idolatry. In secular terms, Israel is addicted to force like a drug, and the US only acts as enabler for Israel's self-destructive passion. I believe that only a multilaterally agreed nonviolent, humane agreement, beginning with Israel's retreat to the pre-1967 green line and removal of illegal settlements, matched by a corresponding irenic Palestinian response, is the way to go forward toward the goal of two viable states in peaceful coexistence. If, God forbid, such a solution cannot be reached and the conflict continues to fester, the state of Israel may fall. Even so, Jews and Judaism will survive and will continue both to enrich and to challenge the rest of the world.

Arch B. Taylor, Jr. 09-18-07

Biographical Note

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