

# The Problem of Israel

## I. A Historical & Political Perspective

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By May 15, 2008, the State of Israel would have reached its sixtieth year of existence. Throughout all that time it has seldom enjoyed a day of peace. Its neighbors have fought the very idea of a Jewish state within what they consider to be an exclusive domain of Islam.

In this article, I would like to deal with the “**Problem of Israel**” from two distinct but related perspectives, the “**Historical and Political**”, and the “**Biblical and Theological**.”

During the last week of November, 2007, the **Annapolis Peace Conference** began its sessions with opening speeches from President Bush, Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, and President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. I don't intend to comment on the conference, as many experts have already made their points. My concern is to point to the **root cause of the Problem, namely Islam**.

When the Ottoman Empire lost its hold on the Middle East in the aftermath of WWI, two European powers tried to fill the vacuum. Britain and France got a mandate from the **League of Nations** to “lead” the nations of the area to political maturity and independence. France received the mandate over Syria and Lebanon; while Britain was burdened with a mandate over Palestine and Transjordan.

The Arab population of Palestine had hoped for complete independence within a larger Arab state, comprised of what is known as the **Greater Syria**. On the other hand, the Jewish population in Palestine looked forward to the establishment of a “**Jewish Home**” in the Holy land. This hope was rekindled during WWI by the British Government's “**Balfour Declaration**” that looked with favor upon the fulfillment of that dream.

The years between the two World Wars were tumultuous in Palestine. While Jewish immigration continued at a faster pace than before, the Arabs under the leadership of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, **Hajj Amin el-Huseini**, strongly resented the Jewish influx into Palestine, and rose up against the British authorities, in 1929, and in the mid 1930s. Just before WWII, the British Government issued a “**White Paper**” limiting the number of Jewish immigrants coming into Palestine, thus postponing a lasting resolution of the problem.

As soon as the war was over, the British Government having failed to convince the two antagonists to accept an interim resolution of the problem brought the matter over to the **United Nations Organization**. Its General Assembly voted in 1947 for the partition of the land into an Arab Palestinian State and a Jewish State. The British, no longer able or willing to keep law and order in Palestine announced that their mandate would end on May 14, 1948. The last British troops sailed from the port of Haifa on that fateful day. At midnight, the leadership of the **Jewish Agency** announced the birth of the **State of Israel**, with David Ben-Gurion its first prime minister.

On Saturday morning, May 15, the armies of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, and Egypt entered Palestine in a move to stop Israel from taking those parts of the land that were allocated to it by the UN Partition Plan. The newly-born Israel rallied its forces and managed to repel most of the invading armies. The UN stepped in and brought about an **Armistice Agreement** between Israel and the Arab states. As a result of the fighting that went on and off during the summer of 1948, around 500,000 Palestinian Arabs left their homes and sought refuge east of the Jordan, in Syria, and in Lebanon. They and their numerous descendants still live in refugee camps in these countries, supported by the **United Nations Relief and Work Agency**, known by its acronym, **UNRWA!**

It is needless to give detailed accounts of the major and minor wars that erupted almost every decade since

1948. I will refer to them briefly. In October, 1956, Israel responded to the provocation of the Egyptian Army and Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza strip, by invading the Sinai and going all the way to the Suez Canal. This action was coordinated with the British and French attack on the Canal that had been nationalized by President Nasser of Egypt.

In June, 1967, after almost two weeks of Nasser's fiery speeches against Israel, he requested the withdrawal of the UN peace-keeping force in the Sinai Peninsula. Israel then launched a surprise attack on Egyptian airfields on June 5. During this war that lasted six days, Israel occupied the entire **Sinai, the West Bank of Jordan, and the Golan Heights in Syria**. It was a stunning victory for Israel, and the most traumatic event for the Arabs.

President Nasser died in September, 1970, and was succeeded by Anwar Sadat. On Saturday, October 6, 1973, he launched a surprise attack against the Israeli forces stationed on the east side of the Suez Canal. He was joined in that action by Syria who tried to liberate the Golan Heights. This war, known as the **Yom Kippur War** (Day of Atonement) resulted in the withdrawal of Israel from the Sinai. A peace agreement was reached between the two countries. A few years later, on the very day Anwar Sadat was commemorating his 1973 victory over Israel, he was gunned down by radical Islamist elements of the Egyptian army.

Lesser wars between Israel and the Arabs took place in the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s. Throughout all these years, several American administrations got involved in diplomatic efforts to bring about a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, beginning with Presidents Carter, Clinton, and Bush. During these years, quite often a resolution seemed to be at hand, only to vanish when put to the test.

What makes the Palestinian problem so impossible to solve? Or, what is the root cause for the seemingly perpetual Israeli-Palestinian conflict? I believe it is Islam.

Over the years, Islam developed an ideology that goes like this: **any land that becomes a part of *Daru'l Islam* (House of Islam) must always remain Islamic**. Islamic imperialism has distinguished itself by being totally different from European imperialisms. The latter were all "**over-seas**" and eventually came to an end. On the other hand, Islamic imperialism spread in a contiguous manner, and did not easily divest itself of its conquered territories. The lands lost to Islam were those that resisted total assimilation into the Islamic faith such as in Spain, in Central and Eastern Europe, and in the Indian subcontinent.

**The central drive or impulse of the Islamic ideology is what I would like to call "*the Divine Right of Conquest*."** Muslims glory in the great *Futuh* (Conquests.) After all, they were all done "*Fi Sabeel-Allah*" (*in the Pathway of Allah*.) They are blessed by Him; more than that, they have been foreordained by the divine will! Thus, Islam cannot and would not concede to the birth of a Jewish homeland within Palestine. This land so important to both Jews and Christians, had been "hallowed" by Muhammad, who according to the Qur'an, paid a special "visit" to the heavens via Jerusalem. ***Ipsa facto, Jerusalem became the third holy city of Islam after Mecca and Medina***. In fact Islam's hegemonic penchant is seen as well in its appropriation of all the great men and prophets of antiquity, beginning with *Adam*, and ending with *Jesus*. All of them are considered as Muslims, even before the advent of Islam!

I don't want to show any disrespect for Western political leaders. They need our prayers and cooperation in these difficult times. Unfortunately, they don't seem to understand the true nature of Islam when they launch their initiatives for solving problems between Islamic countries and their neighbors. They either ignore, or are unaware of the fact that **Islam is far more than a religious faith; it is a complete worldview with global aspirations and pretensions**. If the West, during the last three centuries, succeeded in separating church and state, this has not happened in *Daru'l Islam*. **The opposition to the existence of Israel is a religious matter for Muslims, and therefore cannot be negotiated**.

In this connection I would like to quote from Bernard Lewis' article, "**On the Jewish Question**," published in the Wall Street Journal, on November 26, 2007.

**"The first question (one might think it is obvious but apparently not) is, 'What is the conflict about?' There are basically two possibilities: that it is about the size of Israel, or about its existence.**

“If the issue is about the size of Israel, then we have a straightforward border problem...

If, on the other hand, the issue is the existence of Israel, then clearly it is insoluble by negotiation. There is no compromise position between existing and not existing, and no conceivable government of Israel is going to negotiate on whether that country should or should not exist.

“PLO and other Palestinian spokesmen have, from time to time, given formal indications of recognition of Israel in their diplomatic discourse in foreign languages. But that's not the message delivered at home in Arabic, in everything from primary school textbooks to political speeches and religious sermons. Here the terms used in Arabic denote, not the end of hostilities, but an armistice or truce, until such time that the war against Israel can be resumed with better prospects for success. Without genuine acceptance of Israel's right to exist as a Jewish State, as the more than 20 members of the Arab League exist as Arab States, or the much larger number of members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference exist as Islamic states, peace cannot be negotiated.

“[To go] back to the Annapolis summit. If the issue is not the size of Israel, but its existence, negotiations are foredoomed. And in light of the past record, it is clear that is and will remain the issue, until the Arab leadership either achieves or renounces its purpose -- to destroy Israel. Both seem equally unlikely for the time being.”

## **The Problem of Israel**

### **II. A Biblical Theological Perspective**

It would be wrong for Christians, who believe in the supreme and final authority of the Word of God, to regard the **Problem of Israel** simply from a political and historical point of view. For example, in his **Letter to the Romans**, Paul devoted Chapters 9, 10, and 11, to a treatment of this problem within God's plan of salvation. Quite often, we neglect to comment on these chapters, leaving the field to the **Dispensational school of hermeneutics** (principles of interpretation.) According to this school, the birth of the State of Israel was a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

On the other hand, Christians who subscribe to the **Historical-Grammatical** school of hermeneutics, deny that the emergence of Israel as an independent state took place as a fulfillment of some Biblical prophecies. Our disagreement with our Dispensational brothers and sisters should not imply that we neglect the problem of Israel, from a Biblical and theological perspective. I use the term “**Israel**” here as a reference to God's Old Testament people. I would like to quote from Professor John Murray's commentary, **THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS: Volume II, Chapters 9-16**, published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1965.

*“But what of chapters 9 to 11? It might seem that there is discontinuity in this portion of the epistle and its length appears to aggravate the question raised. It is only as we fail to discern or overlook the relation that these chapters sustain to the thesis of this epistle that any thought of irrelevance or discontinuity is entertained. On closer inspection this part of the epistle is seen to bring to climactic vindication the thesis stated in 1:16, 17 and correlative doctrines unfolded later in chapters 1 to 8. If this section of the epistle were absent, there would be a hiatus leaving us with unanswered questions and the corresponding perplexity. It is not that we may demand or expect answers to all questions. But in this instance we may be profoundly grateful that the supreme author of Scripture inspired the apostle to deal with questions so germane to the grand theme of this epistle and urgently pressing upon the minds of intelligent readers.*

*“It is, however, not merely the questions which emerge from this epistle that are answered in chapters 9 to 11. They are the questions which the biblico-theological perspective derived from the whole of Scripture necessarily provokes. It is noteworthy to what an extent Paul appeals to the Old Testament in this part of the epistle. This appeal shows that the subjects with which he deals are those which have their roots in the Old Testament and are, therefore, to be understood in the light of the apostle's interpretation and application. In*

*other words, the apostle, writing in the full light of the fulfillment which the advent of Christ brought and the inspiration of the Spirit of Pentecost, furnishes us with the orientation in terms of which the prophetic Scriptures are to be understood.*

*“In chapter 11:11-32, Paul discloses what at 11:25 he calls ‘this mystery’ that the rejection of Israel is not final. There is a further implication of the Abrahamic covenant which the future will verify and vindicate, an implication that goes beyond the receiving of a remnant in all generations. As a result of the covenant with Abraham a favour and love on God’s part toward Israel as a people are still in exercise. They are beloved for the fathers’ sake, and this is so even though they are alienated from God’s favour and blessing (11:28). The privileges of Israel enumerated in 9:4, 5 have abiding relevance because ‘the gifts and the calling of God are not repented of’ (11:29). In accordance with these implications of the covenant promise there will be restoration of Israel to the faith and blessing of the gospel. This Paul calls ‘their fullness’ (11:12), a fullness in overt contrast with their trespass and loss and, therefore, characterized by a proportion that will be commensurate in the opposite direction. He also calls this their ‘receiving’ and it is likewise in contrast with their ‘casting away’ (11:15). It is their grafting in again into their own olive tree (11:23, 24). Finally, their restoration is expressed in these terms: ‘all Israel shall be saved’ (11:26).” Pp. xii-xiv*

I have quoted at length from Professor Murray’s commentary to emphasize that the problem of Israel across the last two thousand years has been much **more than a people without a homeland**. I don’t ignore the fact that between 70 and 1948 A.D., the Jewish people lived in the Diaspora. Their sufferings have been beyond description in most of the lands where they had settled, culminating with the Holocaust of WWII. My earnest hope is that nowadays Christians do not restrict their concern for the people of Israel simply to the political sphere, i.e., to **the State of Israel**. We should be equally concerned about their spiritual welfare. The fulfillment of the prophetic passages of Romans 9-11 will take place within the sphere of the preaching of the gospel to the people of Israel. This is exactly what Paul teaches in this section of the epistle: **‘faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.’** In the Greek original: **"ara h pistis ex akohs h de akoh dia rhmatos cristou."** (transliterated into Latin script)

Across the ages, there were many conversions of the Jews to the Christian faith. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was especially rich in such occurrences.

I like to quote the following from an article in **Wikipedia** on the life and accomplishments of an Austrian Jew who came to the Lord Jesus Christ.

**“Alfred Edersheim** (1825 – 1889) was a Jewish a convert to Christianity and a biblical scholar known especially for his book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (1883).

**“Edersheim** was born in Vienna of Jewish parents of culture and wealth. English was spoken in their home, and he became fluent at an early age. He was educated at a local gymnasium and also in the Talmud and Torah at a Hebrew school, and in 1841 he entered the University of Vienna. His father suffered illness and financial reversals before Alfred could complete his university education, and he had to support himself.

**“Edersheim** emigrated to Hungary and became a teacher of languages. He converted to Christianity in Pesth when he came under the influence of John Duncan, a Church of Scotland chaplain to workmen engaged in constructing a bridge over the Danube. Edersheim accompanied Duncan on his return to Scotland and studied theology at New College, Edinburgh and at the University of Berlin. In 1846 he was ordained to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church. He was a missionary to the Jews in Romania for a year. In 1861 health problems forced him to resign and the Church of St. Andrew was built for him at Torquay. In 1872 Edersheim's health again obliged him to retire, and for four years he lived quietly at Bournemouth. In 1875 he was ordained in the Church of England and from 1876 to 1882 Vicar of Loder, Dorsetshire. In 1882 he resigned and relocated to Oxford. He was Select Preacher to the University 1884-85 and Grinfield Lecturer on the

Septuagint ,1886-88 and 1888-89. Edersheim died at Merton, France, March 16, 1889.”  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_Edersheim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Edersheim)

Another prominent conversion was that of **Felix Mendelssohn** (1809-1847). He added Bartholdy to his family name after becoming a Christian. Among his many accomplishments as a composer and conductor, is his role in the revival of **J. S. Bach’s music**. He conducted Bach’s **St Matthew’s Passion in 1829**, in Berlin, for the first time after the death of the composer in 1750! One year before his death, he composed the oratorio **Elijah**.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a great revival of interest in the Hebrew language and in missions to the Jews. One of the men who played a major role in that movement was **Franz Delitzsch** (1813-1890). Here are some quotations about him from **Wikipedia**:

“**Franz Delitzsch** (1813- 1890) was a German Lutheran theologian and Hebraist. He held the professorship of theology at Rostock from 1846 to 1850, and at Erlangen until 1867, and after that at Leipzig until his death. Delitzsch wrote many commentaries on books of the Bible, Jewish antiquities, biblical psychology, a history of Jewish poetry, and Christian apologetics.

“He defended the Jewish community against anti-Semitic attacks and translated the New Testament into Hebrew. In 1880 he established the **Institutum Judaicum** in Leipzig for the training of missionary workers among Jews.

“Today Delitzsch is best known for his translation of the New Testament into Hebrew. Delitzsch's translation is still considered the standard New Testament edition in Hebrew. It is remarkable in that it was composed before the modern revival of the language but still remains fresh and alive for readers today.

“Delitzsch also collaborated with J. F. K Keil on a commentary series which covers the whole of the Old Testament and is still in print, having first appeared in 1861. Delitzsch contributed the commentaries on Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Isaiah.”

I must add to the above information from **Wikipedia**, that these commentaries were written in German, and translated into English. I have the entire set published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The special value of this series is that the comments are based on the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. While the initials of Dr. Keil are listed in **Wikipedia** as J.F.K., the commentaries in my possession list them as C. F.! Furthermore, Dr. Delitzsch wrote a two-set commentary on the “**Epistle to the Hebrews**” based on the Greek text of the New Testament.

Having considered the great achievements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the field of missions to the Jews, it is the responsibility of Christians in our day not restrict their concern for the Jews simply to the political aspects surrounding the State of Israel, and its struggles for survival in a hostile Islamic atmosphere. The Good News of the Messiah should be proclaimed to the Jews everywhere, in love and sincerity. We can do that based on the great hope given to us in Romans 11: 25 to 36:

*“I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:*

*‘The Deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’*

*“As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs. For God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.”*

Having contemplated that great future event, Paul burst into one of the most joyful doxologies of the Bible:

*“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (NIV)*