

A Mid-East Mess

by **Richard T. Ritenbaugh**

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For millennia, the biblical land of Canaan has been the crossroads of the world. Only rarely has it been the center of civilization, yet quite often it has been the contested prize between two empires ranged about it. Within its borders lie vital trade routes, coveted religious sites and significant strategic positions that empires feel they must possess to strengthen or consolidate their power. In this oft-disputed land, God placed His people Israel.

Why God did this is open to debate, but a major reason must be that such positioning amidst neighbors that are often more powerful requires His people to trust Him for their defense. During times of righteous leadership, Israel relied on God, and He delivered them—sometimes in the face of daunting odds. When Israel's leadership failed to seek God's aid, the nation generally fell subject to a stronger power. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles record this roller-coaster history of Israel.

In addition, Israel neither ejected all the Canaanites from the land, as God had instructed them, nor properly dealt with its longtime enemies. Generation after generation, a succession of enemies would rise to challenge, subvert or enslave the people of Israel. These failures—along with the ambitions of mighty empires—have made the small, narrow strip hugging the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea a glowing ember in a volatile region.

Some of these factors play a part in the most recent outbreak of hostilities between the modern state of Israel and the Palestinians. Certainly, the ancient and inherent enmity between the descendents of Ishmael and Isaac provides the historical foundation for the fighting. Religious rivalries and prejudices have a large role. The meddling hands of great powers, past and present, are obvious after even a superficial study into the situation. Lastly, Israel's handling of the situation has probably done more harm than good. In all, it is not surprising that over 200 Israelis and Palestinians have lost their lives in the past two months.

Peace Process?

A major part of the problem since the Camp David Accords in 1978 is that, however one categorizes the "peace" in the region since that time, the process to hammer out a peace deal has been fundamentally flawed. Neither of the two sides necessarily wants peace. Both of them want possession and jurisdiction over Palestine. With this as the unstated but obvious goal of both parties, a peace treaty is an impossible outcome.

The Palestinians—whether this means the Fatah or Hamas faction or both—have never relinquished their long-term goal of wiping the state of Israel off the map. (In fact, Palestinian maps do not recognize the state of Israel at all.) All that has changed is the means of achieving it. Once the Arab-Israeli wars proved fruitless, the Palestinians opted for a successful incremental strategy of demanding land for peace. Israel has returned so much land to them that today 99 percent of Palestinians live under the rule of Yasser Arafat and his Palestinian Authority, and the remaining one percent lives mostly in Arab Jerusalem.

Land for peace has sufficiently weakened Israel that the next steps of the process can commence. The present hostilities are nothing more than a play by the Palestinians for international sympathy so that they can advance two new parts of their agenda.

First, they want the world to recognize Palestine as an independent state. Although Arafat has delayed declaring statehood at least three times in the past year, the frequency of its postponement reveals it as a front-burner item. He has been frustrated in his attempts to declare sovereignty by the understanding that such a declaration would endanger international support, particularly in Europe and the United States. Although Arafat denies personal involvement, Palestinians in his party have engineered the present intifada to sway international opinion far enough in their favor that a declaration of statehood would be accepted or even applauded.

Second—and most important—the Palestinian Authority wants control of Jerusalem. This, however, will never happen, for since 1967, Israel has claimed the city as its "eternal and undivided" capital. Israel would go to war over Jerusalem, international opinion notwithstanding. Israel's present position is to maintain the status quo: Israeli sovereignty with Palestinian control of Muslim holy sites. This, in turn, is unacceptable to the Palestinians, and any other "shared sovereignty" proposal would be rejected as unworkable.

If they cannot have Jerusalem for themselves, the Palestinians want the city internationalized. Arafat has already appealed for international forces to be deployed in the West Bank and Gaza to protect Palestinians from the Israeli army, but so far the United Nations has wisely rejected his request. United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan has suggested sending a group of international observers in lieu of an armed force. This group of observers, however, could turn out to be the vanguard of a stronger, more military or political group sent in months to come. Moreover, since Jerusalem is ultimately the key issue between the Palestinians and Israelis, the city would most likely be the group's eventual destination.

If the Palestinians should succeed in these two areas—declaring statehood and denying Jerusalem to the Israelis—Israel would be so politically and psychologically weakened that its ability to resist further demands would be suspect. With much of its territory stripped from it by the land-for-peace deals, even its military response would be severely hampered. The Palestinians would have Israel right where they want it.

Another Option

Anovel proposal receiving surprising consideration, especially from Israeli hardliners, is to "transfer" Jerusalem to divine sovereignty. Of course, this option raises its own difficulties, including which god receives Jerusalem. A more practical problem concerns who would become caretaker and securer of the city. This proposal dissolves under the same dilemma inherent in internationalizing Jerusalem: Who receives control?

Jerusalem is not just a place where religious sites of several faiths are located. Besides being a home to religion, it is a vibrant city of business, culture, academia and government. Far more than a council of religious leaders would be necessary to keep the city running, growing and secure. Besides, the religious differences between the various faiths are sharp enough to make any kind of consensus government difficult, if not impossible.

The present Pope, John Paul II, has proposed on several occasions to give Jerusalem "special international status"—primarily for religious reasons—and under his plan the most likely governmental body to receive oversight of the city is the UN. The 1948 UN resolution partitioning Palestine agrees, designating Jerusalem as a special international city under UN administration. If this item of the resolution were enforced, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the U.S., Britain, France, Russia and China) would together have de facto sovereignty over the city. Similar proposals would limit UN control to the Temple Mount or other smaller areas containing just religious sites, with sovereignty over the city itself in Israeli and/or Palestinian hands.

Even UN Security Council oversight does not guarantee religious impartiality. Depending on its makeup, the Security Council could include Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, humanists, atheists or any other religious advocate. Adding Japan, Germany, India or any other nation to the Council would only compound the problem. In fact, no human solution will ever solve the problem of Jerusalem.

Divine Sovereignty

Some have proposed the right solution with the wrong implementation. Divine sovereignty is the way out of the tangled mess that is the Arab-Israeli conflict, but attempting to bring this about by human means will turn out to be a costly error. Rather than a sincere attempt to acknowledge God as sovereign over all, most of the "players" in the Middle East peace process see this proposal merely as a symbolic gesture to diffuse a potentially explosive situation.

God, however, repeatedly declares that the only way to resolve the contention over Jerusalem is the return of Jesus Christ to establish His just rule over it and all the earth:

» The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool." The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies! . . . The Lord is at Your right hand; He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath. He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies, He shall execute the heads of many countries. (Psalm 110:1-2, 5-6)

» O Zion, you who bring good tidings, get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, you who bring good tidings, lift up your voice with strength, lift it up, be not afraid; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Behold the Lord GOD shall come with a strong hand, and His arm shall rule for Him; behold, His reward is with Him, and His work before Him. (Isaiah 40:9-10)

» "Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "that I will perform that good thing which I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah: In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely. . . ." (Jeremiah 33:14-16)

» Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. . . The LORD also will roar from Zion, and utter His voice from Jerusalem; the heavens and earth will shake; but the LORD will be a shelter for His people, and the strength of the children of Israel. So you shall know that I am the LORD

your God, dwelling in Zion My holy mountain. Then Jerusalem shall be holy, and no aliens shall ever pass through her again. (Joel 3:14, 16-17)

» Sing, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your judgments, He has cast out your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall see disaster no more. In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. The LORD your God is in your midst, the Mighty One, will save. . . ." (Zephaniah 3:14-17)

» "Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the surrounding peoples, when they lay siege against Judah and Jerusalem. . . . It shall be in that day that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem." . . . Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, and your spoil will be divided in your midst. For I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem. . . . Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. . . . Thus the LORD my God will come. . . . And the LORD shall be King over all the earth. . . . The people shall dwell in [Jerusalem]; and no longer shall there be utter destruction, but Jerusalem shall be safely inhabited. (Zechariah 12:2, 9; 14:1-5, 9, 11)

These are only a few of the verses that speak of Christ's return to solve the problem of Jerusalem. In the next few years, politicians may propose other schemes to end the conflict, but truly, what man proposes God disposes. Only He has an enduring and just solution, and it must wait until the inauguration of His glorious Kingdom.