

260 “Hands off Jerusalem!”

The recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel by President Trump has caused widespread condemnation. This issue is so sensitive because Jerusalem is claimed by both Jews and Muslims, claims which lies at the heart of what is termed “the Palestinian problem”: who owns Palestine? – and who owns Jerusalem?

Now of course Jerusalem is also special for Christians, as being the site of crucial events in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, but in no sense does the physical city itself possess a fundamental spiritual significance for us, a fact which the Crusaders never understood. “For our citizenship is in heaven For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Philippians 3.20 / Hebrews 13.14 and 11.13b, NJKV). Meanwhile Christians are still to pray for the eventual “peace of Jerusalem” of Psalm 122.6-7, because that peace will mark the final victories of Christ for His Church and for His original covenant people, the Jews.

Muslims took control of Jerusalem in 637 AD. On the Temple Mount, the area where the long-destroyed Jewish Temple had been sited, (the destruction foretold by Jesus, eg., Matthew 23.37-24.2), the Muslim conquerors built the shrine of the Dome of the Rock, and the Al-Aqsa mosque. The rock at the heart of the Dome is believed by the Jews to be the site on Mount Moriah where Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22.1-19), and from where subsequently Muslims believe Mohammed ascended to heaven.

So the Muslim claims to Jerusalem come down to: the many centuries of Muslim ownership, emphasised by the two great Islamic structures on the Temple Mount; the presence of thousands of Arab families living in both Jerusalem and Palestine for generations; and the city being now regarded as the third holiest site in Islam.

Now historically, conquest has indeed led to recognised legal ownership in many parts of the world, as we see for example in Europe itself, and then later on over the European colonial conquests in North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australasia. The world would clearly be a wholly different place today if indigenous peoples were to be granted ownership of their original lands: that simply does not happen, so on this argument, Muslims have a strong case for dismissing the Jews’ claim to Jerusalem today because, so they argue, the original ownership of the city by the Jews is now irrelevant.

But in Palestine, mere ownership-by-conquest finds itself pitted against a higher, prior authority – the covenantal promises of Almighty God previously made to Abraham and his seed as recorded in the Holy Bible (egs., Genesis 12.1-3,7 / 13.14-17 / 15.1-18 / 17.1-8 / ...). The question therefore becomes focussed on the nature of the Bible itself: is it indeed God’s Word, with all that that implies in terms of authenticity and authority? Or is it just one set of ancient writings of human origin among the many others, and thus having no intrinsic, unique authority of its own?

In the nineteenth century, fresh attention, by both Protestant Christians and Jewish scholars, was given to the biblical promises regarding God's eventual restoration of the Jewish people to their ancient land. This culminated in the issuing of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, which reads as follows – "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country".

This Declaration – emanating from God's word, concise, clear and fair to all parties - paved the way, via the British-administered Palestinian Mandate, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War and the Holocaust, to the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948.

Our brief historical survey this time shows us just why this whole situation, with the Temple Mount at its physical heart, remains so fraught today for religious and political leaders alike. But the heart of the matter remains spiritual: the real issues exist behind the scenes in the unseen spiritual realm, which we shall hope to explore in our next Reflection, God willing. For Satan is hard at work, and at every mention of Israel and Palestine in the news bulletins we do well to remember that – "we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6.12).

Wearing that "whole armour of God", we are "to pray and to watch with all perseverance" (from Ephesians 6.11 and 18), for great spiritual issues are at stake, in the wider world, in Palestine, in Jerusalem, and on that Temple Mount.

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