

355 “the apple of His eye”

The nations of the Middle East – the nations of the Bible lands – continue to dominate the headlines. For years and years Iraq and Syria have been the focus of terrible conflicts, with western countries, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia all involved in different ways and with different motives. Added to the mix are the Kurdish people now being attacked by Turkish forces after the withdrawal of US protection; the dreadful ISIS group and its offshoots; and continuing troubles in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Afghanistan.

At the epicentre of all this violence lies the small state of Israel, whose enemies - notably in Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, Hezbollah and Iran - boast of their intention to drive the Jews into the sea and erase Israel from the map.

It is high fashion in the western media to attack Israel instinctively and constantly, such an approach being fanned by a carefully-orchestrated storyline of Palestinian victimhood at the hands of the “vicious Jews”. The realities on the ground turn out to be very different from those portrayed on western TV channels; for example in August there were 149 jihadist terrorist attacks on Israel, of which just three were reported by the BBC.

Christian attitudes regarding the Jews and the state of Israel fall into two broad camps. One view, commonly known as “replacement theology”, is that God finally gave up on the Jews, His original covenant people who are referred to in Scripture as “the apple of His eye” (egs., Deuteronomy 32.10 / Zechariah 2.8), when they rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Such a view thus regards “Zionism” and the re-establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as having no biblical or spiritual relevance, because the Jews, so it is believed, have been replaced by the Christians and thus no longer have any special place in God’s plans.

Two significant consequences flow from this belief: first, all the Old Testament references to future blessings for the Jews are now taken as applying to the Christian Church instead; and second, Christians therefore need have no particular love, loyalty or obligation towards the Jews any more than to anyone else. Unfortunately this second consequence has played a part in the long history of antisemitism from within the Christian Church.

This “replacement” view has obvious failings. What about all the promises to the Jews of future divine punishments for their habitual disobedience – are these also to apply to the Christian Church? On what grounds do we assume that references to the Jews, Jerusalem, Zion and so on do not mean what they say? – which is how we find that the rest of the Bible works! And how in all conscience can the remarkable return of the Jews to their land in 1948, in line with prophecy, be written off as having no spiritual relevance? If that return of the Jews is indeed spiritually irrelevant, then presumably we can drop all the other unfulfilled biblical prophecies into the dustbin too.

By contrast is the view held by other Christians that accepts biblical prophecies, including those regarding the Jews, in their plain sense, while allowing for the obvious use of imagery on occasions. This view is clearly far more in keeping with the grain of Scripture, and with current events unfolding before our very eyes. In the Great War it was held by God-fearing men in the British Cabinet who knew their Bibles, and was thus highly influential in the drawing-up of the momentous Balfour Declaration of 1917 which proved to be a key first step in the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

To link this week’s Reflection with that planned for next time we can now turn to the first two chapters of the prophet Hosea. In Hosea 1.2 the Lord told Hosea to “take unto thee a wife of whoredoms (KJV, referring to idolatrous Israel herself), by whom Hosea then had three children, the name for each of whom was chosen by the Lord: a son, Jezreel, “God will disperse”; a daughter, Lo-ru-ha-mah, “No more mercy”; and another son, Lo-am-mi, “Not my people” (1.4,6 and 9). Here was a stark warning, from the Lord through Hosea, as to how things stood between Himself and His people.

But then in Hosea 2.1 things were very different: Hosea was now to address his fellow Israelites as “Am-mi” and “Ru-ha-mah” – prophetically looking ahead to when God would name them as both “My people” once more, and “Having obtained mercy”, after the period of His still-future divine judgments upon them was over.

Scripturally this repeating cycle of warning, judgment and restoration is still the context in which the Lord God deals with the Jews, and in our next Weekly Reflection we can explore, God willing, the present situation regarding the Jews, the Church and the nations in the light of biblical prophecies and the current scene.

Meanwhile we can be quite sure that the Lord is very far from being finished with the Jews: Genesis 12.1-3 and Psalm 122.6-9 are as valid as ever.

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