

Perspective on Palestine

CHARLES C. RYRIE

The Middle East may explode at any time. Nearly every day brings mounting tensions that are felt from the border guardhouse in the Holy Land to the White House in Washington.

Perspective is "the interrelation in which parts of a subject are viewed." This is what we need to gain as we view the many-faceted Palestine problem. Consider some obvious aspects of the problem. For one thing, Scripture reveals that God has a definite purpose for his people Israel that he will surely bring to pass. For another, more than a million Arab refugees (some of them third generation) now live in camps in exceedingly wretched conditions. Add the question of who is to blame, the problem of perpetual border incidents, the reprisal raids, the "fact-finding missions," and the apparent inability of the United Nations to achieve anything concrete in this area, and you have complexity compounded. Another

aspect is the choosing of sides by missionaries and Christian leaders who let their pro-Arab or pro-Israel feelings be known. After a recent border incident one Protestant missionary who worked in Arab lands asked for suspension of all aid to Israel, while another Christian leader who works in Israel openly justified and defended that nation's actions.

The way out of the maze is to focus on people. A concern for people, more than for politics or even prophecy, brings the Palestine problem into proper perspective for the Christian. To be sure, there is a divine purpose for Israel that the Lord of history is accomplishing through these current events. It was first announced in the covenant God made with Abraham, in which he promised, among other things, a certain clearly defined territory to Abraham's physical seed, Israel. "Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates" (Gen. 15:18). It is interesting to note that the report of a recent mission to the Middle East called attention more than once to the fear by Arab nations that Israel's empire must eventually stretch from the Euphrates to the Nile.

Charles C. Ryrie is professor of systematic theology and dean of doctoral studies at Dallas Theological Seminary. He holds the Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh and the Th.D. from Dallas Seminary.

Is this promise to Abraham relevant to the contemporary situation? Premillennialists (of which I am one) are quick to say yes. They point out that something must be done with that promise and that there are only four options: Either it has been canceled, or it was fulfilled sometime in the past (as in the days of Solomon, for instance), or it has been transferred to the Church and will not be literally fulfilled, or it will yet be fulfilled. They feel that the last of these is the correct understanding of the promise and that the Jewish people will possess that promised land completely some day. Therefore, any movement toward that end is of great significance to the premillennialist. The Six Day War in June, 1967, in which Israel tripled its land area, appeared to be another step toward the eventual occupation of the total area from the Euphrates to the River of Egypt. And every such gain is generally viewed with rejoicing, for the furthering of God's purpose for Israel seems to indicate that the coming of the Lord draws near.

But the matter is not so simple as that. Certain other facts must not be overlooked. We must remember, for instance, no matter where our sympathies lie, that in these modern wars no side is entirely blameless. And while the efforts of a political state may ultimately be used by God in the mysterious accomplishing of his purpose, his use of the wrath of men does not excuse that wrath or make right the wrongs that the state may commit. In other words, we must not assume that the end justifies the means.

An analogy may help. The crucifixion of our Lord is central to our Christian faith. Without that event Christianity is meaningless. Furthermore, the slaying of the Lamb was planned before the foundation of the world. But does that mean that those who crucified the Lord are without blame because they apparently did the will of God? The Bible forbids such a monstrous conclusion, yet it allows the matter to stand unresolved. Herod, Pilate, Gentiles, and Jews are held responsible for doing "whatsoever thy hand and thy council foreordained to come to pass" (Acts 4:28). Likewise, the State of Israel is not relieved of its obligation to act responsibly in the community of nations even though the secret purpose of God may be brought to fruition through its actions. Any premillennialist's rejoicing over the apparent nearness of the Lord's return will have to be coupled with sadness over current events.

But there is another important dimension to this politico-eschatological perspective on Palestine: a spiritual one. The return of the Jews to Palestine is clearly taught in the Bible, and many Israelites feel they are now fulfilling these prophecies. To the Christian, this seems to be a sign of the imminent return of Christ. But no Christian can afford to forget that what we are seeing is a political and/or racial and/or religious phenomenon, not a spiritual one. When the State of Israel was born in 1948, there were about 650,000 Jews in Palestine; today there are approximately two

and a half million. But almost all of them are unregenerated. Many are going back to the land with deep religious fervor, but they are going back in unbelief, and this spiritual darkness of the people ought to be of primary concern to the Christian. Even their own sense of fulfilling a biblical destiny must never obscure the fact that without Christ they are lost. A focus on the people will help the Christian keep his political and prophetic viewpoint in perspective.

The Christian's primary concern must always be for people and their needs. Does the plight of the refugees find any sympathetic response in his heart? Does his concern for their physical needs (probably as desperate as those of any people in the world) issue in any concrete action? Even more important, does he ever give a thought or prayer for their spiritual needs?

What of the believers in these lands? Many Arab Christians have been uprooted once or even twice from their homes with considerable material loss. Does our concern go beyond "be warmed and filled" (Jas. 1:16)? Suppose you were a believer who had lived for nineteen years in Samaria under the government of Jordan and then suddenly you found your rulers were Israelis. Imagine reading Romans 13 one day under one government, and the next morning under a new government that only yesterday was an enemy power. Or think of the Israeli Christians who formed such a small minority in a Jewish state and who do not enjoy full freedom to propagate their faith. Our brothers on both sides of the borders trying to bear testimony to Christ have problems whose magnitude we can hardly imagine.

Or consider the situation of the Christian missionary. Being caught up in the political feeling of the people to whom he ministers, working under various handicaps, always conscious of the investment he has in schools, hospitals, churches, and people—these pressures on him are intensified by the ever-changing political scene. Evangelizing Jews is not without its restrictions, and preaching to Arabs often meets with anti-Western feeling. How do you teach converts to be good citizens of heaven and earth in the midst of these complex political and racial problems? The only answer is for the missionary to keep his eyes on the field, not the states into which it is divided, and on people, not the politics in which they are involved.

But what does the future hold? Many believe the Bible clearly predicts "wars and rumors of wars" until the climactic campaign of Armageddon. Some battles will take place in Israel (Ezek. 38:18); one will bring Egypt to defeat (Dan. 11:42); and ultimately the armies of all the earth will be swept toward Armageddon (Rev. 19:19). Finally the Prince of Peace will come and "smite the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron" (Rev. 19:15). Then, and only then, will the enmity between Jew and Arab come to an end. Both will turn and worship the true God, and the Lord will be able to say, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance" (Isa. 19:24). In the light of the contemporary

situation, this sounds almost unbelievable; but He whose right it is to rule and reign will bring it to pass.

What does the present require? Important as the knowledge of the future is, we do not live in the future. Yet knowledge of the future does affect our life in the present. All Christians, regardless of their eschatological beliefs, should realize that our present responsibility concerns people and their needs. The people of Palestine have many needs, but the one that is common to almost all of them is to know the forgiveness of sins through faith in the Son of God.

Is there any bridge between the knowledge of the future purposes of God and the present problems of today? The Apostle Paul answers our question at the conclusion of a major eschatological discussion, and it is simply this: "Therefore [because you do know something about God's plan for the future], my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15:58). This leads to a proper perspective on Palestine. □