

Without Injustice

I was born in 1947, just as the western world was putting itself back together after the horrors of World War 2. Although I was of course completely unaware at the time, it was a most significant period. Many changes came about. Some of these may have seemed to be completely new but probably most of them were the results of processes that had been brewing for many years, even generations.

Two events in particular stand out for me. The independence and partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the establishment of the modern-day State of Israel in 1948.

I went to India in 1967, expecting to stay for two years as I took part in training in Christian life and evangelism alongside other young people, who were mostly Indians from many different parts of that gloriously diverse country, with a sprinkling of foreigners like myself. I stayed until 1972, by which time India felt like my home and I was reluctant to return to the West. Val and I had met each other in India and were married in the UK in July 1972. We both felt a strong desire to return to the land that had become so much part of our lives. Despite several visits with a view to moving back there at least semi-permanently, we found ourselves unable to do so. But that, as they say, is another story . . .

One of the joys of India at that time was the near-total freedom of expression. The Constitution of India as a secular state guaranteed the freedom to practise, preach and propagate any faith. As teams of young and zealous followers of Jesus, we were free to drive around the towns and villages in vans and lorries which were filled to the brim with Christian books in many Indian languages. The 'girls teams' adopted a suitably quiet approach of house-to-house visiting. In the 'boys teams', we would stop in the market places and other busy spots, stand on the tailgate of the truck, sing some Christian songs through our megaphone and then give a very brief talk in the local language about Jesus and why he had come into the world.

Then most of us would disperse into the crowd which had gathered and offer them books to buy in their own language, as well as some free leaflets. The response was often surprisingly positive and only the Lord knows what the results may be of all those books going out into the general population of India all those years ago! Many times, illiterate men would ask me what language the books were in, to make sure that their children would be able to read them, and of course there were many discussions with those who might be interested – and those who were antagonistic!

On very rare occasions, that antagonism would turn nasty and potentially violent. I remember one situation when we suddenly realised that we might be in some physical danger and so bundled ourselves into the truck and drove off swiftly, shutting the rear door as the last team member jumped in. Just seconds later as we were still picking up speed, we heard a loud thump on that rear door and looked out very cautiously, only to see a massive boulder which someone had managed to throw. A few moments earlier, that would have caused severe bodily injury instead of just another big dent in the truck door!

We gradually came to know that on most of the occasions when we encountered strong opposition, it had been fomented by local adherents of extreme right-wing Hindu nationalist groups, who apparently saw Christianity as totally undesirable and a threat to their dream of India as 'Hindu-Stan' – the country of Hindus.

In our travels, we met groups of local Christian believers, often in tiny fellowships. We were made welcome and offered warm and simple hospitality as we joined with them in their worship and witness. They had total freedom: no restraints on their gatherings or their local evangelism.

As more than 50 years have passed, we have retained our close interest in India and have noted with concern that the liberty which we all enjoyed in those early days has been not just eroded but has been almost totally removed.

Back in about 1970, it was perfectly OK for me – as a fair-skinned foreigner – to join with my Indian brothers and speak publicly about Jesus in my broken Hindi to those crowds in the market places. Just the need to keep our eyes open for the potential trouble-makers who might object to my presence linked with what they saw as 'foreign religion'.

These days, the situation is different. It is now almost impossible for even established local believers to make any sort of public witness for the Lord Jesus without encountering immediate and strong opposition.

The secular constitution of India remains unchanged (as far as I know) but the application of that wonderful freedom has been obscured by the rise to power of those same right-wing Hindu nationalist groups, with the result that all non-Hindu minority religious groups now face an increasingly militant and violent reaction. Increasingly often, it seems to go further and they find that their businesses, homes and lives are under very real threat.

For Christian believers, as well as for all the other 'religious minorities' in India, the 1947 dream of freedom is rapidly turning into a nightmare. The harmony between communities for which Gandhi struggled and which Nehru legislated into existence has been despised and overturned. Their vision is, even at this moment, being viciously eroded by the arrogance of those who seem to think that the land is for them and their community only. The current climate feels like an apartheid regime, perhaps even moving towards the horror of another 'final solution', where India is for the Hindus and only for the Hindus.

The promise has been undermined by injustice.

In 1948, like Indians in the previous year, Jews seeking to establish the modern State of Israel also had a dream. In the words of Daniel Barenboim, *"The Jewish people cherished a dream: a land of their own, a homeland for all Jews. But from this dream followed a deeply problematic – because it was fundamentally false – assumption: a land without a people for a people without a land. In reality, the Jewish population of Palestine was only 8% by the end of the first world war. Therefore, 92% of the population was not Jewish, but Palestinian – a population grown over centuries. The country could hardly be called a "land without a people", and the Palestinian population saw no reason to give up their land. The conflict was thus inevitable, and the fronts have only hardened further over generations. I am convinced Israelis will have security when Palestinians can feel hope – that is, justice. Both sides must recognise their enemies as human beings and try to empathise with their point of view, their pain and their hardship. Israelis must also accept that the occupation of Palestine is incompatible with this."*¹

For more years than I can remember, I have passively gone along with the view that is commonly held among western Christians, that the immigration of large numbers of Jewish people to the newly-formed (and avowedly secular) modern State of Israel is a fulfilment of Biblical prophecy that the people of God would return to the Promised Land. For various reasons, I now question that assumption.

It seems that, although there is at least a large minority of religious Jews in modern Israel, about 45% self-identify as 'secular', not practising any form of Judaism, and certainly not the faith as delivered through Moses. They are actually unable to do so anyway, as the system of sacrifices, as set out in the *Torah* (the Law as given to Moses) requires a sanctuary – originally the Tabernacle or 'Tent of Meeting' which was later replaced by Solomon's Temple and then the re-built version of it. Its site in Jerusalem is currently occupied by the Al-Aqsa Mosque, 'The Dome of the Rock' and, as far as I know, there has been no Jewish attempt to erect a tented tabernacle or build a temple in any other location. There have been many rumours of Jewish plans to demolish the mosque and re-build the Temple on its original site!

Without a Tabernacle or Temple, and without a Levitical priesthood to offer sacrifices for sins in that sanctuary, present-day Rabbinical Judaism has to find other ways to seek forgiveness. It can't find them in the Old Testament, so it turns to traditions, especially as embodied in the *Talmud*. I have now started to see that there is a world of difference between Old Testament Israel, based on the Law and the Prophets, and modern Rabbinical Judaism, based on the *Talmud* and other traditions. As I suspect many other Christians have done, I had assumed for years that the two were a lot closer than they actually are.

Alongside dominant secularity and tradition-based modern Judaism, somehow there seems to be a belief that the Jewish people (and therefore, it is assumed, the modern State of Israel) are entitled to occupy the land in its entirety, as promised to Abraham. A blatant inconsistency seems to have been deliberately ignored – claiming the promises made to a historic people by a God whom they no longer trust!

There are clear Biblical promises of a return to 'The Land' for the People of God. Many of these are found in the book of Ezekiel, written when the Jews had been exiled to Babylon because of their persistent unbelief and refusal to follow the LORD (YHWH), the God of their fathers.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/oct/15/orchestra-palestinians-israelis-humanity-daniel-barenboim-west-eastern-divan-orchestra> Daniel Barenboim is a famous Jewish pianist and conductor who collaborated with Edward Said, a Palestinian colleague, to form the 'West-Eastern Divan Orchestra', composed of young musicians from Israel, Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries.

This is probably not the place to try to delve deep into the details and different opinions regarding these prophecies. Enough to say that I am becoming increasingly unconvinced that they form any honest basis to support the cause of Zionism. I understand that there is a significant minority of religious Jews who also believe that the founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948 was not in accordance with the promises of Scripture. It is probably not a coincidence that apparently this minority is drawn from those who pay less attention to the *Talmud* and more to the *Torah* !

Some of the more obvious flaws in the argument for a modern-day return to the land are found in **Ezekiel 37**, the famous ‘dry bones’ chapter, in the closing verses:

Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God. My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them. They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons’ sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.”’

At least three discrepancies here, and they are all significant:–

1) The LORD says that the people will return to faith in him, follow his principles and laws and will be holy before him. That has not happened.

2) He says that his ‘servant David’ will be prince and king over them. This is a clear reference to the Messiah, and I understand that this may be part of the reason for those Jews who do not agree with the 1948 ‘return’ – the Messiah was not involved!

3) He says that his sanctuary will be ‘in their midst forever.’ It’s not there! For Jews receiving Ezekiel’s words, any reference to the ‘sanctuary’ will have meant one thing only – the temple – together with the awesome presence of God, as witnessed when Solomon first completed the building. See **1 Kings 8:10-11** for the LORD’s awesome presence, **1 Kings 9:1-9** and **2 Chronicles 7:12-22** for his promise – and warning – in response to Solomon’s prayer of dedication. Please look up these verses I refer to!

Just as he had warned them, the Israelites DID fall away from serving the LORD and he DID remove them from the land, the temple DID become a heap of ruins and the people DID become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. In his amazing mercy and grace, and through the intercession of Daniel claiming the prophecy of Jeremiah, the LORD restored them and the governor Zerubbabel was able to start repairing the devastated temple in about 535 BC – after the 70 years of Babylonian exile! This was later refurbished and extended by Herod the Great and was the temple at the time of Jesus’ life and ministry in Judea.

So, was the return by Zerubbabel and others the return that Ezekiel had prophesied? Let’s run those 3 tests again:–

1) Did the people return to following the LORD again? Yes, at least to some extent, as recorded in the book of the prophet Haggai.

2) Was the Messiah prince and king over them? No, they only had governors who were still under the authority of foreign powers.

3) Was the temple there as the LORD’s sanctuary ‘in their midst for ever’ ? Well, the temple was there, rather a shadow of its former glory (see **Haggai 2:1-9**), albeit later enhanced by Herod, but destroyed by the Romans in AD 70 and absent ever since; the site has been covered by the Al-Aqsa complex from about AD 637.

So, it looks like neither 535 BC nor AD 1948 marked the return as prophesied by Ezekiel.

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But, just for the moment, let’s look at the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948 as if perhaps it might have been a proper and legitimate return as prophesied by Ezekiel . . .

In that case, despite the fact that it was engineered by the League of Nations and accomplished by a seizure of power backed by terrorist actions with no particularly religious motives, it could possibly be regarded as a demonstration of the extreme faithfulness of the LORD to a people who had very largely rejected him. That characteristic of his faithfulness shines out through the whole of the Bible narrative, especially perhaps in his dealings with the wayward wanderings of his Chosen People!

At the end of their 40 years in the desert, just as they are about to enter the Promised Land without him, Moses (age 120!) gives the people a song which he directs them to sing and teach to their offspring *“Now therefore, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the sons of Israel; put it on their lips, so that this song may be a witness for Me against the sons of Israel. . . Ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He.” (Deuteronomy 31:19, 32:3-4)*

‘Faithfulness’ ? – definitely, Yes! ‘Without injustice’ ? – just as definitely, Yes again!

So, IF (and it is a big ‘if’) it had been the LORD’s doing that brought modern Israel into existence, then his work would have been marked not only by his faithfulness in keeping his promises but also by his justice. Just a brief glance at the attitude and actions of that State towards those whose lands and property they took for themselves will give us the answer. The people who actually DID inhabit the so-called ‘land without a people’ – the Palestinians – have suffered 75 years of persistent injustice which continues in the most extreme form even as I write in December 2023. This feels like another ‘final solution’ to establish one exclusive ‘master race’. I use these terms deliberately because it seems unbelievable that a people who suffered terribly under this kind of regime about 80 years earlier could even contemplate employing the same approach. There are some fine-sounding words, but the actions look very like another system of apartheid and perhaps even the attempted extermination of an unwelcome race. ¹ **Can this really be the work of the ‘God of faithfulness and without injustice’?**

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This still leaves the question of the promised return: a holy and worshipping people with the Messiah as King and his sanctuary in their midst. Does that sound just a little familiar?

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband . . . I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple . . . they will bring the glory and the honour of the nations into it; and nothing unclean, and no one who practises abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life . . . There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. And there will no longer be night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 21 & 22)

No, this is not (as is often said) a vision of ‘heaven’ but of **the kingdom of God on earth**, a kingdom which is in the future but which is already being prepared, with members from every nation of the earth. Some of these are from the LORD’s original Chosen People, who were already part of the original ‘olive tree’ and who have NOT been broken off because of unbelief. And then there are some (myself included) who have been joined into that same tree, who were formerly branches of a ‘wild olive tree’ but who have been grafted in through the grace of God and ‘the obedience of faith’. See Paul’s description of this in **Romans 11**.

There is only one ‘olive tree’. All the ‘branches’ who are in living contact with the life of the tree are heirs of the promises of God, whether they were ‘naturally’ part of it or ‘grafted in.’ Tragically, the majority of those original ‘branches’ have been broken off because of their unbelief, and so they forfeit their part in the inheritance – but the opportunity remains for them to be grafted back in! There is no alternative ‘Plan B’ for them – or for anyone else.

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¹ See : <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/13/israel-gaza-historian-omer-bartov>