

### Understanding Conflict in the Middle East—Part Two

*Why do the Israelis and Palestinians place so much attention on having a homeland in the geographic region called Palestine? Will there ever be an end to the conflicts and political tensions between the Israelis and the Arab world?*

Israelis see the city of Hebron as being the symbolic bedrock of their national conscience and identity in the region of Palestine, which is reasonably understood because the area of Hebron was an historical settlement of the patriarchs and also the familial burial place of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Hebron was also one of the five Amorite cities overthrown by Joshua during Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan beginning in the late 15th century BCE. Noting that Adonizedek, king of Jerusalem marshaled the assistance of Hoham king of Hebron, Piram king of Jarmuth, Japhia king of Lachish, and Debir king of Eglon, to fight against the tribes of Israel who were at that time expanding their conquest in the ancient land of Canaan.

Also, David was crowned king of Judah in Hebron, and he ruled from this city until he was able to overthrow the Jebusites at Jerusalem, which later became the capital city of the powerful regional empire that was the Commonwealth of Israel. Beginning then a long history of the commonwealth's interactions with neighboring kingdoms and successively rising Eurasian-based empires

that lasted for more than 1000 years, and these political interactions are notably evident in the histories of the former ancient empires of Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. Which allows us to reasonably conclude that ancient Israel's place in history and its national identity is largely associated with the land of Canaan—understood to be the general region of Palestine today.

Consequently, it should not seem surprising to discover that the biblical narrative and the commonwealth's geopolitical history in the region of Palestine were influential on the political thinking of the great powers who sought to establish a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine following World War II. Leading of course to the mandates issued by the United Nations—promoted by the United States and the then Soviet Union—that proposed a two-state solution to the national movements of the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs.

However, because of the diverse historical, religious and political views that have long existed between the Israelis and Palestinian Arabs, and among those nations and peoples that have a vested interest in the region of Palestine, we see that the United Nations has not been able to completely implement the mandates that called for two separate sovereign states—one for the Israelis and one for the Palestinian Arabs. (Some consider Zionism to be the catalyst for a more cohesive national movement that developed among the Palestinian Arabs.

A political situation that is quite apparent in the modern-day city of Hebron.

For in the area of Hebron we find an interesting political and religious tapestry where the symbolic heart of Israel's legacy in Palestine falls under the jurisdiction of Muslim authorities, and where a Palestinian enclave is formed by occupying Israeli forces that are precariously situated within the bounds of Palestinian territory in the West Bank. Creating a situation that brings us to examine the underlying common thread that runs through this tapestry that forms a geopolitically unsustainable paradox that undeniably represents the proverbial "powder keg" that exists not only in Hebron, but also in the city of Jerusalem.

So what then is the underlying common thread that weaves through this political and religious paradox in Hebron?

Simply, it is the mutual belief held by both the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs that each has a "right" in Abraham to claim a landed inheritance in Palestine.

Now, from the biblical perspective the covenant by promise made with Abraham is understood to be the solution to the conflicts that exist in the Middle East, because this promise is foundational to the gospel of the coming kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14-15).

However, because this promise also included a landed inheritance in Palestine for the descendants of Abraham—a promise claimed by both the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs—we have a political conflict that is far more than just a territorial dispute in Palestine. And because the Israelis and Palestinian Arabs assume this "right" to have a landed inheritance in Palestine, they have also had to shoulder the burden and

political mantle of the promise given to Abraham.

Creating then a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to a two-state solution in Palestine as the weight of this historical tradition and religious interpretation is brought to bear on the current political issues that now affect the Middle East.

Thus, it should be expected that the proposition of nation-building in the region of Palestine will be fraught with problems that are founded upon centuries-old ancestral beliefs that are embraced by two peoples, each claiming a right in Abraham to inherit the land of Palestine. Beliefs that are of course embellished in some measure by the diverse and influential religious views that exist among those who confess Judaism, and among those who are of the faith of Islam, and also among those who profess Christianity who believe they have a right to weigh in on the issue of landed rights respective to Palestine. (Palestine holds many places deemed sacred to the world's foremost monotheistic religions—Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

Consequently, we should also expect that any political right to the land of Palestine as established by the United Nations mandates would continue to be trumped by the common historical and religious views held by many Israelis and Palestinian Arabs.

Bringing us then to consider the proposed two-state solution in the light of the Apostle Paul's allegory that associated two covenants with the lives of Sarah and Hagar.

Now, it is assumed within some Christian perspectives that Paul's allegory regarding Sarah and Hagar, and the familial conflict between Isaac and Ishmael, are representative

of the current conflicts that now exist between the Israelis and the Arab world, particularly the Palestinian Arabs.

However, this is an erroneous conclusion because it assumes that the current disputes between the Israelis and the Arab world are nothing more than a continuation of a family feud that has existed for centuries in the Middle East. And this misleading conclusion further assumes that the current conflicts between the Israelis and Arab world were inevitable and expectedly unavoidable for the peoples of Palestine. Being an assumption deduced from Paul's allegory that incorrectly associates the lives of Isaac and Ishmael with the people of Israel and the Arab world respectively, instead of correctly associating these two sons of Abraham allegorically with the administration of the two covenants that pertain nationally to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Importantly, then, it should be pointed out that the family issues regarding the birth-right promise became the basis for an allegory that represented the nature of two covenants—one established at Mt. Sinai, and one to be established at Jerusalem. And so the lives of Isaac and Ishmael allegorically came to represent those under the administration of two national covenants that pertain to the twelve tribes of Israel and also to all those who will become heirs of the promises like Isaac.

Concluding then that the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, and the conflict posed by the administration of the two covenants, does not represent the current Middle East conflict that now exists between the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab world. Because the reality is that the current conflicts

are based on historical and religious interpretations that have been assumed by the Israelis and the Arab world and used to justify a “right” in Abraham to claim a landed inheritance in Palestine. (It is inappropriate to use biblical descriptions of individuals to form judgments about the national character of peoples in the Middle East.)

Bringing us to consider something about the new covenant that will be established in the future with the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now, because the people of ancient Israel broke the first covenant a new covenant was needed, and because of sin a sacrifice was needed, which explains why the new covenant required the death of a testator and that testator was Jesus. And because the new covenant (testament) is not yet established with the twelve tribes of Israel we see that the first covenant is growing “old,” and because of sin the people of ancient Israel were deemed to be unworthy inheritors of the Land of Promise (Heb. 8:13).

Thus, we may conclude that the right to claim a landed inheritance in Canaan was forfeited by ancient Israel respective to the first covenant, and consequently their descendants cannot claim a “right” to the land of Palestine today based on the promises given to Abraham, which is to say that such a claim to a landed inheritance must wait until a new national covenant is established with the twelve tribes of Israel.

Likewise, the Palestinian Arabs and the Arab world cannot claim a “right” in Abraham to a landed inheritance in Palestine because the promise was not afforded to them through Abraham and Sarah, and so from the biblical perspective Ishmael was not a recipient of the promises given to Abraham.

Also, from a biblical and secular view, a verifiable genealogy cannot be established to authenticate a lineage that links the modern-day Palestinian Arabs and much of the Arab world with Abraham's son, Ishmael. With the same being true for most of the extant twelve tribes of Israel whose national identities cannot now be established with the patriarch Isaac. (It is likely that many of the tribes associated with Ishmael migrated westward, and the descendants of Esau were scattered and have no representation in any particular nation and peoples today.)

Allowing us to conclude from the biblical perspective that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinian Arabs or the Arab world have any right to a national presence in Palestine based on the promises established with the patriarch Abraham.

Giving us then something else to think about in regard to the continuing conflicts between the Israelis and the Palestinian Arabs.

That is that political views that are influenced by historical and religious interpretations can bring many nations and peoples to focus on the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, which can bring a greater scrutiny to the geography of Palestine. Noting that one of the things that nations and peoples will see on the geographic landscape is the "security" barrier or wall that has been built in the area of Hebron. A barrier that is part of the same security wall that can be found in the area of Jerusalem that may someday garner significant international attention for both the Israelis and Palestinians. (Hebron is a divided city with area H1 being under Palestinian control and area H2 being under Israeli control in accordance with the Hebron

Protocol.)

For just as there are two sides to the security barrier or wall in Palestine there are also two sides to the conflicts that exist between the Israelis and Palestinian Arabs. And even though it is asserted that the security barrier is not political and that it does not represent the borders of Israel, it is nonetheless geopolitically symbolic of the stalemate arguments and opposing views offered by both the Israelis and the Arab world. (For some the wall represents safety and security and for others it represents divisiveness and apartheid.)

Therefore, it could be said that this "wall" was built by both Israelis and Palestinian Arabs because the national aspirations of these two peoples are—for the most part—founded upon the mutual belief that each has a right to claim a landed inheritance in Palestine based on the promises given to Abraham. And from this we could surmise that this barrier in Palestine could someday—given certain political circumstances—come to symbolically represent two geopolitical camps as nations and peoples place their political interests on one side of the wall or the other, which would certainly reveal more political divisions that can further complicate the implementation of a two-state solution in Palestine.

A complication that may bring the international community to someday conclude that the only right to any national presence in the region of Palestine would be that granted by the United Nations. Meaning that the international community may assume the right to impose a two-state solution in Palestine that could lead to unforeseen consequences and possibly greater instability

in the Middle East.

Bringing us then to ask this.

Who has the right to claim a landed inheritance in Palestine based on the promises given to Abraham?

From a biblical perspective it is understood from the covenant by promise that the coming new covenant will be foundational to the governance of the twelve tribes of Israel in the future at Jerusalem. Making it evident then that the promise of a landed inheritance remains for the twelve tribes of Israel in those lands promised to Abraham, including the region of modern-day Palestine (Gen. 13:14-17; Rom. 4:13; 11:18-21).

Something that was well understood by the disciples of Jesus when they asked him: “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:16.) A question that tells us the disciples knew that Jesus was the “mediator of the new covenant,” and so we find that the apostles were not negligent in informing the church of God that a new covenant was in the offing for the twelve tribes of Israel. An issue that was brought forward by the apostles when they referenced the prophecy of Jeremiah, who wrote: “I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8:8; 12:24).

Thus, we should consider that the twelve tribes of Israel will someday be expected to have a future inheritance in all the lands promised to Abraham, which would include modern-day Palestine. Which means that the promise given to Abraham will remain in conflict with the national aspirations of those peoples who currently claim a right to settle in this region of the Middle East.

Complicating of course any proposed solutions to the issues facing the Israelis and Palestinian Arabs today.

But it should also be understood that the right to claim a landed inheritance in Abraham—in the future—is dependent upon who is able to claim the mutually inclusive promises of eternal life and a landed inheritance by their personal covenant with God through Christ. Leading us to conclude then that all the lands promised to Abraham will be given to all those who become an heir to the kingdom of God with Christ and an heir to the promises in the context of being children of Abraham.

Leaving us then with the only real current solution to the conflicts in the Middle East, which is an active cooperation between the Israelis and the Arab world to bring peace and prosperity to the region, which would include a constructive participation in helping those who are the most disenfranchised in this region of the Middle East. 