

# The Paradox Newsletter

by The Rev. Tony Higton

## The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Ministry in Israel and the Palestinian Territories

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*Paradox Ministries encourages Christians to understand and pray about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, seeing it through the eyes of both people groups involved, and taking the needs, fear and pain of both sides seriously. Its director, the Rev Tony Higton, who was Rector of a church in the Old City of Jerusalem for a number of years, circulates this email newsletter, speaks at seminars and encourages support of indigenous reconciliation ministry in Jerusalem. The newsletter is available free on request to those who add their email address to our Newsletter update list, available on the top of the ['Newsletter' page](#). Alternatively, send your email address and name to us via our online [Contact Form](#). Please encourage others to join the mailing list.*  
Tony Higton

### What really happened on the Gaza flotilla?

The terrible tragedy of May 31<sup>st</sup> shocked and horrified all decent people. The majority laid the blame squarely on the Israelis and it was seen as another example of Israels crimes.

But how are we Christians to respond to such an event? Surely, it is to follow the way of Christ. That does not mean always being gentle, meek and mild. That is a childrens hymnwriters definition of Christlikeness. (I dont know of any hymn which explicitly praises Jesus condemning religious hypocrities as an evil brood of vipers, sons of Hell, and whitewashed tombs!) It is not un-Christlike to condemn evil.

Jesus had perfect discernment but he was not judgmental, in fact he condemned judgmentalism. Our discernment is imperfect, as is our knowledge. If Israel really deserves to be condemned, so be it. But is that the case? Is it the whole story? For the passionate Christian Zionist and the passionate pro-Palestinian activist the conclusion is clear. But we need to avoid such extremes (see my article below).

If we are going to be Christlike we shall:

- a. Suspend judgment until we have an adequate knowledge of the facts.

- b. Listen to both sides.
- c. Try to identify with the fears and pain of both sides.
- d. Carefully consider an appropriate response.

I am writing this extra newsletter now because of this major trauma. We may not know all the significant facts. But here are some of them:

#### A. ON THE FLOTILLAS SIDE

1. The activists were justified in taking a stand against Israel's treatment of the Gazans which, it is widely accepted, goes beyond proper security considerations into oppression of the people of Gaza. This causes great suffering and even the death of innocent people who are effectively denied medical treatment.
2. The activists were justified in taking action which was guaranteed to focus world attention on the issue.
3. Those activists with solely humanitarian motives were justified in risking being arrested by Israel in order to make their point.
4. Those activists with solely humanitarian motives were justified in not anticipating violence.
5. The ships were still in international waters.

#### B. ON THE ISRAELI SIDE

1. Israel is aware that there are groups and nations who are committed to her destruction. Iran and Hamas are two examples and Hamas is on Israel's doorstep, well able to launch rocket attacks on innocent Israeli civilians. As a sovereign nation, Israel has a right to defend itself, and does so against the background of almost 2000 years of anti-Semitism. It is afraid that Gaza could in effect become an Iranian base.
2. Israel knows that arms are being smuggled into Hamas-controlled Gaza and is justified in seeking to prevent this.
3. Israel is justified in seeking proper control over aid reaching Gaza to prevent it being used for armaments.
4. Israel warned the flotilla not to proceed but to channel their aid via Israel.
5. Israel, as a sovereign nation, has the right to prevent invasion of its territorial waters.
6. Israel was justified in thinking the flotilla included those linked with terrorism, who had non-humanitarian motives. (The Turkish group behind the flotilla, The Foundation for Human Rights, Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), according to French and Danish sources, has been involved in Islamic extremism including an attempted bombing of an airport in the US).
7. Israeli troops have a right to defend themselves, including with guns, if their lives are seriously threatened (which appears to have been the case. The troops were faced with a crowd armed with metal pipes, knives and stun grenades. Israel claims they also had night-vision goggles, gas masks and life vests).

*However,* it has to be said that, although Israel allows a considerable amount of aid into Gaza, it also restricts aid, which has a very bad

effect on the people of Gaza. This is both morally wrong and politically unwise because it only serves to bolster the Hamas government which is committed to the ultimate destruction of Israel. I am no military strategist, but it does not seem impossible to me that Israel could have followed a safer strategy than to drop commandos out of the sky in the middle of the night on a ship in international waters. It left their troops very vulnerable and led to their having to defend themselves with guns. A daylight stand-off might have led to a peaceful negotiated settlement.

We need to pray that

- i. God will bring healing to those injured and bereaved through this incident.
- ii. Israel will modify its blockade of Gaza so that humanitarian considerations will be met.
- iiii. Turkey will not turn away from the West towards Islamic extremists in Iran and Syria.
- iv You might find the following article, which I felt inspired to write a few days ago, helpful.

## **The Holy Land conflict needs less Christian passion**

I can remember the excitement I felt as a child that Jesus could come at any moment and rapture us to heaven. I was brought up on this view (Dispensational Premillennialism) but no longer accept it as true to Scripture. However, it isn't all wrong and the New Testament does encourage us to live in the light of the fact that The Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:9), i.e. ready to come onto the world stage. In my experience most Christians never really think much about the Second Coming and would perhaps die of fright if it happened. My excitement may have been somewhat excessive but it wasn't totally misplaced.

One of the aspects of my excitement was over the re-establishment of the State of Israel and the special place of the Jewish people in God's purposes. Here was biblical prophecy being enacted before our very eyes. It was a sure sign that the return of Jesus was imminent. Now I still believe much of that, but in this article I am concentrating on the excitement, the exhilaration which I felt then and which many Christian Zionists feel today.

I remember when our church in Essex had an experience shared by many Christians around the world in the 1980s. It began out of the blue when my wife began to experience what she described as a deep inner weeping for the Jewish people. This was a wholesome burden of intercession which soon affected the whole church. With it came a love for Israel and an exhilaration about its re-establishment and remarkable development. It led to feeling Jewish people were special, even holding them rather in awe. It was a very powerful experience and much of it was good. It is interesting that I felt it again recently as I read a Christian Zionist magazine published in Israel. The

magazine was very clear that Israel should not give up any land to the Palestinians and, despite the fact that I don't agree with that, I felt that old excitement about it.

Am I therefore wrong to take the view I now do, favouring reconciliation and the two-state solution? Have I compromised and gone liberal or, worse still, anti-Israel, even anti-Jewish? I take such questions seriously and don't just assume I'm right. In fact, I thought about it as I read the magazine, and, as I did so, one important point became clearer to me than ever before.

I still hold to much of what are called Christian Zionist views because I believe them to be biblical. I believe the re-establishment of Israel is very significant in God's purposes, that Israel's survival and development is remarkable and that God has a purpose for the Jewish people in Christ. But I hold those views in a less emotional, more objective way.

The history of Christianity shows that if the devil can't stop Christians believing a truth he gets them to go overboard on that truth in isolation from other truth, which can lead to heresy. Passion in belief is a wonderful thing and I have plenty of it. But emotional passion can cloud our understanding and objectivity. This happens in belief about the End Times in general and Israel in particular. It leads to an unhelpful idealisation of the Jewish people and Israel.

Christian Zionism is a powerful, inspiring legend. There is very important truth in it but also a very idealised view of Israel. Even after living there for some years I can still say that Israel is a special place historically and spiritually. It is the holy land. The re-establishment and survival of the state and what it has achieved in many areas of life is little short of miraculous.

However, Israel is also aggressive, oppressive, secularised and anti-Christian. It persecutes Messianic Believers. It oppresses Palestinians and even shows disrespect for Israeli Arabs. It is at times racist. It has all the aspects of a secular democracy: self-seeking politicking and corruption. It is as godless as Britain. It rejects and shows contempt for Jesus. It uses Christian Zionists as what Karl Marx called useful idiots to bolster its own protection and welfare, whilst rejecting their Saviour and Lord. Living in Israel for a few years normally corrects the legendary aspects of Christian Zionism. Also any idealistic view of the Messianic Movement (Jewish believers in Jesus) is misplaced. Its growth in the last 30 years is remarkable and exciting. We met many wonderful believers. But the Messianic Movement suffers from the same faults as the Gentile Church even though some of them, like new churches in the UK, would prefer to think otherwise.

It is important to remove the highly emotive legendary aspects from Christian Zionism. By all means appreciate the significance of the re-establishment of Israel, see it as a partial fulfilment of prophecy, recognise it as a sign of the End Times, and pray for its deliverance from all its many enemies. But it is irresponsible and ultimately sinful to float about on some End Times cloud supporting and justifying everything Israel does. Israel is very far from perfect as are the Jewish people. God does not call us to uncritical support of any people group, let alone a modern political state. True friends of Israel who want to be biblical will criticise the aggression, oppression, secularism,

racism, corruption and downright anti-Christian godlessness in Israel. To do so is to be truly prophetic.

At the same time Scripture calls us to be godly enough to hate injustice and to further justice not only for the Israelis but for the Palestinians, whom God loves, too.

I often joke that I like to upset both sides in the Israel-Palestinian debate, so, before finishing, let me do that! Those who are passionately pro-Palestinian and perhaps anti-Israel need to understand what I've described above about Christian Zionists. If you don't understand the deep excitement and exhilaration many Christian Zionists experience you won't be able to help them.

However, you too need to watch your own passion. I have seen many passionate pro-Palestinian Christians. Sometimes the passion comes over as deep anger. There is such a thing as godly anger. It can be prophetic. But it is only a few millimetres away from ungodly anger which can lead to prejudice, hatred and even racism. You rightly see the desperate need, pain and fears of the Palestinians. But if you don't recognise the need, pain and fears of the Israelis, in their tiny land, threatened by (sometimes neighbouring) groups and nations who seek their destruction, after 2000 years of anti-Semitism, you are not thinking straight. If you do not recognise their need of a safe homeland, controlled by Jewish people, after the Holocaust and in the light of on-going anti-Semitism, despite the effects on the Palestinians of the UN decision to divide what was Palestine, you are not showing compassion.

A passion which leads to such errors is just as bad as the passionate Zionism I have described above.

We all need to stand back, think carefully, try and imagine being in the shoes of both sides and to ask God to help us act on the whole teaching of Scripture including prophecies of the End Times on the one hand and issues of justice and equality on the other.

***Tony Higton***