

Wilderness Reflections - 1 - What's Happening in the Holy Land?

What's happening in the Holy Land is tearing at our hearts. It's not just the violence and loss of life. We are somehow inextricably wound up with the people currently living and dying there. Of course, we are all members of the same human race, which makes us truly brothers and sisters at a profound level. In addition, we see our origins in the same God – Creator of all and Most High above all that is – and we look to this Supreme Being for our eternal destiny, but not all of us do. There are differences among us – there always have been – and these are tearing us apart.

Many generations after the great flood, we know there were, through the centuries, successive kings and wealthy princes ruling the lives of countless simple folk among the nations inhabiting what we now call the Middle East. If we try to interpret the history of these lands through the perspective of the God in whom we all believe, those of us who do believe at all, then we will see discrepancies in the decisions and motives we attribute to God or that we understand Him to have shown us.

Either there is no god at all, which would explain these discrepancies, or else it is his way to maintain a veil of secrecy or mystery around his motives. We could understand how such a veil could come about simply by virtue of our inability to read the motives of the hearts of kings, princes, wealthy nobles and simple folk alike, in addition to our inability to see the full breadth of history with its impact on the present, not to mention the pull coming from God's will as He intends for human history to unfold in the future – with or without our cooperation.

Our greatest challenge is two-fold: to clearly understand our differences in both their origins and continuation, and to purify our understanding of God, the Most High, of our many forms of manipulation – however motivated they may be by religious impulses – to find now all the truth of God we can and which we will finally and fully see beyond the portals of death, when it will be too late to benefit our conduct and that of others here on Earth. The God in whom we believe is indeed only One, but how that oneness is in truth manifest in the realm of God's own Spirit is in question among the great religions. Their diverse claims to the truth about how God is in his own self cannot all be right. So just what is the truth about God, and how can we know it?

Observers both within and without the Jewish faith will admit that in contrast to all of the world's religions – which originated in human beings formulating intuitions about how to enter into contact or harmony with the god and origin of all – here there is something new: a historical record of individuals claiming to have had direct and observable encounters with either God himself or some of his messengers. Thus begins a body of written testimonies that in time constitute what is called Divine Revelation – tangible testimony and a new record of God intervening in human history with the express purpose of making Himself known to us, that we might enter into a very specific and clearly defined relationship with Him – beginning now and continuing into eternity.

There is no mistaking God's predilection for the Jewish People, the descendants of Abraham through Isaac, the family of Joseph and their descendants who lived and prospered in Egypt for 4 centuries and then were led out into the wilderness through the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses. Where the confusion begins is over God's attitude toward the people who are "swept away" to make room for his Chosen People. What about the Egyptians, the people of Jericho, and all the peoples of the Canaanite plain? What about their eternal destiny?

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Are all the other nations merely junk, refuse in God's eyes? Today we have great difficulty with such an isolationist and exclusivist view of salvation history. Even Isaiah reports the Lord saying it's not enough for them to be his Chosen People, but He will make them a light to the nations. This would indicate that the Lord cares about those nations and their people, and their destiny.

Perhaps the only way we can make sense of it all and find truth in this history that can enlighten our times is to consider separately the progress of God's overall plan of salvation and the eternal destiny of all the particular individuals who have lived and died through these times. When it comes to the glory of his Holy Name and the carrying out of his Holy Will, there is ample evidence in the Jewish Scriptures for what is at times referred to in the first person singular as God's "jealousy" for his Holy Name, or his reputation to the nations. On the other hand, there is also ample evidence of God's forbearance, patience, and mercy for individual persons – especially the poor, the weak, the suffering, and all who cry out to Him.

There is no doubt that God has a definite plan of salvation, and the role of his Chosen People is a foundational role. That they should have a place in which to thrive, that they should in a visible way observe God's commands and prescriptions in order to reveal his majesty and wisdom to the nations, that they should practice mutual love even towards aliens among them – these are all so important for the unfolding of God's plan, that He punishes transgression and withdraws his blessing from those who are unfaithful and unrepentant.

Throughout the Scriptures there is a growing preponderance of evidence that God intends for his plans for the salvation of mankind to unfold – no power in the universe will be allowed to frustrate his designs – blessings will shower on all who cooperate with these plans, and a curse will descend on all who oppose them, but no one will be allowed to stop them – though there may be some delays.

The good of the individual and each person's eternal destiny seems to be quite another matter. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God made it quite clear that no one can know what is in a person until the moment of his or her death. Someone apparently good can suddenly turn and throw their lot in with sinners and criminals, and their apparent goodness is finally revealed for what it was all along – the emptiness and ruin of an impure heart wearing the outward appearances of good out of empty motives such as fear, need to be well considered, or desire of gain.

On the other hand, sinners and criminals can come to be that way through the circumstances of life, and then discover truth, goodness, beauty, love and mercy, and can turn from their wicked ways and finish their days in righteousness and humility – even at the very end of their lives – revealing that for many years, if not their whole life, the impulse to goodness suffered imprisonment within their tormented souls and finally found the freedom to come out into the light of day.

It is clear in the Jewish Scriptures, that God alone searches the thoughts of the mind and probes the motives of the heart, so that He alone can judge justly. If He is God and so is consistent with Himself, then we can only conclude that wherever and whenever good people suffered and died they would have entered into the eternal reward intended for them by God. This is true whether they knew the true God directly or not in their lifetime, or only indirectly in his attributes such as justice or truth.

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In the destruction of Egypt's first-born, of Pharaoh's army, of the inhabitants of Jericho, of the peoples of the Canaanite plain, of the Philistines and of all the other opponents of his People – all good people who prematurely lost the remainder of their days on earth for the sake of the progress of God's plans for salvation and so that his Holy Name and wisdom might be known – would through their death nonetheless enter into the eternal destiny of happiness intended by God for them and for all people of good will. Their deaths served to manifest to all the earth that truth, justice, goodness, and fidelity are in the true God, Creator of the Earth and of the whole universe.

No other explanation will satisfy, since there is no other way to make right the inequalities suffered by human beings on this Earth and in the course of this brief existence. The Book of Job shows very clearly that in God's eyes, the development of a stronger faith in Him is more important than the uninterrupted enjoyment of earthly blessings. Job's children who perished would, in the moment of their deaths, have had the same opportunity to trust in God as Job came to have over a longer period of suffering, and as we can foresee that his wife would herself have had in the time remaining to her. If God's entire plan was only for this life, then we could agree with the atheists and agnostics that the current state of affairs simply doesn't make sense.

In the light of these reflections, we can begin to understand that much of the trouble in the Holy Land over the centuries may owe to the motivation of all the rulers and simple folk involved, who set their hearts on this earthly existence and dominion over the land, rather than in the good of all and the valuing of each person's eternal destiny. Our ancestors and we have all been guilty of clinging to our own particular understanding of God and his will to the point of going against Him and excluding the other peoples also intended by Him to come into his eternal inheritance. We're glad to be chosen by Him, but like jealous siblings we are opposed to our rivals and equals being invited to the feast. What is God going to do with us?

If we look back in time to the Exilic Period in Jewish history, we see that the Lord taught them to recognize his presence and power even while they were in foreign countries. He also taught them to get along with their foreign hosts while they lived there among them. This lesson has stood them well ever since then. Later, they returned to their Promised Land, and enjoyed peace until new tyrants came and tried forcibly to remove the freedom to practice their faith. The Maccabees arose to show the Jewish People that they could defend their faith and the glory of God's Holy Name. There followed an extended period of occupation, during which they did enjoy some freedom of religion – but not without persecution.

Finally, there came one whom some recognized as the long-awaited Messiah, and whom others rejected – Jesus of Nazareth, also called the Christ (Kristos in Greek, Messiah in Hebrew), and the Lord. This difference of faith caused Jews and Christians not only to find themselves in opposition to each other, but also in opposition to Rome – which had no tolerance for anyone practicing a religion which excluded harmony with the religion of Rome – melting pot of the gods of all the nations – even including the Cult of the Emperor. From a Christian point of view, it's interesting to note that the Son of God chose to come into a human life precisely at that point in human history when a ruler claimed to be a god and demanded worship. Augustus only expected it in death, whereas Nero and his successors demanded it during their lifetime.

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It could be very enlightening to see how ordinary Jews and Christians got along in the land after the destruction of Jerusalem: how much freedom they enjoyed under Rome, and how they got on with each other. The next major change came at the beginning of the 7th century and thereafter, as a Muslim tidal wave of combined conversion and conquest overran the whole area and beyond into Asia and Europe. It was “submit to the God of Mohammed – convert to Islam – or die.”

What happened to Jews and Christians then? Did any continue to live and practice their faiths in any part of the Holy Land, or did the entire population become Muslim? The Crusades from the 11th through the 13th centuries reclaimed some of the Holy Land – sadly there were atrocities committed by both sides – the Crusaders rebuilt some of the Holy Sites, and restored some Christian community to the land, but what happened thereafter? Were there any Jewish people able to live and practice their faith throughout these centuries?

Throughout the first two millennia, the freedom to practice a particular faith combined with worldly rule. First, there was the Roman Empire, which allowed and then adopted the Christian faith as that of the empire. When it was divided in the fifth century, there came to be the empires of West and East – the Holy Roman Empire and Byzantium. Then came the Ottoman Empire, succeeded by the British Empire. Were there any Jews and Christians living in peace among Muslims in the Holy Land in all these centuries?

I have read that through the years of the British Protectorate after World War I there were both Jews and Arabic Christians living in peace with Muslims in the Holy Land. How well did they actually get along with each other? I have heard stories of good friendships and neighborhoods, where there was more harmony than trouble, until the weakening of the British Protectorate after World War II.

A Jewish insurrection movement asserted itself in the late 40's, and with the world's approval of their authority in the founding of the State of Israel, a policy began to assert itself. What is that policy? In order to understand it, we need to consider not so much all that has been publicly stated as official policy, but just look at what has actually happened in the land as the fruits of the policy. We could summarize it as a takeover of the whole land – the dispossession of the Arab-speaking people, both Muslims and Christians, and repossession by Jewish or Hebrew speaking people.

This is not enough to understand what is going on. We also need to see who are all the players that are involved and moving the course of events. Moreover, “he who lives in a glass house should beware of throwing stones”, in other words, we Canadians, Americans, North and South Americans live in a land where our European ancestors dispossessed the local native populations, through direct exploitation, enslavement, warfare, conquest, cultural persecution, dispossession of the land, and even “ethnic cleansing”, to use a modern term. We are ill placed to sit in judgment of what is happening in the Holy Land. We can only weep, as undoubtedly our God, the Father of us all must also weep.

Much could also be said about our treatment of the environment. Some are quick today to accuse Brazil's landowners of cutting down the Amazon rainforest, but let us remember what we did to our own lands, from the time of Lebanon whose cedar forests are all but gone to our clearing of forests here in North America over the past five centuries. All we do affects everyone else. We are one body.