

A Response to John Piper's Article Part 1 (of 2) by Rabbi Baruch

"Israel, Palestine and the Middle East"

Part 1 (of 2)

The issue that Mr. Piper speaks to in the aforementioned article is indeed important and dear to my heart. I agree with him that both Biblical and historical concerns must be taken into consideration to arrive at a view that is in line with the revelation of Scripture. Where I begin to disagree with Mr. Piper is from the very first paragraph. There, one is able to see a bias held by him, which colors his statements throughout his article and causes him to incorrectly interpret key Biblical passages and arrive at conclusions which are in conflict with the Word of God. His main point, that the Jewish people have forfeited their right to the Land of Israel, is not supported by the revelation of Scripture and leads him to make additional statements that are in error.

Mr. Piper begins his article with a quotation from Romans 11:25-32. He states that he wants to use this passage as well as other Scripture verses in "an effort to draw out implications...for a very vexing problem in the world today." What is this very vexing problem? He writes,

"The existence of Israel in the Middle East and the extent of her borders and her sovereignty are perhaps the most explosive factors in world terrorism and the most volatile factors in Arab-West relations."

It is quite interesting and sad that Mr. Piper places the existence of Israel as the foremost problem in the Middle

East. I guess he thinks that Iraq invaded Kuwait because of Israel's existence; that the war between Iraq and Iran was also due to Israel's existence; that Saddam Hussein used lethal gas on his citizens because of Israel's existence; that numerous Arabs are butchered by Muslims because of Israel's existence; that many Christians are persecuted, tortured and martyred by Muslims because of Israel's existence; that the conflict between the Shiites and Sunnis are rooted in the fact that Israel exists. Yes, it would seem to John Piper that removing Israel would solve most of the problems in the Middle East today and that world terrorism would come to a near halt.

Such a view is exactly what the Muslim world wants the West to believe in order to join them in their objective of destroying the Nation of Israel. Sadly, it would seem that John Piper is among the growing number of "Christian leaders" who believe Israel's existence is the core cause for much of world terrorism and the poor Arab-Western relations.

This statement of Mr. Piper's shows a gross misunderstanding of the Middle East and perhaps the basis for numerous elementary errors in his interpretation of Scripture. The question which must be pondered is if Mr. Piper's views are based in an ignorance of the Middle East or an underlying factor that causes him to point the finger at Israel and the Jewish people as a cause for world terrorism and deteriorating West-Arab relations.

My concern is that more and more "Christian leaders" are joining Mr. Piper in blaming Israel for much of the major problems facing the world today. It is this misguided and irresponsible tendency that fostered the very views that gave rise to the holocaust. These are the same views which caused many pulpits in Germany to be silent rather than speaking out against the socialist and fascist policies of Adolph Hitler and the Third Reich.

It must be stressed that I do not take lightly my statements. In fact, I hesitate to make them in fear that I will be dismissed as one who cites the holocaust and anti-Semitism whenever Israel is spoken of in a disparaging manner. Obviously one can criticize Israel and not be anti-Semitic. However, to list the existence of Israel and the extent of her borders and her sovereignty as the most explosive factors in world terrorism and the most volatile factors in the Arab-Western relationship, shows a great bias. Why did not Mr. Piper speak concerning the existence of a Palestinian State as being problematic? What about the Islamic view that Muslims must conquer the world through Jihad? Why is it that Mr. Piper presents a one-sided and distorted view concerning Israel and the Jewish people?

Mr. Piper writes in the next paragraph that both Jews and Arabs claim a divine right to the land in question. This statement is false. Whereas the Bible states numerous times that God has promised the Land to the descendants of Jacob, the Koran makes no such statement. For example, Jerusalem does not even appear in the Koran. It is only a tradition that Mohammed ascended into the heavens from Jerusalem. To equate an Islamic tradition, albeit very important to Muslims, as a basis for divine right, is misguided. This would be like saying that because the first Passover occurred in Egypt, the Jews have a divine right to all of Egypt. Mr. Piper should understand that a single event occurring in a particular location is not equal to a statement by God in the Scripture which promises the Land of Israel to the Jewish people.

In speaking to individuals who have far greater expertise in Islamic law than I possess, I have learned that the Muslim claim to Israel is not based upon a divine right, i.e., a promise from the mouth of Allah, but rather the Islamic view that once land is acquired by a Muslim, it can only be sold to another Muslim. If for some reason land falls out of

Muslim ownership, Islam teaches that it is an act of merit to redeem this land. Obviously individual parcels of land could be purchased and thereby return to Muslim ownership; however, redeeming the land is one of the principles which provide the basis for jihad. It is also important to realize that not only redeeming land, but acquiring new land, and attaching to it Islamic ownership is also a chief objective of Islam. It is obvious today that Muslims want to enter into the governments of nations with the objective of ruling those governments and imposing upon all Islamic law. The recent changes in Lebanon and Turkey are excellent examples of this. Israel is not an abnormality, but rather an example of what Muslims are trying to achieve worldwide.

In regard to Israel, let's look at some interesting facts. If one looks at the ratio between Jewish-Arab populations in 1948 for the area that makes up Israel today, there were 3 Arabs for every Jew. The best estimates recorded a Jewish population of nearly 700,000. Beginning in the 19th century, Zionism began as a desire to return to the homeland of the Jewish people. Although nearly 1900 years had passed since the destruction of the Second Temple to the proclamation of the modern State of Israel in 1948, it is important to note that although other nations/empires included this land under their rule, the last government which called Israel its homeland was a Jewish one.

When the modern State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, the response of Israel's neighbors, by and large, was to attack and make war. It was only after losing the war that many of the Arab inhabitants of Israel abandoned the land. It is vital to recognize that those Arabs who did not leave, but chose to reside under a Jewish government, received full citizenship with all the rights and privileges pertaining to it. For the next 19 years, Israel did not expand its border based upon the pretense of a divine right to the land; its residents lived peacefully side by side with their Arab

neighbors (with the exception of the Sinai Campaign in 1956). It was only upon Arab aggression that Israel launched a pre-emptive strike in 1967. The facts are clear that the Six Day War was not an Israeli aggression to expand its land, but rather a necessary action of defense and a desire to secure her borders to ones that could be defended against further Arab aggression. Such a decision proved to be wise when once again Israel was faced with Arab armies mobilizing at her borders in 1973 which led to the Yom Kippur War. Israel has faced several attempts to massacre her people and destroy the Nation. Defensible borders are a prerequisite for Israel's survival. Returning to the pre-1967 borders and establishing a Palestinian State in Judea and Samaria is a formula not for peace, but a recipe for a war which Israel would not survive without divine intervention.

As a result of the Six Day War, Israel took control of all of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, land that was previously part of Jordan. Due to the loss of the war, many of the Arab inhabitants of this land fled while others who remained continued to be hostile toward the Israeli government and Jewish people. Israel also took control of the Sinai (later given away to Egypt in a peace deal) and Gaza from Egypt. It is primarily today East Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and Gaza which are at the heart of the Israeli-"Palestinian" conflict.

I, like Mr. Piper, do not intend to write in this response about all the issues or solutions to the Israel- Palestinian conflict, but thought a few paragraphs on Israel's modern history would help to provide a proper perspective.

In returning to the article, Mr. Piper writes that he is not attempting to,

"lay out a detailed peace plan, but I will try to lay out some biblical truths that could guide all of us in thinking

about peace and justice in that part of the world.” “What we think about this, and what we say, does matter...we need to know how to pray. And we need to know how to talk to others in a way that honors the truth.”

This is well-said. The problem is that Mr. Piper grossly mishandles the Scripture and thereby arrives at “his truths” which are a distortion of the Biblical record. For example, in quoting Romans 11:28, “As regards the Gospel they (Israel) are enemies of God for your sake but as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.”

The first problem is that, if one checks the original Greek text, the word “God” does not appear in this verse.

κατὰ μὲν τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἐχθροὶ δι’ ὑμᾶς, κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἐκλογὴν ἀγαπητοὶ διὰ τοὺς πατέρας:

Correct translation: “In regard to the Gospel, (they are) enemies for your sake, but in regard to the election, (they are) beloved for the sake of the patriarchs.”

In the next paragraph, Mr. Piper explains the first part of this verse,

“As regards the gospel they (Israel) are enemies of God...”, and says “in other words, they are rejecting their Messiah and putting themselves against God. This is what Jesus said to Israel in John 8:42: ‘If God were your father you would love me.’”

It is incorrect to interpret the John 8 passage as referring to Israel or the Jewish people at large, for this is not the context. The only individuals that Jesus is addressing in this passage are a small group of Pharisees who entered into a discussion with Him. (See John 8:13). Further on in this passage, verse 22 says “the Jews”, but once again, the text is not referring to the Jewish people as a whole. The term

“Jew” is often used to refer to a Judean sect synonymous with the Pharisees and/or Scribes. Whether one accepts this interpretation for the term “Jews” or whether one does not, is not vital. This is because once again, context is of key importance. In this section, context demands that the statement in question from verse 42, is only speaking about those Jewish individuals who wanted to kill Jesus. One must be extremely careful not to include the Jewish people at large in this desire of a few Jewish individuals to kill Jesus, which was ultimately carried out by Gentiles. For Mr. Piper to use John 8 as a proof text to support his view that the Jewish people at large are enemies of God cannot be substantiated by this text. Mr. Piper sounds awfully similar to those who label the Jewish people as “Christ killers”. If one looks throughout the Gospels, one will find that Jesus Himself made a distinction between the Jewish people in general and those Jewish individuals that He happened to be speaking with at any given time.

I do believe that anyone (Jew or Gentile) who rejects the Gospel is lost and remains in the same status as when he was born—in need of redemption. But, to imply that Jewish individuals are enemies of God in some unique way from other individuals who have not accepted the Gospel is incorrect. In all fairness, I’m not saying that Mr. Piper has made a distinction between the conditions of the unbelieving Jew vs. the unbelieving Gentile. But what Mr. Piper has done, is say that because of the overwhelming rejection by Jewish people of the Gospel, that this has caused a loss of rights for the Jewish people for the land of Israel today. This view cannot be substantiated by Scripture.

Although Mr. Piper correctly sees this rejection of Jesus as a “hardening” as part of God’s plan to move the Gospel to Gentiles and a future restoration of Israel, the problem is that he does not include the current issues in regard to the Land of Israel into God’s future plan for the Jewish people.

Nor does he correctly state that this “hardening” is only in part (ὅτι πώρωσις ἀπὸ μέρους τῷ Ἰσραὴλ γέγονεν). This means that there is a remnant of Israel which has not been hardened and has received (or will receive) the promise.

Next the article switches to modern day Israel. In speaking about the Promised Land, it is very telling that Mr. Piper writes,

“So now we ask, ‘Is the so-called “Promised Land” part of the inheritance and salvation that “all Israel” will receive?’”

Please notice that when referring to Israel he feels the necessity to put the term Promised Land in quotations. Why is this? Because, once again Mr. Piper does not see the Biblical promises attached to the Land as relevant today for the Jewish people nor part of God’s future plans. As his article continues, he offers seven “truths” which serve as guiding principles in helping the reader formulate his views in regard to Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East. The first is, GOD CHOSE ISRAEL FROM ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD TO BE HIS OWN POSSESSION. The Second is, THE LAND WAS PART OF THE INHERITANCE HE PROMISED TO ABRAHAM AND HIS DESCENDANTS FOREVER. After making the second statement he writes,

“This of course creates a huge cleavage between the Islamic view of God’s covenant and the Jewish and Christian view of God’s covenant.”

Why does Mr. Piper feel the need to make this statement? As a Christian what does Islamic thought offer to this issue? From his first two statements it would seem that the debate is a mute point, as he writes, “The Land is destined to be Israel’s”. But he quickly retreats from this statement at the end of the discussion that follows the second point with the words,

“But it’s not that simple. This is not an issue that can be dealt with in soundbites (sic).”

It is only when one reads Mr. Piper’s third point that it becomes obvious that he does not accept his first two points in a literal sense. His third point is: THE PROMISES MADE TO ABRAHAM, INCLUDING THE PROMISE OF THE LAND, WILL BE INHERITED AS AN EVERLASTING GIFT ONLY BY TRUE, SPIRITUAL ISRAEL, NOT DISOBEDIENT, UNBELIEVING ISRAEL. It is now that one learns of Mr. Piper’s Replacement Theology views. He believes that it is the Church which is the true and rightful recipient of these promises of G-d. However, he fails to see that Jewish individuals and God’s faithfulness to them, according to His covenant, also play an important role in the last days. Although Mr. Piper opens this article with a quotation from Romans 11, he neglects to take into consideration some of what is included in this passage. For example, he never deals with the statement that the Jewish people are beloved for the sake of the Patriarchs, nor the fact that the gifts and the callings of God are irrevocable (see Romans 11:28-29).

Mr. Piper states, “So the promise to Abraham that his descendents will inherit the land does not mean that all Jews inherit the promise. It will come finally to the true Israel that keeps covenant and obeys her God.” In one sense this is a true statement. The problem is that Mr. Piper understands true Israel as synonymous with the church and fails to see that this Scripture points to a future restoration of Jacob, i.e., the Jewish people. The point is Mr. Piper understands the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant as complete through Gentile believers and the relatively small minority of Jewish people who have accepted the Gospel. He fails to take into consideration that there will be in the last days a great turning to Jesus by the Jewish people who have returned to the Land of Israel. (To be continued in part 2).