

SOME THOUGHTS ON RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN GAZA

This paper differentiates between the West Bank and Gaza and argues that there is substantial RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION in Gaza and although there is arguably some religious persecution in the West Bank and many of the arguments used here apply, it is not so evident and so strong

These are some notes written initially following consideration of a publication that according to the publishers, persecution in Gaza is not religious persecution. I believe that the suffering and way of life of the Christians in Gaza is caused by the persecution of the people - both Muslim and Christian - and this is caused by the action of the IDF and the Israeli Government and it is based on religion (*historic and present Judaism.*)

There is also limited (generally low level currently) persecution because of the presence of Islam which reflect on students' studies, employment and travel in town markets and outlying villages (e.g. women not wearing the hijab, Muslim applicants being preferred to Christian, some marginalisation of students in Colleges etc).

When looking at life in Gaza we see that Christians do not have the freedom to live out their faith in the following spheres of life. (*some examples given - there are many more*)

- **private life** (*e.g. limitation on ability to study due to lack of electricity and inability to concentrate because of Israeli rocket attacks, also Israeli prevention of taking in such things as Bibles and mini player - also restrictions on what can be taken in and out by Palestinians e.g. laptops*)
- **family life** (*e.g. trauma and fear amongst children and disruption leads to unhappiness and bad behaviour*) See recent Norwegian Refugee council survey 25.3.19 saying Gaza Children's mental health rapidly deteriorating,
- **community** (*e.g. unable to meet with family and other members of the Christian community in the West Bank due to restrictions on border - both Eretz and Rafah also, "special cases" for Christians at Easter and Christmas seem to be being limited*)
- **national** (*e.g. difficulty in expressing national identity because of misunderstanding both by Israelis and by political Islamic groups in the light of Biblical theology and Christian teaching...Evangelicals support Trump and therefore cannot be "good" Palestinians*)
- **church life** (*e.g. careful naming of buildings and association because of Islamic suspicions and Evangelical church practices (baptism by immersion), Difficulties for MBBs. Israeli refusal to allow pastors in from West Bank and difficulty gaining permission from historic churches*).

Christians in Gaza should be free to live out their lives in the "Jesus way""having life in all its fullness" - this is "freedom"!

(a) **What is the way of life expressed and desired by Jesus for all His followers?**

The church in Gaza needs to be made aware that their situation is not what they deserve or what Jesus intends for them - such an awareness will give them hope and faith for the future. When we pray "thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" we are not just praying

spiritually but practically and in a "down to earth way". The kingdom is both past and future but is also essentially NOW because Jesus said so! Luke 4.18-19. Jesus came to bring for believers these aspects of life here and now.....

- **"good news for the poor"** - an excellent quality of life and a really good emotional and spiritual experience for the physically poor and the poor in spirit.
- **"freedom for prisoners"** - prisoners to fear, restricted to a house or a piece of real estate, prisoners to circumstances out of which there is no escape, overwhelmed with a broken heart - people need healing and given freedom
- **"recovery of sight for the blind"** - those who cannot see a clear way forward or a way out of a hole in which they find themselves, people who cannot explain in a comprehensible way why they are in the plight they are in and have no light in the tunnel of their existence - basically people who are living in darkness of mind (as well as literally without electricity !)
- **"release the oppressed"** - the Gazans are really under pressure, stressed both psychologically and physically with no hope, no job, no money, no food, no electricity, no water - squeezed into a strip of land - that's pressure literally.
- **"proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour"** - (not the year of the 100 years of the Balfour Declaration!) The Lord's Favour from Greek "dekton" - "that which is approved and acceptable" God wants for all a life which is acceptable to Him and approved by Him - this is clearly not the case in Gaza.

Any thing that denies or detracts from this way of life for the believer should be construed as persecution!

(b) The nature of the persecution experienced by Gazan Christians is religious and through this persecution they become a suffering church?

There is pressure on the Christians in Gaza primarily by the Israeli government so that the quality of life which is deserved (see above) is not being realised. The church is being persecuted. Persecution in a general sense means to "harass (someone) persistently". It comes from the Latin "persequi" which refers to "take vengeance on someone" The government through the IDF and through their border controls is doing this. This is RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION because IT IS MOTIVATED AND INSPIRED BY RELIGION - the religion of Judaism and the Bible on which the Israeli Government bases its policies and actions. (***Witness the Israeli Ambassador at the United Nations protesting at a recent meeting in New York and holding up a Bible saying, "this book gives the legitimization for us having this land!"***.) The Torah and other Old Testament teaching give the basis for the government and the IDF's political and defence policies and practise. This is not a popular argument to present either to Israelies or to Christians who adopt a Zionist perspective and follow arguments that the land belongs to the Jews, given to them by God.

What is the religious basis for Israeli action?

For example,

- **The Bible permits - The use of overwhelming force** (see action and words - and results/statistics - in 2014 war and recent attitudes and actions following Gaza protests at the border fence in 2018/2019) Deut 12.2 "destroy utterly all the places" (*where there is perceived evil and wrong*) in the nations you are dispossessing" Jer 12.17 "nations that don't listen I will completely uproot and destroy."
- **The Bible permits - you should always retaliate, never compromise, never back off, never forgive.** The principle is one of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" Ex. 21.24 and note Jesus' revolutionary and contradictory words in Matt.5.38
- **The Bible permits -The area of Judea and Samaria belongs to the Jews** (and that includes Gaza - home of the Philistines ? - in the minds of many) Gen 13.14-28 "the land you see I will give you" (many other scriptures it is suggested argue this although they really refer to the return from Exile)
- **The Bible permits - that Jerusalem is the sacred capital for the Jews.** (and some would say the new temple should be there too) See Isaiah 62.6-7., Zech 8.3 and many other scriptures which call for a return to Jerusalem and the establishment of this as a capital, but is not this referring to the return to the land after exile? (current arguments for the USA Consulate to be there is based on this principle)
- **The Bible permits - a return to the land for all Jews.** The Holocaust is linked with the escape from Egypt and the Passover story and the return from Exile in Babylon etc. This is their home and always has been so living and returning is OK - this justifies settlements and taking land from the local people (the Palestinians) (cf Isa 40.1-5 etc. Deut 30.1-5)
- **The Bible permits ethnic cleansing and maintaining the "purity" of the race.** Read the prophetic denunciations of the people who have erred into sin in Jeremiah and early chapters of Ezekiel and Jesus criticism of religious leaders who professed purity according to the law but were "white washed tomb stones". New national laws relating to the country being "Jewish" comes straight from Torah teaching and links with South Africa's Calvinistic teaching on apartheid which is based on Judaism
- **The Bible permits the complete destruction of families** because even children are tainted by the sins of their fathers e.g. 2 Kings 10.17 "Jehu killed all who were left of Ahab's family" and other scriptures where it seems legitimate even to kill unborn children (*recent rocket attack killed a pregnant mother in Gaza*) But the prophets make it clear that individuals are responsible for their own sins, not the sins of their fathers (see Ezekiel 18)
- **The Bible permits Gaza particularly (Amos 1 6ff) and also the Philistines** (the modern Palestinians according to Israelies) to be killed and destroyed (see David's exploits etc.)

The interesting thing is that the political dogma does not take into account other Scriptures which say that the **people in the land should be cared for** - this is ignored. e.g. "help an enemy's ox and donkey - if they fall down help them up and if they wander off help them to bring them back"!!! (witness the total disregard soldiers have for pregnant women at check points!) (Ex 22.21-22) and **"don't deny justice to the poor and make false charges, do not**

put an innocent man to death" (witness the World Vision scandal and the 18 months prison sentence for a soldier who shot a live Palestinian in the head!). There is a selective reading of religious texts in order to serve a political agenda! Support for the Palestinians has been reinforced by the United Nations and international governments but consistently ignored

There are elements of harassment and unpleasantness experienced by some in Gaza due to the attitude of extremists (on the edges of Hamas) and people who just don't think within day to day to day life (children throw stones at the Roman Catholic church - sorted out by local Sheikh !!). Particularly women are looked at critically mainly because Christian women do not cover their heads - in the Universities for example or in some market areas when shopping. There are also some difficulties in gaining employment although arguably the percentage of Christians who are without employment is far less than the majority community. These aspects of life need to be explored further but they only contribute a small part to the overall religious persecution meted out by the Israelis. It could be argued that this area of persecution is more cultural than religious.

(c) What are the actions that should be taken to bring support for the persecuted church?

- Preach and encourage the Christians to have hope and resilience for the future in the awareness that God wants to see them living in the delights of the Kingdom. Give skills for living and employment and encourage faith. *(I believe many are doing this in Gaza at the moment with the RC church young people and also to a lesser extent with the Orthodox Church and the Baptists!)* Help them to find their security in God and their relationship with Him.
- Make them aware that behind the rockets and the restrictions is a government which is basing its actions on the Old Testament scriptures and are acting in error arguably bringing upon them the judgement of God! BUT encourage them to "pray for their enemies and for those who despitefully use them". Houses of Christians have been destroyed (end of April 2019) and also some Christians injured. Most of the physical suffering is on Muslims, but not all. But there are only 900 Christians amongst 2 million Muslims
- Make the situation known in the international community that this is serious religious persecution and is totally unacceptable to God. Spreading the story in the West will give confidence to the Gazan Christians, they will know they are understood, the situation is understood and there are those outside who are for them and praying and working for them and giving them support. *(This is difficult with the polarizing of views on Israel theologically. The situation in Gaza ebbs and flows and so does the support of Christians in the West Bank and the West - a lot of words sometimes but often little action to make contact or give support. Need also for coordinated actions from all Christian agencies concerned for Gaza)*