

Four Thousand Years of Trouble and Glory: A History of the Holy Land

Genesis 12:1-9, 17:1-8

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Perhaps someone here today has made a New Year's resolution to learn more Bible history or understand more deeply world history to gain insights into current events. I hope in some small way this sermon will help you fulfill some of your resolutions.

I gave a sermon very similar to today's sermon over sixteen years ago, (two years before becoming one of your pastors) a month after the 9-11 attacks in 2001. Sixteen years later we still need to understand the big picture and see that in 2018 we are still part of a great drama unfolding whereas Jesus said, "Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places." (Matthew 24:7)

By observing the ups and downs of human behavior, comedy and tragedy, greatness and shamefulness, peace and war, tolerance and intolerance, cosmopolitanism and tribalism, I remain convinced that Christians, the people who follow Jesus, are critical to a better world, better human conduct, and improvements to our world in many ways.

Three major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all consider Jerusalem and its surroundings a holy place.

Many distinct and brilliant races of people have lived in, fought in, conquered, plundered, improved, ruined and evacuated this troubled spot along the Mediterranean Sea.

What I hope to accomplish is an overview of the history of the Holy Land or Promised Land — modern Israel — and the Palestinian state over the last four thousand years.

Jews call this region the Promised Land because God promised it to Abraham and his descendants. Why God chose *this* land then known as Canaan is anyone's guess.

Abraham at the time was living in Haran which is at the Syrian Turkey border, barely into what is now modern day Turkey.

The Bible does not tell us that Abraham was desperate or starving up there in Haran and that moving to Canaan would make life easier for him. But God did tell Abram, later called Abraham, Abram means exalted Father, Abraham Father of a Multitude, that it was a good land and that he would be blessed in it.

The Holy Land has a variety of terrains and climates. It has desert and fertile watered valleys and ranges from 1296 feet below sea level at the shores of the Dead Sea to 3347 feet above sea level at Mt. Hebron.

Abraham is thought to have wandered into Canaan about 2000 BC. Of course, the Canaanites were already well established there, but Abraham mostly lived in peace there keeping a low profile and prospered all the same. When Isaac (Abraham's son) was finally born and of marrying age, he had his servant go back north to Haran to bring back a wife from his own people. This was Rebekah.

During the entire history of the Jews in the Old Testament, there were constant problems and disasters involving the Jews mingling with the Canaanites and other ethnicities in the region. These problems were primarily about mixing the Canaanite religion in with their own worship of God and thus becoming unfaithful to God's commands. Such things as actually worshipping statues of cows or bulls and worse became at times rampant.

During a famine in the Promised Land the Hebrews migrated to Egypt and multiplied. Eventually however they were made slaves and were more than ready to leave.

We know that with the Lord's almighty help Moses led the people out of Egypt and slowly toward the same land that had been promised to them through Abraham.

This time, unlike in Abraham's time, there were too many Jews or Israelites or Hebrews (the names are interchangeable) for a quiet peaceful settlement. Canaanites were killed and evacuated to make room for the Jews.

Joshua conquered parts of Palestine by 1230 BC — seven hundred seventy years after Abraham's initial appearance.

In 1125 BC the Israelites finally after one hundred five years of raids and bloodshed defeated the Canaanites but not the Philistines — Goliath was a Philistine.

David around 1000 BC was able to unite his people and defeat the Philistines. In the time of David, Jerusalem, the great Holy City, was a tiny place of only fifteen acres and two thousand people.

Under David's son Solomon there was a moment of peace and prosperity, but after Solomon died in 922 BC, the old divisions amongst the Jews between north and south resumed. Judah is the south and Israel the north, and because of this division, when neighbors began to attack, the Hebrew people were not strong enough to defend. United, they might have prevailed, but divided they fell.

The Assyrians (modern northern Iraq) wiped out Israel in 722 BC and then in 587 BC the Babylonians (also part of modern Iraq the famous city of Babylon was fifty-nine miles southwest of modern day Baghdad) also known as Mesopotamia, destroyed Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Most of the Jews were taken prisoners and exiled to Babylonia. There in

their exile, as often happens to people in exile, they rediscovered their religious faith. Many of the books of the Old Testament were written while the Jews were living in Iraq. The official language of Babylon was Aramaic, the same language Jesus spoke.

When Cyrus the Great of Persia (Iran) defeated the Babylonians (the Iraqis) in 539 BC, the Jews were allowed to go back to Judea and rebuild Jerusalem. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about this time.

Over two hundred years passed, but the Jews never returned to the Glory of David and Solomon. In 333 BC Alexander the Great of Macedonia — a Greek — replaced the Persians. The Jews rebelled against the Greeks and actually established an independent state from 141-63 BC until Pompey the Great conquered Palestine for Rome and made it a Roman province ruled by Jewish kings. King Herod was one of these Jewish kings, and it was under his rule that Jesus was born.

Jewish zealots led unsuccessful revolts over the next one hundred years after the time of Jesus. Many Jews were killed, sold into slavery, and not allowed to visit Jerusalem. Judea was renamed Syria Palaestina. The word Palestine originally refers to the land of the Phoenicians, a seagoing people neither Jewish or Arab.

After the Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and made it the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 AD or CE for Christian ERA the Promised Land became the Holy Land because it was the homeland of Jesus — where he lived, died and rose from the grave.

Christians from all over made Holy Pilgrimage to Palestine, and there was about three hundred years of prosperity, security, and cultural advancement. Most of the population adopted Greek customs and the Christian religion.

The Persians (Iranians) however occupied for fifteen years from 614-629 and then in 638 Muslim Arab armies invaded Palestine and captured Jerusalem.

The religion that Muhammad founded in the early years of the seventh century was one of peace and wholeness. The original meaning of Jihad was a spiritual struggle to integrate all of life into godliness or righteousness.

In that sense, the mission of the Christian Church is Jihad — the struggle to spiritually integrate all of life into righteousness. A shocking word to use, I know, but that is our goal and hope. “Muhammad had not expected Jews or Christians to convert to Islam unless they especially wished to do so, because he believed that they had received valid revelations of their own. In these early days, the Muslims regarded Islam as the religion given to the Arabs, the sons of Ishmael — Abraham’s son through Hagar Sarah’s slave girl — just as Judaism was a faith for the sons of Jacob — Isaac’s son Jacob whose brother was Esau and whose mother was Rebekah, from the land of Haran.” (K. Armstrong, p. 227)

All three religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a great deal in common. All three honor Abraham as the father of their religions. Abraham was the first great Monotheist,

worshiper of the one holy God. All three arise and then branch off from the profound sacred text of the Old Testament. All three are rooted in the early insights and visions of the Jews — those brilliant historians, poets, storytellers, and mystics who came into holy contact with the Holy God, the one God Yahweh whom we all worship and seek to obey.

Rather than evangelical fervor to spread Islam, what certainly inspired the Arab tribes to invade the Holy Land was the old combination of necessity and opportunity. The Byzantines and Persians were exhausted and vulnerable, and the Arab Muslims needed the land.

Thus began thirteen hundred years of Muslim presence in Palestine. The Muslim rulers did not force their religion on the Jews and Christians, whom they respected as “people of the Book.” Despite the modern examples of Islamic terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism and the horrors of the Taliban, Isis, and all the rest, this was a time of cosmopolitanism, sophistication, and religions toleration of the highest order.

The Christian crusades beginning in 1096 disrupted almost five hundred years of Islamic advancement.

Bands of European Christian extremists and fanatics set out to liberate the Holy City — Jerusalem from the Infidels, i.e. the Muslims. Pope Urban II riled up the people. Jews in European cities were categorically slaughtered along the way, beginning tragically what would be the establishment of anti-Semitism as Europe’s incurable disease. Nine hundred years before Auschwitz. When the crusaders arrived in Jerusalem, they “overnight turned the thriving and populous city of Jerusalem into a stinking charnel house. A vault of skeletal remains. There were still piles of putrefying corpses in the street when the crusaders held a market three days after the massacre. With great festivities and celebration, they sold their loot, blithely unconcerned about the carnage they had inflicted and the hideous evidence lying at their feet. If a respect for the sacred rights of their predecessors is a test of the integrity of any monotheistic conqueror, the crusaders must come at the bottom of anybody’s list. (From Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem, One City, Three Faiths* p. 275)

A crusader Christian presence held on from 1099 – 1187. The practice of violent jihad had died out in the near east, but the cruel aggression of the Christian Crusaders rekindled it.

The Muslim leader Saladin orchestrated a jihad on Jerusalem and entered as conquerors on October 2, 1187. Saladin was a Kurd from Iraq who had grown up in Armenia. Ironically, not a single Christian was killed.

Some were taken as slaves but later released. The wealthy Christians ransomed themselves but left with great wealth and the Muslims were scandalized to see these rich Christians leaving and selfishly refusing to use their money to ransom their poor countrymen.

Saladin said, “Christians everywhere will remember the kindness we have done them.” And they did for a time. Christians in the west were uneasily aware that this Muslim leader had behaved in a far more *Christian* manner than had their own crusaders when they conquered Jerusalem.

The Ottoman Turks occupied Palestine in 1517 and ruled until 1918, with a few exceptions. Of course volumes have been written on the Ottoman Empire, but it is true that these four hundred years were marked by stability, civic improvement, architectural splendor and religious toleration. Jews and Christians remained in the Holy Land and prospered.

As the Ottoman Empire declined and anti-Semitism rose in Europe during the 1880s, Jews from Europe began to immigrate to Palestine. The Zionist movement began, a movement for Jews to return to their Old Testament home and find safety there from persecution. One cannot blame the Jewish people for needing a sanctuary nor can we deny their biblical claim, but it had been over twenty seven hundred years since their glory days under Solomon.

In 1880 ninety-five percent of the total population of Palestine was Arab. As the Jews moved in and bought land, the Arabs became alarmed and some were adamantly opposed to Zionism. They were naturally threatened by their new neighbors.

Aided by the Arabs, the British captured Palestine from the Ottoman Turks in 1917 and 1918. This was the era of the famous T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia.

The British for the next thirty years tried unsuccessfully to keep both the Jews and the Arabs happy. The British wanted to restrict the size and power of the Jewish state so as not to infuriate their Arab friends and to protect their oil interests.

After the Nazi regime began, sixty-two thousand more Jews entered Palestine. Jewish and Arab revolts broke out. After the horrors of the Holocaust, even more Jews fled to Israel. The British continued to try to hold off immigration to keep the peace with the Arabs, but Jews entered illegally all the same. Shortly after WWII the Jews organized and invented their own forms of terrorism in hopes of removing the British. July 22, 1946 Menachem began and the Haganah blew up the king David Hotel in Jerusalem killing twenty-eight British, forty-one Arabs, and seventeen Jews.

Eventually and partly as a result of Jewish terrorism, the British, exhausted, turned the problem over to the UN. The Palestinians outnumbered the Jews 1,300,000 to 600,000 but the Jews were better prepared and, the Jews won after many battles and in 1948 the state of Israel was established. 780,000 Palestinians became refugees.

From 1948 to the present many battles and failed treaties have ensued. In 1967 during the six day war, Israel captured the West Bank and the Gaza strip and other areas. The West Bank is a rather large and valuable area west of the Jordan River.

In 1993 hopes were high and a peace treaty was signed between PLO leader Yasir Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

On November 4, 1995 Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated after speaking at a peace rally in Tel Aviv. The assassin was a fellow Jew, a young student names Yigal Amir who declared that he had acted under God's direction and that it was permissible to kill anybody who was prepared

to give the sacred land of Israel to the enemy. Meaning of course that the peace treaty involved giving land back to the Arab Palestinians.

Over the last four thousand years, beginning with Abraham moving his family and flocks from Haran to Canaan, we can say with rough historical calculations that Christians governed the Holy Land less than four hundred years, the Jews were the principle governors six hundred fifty years, Arabs almost two thousand years, Pagan Greeks and Romans six hundred years, and Turks four hundred years. Arabs, Persians, and Turks (all Muslims now) have been the principle rulers of the Holy Land through its troubled history, ruling three and a half times longer than any other nation or empire.

From the ironies and tragedies of history we see the horrible truth that religions frequently fail to live up to their most treasured ideals. Christianity the religion of love has often expressed itself in hatred, violence and contempt. The Jews who came to Israel to escape the horrors of Gentile extermination have themselves been agents of oppression. Islam, the faith of unity and integration, has splintered into fanatical sects who have killed thousands of innocent people who wished them no harm and were incapable of alleviating their bitter and ancient grievances.

Meanwhile, our hope is not in historical progress or in the politics of nations but in *God-filled* human beings, individuals of faith, our friends and neighbors who continue day in and day out despite the absurdities and insanities of history, to live their lives with reason, compassion, wisdom, peace, and prayer.

We join with them, wherever they are, whatever faith they obey; Jews, Christians, Muslims, Humanists, Buddhists, Hindus, in forming a community of sanity, a community that will not and cannot with God's help fail to live up to our most treasured ideals.

You are my community of sanity, and I thank you for it. Because we have one another, we need not despair or fear in those troubled times.

Today we receive the sacrament we call The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. By receiving this spiritual food (I like to call it spiritual power) we are reminded that we can do all things with Christ working in us and unite as People of Faith to build a more holy and peaceful world.