Israel and the Middle East

Part 1 of 2: Backgrounds to the Current Israeli Conflict
with Darrell Bock, Mitch Glazer, David Brickner, Jim Sibley
Release Date: December 2014
Welcome to The Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. And today, our topic is Israel and the Middle East. The current situation there. As we are taping this, we have been through a little over a month of direct conflict in the Middle East triggered by the kidnapping of three Israelis and really the murder of those three. And then in a reprisal, a kidnapping of a Palestinian who has also died that has led to this latest conflict. And there really is a context for what’s going on here. When these things happen, they don’t happen in isolation.

So I’ve brought together three people with background and experience, not just in thinking about Israel and the Middle East, but also having spent time in Israel. Significant time in Israel. And so we just want to discuss kind of the background and situation with them. My guests are David Brickner, who is president of Jews for Jesus, who is with us by Skype and is on vacation in the San Francisco area. And Mitch Glazer, who is president and CEO of Chosen People Ministries. He’s the other Skype person that you see. I was going to describe them by their beards, but they both have beards, so if you want to distinguish them, what’s the best way to say this? Mitch is the more mature of the two that you’re looking at. And then

I would say it’s because I’m wearing glasses.

Is that what it is? Well that’ll work. There you go. There are multiple ways to distinguish the two personalities that we have by Skype. And then with me by studio is Jim Sibley, who has spent years as director of the Jewish studies program at Chriswell College and is an adjunct professor at Southwestern in Chriswell as well. So they all have extensive experience in being involved and having an awareness of what’s going on in Israel. And of course I’m Darrell Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement at the Hendrick Center here at Dallas Theological Seminary.

So we welcome you for being a part of the podcast today. Well gentlemen, as is often the case, the mid-east is boiling. And we’re going through a sequence in which we’ve had events that have triggered violence and conflict and rockets going back and forth. We’ve had cease-fires and violation of cease-fires. It’s a pretty chaotic situation that we see. Mitch, I’ll start with you. In your mind, how did we get to where we are?
Mitch Glazer

Well it probably started with the holocaust Darrell. And you can go all the way back to Abraham and to Genesis 12 and the promise of the land to the Jewish people. But I think the current conflict was really born out of the holocaust where God was faithful to the Jewish people. Didn’t allow the Jewish people to be destroyed, although so many were killed. And sort of the sympathies of the world were turned towards those who remained after the holocaust. And somehow between the Ottomans, the British, and the fledgling U.N., the United States were very supportive as well, Israel was given back their historic land.

And then Israel started settling that land, although there were plenty of Jewish people there beforehand. But this was a land now really settled by those who had survived who needed a country where they could be safe. And so there were some people there who were bedouins. And Arabs, it was all part of the Ottoman Empire. You know you had the Jewish people moving in. There was plenty of land for everybody. And instead of just going along with what the fledgling United Nations had really established, you basically had a fight over land.

And that fight over land has continued ever since. And I don’t think until everybody agrees to live with each other in peace. Until it’s recognized that historically and even legally that this is a Jewish country, but there’s room for everybody else, I think that there’s going to continue to be hostilities. And we’ve had three or four major wars, depending on how you count them. Maybe even five. And you continue to have internal strife. And I think that that’s how we got to where we are. Much more complicated, but basically it’s a dispute over land.

Dr. Darrell Bock

Yeah, and we’ll be talking about the language that you used to describe what’s going on here and how that even – even the way you talk about this ends up being and raising issues. David, what’s your take on how we got where we are?

David Brickner

Well Darrell in your question you used a word to describe the current situation as boiling. And I thought that was very biblical of you. Because of course we know in Zachariah 12: 3, God promises that in the last days he’s going to make Jerusalem a heavy stone. And a boiling pot of the nations. And we see that in reality today. And I think it’s important for Christians to understand like what Mitch was saying, that all of this comes in not just in historical context, but in a biblical framework.
And Christians often have a depth of theological understanding regarding Israel and the past. Many are also very keenly interested in what the Bible has to say about Israel in the future. Unfortunately, it seems that when it comes to present day Israel, biblical thinking takes a backseat to political expediency. And so Christians who look at what’s going on in the Middle East today through a CNN worldview, are going to have a failed perspective. We need to understand that the Bible gives us a framework for understanding the conflict and as Mitch pointed out, God promised the land to Israel long ago.

And since then, as the scriptures say, the Jewish people, the nation of Israel has been at the nexus of the cosmic conflict between God and Satan. And God has made promises to the Jewish people. He intends to keep them. Satan wants to make God a liar. And his minions are trying to follow through on that. The church needs to stand with Israel right now and recognize that God is simply fulfilling the promises of his word. And we are alive to see it today.

Dr. Darrell Bock

I’m going to come back in a minute and ask this question. You can be mulling it over. I’m going to turn to Jim here in a second and get his input on the first question. But the question I want to deal with is people can understand biblically the connection to Israel because she’s so prominent in the Old Testament. And they can understand the idea of thinking about Israel in the future because she also is prominent in the way scripture talks about the last things.

The reason people deal with Israel in its current state is because of what I would say some people have an uncertainty about how to view the current state of Israel. So we’re going to come back to that question. It’s an important one that you’ve raised David. Jim, what’s your take on how we got to where we are?

Jim Sibley

Well I think it really goes back to earlier than the holocaust. I think it goes back to the Zionist movement in the late 1800’s. That’s when the Jewish National Fund began purchasing land. Other organizations were also purchasing land in Israel at that time. Settlers were coming in prior to the establishment of the state of Israel. The holocaust definitely added a tremendous impetus to the whole movement. But it actually began in the late 1800’s with the return of the Jewish people to the land.
Dr. Darrell Bock

So what we’re dealing with here – and I’m just trying to pull together what you all are saying – there’s a biblical dimension, that’s what David has raised. There is historical and I would even say an emotional dimension of what the holocaust contributed to the momentum of what was already going on in the Middle East. And then the roots of the practical situation we have in the land really comes as a result of the whole Zionist movement and the influx of Jews into the land. Obviously predating the holocaust. I mean we haven’t even mentioned the Balfour Declaration and things like that—that established a presence of Jews in the land. And then we have this ongoing discussion about whose land is it anyway. And what that is representative of. That’s a good overview. And I think it’s interesting you each took a different tact on this. Because what I’m hoping people see in our conversation is that there really are layers to this discussion. There are several things going on simultaneously that people have to be aware of as they talk about what’s going on in the Middle East. Let’s come back to the question that David’s remarks raised. And that is there’s – I don’t know how to say this – ambivalence, I don’t know if that’s the right word.

There’s an uncertainty about how to talk about modern Israel. We know that the biblical Israel of the Old Testament is in the center of the biblical story. Many people believe that there is a future for a roll of Israel coming back into the program and promise of God because of texts like Romans 9-11, etc. So they talk about Israel having reconnected to the messiah and being in the middle of the program of what God is going to do. Those are categories that people are used to. But what we often get is discussion about how in the world should we think about modern Israel. She’s in unbelief. She doesn’t believe in the Messiah.

As things stand right now, there’s a remnant certainly of Messianics who do, but generally speaking the mass of Jewish people have not responded to Jesus. And so that leaves an ambivalence towards the modern state of Israel and to how to view Jewish people. So how do we walk into that scenario? And David, since you raised the questions initially, I’m going to let you take the first crack at it. But I’m going to come to all three of you on it.
Yeah, I think some of the previous support of Israel and the Jewish people that we witnessed among evangelicals in the certainly sixties and seventies when Israel recaptured Jerusalem, has begun to be eroded by some of the key theologians in the world today. People like N.T. Wright and others have written specifically concerning Romans 9, 10, and 11. And though they say that they’re not suggesting replacement theology, they end up in the same place.

And so because of their popularity, because that’s what people are reading, many people have started to waver on their understanding of what modern Israel has with regards to a claim to the land. I had a debate with John Piper about this where he said Israel has no divine right to the land. My counter was that Israel never had a divine right to the land. Israel always possessed the land by divine mercy.

And for much of the biblical record, Israel lived in the land while rebellious breaking the Mosaic Covenant. And yet God was merciful. He allowed Israel to remain in the land despite her unbelief. And he did this because of his gracious promise to Abraham and his descendants. Why could God not act in the same way today as he did back then?

So the point is, is that there’s a commitment that God has made to the people of Israel. And that is in place and applies whether or not Israel is in faith or not. Is that what you’re suggesting?

Not only that, but there are numerous places in the scriptures both Old and New Testament where it seems to indicate that Israel will be back in the land in unbelief before the great and terrible Day of the Lord. Zechariah 12, Ezekiel 37, even Romans 11. And so we have to recognize that it’s not only a possibility. But it seems from the scriptures to be part of the predictive plan.

Okay, Mitch?
Mitch Glazer

Well I would agree with everything David said. I think that there’s been a – we have to take a careful look at the times in which we live. I think that when I became a believer in 1970, I got saved with a copy of the New Testament in my right hand and a copy of The Late, Great Planet Earth in my left. And so there was a deep interest in prophecy, particularly after Israel became a state in 1948. And then the recapturing of Jerusalem in 1967. But then I think that there was a reaction I think that again the luster of benevolence that was attached to the holocaust began to wear thin.

And the Palestinian promotional agenda and narrative began making its way into the United States. And so we saw a reaction to probably you saw it most in reaction to the left behind series and to an emphasis to prophecy. But I think it goes much deeper than this sort of knee jerk reaction. I think that there’s been a growth as David mentioned to what I would call a Neo-Reformed revival in the United States where a lot of great theologians are from that background. And basically they’re either historic premillennialists to an extreme or they are supersessionists or traditional amillennialists.

And they would never take the Old Testament prophecies literally anyway. They would see the land promises fulfilled spiritually in the church. Therefore, there’s no theological future to Israel in the land whether it happened in 1948 or whether it happens when Jesus comes back or before Jesus comes back. And so I think that we have to understand that that is the climate.

Now you add to this the tremendous interest of our younger generation in social justice. And at one time, the Jewish people were weak and despondent and almost destroyed and so they were the objects of Christian sympathy, whereas today the Palestinian plight is much more dominant than the Jewish people who have a country and a military and everything else. And so the heart and the sympathies, the emotions as you mentioned Darrell, have been extended toward the Palestinian narrative. And so I think that just gives sort of a sociological setting to this. I also just want to affirm what David said.
And I’m asked all the time whether I believe modern Israel is a fulfillment of prophecy. And I would always say yes. And then people would say, “So you believe that the modern state of Israel is God’s established kingdom?” And I would say, “Well, hardly.” All you have to do is make one tour to Israel and you’ll know that’s not true. And so Israel is a very secular country. The reason I say this is that number one I do believe according to Ezekiel 36: 25 and following, that before the dry bones are made alive, they need to be resident in Israel; and it’s 37.

You do have Israel coming back into unbelief and so that would be the fulfillment of prophecy. Whether or not the Jewish people are moved out again, I once tried to figure out how many El Al planes it would take to move out six and a half to seven million people. It would be a major operation, needless to say. But let’s say that this is not the absolute final. It is one stage in the fulfillment of prophecy. But then again, if you’re dealing with people who are really not interested in prophecy, who are spiritualizing and allegorizing the scriptures and the land being the blessings enjoyed by the Church, then the truth is, Israel never gets back to the land.

And so prophecy in that sense is never fulfilled because it’s not literal. In fact it was a non-literal prophecy that’s been spiritually fulfilled in the Church, which is a position I just simply don’t accept.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

Okay, now the passage that’s also in the background – a New Testament passage – that’s also in the background. And I’ve got to bring this up cause it’s in the gospel of Luke, is a passage in Luke 13 in which Jesus says that the house of Israel is desolate until you say blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. So what we have in scripture, and I think this is important for people to appreciate, are kind of two themes. The relationship of them to one another is hard to pin down.

One is the idea of yes Israel is going to be back in the land. She’s even going to be back in the land in unbelief. But the real trigger for the end time vents beyond that is associated with when Israel as a mass turns back to the Lord. And that’s when major triggers related to final events are going to take place. And I think keeping both of them in balance is an important part of this conversation. Jim, what’s your take on what we’re talking about?
Well now in Luke 13, the house is the temple.

No, I don’t think Luke 13 is about the house being the temple. When he says the house is desolate, it’s not like John 2 or the taking over the temple area. This is coming as Jesus is going to Jerusalem and on his journey to Jerusalem and as he moves towards Jerusalem, he is declaring the position of the nation as being under judgment until she responds, which is the background for Peter’s appeal in Acts 3, that the nation needs to repent in order that the times of blessing for the nation may come.

Well that’s – we’ll agree to disagree on that one. But at least as far as the promise of the land in the Abrahamic Covenant, the promise to the fathers in Genesis, three things were promised. Land, seed, and blessing. And for those who want to say that the land promise has been spiritualized or allegorized or whatever, then what about the promise of blessing to the nations to all the families of the earth; the blessings of salvation.

I don’t see how you can escape the conclusion that those also have been spiritualized, that they are not to be taken literally. Under the Mosaic Covenant, enjoyment of the land was conditioned on obedience or whatever, but the promise of the land was still unconditional and irrevocable. Now under the New Covenant, we have the prophecy of Ezekiel 36 and 37 that the people will be brought back in unbelief. To hold them to the same standards as under the Mosaic Covenant, I think biblically doesn’t really work.

Although the modern state of Israel is committed to Western and Judeo-Christian values of property rights and the rights of individuals and all of these kinds of things, nevertheless those who want to try to hold Israel to the Mosaic standards may have difficulty with consistency.

What about general prophetic calls to the core morality about how you treat foreigners and that kind of thing?

Yeah, exactly. I think those are things that Israel has in place. Have there been abuses and are there incidents of injustice? I think any rational person would have to say yes, there have been on both sides.
The Table Podcast  
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Dr. Darrell Bock  
So this raises another question that comes up in this conversation that’s an important one. And that is in saying that Israel has a right to the land and even saying that this modern state of Israel has a place somehow in the biblical framework of displaying that God is being faithful to his promises, that doesn’t necessarily mean that Israel gets a carte blanche on everything that she does in terms of dealing with the situation that she finds – I’m going to let you go first, Jim, on this one since you haven’t had a chance to go first yet. So is that a fair way to summarize kind of where we are?

Jim Sibley  
Oh absolutely. At the same time I’m not sure that Israel needs to be held to a different standard than those who oppose Israel. For example, on the issue on civilian deaths in Gaza. When Hamas is firing missiles at Israel citizens targeting Israeli civilians deliberately and repeated. And then uses civilians as human shields, it seems very strange then to criticize Israel for the deaths of those civilians which they have tried to avoid.

Dr. Darrell Bock  
Yeah, I think that that’s a point that’s often missed in the conversation. Mitch, your take on does Israel get a carte blanche?

Mitch Glazer  
Well our country just sent the air force to attack ISIS militants in Iraq because – and the reason was allegedly humanitarian – which very well might be the case in that the ISIS folks were doing things that were evil and horrible to citizens of Iraq. We reacted with—responded militarily. The fact that Hamas created rocket launch centers in homes, in schools, some sponsored by the U.N. The fact that they had at least 30 or 40 tunnels that we know about, probably more, and that they all landed up in a public institution, a mosque or a school or someone’s home.

Then for the U.S. or for western nations – the U.S. has been the best – but for western nations to then judge Israel in some type of moral equivalence debate that Israel is unfairly killing civilians. When the truth is what’s happening in Gaza with Hamas is the same as what’s happening with ISIS. They float in the same stream. And what you have is a real problem with a value that extreme Muslims seem to have.
And that is they do not regard human life at the same level that we do in the west. Particularly those of us who have been influenced by Judeo-Christian teaching. And until we recognize that, we’ll never be able to understand at the moral equivalence dilemma should not even in some ways, be discussed. Because if you had civilians killed, it’s not that these Israelis didn’t make a mistake here and there – in war there’s always civilian casualties, we know that.

But the reason why there might be quite a few of these, although not as many as claimed, is because of the actions of Hamas, not the actions of Israel. So I think we need to really rethink the moral equivalence debate.

**Dr. Darrell Bock**

And I think it’s also fair to say that those who are making a point about how many children are killed et cetera, know that there is in the west a sensitivity to these kinds of civilian deaths, even in the midst of using people as human shields, as we’re talking about. I’m very aware of stories of people on the Palestinian side seizing homes, launching rockets from homes from people who are completely innocent. Because they know the reprisal will come from where the rocket is launched.

And they’re actually trying to do two things at one time. Because often times they’ll march into a Christian home – a Palestinian Christian’s home and launch the rocket from that location in the hopes that the reprisal comes against that location. And that is a form of human shielding as well. And so to do this in the midst of families, in the midst of homes, et cetera and then to have the reprisal come and civilians and children die in the midst of it, they’re well aware of what it is that the strategy is reaping. And people who aren’t sensitive to that are missing part of what’s going on. David, your thoughts on this?

**David Brickner**

Yeah. Well it’s been said many times before. But the fact remains that if the Palestinians laid down their arms tomorrow, there will be peace. If the Israelis laid down their arms tomorrow, there would be a blood bath. And so we have to consider the source of these reports. There’s no way that even with the best of talking points can stand up against the images of children and women in bloodied conditions in hospitals.
But those reports and those images are being broadcast by a very successful P.R. campaign that’s designed to allow these human casualties in order to whip up – not just anti-Israel sentiment around the world – but scratch that anti-Israel sentiment and very close to the surface, you’ll find the anti-Semitism that has been roiling throughout Europe. Jewish businesses being protested, boycotted, that maybe these owners have never even set foot in the land of Israel.

And yet, now it’s not just Israel in conflict with Gaza, it’s Jews around the world who are being blamed by these U.N. sponsored, media-centers like CNN or British press. Particularly in Europe, not so much in America, but it’s a tragedy that just going to the very heart of what this conflict is, which is not just a political conflict, it’s a spiritual conflict. And if we forget that as believers in Jesus, we’re not going to have the biblical world view and the framework to understand what’s happening today.

*Dr. Darrell Bock*  
I think one of the things that strikes me about what’s going on is how quickly if I can say it that way, we have forgotten the holocaust and what it actually represented it and what generated it. And I think we’re coming to a point and I’m thinking about this, I think we’re coming to a point where we are losing the people who went through the holocaust and for whom it is a historical reality.

We now have a generation for whom it’s just about something they saw on film or something like that. And as a result we’re losing the memory and the impact of what got us there to begin with. And those who don’t remember history are prone to repeat it. And I think we’re seeing a little bit of that in what’s going on today.