

One Solid State

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THERE HAS BEEN ongoing unrest, feuds and open warfare in the Israel/Palestine region for thousands of years. Each succeeding century has seen a new invasion, a new alliance, a new claim to a very limited land area. Instability has been endemic and each ruling dynasty, whether it be the Canaanite, Judaic, Israelite, Roman, Byzantine, Crusader, Ottoman, British or Israeli, has seen new boundaries, new borders, new attacks.

I visited Israel/Palestine in 1976 participating in an archaeological dig in the Northern Negev desert, a place called Rehovot (Gen 26:22). The trip gave me the opportunity to experience the realities of the region at first hand and to be free to discuss sensitive matters of history and religion in a more open-ended, objective way than in the loaded, emotionally-charged way in which these time-shaping matters were dealt with at home. We were able to sit around in the evening and discuss a wide range of issues, historical and contemporary.

The personnel in the dig were international, American, British, European mostly, with the dig organisers, scholars, archaeologists and students coming from Israel. One topic we discussed, for instance, was the life of Jesus of Nazareth. I was able to hear from these scholars how they saw the life of Jesus and to express to them what I had been told/taught in Tipperary. We were told, for instance, by a senior Christian Brother in c. 1960 that the Jews "had it coming to them" (for what they had done to Jesus. By "it", he was talking about the Holocaust).

The scene in Jerusalem in the time of Jesus was sketched by them, with false prophets allegedly abounding. The claims of the Nazarene seemed, at the time, to be indistinguishable from the others' claims, according to my informants.

I have always been puzzled how the man Jesus, who must have been the celebrity of celebrities of his time, what with walking on water, healing the sick, feeding 5000 (5000!), raising the dead, then the ultimate miracle, raising himself from the dead, had such a small following. Hearing the Israeli scholars quote Josephus and others, put things in a context of time and event which I much needed, so distorted in my mind was the life of this great man by the skewed indoctrination and lop-sided teaching (and worse) which I had received.

I took the opportunity to travel throughout Israel, (remember this was less than ten years after the '67 War). I saw shanty towns of Palestinians as I travelled down the West bank from Galilee to Jericho. When I mentioned these huddled masses to my Israeli friends they were very arrogantly dismissive, one of them going so far as to say "They (the Palestinians) don't know any better". I pointed out that unless fair-minded policies were developed to deal with these displaced people, trouble would ensue. I got nowhere. I was talking to people who had recently scored a major victory over a very old enemy and they were in no mind to be conciliatory.

I knew, and everyone on the dig knew, that although the overt reasons for the large resources devoted to archaeology in Israel was the pursuit of knowledge of the Ancient World, the covert rationale was the furtherance of Israel's claims to the land. I heard statements very reminiscent of "Not an inch", or "No surrender" or "What we have we hold".

When I put it to the Israelis that their claim to the land was based on ancient texts and on claims that God gifted the land to the Jews, His Chosen People, they openly acknowledged the weakness of those arguments although many of them fervently believed them. An old-timer at Kibbutz Revivim told me that the original settlers had claimed the land under an old Ottoman law, which stated that if you raised a roof (even canvas), under cover of darkness, you could claim the land come sunrise. I was told that when they arrived, the land was a wilderness and that they had made the desert blossom.

It is important to remember that when we are referring to Israel, we are talking of a tiny country of approximately 7 million people on 8K square miles (R. of I. 4.5m on 27 K square miles) This is a country bristling with nuclear weapons which would (or will) use them, and I believe would use them pre-emptively if it believed the time was right, a country that is erecting a massive "peace wall" (567 km long) (sounds familiar?), separating farmer from farm (and kith from kin). One commentator actually said "Good fences make good neighbours". Déjà vu again. Tony Blair is the most recent in a long procession of external "fixers" trying to turn a silk purse into a sow's ear.

I have come to the conclusion that the two-state solution cannot work. And why? Because it will never be assented to by critical sectors of Israeli and Palestinian opinion, but probably, and more importantly, it will not be accepted by the enemies of Israel.

A solution is required which involves much bolder thinking than that which we've heard to date. Powerful international voices need to start articulating what up to now has been unimaginable and to start proposing and backing a one-state solution.

What are the advantages of this proposal?

- The new state would be a democracy.
- It would have a secular constitution.
- It would share the whole Israeli/Palestinian land mass.
- The problem of Jerusalem would be solved.
- It would be non-nuclear.
- There would be central agreement on the vexed matter of planning and land use.
- There would be no more "peace" walls.
- No more warring factions and terrorist outrages.
- There would be no more suicide bombers (because no need for them).
- No ungovernable pockets of non-contiguous land.
- The disempowerment of extremist fundamentalist religious zealots.
- No more doom-sayers who believe that Jew and Arab must be locked in a never-to-end feud.
- No more humiliating, aggravating checkpoints.
- The settlement would, if properly backed by the relevant powers, end thousands of years of friction.

This is what I believe will be recognised as the way forward, in the hopefully not-too-distant future. When a critical mass tips the scales, this way forward will become clear.

There are other advantages too numerous to mention but the greatest advantage could be the avoidance of a war that would wipe out much of what has been achieved by humankind.

If such a concordat could be entered into with an absence of arrogance, meekly, then the people and their children will surely inherit the earth.

One solid state. Naïve, perhaps. But just imagine. □