

What Would Jesus Do About the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict?

For many decades, evangelical support for Israel seemed rock solid. Today, however, many younger Christians in Western churches are hesitant to give Israel the same unconditional support their parents did. Stories of Palestinian suffering, rather than the struggles and triumphs of Israel, have attracted the sympathy of young evangelicals.

They appear to be motivated more by the cause of social justice for the “oppressed” Palestinians than the prophecy-driven backing of the restored Jewish state. Many Christian youngsters have sided with the Palestinians as the perceived underdog. And in any case, Jesus in the Gospels seems to have very little to say about the current situation.

So for a generation known to read far less in the Old Testament than previous generations, this supposed New Testament “silence” makes a big difference in how they view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Today, they simply ask: What would Jesus do?

That is, would Jesus affirm the national calling of Israel according to the promises made to the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets? Would He affirm Israel’s right to live in the land? Or would He rather side with the Palestinians as a weak and suppressed minority?

A strong guide for answering these questions is to look at how Jesus dealt with the most prominent indigenous minority living in Israel during his time. As we shall see, there are many striking parallels between the Samaritan people in the days of Jesus and the Palestinians of today. So, who were the Samaritans, and how did Jesus treat them?

A Replaced People

The first time the Bible mentions the Samaritans is in 2 Kings 17:22-41, which gives their historical background. The passage recounts how the northern kingdom of Israel was “carried away from their own land” (v. 23) and taken into exile in 722 B.C. by Assyria, whose King Sargon II followed a common practice of conquering empires in those days. He replaced the dislodged Israelites with people from other regions of his empire. Thus, he took people “from Babylon, Cuthah, Ava, Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities” (v. 24).

These new implants, thereafter called the Samaritans, began intermingling with some of the Israelite remnant left in the land and quickly adopted some of their religious practices. Besides their own gods and traditions, they also worshipped and “feared” the God of Israel.

Then in 586-582 B.C., a second uprooting occurred when the southern kingdom of Judah also was forced into exile by the Babylonian Empire. This gave even more room for the Samaritan people to expand and solidify their presence in the land of Israel.

Resisting the Restoration

Some 70 years later, the Jewish people started to return to the land and rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. Yet the Samaritan communities were among the strongest opponents of this Jewish restoration. They resisted it religiously and politically (Ezra 4; Neh. 4:1-3). Nevertheless, Jerusalem and the temple were restored, and the Jews re-established their presence again in their promised homeland because the Lord was with them (Hag. 1:13).

Still, the Samaritans continued to oppose the Jewish return and to develop their own rival culture and national identity. Over time, they even cultivated their own form of pseudo-

Judaism. The prophets and other writings of the *Tanakh* were rejected, and only the five books of Moses were considered binding. For this reason, the Samaritans rejected the idea of a promised Messiah from the lineage of David who would restore the kingdom for Israel. Rather, they expected a messiah figure who would be “a prophet like Moses,” as the book of Deuteronomy foretold, ushering in a moral and spiritual revival but not a national restoration.

Tense Relationship

By the time Jesus came along, the Samaritans had lived in the land for more than 700 years. They developed their own narrative of the region’s history and considered themselves the true Israel and rightful heirs of the land, claiming descent from Ephraim and Manasseh. The temple in Jerusalem was considered an apostate shrine and its worship blasphemous to God. During the time of Alexander the Great, the Samaritans built an alternative temple on their holy mountain of Mt. Gerizim—the biblical “Mountain of Blessing” overlooking Shechem.

Meantime, the Jews did not recognize the Samaritans as part of their people and would not allow them to enter the temple in Jerusalem. Yet when Jesus was a child, around 6-9 A.D., Samaritans reportedly forced their way into the temple during Passover and desecrated it by throwing bones into the sanctuary. Indeed, for centuries it was a relationship characterised by tension and disdain. Jewish writings from 200 B.C. called Samaritans “the foolish people.”

Thus, during the time of Jesus, both Jews and Samaritans refused to mingle (John 4:9). Jewish pilgrims who were on their way to worship in Jerusalem were harassed (Luke 9:51-55). The Jewish historian Josephus reports that in 52 A.D., Samaritans even massacred a group of Jews making pilgrimage to Jerusalem. For Jews, the name *Samaritan* became a

curse word (John 8:48). Even the disciples of Jesus were not fond of the Samaritans and were anxious to call down fire on their heads (Luke 9:54).

Jesus Crosses the Border

Amid this hostile, complex relationship, Jesus sets a refreshingly different tone toward the Samaritan populace. The Gospels surprisingly record that Jesus healed them (Luke 17:15-16) and reached out to them individually and as a community (John 4). In fact, Jesus rarely shared such deep thoughts on worship, his own Messianic identity and the Spirit of God as He did with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The encounter eventually led to revival in the entire village, and it was there that Jesus spoke about the fields being white for harvest (John 4:35ff).

Then there is the legendary parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). Surely, it was offensive to Jewish listeners when Jesus described the Samaritan and not the Jewish priests as being the true neighbour to the man in need.

Thus, Jesus would not allow Himself to be drawn into the negative stereotypes of His time. When His disciples wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village for not allowing their master to pass, Jesus rebuked them harshly, saying, "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them" (Luke 9:55-56).

So Jesus did not consider the Samaritans as enemies, but reached out to them with compassion and love. He healed them, ministered to them, used them as examples to His Jewish brethren and even envisioned them as part of the harvest.

Jesus and the Samaritan Narrative

Still, while Jesus may have displayed an unusually kind attitude toward the Samaritans, He did not buy into their

version of history. When Jesus healed the 10 lepers, the only one who returned to thank him was a Samaritan, to which Jesus replied, "Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" (Luke 17:18).

Jesus had reached out to the man with compassion and healing yet still considered him a "foreigner." The Greek word used here is *allogenes*, and it is used in the Septuagint translation to mean the "stranger" who dwelt within the land. This person would have many rights and privileges but would still be excluded from the covenant promises and privileges of Israel. It was the same Greek word used in the inscription around the temple courts, allowing access only to Jews but not to *allogenes*—foreigners.

So Jesus reached out to the Samaritan people but also maintained a clear distinction between them and the Jews. He once instructed His disciples not to "enter a city of the Samaritans" (Matt. 10:5), but to focus rather on "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 6).

Finally, when Jesus ministered to the Samaritan woman at the well, she confronted Him with her people's own narrative, saying, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship" (John 4:20).

In other words, she wanted to know whose narrative was correct. And Jesus answered, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-23).

Jesus portends that a new era in salvation history was soon coming when the place of worship would become secondary and each believer would become a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit. But

Jesus did not conclude that Jewish tradition would become irrelevant. On the contrary, He strongly challenged the Samaritan belief system, saying, "You worship what you do not know." At the same time, He identified Himself with Jewish tradition in a manner rarely found in the Gospels, saying, "We know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews."

In a way, Jesus underscores with the Samaritan woman what He also stated to the healed leper—that they were foreigners to the covenants of God with Israel. The only way for them to become truly part of the household of God would be through the covenants and revelation given to the Jewish nation.

Note that Jesus did not say salvation is received by becoming Jewish, but rather that the woman should reconsider her theological and personal attitude toward the Jews. Decades later, the apostle Paul would make the same point: "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:1-2; see also Rom. 9:4-5).

Jesus thus affirms to the Samaritan woman the ancient Abrahamic calling of Israel, that through them "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This covenant relationship with Abraham's natural descendants remains even if they reject Jesus as their Messiah (Rom. 11:28).

The Samaritans of Our Day

There is still a small Samaritan community living in Israel today. They number less than a thousand members and are mostly located on Mt. Gerizim, near modern-day Nablus. However, their numbers are too small for them to play a significant role in current affairs. Instead, the community that more closely mirrors the dynamic between Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus is that of the Palestinians.

When the Jews were exiled by the Romans under Titus in 70 A.D. and later under Hadrian in 120 A.D., other people groups moved in. Each successive conqueror seizing control of this major crossroads of the world brought their own ethnic mix, whether they were the Romans, Byzantines, Arab-Muslim invaders, the Crusaders, the Mameluks or the Ottoman Turks. The result is an indigenous people with a broad amalgam of ethnic backgrounds. Some Palestinian Christians today may claim to be descendants of the first Messianic Jewish community in Israel, but this would be difficult to prove after all the turbulent history in the region.

Scholars have also documented that when Jews started to return and cultivate the land of Israel in the 1800s, many Arabs from neighbouring countries also came to find work created by the Zionist movement.

Most of these people today would call themselves Palestinians. The vast majority of these Palestinians are Muslims. They not only reject the teachings of the Bible but also maintain that Jews have no right or historic connection to the land. Supported by the global *ummah* (body of Muslim believers), they resist by all means the restoration of Israel on the land much like the Samaritans in the times of Nehemiah and Ezra.

On the other hand, the small Palestinian Christian community shares in many ways a common faith in Christ and the Bible that we do, yet they have developed their own unique twist to history and theology. Many of the Palestinians Christians contest the restoration of a Jewish state, both politically and theologically. In their own nationalized version of replacement theology, they not only see the Jewish people as being replaced by the church but Jesus as a Palestinian—one of the true custodians of the Holy Land. They see the promises of God to Israel to have elapsed either by being fulfilled in Jesus or by now falling to the Palestinian people.

Like in biblical times, both sides rarely mingle, and the

tense relationship has drawn even more blood than in the times of Nehemiah, Ezra and Jesus.

A Call for Today

The unique approach of Jesus to the Samaritans can help us face the challenges of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today. Jesus demonstrated a heart of compassion toward the Samaritans, who were not accepted by most of His fellow Jews. Under His ministry, the Samaritans were privileged as the only people besides the Jews who experienced the personal touch of the Messiah. After His resurrection, Jesus instructed His disciples to consider the Samaritans as the very first non-Jews to receive the gospel. Philip, Peter and John did just that and brought a powerful revival to them.

Likewise, the church today is called to show similar compassion in reaching out to the Palestinian people, and in particular the believers among them. They often feel forgotten by many evangelicals around the world who show support to Israel but ignore their Arab brothers living in the land.

But we also learn from Jesus that despite the fact that Samaritans had lived in the land of Israel for hundreds of years, Jesus still considered them “foreigners,” even though such a notion surely offended them. Jesus did not deny their right to live in the land, but He also affirmed the unique covenant promises enjoyed by Israel, including the land promise.

Paul notes that Jesus “has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers” (Rom. 15:8). He was sent by God to “remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to Abraham” (Luke 1:72-73), not to forget or forfeit that covenant.

So Christ, in His time of earthly ministry, set a remarkable example for us on how to reach out to the Palestinians—and the

Christians especially—without compromising the divine calling of His own people.

This might be a challenging balancing act for today, as the harsh realities on the ground are often more complex than they appear. For Palestinian Christians to look into the eyes of young Israeli soldiers and call them “beloved for the sake of the fathers” (Rom. 11:28) is far more difficult than for Christians from abroad to do. For many Jewish believers, it is equally difficult to accept as their brothers and sisters those Palestinian Christians who question their biblical right to the land and even voice support for Israel’s worst enemies.

In the end, the church in the nations is called to pray and care for both sides. We are called to uphold God’s promises to Israel and support a nation that after 2,000 years has returned to the land of its fathers and remains surrounded by implacable foes bent on its destruction. We are also called to recognize the needs of our Arab brothers and sisters in the land, who are often caught in between their longtime Muslim neighbors and the new Jewish reality.

That means we are called to be peacemakers without compromising truth. May the Lord help us in pursuing these worthy aims.

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