

The bible unequivocally reveals God as a God of history - a God who reveals himself in history and works out his purposes through history. It is for this reason that the extraordinary emergence of the state of Israel in 1948 demands our attention.

It certainly was an extraordinary emergence, indeed in the eyes of many Jews little short of miraculous. It was only at the end of the 19thC that the idea of actively restoring the state was fully conceived, and its implementation faced huge and intractable obstacles. Yet within a mere two to three generations a bedraggled, poverty stricken group of individual Jews in Palestine had become a state numbering millions.

The fact that the state of Israel became a reality against all odds was the result of an interweaving of powerful historical forces on a large canvas, forces which unremittingly and inexorably removed the obstacles and brought about the arrival of the new state. It is in the operation of these forces, therefore, that the divine hand can, if anywhere, best be discerned, though it can also be seen in some specific and extraordinary moments of providence. We need to look carefully to see how these obstacles were removed. Essentially they were twofold; the first was the huge inertia, even antagonism, within Jewry itself to any restoration in Palestine, and the second was the complexity of international politics which made a Jewish state seem impossible. This pamphlet addresses the first obstacle, Jewish inertia and antagonism.

Jewish Inertia

Jewish inertia in regard to possessing the promised Land has a long history. Even Moses found it very difficult to get the Israelites out of Egypt. When Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Palestine after their 70 yr exile only a minority took the opportunity, the rest preferring to remain with the luxuries and opportunities of Babylon. In the great exile from the early 2thC AD right up to the 19thC, the Rabbis, though well aware of the promises of restoration to their own land of Israel, made no effort at all to encourage any large scale move back to Israel. They took the view that any such upsurge for a return to Israel would be merely human endeavour and would fly in the face of a God-inspired Messianic return. And, of course, there was certainly no attraction in returning to what was a derelict, barren and hostile land totally lacking in opportunities.

This orthodox was implacably and bitterly opposed to the new Zionist stirrings of the later 19thC. Moreover, even the newly enlightened and liberal Jews of the 19thC political emancipation still remained very opposed to Zionism, seeing it as an obstacle to a much desired assimilation. Nor were the Jews particularly drawn to their historic home by the new spirit of nationalism that burst out in Europe in the 19thC. Orthodox or enlightened, they were not prepared to move.

This stubborn inertia would obviously require some massive force to cause it to break if any return was to happen. That force came in perhaps the only possible form it could come - virulent anti-Semitism. Jews throughout the centuries had always tended to stay wherever they were allowed to settle, and only intolerable persecution had ever moved them on. Significantly, the late 19thC and the first half of the 20thC were to see the emergence of two vast cauldrons of violent hatred toward the Jews, one in Eastern Europe and the other in Central Europe. It was these that caused the Jews to move on, and some to move on toward a Jewish state. They broke the inertia.

The Eastern Cauldron - Russia and Poland - 1881-1914

Towards the end of the 19thC there were some 4 million Jews in Russia, the large majority of whom were herded together into an area of Western Russia/Poland called the Pale. They were without citizenship or opportunities and were constantly oppressed by the Russian authorities and native populations. In typical fashion, however, they tried to survive and trusted for some liberal intervention from the Tsar.

The hope was never realised. From 1881 to 1884 violent pogroms broke out across the Pale, leaving hundreds of thousands of Jews homeless and ruined. Instead of alleviating the situation, in 1882 the Tsar instigated a severe programme of repression on the Jews (The "May Laws") by which they were not allowed to rent land, and were forcibly driven off the land into the growing cities. This meant huge loss of livelihood and great concentrations of pauperised Jews. The Tsar's programme was relentless, even when the pogroms eased, and was made worse by the forcing of 500,000 additional Jews into the Pale. In 1903 a fresh round of unusually violent pogroms started at Kishinev. More followed in 1904 to 1905, bringing killings, abuse and wholesale destruction of property. This went on until the Pale became the eastern battleground of WW1, adding to the carnage. A massive exodus of Jews was inevitable. It lasted three decades, and some 2 million Jews went to North America alone, a fact of critical importance for the support of the Jewish state later.

The Early Zionists

It was in this cauldron that the state of Israel found its beginnings, for not every emigrant set out for the West or for America. There was a very small number for whom the preferred goal was "eretz" Israel (*the land of Israel*). These became the early "Zionists".

In 1882, one year after the pogroms started, the "*Hibbat Zion*" "Love of Zion" came into being. Its eventual mentor and leader was Leon Pinsker, a doctor and a Polish Jew, who at the age of 60 was profoundly affected by the pogroms of 1881. For years an assimilationist he suddenly realised that anti-Semitism would always prevent the Jews from finding a true home in the dispersion, no matter how enlightened it might become. They needed a national home of their own. The *Hibbat Zion* movement aimed at precisely that and began to establish agricultural colonies in Palestine and to build factories there, all manned by Jews. Its philosophy was captured in Pinsker's book, "*Self-emancipation*" and it represented an unprecedented new attitude toward Palestine, a profoundly new spirit - a vision of a new Jewish home. It was unparalleled in eighteen centuries of Jewish history. The difficulties were enormous; the barrenness of the land, Turkish and Bedouin hostility and constant financial shortages. Yet by 1903 some 25,000 "*olim*" (Hebrew for "ascenders") had settled in Palestine and there were 700 independent farms. It was small and vulnerable but very definitely a bridgehead for the future.

Hibbat Zion became a crucial part of a greater initiative when in 1897 Theodore Herzl, a Jew from Vienna, called for a World Zionist Conference. Herzl, like Pinsker, had been an enlightened Jew but in 1894 experienced the same profound change of

heart as Pinsker through the vicious and blatant anti-Semitism of the French “Dreyfus affair”. For him also there could never be any safe haven for the Jews in anything but their own country. He put down his thoughts in his book “*The Jewish State*” in 1895, a powerful plea and a practical proposition for the establishment of such a state. 90% of the attendees of his 1897 conference were from Russia and Poland, but though the Eastern Jews remained Zion’s foot soldiers, his successive conferences put Zionism on the map in the West. Thus the “Zionist idea” was born out of sheer desperation with 19thC anti-Semitism. It was also a unique visionary idea, for though it was almost entirely secular and pragmatic in origin, it was the first real serious attempt to “restore” Zion for two millennia.

The decade 1904 to 1914 saw no diminution of anti-Semitic pressure on the Jews either from the Tsar or from the Russian and Polish communities. Inevitably this all led to a further surge of emigration to Palestine, and by 1914 some 85,000 “*olim*” had settled in Galilee and around the newly founded Tel Aviv. The crucial institutions of the Anglo-Palestine bank and the Zionist Organization Palestine office also appeared. The bridgehead had been substantially strengthened.

The Central European Cauldron 1919-1945

Unlike Russia and Poland the more enlightened countries of western and central Europe gradually gave their Jews full citizen status. Most Jews avidly embraced the educational and employment opportunities such status provided. By the beginning of the 20thC, they had become dominant in science, literature, industry, banking and the professions, and particularly so in Germany and Austria. However, their aim was assimilation and they bitterly opposed Zionism. They believed passionately that any vestige of their former status as a pariah nation would eventually die out. The 20thC, however, was to destroy this hope completely; an anti-Semitic cauldron of unparalleled intensity, much greater than that in Russia, was brewing that would destroy 2/3rds of European Jewry, a cauldron that ironically would be centred on Germany and Austria.

The fact was that, despite political emancipation, anti-Semitism as a social force never ceased to simmer just below the surface of European society. In the late 19thC it surfaced in France in the Dreyfus affair and at the same time it surfaced in Germany with the pseudo-scientific myth of Aryan racial superiority and Jewish inferiority, a view championed, amongst others, by the composer Richard Wagner. The Kaiser called the Jews “The fungus on the German oak”. Reactionary forces were re-appearing everywhere on the Continent as the 19thC came to a close, and it would only take some drastic event to bring them to the boil.

The First World War was precisely such an event, not so much the war itself but the political and economic chaos to which it gave rise. That chaos enabled anti-Semitic forces to gain a very strong grip in central Europe and especially Germany. In the political chaos of 1919 Russian and eastern Jews were found leading attempted Bolshevik-style take-overs in Germany, Poland, Rumania and Hungary. They were thwarted but thereafter the Jews were stigmatised as the extreme left, the Bolshevik menace. This would prove fatal for Jewry when right wing Fascism was later gaining power. In the economic chaos the assimilated middle class Jews with their huge financial and industrial power were an easy target to blame for the economic ills overwhelming Germany.

Jewry may none the less have survived had it not been for the Great Depression of the late 1920s and early 30s. It was this chaos that opened the way for Hitler, the Nazi leader, to massive gains of seats in the Reichstag (the German Parliament) and thence to become Chancellor. He unashamedly used the force of his para-military supporters and the burning down of the Reichstag building in 1933 to seize rule by administrative decree. From that point it was a straight path for him to total and brutal fascist power.

Hitler was able to get to this point because he brought together so many strands that deeply appealed to German people at large. He was completely taken over by the popular myth of the Nordic German racial supremacy; he was a reactionary who expressed the military values of the old “Empire” and so connected with the aristocratic military who was still very active in German politics; he pleased the Pan-German party looking for a greater “Reich”; he formed an alliance with Thyssen and other very powerful industrialists who saw him as the only alternative to economic chaos. But above all these things he embodied the growing widespread mood of virulent anti-Semitism. There is a consensus that Hitler’s life was decisively shaped by racist ideology. In 1919 he wrote that the Jews were the reason for the wartime defeat and deserved to be eliminated from all levels of economic and cultural life. He emphasised anti-Jewish items in the Nazi programme in 1920, and *Mein Kampf* was virulently anti-Semitic. Once in power he rode a strong, European-wide wave of anti-Semitism and fascism, first expelling the Jews, and then as he conquered Europe, destroying six million in a “final solution” of Holocaust.

There were three main results of this appalling and totally unparalleled cauldron pertinent to the emergence of the State of Israel in 1948. The first was that in the period 1933 to 1939 some 90,000 German Jews went to Palestine. The second was that the appalling event of the Holocaust profoundly strengthened a growing radical determination among Zionists that the Palestinian home must be secured at any cost, even though it meant war with the British mandate in Palestine and the Arabs. For the Jews there could be no going back after the Holocaust. It was the defining moment; the inertia of centuries gave way to a readiness to fight to the death for a homeland. It was this spirit that motivated Ben Gurion to grasp the half chance that the U.N. Partition Plan offered in 1948 and declare unilaterally the state of Israel. The third result was that the Holocaust provided a moral impetus in the Western world to do something for the Jewish tragedy. This was particularly important in shaping post war American attitudes and helping to bring American recognition of Israel. As so many have observed there was a direct connection between the Holocaust and the founding of the Israeli State. It was a resurrection moment.

Conclusion

Clearly the Jews were not in control of the events in East and West Europe that led to their new state; rather such events were driven by huge waves of violent anti-Semitic hatred which propelled the Jews over all obstacles into a return to Palestine. Even the “Zionist idea” itself was fundamentally the result of that hatred. All the agony of the exile has always been under God’s control - he sent the Jews into exile, and he chastised them there. He cannot have been uninvolved in the horrific chastisements of the 19thC and 20thC by which they were led to the shores of their promised land. In the previous history of exile in Europe God had always providentially opened up new refuges for the Jews at a time of persecution. In the 20thC he seems to have uniquely opened up Palestine.

The story is very sobering and raises many questions, but it is hard not to conclude that God was at work among the Jews in their return, and that events, horrific though they were, were working toward an outcome that, was astounding.