

The Main Reason for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Edwin de Kock

Until a few years ago, I used to believe—and even preached on more than one occasion—that the modern conflict between Jews and Palestinians resulted from Abraham's ancient mistake in taking Hagar as a secondary wife, who bore him Ishmael, father of the Arabs. But further consideration of the problem has caused me to abandon this view. It is both biblically doubtful and historically untenable.

When they adopted Islam, Arabs had no special dislike of the Jews. These were simply their Semitic cousins, from whom Mohammed obtained his monotheism. Besides, it is an oversimplification to think of all Arabs as the children of Ishmael. Many are descended from the six sons of Keturah, Abraham's second wife (Gen. 25:1-4). Esau, his grandson, fathered a nation known as the Edomites, who eventually also became Arabs. The same is true of the Ammonites and Moabites, whose ancestor was Abraham's nephew, Lot. And several Muslim nations in the Middle East and North Africa are not Arabs at all; they only speak Arabic. For instance, Syrians, Iraqis, Egyptians, and Moroccans have Aramaic, Greek, Mesopotamian, and African ancestors, who converted from Christianity.

The early Arab Moslems were disappointed when the Jews and their Christian neighbors refused to embrace Islam, yet Mohammed instructed his followers not to ill-treat them. He designated both groups as People of the Book. They were not to be regarded as outright infidels. For centuries, subject Jewish and Christian populations in the Islamic empire suffered only limited disabilities, mostly extra taxation, though they were also not allowed to proselytize. While Arabs dominated the Muslim world, both Jews and Christians could usually practice their religion in peace.

In the early period, the Muslims' chief enemies were the Byzantine or Eastern Roman Empire and the Catholic countries to the West, with their very similar religion. Before Mohammed's time, the Near East and North Africa had a predominantly Christian populace, amongst others Copts in Egypt, Jacobites in Syria, Nestorians in Mesopotamia, and Armenians in or near northeastern Anatolia. Many of these, persecuted by the Eastern Orthodox Church with its headquarters in Constantinople, actually hailed the conquering Muslims as liberators, and sometimes fought by their side. Most enlightening in this regard are the following facts presented by the eminent Catholic historian Paul Johnson:

The first big Islamic victory, at the River Yarmuk in 636, was achieved because 12,000 Christian Arabs went over to the enemy. The Christian Monophysites—Copts, Jacobites and so forth—nearly always preferred Muslims to Catholics. Five centuries after the Islamic conquest, the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, Michael the Syrian, faithfully produced the tradition of his people when he wrote: "The God of Vengeance, who alone is the Almighty . . . raised from the south the children of Ishmael to deliver us by them from the hands of the Romans." And at the time a Nestorian chronicler wrote: "The hearts of the Christians rejoiced at the domination of the Arabs—may God strengthen it and prosper it." The Monophysite Muslims and the Monophysite Christians never fused theologically. But, unlike the Jews, they did not remain racially and culturally distinct. The religious pattern froze: the Arab Muslims tolerated all Children of the Book, but would not allow their rivals to expand. Christians were in the majority only in Alexandria

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and certain Syrian cities. Generally, they preferred Arab-Muslim to Greek-Christian rule, though there were periods of difficulty and persecution. There was never, at any stage, a mass-demand from the Christians under Muslim rule to be “liberated.”¹

That was the case not only in the Levant but also in Spain. The Arab and Berber Muslims, also known as the Moors, overwhelmed that country in 711 and dominated larger or smaller parts of it for seven hundred and eighty years. Did they cruelly massacre the Jews and all the Catholics? Not at all. “Though the Arabs took one-fifth of the land for themselves, the Christian communities were left with their religious and legal independence intact and were protected by Koranic law.” And, amazingly, “The Jews, subjected to fierce persecution since the reign of Sisebut (612-621), welcomed the tolerant invaders as liberators.”²

When Granada fell to their Catholic majesties Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 and the Islamic presence vanished after all those centuries, most of the inhabitants still belonged to the Roman Church. This provides a physical proof of Islamic tolerance, in contrast with what followed, when the Inquisition took all Spain in hand. It forcibly converted or exterminated every Christian “heretic” it could find, and the Jews had to hurry out of the country.

Before the cruel Mongols and the less tolerant Ottoman Turks appeared on the scene, the People of the Book were much better off in the Near East, and also Spain, than in Christian Europe. At that time, many Spanish Jews spoke Arabic at home, though others preferred Ladino, while maintaining Hebrew as a synagogue and a literary language. Some of them pleased their rulers so much that they rose to great prominence. For instance, Samuel ha-Nagid (993-1056)—which means “the Prince”—became the Vizier to the Moorish king of Granada. He was “at one and the same time, poet, rabbi, statesman and general, and distinguished in each of these fields.”³ Jews were also able to travel freely throughout Islamic lands and, to a lesser extent, through Catholic and Orthodox territories, trading as far away as China. The relationship between the children of Isaac and those of Ishmael was often cordial.

Christians who have not studied this topic in some depth should tread carefully in evaluating the situation of modern Israel vis-à-vis Islam. And yet the question remains: Why do present-day Palestinians cherish such an intense dislike for the Jews? The answer is fairly straightforward: they regard the Israelis as intruders, who have taken away what they consider to be their land. This is not how the Zionists view the matter, and at first they bought up the property on which they settled. Nevertheless, that process, initiated during the nineteenth century, culminated in the creation of a Jewish state in 1948.

Colonists are almost always resented and resisted by the people who already occupy the lands where they settle. If the newcomers remain a minority, they are usually assimilated, sometimes—though not always—losing their language, culture, and religion. This happened in countries like France where the Franks quite soon amalgamated with the original Latin-speaking, Catholic population, and China, which has repeatedly absorbed its invaders, making Chinese of them. Colonists that cannot blend with the original people tend eventually to be killed off or have to leave, as in many African and Asian countries since the Second World War. As a rule, the total triumph of colonization occurs by largely eliminating the natives.

This happened *inter alia* in the North American colonies. Here the indigenous people perished by contracting European diseases like smallpox, with which their immune systems could not cope, and because they fought on the wrong side of white people’s wars. They first supported the French against the British and then the British against the American revolutionaries. Deliberate genocide also played a significant role. Survivors were herded into

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reservations. They could, however, also “detrribalize themselves and fit into the American system. If they chose to do so, they could be provided with land (640 acres a family was a figure bandied about) and US citizenship. This was, in fact, the option countless Indians chose. Many settled, took European-type names, and, as it were, vanished into the growing mass of ordinary Americans.”⁴

But Jews who settled in Palestine were unable to ensure their survival by exterminating the Arabs or blending with them. These proliferated and are still dedicated to the destruction of the Israeli state. This, however, has little or nothing to do with the ancient story of Abraham and Hagar. If Ishmael had never been born, the Jews’ repossession of their former country would still have enraged whatever other people had in the meantime come to occupy that land. After so many centuries of living there, they would also have regarded it as their own and desperately fought against the Zionists. It is a tragedy to be Jews in what used to be their ancestral home, from which their neighbors have been trying so hard to evict them.

Bibliography

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