

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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The Western Wall, 1870

The Spiritual Battle Over the Temple Mount

by Galen Peterson



Al Aqsa Mosque 2015

Israel has been repeatedly in the news with reports of young Muslim men without any apparent connection to terror groups stabbing Jews or ramming their cars into crowds, and then being shot to death by police or soldiers. It is a very tragic situation.

It has arisen from a dispute over the place known to Jews as the Temple Mount where the first and second temples stood, and to Muslims as *Haram Al Sharif*—the Noble Sanctuary where the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosques stand today. In addition, it involves the *Kotel*—the Western Wall, or as some have called it, the Wailing Wall (a retaining wall supporting the Temple Mount above).

This dispute has its origin in the days of the Ottoman Empire. In 1560 Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent issued a decree granting Jews the right to pray at the Western Wall. In 1757 Sultan Osman III issued another decree regarding Muslim, Christian and Jewish sites that established the right of existing religious authorities to control them in perpetuity. In other words, there could be no

change in management over all Holy Places throughout the region, including Jerusalem. It was called the *status quo*, meaning “the way things are now.”

When the Ottoman empire fell because they aligned themselves with the losing side of World War I and the British gained control of the region, leaders of the Muslim and Jewish communities reaffirmed the status quo in 1919 in the Faisal–Weizmann Agreement:

No regulation or law shall be made prohibiting or interfering in any way with the free exercise of religion; and further, the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever be allowed.

So we can look back for 258 years and see that the various religious groups in the Holy Land by mutual consent repeatedly preserved the authority, responsibility and privileges associated with their own holy sites.

For Christians that applied to places like the Holy Sepulchre,

which is said to be where the crucifixion and burial of Yeshua (Jesus) occurred. Since various Christian sects all had a presence there, under the status quo, they were given shared control over the building in perpetuity. It applied to the division of the hours of the day for religious activities, as well as the physical structure itself. This included the famous immovable ladder that has leaned against the wall above the entrance to the church since at least 1839. The ladder is still in the exact same position 176 years later because of the status quo.

For Muslims the status quo means control over the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosques, with Al Aqsa extending to the edge of the southern wall of the Old City.

For Jews, it means the ability to pray at the Western Wall—the only remaining vestige associated with their historical place of worship. The earliest photographs of the wall in the late 1800s show Jews praying freely there long before Israel became a nation. The ability to pray there continued throughout the British Mandate.

Then in 1946 the British granted independence to the nation of Transjordan (later renamed Jordan) on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Two years later, in 1948, the British granted independence to Israel on a portion of the western side of the Jordan River. That led to the Arab-Israeli War, during which Transjordan invaded the West Bank illegally and gained control of the old city of Jerusalem. That is one aspect of history that many people don't seem to know. The Jordanians were obligated to exercise the status quo regarding the holy sites, which meant Jews should still have been able to pray at the Western Wall.

But that never happened. For 19 years no Jews were permitted at their holy site. In fact Jews were purged from the entire of the Old City of Jerusalem. It became a Jewish quarter without Jews. The commander of the Jordanian army declared: "For the first time in 1,000 years not a single Jew remains in the Jewish Quarter. Not a single building remains intact. This makes the Jews' return here impossible."

Christian tourists traveling to the old city of Jerusalem during that time had to bring a birth certificate proving that they were not Jewish. Clearly the status quo respecting religious rights at that time did not apply to Jews.

That changed in 1967 when Israel gained control of East Jerusalem during the Six-Day War. Ten days after capturing the Old City, Israel's Defense Minister Moshe Dayan met with Muslim leaders and reformulated the status quo. Muslims would continue to exercise control over the *Haram*/Temple Mount, while Israel would maintain security of the area. They reaffirmed the right of Jews to pray at the Western Wall. In addition, Jews were granted the right to visit the Temple Mount as long as they did not pray or antagonize the Muslims

there. This became the basis of the status quo that has officially continued forward until today.

At the same time, rabbinical leaders issued a ruling that Jews are not allowed to pray on the Temple Mount. Their reasoning was based on the issue of ritual purity. Since all Jews are considered to be defiled because they have either been in contact with a dead person or in a room with a dead body, and the only way to become ritually pure according to Numbers 19 is being sprinkled by water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer, which is currently not possible, they ruled that Jews could not go on the Temple Mount.



The immovable ladder due to the status quo at the Holy Sepulchre

While the vast majority of Jews have abided by that religious prohibition, a small number of groups have opposed it, most notably the Temple Mount Faithful. This group typically applies for a permit right before major holidays to ascend to the Temple Mount to pray. The permit is invariably denied by the government, then they march up the ramp anyway and are turned back by Israeli police. Other groups have pursued judicial methods, but each time their appeals have reached Israel's High Court of Justice, their petitions have been denied and the status quo reaffirmed.

Periodically over the years, Muslims have responded to perceived threats to their control

over the site by protesting in violent ways, typically by throwing stones or dropping them on the worshippers at the Western Wall below. The most extreme manifestation of that opposition came in 2000 when the Second *Intifada* (uprising) began, which was marked by a wave of Palestinian suicide bombers lasting five years in which over 1,000 Israelis were killed in attacks on buses, restaurants, and other buildings. Nevertheless, the status quo held once more.

There are similarities between the most recent wave of violence and what took place fifteen years ago. On September 12 of this year, Israeli police entered the Al Aqsa Mosque and removed stockpiles of rocks and pipe bombs that were to be used in a planned riot disrupting Jewish worshippers the next day on *Rosh Hashanah*. As usual, opponents of Israel lashed out and called it a breach of the status quo, even though the longstanding agreement called for Israel to provide security for the area, which meant it was actually a responsibility of the status quo. Regardless, the path toward violence began.

On September 30, during his speech at the U.N. General Assembly, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas accused Israel of violating the status quo by supporting extremist Jewish groups who seek to make incursions on Al Aqsa while not actually providing evidence in that regard. The next day, *Zayzafuna*, a Palestinian magazine called out to young people: "Who will liberate our holy sites in Palestine?" At the same time Hamas was showing a cartoon on television, which depicts Israelis digging beneath the Al Aqsa mosque. It employs imagery similar to that used by the Nazis, distorting their appearance as sinister, almost inhuman, characters with an evil

plot bent on destruction.

Looking back at recent trends, whenever a wave of violence begins, whether it is bus bombings, launching thousands of missiles into civilian areas, or stabbings, Israel responds with security measures, then the perpetrators protest what they call excessive force, and apologists excuse the violence, saying it is understandable in light of the so-called occupation. And then the perpetrators, who have become victims in the eyes of opponents of Israel, take their grievances to international bodies to gain further support and to justify the continuance of the violence.

This time was no different. On October 19 a resolution was submitted to The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) calling on that body, which is responsible for protecting historical and cultural sites around the world, to recognize the Western Wall as part of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Negotiations led to that particular line of the resolution being removed. But it accused Israel of unsubstantiated changes of the status quo, while at the same time advocating for a truly drastic change of the status quo by giving administration of the place revered by Jews to Muslim authorities.

Knowing this history is important for understanding the big picture that the mass media fails to provide. But it is also consistent with the Bible when it declares that we are engaged in a spiritual battle, not just one that can be perceived with our eyes and ears. In fact this current situation can serve as a reminder that virtually everything we do in life has a spiritual component and that we have been given specific guidelines and resources for dealing with them.

There are many places in Scripture when the events cannot be understood using natural explanations. One such passage is found in the tenth chapter of the book of Daniel. He was given a

vision of “great conflict.” Then he was approached by an angelic visitor who told Daniel what is taking place in the spiritual realm. The angel declared:

“But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia.” (Dan 10:13).

Angelic beings include those who are loyal to the Lord and those who rebelled against Him (Rev 12:7-9). Those fallen angels are characterized as demons. As this passage in Daniel indicates, there is a struggle between these loyal and fallen angels.

This reference to a prince or ruler of Persia who was operating in the spiritual realm shows that there are powerful demons who operate in certain places on earth. This fallen angel demon in Persia fought against the loyal angel successfully until Michael, a more powerful archangel, stepped in and enabled the messenger to get through.

So the first lesson we can draw from this passage is that there are great spiritual battles being waged in this universe, but we may not be aware of them taking place. And if it wasn't for special visions that are rarely given, or God's revelation in His written Word, we would never have that understanding. And that is truly the case for the vast majority of people alive today. They are either influenced by the presence of demonic beings in their midst, or they carry on in ignorant bliss and act as if the supernatural doesn't matter. But if you have faith in the God of the Bible, then you are privileged in being able to know that such things are occurring.

The angel informed Daniel that his message involved Daniel's people—the Jews. And in chapters 11-12, he foretells in great detail about the rise and fall of empires eventually leading into the last days,

culminating with a reign that uses the sword to kill (11:33), and speaks against the true God (11:36), while honoring a foreign god who helps them (11:39). That indicates that a spiritual being perceived to be a god is actually able to help people in their schemes. And contextually we can see how that the perceived god is in reality a demon.

This thread of fighting against the Jewish people weaves throughout Scripture. And it explains the unrelenting persecution of the Jewish people that no natural explanation could ever approach.

- There is no reason for the attempted annihilation of an entire race of people like we witnessed in the Holocaust, unless there is a powerful being in the spiritual realm who wants to rule over the entire universe and thinks he can do that by defeating the Lord by breaking His promise in that “the offspring of Israel” shall remain “a nation before Me forever” (Jer 31:36).
- Unless there is an Adversary who delights in killing, and was “a murderer from the beginning” as Yeshua declared (Jn 8:44), there is no real explanation for the way that human beings kill one another simply because of hatred.
- And unless there is a real devil and real demons who serve him, and the Scriptures proclaim that the accuser of the brethren will be defeated “because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony” (Rev 12:11), there is no adequate secular explanation for the martyrdom of believers that we have witnessed historically and even today.

Try as you like using psychological and social reasoning, your conclusion will only scratch the surface. Only when you see and explain it from a spiritual perspective will it make sense. This was the message that Paul

communicated to the Ephesians. Like Daniel, he acknowledged the reality of the spiritual realm, saying:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12).

These rulers operating in the spiritual realm have the character of darkness and wickedness. And Paul pinpoints that fact as our real struggle in life.

But he doesn't just warn us of the problem, he informs us about the tools and resources we have for dealing with the problem. He calls it "the full armor of God" (vv. 11,13). Using the metaphor of Roman military armor and weapons of that day, he cites our tools and resources as being truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the Holy Spirit in accord with the Word of God, and prayer and petition (vv. 14-18).

There is nothing in that list involving mystical powers or something the average believer cannot relate to. That is what makes this so relevant for our lives. God is asking us to do the same things He has been saying all along throughout biblical history. They are the virtues taught by Moses, by the prophets, and by Yeshua and the writers of the New Testament. In essence God is asking us to remain faithful in reflecting His attributes and then

trusting in Him and His angels to do the real fighting on our behalf. And it applies to every situation of life, including the Holy Land. So using the template given by Paul:

- It means we are called to be people of truth, speaking out against the falsehoods that are being promoted.
- It means practicing righteousness, which means standing with victims of terror on the one hand, and showing empathy for those who deal with hardship on the other hand.
- It means proclaiming the gospel of peace that only Yeshua brings. So it is our duty as believers to support efforts that are engaged in promoting true peace that is biblically, not politically based.
- It means being people of faith who trust in the Lord to exercise His will in His timing, not our own.
- It means being witnesses of the life-changing power of Yeshua, so that both Jews and Arabs in the region will believe in Him and receive the gift of salvation. It also means supporting existing evangelistic ministries bringing the Good News to both people groups.
- It means rightly dividing the Word of God so that our doctrines and practices will always be in line with the will of God and can be used by the Spirit

for His glory.

- And it means being people of prayer who continually pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Ps 122:6).

That's what it means to put on the full armor of God for the spiritual battle in the Holy Land. And we can do the same in every situation of our lives. We can go right down this list and evaluate how well we are doing in each of these areas whenever we find ourselves in a conflict, whether it is our homes, our neighborhoods, our jobs and our places of worship. We have a godly *status quo* to uphold—it is "the way things are" for believers.

There are indeed spiritual battles taking place all around us. May we all be alert to their presence and then join the battle in the godly way that has been given to us.



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