

God's Providence in the Middle East

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President Obama visits the residence of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, March 20, 2013.

What is the work of God as the molder and shaper of the events of history in 2013, and in the Middle East in particular?

The Judeo-Christian Bible speaks to a God active in history. The Hebrew prophets were tasked with discerning God's hand in the events of their day and thereby to give guidance to kings. Christians in the American colonies recognized the hand of God's providence in the founding of this nation. President Lincoln recognized the hand of God's providence when, in his Second Inaugural Address, he described the Civil War as God's judgment for the sin of slavery, paid for in blood. America's sense of exceptionalism stems from numerous events in its history understood by faith to be divinely guided, from the American Revolution even to the rise of American power in the 20th century to lead the fight against fascism and communism.

The modern State of Israel is another nation where many Christians and Jews have seen the hand of Divine Providence. The remarkable story of its founding in 1948 and its survival through the trials of the Six Day War and Yom Kippur War against larger Arab forces have been widely celebrated as indications that Israel exists by the hand of God.

While many secular Israelis credit their success to superior organization and military prowess, believers know better. I have visited Israel and Palestine over a dozen times, and am convinced it is a special place, where God has planted His flag. Nothing there happens easily because of the weight of providential history that lives in its very stones.

In the Unification Church, we understand that God's providence is not unilateral or irresistible; rather, it advances as a result of cooperation between the divine and the human realms. Thus, we critique the apocalyptic scenarios of fundamentalists who await the Last Judgment, which they conceive to be an event of cosmic proportions when nothing that human beings do will avail. On the contrary, we believe that our task is to be co-creators with God to bring His Will to pass. It has to do with God wishing to bequeath to humankind the dignity and rights of ownership in His Kingdom.

In Rev. Moon's life, he dedicated himself to what he saw was a major goal of God's providence: ending the scourge of communism. He organized a movement, CAUSA, to critique and offer a counterproposal to Marxist-Leninist ideology for front-line states. He founded *The Washington Times* to promote that fight on the stage of American politics. Having been given prophetic knowledge that the Soviet Union would meet its demise, in 1985, when its power seemed at its height, he organized a conference of Sovietologists

and insisted on the audacious title, “The Fall of the Soviet Empire: Prospects for Transition to a Post-Soviet World,” much to the chagrin of many of the academics in attendance. Yet his prediction proved correct: by 1989 the Berlin Wall had fallen, and those academics could take pride they had participated in a conference that anticipated what few of their colleagues saw.

Where is God’s providence today in 2013? The Sovereign of all humankind is at work in every corner of the globe, but there is often a focal point. It is like the fulcrum of a lever, strategically placed to move the whole world. During the Cold War, that focal point was Korea. Today, I believe it is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Achieving a two-state solution will do more to bring peace to the Middle East than five Iraq wars. It will do more to end the Iranian nuclear threat than fifty air strikes against its nuclear facilities. It will do more to end the threat of terrorism than 5,000 drone strikes.

The three Abrahamic faiths all have a deeply rooted and emotional stake in its outcome. As long as this conflict festers, it provides fuel to incite Muslim hatred of the West. Yet the “clash of civilizations” would rapidly go away if the Israelis and Palestinians were living peaceably in two neighboring states. With natural links of trade, tourism and shared security, Israel and Palestine potentially could become a model of reconciliation, giving hope to peace-loving people in other Muslim-Christian conflict zones.

Rev. Moon began investing in the Middle East in March 2003, when he called on the Christian clergy to take down their crosses and go to Jerusalem. Among other things, it was to be an act of Christian contrition, recognizing the pain that the theology of the cross with its latent anti-Semitism had caused to the Jewish people through history. We arrived in the midst of the Second Intifada, when suicide bombers were striking every week and Jerusalem was empty of tourists. Yet in addition to the Jewish-Christian amity that our visit generated, we could see something else: the suffering of the Palestinians. When this was reported to Rev. Moon, he said, simply, “*Gaza kaja*,” Korean for “Let’s go to Gaza!”

The Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) was born. Thousands of clergy, Ambassadors for Peace, and others participated in peace marches, prayers, and door-to-door visits. It attained certain goals: notably it forged a personal bond between Rev. Moon and Yasser Arafat. Rev. Michael Jenkins, then President of the Unification Church of America, was the only Christian minister to attend Arafat’s funeral in November 2004.

By 2005, the initiative largely had petered out. God’s providence pays attention to timing, and in 2006 the time for peace was not yet ripe. Yet my own ministry in this area was only just getting started.

In April 2011, a small group of us, including Rev. Moon’s eldest daughter, Ye Jin Moon, met in Hawaii and drew a map where we understood God would wish to place a definitive border. After a trip to Jerusalem to refine the border in the contested areas around that city, we published it on a website as the “Citizens Proposal for a Border between Israel and Palestine.”

I began posting blogs advocating measures to move towards this solution on WorldPolicy.org, site of the half-century-old World Policy Institute. As I understood my role, the point of our Hawaii meeting and the map was to lay down a marker on earth of what God wishes to accomplish through His providence. This is how the prophets of old worked: they spoke the word as a foundation for God to bring that word to pass.

Today, many commentators pronounce the two-state solution on its last legs, but I am convinced it will definitely come to pass within the next five years and maybe much sooner, because God wills it so. However, the speed with which God can conclude His Providence always depends on the extent of human cooperation.

When necessary, God can nudge things along. I see the Arab Spring in this light: although based on Arab citizens’ desire for democratic change, it also had a providential purpose to change the environment around the Israeli-Palestinian issue by destabilizing the status quo. I also see Europe’s growing impatience with Israel over the settlement issue, the surprisingly lopsided vote last November in the UN General Assembly granting Palestine observer state status, and the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) Movement, all as arising out of God’s desire to prod Israel, which has grown too comfortable with being an occupying power, into giving the Palestinians their state.

God’s providence is slowed by non-cooperation. On that score, God has been handicapped by a weak American administration that, until recently, was more worried about the politics of the Jewish vote than about pursuing goals of peace in the world. Only now, with the visit of President Obama to Israel in March and Secretary of State Kerry’s efforts at shuttle diplomacy, is the United States taking up its providential responsibilities. We hope the Secretary Kerry will stand strong, for by doing so, he can be a lever that God can use to advance the Will.

If a person in a central position stubbornly stands in the way of what God is doing, God can cause his downfall. This seems to be happening to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Despite

admonishments from the U.S., Europe and the UN, he has stonewalled peace talks and pandered to the settler movement. If Netanyahu were simply balancing competing domestic forces while defending Israel's national interests, such behavior would be permissible, but the Israel-Palestinian problem is a worldwide problem, and God regards it to be His problem.

So what happened? Just a year ago he was on top of the world; "King Bibi" *TIME* magazine called him. But through a series of missteps his power has been steadily diminishing. Today, a swarm of politicians are nibbling at his heels, and Israel's new coalition government has been called "the stuff of Benjamin Netanyahu's nightmares." "King Bibi" may be on his way to becoming a modern-day King Saul, an object-lesson on the fate of those who oppose God.

I am convinced that God intends to establish a Palestinian state, and that this is a high priority matter. Therefore, rather than giving in to cynicism about the futility of the task ahead of them, Obama and Kerry should understand that because the time is propitious for God to advance the Providence, God is supporting their work in a major way. They are positioned to be successful, not because America is so influential, but because God is furthering their endeavors.

If only the President and Secretary of State knew that they are at the cusp of God's Providence! If only they understood their position to co-create with God a new future for humankind! I wish they will gain that sort of conviction, of the sort that kept many of us Unificationists going through the darkest days. But even if they don't, God does, and therefore they may be surprised at the degree of success that comes their way.