

Unholy Land

Editorial

The Second Coming of King Herod

The first King Herod was born in 73 BC and followed a military career, starting out as a general. We apparently owe it to Mark Antony that he, a non-Jew, was singled out by the Romans as the national leader of the Jews. It was the Roman Senate which made him King, and provided him with the military assistance to enable him to grasp the throne. His dependence on Rome was thereafter unquestioned, although Rome allowed him considerable leeway in the determination of domestic matters. But this flexibility was insufficient to assuage the suspicions of so many of the Jews that his rule was marked by outbursts of strong discontent, culminating in a period of naked repression and sheer terror.

Herod's assumption of power over the Jews was bathed in blood, and he ruled through the liberal use of foreign armaments. True, he undertook substantial building works, notably new walls for Jerusalem, and the fortress of Antonia, named after his Roman patron. Such flattery was not the only device by which he pleased his masters, and he also showered rich presents on Mark Antony himself, and his doxy, Queen Cleopatra.

After the fall of Mark Antony, Herod did not equivocate, and declared undying loyalty to his successor, Octavian. Once Antony and Cleopatra were dead, Octavian became the unchallenged leader of the Romans, and took the name Augustus when he became the first Emperor. The first Emperor was pleased with his pliant disciple, and promptly bestowed Jericho and Gaza on him, widening his domain.

Herod's building works continued, and diversified into audacious schemes to create the Port of Caesarea, which honoured the Emperor in the same measure that it antagonised his own subjects. Taxes were fixed at sky-high levels, and their collection necessitated the widespread employment of mercenaries and secret policemen. In spite of their best efforts, none of this was able to naturalise Herod as a Jewish King, even though he styled himself 'the Great'. He was, and would remain, a real Roman placeman. This status was confirmed when he affixed a golden eagle to the top of the temple's gates.

In spite of the King's ten eventful and discordant marriages, his fame among present generations is attributable to the Gospel of St. Matthew, which tells us that the King sent for the wise men who famously came from the East to Jerusalem and asked them where the Christ should be

born. They told him that He would arrive in Bethlehem of Judaea, whereupon Herod sent them to search diligently for the young child ‘that I may come and worship him also’. But the wise men were too wise to fall for that one, although according to Matthew they had the advantage of being ‘warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod’. Be that as it may, ‘they departed into their own country another way’. At this point, an angel told Joseph to take the young child and his mother ‘and flee into Egypt ... for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him’.

With his victims holed up safely in Egypt, Herod ‘was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men’.

Herod’s mercenaries would have found it a painfully difficult labour to slaughter all the infants of Bethlehem and its environs. Today’s Herod has not been dependent on old-fashioned butchery with its exhausting exertions involving swords and knives, but can instead call up massive assistance from the modern Rome, which supplies unlimited numbers of bombs containing phosphorus and depleted uranium, and augments them with DIME munitions and F-16s.

It was with such amenities that the modern Israelis were able to massacre 1,380 people in Gaza, of whom 431 were children. We must admit that these will prove to be provisional figures, although they have

‘We are now spectators of the latest – and perhaps penultimate – chapter of the 60 year old conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people. About the complexities of this tragic conflict billions of words have been pronounced, defending one side or the other.

Today, in face of the Israeli attacks on Gaza, the essential calculation, which was always covertly there, behind this conflict, has been blatantly revealed. The death of one Israeli victim justifies the killing of a hundred Palestinians. One Israeli life is worth a hundred Palestinian lives.

This is what the Israeli State and the world media more or less – with marginal questioning – mindlessly repeat. And this claim, which has accompanied and justified the longest Occupation of foreign territories in Twentieth Century European history, is viscerally racist. That the Jewish people should accept this, that the world should concur, that the Palestinians should submit to it – is one of history’s ironic jokes. There’s no laughter anywhere. We can, however, refute it, more and more vocally. Let’s do so.’

John Berger, 27 December 2008

been provided by the Palestinian Ministry of Health. They relate, of course, to the body counts in the hospitals, which were unable to provide any estimates of the numbers entombed by collapsing buildings, buried in the ruins of their own houses or entrapped in the public compounds where they had been advised to seek shelter. An estimated four thousand one hundred housing units were completely destroyed in this conflict, and a further seventeen thousand were partially damaged. Ninety-two mosques, and twenty-nine schools or other educational establishments were also hit, and either destroyed or damaged. Sixteen ministerial buildings were lost, with five local authority offices. Nobody knows how many bodies will be recovered from all these ruins when this fearful labour becomes possible.

Perhaps a better estimate of the lethal impact of Israel's war can be arrived at by examining its casualties. Five thousand three hundred and eighty people were known to the Palestinian Ministry of Health as having been injured. Eight hundred of these were women and one thousand eight hundred and seventy two were children. All this damage was inflicted during the first phase of the recent war. That future phases may well follow seems highly likely. But the world has not yet fully digested the horrors unleashed upon it in early January 2009:

‘On the afternoon of 7th January, four Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS) ambulances and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) managed to obtain access for the first time to several houses in the Zaytun neighbourhood of Gaza City that had been affected by Israeli shelling.

The ICRC had requested safe passage for ambulances to access this neighbourhood since 3rd January but it only received permission to do so from the Israel Defense Forces during the afternoon of 7th January.

The ICRC/PRCS team found four small children next to their dead mothers in one of the houses. They were too weak to stand up on their own. One man was also found alive, too weak to stand up. In all there were at least 12 corpses lying on mattresses.

In another house, the ICRC/PRCS rescue team found 15 other survivors of this attack including several wounded. In yet another house, they found an additional three corpses. Israeli soldiers posted at a military position some 80 metres away from this house ordered the rescue team to leave the area which they refused to do. There were several other positions of the Israel Defense Forces nearby as well as two tanks.

“This is a shocking incident,” said Pierre Wettach, the ICRC’s head of delegation for Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. “The Israeli military must have been aware of the situation but did not assist the wounded. Neither did they make it possible for us or the Palestine Red Crescent to assist the wounded.”

Large earth walls erected by the Israeli army had made it impossible to bring ambulances into the neighbourhood. Therefore, the children and the wounded had to be taken to the ambulances on a donkey cart. In total, the ICRC/PRCS rescue team evacuated 18 wounded and 12 others who were extremely exhausted. Two corpses were also evacuated. The ICRC/PRCS will recover the remaining corpses on Thursday.

The ICRC was informed that there are more wounded sheltering in other destroyed houses in this neighbourhood. It demands that the Israeli military grant it and PRCS ambulances safe passage and access immediately to search for any other wounded. Until now, the ICRC has still not received confirmation from the Israeli authorities that this will be allowed.

The ICRC believes that in this instance the Israeli military failed to meet its obligation under international humanitarian law to care for and evacuate the wounded. It considers the delay in allowing rescue services access unacceptable.'

Some infants survived their parents, and rescuers discovered a live baby in suck on the toe of its dead mother. St. Matthew records no such examples of the thoroughgoing brutality of the original King Herod, but we have to allow for the progress of civilisation. Amnesty International sent a fact-finding team to investigate the use of white phosphorus in Gaza City. This is what they reported:

'When white phosphorus lands on skin it burns deeply through muscle and into the bone, continuing to burn until deprived of oxygen.

Amnesty International's delegates found still-burning white phosphorus wedges all around residential buildings on Sunday. These wedges were further endangering the residents and their property; streets and alleys are full of children playing, drawn to the detritus of war and often unaware of the danger.

The carrier shells which delivered the wedges were also still lying in and around houses and buildings. Some of these heavy steel 155mm shells have caused extensive damage to residential properties.

"Yesterday, we saw streets and alleyways littered with evidence of the use of white phosphorus, including still burning wedges and the remnants of the shells and canisters fired by the Israeli army," said Christopher Cobb-Smith, a weapons expert who is in Gaza as part of the four-person Amnesty International team.

"White phosphorus is a weapon intended to provide a smokescreen for troop movements on the battlefield," said Cobb-Smith. "It is highly incendiary, air burst and its spread effect is such that it should never be used on civilian areas."

Donatella Rovera, Amnesty's researcher on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories said that such extensive use of this weapon in Gaza's densely populated residential neighbourhoods is inherently indiscriminate. "Its repeated use in this manner, despite evidence of its indiscriminate effects and its toll on civilians, is a war crime," she said.

When each 155mm artillery shell bursts, it deploys 116 wedges impregnated

with white phosphorus which ignite on contact with oxygen and can scatter, depending on the height at which it is burst (and wind conditions), over an area at least the size of a football pitch. In addition to the indiscriminate effect of air-bursting such a weapon, firing such shells as artillery exacerbates the likelihood that civilians will be affected.

“Artillery is an area weapon; not good for pinpoint targeting. The fact that these munitions, which are usually used as ground burst, were fired as air bursts increases the likely size of the danger area,” said Chris Cobb-Smith.

Among the places worst affected by the use of white phosphorus was the UNRWA compound in Gaza City, at which Israeli forces fired three white phosphorus shells on 15th January. The white phosphorus landed next to some fuel trucks and caused a large fire which destroyed tons of humanitarian aid.

Prior to this strike, the compound had already been hit an hour earlier and the Israeli authorities had been informed by UNRWA officials and had given assurance that no further strikes would be launched on the compound.

In another incident on the same day a white phosphorus shell landed in the al-Quds hospital in Gaza City also causing a fire that forced hospital staff to evacuate the patients.’

From the point of view of the victims, modern technology has been less of a boon than ancient customs. There have been no warning angels to guide Joseph’s footsteps into Egypt. Indeed, the border with Egypt has been closed, allegedly to prevent Palestinians from smuggling weapons. This gave rise to a maze of tunnels which have been devised to facilitate the movement of food and basic necessities (and possibly some weapons) into Gaza.

The slaughter of Palestinians has been greatly aided by the closure of Gaza’s borders, and the rigorous exclusion of foreign journalists from the area. Admission has been largely confined to the slaughterers, although at a late stage in the conflict inadequate numbers of truckloads of aid were allowed to enter Gaza each day through selected checkpoints. Humanitarian organisations could admit, with ‘serious restrictions’, some workers to assist in the distribution of this aid. This was a perilous undertaking, as could be amply established by the United Nations. The

Norwegian doctors informed the Iranian television correspondent Akram al-Sattari that some of the casualties of Israeli attacks on the Gaza strip have traces of depleted uranium in their bodies. Israeli tanks and troops surged across the frontier into Gaza after eight days of intensive attacks by the Israeli air and naval forces. The depleted uranium traces were found by the Norwegian doctors shortly after the beginning of the ground offensive.

United Nations Relief and Works Agency reported more than forty fatalities outside its school in Jabalia, during a sustained shelling by the Israeli forces on the 6th January. At times it appeared that a principal target of the Israelis was in fact the United Nations, whose personnel showed extraordinary courage in their efforts to minister to the victims.

When Ban Ki-moon visited Gaza shortly after the fragile ceasefire, he was scheduled to visit three UN compounds which had been targeted during the war. He was greeted by officials on the ground, with estimates that \$330 million were needed urgently for immediate rehabilitation projects, and that further needs would undoubtedly be revealed in time.

Insistent allegations about Israeli war crimes must have greatly troubled the United Nations General Secretary. His Special Rapporteur for the Palestinian Territories occupied since 1967 had presented a damning report which we publish below. He had been denied admission to Gaza in mid-December, and held in a cell at the Ben-Gurion airport before being expelled the following day. This remarkable ill treatment of a UN plenipotentiary was the foretaste of a succession of atrocious acts which were about to follow.

How can these atrocities be brought to book?

On the 30th January 2009 a Spanish judge opened a criminal case against seven past and present Israeli officials, charging that they may have been involved in crimes against humanity in the affair of the assassination in the year 2002 of a senior Hamas official. To cries of indignation from Israel, the Spanish Courts are charging that Moshe Yaalon, former Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces and at present a well known political leader, was involved with Dan Halutz, formerly head of the Israeli Air Force, in launching an air strike to kill Salah Shehadeh, a Hamas leader, on July 22nd 2002. A thousand pound bomb was dropped on the residence of Mr. Shehadeh. This attack also killed thirteen other Palestinians and wounded one hundred and fifty more, including children.

The judge argues that the attack could be a ‘crime against humanity’, which admits Spanish jurisdiction even if neither the victims nor the perpetrators were Spanish citizens. Israel has refused to cooperate with this enquiry, rejecting a formal request to do so. But Spain and Israel are both parties to an international agreement between the European Union and Israel which requires such cooperation. Ehud Barak, the present Defence Minister of Israel, says ‘whoever calls the assassination of a terrorist “a crime against humanity” is living in an upside down world’. Perhaps this is the same world that was inhabited by Tzipi Livni’s father, ‘Eitan Livni, chief operations officer of the terrorist *Irgun Zvai Leumi*, who organised

the blowing up of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, in which ninety-one victims were killed, including four Jews', according to Gerald Kaufman MP, speaking in the British House of Commons.

How far the Spanish courts can succeed where other European jurisdictions have failed remains to be seen. But many eyes are now turned towards The Hague, where the prospect of a full-scale war crimes tribunal becomes more real at the International Criminal Court. Various Palestinian groups had petitioned the International Criminal Court, but Luis Moreno-Ocampo, the prosecutor, responded to the effect that he had no jurisdiction, since Israel had not signed up to the Rome Treaty. Therefore he could not open further investigations. But now the prosecutor has informed *The Times* that he is examining whether there may in fact be Palestinian jurisdiction over the crimes committed in Gaza, since the Palestinian authority is the *de facto* State in the territory where the crimes have allegedly been committed. This possibility is strengthened by the Israeli insistence that it has had no responsibility for Gaza since its withdrawal from the territory in 2005. The alternative road to a war crimes investigation would be through the United Nations Security Council, where hostile vetoes lie in wait for any investigation which might embarrass client States of any of the veto-wielding powers.

This is the context in which preparations are being made for a Russell Tribunal, aiming to bring together the forces of civil society to insist on a truer justice than that obtainable at arms.

Ken Coates

DIME weapons

Dense Inert Metal Explosive (DIME) weapons consist of a carbon fibre casing filled with a mixture of explosive and a very dense powder of a heavy metal tungsten alloy (HMTA) composed of tungsten and other metals such as cobalt, nickel or iron.

Upon detonation of the explosive, the casing disintegrates into extremely small particles, as opposed to the shrapnel which results from the fragmentation of a metal shell casing. The HMTA powder acts as micro-shrapnel which is very lethal at close range (about four metres or thirteen feet), but loses momentum very quickly due to air resistance, coming to a halt within approximately forty times the diameter of the charge. This increases the probability of killing people within a few metres of the explosion while reducing the probability of

causing death and injuries or damage farther away. Survivors close to the lethal zone may have their limbs amputated (as the micro-shrapnel can slice through soft tissue and bone) from the HMTA micro-shrapnel embedded in their body tissue.

Toxic/carcinogenic effects: The carcinogenic effects of heavy metal tungsten alloys (HMTA) have been studied by the US Armed Forces since at least 2000 (along with depleted uranium (DU)). These alloys were found to cause neoplastic transformations of human osteoblast cells. A more recent US Department of Health and Human Services study in 2005 found that HMTA shrapnel rapidly induces rhabdomyosarcoma cancers in rats. The tungsten alloy carcinogenicity may be most closely related to the nickel content of the alloys used in weapons to date. However, pure tungsten and tungsten trioxide are also suspected of causing cancer and other toxic properties, and have been shown to have such effects in animal studies.

DIME wounds are considered to be untreatable because the metal is delivered in the form of small pellets rather than larger chunks of metal that could be removed with surgery.

Reported use: As reported in the French national newspaper *Le Monde*, according to a team of journalists from the Italian State radio-television RAI, DIME-type bombs were being used in the Gaza Strip by the Israeli Defence Forces against Palestinian targets during July/August 2006. The investigation was performed by examining the unusual wounds, and a lab analysis of the metals found in the victims' bodies was reportedly "compatible with the hypothesis" that a DIME weapon was involved. Israel denied possessing or using such weapons.

Dr. Mads Gilbert and Dr. Erik Fosse, working on wounded from the 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza conflict, report injuries that they believe can only be caused by some new type of weapon used by Israel which they suspect are DIME bombs.' *Source: Wikipedia*

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Alex Thomson of Channel 4 News reported on the 22nd January 2009: 'I've been digging around at the US air base at Lakenheath in Suffolk. There could be a key connection between the vast base and the war in Gaza. In particular, the use of controversial DIME munitions said to be used in Gaza, causing wounds to the human body the like of which doctors have not seen before. All the documentation points to Lakenheath as the key point of US-Israeli contact – we know the Israelis bought 1,000 bombs of the type that could be DIME just as they were preparing for Gaza in the autumn.'