

An Alternative Theology of the Holy Land: A Critique of Christian Zionism

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There are two essential questions which this article will seek to address: one political and one theological. They are multifaceted and interwoven.

The political question is this: How should Christians view the situation in Israel/Palestine today, where two peoples claim the same territory? How should they regard the State of Israel? As a democracy or apartheid state? Should the Israeli authorities and Christian Zionists continue to resist Palestinian aspirations to autonomy and statehood? Should they continue to occupy, settle and annexe more and more of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, creating small urban Bantustan reservations for Palestinians living under military occupation within an exclusive Jewish state? Or, do Palestinians have fundamental human rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? For example, to live in the land of their birth, to freedom of movement, to work, education and religious practice. and collectively to the right of self-determination, political expression, autonomy and nationhood? That is the essential political question.

The central theological question is this: Does possession of the Land by Jewish people today, and the existence of the State of Israel, have any theological significance in terms of the fulfilment of biblical prophecy or within the purposes of God? Or, should we believe that this understanding of the Land is inconsistent with the gospel proclaimed by, and summed up in, Jesus Christ? The question is whether we have good biblical and theological reasons for giving whole-hearted support to the Zionist vision? Or, do we find in Scripture grounds for criticizing and rejecting this ideology as sub-Christian or even heretical?

I will attempt an answer under seven propositions taken from Scripture. Each of these can stand on their own, but each also forms a vital link in a logical and progressive argument based on the flow of biblical history and revelation.¹

1 The Relationship of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant

Christian Zionism errs most profoundly because it fails to appreciate the relationship between the Old and New Covenants and the ways in which the latter completes, fulfils and annuls the former. It is fundamental that Christians read the Scriptures with Christian eyes, and that they interpret the Old Covenant in the light of the New Covenant, not the other way round. In Colossians, for example, Paul uses a typological hermeneutic to interpret the Old Covenant:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a *shadow* of the things that were to come; the *reality*, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2: 16-17)

Similarly, the writer to the Hebrews stresses:

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a *copy* and *shadow* of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: 'See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.' But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. (Heb 8:1-6)

The law is only a *shadow* of the good things that are coming – not the *realities* themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. (Heb 10:1)

Under the Old Covenant, revelation from God came often in shadow, image, form and prophecy. In the New Covenant that revelation finds its consummation in reality, substance and fulfilment. The question is not whether the promises of the covenant are to be understood literally or spiritually as Dispensationalists like to stress. It is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Covenant shadow or in terms of New Covenant reality. This is the most basic hermeneutical assumption which Christian Zionists consistently fail to acknowledge.

So, for example, in the Old Covenant animals and food are sacrificed anticipating the offering of the body of Christ. A portable tabernacle foreshadows the permanent presence of the Spirit of God indwelling his people. God provides Israel in the desert with manna from heaven, water from a rock and a serpent on a pole. All these images find their fulfilment not in more manna, or water or indeed in a higher pole but in the redemptive work of our Lord Jesus Christ of which the Old Covenant forms were but a shadow. By their very nature the Old Covenant provisions must be seen as shadowy forms rather than substantial realities. The same principle applies to the promises concerning the Land which also serve as revelational shadows, images, types, prophecies, anticipating God's future purposes, not only for one small people, the Jews, but the whole world, revealed fully and finally in Jesus Christ. Hebrews sums this up succinctly: 'In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe' (Heb 1:1-2).

2 The Meaning of the Abrahamic Covenant

Consideration of the Abrahamic Covenant begins not in Genesis 12 as Zionists prefer but actually in Genesis 2. The covenant began with God's creation of a paradise in the garden. This was the place where people could receive all of God's blessings and commune in fellowship with him. This is where the image of land begins in the Bible. This land of paradise was lost in the Fall but a foretaste of heaven is reflected in the imagery of the promise made to Abraham: 'The LORD had said to Abram. "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you"' (Gen 12:1). In Genesis 15 God is more specific and indicates the extent of that land: 'On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates"' (Gen 15:18). In Genesis 17 the promise is

repeated and amplified:

^{17,1}When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. ²I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.' ³Abram fell face down, and God said to him, ⁴'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.' (Gen 17:1-8)

The promise that God was going to give access to the Land again is restated to Moses. The land is described as flowing with milk and honey in Exodus 3:8 and a number of other passages in the Pentateuch:

So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that Land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey –the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. (Exod 3:8)

These images are paradigms. The Land of the Bible does not and never ever did flow with literal milk and honey. It is indeed a beautiful land but the biblical imagery points to a restored paradise in the future. From the very beginning this Old Covenant shadow would have to wait for the New Covenant for the actual fulfilment of the promise. The Land in the Old Covenant was not an end in itself.

That is why the tabernacle, the place of worship in the Old Covenant, was never intended to have a settled location in God's plan of redemption. It pointed to Jesus Christ who would 'tabernacle' among his people in the Incarnation and since Pentecost through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. The sacrificial system could never atone for sins but only foreshadow the ultimate sacrifice of the sinless, perfect Son of God. So the patriarch Abraham receives the promise of the Land but never possesses it himself. This is not to spiritualize the promise away. It will ultimately be experienced in paradise. This was the promise of the covenant, not the permanent and everlasting possession of the Middle East. In Hebrews 11 we learn that by this non-possession the Patriarch learned to look forward to the city with foundations whose architect is God. This is the only legitimate interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant for Christians:

¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren –was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. ¹²And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. ¹³All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:10-16)

It is important to stress once again, in Hebrews, that the heavenly does not mean allegorical or spiritual or non-literal. Just the reverse, the heavenly is the consummate true state of reality. So, the Jerusalem above, the heavenly city for which the Patriarchs were looking, is not a nebulous ethereal idea. It is the ultimate reality which we can only foretaste in our present state. It is significant to note at this early stage in Genesis how the role of Jerusalem is central. Abraham paid tithes to Melchizadeck, the priest king of Jerusalem (Gen 14:20). At this significant place Abraham offered his son Isaac as an offering to God (Gen 22). But in both, these shadowy events pointed to the greater realities of the New Covenant, ultimately realized in the heavenly priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizadeck (Heb 7) and the once for all sacrifice of the Son of God at Calvary.

Significantly the Land never belongs to Israel in the Torah. The Land belongs to God. Land cannot be permanently bought or sold. It cannot be permanently given away, let alone stolen or confiscated as has occurred in the Occupied Territories since 1967. The Land is never at the disposal of Israel for its national purposes. Instead it is Israel who is at the disposal of God's purposes. The Jews remain merely tenants in God's Land: 'The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants' (Lev 25:23).

There are four aspects to the Abrahamic Covenant. Any interpretation of the land aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant cannot be divorced from the other strands of the covenant. Christians generally have no difficulty in seeing the fulfilment of the promise in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In him God has indeed first, blessed people of all nations, second, drawn them into a covenant relationship with God in which, third, there is now neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, but all members of one holy nation saved by grace. If these three strands of the one covenant find their fulfilment in Christ in his church, how can the promise concerning the Land be put into a totally different category and possessed exclusively by the Jews?

The statement God made to Abraham that the Land would be 'an everlasting possession' is not necessarily understood in literal terms. Insisting on literal fulfilment is a double-edged sword. In 1 Chronicles 15:2, for example, David insists that the Levites would carry the ark of the Lord and minister before him for ever. Was this fulfilled literally on earth or figuratively in Christ? In 1 Chronicles 23:13 God similarly promises that the Aaronic priesthood would continue 'for ever'. The same question may be asked, is this being fulfilled literally now on earth or figuratively in Christ? In 2 Chronicles 33:7 God says that he has put his name in the Temple in Jerusalem for ever. Is that being fulfilled literally now on earth or figuratively in Christ and the church? In 1 Chronicles 23:25, God promises that he has come to dwell in Jerusalem for ever. Is that being fulfilled literally now on earth or figuratively in Christ and the church? Likewise in 2 Samuel 7:12-16, God promises that a descendant of David will sit on his throne for ever. Is that being fulfilled literally on earth or figuratively in Christ?

Christian Zionists insist that because the Jews have never literally occupied the entire land promised to Abraham, from the Nile to the Euphrates, this promise must still await future fulfilment. Hence their support not only for the occupation and settlement of the West Bank but implicitly the rest of the Middle East as well. Such reasoning ignores the way the Old Testament writers themselves understood the promise made to Abraham. God reaffirmed that same promise to Joshua: 'Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them' (Josh 1:6).

The question then arises, did Israel ever do so? While it is true that the Jews have never exercised political sovereignty over all the land between the Nile and the Euphrates, nevertheless Joshua makes clear that in that generation the covenant promise had indeed been fulfilled:

So Joshua took the *entire land*, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war. (Josh 11:23)

So the LORD gave Israel *all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers*, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. *Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed: every one was fulfilled.* (Josh 21: 43-5)

It is significant that we are told Joshua took 'the entire land' because the Lord had given 'Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers'. To the claim that certain promises have yet to be fulfilled, Joshua is emphatic: 'Not one of all the Lord's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.'

Likewise, Nehemiah, writing after the second exile, looked back to the first exile and could testify in praise to God for the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham: 'You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers ... *You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess*' (Neh 9:22-3).

These passages record the first re-gathering of the Israelites to the Promised Land. Nehemiah even refers in the past tense to the fulfilment of the metaphorical promise to make Abraham's descendants 'as numerous as the stars in the sky' (cf Gen 22:17). Since the promise given to Abraham concerning the Land is to be understood as intimately bound up with the covenant relationship with and blessings for all peoples of the world, to insist on an interpretation that now gives people of Jewish origin an exclusive title deed to Palestine in perpetuity runs contrary both to the promise itself within its Old Covenant context as well as its New Covenant fulfilment. The four strands of the Abrahamic Covenant comprise a package deal and are interwoven together, prefiguring the finished work of Christ.

3 The Promise of Exile and Return

The entire possession of the Land promised to Abraham was never realized. Dominion over the Land remained a constant struggle, an aspiration never fully achieved. Solomon, even at the zenith of his reign and power, ruins the prospect by introducing foreign gods, tolerating the noisy and abominable worship assemblies of his heathen wives and their priests just over the Kidron valley from the Temple Mount on the Mount of Olives. During this period invading armies sent by God chasten the Jews for defiling the Land. In fulfilment of the promises made through Moses and the Prophets, the Jews were dispossessed and driven out, exiled from the promise of the Land that had been given to their forefathers. Jerusalem was safe from foreign armies only as long as the shekinah glory of God dwelt in her midst.

That is the significance of Ezekiel's visions in which step by step he sees the departure of God's glory from the city. Once the shekinah glory of God had departed, Jerusalem was as

vulnerable as any other place on earth. It was no longer a consecrated city guaranteed by God's protection. The exile and dispersion of Jerusalem's inhabitants could not be averted. But the history of the Jews under the Old Covenant did not end with the exile. At God's appointed time about 49,000 returned in contrast to the estimated 3,000,000 that had come out of Egypt 1,000 years before. They returned to only a small part of the original territory and built only a small replica of Solomon's temple. But God's prophets were not distracted from their vision of the greatness of God's redemptive work. In fact they paint a picture of restoration so glorious that it could not be contained within the boundaries of the Old Covenant form of realization. Haggai and Zechariah, for example, paint a picture of the future that breaks out of the Old Covenant shadowy forms. Jerusalem becomes a city without walls. The reconstructed temple manifests a glory even greater than Solomon's magnificent structure: "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house", says the LORD Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace", declares the LORD Almighty' (Hag 2:9).

The language of the restoration prophets is very inspiring but the reality experienced under the return from exile was much less impressive. Indeed this extravagant picture of a great city without stone walls, a wall of fire around it and into which the gentile nations would come to worship, bursts the bounds of the Old Covenant wine skin. This vision found its fulfilment only in the New Covenant when Jesus taught that his followers would no longer worship in Jerusalem or Samaria but anywhere, since the shekinah glory of God would be omnipresent with every child of God (John 4). So, according to the irreversible fulfilment values of the New Covenant, the covenant below would no longer be the focus for God's presence on earth: 'But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother' (Gal 4:26).

This is not to be perceived in terms of some esoteric nirvana either. This Jerusalem is not a spiritualized or ethereal phenomenon. Indeed, according to the writer to the Hebrews (12:22), whenever Christians assemble for worship, they are already meeting in the presence of the angels in the real Jerusalem: 'But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly' (Heb 12:22).

Once this consummation had been achieved, the New Testament refuses to countenance a return to the paradigms of the Old Covenant. Retrogression to the older, shadowy forms of the Old Covenant was forbidden. God's children have become temples in which his shekinah glory dwells. To suggest therefore that the shekinah is to return to a single local geographical shrine to which Jews and Christians must come to worship in Jerusalem in the imminent future once the Dome of the Rock has been destroyed is to regress from the reality to the shadowy, to re-erect the dividing curtain of the Temple, to apostatize from the New to the Old Covenant, since it impugns the finished atoning work of Christ. The Apostle Paul is quite emphatic in opposing those who attempted to reintroduce a judaizing theology to the church at Galatia:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel which is really no gospel at all... We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All

nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’. (Gal 1:6-7, 2:15, 3:6-10)

4 The Ethical Requirements of the Covenant Relationship

As has been stated, contrary to the insistence of Christian Zionists, the promise of land was never an unconditional right, but always a conditional gift. During the wilderness wanderings, God prepared his people with promises:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. *And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.* (Lev 18:24-8)

On the basis of such a passage, the present brutal, repressive and apartheid policies of the State of Israel would suggest another exile on the horizon rather than a restoration. As one Jewish peace activist put it: ‘how sinful do you need to be to get to be on God’s hit list?’²

With reference to the treatment of aliens, for example, 36 times in the Hebrew scriptures the Jews were warned to be compassionate to strangers and aliens because they should remember their own collective experience living as aliens:

Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him for you were aliens in Egypt. (Exod 22:21)

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:33-4)

The Exodus story, retold at every Passover, was meant to remind the Hebrew people that they should be freed from the need to dominate and persecute. In the Psalms the inheritance of the Land is celebrated as one of the greatest blessings of redemption. Psalm 37, for example, encourages the Jews not to despair over the prosperity of the wicked. They are told to trust in the Lord’s promises that they shall inherit the Land. In the context of other promises concerning the Land this must always be seen in terms of conditional residency rather than permanent possession. Six times in this Psalm this virtually identical phrase is used:

¹Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; ²for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.

³Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture... ⁸Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it leads only to evil.

⁹For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land... ¹⁸The days of the blameless are known to the LORD, and their inheritance will endure forever... ²⁷Turn from evil and do good; then you will dwell in the land forever. ²⁸For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the

wicked will be cut off; ²⁹*the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.*

³⁴Wait for the LORD and keep his way. *He will exalt you to inherit the land;* when the wicked are cut off, you will see it. (Ps 37:1-40)

This Psalm was used regularly in Jewish worship and so it must have had the effect of strengthening the concept in the minds of the people that the land of Canaan was a gift of God. Only the righteous and faithful have the assurance that the Land would be theirs. Isaiah's great prophecy begins with a similar warning:

¹⁶wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, ¹⁷learn to do right! *Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow...* ²⁷*Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.* ²⁸But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the LORD will perish. (Is 1:16-17, 27-8)

Jeremiah reiterates the corollary: *'Through your own fault you will lose the inheritance I gave you. I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know, for you have kindled my anger, and it will burn forever'* (Jer 17:4).

Daniel and Nehemiah both personified the individual and corporate repentance required before God would bring back his remnant (Dan 9:1-19; Neh 1:4-11). Thus when God does bring the remnant back to the Land, he does so in accordance with the conditions described in Deuteronomy 30:1-5.

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, ²*and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today,* ³*then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.* ⁴Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. ⁵He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. (Deut 30:1-5)

Repentance is always a condition of return. The assertion therefore that the events subsequent to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 indicate God's blessing on the Jewish people is totally without foundation in Scripture.

Jesus predicted that the Temple would be destroyed and the Jews exiled from the Land as God's judgment for their failure to recognize him as the Messiah (Luke 19:41-4). The repentance required in the terms of Deuteronomy 30 would, from the perspective of the New Covenant, require recognition of Jesus as Messiah as a condition of return. Never therefore can the promise of the Land be claimed by those who fail to exercise true faith and faithfulness in the Redeemer provided by the Lord in the Covenant. The Land is never promised to Israel unconditionally, but always requiring repentance, faith and obedience. To affirm that the Land is Israel's right irrespective of her collective behaviour is to contradict the most basic prophetic lesson of redemptive history in Scripture.

The challenge to Christian Zionists is therefore this. If they appeal to Genesis to claim the promise of the Land, what about Exodus and the commandments not to steal, kill and covet?

If they believe in the predictive element of prophecy, what about the prophetic demand for justice? Palestinian theologians are not alone in seeing in the present Israeli government's policy of forcibly judaizing the West Bank and East Jerusalem a twentieth-century parallel to Ahab's theft of Naboth's vineyard.³

What is needed among Christian Zionists are contemporary Elijahs who, out of love for the Jewish people, are prepared to speak a prophetic warning to the Ahabs in the government of Israel today. The stronger the claim to the Land is made, allegedly from the Old Covenant, the more Christian Zionists must expect and indeed invite the evaluation of what the Jews have done in the Land by the moral standards of those same Scriptures.

5 The Land in the Teaching of Jesus

Teaching about the Land is conspicuous by its absence in the Gospels and in the priorities of Jesus. There are four references to the Land in the Gospels and these are all indirect. The strongest is found in the Beatitudes. In Matthew 5:5 Jesus quotes from Psalm 37:11. The inheritance of the Land promised to the meek has been universalized to include the earth. The Greek term for 'earth' here is the same word used in the Septuagint for land yet the context of Jesus' Beatitudes requires that the perspective be stretched beyond mere possession of Palestine. Either that or all Christians bearing the fruit of the Spirit may claim the Land as their rightful possession. Since the Land was such a fundamental part of Judaism at the time of Christ, his silence can only have been deliberate. Like the prophets before him, Jesus did however, predict the destruction of Jerusalem as a judgment upon the Jewish nation (Luke 19:41-4). But unlike the Prophets Jesus did not promise there would be another return to the Land. Instead he predicted the coming of the Kingdom of God in terms drawn from Daniel's vision of the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days to receive his kingly authority (Matt 24:30-1; Luke 21:25-8; cf Dan 7: 13-14). It can only have been deliberate that Jesus had so little to say specifically about the Land and so much about the world (78 times in the Gospels alone).⁴

6 The Land in the Teaching of the Apostles

The turning-point for the disciples comes with the resurrection encounters and Pentecost. Until this point they seemed to share the same understanding of the Land as other Jews of the first century. They had looked forward to God's decisive intervention in history which would restore political sovereignty to the Jews within the Promised Land. This is reflected in the words of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who confessed: 'we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21).

It must also have been the idea in the minds of the disciples, when, before the ascension, they asked: 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1:6). John Calvin comments: 'There are as many mistakes in this question as there are words.'⁵ Jesus' reply shows him correcting not only their concept of time but also their priorities: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:7-8).

Jesus now redefines the nature of the Kingdom of God and thereby the meaning of

chosenness. The expansion of the Kingdom of God throughout the world necessitates the exile of the Apostles from the Land and indeed the turning of their backs on Jerusalem. They are sent out into the world but never told to return. Subsequent to Pentecost, the Apostles begin to use Old Covenant language concerning the Land in new ways.

So for example, Peter speaks of an inheritance which unlike the Land, ‘...can never perish, spoil or fade’ (1 Pet 1:4). Paul likewise asserts: ‘Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an *inheritance* among all those who are sanctified’ (Acts 20:32).

In his letter to a predominantly gentile church at Ephesus, Paul applies the promise of the inheritance of the Land, specifically to obedient gentile children of Christian believers: ‘Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honour your father and mother” – which is the first commandment with a promise “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth”’ (Eph 6: 1-3).

The fifth commandment promised that obedient children would live long on the land the Lord God was giving them. Now Paul applies the same promise to the children of Christian parents living 700-800 miles from the land of the Bible. These children of gentile and Jewish Christians who submit willingly to the authority of their parents will, Paul promises, enjoy long life on the earth. Land in the New Covenant context has now come to fulfilment in the purposes of God. The limitations of the land type under the Old Covenant have been transcended so that it stretches through the Great Commission to the uttermost ends of the earth.⁶ In his letter to the predominantly gentile church in Galatia, Paul says:

²¹Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. ²³His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

²⁴These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother... ²⁸Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say? ‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son.’ ³¹Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. (Gal 4:20-31)

In a quite shocking way Paul compares contemporary Jerusalem and its Judaism to Hagar and her slave children, whereas the gentile Galatian believers are likened to Isaac as children of the promise. This criticism surely applies to the modern city of Jerusalem just as much as it did in the days of the Apostles. Contemporary Jerusalem is literally in legalistic slavery, captive to the minority religious political parties. It cannot be presumed by Christian Zionists that those living in Jerusalem or Israel today without faith in Jesus Christ remain the elect, chosen people of God.

Apart from repentance and faith in Jesus Christ on the same terms as people in other parts of the world, the inhabitants of the present Jerusalem continue to be in slavery, without God and without hope in the world. To suggest anything else is to slight Jesus Christ and his sacrifice

and at the same time imperil the souls of men by encouraging false presumption.

Chris Wright summarizes the main argument of Hebrews:

Hebrews' affirmation of what 'we have' is surprisingly comprehensive. We have the land, described as the rest into which we have entered through Christ, in a way which even Joshua did not achieve for Israel (3:12-4:11); we have a High Priest (4:14, 8:1, 10:21) and an Altar (13:10); we have a hope which in this context refers to the reality of the covenant made with Abraham (6:13-20). We enter into the Holy Place, so we have the reality of the tabernacle and the temple (10:9). We have come to Mount Zion (12:22) and we are receiving a kingdom, in line with Haggai 2:6 (12:28). Indeed according to Hebrews (13:14), the only thing we do not have is an earthly, territorial city. 'For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come' (Heb 13:14).⁷

There is no evidence that the Apostles believed that the Jewish people still had a divine right to the Land, or that the Jewish possession of the Land would be an important, let alone central, aspect of God's future plan for the world. In the christological logic of Paul, the Land, like the Law, both particular and provisional, had now become totally irrelevant.

7 The Future of the Jewish People

Paul did indeed look forward to a glorious future for the Jewish people (Rom 9-11). In Romans 9 where Paul emphasizes how the Lord has not forgotten the Jewish people and that their hardening toward the gospel would be temporary, he lists the blessings they have received:

...the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. (Rom 9:4-5)

Paul omits only one blessing. He does not include 'theirs is the Land'. Although Zionists argue this is implicit in the reference to the covenants, there is no suggestion in this passage that the future salvation of the Jews is related in any way whatsoever to the Land, the Law, temple worship or any other Old Covenant 'shadow' but only faith in Jesus Christ alone. Paul's silence about the Land does not suggest that he still held to a Jewish theology of the Land, rather that he had universalized it. So, in interpreting the promises made to Abraham in Genesis. Paul insists: 'It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith' (Rom 4: 13).

Abraham's descendants would now inherit not the Land but the cosmos. For Paul, the children of Abraham are both Jews and Gentiles who through faith in Jesus Christ have been made righteous. The promise of the Land has become a promise of the world. Now the imagery of the Land has become the picture of paradise restored and consummated. It is not, however, just a return to the original paradise, to the Land flowing with milk and honey, but to a reconstructed cosmos inhabited by resurrected people. An entirely new heaven and a new earth is promised, something that exceeds the original Adamic paradise. It is no longer merely a portion of the earth that is the consummation of God's work of redeeming a fallen world, but instead the whole of the cosmos participates. In Ephesians 3 Paul understands the

Old Covenant shadow as a mystery that has at last been revealed:

In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (Eph 3:4-6)

Under the Old Covenant, on condition that they kept the covenant, Israel was promised: 'Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:5-6). Paul takes this promise to describe the effect of Christ's atonement upon the church which is now made up of both Jewish and gentile believers, '...who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good' (Titus 2:14). Similarly, Peter quotes directly from Exodus 19 using the promise made to the Jews and applies it to the church: 'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Pet 2:9). Indeed Peter warned his Jewish audience soon after the Day of Pentecost that if they persisted in refusing to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, they would cease to be the *laos* of God: 'Anyone who does not listen to him [Christ] will be completely cut off from among his people' (Acts 3:23).

Christian Zionists do violence to the flow of biblical revelation, when, in spite of the way in which Scripture interprets Scripture, they continue to regard the Jews as God's covenant people: They are also in error to imply that only they give the Jews an important place in God's future purposes.⁸ Postmillennialists, for example, held from the early days of the Reformation that there would be a great revival among the Jews before Christ returned.⁹ However: 'Puritans did not believe that there are any special and unfulfilled spiritual promises made to Israel apart from the Christian Church.'¹⁰

How different from the future scenario for the Jews held by Christian Zionists such as Hal Lindsey and John Walvoord:

Many evangelical dispensationalists have committed themselves to a course for Israel, that, by their own admission will lead directly to a holocaust indescribably more savage and widespread than any vision of carnage that could have generated in Adolf Hitler's criminal mind.¹¹

8 Conclusions

Karen Armstrong is not alone in tracing in Western Christian Zionism evidence of the legacy of the Crusades. Such fundamentalists have, she claims, returned to a classical and extreme religious crusading'.¹² The Ruethers also see the danger of this kind of Christian Zionism in its, 'dualistic, Manichaeic view of global politics. America and Israel together against an evil world.'¹³

The following quote from Senator Bob Dole is a good example:

American-Israeli friendship is no accident. It is a product of our shared values. We are both democracies. We are both pioneer states. We have both opened our doors to the oppressed.

We have both shown a passion for freedom and we have gone to war to protect it.¹⁴

This ‘*simple dualism*’ and ‘*highly dogmatic thinking*’ is something a number of sociologists have observed as common to much American fundamentalism.¹⁵ Bishop Kenneth Cragg writes satirically:

It is so: God chose the Jews; the land is theirs by divine gift. These dicta cannot be questioned or resisted. They are final. Such verdicts come infallibly from Christian biblicists for whom Israel can do no wrong – thus fortified. But can such positivism, this unquestioning finality, be compatible with the integrity of the Prophets themselves? It certainly cannot square with the open peoplehood under God which is the crux of New Testament faith. Nor can it well be reconciled with the ethical demands central to law and election alike.¹⁶

The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), representing the indigenous and ancient Oriental and Eastern Churches, has been highly critical of the activities of Christian Zionists, and the International Christian Embassy, (ICEJ) in particular. They assert, for instance, that Christian Zionists have aggressively imposed an aberrant expression of the Christian faith and an erroneous interpretation of the Bible which is subservient to the political agenda of the modern State of Israel. Indeed they represent a tendency to:

...force the Zionist model of theocratic and ethnocentric nationalism on the Middle East... [rejecting]... the movement of Christian unity and inter-religious understanding which is promoted by the (indigenous) churches in the region. The Christian Zionist programme, with its elevation of modern political Zionism, provides the Christian with a world view where the gospel is identified with the ideology of success and militarism. It places its emphasis on events leading up to the end of history rather than living Christ’s love and justice today.¹⁷

In 1988 the MECC went further, insisting that Christian Zionism had no place in the Middle East and should be repudiated by the universal church because it was ‘a dangerous distortion’ and significant shift away from orthodox Christocentric expressions of the Christian faith:

[This is] ... a fundamental disservice also to Jews who may be inspired to liberate themselves from discriminatory attitudes and thereby rediscover equality with the Palestinians with whom they are expected to live God’s justice and peace in the Holy Land.¹⁸

Although ICEJ’s support for Israel is primarily political, MECC has been concerned more with its theological basis, and ICEJ’s attempt to sacralize a political ideology beyond human criticism or ethical standards and to treat the security of a Jewish State within the entire land presently occupied as a fundamental axiom of their supra-historical eschatology. The declarations following the first, second and third Christian Zionist Congresses, organized by ICEJ in 1985, 1988 and 1996, according to MECC, show a significant shift away from orthodox Christocentric expressions of the Christian faith. Based on the writings of ICEJ’s spokesman, Rev Jan Willem van der Hoeven. MECC argues that the ‘Christian Zionist’,

...is placed in a reductionist eschatology by engaging in actions designed to bring ‘comfort and support’ to modern political Israel. Accordingly, Jesus is de-emphasised, as is His death and resurrection, while salvation and judgment are redefined... Christians will be judged solely according to their actions on behalf of the state of Israel. True Christians are those who leave their Gentile background and become ‘Israelites of God’.¹⁹

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that among the Middle East churches generally, Christian Zionism is regarded as a devious heresy and an unwelcome and alien intrusion into

their culture, which advocates an ethnocentric and nationalist political agenda running counter to their work of reconciliation, and patient witness among both Jews and Muslims.²⁰ In the course of interviews conducted in 1993, one leading Anglican cleric said: 'Making God into a real estate agent is heart breaking... They are not preaching Jesus any more.'²¹ They are, in the words of another Palestinian clergyman, 'instruments of destruction'.²² Another senior churchman was equally forthright: 'Their presence here is quite offensive ... projecting themselves as really the Christians of the land ... with total disregard for the indigenous Christian community.'²³

Similarly outspoken criticisms of the Israel Trust of the Anglican Church (ITAC) were made by another Palestinian Anglican clergyman: 'CMJ are propagating Zionism rather than Christianity. It is working against the interests of the Anglican Church in Israel.'²⁴

Essentially, Christian Zionism fails to recognize the deep-seated problems that exist between Palestinians and Israelis; it distorts the Bible and marginalizes the universal imperative of the Christian gospel; it has grave political ramifications and ultimately ignores the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of indigenous Christians.²⁵ It is a situation that many believe Israel exploits to her advantage, cynically welcoming American Christian Zionists as long as they remain docile and compliant with Israeli government policy. Consequently:

Local Christians are caught in a degree of museumization. They are aware of tourists who come in great volume from the West to savour holy places but who are, for the most part, blithely disinterested in the people who indwell them. The pain of the indifference is not eased insofar as the same tourism is subtly manipulated to make the case for the entire legitimacy of the statehood that regulates it.²⁶

Cragg offers this astute critique of Christian Zionism:

The overriding criteria of Christian perception have to be those of equal grace and common justice. From these there can be no proper exemption, however alleged or presumed. Chosenness cannot properly be either an ethnic exclusivism or a political facility.²⁷

Christian Zionism shows an uncritical tolerance of Rabbinic Judaism and endorsement of the Israeli political right, while at the same time demonstrating an inexcusable lack of compassion for the Palestinian tragedy and plight of the indigenous Christian community in Israel and Palestine. In doing so it has legitimized their oppression in the name of their interpretation of the gospel.

Steve Schlissel draws a useful contrast between dispensationalism and non-dispensationalism, typified in the reconstructionism of Demar and North, but also representative of other post-millennialists and covenantalists:

Dispensationalists believe that the Jewish people have a title to the land that transcends virtually any other consideration, including unbelief, rebellion, and hatred toward Christ and his church. Consequently anti-zionism is equated with anti-semitism. The reconstructionist, on the other hand, makes a distinction. He believes that the Jewish people may exercise the title only when they comply with the condition of repentance and faith. He has nothing against Jews living in '*eretz yisrael*' *per se*, but he recognizes that the far more significant question is Israel's faith. In light of this, it might be appropriate to ask which theological system has the true and best interests of the Jews close to heart? If one's heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel agrees with the inspired Apostle's as recorded in Romans 10, can he thereby be called

anti-semitic?²⁸

The fundamental question Christian Zionists must therefore answer is this: What difference did the coming of Jesus Christ make to the traditional Jewish hopes and expectations about the Land? Christians may not interpret the Old Covenant as if the coming of Jesus made little or no difference to the nationalistic and territorial aspirations of first-century Judaism. Christian Zionists seem to read the Old Testament with the spectacles that the first disciples wore before their resurrection encounters with the risen Christ and before Pentecost. They seem to believe the coming of the kingdom of Jesus meant a postponement of Jewish hopes for restoration rather than the fulfilment of those hopes in the Messiah and new, inclusive, Messianic community.

In the process of redemptive history a dramatic movement has been made from type to reality, from shadow to substance. The Land that once was the specific locale of God's redemptive working served well under the Old Covenant forms as a picture of paradise lost then promised, but under the New Covenant fulfilment this Land has been expanded to encompass the cosmos. The exalted Christ rules from the heavenly Jerusalem demonstrating his sovereignty over the entire world. A regression to the limited forms of the Old Covenant shadow is apostasy:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (Heb 6:4-6)

The reality cannot give way again to shadow, for in the will and purposes of God the shadows no longer exist. The light has come in Jesus Christ: 'By calling this covenant "new", he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear' (Heb 8:13). The destruction of the Temple and sacrificial system in AD70 fulfilled that prediction. Until the rise of the novel theology of Christian Zionism, unlike the Jews, Christians have never looked to or expected the Temple to be rebuilt. Christian attitudes to the Temple therefore crystallize the issue. The choice is between two theologies. One based primarily on the shadows of the Old Covenant and one based on the reality of the New Covenant. Christian Zionism is an exclusive theology that focuses on the Jews in the Land rather than an inclusive theology that centres on Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. Christian Zionism provides a theological endorsement for apartheid and ethnic cleansing, what Don Wagner calls 'Armageddon Theology'²⁹ rather than the inclusive theology of justice, peace and reconciliation which lies at the heart of the New Covenant.

Politically, Israel will only be able to maintain its hold over the Occupied Territories with continued massive funding from America for its by-pass roads and settlements and through repressive military control. She will never enjoy peace with her neighbours until she acts with justice and reciprocity toward the Palestinians. Until then there will never be peaceful coexistence. In the words of Naim Ateek, 'justice delayed is justice denied'.³⁰ Israel is a materialistic and apartheid State practising repressive and dehumanizing measures against the Palestinians in flagrant disregard of the United Nations and UN declaration of human rights. Theologically, Christian Zionists who endorse such policies would do well to heed Joshua's final words:

Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. But just as every good promise of the LORD your God has come true, so the LORD will bring on you all the evil he has threatened, until he has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD'S anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you. (Josh 23:14-16)

Like Isaac's children Jacob and Esau, it is time to stop fighting over the birthright and start sharing the blessings.³¹

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Endnotes:

- 1 I am deeply indebted to O P Robertson for many of the insights offered in this paper. Palmer Robertson delivered a similar paper at a Theology of the Land Consultation, The Levant Study Centre, Droushia, Cyprus, June 1996.
- 2 Yehezkel Laudau. In a seminar given at St George's, Jerusalem, December 1998.
- 3 See Naim Ateek *Justice Only Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1990)
- 4 The most readable commentary on the New Testament perspective of the Land, Jerusalem and Temple is found in P W L Walker *Jesus and the Holy City* (Cambridge: Eerdmans 1996).
- 5 John Calvin *The Acts of the Apostles 1-13* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press 1965) p 29
- 6 Walker *Jesus* p 127
- 7 C J H Wright 'A Christian Approach to Old Testament Prophecy Concerning Israel' *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God* P W L Walker (ed) (revd edn Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Baker 1994) pp 18-19
- 8 Hal Lindsey is quite offensive in *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam 1989) to suggest that those who oppose a dispensationalist reading of scripture are anti-Semitic.
- 9 Peter Toon 'The Latter-Day Glory' in *The Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600-1660* Peter Toon (ed) (Cambridge: James Clarke 1970) see also Chapter 2.4 'The Reformation and Puritan Attitudes Toward the Jews'.
- 10 Iain Murray *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: Banner of Truth 1971) p 77
- 11 Gary DeMar & Peter J Leithart *The Legacy of Hatred Continues, A Response to Hal Lindsey's The Road to Holocaust* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics 1989) p 26. See also Grace Halsell *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* (Westport, Connecticut: Lawrence Hill 1986).
- 12 Karen Armstrong *Holy War, The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World* (London: Macmillan 1988) p 377

- 13 Rosemary Ruether & Herman J Ruether *The Wrath of Jonah, The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (San Francisco; Harper 1989) p 176
- 14 *Near East Report* vol 21. no 20, 18 May 1977 p 78. Cited in Sharif *Non-Jewish* p 136.
- 15 Keith Roberts *Religiott it1 Soc~ological Perspective* (Belmonl, California: Wadsworth 1990) p 272
- 16 Kenneth Cragg *The Arab Christian* (London: Mowbray 1992) p 238
- 17 *MECC What is Western Fundamentalist Christian Zionism?* (Limassol: MECC 1988) p 13
- 18 *MECC What is Western Fundamentalist Christian Zionism?* preface
- 19 *MECC What is Western Fundamentalist Christian Zionism?* preface
- 20 *MECC What is Western Fundamentalist Christian Zionism?* p 1
- 21 Based on interviews with Palestinian clergymen (Interview 1993:3.9)
- 22 (Interview 1994:3.23)
- 23 (Interview 1994:3.12)
- 24 (Interview 1994:3.23)
- 25 Colin Chapman *Whose Promised Land?* (Oxford: Lion 1992) p 277
- 26 Cragg *Arab Christian* p 28
- 27 Cragg *Arab Christian* p 237
- 28 Steve Schlissel 'To those who wonder if Reconstructionism is anti-Semitic' *The Legacy of Hatred Continues: A response to Hal Lindsey's The Road to Holocaust* Gary DeMar and Peter J Leithart (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics 1989) p 59
- 29 Donald Wagner *Anxious for Armageddon* (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald 1995)
- 30 Taken from an unpublished address given to a pilgrimage group in 1998
- 31 Yehezkel Landau. An illustration given at St George's, Jerusalem, December 1998