

## OUTLINE FOR DISCUSSION ABOUT THE LAND OF ISRAEL / PALESTINE

- I. Definition of the land, this “land of Canaan” as it was called, a land between, a byway, crisscrossed by world powers time and time again in their jockeying for supremacy in global affairs
  - A. Different boundaries
    1. West boundary, Mediterranean Sea
    2. East boundary, Jordan valley
    3. North boundary, not clearly defined
    4. South boundary, not clearly defined
  - B. The ambiguity of the land, which, in a large way, precipitated the constant flux of ancient cultures and varying episodes of historical events, still reveals itself in the stark ambiguity of modern events that haunt many of the inhabitants of the land today and captivate the attention of the rest of the world.
  
- II. The land between
  - A. The physical geography defines Palestine (so designated by Hadrian, *Provincia Syria Palaestina*, from “Philistia” or “the land of the Philistines”) as a land corridor from ancient Mesopotamia to Egypt, or in modern designation “the only land bridge between the two continents of Asia and Africa.”
  - B. The ancient struggle for this “passageway” continues today, albeit as a “political” or “cultural” corridor between conflicting passions in a quasi-religious battle for homeland.
  - C. The struggle of the land also reveals itself as a conflict between two distinct, divergent natural powers—the desert and the sea.
  
- III. The land of many contrasts
  - A. Palestine is an amazingly compact land of many contrasts. The land exhibits many tiny regions with peculiar geographical features and many small districts differing sharply from one another.

- B. However, four distinct “strips” can be defined well.
  - 1. The coastal plain
  - 2. The central mountain range
    - I. Flanked by foothills or the *shephelah* on the west
    - II. Flanked by the Judean wilderness on the east
  - 3. The Jordan river valley
  - 4. The transjordan highlands

#### IV. Jewish **attachment** to the land

- A. The Hebrew conception of YHWH (“God”) is interrelated with the geography, climate, and inhabitants of the land of Israel. This is a land, which by virtue of its geography, climate, and societies, would force Israel to trust and depend upon a sovereign God, if indeed they would take, occupy, and keep the land.
- B. Jewish existence—historically, politically, religiously—is born of and rooted in the land.
  - 1. Babylonian exile and return
  - 2. Rabbinic attitudes after Roman devastations of 70 and 135 A.D.
  - 3. “The land was much too closely interwoven into the whole fabric of the Jewish religious tradition to require either temple or hierarchy to maintain its uniqueness.”
  - 4. Jews living in the Diaspora depended heavily upon the land for self-identity and religious orientation.
- C. “Judaism without Jerusalem is a body without a heart.” But is this “attachment” in the late twentieth century purely religious, or do “secular” cultural, economic, political, and social considerations overshadow any purely religious reasons for this attachment?

#### V. Christian **detachment** from the land (although sometimes an ambiguous detachment)

- A. An important rift occurred between Judaism and Christianity after the Roman conquests of 70 and 135 A.D.
  - 1. “Christianity’s centre moved away from Jerusalem and never looked back to its first home.”
  - 2. Christians affirmed “heaven” as their home; life on earth was a “journey” or “pilgrimage”; they lived on earth temporarily as “strangers” / “exiles”.

3. This contrast between Jewish and Christian perspectives on the land is striking. Jesus, his first disciples, and the first Christians were all Jews. In Jewish thought, *galuth* (“exile”) is negative (punishment, abandonment, godlessness) and *ha’aretz* (“the land”) is positive (goal, reward, blessing).
  4. Why did followers of Jesus of Nazareth forsake the roots of their homeland and adopt the stance of “exiles” among the Greeks, Romans, and even fellow-Jews, longing not for “Jerusalem” and not for “Palestine” but for “heaven”?
- B. The “other-worldly-ness” of Christianity, i.e. “our homeland is in heaven.” Jesus delivered Israel, not from Parthians or Romans, but from “sins”. His kingdom was “not of this world”. Hence, he left this world and returned to his proper abode (“heaven”) in order to rule his kingdom. So, the home of Christians is where Jesus is, and Christians will experience “homecoming” at his return.
- C. But, on the other hand, Christians live out their lives in the “here and now”. They are “in the world” even though “not of the world”. Furthermore, at the time of this “homecoming” and the belief in a restoration of all things, the concrete realities of “the new heavens and the new earth” will be experienced and enjoyed. The Christian view of the land is not so much a rejecting of “this world” for a spiritualized “world to come”, rather it is a postponement of “the world to come” (and the continuity with “this world”) until the return of the Messiah.
- D. Christianity’s outlook on the land is rooted and grounded in the fact of Jesus himself. He proclaims himself as “temple”; he assumes the role of “high priest” and offers himself as “sacrifice” for the sins of all people. He manifests the *shekinah adonai* (“the presence of the Lord”) on the earth. Historically, he is rooted in the land; eschatologically, to his land he will return. In the interim, he functions as living Lord. He is “free to move wherever he wills,” and until he comes, his followers find “holy space” or “land” in him. So Christian “detachment” from the land is not so much a spiritualization of Jewish *realia* and holy space as it is a personalization of such.

## VI. Islam’s **involvement** in the land

- A. Islam is “detached” both chronologically and geographically from the land.
1. Islam postdates both Judaism and Christianity.
  2. The heart and soul of Islam is to be found in Mecca (and Medina).

- B. Yet, strong attachments of Islam to the land exist.
  - 1. The families of faith have a common ancestry—the patriarch Abraham.
  - 2. Muhammad first directed daily prayers be said facing Jerusalem.
  - 3. Caliphs conquered Jerusalem and began governing Palestine from Ramla in 638 A.D.
  - 4. A few decades later, *Abd el Malik* built the Dome of the Rock on the site of the ancient Jewish temple.
  
- C. The view “from the center” versus the view “from the edge”.
  - 1. The view from the center portrays Islamic history as an outgrowth from a single nucleus, a spreading inkblot labeled “the caliphate”. This view with its fragile “cohesion” via a political authoritarianism cannot give much help in dealing with complex questions concerning the land.
  - 2. The view from the edge which is the viewpoint of the fringe people—the abandoned, the marginalized, the impoverished—holds promise for understanding and perhaps for some solution for the many who have suffered unjustly in the land.
  
- D. The heart of Islam’s land remains modern Saudi Arabia, the home of Mecca and Medina. Issues about Palestine and Jerusalem remain, at best, only involvement for Muslims in the tradition of the caliphate and the sultans.
  
- E. However, the issue about the land for Arabs / Palestinians (most are Muslims, but many are not!), who are kinsmen of the Jews—both descend from Abraham—is quite different.

## VII. **A sociological interpretation**

- A. Think positive! Resist media characterization of the problem.
- B. Whose land? Can the analysis of historical priority work?
- C. Have issues of power and control contributed to the problem? If so, how can these forces be removed?
- D. Do “cultures of power” (i.e. military elite, religious elite, political elite) bear any responsibility for the conflict? If so, what can be done to change these cultures of power?

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- E. Can “pure religion” (i.e. pacifist or peaceful religion(s)) give voice to those without speech, face to those without identity?
  
- F. How can religion, which has a tendency to merge with state, power, control, and thereby become corrupt, resist this tendency toward assimilation? [This problem is quite different for each of the major world religions.]