

JEWISH, CHRISTIAN, AND ISLAMIC ATTITUDES TOWARD THE LAND OF PALESTINE

The ambiguity of the land. Except for the “Great Sea” or Mediterranean to the west and the Jordan River Valley¹ to the east, clear physical boundaries for Palestine,² both in ancient and modern times, have not been easy to determine. For example, what is the definite physical boundary between Palestine and Egypt? The Negev and Sinai are both desert, shifting sands, without permanent definition. The only possible geographical barrier, Wadi el-‘Arish,³ presents no formidable obstacle. Likewise it is difficult to pinpoint any natural boundary between Palestine and Syria to the north. The high Lebanese mountains might qualify, but historically Syria and Palestine are viewed together as a unit by the ruling kingdoms. This geographical ambiguity marks Palestine, or the biblical “land of Canaan,”⁴ as a land between—a byway, crisscrossed by major powers time and time again in their jockeying for supremacy in global affairs. 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

¹The Jordan valley is part of the Great Rift Valley which begins in the Levant and cuts southward into northeastern Africa. See Christopher L. Salter, Joseph J. Hobbs, Jesse H. Wheeler, Jr., and J. Trenton Kostbade, *Essentials of World Regional Geography*, 2nd edition (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 403.

²The Roman emperor Hadrian changed the name of the region to *Provincia Syria Palaestina*, which reflects the Hellenistic form “Philistia” or “the land of the Philistines” (see Genesis 21:32, 34; Exodus 13:17; 1 Kings 4:21).

³Also called the “brook of Egypt,” this dry river bed drains the Sinai peninsula and exits into the Mediterranean just southwest of modern-day Raphia.

⁴See Genesis 17:8; Numbers 34:2. Ancient borders for the apportionment of Canaan by the invading Israelites are given in Numbers 34:1-12; cf. Joshua 15:1-12; Ezekiel 47:15-20. The borders of the land as seen by Moses from Mount Nebo just prior to his death are described in Deuteronomy 34:1-3. A common expression, “from Dan to Beersheba” (see Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20; 2 Samuel 24:2; 1 Kings 4:25), approximates the expanse of land settled by biblical Israel, defined by important Israelite settlements rather than definite natural features.

modern events that haunt many of the inhabitants of the land today and captivate the attention of the rest of the world.⁵

The land “hedged in” between. The length of Palestine north to south, from the Taurus mountains to the Sinai, is about 350 miles. The width west to east, from the Mediterranean to the transjordan desert, is about 60 miles. Comparatively, it is a small area. This long, narrow strip with varying terrain and exceptional climate forms the southwestern arm of what traditionally has been called “the Fertile Crescent.”⁶ The land is “hedged in” by the natural barriers of the Mediterranean to the west and the arid wasteland to the east. This physical geography defines Palestine as a land corridor or passageway from ancient Mesopotamia to Egypt, or in modern designation the only land bridge between the two continents of Asia and Africa!

Palestine and Syria became a middle ground between Mesopotamia and Egypt from both the economic and the political point of view. The mighty kingdoms on both sides of the Fertile Crescent considered this strip of land a thoroughfare; and both of them laboured to impose their authority over it, mainly so as to control the trade routes passing through it and to use it as a bridgehead for defense or offence. The position of Palestine as a land bridge between the great world powers surrounding it has made an indelible impression upon its history. For long periods it was subjugated to foreign rulers. Cultural influences from both the north and the south met here, being carried by the many peoples who traversed its length. This made it very difficult for any kind of independent

⁵The mix of cultural, geographical, historical, and political ambiguity in the land is unmistakable. “Israel has a *complex* geography. The northern region, Galilee, is a *continuation* of the Lebanese mountains, but at a lower altitude. . . . Another upland plateau extends south. . . . This area contains *the ancient Jewish heartland*—Judea and Samaria to Israelis, *the West Bank for Palestinians*—which is supposed to serve as the core of the self-governing Palestinian state. . . . This plateau *gradually* levels off into semidesert, the barren wilderness of Judea. The wilderness merges *imperceptibly* into the Negev.” William Spencer, ed., *Global Studies: The Middle East*, 7th edition (Guilford, CT: Dushkin / McGraw-Hill, 1998), 74. Emphasis is mine [dwf].

⁶The northern part of the “crescent” lies in Syria and Iraq, while the eastern arm of the “crescent” is situated in Iraq and a small part of Iran, in what is ancient Mesopotamia, the land between the two great rivers—Tigris and Euphrates. See Salter, et al., *World Regional Geography*, 7th edition, 212.

economic and political development, but it also gave access to all the accomplishments of ancient civilization.⁷

The ancient struggle for this “passageway” continues today, albeit as a “political” or “cultural” corridor between conflicting passions in a battle for homeland. Interestingly, these passions are held by adherents to the three major world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—yet based on different philosophical foundations and held for a variety of reasons.

The struggle of the land also reveals itself as a conflict between two distinct, divergent natural powers—the desert and the sea. This conflict defines two seasons for this sub-tropic zone: wet and cold, and hot and dry. Westerly winds bring wet storms in winter and refreshing summer breezes of the sea. Easterly winds bring the dust and dryness of the desert—hot and burning in the summer but cool and dry in the winter. The rainy season begins October/November. A few weeks after these “early rains” or “former rains,” a green carpet covers the hills and valleys and provides pasture for the flocks. These early rains open the agricultural year. The soil, hardened and cracked by the long summer, is loosened, and the farmer begins ploughing, i.e., seed-time. Rain increases through December/January/February and begins to abate in March. Rainfall varies according to nearness to the sea and altitude. Rainfall decreases with lowness, southness, and/or distance from the sea. Thus, amount of rainfall highlights the endless conflict between desert and sea. The “latter rains” or “spring rains” begin in March/April. As with the early rains, these latter rains also precede a season of seed-time or planting. The importance of these rains to the agriculture of the region cannot be overestimated. By April/May the dry desert winds begin. The sirocco (*khamsin* in Arabic and *sharav* in Hebrew) can last for a few days to a week. The sirocco dries the land and turns it from

⁷Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, revised edition, trans. A. F. Rainey (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1979), 6.

green to yellow. In June/July/August, long days with a scorching sun characterize the dry summer. Agriculture is sustained by the dew. At night the radiation from the land cools the moist, warm air from the Mediterranean Sea. The condensation of the air forms this built-in summer irrigation—dew. August/September begins the season of harvest, a time of festivity and joy. Yet by September/October, with the annual cycle almost complete, the conflict of desert and sea continues with the appearance of the autumn sirocco.

The land of many contrasts. Palestine is an amazingly compact land of many contrasts. The land exhibits many tiny regions with peculiar geographical features and many small districts that differ sharply from one another. Notable geographical variations account for extreme changes in altitude over small distances, noticeable fluctuations in climate over the same, and “chopped up” mountainous appearance. Yet four distinct north-south “strips” can be defined. These are: (1) the coastal plain(s), (2) the central mountain range (flanked on the west by foothills or the *shephelah* and on the east by the Judean wilderness), (3) the Jordan river valley, and (4) the transjordan highlands.

The *coastal plain*, which begins north of Acco near Haifa bay (about 3 miles wide) and broadens southward to Gaza (over 15 miles wide) is not only the country’s Mediterranean outlet but also agricultural land, transportation route, and the heartland of modern, secular Israel (the capital Tel-Aviv/Yafo is located centrally here). The coastal plain is a series of smaller plains, including the plain of Acco, the plain of Sharon, and the plain of Philistia. Only Mount Carmel breaks up the continuity of the coastal plain as *nahal* Kishon drains the Jezreel valley to the Mediterranean in the southern part of the Acco plain.

The *central mountain range* forms the heart of the land occupied by ancient Israel. Today, ironically, it is the heart of modern Palestinian settlement, the West Bank. Galilee in the

north contains the highest of the mountains. Relatively isolated from the southern mountains by the Jezreel or Esdraelon valley, Galilee is divided into “Upper” and “Lower” sections by deep east-west valleys. South of Jezreel begins Mount Ephraim or the mountains of Samaria. Towns like ancient Shechem (modern day Nablus, which is predominately Arab/Palestinian), between Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, exhibit the cultural, ethnic, religious, and political tension that is characteristic of many towns in this West Bank area. Next are the mountains of Judea where important places like ancient Bethel, modern Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron are located. Flanking the Jerusalem hills and the small “Gibeon” plateau immediately to their north are the *shepheleh* and the Judean wilderness. These latter areas act as buffer zones with approaches from the *shepheleh* in the west through distinct east-west valleys (i.e., Aijalon, Sorek, Elah, Guvrin) and approaches from the east over barren, desolate wasteland. South of the mountains of Judea, beginning at Beersheba, is the eastern Negev, a semi-arid, desert-like region.

The *Jordan river valley* forms the third geographical “strip” of Palestine. Starting at the foot of Mount Hermon, at the intersection of modern Syria, Lebanon, and Israel, the valley stretches over 200 miles southward to the gulf of Elat (an extension of the Red Sea) and includes such notable features as the Huleh valley, Chinneroth or the Sea of Galilee/Tiberias, the Dead Sea or Salt Sea, and the Arabah. The entire valley is below sea level with the Sea of Galilee about 700 feet below and the Dead Sea about 1300 feet below. This fertile, lush area served as an important north-south transportation route historically and also as an east-west transition border. Today it remains a significant agricultural region and the modern border between Israel and Jordan.

The final geographical “strip” is the *transjordan highlands*. These mountains rise sharply just east of the Jordan valley and form a broad plateau that reaches from Damascus to the Red

Sea. To the east of these mountains is the Syrian/Arabian desert. Israel's ancient kinsmen neighbors—Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites—lived on these highlands. Today, Israel's modern kinsmen neighbors—Syrians, Jordanians, and Arabians—live on these same highlands.

Jewish attitudes to the land. From the ancient Hebrew perspective, the conception of YHWH (“God”) is interrelated with the geography, climate, and inhabitants of “the land” of Israel.⁸ This is a land that by virtue of its geography, climate, and societies would force Israel to trust and depend on its sovereign God, if indeed they would take, occupy, and keep the land. In the Hebrew Bible, the journeys of the patriarchs, the military campaigns, the tribal boundaries, imagery in the psalms and the writings of the prophets all find meaning by their attachment to the land. In other words, Jewish existence—historically, politically, and religiously—is born of and rooted in the land known as Palestine.

Just as this was true for ancient Israel after the Exodus from Egypt and the return from Exile in Babylon, so it is true of modern, secular Israel since the twentieth-century rise of Zionism and the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. Arthur Hertzberg reflects on the difficulty of God's gift of the land to Israel. In the classical period, he notes:

The Bible itself was already aware of the problem that the land was inhabited by others and that they might therefore claim ownership. It offers two answers: that the tribes living in the land were guilty of many sins, thus defiling [the land], and that no people could claim ultimate ownership in any land, “for the earth is the Lord's.” In modern times, Martin Buber addressed the problem this way as he wrote to Mahatma Gandhi, “God does not give any one portion of the earth away. The conquered land is, in my opinion, only lent even to the conqueror who has settled on it—and God waits to see what he will make of it.” The medieval interpreter Rashi also felt a need to speak to the problem of the land when he commented on Genesis 1:1, “Should the people of the world tell the Jewish people, ‘You are robbers, because you took the land of the seven nations of Canaan by force,’ they could reply, ‘All the earth belongs to the Holy One, praised be

⁸See Deuteronomy 11:8-25.

He. He created it and gave it to whom He pleased. When He willed, He gave it [the land] to them, and when He willed He took it from them and gave it to us.”⁹

Hertzberg concludes that this difficulty, this doctrine of God’s choice or gift of the land to Israel, is a *mystery*.

Even after the Roman devastations of Palestine in 70 and 135 AD deprived the Jewish nation of both temple and priesthood, “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.”¹⁰

It was impossible to forget that it was within the Land of Israel that the religious formation of the Jewish people had taken place. A sanctity remained inherent in its soil. The concept of a ‘return’ was never absent from Jewish thought, and there was no alternative but the holy soil of The Land to which a ‘return’ could be envisaged. Jews did not forget that once before there had been an exile and a restoration.¹¹

Jews living in the Diaspora to a large extent depended heavily on the land for self-identity and religious orientation.¹² Codifications of Oral Law show rabbinic encouragement of this attachment. The Mishnah says:

⁹Arthur Hertzberg, ed., *Judaism: Great Religions of Modern Man*, general editor, Richard A. Gard (New York, NY: Washington Square, 1961), 148-149.

¹⁰James Parkes, *Whose Land? A History of the Peoples of Palestine*, revised edition (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1970), 32-33.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²See Shmuel Safrai, “Relations between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel,” *The Jewish People in the First Century*, Vol. I, edited by S. Safrai, M. Stern, D. Flusser, and W. C. van Unnik (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1974), 184-215. See also Safrai’s section on “The Place of the Land of Israel in the Life of the Nation” in *A History of the Jewish People*, edited by H. H. Ben-Sasson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1976), 307-313.

One may compel his entire household to go up with him to the land of Israel, but none may be compelled to leave it. All of one's household may be compelled to go up to Jerusalem, but none may be compelled to leave it.¹³

For the rabbis, it was better to “live in the land of Israel,” even in a predominately Gentile city, than to “live outside of the land,” even in a predominately Jewish city. “Whoever lives in the land of Israel is considered a believer in God. . . . Whoever lives outside of the land is considered to be in the category of one who worships idols.” The one who lives in the land lives “a sinless life”; the one who walks four cubits in the land receives “a place in the world to come.”¹⁴ While this viewpoint seems strange and extreme to moderns, it does highlight the unwavering attachment to the land in postbiblical rabbinic thought, an attachment that undoubtedly has continued until the present.

One could argue, however, that “secular” political and economic considerations strongly overshadow any purely religious reasons for this attachment in modern Judaism. Hertzberg notes that, while Zionism found its nurture in the soil of rabbinic teachings about the Holy Land and a return to it, the contemporary expression of Zionism blends three important elements—“the pain of the Exile, in its modern manifestation in anti-Semitism; the example of national revivals in Europe and the world; and a secularized version of the Messianic ideal.”¹⁵ Daniel Pipes contrarily asserts that, whereas Islamic attachment is sporadic, inconsistent, and politically motivated, the Jewish attachment is rooted firmly in both history and theology apart from

¹³Mishnah *Ketubot* 13:11, quoted in Hertzberg, *Judaism*, 151.

¹⁴*Ketubot* 110b-111a, quoted in Hertzberg, *Judaism*, 151.

¹⁵Hertzberg, *Judaism*, 172.

political motivations.¹⁶ Brian Lancaster similarly supposes as determinative the theological underpinnings of Zionism. He writes:

The equation of Zionism with what is generally understood as nationalism is very misleading, and has become the vehicle for a peculiarly modern form of anti-semitism. The Zionist ideal is not simply a political goal grafted onto a group of people defined by some cultural or social heritage. Jerusalem, to which the biblical word ‘Zion’ refers, and Israel itself occupy an absolutely central place within the corpus of Jewish teaching and tradition. “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea we wept, when we remembered Zion,” cries the Psalmist (Psalm 137:1). Judaism without Jerusalem is a body without a heart. All prayers have focused on Zion for two thousand years; many commandments of the Torah can operate only in relation to the Land of Israel; Jewish history—which is seen as the vehicle of God’s presence in the world—is ultimately defined in relation to Israel; and Jews have always aspired to settle in the Land of Israel when conditions permitted.¹⁷

But the view of Pipes and Lancaster seems to restrict “Zionism” to apolitical meanings, and this is not realistic historically. To deny the political motivations of Zionism, ever from its inception by noted intellectuals like Theodor Herzl, runs the risk of mythologizing the movement that definitely had a legitimate relationship to nonreligious claims on the land.¹⁸

In fact, extreme religious ideology motivated certain Orthodox Jews to organize against the Zionists. For example:

In 1912, Agudat Israel, the political wing of Jewish orthodoxy, was founded. Led by rabbis from Eastern Europe and Germany, it fought to preserve strict adherence to ancient religious norms and withdrew from the political struggles of the Gentile world. If left to its own devices internally, orthodoxy promised unswerving loyalty to whatever regime happened to be in power in any given country. Zionism, assimilation, socialism,

¹⁶Daniel Pipes, “If I Forget Thee: Does Jerusalem really matter to Islam?” in Spencer, ed., *Global Studies: The Middle East*, 7th edition, 214-217.

¹⁷Brian Lancaster, *The Elements of Judaism* (Shaftesbury, Dorset, UK: Element, 1993), 13-14.

¹⁸For more about Zionism, see the excellent section “Zionism and Israel” in Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1991), 257-342.

Western democratic values—all were rejected in favor of strict observances of customary law.¹⁹

Interestingly, this anti-Zionist agenda came precisely from those most closely aligned with the ancient practice of Judaism. But ancient attachment to the land no longer held sway. Hope in Messianic intervention to overcome centuries of Diaspora dampened the zeal for human efforts toward any in-their-lifetime return to literal Zion. Orthodox Jews thus opted for assimilation to Torah and apocalyptic fantasy, while moderate and liberal Jews found some assurance in acculturation to the surrounding society. These varying attitudes among Jews toward Palestine hardly represent any monolith.

Christian attitudes to the land. An important rift occurred between Judaism and Christianity after the Roman conquests of 70 and 135 AD.

Christianity's centre moved away from Jerusalem and never looked back to its first home. For Christianity the *organizational* break was complete. In all its subsequent history it never again regarded the Holy Land as either its intellectual or geographical centre. No bishop of Jerusalem ever contested the primacy of the Pope of Rome or the Patriarch of Constantinople; no special authority ever attached to the opinions of the scholars of the Holy Land; and no permanent centres of learning came into existence in the country.²⁰

The cultural and political upheavals inflicted by the Flavians upon Palestine served to reaffirm the thinking of Christians that “heaven” was their home. Life on earth was a “pilgrimage” or “journey”. They lived on earth only temporarily as “strangers” or “exiles”. The second century *Epistula ad Diognetum* nicely summarizes this Christian perspective.

For the distinction between Christians and other men, is neither in country nor language nor customs. For they do not dwell in cities in some place of their own. Yet while living in Greek and barbarian cities, according as each obtained his lot, and following the local customs, both in clothing and food and in the rest

¹⁹Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (Danbury, CT: Franklin Watts, 1982), 51.

²⁰Parkes, *Whose Land?*, 32-33.

of life, they show forth the wonderful and confessedly strange character of the constitution of their own citizenship. They dwell in their own fatherlands, but as if sojourners in them; they share all things as citizens, and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is a foreign country. They pass their time upon earth, but they have their citizenship in heaven.²¹

The contrast between Christian and Jewish perspectives about the land is striking. Even after giving due weight to the respective polemics of Jews and Christians against each other, the contrast remains surprising.²² Why did those Jews who became followers of Jesus of Nazareth forsake the roots of their homeland and adopt the stance of “exiles” among Greeks, Romans, and even fellow-Jews, longing not for “Jerusalem” and not for “Palestine” but for “heaven”? What caused this radical shift in thinking? This problem is especially acute since *galuth* (“exile”) bears negative connotations in Jewish thought, such as punishment, godlessness, abandonment, and *ha’aretz* (“the land”) figures so positively, as goal, reward, blessing.

For early Christian writers, the anticipation by Israel’s prophets and priests of a coming redeemer, the coming kingdom of God, a new covenant, the restoration of Israel, the outpouring of God’s spirit, the day of the Lord, and a new heavens and earth all find fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth and his work. But early Christian authors do not speak in concrete, tangible realities. They speak in “other-worldly” terms. Jesus delivered Israel, not from Parthians or Romans, but

²¹*The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. II, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1913), 359, 361. This epistle’s use of “Philippians 3:20, which refers to Christians as a ‘colony of heaven’ (Moffatt), expresses most aptly the point of [Diognetus], with its simultaneous recognition of the transcendent destiny and the earthly responsibility of the Christian.” *Early Christian Fathers*, edited by Cyril C. Richardson (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1970), 217. However, Everett Ferguson cautions, “The Greek apologists were defending Christianity before a [hostile, dwf] pagan world, so a certain idealizing is to be expected in their presentation.” *Early Christians Speak* (Austin, TX: Sweet, 1971), 198, 201.

²²Note that this ancient difference in attitudes about Palestine predates the very existence of Islam!

from “sins”.²³ His kingdom was “not of this world”.²⁴ He left this world and returned to his proper abode or heaven in order to rule his kingdom. So Paul can tell fellow-believers, “Our homeland [Greek, *to politeuma*] is in heaven.”²⁵ The home of Christians is where Jesus is, and Christians will experience “homecoming” at his return.

Yet the emphasis in Christian thought is not on heaven itself in a Platonic or Philonic sense.²⁶ “The heavenly realm is not some static eternal state but rather part of the forward

²³See Luke 1:68-79.

²⁴John 18:36.

²⁵Philippians 3:20. Hermann Strathmann comments, “The commonwealth to which Christians belong, their ‘homeland’, is in heaven. Hence *ta epigeia* [“earthly things”] are neither normative nor attractive for them. Here they are only *paroikoi kai parepidemoi* [“sojourners and exiles”], with no rights of domicile. Exposition, then, is not to be based on the usage which employed *politeumata* for foreign colonies outside the mother country with certain specified rights. If so, the Christian community would be a heavenly *politeuma* in the world. What we have here is rather a figurative use of the term in the sense of state or commonwealth and with a view to describing the fact that Christians are inwardly foreigners, not specifically in relation to the earthly state, which is not mentioned at all in the context, but very generally in relation to the earthly sphere. More positively, the word is used to describe their membership of the heavenly kingdom of Christ, to which they belong as it were by constitutional right. The *basileia ton ouranon* [‘kingdom of heaven’] is the *politeuma* [‘commonwealth’] of Christians.” “*Polis, polites, politeumai, politeia, politeuma,*” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VI, edited by G. Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 535.

Andrew T. Lincoln says *politeuma* here is “the state as a constitutive force regulating its citizens. [It] can be compared to the significance of the term *basileia* [‘kingdom’] as reign rather than realm.” *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimensions in Paul’s Thought With Special Reference to His Eschatology*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, general editor, R. McL. Wilson (London, UK: Cambridge, 1981), 99.

²⁶This is the viewpoint of W. D. Davies who, on the basis of certain strata of New Testament tradition, concludes, “It is justifiable to speak of the *realia* of Judaism as being spiritualized in the Christian dispensation.” *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1974), 366. Better is the approach taken by Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977), who criticizes Davies and says, “The land there is more central than Davies believes and that it has not been so fully spiritualized as he concludes. The promissary language [in the New Testament] is focused on land and surely cannot be understood apart from it” (p. 170).

moving history of salvation.”²⁷ In the now, believers experience the tension of “already home, but not yet home.”²⁸

Because of Christ’s exaltation in his glory, [believers] too belong to the heavenly commonwealth where Christ in his glory now is; but they cannot yet claim all their rights as citizens, for its constitutive power must at present be exercised on earth through their bodies of humiliation.²⁹

Christians are “strangers” and “exiles” upon the earth;³⁰ they live in *diaspora*.³¹ On the other hand, they are no longer *xenoi* (“aliens”) and *paroikoi* (“strangers”); they belong to God’s household, and they enjoy citizenship with the saints.³² They live “in the heavenly (places)”;³³ they live in “the Jerusalem above”.³⁴ In other words, believers in Jesus experience a “now, but

²⁷Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 108.

²⁸See Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 68-75. Compare the New Testament expressions, “the coming age” and “the age(s) to come” in Matthew 12:32; Luke 18:30; 20:35; Ephesians 2:7; Hebrews 6:5.

²⁹Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 107.

³⁰1 Peter 2:1; cf. 1:1 and Hebrews 11:13, where Abraham and the patriarchs function as patterns for Christians. Abraham anticipated a future “city” (Hebrews 11:10; cf. 12:22; 13:14). On the use of these words by the Septuagint (LXX), cf. Genesis 23:4; Psalm 39:12.

³¹“The word *diaspora* is never used to translate *golah* and *galuth* in the LXX; it is clearly distinct in meaning.” See Friedrich Samuel Rothenberg, “Diaspora,” *The New Testament International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. I, general editor, Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 685-686. For Christian use of the word, see 1 Peter 1:1; James 1:1; cf. John 7:35; Acts 8:1, 4; 11:19. On the first two references, Rothenberg remarks, “If these letters were written to Gentile Christian churches, the word *diaspora* has here a special theological significance. The apostles see in the fact of the ‘dispersion’ a parallel to the Jewish dispersion.” Ibid.

³²See Ephesians 2:19.

³³A favorite expression in Ephesians (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).

³⁴Galatians 4:26.

not yet” ambiguity, an ambiguity to be resolved at the final consummation of all things and the second coming of Christ.

Being with Christ is a temporary stage prior to the consummation of salvation which will involve a manifestation of Christ in glory *from* heaven. This final salvation at the parousia is not depicted as Christ taking believers back to heaven with him. Rather Christ’s coming from heaven will bring about the redemption of the body as believers are clothed with heavenly glory.³⁵

At the time of “homecoming” and the restoration of all things, the concrete realities of “the new heavens and the new earth”³⁶ will be experienced and enjoyed. The Christian view of “the land” is not so much a case of rejecting ‘*olam hazeh* (“this world”) for a spiritualized or Platonized ‘*olam haba* (“the world to come”); rather it is a postponement of ‘*olam haba* (and all that it encompasses by way of parallel with ‘*olam hazeh*³⁷) until the return of Messiah. Jewish thought interestingly follows a similar path in both apocalyptic and even rabbinic circles.³⁸

This modified “spiritualized” version of the land by Christianity certainly has contributed to both a representational presence in Palestine by most all branches of Christendom and also a steady stream of pilgrims who have visited the holy sites regularly. In fact, the abuse of the pilgrims by Islamic administrators in Palestine during the late eleventh century gave Pope Urban II a pretext whereby to inflame the anti-Muslim sentiments of congregants gathered at Clermont, France in November 1095.

If neither the words of Scripture arouse you, nor our admonitions penetrate your minds, at least let the great suffering of those who desired to go to the Holy Places stir you up. Think of those who made the pilgrimage across the sea! Even if they were more

³⁵Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 108.

³⁶See Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21.

³⁷Note the striking parallels between Revelation 22 and Genesis 2.

³⁸See George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, Vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1977), 377-395.

wealthy, consider what taxes, what violence they underwent, since they were forced to make payments and tribute almost every mile, to purchase at every gate of the city, at the entrance of churches and shrines, at every side journey from place to place; also, if any accusation whatsoever was made against them, they were compelled to purchase their release; but if they refused to pay money, the prefects of the Gentiles, according to their custom, urged them fiercely with blows. What shall we say of those who took up the journey without anything more than trust in their barren poverty, since they seemed to have nothing except their bodies to lose? They not only demanded money of them, which is not an unendurable punishment, but also examined the callouses of their heels, cutting them open and cutting the skin back, lest, perchance, they had sewed something there. Their unspeakable cruelty was carried on even to the point of giving them scammony to drink until they vomited, or even burst their bowels, because they thought the wretches had swallowed gold or silver; or, horrible to say, they cut open their bowels with a sword and, spreading out the folds of their intestines, with frightful mutilation disclosed whatever nature held there in secret . . .”³⁹

Regardless of the accuracy of Urban’s accusations, the zeal of Christian pilgrims for the land and the concern of church officials for unhindered access to holy sites in Palestine is unmistakable. Such devotion to the land undoubtedly sparked the most famous European quest for the Holy Land, the Crusades.

So while Christian believers are considered to be “strangers” and “exiles” on the earth, many have a firm foot in this world and sincerely desire the earthly Jerusalem, “the Jerusalem above” notwithstanding! And, in more recent times, this Christian attraction to the land sharply defines, as something more than just worldly, European and American obsession with political control and influence of Palestine. It also helps explain some of the bizarre “dispensational” or “premillennial” interpretations of Middle Eastern events. In certain Christian circles, expectation for a literal return of Messiah Jesus to Jerusalem run very, very high.

Islamic attitudes to the land. Islam, as far as some adherents to Christianity and Judaism are concerned, is a religion come-lately. Judaism came first, then Christianity, and finally Islam

³⁹F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1985), 251-252.

over six centuries later. With its origin in Mecca in the early 600s AD, Islam understandably does not appear to have the same historic attachment to Jerusalem and Palestine as do Judaism and Christianity. Yet very soon after the founding of Islam by Muhammad, Arab caliphs conquered Jerusalem and began governing Palestine from Ramla in 638 AD. Only a few decades later, the caliph *'Abd al-Malik* built the Dome of the Rock on the site of the ancient Jewish temple. This hallowing of the place of Muhammad's Ascent, the near sacrifice of Ishmael, and other important Islamic traditions, strongly asserted the "final truth of Islam" over both Judaism and Christianity.

Notwithstanding these Islamic attachments to Palestine, the Jewish mind often disdains what it perceives as an ambivalent attitude by Muslims toward the land. Daniel Pipes notes, "Muslims have taken serious interest in Jerusalem at times when it has most conspicuously served them politically; and when the political climate has changed, the religious interest has flagged."⁴⁰ But this viewpoint is a bit too critical. The families of faith do have a common ancestry from the patriarch Abraham. This is especially true of Arab and Jewish bloodlines. Both spring forth from "their father Abraham" and can make a legitimate claim to the promises of God through him. Furthermore, Muhammad, the father of Islamic faith, at first directed that daily prayers be said facing Jerusalem, and this indicated "how firmly [he] believed in his continuation of the Abrahamic tradition."⁴¹ Jews have a claim to the land, but they do not have the only claim.

⁴⁰Pipes, "If I Forget Thee," in Spencer, ed., *Global Studies: The Middle East*, 7th edition, 215.

⁴¹G. H. Jansen, *Militant Islam* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979), 22.

Maybe this argument from a historical perspective falls into the trap of looking at this very complex issue “from the center,” that is, chronologically and hierarchically from the Prophet through the caliphs and sultans, with emphasis on the powerful elite—the Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, Ayyubids, and Mamluks, and the Ottomans/Turks.⁴² This view “from the center” leaves many questions unanswered: Where did all those Muslims in Palestine come from? Why did they desire to settle in Palestine? Why did they remain there to champion a homeland for their families and their descendants? With its fragile “cohesion,” the view from the center often fails to give substantial help in dealing with complex questions about the land. As William Spencer observes:

The Arab states that surround Israel, although politically new, are heirs to a proud and ancient tradition, reaching back to the period when Islamic-Arab civilization was far superior to that of the Western world. This tradition and the self-proclaimed commitment to Arab brotherhood, however, have yet to bring them together in a united front toward Israel. A major obstacle to Arab unity is the variety of political systems that exist in the individual Arab states.⁴³

This highlights the problem of Islamic fragmentation as a major pitfall of the view from the center which depicts the history of Islam as a unified outgrowth from one single nucleus, or a spreading inkblot called “the caliphate.”⁴⁴

Contrarily, “the view from the edge” or the viewpoint of people on the fringe—the abandoned, the marginalized, and the impoverished—holds promise for understanding and

⁴²Other powerful elites who ruled Palestine include the Canaanites, Israelites, Assyrians, Judeans, Babylonians, Persians, Hasmoneans, Herodians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Crusaders, the British, and now the Israelis.

⁴³William Spencer, “The Middle East: Theater of Conflict,” in Spencer, ed., *Global Studies: The Middle East*, 7th edition, 28.

⁴⁴See Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York, NY: Columbia, 1994), 8.

perhaps some solution to the injustices suffered in the land of Palestine by many. If anything, Palestinians and their leaders are “on the edge”! They certainly are not “at the center” under the Israelis, and they probably are not “at the center” in the world of Islam. The heart of Islam’s “Land” remains modern Saudi Arabia, the home of Mecca and Medina. Just as Jerusalem is the heart and soul of Judaism, so Mecca is the heart and soul of Islam.

The city of Mecca . . . exerts a pull on the world’s 800 million Muslims that begs the emotional sway of any other sacred site. Millions make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca during the sacred month of Dhul-Hijja, temporarily trading their distinctive national costumes for the anonymity of the *hajji’s* white robes. Hundreds of millions more prostrate themselves toward Mecca five times a day, acknowledging the holy city and its devotional epicenter, the Kaaba, as Islam’s *kiblah*, or focus of prayer. Mecca is unexampled in another respect as well, for unlike Ise, Jerusalem, or the Vatican, it is proscribed to non-believers—and has been since Muhammad took the city for Islam in A.D. 630. Foreign visitors have entered Mecca from time to time, but only in disguise and only at their peril.⁴⁵

So the issue about Jerusalem and Palestine, at least for Muslims in the tradition of the caliphate and the sultans, remains a difficult one at best, as not only cultural and political concerns but also religious meanings dictate their involvement in both Palestine and Saudi Arabia. The issue about the land for Arabs who are kinsmen of the Jews—both descendants from Abraham—is also complex and difficult. To try to distinguish these two—for example, those who are ethnically Arab or Palestinian and those who are religiously Muslim—makes for interesting discussion, to say the least.

Whose land? Is the question of ownership of the land in Palestine a question of historical priority? This approach raises perpetual questions of uncertainty. Even the patriarch Abraham was a sojourner in the land. He lived among others and coexisted peaceably with the inhabitants of the land. Many peoples predated Abraham in Palestine, and descendants of any of those early

⁴⁵Desmond Stuart, *Mecca* (New York, NY: Newsweek, 1980), 11.

predecessors to Abraham would be difficult if not impossible to find, although some Egyptians might qualify. Does the land belong to them? Historically, Canaanites conquered and were ousted, Philistines and Israelites also conquered and were ousted, then foreigners were mixed in by the Assyrians, for example, the Samaritans, then Hellenists, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and Turks.⁴⁶ In Palestine the problem of settlement, displacement, and resettlement is acute. It really defies any historical solution.

The political solution deals with the exercise of power and control, and the flow of regional and global politics. But with politics comes strife, and with strife comes war, and war brings death, and death produces bitter, bitter hatred. Correspondingly, those who are “faceless” or “unheard” become displaced in society as refugees or homeless and without land. These sufferers of injustice rise up to claim for themselves and their families the dignity and the respect of a secure resting place or a home(land). If this is denied by further oppression, then the dignity and respect of a resting place or a belonging place is found in a cause or a program and even something radical if necessary. G. H. Jansen, in his insightful analysis of militant Islam, details almost sixty occurrences from 1798 to 1956, roughly 150 years, “when Muslim territory passed

⁴⁶Hershel Shanks notes twenty-three conquests of Jerusalem throughout history. His book about Jerusalem highlights, “How the Israelites conquered the city from the Jebusites—three times. How the Assyrians devastated it after the Israelite confederation broke apart. How the Babylonians destroyed it. How the Persians defeated the Babylonians and ruled Jerusalem. How Alexander the Great conquered the world and Hellenized Jerusalem. How Alexander’s heirs fought over the city until the Maccabees established an independent Jewish state once again, ruled by the Hasmonean dynasty. How King Herod ousted the Hasmoneans and killed their descendants. How Roman prefects and procurators exercised direct control over the city. How the Jews revolted against Roman rule and the Romans retaliated by destroying Jerusalem. How the Jews revolted again and the Romans banned Jews from Jerusalem and rebuilt it as a Roman city renamed Aelia Capitolina. How the city became Christian under Byzantium. How Arab Moslems ousted the Christians. How the Crusaders ousted the Moslems. How the Moslems ousted the Crusaders.” *Jerusalem: An Archaeological Biography* (New York, NY: Random House, 1995), xiii.

under Western Christian control or conquest was attempted, and of Muslim resistance thereto.”⁴⁷

This cycle of inequity, oppression, response, and uprising is an old theme, as old as humanity.

Also, the role of cultures of power must not be forgotten in this analysis. These are distinct cultures—the military elite, the religious elite, and the political elite—that have their own particular agenda and goals. This cultural elite agenda most often is driven by greed and by desire for control and power. Unfortunately, organized power often neglects the little people. In a power system, for example, the needs of the “state” usually take precedence over the needs of the common people.

Contrary to this program of power and control, the religious solution in its intended form takes up the plight of the common person and the marginalized, that is, those who are “on the edge.” This spiritual force gives voice to those without speech, and such divine inspiration gives face to those without identity. This empowerment comes via the community of the common in contact with the divine, and such finds representation in the sayings of the Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, the Hebrew prophets, certain Islamic spiritual traditions, and notable pacifist thinkers. But religion joined with the state often becomes corrupt and out of touch with those “on the edge.” A tendency of seeking power rather than humility, position rather than service, wealth rather than sharing, and pride rather than submission is evident, and such corruption of the original intent of the religious axioms of the three major faiths involved as players in Palestine seriously retards efforts toward peace in today’s Middle East. On the positive side, however, are those expressions of goodwill, peace, and cooperation among many Jews, Christians, and Muslims even in Palestine. Good things do happen and go far toward mutual understanding and the reversal of old feelings.

⁴⁷Jansen, *Militant Islam*, 63-65.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aharoni, Yohanan. *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*. Revised edition. Translated by A. F. Rainey. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1979.
- Bauer, Yehuda. *A History of the Holocaust*. Danbury, CT: Franklin Watts, 1982.
- Ben-Sasson, H. H., ed. *A History of the Jewish People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1976.
- Brown, Colin, gen. ed. *The New Testament International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Three volumes. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Land*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977.
- Bulliet, Richard W. *Islam: The View from the Edge*. New York, NY: Columbia, 1994.
- Davies, W. D. *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1974.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Early Christians Speak*. Austin, TX: Sweet, 1971.
- Friedrich, G., ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Ten volumes. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968.
- Hertzberg, Arthur, ed. *Judaism: Great Religions of Modern Man*. General editor Richard A. Gard. New York, NY: Washington Square, 1961.
- Hoekema, Anthony A. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Jansen, G. H. *Militant Islam*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Lake, Kirsopp, trans. *The Apostolic Fathers*. Vol. II. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1913.
- Lancaster, Brian. *The Elements of Judaism*. Shaftesbury, Dorset, UK: Element, 1993.
- Lincoln, Andrew T. *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimensions in Paul's Thought With Special Reference to His Eschatology*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series. General editor, R. McL. Wilson. London, UK: Cambridge, 1981.
- Moore, George Foot. *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*. Three volumes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1977.
- Parkes, James. *Whose Land? A History of the Peoples of Palestine*. Revised edition. Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1970.

David W Fletcher, Spring 2000, Revised July 2012

All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / www.davidwfletcher.com

Peters, F. E. *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1985.

Richardson, Cyril C., ed. *Early Christian Fathers*. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1970.

Safrai, S., M. Stern, D. Flusser, and W. C. van Unnik, eds. *The Jewish People in the First Century*. Two volumes. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1974.

Salter, Christopher L., Joseph J. Hobbs, Jesse H. Wheeler, Jr., and J. Trenton Kostbade. *Essentials of World Regional Geography*. 2nd edition. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1998.

Shanks, Hershel. *Jerusalem: An Archaeological Biography*. New York, NY: Random House, 1995.

Spencer, William, ed. *Global Studies: The Middle East*. 7th edition. Guilford, CT: Dushkin / McGraw-Hill, 1998.

Stuart, Desmond. *Mecca*. New York, NY: Newsweek, 1980.

Telushkin, Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*. New York, NY: William Morrow, 1991.