EQ 78.3 (2006), 203–208

Jerusalem: the Christian perspective

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KEY WORDS: Jerusalem, Land, Melchisedek, Aelia Capitolina, Zionism, Islam.

It is impossible to think of Jerusalem without thinking of the land as a whole and *vice versa*. The two are so closely intertwined that consideration of the one necessarily involves the other. I have tried, therefore, to consider the two together.

Continual cycles of conquest and capitulation, nomadic incursion and settlement, invasion from sea and from land, have given the land we call holy a decidedly mixed history, and with it a mixed population. Throughout the ancient world and even today people of different faiths and ethnic origins invest the land in which they live with a greater or lesser amount of sacredness. The origins of Israel, then, whether these are understood in terms of intruding semi-nomads or of the further organisation of peoples already in Palestine, or of both, have to be understood in the light of this plural background. Similarly, Israel's understanding of the land which was to be theirs has to be understood in the context of 'belonging to a place' which is so common. Even the biblical accounts in the books of Joshua and Judges of the unification of the land and peoples leave us in little doubt as to the mixed population of the time, and this situation seems to have continued well into the monarchical period.[1]

Consciousness that the land was theirs by divine promise was widespread in early Israel. This theme dominates the Bible, and is used hundreds of times in a variety of ways. The gift of the land was, however, *conditional*. It required certain kinds of moral and cultic behaviour, and without these God's covenant with his people could be broken, and they could lose the right to continue living in the land (Deut. 4:25-7; 1 Kgs 9:6-7; 2 Kgs 17:5-18; Jer. 9:13-16). Indeed, Jeremiah thought that the covenant was so completely broken that a new one was needed in its place (Jer. 31:31). In spite of their dire warnings to a fickle and rebellious people, however, the prophets seem to have continued hoping against hope that Israel would repent and that God would restore the land to his people (Jer. 16:14-15; Ezek. 36:8-15).

It has been noted that part of the 'conditionality' which attaches to the land has to do with Israel's treatment of the stranger or alien in its midst. The stranger was not to be oppressed, and was to be treated as a native (Lev. 19:33-4). Wages were not to be withheld from strangers and the poor generally (Deut. 24:14), and justice was to be meted out impartially (Exod. 12:49; Deut. 1:16; 24:17; 27:19).

1 See further M. H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 9-10; A. D. H. Mayes, Judges (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 66ff.; Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: a Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1989), 103-04; Gerald McDermott, *Evangelicals and Israel* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Centre, 2003), 8-9.

From the time of the Exodus a 'mixed multitude' went with the Israelites, and even during the conquest they concluded various kinds of agreement for co-existence between Israel and other people in the land. This is true of the very narratives which speak of Israelite conquest, and it seems to have been true throughout the biblical period. Ezekiel's vision of re-settlement after the Exile includes a portion for the strangers who reside within Israel (Ezek. 47:21-23). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the Bible shows us the centrality of *justice* in Israel's dealings with the people roundabout. There can be no enduring peace without such an understanding of biblical and theological justice.[2]

What can be said of the land as a whole can also be said of Jerusalem; its main city and capital of many kingdoms. In its pre-Israelite days it seems to have been a stronghold of the Jebusites. While its conquest is reported in Joshua (10:1, 22-27) and in Judges (1:8), it seems clear also that they *could not* (Josh. 15:63) or *did not* (Judg. 1:21) drive out the original inhabitants, and seem to have co-existed with them until well after the rise of the monarchy in Israel (2 Sam. 24:15-25).

The first reference in the Bible to Jerusalem seems to be in the story about Abraham (still called Abram), and the priest-king Melchisedek, King of Salem (usually taken to be Jerusalem. The encounter itself takes place in a valley near Jerusalem). This is a most remarkable passage: a Canaanite priest-king (the very thing Israel was told to destroy) brings the father of the faithful bread and wine and blesses him. Abraham then makes him an offering. What are we to make of this incident?

Many of the historical details lying behind the story have been confirmed by recent archaeological and literary discoveries. Von Rad comments that 'Melchisedek, in his veneration of God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, came close to believing in the One God of the world, whom Israel alone knew... Such a positive, tolerant evaluation of a Canaanite cult outside Israel is unparalleled in the Old Testament.'[3] However, it is not only an evaluation of a cult that is at stake here. Melchisedek is later taken as a justification for the sacral kingship of the Davidic king: 'Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchisedek' (Ps. 110:4), Our Lord himself refers to this psalm in a messianic context (Mark 12:35-37 and parallels), and certainly later Christian reflection relates the priesthood of Melchisedek to the eternal and unchanging priesthood of Christ himself (Heb. 6:20-7:25).

From the time of the exile onwards, Jerusalem has been ruled by the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. The last named destroyed it in AD 70 as a reprisal for a rebellion, and then in AD 135, after suppressing another revolt, refounded it as a pagan city, *Aelia Capitolina*, which the Jews were forbidden to enter. A gentile-led church continued to survive there until the conversion of Constantine when, because of the influence of his mother, Helena, it began to

2 This is the burden of Naim Ateek's, *Justice and Only Justice*, especially chs. 4 and 8.

3 Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM, 1972), 80.

become the important site of pilgrimage it is today. The See of Jerusalem, which was suffragan to Caesarea, was raised to patriarchal dignity at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). From the time of St Cyril (304-386) onwards, Palestine, and particularly Jerusalem, began to be seen as 'the fifth Gospel', an important place not only of pilgrimage but also of residence for pious Christians, even though the New Testament, conscious of the Church's universal mission, lays little stress on the land as such, whether for Jews or for Christians.[4]

Jerusalem's capitulation to the Muslims in AD 638 brought yet another religious tradition to the Holy City. Muslims regard the land and the city as holy, apparently because it is so called in the Qur'an (Q5:23), and because the prophet of Islam is said to have performed the *mi'raj*, or his night journey to heaven, from the Temple Mount (cf. Q17:1). It is for this reason that the Caliph 'Abd Al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock there in AD 691, to rival the Christian pilgrimage site of the Holy Sepulchre. The Al-Aqsa mosque is nearby. Whether or not the site mentioned in the Qur'an is the one presently identified as the place of the prophet's ascension, and there is much debate on this issue, it has certainly acquired this sense in Muslim piety, and there are many incentives to visit it and to worship at it.[5] It is also true, of course, that the siting of the third holiest shrine of Islam (after the *Ka'aba* in Mecca and the prophet's mosque in Medina), on the Temple Mount itself poses almost insoluble questions as far as the future of Jerusalem is concerned.

The point of this potted history is, of course, to show that Jerusalem has been settled, invaded, destroyed and resettled by people from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Both Christians and Muslims have, for centuries, regarded the city as holy to them, and have important sacred sites there. Any settlement would have to take this into account. In Jewish prophecy the city has often been presented as a place for all nations: it is where they gather (Isa. 2:2-4; Mic. 4:1-4), where the Lord provides a feast for *all* peoples (Isa. 25:6-8), and where the temple becomes a house of prayer for all (Isa. 56:7; cf. Mark 11:17).

The Jewish people make a strong claim to both land and city. It is where their ancestors arrived in the course of their nomadic journeys, it is a land which they conquered and settled; where their judges and kings ruled until the great disruption of the eighth and sixth centuries BC, and to which, after much waiting and longing, they returned from the Exile. It is from here that they were scattered once again, in the reign of Hadrian (AD 135), and to which they have desired ardently to return, especially in the prayer, 'Next Year in Jerusalem'.

Even here, however, there are complicating factors: biblical Israel cannot be identified *simpliciter* with Rabbinic Israel as reconstituted after the Synod of Jamnia (c. AD 100). As has already been noted, there is evidence that Judaism was an actively missionary faith in the ancient world, and claimed a substantial

4 Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 113-14.

5 See further, Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?*, (Oxford: Lion, 2002 rvd edn), 289-90.

number of formal adherents as well as a considerable and influential fringe. It seems clear also that there were conversions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere at a later date. How 'Jewish' are the *Falasha* of Ethiopia, or the *Bani Israil* of Bombay? A significant number of recent immigrants to the State of Israel are thought to be gentiles taking the chance to get out of Russia or Ethiopia. So much is this so that there were reported to be 'judaising' centres for their reception and integration. It is possible still for anyone to be instructed for a period by an orthodox Rabbi, to convert, and thus to acquire the 'right to return' to Israel.[6]

But if the question 'What is a Jew?' is a problematic one, so is the question 'What is an Arab?' Even during the prophet of Islam's lifetime there were notable Jewish tribes in Arabia. When after his death Islam expanded into the rest of the Middle East, North Africa and South Western Europe, the Christian, Jewish and other people of the region gradually became 'arabicised'; Arabic first became a *lingua franca* between conquered and conqueror, and eventually became the main language of society, even if the religious and ethnic communities sometimes clung on tenaciously to their scriptural and religious languages.

The process of 'arabicisation' is complex and difficult enough to assess in its earliest manifestations, but it is accompanied by a mainly political process more recently, which attempted to integrate various Christian communities into the Arab nation, a process resisted by the oriental Jews because Zionism was already in the air, and their eyes were set on Palestine. Their history of both glory and tragedy cannot be ignored.[7]

As we have seen, from the beginning Palestine has seen a great mobility of populations, and this is no less true of the modern period. Ye'or claims that European Muslims from the Balkans were settled in Palestine in the nineteenth century, as were people from the Caucuses and Central Asia. Chapman also admits that it was first the Crusades and then the Zionist enterprise which alerted Muslims to the significance of the land for them.[8]

However, it remains true that whatever we may say from the point of view of history, the Jewish people, wherever they may be and however long they have been there, invariably have a strong attachment to the land and the City. They want access to it, to visit it, to worship there and, if possible, to live there. This sense of belonging is based on strong ethnic, cultural, historical and religious factors. It must be taken into account in any thinking about the land.

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6 See further J. Stambaugh and D. Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), 41ff.; Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 105; Arthur Koestler, *The Thirteenth Tribe* (New York: Random House, 1976).

7 Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian* (London: Mowbray, 1992), 52ff., and Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1996), 200ff.

8 Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi* (New Jersey: Associated University Press, 1985), 385-86, and Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?*, 297. See also McDermott, *Evangelicals and Israel*, 12.

In the same way the Palestinians are there in the land. This is 'a fact on the ground' which no one has been able to deny. Many of the Christian and Muslim communities make ancient claims about their presence in the land, and it is clear that the presence of most of them predates the beginnings of Zionist settlement in the land.

Here then are two people claiming the same piece of territory, and the religious aspects of the claims are very much to the fore. Whatever the Christian (and even Jewish) background to a spiritual understanding of the Promised Land, this will not wash with millions of Jews who have left their homes from India to Morocco and from Moscow to New York to live in *Eretz Israel*.

Christian and Muslim Palestinians, similarly understand at least part of their *raison d'être* to be custody of their respective holy places. Neither side will be driven out by the other, and those who have proposed it on either side are living in a world of fantasy. A way has to be found for these people to live in the same land and the same city. Unfortunately for us, a *one-state* solution which might have been possible *if* the British had sought to fulfil *all* the aspirations expressed in the Balfour Declaration never saw the light of day. Later on the Palestine Liberation Organisation (the PLO) also aspired to a unitary state, where at least some Jews and non-Jews could live together. *Hamas* and *Islamic Jihad* also struggle for a unified State which would be Islamic in character, and where Jews and Christians would have to live in accordance with Shari'a Law. Such a charter clearly causes deep and widespread concern.

Since 1988, however, the PLO has accepted a two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine living side by side and, more or less, in peace. This is now also the official position of the government of Israel and of the international community. Once again, though, there are several intractable problems. The return of Palestinian refugees is one of them: how many can return to their homes, now mostly within Israel? Is financial compensation acceptable for those who cannot return? Who will pay, Israel alone or the international community as well? There is, then, the very real issue of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Will secure access to them by Israel turn any Palestinian State into a number of *de facto* Bantustans, ensuring Israeli hegemony? There are other issues such as the sharing of scarce resource such as water. But the most dramatic of them is easily the future of Jerusalem.

The 1947 UN plan for the partitioning of Palestine envisioned Jerusalem and the area surrounding it as an 'international zone'. This kind of thinking was also supported by many countries and churches, and, indeed, accepted by Israel. It is recognised now, however, that both Palestinians and Israelis feel the need for sovereignty in Jerusalem so strongly that they are unwilling to give it up, even to the international community.[9] Internationalisation, therefore, as a possible solution has given way to some kind of shared sovereignty. Israel has continued to

9 Colin Chapman, *Whose Holy City? Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Oxford: Lion, 2004), 183.

claim sovereignty over the whole of Jerusalem, but it is said that Prime Minister Barak at the 2000 Camp David talks *did* offer Palestinians some sovereignty over parts of Jerusalem. It is thought that the negotiations broke down over the question of control of the Holy Places.

The Anglican position on Jerusalem, as reflected in the Lambeth Conference 1998, Resolution V20, is similar to the stance taken by the eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches meeting in Harare only a few months later. It urges an open and inclusive city, with access for people of all faiths, and shared sovereignty between Israelis and Palestinians. The Harare Assembly refers to a joint Memorandum by the Patriarchs and heads of Christian Communities in Jerusalem, which calls for the application of a special statute for the protection of the Holy Places in Jerusalem, which are to be regarded not simply as monuments but as living centres of community life.[10] Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England have also drawn attention to the importance of international law in the governance of relationships between Israel and the Palestinians.[11]

With so many layers to the problem and with such volatility, it is difficult even to hazard a guess at what might work. It is perhaps enough to note that the trend in recent negotiations seems to be towards Palestinian sovereignty of at least some parts of the City, and Israeli sovereignty over others, with overall municipal co-operation. The question of the settlements remains, as does the complexity of the Old City and the Holy Places. It is possible to imagine a formula for shared sovereignty covering the latter, with actual governance by an inter-religious Council, and with freedom of access for all, guaranteed by the international community. As Colin Chapman has well said, 'If we will it, it is not a dream.'

Abstract

Jerusalem has been settled, invaded, destroyed and resettled by people from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds over the centuries. In particular, both Jews and Arabs have strong historical claims to it. The Anglican church favours an open and inclusive city, with access for people of all faiths.

10 *The Official Report of the Lambeth Conference 1998* (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1999), 427ff.; Diane Kessler (ed.), *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 187-88; Chapman, *Whose Holy City*, 244-45.

11 Chapman, *Whose Holy City?*, 202; Richard Harries, *After the Evil* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 150.