CHOSEN?

Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Chapter 1

READING THE BIBLE AMID THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

The ongoing conflict between the state of Israel and the Palestinian people is intense and complex, and it offers no easy or obvious solution. This chapter considers how to read the Bible responsibly in the midst of that conflict and consider what, if any, guidance may be received from it.

Reading the Bible with reference to any contemporary issue is at best tricky and hazardous, and any conclusion drawn from it is not likely to be persuasive to all parties in the dispute. People of faith can read the Bible so that almost any perspective on a current issue will find some support in the Bible. That rich and multivoiced offering in the Bible is what makes appeals to it so tempting—and yet so tricky and hazardous, because

much of our reading of the Bible turns out to be an echo of what we thought anyway.

THE ISSUE OF LAND

The dispute between Palestinians and Israelis is elementally about land and secondarily about security and human rights. Various appeals are made to the Bible, especially concerning the disputed land. The appeal of the contemporary state of Israel to the Bible concerning the land is direct and simple. It is that the land of promise was given initially and unconditionally to Israel and thus to the ongoing community of Jews. It is a promise made to Abraham, reiterated to succeeding generations in the ancestral narratives of Genesis and then to the generation of the exodus.

A very different understanding of the land is offered in the covenant tradition of Deuteronomy and the prophets, wherein the land is held *conditionally*, depending upon obedience to the Torah. That tradition

Multiple Traditions in One Bible

Biblical scholars have identified a number of often competing traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament. Not only were many books written by various authors, but many books also have multiple authors from multiple generations who edited previous writings. Part of the task of faithful interpretation is to acknowledge the variety of often competing positions found in the same Bible we say is the *Word of the Lord*.

in Deuteronomy, along with the prophetic tradition, asserts that the land is losable. It is possible to conclude that the land is given unconditionally but is held conditionally.

The reality of history is that the land was indeed losable, as the city of Jerusalem was destroyed in the sixth century BCE and the monarchal state of Judah under the Davidic dynasty lost its political identity. In the ongoing tradition after the deportation (exile) of the Jerusalem leaders, there was a great and inevitable interpretive dispute about the reasons why the land had been lost and the ways in which it might be returned and restored. Most likely, the great tradition of land promise and land reception was given final biblical form during this critical period. That final form of the promise took a long look back in history, but it was heavily influenced by the crisis of exile and sought to give legitimacy and assurance in the moment of restoration. The land promise as we have it is in some large part the accomplishment of fifth-century traditionists, an accomplishment that became the bedrock conviction for the Judaism that followed.

EZRA, THE EXCLUSIONIST

The reformulation of the tradition in the fifth century and the evocation of Judaism as heir to ancient Israel were accomplished under the leadership of Ezra the scribe. Ezra is remembered in Jewish tradition as second only to Moses as a religious leader. Ezra referred to the community as "the holy seed" (9:2). That phrase intends a biological identity, so Joseph Blenkinsopp can translate

Sorting Out Some Names and Dates

The term *Israel* came to be used in a variety of ways over the course of time. *Israelites* is the name given to all the descendants of Jacob, who was also called Israel (Gen. 35:10). Jacob, or Israel, had twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. One of these sons was Judah. Things became confusing hundreds of years later when, two generations after King David's reign, the kingdom of Israel split into two nations. The northern kingdom continued to call itself Israel, and the southern kingdom took the name of its largest tribe, Judah.

After the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in the eighth century BCE, *Israel* once again became available as a name for all the descendants of Jacob, including the Judeans. At this point, the names became somewhat interchangeable. Though the political name of the nation that was left remained *Judah* (and later *Judea*), and though the terms *Judaism*, *Jew*, and *Jewish* derive from this name, *Israel* continued to be used side by side with these terms.

Three other names are easier to distinguish. *Jerusalem* is the city in Judah that King David adopted as his capital. *Zion* is another name for Jerusalem. *Canaan* identifies the physical land that the Israelites occupied, because it was originally inhabited by Canaanites.

Key Dates

1000 BCE	King David's reign
922 BCE	Israel divides into north (Israel) and south (Judah, which includes Jerusalem) after Solomon dies.
722 BCE	The Assyrians destroy and annex the north.
587 BCE	The Babylonians destroy the south and exile many leaders.
587–538 BCE	The Exile in Babylon (see glossary)
539 BCE	The Persians (now Iran) under King Cyrus conquer Babylon and then allow the exiles to return and rebuild the temple.

it as "holy race." Ezra's governance, moreover, led to the expulsion of foreign wives who had been acquired during the time of deportation (Ezra 9:1–4; Neh. 13:1–3, 23–30). The exclusion was in order to guarantee the purity of the land and of Israelite society.

BIBLICAL TENSION BETWEEN EXCLUSION AND WELCOME

The biological dimension of identity that necessarily concerned purity and the expulsion of outsiders created an ongoing ambiguity in Jewish identity, as noted by Blenkinsopp:

> The factor of biological descent was certainly important and continues to be so, as is clear from the

> juridical definition of Jewish identity in the State of Israel today. What this means is that unlike Christianity, Judaism has continued to think of itself in terms of peoplehood. But it will be clear . . . that the primary concern is with the *religious* identity of the community, a concern which continues to be paramount throughout the Second Temple period[1]

That ambiguity about outsiders runs through Judaism, as it does in Christian faith in a somewhat different expression.

We should not, however, miss the emphasis on peoplehood that results, in one dimension of Judaism, as a rather hard-nosed conviction about "one people in one land" to the exclusion of others. Thus, the exclusion of the foreign women becomes something of an epitome or metaphor for the maintenance of purity that led as well to the purity of the land, to the exclusion of all others from the land.

Judaism also had and continues to have another interpretive trajectory that makes welcome room for the other. In the postexilic period, such an openness is shown in the story of Jonah, wherein God shows mercy toward Nineveh by sending Jonah to this perceived enemy of ancient Israel; in the narrative of Ruth, which explains that David has a Moabite (non-Jewish) mother, thus in violation of "the holy seed"; and in Isaiah 56, part of which concerns the welcome of foreigners and eunuchs (two populations sure to jeopardize purity) and includes God's promise "that my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (v. 7).

In the current state of Israel with its Zionist policies, the exclusion of the other (now the Palestinians)

is a dominant motif. And while the state of Israel continues to "negotiate" with the Palestinians, the dominant Zionist appeal to land promises continues to hold intransigently to the exclusionary claim that all the land belongs to Israel and the unacceptable other must be excluded, either by law or by coercive violence.

The Bible is ambiguous about "the other." Some books and passages welcome the other; some reject the other. When this dialectic is brought to the matter of the land, it becomes an issue either of making room for the other in the land or of excluding the other from that land. Both parties can appeal to the Bible and find support for their interpretation.

MODERN TENSIONS: SAME OLD SAME OLD

The issue of Bible and land is whether to read with a welcome to the other or with an exclusion of the other. Welcome to the other appears to be a romantic dream in the world of real politics, and certainly current Israeli policy would find such openness to the Palestinians to be absurd. But if welcome to the other is considered romanticism, so ultimate exclusion of the other is a suicidal policy, because the other will not go away and cannot simply be wished away or forced away. As a result, the question of the other becomes the interpretive key to how to read the Bible. The other can be perceived, as in Zionist perspective, as a huge threat to the security of the state and the well-being of

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the holy seed. Conversely, the other can be perceived as a neighbor with whom to work at shalom.

The issue of exclusion or inclusion is one the Christian church also struggles with; the admission of Gentiles to the earliest Jewish Christian community occurred after a huge dispute and an enormous decision in which it finally came to be understood that the gospel concerns God's reach beyond settled boundaries to the other. That same interpretive dispute has been performed many times since in the ongoing world of faithful interpretation:

- Much of the Bible (in both Testaments) sanctions slavery. In Britain and the United States, ending slavery involved a hard interpretive struggle, and there exists a continuing legacy of racism.
- The patriarchal casting of the Bible treats women as second class. Only in recent times have women begun to be accepted as equal members of a welcoming community.
- Until recently, the Bible has been read as a judgmental text toward gays and lesbians as threaten-

> ing others. Now that view has largely yielded to a welcome.

It is the same script being performed anew with every issue, and every time it is a difficult life-or-death issue. In the current Near East, the issue of the other is acute. It matters enormously how the Bible is read. The proponents of "holy seed" can readily appeal to the Bible, but the ongoing work of interpretation pushes us in a different direction. We know that how we read the Bible and where in the Bible we read is largely determined by our vested interest, our hopes, and elementally our fears—in many cases, our fear of the other. Martha Nussbaum has written concisely and eloquently about the issue in the wake of her study of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India:

> The clash between proponents of ethnoreligious homogeneity and proponents of a more inclusive pluralistic type of citizenship is a clash between two types of people within a single society. At the same time, this clash expresses tendencies that are present, at some level, in most human beings: the tendency to seek domination as a form of self-protection, versus the ability to respect others who are different, and to see in difference a nation's richness rather than a threat to its purity.[2]

In response to the assumption that there is a "coming clash" between Western culture and Muslims, she concludes, "The real 'clash of civilizations' is not 'out there,' between admirable Westerners and Muslim zealots. It is here, within each person, as we oscillate uneasily between self-protective aggression and the ability to live in the world with others."[3]

Clearly, it is not simply exegesis that determines how we read the Bible; rather, it is our vested interests, our hopes, and our fears that largely determine our reading. And because the reach of the gracious God of the Bible is toward the other, we ought rightly to be skeptical and suspicious of any reading of the Bible that excludes the other, because it is likely to be informed by vested interest, fears, and hopes that serve self-protection and end in self-destruction. Palestinians' and Israelis' fear of the other, said to be grounded in the Bible, has been transposed into a military apparatus that is aimed at the elimination of the other. It is wholly illusionary to imagine that such an agenda is congruent with the God of the Bible who is commonly confessed by Jews and Christians.

SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT READING THE BIBLE

We may draw these conclusions about reading the Bible.

1. It is important in any case to recognize that the Bible refuses to speak in a single voice. It argues with itself, and we must avoid simplistic, reductionist readings of any ilk.

2. Any "straight-line" reading from ancient text to contemporary issues is sure to be suspect in its oversimplification. Such a reading disregards the huge impact of historical distance between the text and our current context.

3. Such a straight-line reading that ignores historical distance is most likely to be propelled by an ideology, that is, by a deeply held conviction that is immune to

critical thought and is unswayed by argument, by reason, or by the facts on the ground. That is, it disregards complexities in the process of interpretation. A one-dimensional, uncritical appropriation of the ancient land promises for the state of Israel is exactly such a conviction that is immune to critical thought, reason, or facts on the ground. The work of faithful interpretation and informed reading, however, is to attend to the complexities that relativize such convictions.

Responsible interpretation must pay attention to the disruptions that break open our long and deeply held preferences.

Just as one-dimensional Zionism is unrealistic in its oversimplification, so much Christian passion in support of Zionist ideology is also intellectually unreflective. This may take the form of a millennialist timetable that has been imposed on the biblical text. Or it may take the form of the romanticism of some liberals that compresses ancient Israel and the current state of Israel as though they were the same historical entity entitled to the same deference. Responsible interpretation must pay attention to the disruptions that break open our long and deeply held preferences.

4. The matter of ideological simplification versus responsible reading that pays attention to historical distance and interpretive complexity, when transposed into social power, becomes a contest between tribalism versus communitarian attentiveness to the other. Tribalism, often in Christian practice expressed as sectarianism, tends to absolutize its claims to the exclusion

of all else. The tribe or sect characteristically imagines that it has a final formulation, a final interpretation. Absolutist readings of the Bible lead to violent actions against one's opponent.

5. The other—as African slaves, or women, or gays and lesbians, or Palestinians—is not a disposable presence. It is, every time, a real and durable presence that will not go away. Proponents of the continuing racism in our society would like blacks to go away. Churches that resist women in leadership would like for women to go away. Much of society for a long time wanted gays and lesbians to go away. Hindus in India wish Muslims would go away. And surely Israeli Zionists want Palestinians to go away. Conversely many Arabs wish Israel would go away. But they will not. They cannot! And so room must be made. Making room for the other is a huge interruption of any absolutist claim.

6. In his elegant exposition of the Ten Commandments, Walter Harrelson has seen that the Decalogue, the core Torah requirement in Judaism, is a bottom line articulation of indispensible requirements of a viable society:

> The continuing witness of the Jewish people and of Jewish religious tradition is of great importance, for the Torah has the function of the Ten Commandments when the practice of dietary laws, Sabbath observances, and Jewish fidelity to Torah is not corrupted into a system of mere observances or mere regulations. . . . No, the central need is for people to know two fundamental things. The first thing people need to know is that they can have no real life, no real freedom, no real joy in life save as they lay aside the kinds of actions

> that destroy the very things they are seeking. The Ten Commandments ward off conduct on our part which, if engaged in, will make impossible the love of God and of neighbor. The second is the need to know that we are being drawn toward the day appointed by God when people will indeed avoid these prohibitions, will love God and neighbor. We need to feel the lure, the drawing power of biblical eschatology.[4]

By the end of his exposition, Harrelson proposes that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an extension of the vision and creativity of the Decalogue. The Declaration includes these articles:

1. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

2. Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person.

7. All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

15. Everyone has the right to a nationality.

17. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.[5]

These are all guarantees for the well-being of the other. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be resolved until the human rights of the other are recognized and guaranteed. These human rights are demanded by sociopolitical reality. They are, moreover, the bottom line of Judaism that has not been preempted by Zionist ideology. As Bishop Desmond Tutu has recently written:

> Goodness prevails in the end. The pursuit of freedom for the people of Palestine from humiliation

and persecution by the policies of Israel is a righteous cause. It is a cause that the people of Israel should support.

Nelson Mandela famously said that South Africans would not feel free until Palestinians were free.

He might have added that the liberation of Palestine will liberate Israel, too.[6]