One land and many voices

Strands of Christian thought about who lives in the Holy Land

Christian Aid

We believe in life before death

Prayer

**Pray not for Arab or Jew,
for Palestinian or Israeli,
but pray rather for ourselves,
that we might not
divide them in our prayers
but keep them both together
in our hearts.**

Contents

1. Preface 1
2. A brief history 2
3. Introduction 3
4. The stories of the land 4
   - A story told 4
   - A story understood 6
   - Many interpretations of one story 7
5. Land and the Kingdom of God 8
6. Land, language and theology 9
   - View one: Replacement theology 10
   - View two: Christian Zionism 10
   - View three: Liberation theology 11
7. Justice and peace 12

1/Preface

In October 2004, Christian Aid published a report entitled *Facts On The Ground*: *The End of a Two–State Solution.* It drew attention to injustices relating to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This paper complements it by offering theological reflection on some of the issues.

It is subtitled *Strands of Christian thought about who lives in the Holy Land*, in recognition of the fact that there is no single approach to this issue that unites all Christians. Deeply principled people who have read the Bible with close attention have come to different conclusions about the way passages concerning the land east of the Mediterranean and its inhabitants should be interpreted. The varying conclusions to which they have come have led them to lend support to varying political initiatives that have had a profound impact on the lives of all the people who live in the region. It is important for Christians not only to understand the theology that underpins their political conclusions, but also to try to understand why others who share the same faith and Scriptures have different views.

Of course, it is not only Christians who have a theology relating to the Holy Land. Jews and Muslims also study the issues with equal rigour. This booklet, as a piece of work published by Christian Aid, does not presume to speak for Jewish or Muslim theologians. It is restricted to Christian thought. However, Jewish and Muslim academics read and commented helpfully on early drafts, as did Christians of different persuasions in the UK, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

In the paper you will read the story of God's dealings with the people who lived in the land east of the Mediterranean during the period covered by the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, and also some of the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God. Reflections on how this story has been interpreted in recent years follow. And, finally, the booklet introduces three distinctive (and perhaps irreconcilable) strands of Christian thought that are each held by large numbers of faithful people today. The author does not direct readers to come to a specific conclusion in matters of biblical interpretation. However, for those who read it in conjunction with *Facts on the Ground: The End of a Two–State Solution*, it will become clear that Christian Aid's advocacy on behalf of the poorest people who live in this region has developed alongside a thorough theological reflection on issues of poverty, justice, land and power.

This paper was written by journalist and clergyman Martin Wroe. It was edited by Nigel Varndell and Peter Graystone, of Christian Aid's Churches team, who are grateful to a large number of people who have advised on its content. Ramani Leathard of Christian Aid's Middle East and Asia team supplied the historical information. We hope that its accessible style will mean that many people who are not inclined to read weighty theological books will be better equipped to work and pray for peace and justice in the lands where Jesus lived, died and rose again.

Quotations from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

‘Love not fear; love not hatred; love not violence.’
Constantine Dabbagh, director of the Middle East Council of Churches, Gaza Strip

2/A brief history

Historically, the land known to Christians as the Holy Land is the area bounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the River Jordan, Lebanon and the Sinai desert. The land’s indigenous inhabitants for hundreds of years have been those from whom present-day Palestinians are descended. Small Jewish communities have also had this as their home throughout all those centuries. As persecution of Jews in Europe increased in the 19th century, so the need for a Jewish homeland grew. Jewish people began to migrate to Palestine – for many the focus of their aspirations – in increasing numbers. In 1948, following World War II and the Holocaust, and after a vote by the United Nations, the state of Israel was created. In the war that followed, three-quarters of the area formerly known as Palestine came under the control of the new Jewish state. During this time, many Palestinians fled or were evicted from their homes and became refugees in neighbouring Arab countries, or in the remaining parts of Palestine, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In 1967, after the Six-Day War, Israel occupied the Palestinians’ remaining territories, including East Jerusalem, creating more refugees. Seeking to defend itself, Israel imposed a harsh military rule over the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Palestinian opposition to this military occupation, which has denied them the most basic human rights, came to a head in 1987 with the intifada (‘shaking off’ in Arabic), a popular uprising which aimed to end the occupation and establish an independent Palestinian state.

‘We look for peace, but find no good; for a time of healing, but there is terror instead.’
Jeremiah 8:15

The Oslo peace process began in 1993, with great hopes that there would be peace for both Israelis and Palestinians, an end to Israel’s occupation, and the establishment of a Palestinian state. However, by 1999 Israel remained effectively in control of 83 per cent of the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

A series of suicide bombings in the late 1990s shattered Israeli confidence in the peace process. In 2000, Palestinian frustration at the failure of the Oslo peace process to bring an improvement in the circumstances of their lives led to a new uprising. Since this second intifada, Israel’s control over the Occupied Palestinian Territories has contributed to rising levels of Palestinian poverty. In 2002 Israel began the building of a separation barrier to cut itself off from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, justifying this as a response to violence. The barrier has not only exacerbated the humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people, but has come to symbolise the divide between the two peoples at the heart of the Middle East crisis.

In an advisory opinion in July 2004, the International Court of Justice in The Hague pronounced Israel’s separation barrier in the West Bank illegal and recommended that it should be removed immediately. Shortly afterwards, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution by a vote of 150 to six (with ten abstentions) to request Israel’s compliance with the court’s opinion. Israel does not accept the ruling of the International Court of Justice.

3/Introduction

We take it for granted!

It is so intrinsic to our everyday lives that we never think about it.

Land.

The earth beneath the concrete beneath our feet. The streets we walk down on the way to our work or the shops. The carefully measured plots on which our homes are positioned – the value of which is taken into account when we pay rent on our flat or buy our house.

For most of us, the question of who owns the land on which we live and move and have our being, never arises. The issue has been solved a long time ago by people with whom we probably now have no connection.

But for some people, the question of who owns the land on which they live is critical – even a matter of life and death. Their ability to live and move freely in the place they have always known as home is contested.

Sometimes the disagreement is so implacable that no amount of talking appears to provide resolution. Violence, conflict and war ensue. This is the situation in the eastern Mediterranean today – in the region that Christians call the Holy Land. Today, the villages and towns in which Jesus walked, the hills on which he told his stories, are the subject of disputes as never before.

Even before the second world war, Palestinian Arabs whose forebears lived here for centuries began to lose their land to Israeli Jewish people who claim that their ancestors lived there even earlier. Many people recognise that the two communities, each of which has a far–flung diaspora, both have reason to call this land home – and that they should share the disputed land. Few can agree on how.

Many others believe that one side has inalienable rights to this land, and that the other must adjust their ambitions accordingly. The stakes could not be higher.

If one people rather than another owns this land, then it is their tradition and culture which will be fostered – the story of the other will not be told. But the story of each community is historically tied to this region and so the very identity of people is at stake.

Take the case of Daoud, for example. He is a farmer on the West Bank, supported by a Christian Aid partner, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). I have no right to build a house on my land,' he explains. 'I have 42 acres, half of which is under threat of confiscation.'

Why does Daoud think the land is his? Because his grandfather bought it in 1924. It has been in the family for decades. But during the 1970s and 1980s his land, like that of many Palestinian people in the region, was gradually surrounded by illegal Israeli settlements. Soon his right to make plans for the use of his own land was taken away.

Can Daoud call his land his own if he has no control at all over what to do on it? Control over land in many countries has often been established by force, but the effects of this force are long forgotten as centuries go by. Not so in the Holy Land.

And because three of the world's religions claim holy ancestry here, agreeing ownership is not simply about secular law, but about religious tradition. For people of faith, religion is at the heart of territorial claims. Christian, Jewish and Muslim groups all believe that part of the answer to the conflict between Palestinian Arab and Israeli Jew is to be found in a specific interpretation of their own scriptures. This document focuses on the Christian tradition. However, among Christians there are many theologies that relate to the land east of the Mediterranean, not just one. The loudest voices often fail to recognise that their particular reading of the Bible is not the only one.

There are Christians who support Israeli acquisition of Palestinian territory by turning to references in the Bible to God promising the land to the Hebrew people. There are others who stress parts of the same Bible in which it is clear that there are obligations on those to whom that land was promised – obligations which were once broken and led to exile from the land. When religion is used as a means of legitimising a political position, which happens in many spheres, a degree of suspicion is called for. And yet theology dare not be ignored in the quest for a fair and just solution for the claimants to this land.

4/The stories of the land

When we set out to ask what the Bible says about the role of the land in the eastern Mediterranean (or, for that matter, any other question) it is wise to remind ourselves that the Bible does not make the claims for itself that many people of faith have made for it.

This inspired collection of books, compiled into the definitive holy book for the Christian, emerged over many centuries and in widely varying circumstances. In seeking to interpret it, we need to recognise that we all tend to approach scripture with our own perspective. While Christians generally follow Moses when it comes to the ten commandments, we generally choose to reinterpret him when he talks about food and hygiene. While we respect the apostle Paul on fidelity in marriage, we don't treat his advice on how to treat our slaves or the correct length for hair as obligatory for our lives in the 21st century. We revere certain parts of the Book because of our own particular perspective, and the challenge we face is to recognise when and why this is happening and understand that other parts are not being downplayed, but seen in the context of the 'big picture' of the Bible's entirety. Although it is inevitable that different conclusions will be reached, most Christians agree on the need try to achieve a holistic understanding of the scriptures, deduced from a comprehensive understanding, rather than a few selected portions of it.

When we look at the story of the promised land it is cautionary to remind ourselves how many people defend widely varying positions from readings of the same Bible. This doesn't mean to say that we must question the authority of the Bible – only that we must question the authority of those who use it.

A story told

The book of Genesis, which begins both the Hebrew scriptures of the Jews and the Old Testament of the Christians, tells the story of Abraham – an outstanding figure revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

God promised a land to Abraham

It was part of the covenant, the deal, that they made together. Abraham and his small tribe left Ur of the Chaldeans, not far from present-day Basra in Iraq, to travel to Canaan. Canaan became the land of promise to Abraham and his descendants: 'And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God' (Genesis 17:8).

But this is not 'ownership' in the way the modern mind might see it – Abraham could not do whatever he liked. After all, he had to purchase the very land on which his tomb was built. The promise of God was not a steal or snatch for Abraham – the promise came with obligations, for example toward the people on the land.

Later, in a dream, Jacob too heard the promise and his name was changed to Israel (35:12). When Joseph was about to die (50:24) he told the people: 'God will bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' Genesis sets the tone for the opening books of the Bible, with the promise of land central to the emerging Hebrew nation.

The book of Exodus tells the story of the people's flight from captivity, after four centuries in Egypt, until the eve of their settlement in Canaan. When Moses on Sinai was given the message of liberation, he was told that the people would be brought to a good and broad land, flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Exodus 3:8). But with that promise came serious warnings about how the land was to be understood and treated (Deuteronomy 6:10-19).

‘Both nations must “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God”. Once those biblical demands of justice have been satisfied, a good measure of peace will be achieved. The result will then be a new and deeper security enjoyed by all throughout the land.’
Naim Ateek, director of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, Jerusalem

And in the Book of Joshua, we see the dream of land beginning to find fulfillment with the Hebrew nation settling in Canaan – but a fulfillment in ways that no one could have imagined. Life on the land turned out to be far from ‘milk and honey’. People could not agree with each other, and a monarchy emerged in a bid to create political stability. Despite the fabled leadership of the king David and Solomon, the gift of the land was misused – institutions were corrupt, greedy landowners marginalised and exploited the poorest people, while rival tribes fell out.

The prosperity of David’s reign was short-lived and, when the ten northern tribes revolted against Reheboam after Solomon’s death, the land dramatically split. There were then two separate kingdoms – in the north, with a capital in Samaria, in the south, with a capital in Jerusalem.

Is this what the promise was about ?

In fact, as dispute and conflict continued in the story of the young Israel, the precise extent of the land of promise was never certain. One common formula, invoked to note the boundaries of ancient Israel, was ‘from Dan to Beersheba’ (Judges 20:1, 1 Samuel 3:20, 2 Samuel 17:11). But the boundaries were never so clear and never did the land, as one text put it, stretch from the Nile to the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18)! The Bible offers no plan drawings for Israel – ancient or modern – and no divine mandate marking the borders of the promise.

Gaining a land led to political break-up. In time it meant the disappearance of the northern tribes of Israel, obliterated in battle. And shortly afterwards the southern kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem, also faced disaster – forcible exile by the Babylonians from the land they thought they would have for ever.

The exiled Jews in Babylon could only remember the land and wonder at the meaning of the promise. Their worst fear was that, since the temple at Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God, had been destroyed by the Babylonians, they had not only lost their land, they had also lost their God. However, given hope by prophets such as Isaiah (chapters 40-55) they came to discover that God was not inert in the ruins of the temple. In fact, he was still with them in exile. He was continuing to honour his covenant, whether or not they were in residence in the land.

When, after eight decades, the Jews returned from exile to Jerusalem and its surrounding area, they fortified the city and began the task of rebuilding the temple. It was a poor substitute for the grandeur of the original, but its presence and location were profoundly significant for them (and indeed still are, although only remnants of its western wall remain).

Shifts of power over the succeeding years made the Jews subject to one empire after another, until under their military leader Judas Maccabeus there was independence for a few decades. However, a power struggle led to the Jews becoming subject to the Roman Empire. Thus it was that Jesus Christ was born into Occupied Jewish Territories.

‘Land is a central, if not the central, theme of biblical faith. Biblical faith is a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging.’
Walter Brueggemann, theologian

A story understood

The story of the emerging Hebrew nation that we find in the Old Testament, or Hebrew scriptures, is a story of hope against the odds, a story of defiant refusal to accept that history means subjugation and oppression, a firm belief that God will make a new history for the people.

The sign of God's love is the promise of land. Our Christian tradition interprets the story of the Jewish people as an iconic story for all people – a sign that the real story in human history is God's persistent offer of salvation. To all people, in all places, in all times! God offers a new history for all people, Palestinian as well as Israeli, Christian as well as Jew or Muslim.

Even when they are absent from the land, the land symbolises the people’s response to God. When Abraham ups sticks and heads for the promise, he is choosing to take on insecurity and risk, to abandon the familiar and comforting, in order to travel with God. He has a promise and he follows in faith!

The continuing lack of land remains a sign of God’s presence when the people have left slavery in Egypt and are wandering in the desert, hoping that Moses knows more than they do! Landless and fighting for their very survival, God is with them all the same – he travels in cloud and fire. In the light of the New Testament, Christians identify the tabernacle as a sign of God's companionship – not bound to any location but symbolising the universal presence of God (Acts 7:44). And when, much later, Solomon is permitted to build the temple, God, according to Christian interpretation, makes it clear that he will not be in any way limited to or by it (Acts 7:48-50).

Land, although it secures the roots of faith, does not mark out the limits of faith. And when faith in the promise does lead to land, even then there are other promises which must be upheld by the people in order for the promise to be fulfilled. If there are corrupt political structures, if the rich trample the poor, if the marginalised are thrown off the land, if God is forgotten in the blind rush to possess and accumulate, the promise of land turns sour. Mere possession of the land is no guarantee of the promise – it may even come between the people and their God.

God was with the people in slavery in Egypt. He was with them in their confusion in the desert. He was with them, despite unfaithfulness to the covenant, when they had come in to the land. And, transforming their worst fears, he was with them in exile, too. God, they discovered, was greater and more mysterious than they had realised. He is not geographically limited to any one area. It was this truth that sustained thousands upon thousands of Jews through the harsh years of the diaspora that resulted from Roman persecution in the decades after Jesus. And the continuing witness and faith of the Jewish community to this day is an earnest of a deep, ongoing engagement with these truths.

But when God makes promises, they are not always fulfilled as anticipated. Over centuries, the people are judged by the quality of their response to God: faithful remembering of the promise led the people towards the land, but unfaithfulness to God led to exile. The land doesn't just symbolise the people's response to God – it symbolises God’s response to people. There is a warning as well as a promise about the land.

Many interpretations of one story

For some people the story of the conquest of Canaan, under Joshua, and the taking of the land was not a story of good news – if, for example, you were on the land when it was being taken. In our wonder at the way the Hebrew people found their promised land, it is easy to forget the plight of the people who already lived on it – a people whose experience must not be ignored.

We have to own up to the fact that our reading of the Bible is inevitably informed by our own story. While many Christians and Jews read the story of the Hebrew people's progress through the wilderness to the land as one of triumph, Palestinian Christians and Muslims read it as one of oppression.

We must also admit that the Bible is not an easy book – that it can pose difficult moral problems, if we take it only at face value. The Hebrew slaves who left Egypt invaded a land that was already inhabited, and their arrival meant violence and killing. In the biblical accounts, this activity is presented as being approved and mandated by God.

Under the leadership of Joshua, for example, as the Israelites kill, God is depicted as master and commander. The warrior God defeats those who oppose them. 'Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. I will set your borders from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates; for I will hand over to you the inhabitants of the land, and you shall drive them out before you' (Exodus 23:30-31).

The Bible record emerged over centuries, and only when we read the scriptures as a whole can we appreciate the developing Hebrew understanding of God. Just as our understanding of God must be informed by the whole canon of Scripture, not just isolated passages, so our understanding of difficult theological concepts, such as the promise of the land, needs to be seen as part of an unfolding revelation of God.

For example, in the same Old Testament that portrays God willing the destruction of those in the way of the Israelites, we also find God describing the inalienable right of the poor to have land, and warnings not to crush or rob them (Proverbs 22). Why not? Because the Lord God will 'plead their cause and despoil the life of those who despoil them' (v 23).

Later, the prophet Micah explores the consequences of land seizure, predicting that those who manage to grab land from others will surely come to death (2:1-3). God 'must be reckoned with and answered to for the way land is managed,' says the theologian Walter Bruegemann. There is no escape from this accountability. Those who have so much land that is not rightly theirs, even if legally secured, will come to destruction.

Unneighbourly land practice will lead to a reckoning because God is running history – and one day there will be a public assembly to redistribute the land. The big land-grabbers will not be present when the boundary lines are redrawn – they will end up landless (2:4-5).

The use of the land is marked by warning, not only promise. While we do not forget the promise of land, we dare not ignore the concurrent stories where God promises peace and justice to his people, righteousness flowing like a river, the lion lying down with the lamb and the poorest being included. These commands temper those of conquest and domination. The text is polyphonic. No one story can relegate the others – many stories make up the story. And through them all there is no more powerful theme than the justice of God, his longing for the well-being of the human community and the *shalom* of the earth which will ultimately come to be.

However, a biblical reading of the land is informed for Christians by more than just the story of ancient Israel; it is also shaped by the coming of Jesus.

5/Land and the Kingdom of God

In the ministry of Jesus we find a dramatic rethinking of the promise of the Old Testament. So much so that he barely mentioned the land.

The promise of Jesus is a kingdom, God's kingdom, which is to be the true fulfillment of the Old Testament. The rule of God, which his own life signifies, is the moment when the prophecies of God's blessing for Israel are fufilled.

In fact, the one time Jesus raises the subject of the land he makes the striking reference that it is the meek (Matthew 5:5) who will inherit it. The meek, the humble, the poor in spirit are those who will inherit the land, those who will enter the kingdom of God.

In the new, Christian tradition, the community known as the church is to be the way in which God's promises to Israel become universal promises to all people in all countries. New Testament writers even give the church titles that had previously been reserved for Israel. Gentiles are to be grafted into Israel, according to Paul (Romans 11:17-24) and thereby become the 'one new humanity' (Ephesians 2:15).

And when Paul looks forward to a more glorious future for the Jewish people, he doesn't find the salvation of Israel connected to the land. Now the children of Abraham are all Jews and Gentiles who by faith in Jesus Christ are made righteous.

They will inherit not the land, but the world.

Holy space can never again be limited to the land, to Jerusalem and its temple. Now the earth and its fullness belongs to the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:26).

Jesus said, 'The spirit of the Lord … has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'
Luke 4:18

For New Testament writers it is being 'in Christ' – not in a particular land – that is important. And as being in Christ offers true life to all people, regardless of their race, gender or status, the motif of one particular land ceases to be a central idea. In this covenant, this new people of Jew and Gentile, finds its home in all creation – no longer limited to the Mediterranean fringe.

In the earliest days of Christianity there was no great interest in giving the land of Palestine any special status. It wasn't until the conversion of Constantine that the idea of holy Christian places and a holy land gained special currency.

To understand the promise of God in Abraham, the Jewish people play a special role in history. But there is a sense in which Christians have been adopted into the faith of Abraham (Galatians 3:29; 4:5). For Christian people, the promises of Abraham and his descendants are now found in the kingdom of God. The values that count now, not just in this land, but in all lands, are the kingdom values of Jesus – mercy, peace, love and justice.

While the Jewish people have not been abandoned in favour of the rest of the world, we now find a range of views from Christians of many traditions as to whether the land in which the Jews historically lived has a particular significance for their salvation, or that of others.

6/Land, language and theology

Our language plays witness to our theology, which itself informs how we think about crucial subjects such as: ‘Who owns the land?’ And how we think indicates how we will act, with whom we will side in the struggle for justice to be done, for the hope of peace to be made reality.

Take the phrase ‘chosen people’. Some Christians interpret scripture to mean that the church has replaced the Jews as the ‘chosen people’. For them, it is then just a short step to argue that who lives where in the eastern Mediterranean is not an important part of their religious conviction. This particular land is important only for historical reasons – holy because of what once happened here, not because God has some special place for it above and beyond all other land.

On the other hand some Christians interpret scripture to mean that the modern ‘state of Israel’ has a spiritual parallel with ‘ancient Israel’. They read prophetic words originally addressed to ancient Israel and apply them to modern-day Israel, for example: ‘I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel… I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life… Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you… from the end of the earth’ (Isaiah 43:3-6). From this position it is an equally short step in a different direction to see the modern return of the Jewish people to the land their ancestors once called home as a fulfilling of biblical prophecy. It is only one more step to argue that the Jewish people – in the form of the modern state of Israel – have a paramount claim to the land. It then follows that whoever lives there now, or has done so in recent history, has to make way and move on. Nothing can stand in the way as God’s purposes in history are worked out.

Countering this view is the argument that ‘Israel’ under King David, a millennium before Jesus, bears little geographical relation to the Israel of today – so any comparisons are unreal. During the last 4,000 years there has never been a time during which the Hebrew or Jewish people lived alone in the land. Indeed, for most of that time the non-Jewish presence has predominated.

It is easy to see that the way we understand the Bible will define our political views of the actions of the modern state of Israel.

For example, a large and influential group of Christians believe that key passages in the Bible point to a time when the people of Israel would return to this geographical area. They say that this will be a sign that the return of Jesus Christ is near. Such people can be dismissive of the plight of Palestinian people who have been thrown off their land and evicted from their homes. It may be tragic, they imply, but it is a tragedy we can live with because it is a sign of God’s return.

But this approach to marginalised and poor people runs against the grain of the holistic view we find in the Old Testament of God’s desire to see justice done. The Bible makes a recognition of the needs of sojourners and strangers on the land a touchstone of the readiness of people to pursue just and compassionate practices (Deuteronomy 10:18-19). Such an approach also runs counter to the view that Jesus saw the Kingdom of God in the fullness of its expression as something unlimited and non-temporal.

Three distinct (but contradictory) schools of thought among Christians have emerged as principled people have sought a coherent theology in this area. These are known as ‘replacement theology’ (or ‘supersessionism’); ‘Christian Zionism’ (as part of which there is a distinct subgroup called ‘dispensational theology’); and ‘liberation theology’.

View one: Replacement theology

Some Christians have adopted what is known as 'replacement theology' or 'supersessionism', a view in which the church is seen as the 'new' Israel, perhaps even the 'true' Israel, which means that the promises in the Bible to the 'old' Israel are now transferred to the church. The Jewish people missed their chance as the special people of God but, like any other person, the offer of salvation is open to them through Jesus Christ. Those who take this view stress the explanation by the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews of God's 'new covenant', a concept that first appears in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah 31:31-34 among many other places. Hebrews expounds this by adding that 'in speaking of a "new covenant" [God] has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear' (8:13).

For adherents to this view, the modern state of Israel has no special theological significance. It is a state like any other, which happens to be Jewish at present, and is called to the same basic communal obligations as any other. At its most extreme, replacement theology has been responsible for the belief that the Jews are now actually rejected by God. It is easy to see how this view has often been responsible for fuelling anti-semitism, and it is widely rejected in modern Christian tradition.

'The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender. Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of anger will fail. Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.'
Proverbs 22:7-9

View two: Christian Zionism

One response to replacement theology, addressing particularly its role in nurturing anti-semitism and the Holocaust, has been 'Christian Zionism'. It was one version of this view which drove political moves towards creating the state of Israel as a homeland for the Jews after the war, its adherents arguing that the Jewish people deserved the basic right to life and safety found in the Bible and Christian tradition. Taking inspiration from a specific interpretation of Isaiah, it can be claimed that the Old Testament literally demands this. For example: 'I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up", and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth – everyone who is called by my name"' (43:3-7).

Christian Zionism is also open to being expressed in an extreme way. There are some who follow a 'dispensational theology'. They claim that it is the sovereign will of God that his chosen people return to their homeland in order to fulfil Old Testament prophecy. Jesus' teaching has not changed the 'covenant', and the promises of God will always tie the Jewish people to the land they call Israel and most particularly to the historic site of the temple. They see the return of the Jews to the land as a sign of the last days before the second coming of Jesus and some claim that in taking over the land, the Jews will actually trigger Jesus' return. For the dispensational Christian Zionist, the Jewish people continue to have a key role in God's plans and they should be encouraged to seize all of the 'promised land' from its current inhabitants (even Palestinian people who have lived there for many generations), in order to bring about the end of history that God has ordained.

‘We should put out a clarion call to the government of the people of Israel, to the Palestinian people, and say: Peace is possible, peace based on justice is possible. We will do all we can to assist you to achieve this peace, because it is God’s dream, and you will be able to live amicably together as sisters and brothers.’
Desmond Tutu, former Archbishop of Cape Town

View three: Liberation theology

An alternative theme in thinking of the land and covenant within the Christian tradition offers a more liberational model. Christian liberation theology finds its most urgent expression in work that is rooted in the experience of the world’s poorest communities. The story of the exodus from Egypt has often been a focus for liberation theologians, who find in it a paradigm for contemporary struggles by oppressed people to be free from those who abuse their power. This approach suggests that the experience of one particular people should never be used as a controlling interpretation of the scriptures for all peoples, but that every group should interpret the texts for themselves. In this case they point out that when Christians develop a theology of the Holy Land that sees it entirely from the perspective of the Jews, it rides roughshod over the hopes and aspirations of Palestinians, because they happen to be in the way of the chosen people. Indeed the Exodus narrative, with its story of violent conquest, no longer inspires the Palestinian Christian community, who too often see it used to justify current Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank.

While not denying the theme of ‘promise’ in the Bible, the liberation theology approach stresses that the promise to Israel was to be a promise to all. The blessing of God to Abraham’s ‘seed’ is not to a particular geo-political group but, through fidelity to God, to all the nations of the world (Genesis 22:17-18). Liberation theology emphasises that there are other dominant themes too – not least, those of justice and peace: ‘The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land... You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you. Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances and his statutes’ (Deuteronomy 8:7,10-11). These themes recur in the New Testament and find their clearest statement in the revelation of God that is perfectly expressed in Jesus, who announced himself as anointed to bring ‘good news to the poor,… release to the captives and… [freedom to] the oppressed’ (Luke 4:18).

Some adherents to this view argue that there is no particular divine provision specific to the Jewish people – just as we must denounce the sufferings of the Holocaust, so we must denounce the sufferings which have followed the political response to the Holocaust, the establishment of the state of Israel. Others argue that even if God’s intention was for the Jews to return to the land, they are not to return to oppress, but to steward the land, embodying the love and grace of the God who called them.

Rather than seeing God as ‘the God of Israel and the Israelites’ or even ‘the God of the Christians’, those who profess a liberational approach stress that: ‘God so loved the world’ (John 3:16). The question, ‘Whose is the land?’ can only find a satisfactory response in the context of the question, ‘Whose is the world?’ And the answer? ‘The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it’ (Psalm 24:1).

7/Justice and peace

If there is to be a Christian theology of just and peaceful cohabitation of two peoples and three religions, then each of the three great faiths represented in the Middle East has to think theologically and ask what kind of God it believes in.

Is it a life-giving God who cares for everyone?

Is it a liberating God who wants to see people free of economic and political bondage?

Is it a God who loves the whole of the created world and all of its inhabitants and not just a particular religious people?

The chronological history of the Hebrew people and the narrative progress of the Bible point to a movement, both in the understanding of God and in the understanding of the land. The first Hebrews saw God as a warrior who would march with them into battle and vanquish any tribes who stood in their way. But many generations later, when their experience of exile had hit home, their descendants' understanding of God had developed. They came to understand that God values all people – he cares for those other than Jews and for lands other than the land of Israel.

The land was bound to be a significant theme of the Old Testament, for the simple reason that parts of it were written during the period of exile, when the one thing the people longed for was home. And when God promised land to Israel he was making a promise to people who were on the move, people for whom the gift of land was the ultimate anticipation of a better life.

The same is true of the poorest people everywhere, rich and poor being equal in the eyes of God in the Christian tradition – each and every human being made in the image of God.

'The Lord your God is… not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.'
Deuteronomy 10:17-19

But the land is associated not only with promise but with warning. In the fulfillment of the promise, in gaining the land, the promise of God's faithfulness is easily forgotten – and the true purpose of his action in saving people in history is ignored.

The land can be lost, too, because along with the promise of land comes particular responsibility to all who are 'sojourners' in the land. There is a command never to forget the experience of having one's self been dispossessed.

Jesus Christ radically reinterprets the promise of God – offering a new and inclusive concept of the kingdom of God which overtakes exclusive notions of land. Now we see that the land of Israel, the land of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, is part of God's world and belongs to God just like the rest of the world.

No less, no more!

God is creator and owner of the holy land – as of the holy world.

And those Palestinians and Israelis who inhabit this holy land, or are part of a diaspora that longs for the right to return to it, are called to live as good neighbours.

Both nations must 'do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God' (Micah 6:8). A meaningful peace in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is dependent on translating those ancient calls of God upon humankind – justice, mercy, humility – into effective action. The security for which those who live in the Holy Land long (as, indeed, do all the inhabitants of the world) awaits that day.

'For the effect of justice will be peace, and the result of righteousness, security and trust forever' (Isaiah 32:17).

Land. We take it for granted. The earth beneath the concrete beneath our feet.

The Bible says a great deal about land, and in particular about the area known to Christians as the Holy Land. Deeply principled people have come to different conclusions about the way passages concerning the land east of the Mediterranean and its inhabitants should be interpreted. One Land and Many Voices is designed to help Christians grasp the theology that underpins work that promotes justice in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. And it seeks to help them understand why others who have the same faith and Scriptures have different views.

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Cover photograph: Jerusalem viewed from inside Dominus Flevit church Christian Aid/Sam Watson

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