

## **Zionism, Masada and the promise Jewish Redemption: Towards a Christian Re-Appraisal of Zionism**

*Peter Colwell*

Whenever as Christians we attempt to speak about the Holy Land, or about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, sooner or later we run into the question of how to speak about Zionism, how it relates to Judaism, and how it should be responded to and critiqued. And yet the very name of the modern Jewish State “Israel” throws down an important challenge to Christian self-understanding, something that is explored in the concept paper sent prior to this consultation.

Many attempts by Christian theologians or church reports to respond to Zionism have often floundered within the Jewish-Christian encounter. In this paper I am offering a different approach to evaluating Zionism by looking at the place of Masada in Zionist consciousness as a way of attempting to understand Zionism, especially as it relates to the State of Israel, and to attempt some theological response, using Bishop Kenneth Cragg as our initial theological reflector.

Before we turn to the specific matter of interest, it might be helpful to attempt the briefest of definitions of Zionism. With its roots in the liberationist excitement that arose from the enlightenment, and inspired by 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism, where the individual sought to be set free from powers and systems, both sacred and secular, Zionism became for Jews the answer to a thousand year question: who is the Jew and how do they relate to the world? New nationalisms were emerging across Europe in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and whilst this gave to Germans, Austrians, Italians and many others, a newly discovered sense of belonging, identity and national pride, for many Jews there was a question as to where they fitted within this new political order. It was none more so than amongst those who lived in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where anti-Semitic feeling was on the rise as ethnic identities were being recognized.

Figures such as Theodore Herzl offered the answer to European Jewry’s questions – if there could be no home for Jews in Europe then Jews should develop their national pride in their ancient homeland. Israel then was to become central to Jewish identity, or in the words of Rabbi Eugene Korn: “Israel stands at the centre of Jewish self-perception – how most Jews see themselves individually and collectively as a people. Israel is the

stage on which Jewish life and peoplehood is played out most vividly in the present, and the key to Jewish spiritual hopes for the future.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a point reiterated over and over again whenever the question of Israel arises in Jewish-Christian dialogue. There are therefore two alternatives by way of Christian response: the first is to disregard the way Israel relates to Jewish identity and instead engage with the minority of Jewish voices that had decoupled Israel from identity. The second is to find a means by which Christianity can engage with Judaism in terms of its own self-understanding, including Israel. The former will inevitably leave one exposed to charges of treating Judaism, not on its own terms, but in terms of one’s own, politically conditioned, definitions, this is why it can “smell” of anti-Semitism to many Jews.

The second runs the risk of an uncritical endorsement of Zionism, as an expression of Jewish self-understanding, with all the implications for human rights that this entails. Yet the point of inter-religious dialogue is not an uncritical endorsement of the ‘other’ but to come to an understanding of beliefs and practices different to one’s own in order to develop greater missiological perspective. This missiological task is not merely ‘conversation’ and ‘proselytism’ but our participation in God’s work of reconciliation, transformation and redemption in the world. And we fail in this participation if we merely disregard Zionism and attempt to dialogue only with a minority of voices that merely chime with our own perspective.

This however is not an easy task in dialogue, and this is especially the case in respect of Zionism. This is so, because Zionism is not merely a set of theological ideas (the theology is largely a secularization of ancient messianic notions of Israel and Jewish redemption), but is also a political movement that sought to free a people who were never at home in Europe. It also sought to defend and take pride in the history and character of the Jewish people. Zionism today has of course many different colorations, religious and secular, political left and political right, yet all of the above would represent characteristics of Zionism in all its diversity.

Theodor Herzl and other prominent pioneering Zionists sought to create a national ideology that expressed what many Jews from Eastern Europe were already doing by

---

<sup>1</sup> Eugene Korn, *The Jewish Connection to Israel, the Promised Land: A Brief Introduction for Christians*, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008, pp. ix-f

fleeing to Palestine from the pogroms. But those early arrivals also viewed any hostility from the Arab inhabitants in terms of their own experience in Europe. As more European Jews arrived while the darkness descended across Europe this new Jewish national consciousness needed a narrative. And that brings us to Masada.

### ***Masada and National Myth Making***

Masada was the ancient fortification in the Judean desert overlooking the Dead Sea, which was the site of the legendary siege by the Roman armies in 73CE against the Sicarii Zealots that, according to the historian Josephus brought to an end the Jewish War when the zealots committed mass suicide rather than fall into Roman hands. For centuries Masada represented for many Jews the folly of political and religious zealotry. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, amidst the threat posed to the early Zionist settlements and to the subsequent State of Israel, Masada attracted fresh interest. This initial interest can be traced to the poem “Masada” by Yitzhak Lamdan (1899-1954)<sup>2</sup> which was published in the 1920’s and describes the Jewish struggle for survival amidst a hostile world. With numerous deadly attacks on Jewish settlers in Palestine in the 1930’s, the idea of an embattled Jewish people who will nonetheless hold out even to death was viewed in marked contrast to the Jews of the past who had “surrendered” to the power of anti-Semitism, even and especially during, the Holocaust.

Yet it also suggested that Israel might also be a trap for Jews: as the new Masada, Israel might well become the place where Jews would face their final confrontation with more than a suggestion of inevitable defeat and national self-immolation. The suggestion from David G. Roskies that Lamdan’s poem inspired the Warsaw Ghetto uprising further underlines the moral ambiguity that the Masadan model encapsulates.

It is the events of the 1940’s that focus Zionist minds and why Masada is transformed from a model of futile and destructive national zealotry into a compelling icon of Jewish identity, defiance, survival and redemption. Jews in Palestine not only faced growing hostility from indigenous Arabs who felt their land was being usurped, but Zionist leaders were all too aware of the Wehrmacht’s advance across North Africa and that, were the Red Army to fall at Stalingrad and the Crimea lost, Palestine would be caught in a pincer movement. Zionist leaders, such as Shmaryahu Gutman (a Scottish born Jewish settler), were all too aware of some of what was befalling Jews who came under

---

<sup>2</sup> The text of the poem can be viewed at: <http://allpoetry.com/Masada>

Nazi rule, could see what was becoming a genuine possibility: that Jews would be trapped in Palestine. Gutman became enthralled by the potential symbolism of Masada and resolved to climb to the summit with a group of young Jews. His climb to the summit reflected the task of Zionism: Fraught with danger, yet only by pressing on, in spite of all that threatens it, will Zionism survive and achieve its goals.

Ari Shavit in his recent, and influential book “My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel” makes this observation:

“(Gutman) has always known that at its core Zionism embodies conflict. Yet he always believed in the desperate energy of Zionism. He believes that the essence of Zionism is momentum – never to retreat, never to rest, always to push forward. The new Hebrews must push the limits of what the Jews can do, of what any people can do. They must defy fate.”<sup>3</sup>

What is particularly striking about the way in which Shavit narrates the story of Gutman’s embrace of the neo-Masadan model is the almost Messianic overtones to the narrative. Gutman, whilst being very much a secular figure, has at the same time a mystical bent. His mission is one to save a defeated nation and not wait for an eschatological Messianic age.<sup>4</sup>

Gutman’s decision to climb Masada is certainly a personal commitment but also one undertaken with a group of young Jews whom Shavit calls “disciples”. The Zionist determination to go up to the summit of Masada in spite of the implications that such a place offers might suggest to a Christian reader significant Christological echoes. He himself notes a wider and more profound reality going on:

“I realize that this paradox is exactly the essence of Zionist Masada; it is a modern, secular icon that transcends modernity and secularism. It is an artificial symbol that transcends its artificiality. What Gutman is doing in bringing this young, idealistic group to this desert ruin is using the Hebrew past to give depth to the Hebrew present and

---

<sup>3</sup> Shavit p.84

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.118

enable it to face the Hebrew future. In order to achieve a concrete, realistic, and national goal, Gutman imbues the fortress with a man-made historically based mysticism.”<sup>5</sup>

And as the young men and women that accompanied Gutman dance on the summit of Masada, Shavit further comments:

“He knows that Zionism has no church and no theology and no mythology. He knows that Zionism is on the brink and needs a poignant symbol that will be a substitute for church and theology and mythology. In Masada he finds this symbol that will unite and inspire Zionism’s followers. He finds a pillar for Zionist identity that is at once concrete, mythic and sublime. In Masada, (he) finds both the narrative and the image that will give the young Hebrews the depth they lack. Masada will captivate them, empower them, and galvanize them for the challenge ahead. This tragic mountain will give meaning to their struggle. In the name of Masada the dancing boys and girls will fight the cataclysmic war that will save Zionism and save the Jews”.<sup>6</sup>

With the unfolding of events elsewhere – the advance of Rommel close to Alexandria and the alarming news coming out of Europe of a mass pogrom against Jews – Masada becomes a central symbol of Jewish identity. With the slaughter of Jews in Europe (by 1943 Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary was declaring that the Nazis were systematically exterminating Jews) there was no alternative but the new Masada that was Palestine. Masada might be the name of last place of Jewish resistance against the Romans, but what was to become Haaratz-the Land of Israel would become the new Masada that comes to symbolize the resistance, pride and survival of a people against all odds.

### ***Jewish Appraisals and Critiques of the Masadan myth***

Since Masada entered into the Israeli national mythology it has been re-evaluated and critiqued by numerous Israeli scholars and it is worth at this point giving just a flavor of this. They not only question to historical veracity of the way the events of 73CE unfolded but also in the manner in which the myth has operated in Israeli national consciousness. The sociologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda points out that the way in which 20<sup>th</sup> century Zionism had made use of the Masada incident is at variance with the only

---

<sup>5</sup> ibid p.86

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.88

ancient source, that of Flavius Josephus, for whom the Sicarii were assassins and a violent group, despised by most contemporary Jews and who had murdered and plundered from their own people. He therefore challenges the accuracy of the basis of the Masada ideal. Having said that, the veracity of Josephus is not beyond reproach given that Josephus had switched from the Judean to the Roman side in the Jewish War and wrote his history from the standpoint of the winning side. Other sociological approaches have analysed the myth in terms of classical Durkheimian approaches that look the functional role of the myth in Israeli society, particularly in respect of integration and social cohesion. Others, most notably the historian Bernard Lewis have pointed to the need to construct a national narrative, what Lewis calls “invented history”. Meanwhile there are those such as Anita Shapira who point to the way in which the myth has helped to legitimize forms of violence.<sup>7</sup>

The Israeli scholar David Ohana has recently explored the theme of the Jewish people as victims of external powers and how this has impacted upon a developing Jewish (Zionist) consciousness and the holiness of particular sites. Ohana draws attention to two narrative assaults that are both “umbilically” connected to Zionism and its most serious threat: the “Canaanite” and “crusader” narratives. The “crusader” narrative associates Zionism with Western colonial expansionism, whereas the “Canaanite” views Zionism only in terms of the land and territory, and thus breaking free of historical continuity.

“The Zionist ideology was part of the modern enterprise. It represented the Promethean passion of western man, which meant being one’s own master, rebelling against the fate decreed by one’s history, being able to mold the future, to create a society independent of existing circumstances. At the heart of modernity – that is, behind the Promethean passion – there is the assumption that man is stronger than the place. The claim of Zionism as modern movement was that the new Jew who had left Europe would conquer the place and would mold it to his measure.”

---

<sup>7</sup> See: Nachman Ben-Yehuda, The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, pp.14ff

It is for this reason that both the crusader and Canannite narratives are a serious threat to Zionism: the former will lead to the degradation and defeat of its existing inhabitants and later risks turning into an extreme nationalistic ideology.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Some Christian Theological Reflections***

One of the first Christian theologians to comment on the place of Masada in Zionist thinking and Israeli national life was Bishop Kenneth Cragg. Cragg hints at a wider significance for Masada within Zionist thought. Masada represents a moment of supreme defiance against overwhelming odds. The ingathering of Jews into Israel, fleeing from a hostile world into a small piece of land surrounded by hostile neighbours is the Masadan complex that lies within Zionism.<sup>9</sup> He observes that “Zionism has rarely, if ever, celebrated explicit sites” (in contrast to Christianity). The only place that could be regarded as having any vestige of “holiness” within Zionism is Masada, the place where the remnant of Jewish resistance fell to the overwhelming forces of the Roman Empire<sup>10</sup>. Thus the precise nature of the “holiness” lies within the dignity of the story of the Jewish people as victims of external power, yet always determined to resist, even against all odds.<sup>11</sup>

It is striking that he uses the word “resurrection” in terms of Masada as symbol of Israeli liberation, and whilst this is not an exclusively Christian word (there is a strong Jewish tradition of an understanding of resurrection) he nonetheless (deliberately or inadvertently) points to a resonance with Christian atonement theology. There are of

---

<sup>8</sup> David Ohana, [The Origins of Israeli Mythology: Neither Canannites nor Crusaders](#), Cambridge University Press, 2012 (first published in Hebrew in 2008), p.1ff

<sup>9</sup> The aim of (Jewish) Zionism to be a place of return for Jews has strong echoes with the movement known as Christian Zionism. They are often viewed as being part of the same movement whereas in fact Christian Zionism predates Jewish Zionism and it does not always follow that Christian Zionists are well disposed to Judaism as a thriving faith tradition; for many Christian Zionists the return of Jews is merely a means to an end, namely the hastening of the eschaton and the second coming of Jesus. See further: Dan Cohn-Sherbok, [The Politics of Apocalypse: The History and Influence of Christian Zionism](#). Oxford: Oneworld, 2006; Robert O.Smith: “Toward a Lutheran Response to Christian Zionism”, in [Dialog: A Journal of Theology](#), Fall 2009, Vol.48, Issue 3, p.279-291; Elizabeth Phillips: “We’ve read to the end of the book: An engagement with contemporary Christian Zionism through the eschatology of John Howard Yoder”, in [Studies in Christian Ethics](#); 2008, Vol.21 Issue 3, p.342-361; [Land of Promise: An Anglican exploration of Christian attitudes to the Holy Land, with special reference to Christian Zionism](#). Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns, 2012

<sup>10</sup> See also Nachman Ben-Yehuda, [The Massada Myth: Collective Memory and Myth Making in Israel](#). University of Wisconsin Press, 1995; Shlomo Sand, [The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland](#). New York, Verso 2012, P.96f; Ari Shavit, [My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel](#). New York, Scribe Publications, 2013, pp.71-77;

<sup>11</sup> Cragg, op.cit. p.84

course dangers in attempts to Christianize Jewish suffering in the Shoah and yet, as we have seen there are echoes of Christian theological language with regard to the Masadan myth, notably in Gutman's journey, with "disciples" to the summit which is a context of suffering and defeat yet which is turned into a resurrection of a people. Cragg suggests that whilst Masada is both a symbol of supreme heroism and defiance it can also be read as a negation of theism whereby God can only be had on human terms and a future can only be embraced if it is forged by human hand.<sup>12</sup>

For Cragg the intriguing quality of Masada in Zionist thinking is related to understandings of "holiness" particularly as it relates to Land. What is uncovered by Cragg's enquiry into the concept of holiness is that whilst Masada is rightly identified as the nearest thing that Zionism has to a "holy site" (that is in any sense comparable to notions of holy places in Christianity and Islam) Zionism did not incorporate any sense of holiness of "the Land", even with regard to Scriptural promise. Any sense of "holiness" (and Zionist writers do not generally use the term) is implicit in the struggle to survive, in the defiance of powers which seem almost omnipotent. It is in such struggle and victory that Zionism sees its fulfillment, but also, and critically, the redemption of the Jewish people. This is the secularization of the ancient Jewish messianic longing, whereby the passivity of Judaism of the past, that merely awaits the return of the Messianic age, is rejected in favour of Jews taking hold of their own destiny, by "stepping back into history" and realizing Jewish redemption without the need of the divine. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is the thinker to whom Zionism owes a good deal: he was attractive to many early Zionists for his declaration that "God is dead", the rejection of Christianity and the culture that went with it, and the belief in the almost omnipotence of human potential, the "will to power" as he described it.

Cragg whilst suggesting that Masada represents Zionist holy place, does not attempt to divorce Zionism from Judaism: he fully understands that for much of contemporary Judaism, Zionism is how Jews find their place in the world. This is related to notions of "chosenness" but as an ontological reality rather than a received hermeneutical imperative. But for Cragg Jewish "chosenness" – what he calls exceptionalism – is something with which he struggles as a Christian theologian.

He reflects upon how notions of Jewish election have related to centuries of Jewish persecution and asks a series of questions:

---

<sup>12</sup> Cragg, [This Year in Jerusalem](#), London, 1982, p.127f

“has this to be the price, within the human scene, of ‘chosenness’ in the identity of one of its communities?...Are we left, in the end, with the shattering irony that history’s most intense sense of corporate religious destiny and its bitterest crime of rejection go together? Why has *this* election experienced *this* enmity? Why is it that Jewry has somehow become the butt of the deepest revelations of human perversity and Jewish existence somehow the touchstone of human antipathies? Is it that humanity cannot ‘allow’ so confidently ‘elected’ a people? How is it that being a people on behalf of God has meant, so largely, being a people in spire of men? And what, through all the vexing tangle of these questions, becomes of the goal for which election stood, or stands?”<sup>13</sup>

“Chosenness” is problematic for Cragg because it is a notion that is enlarged by the New Testament to include Gentiles, through the concept of adoption in Christ. There is within Judaism a fundamental division between Jew and Gentile that cannot be overcome. Furthermore, it is in the very nature of things that the salvation of the world *depends* upon the Jews being set apart: “their mission could never be shared, since they held the copyright”.

It is the Masadan myth that is part of the Zionist ethos as it relates to the Land. The way in which this model has developed might suggest that the dichotomy of Jew and Gentile has been replaced by that of Israel and the world: Israel becomes the new Masada that is prepared to hold out against a hostile world. If this is so, Jewish-Christian dialogue has new and important challenges with regard to language of “chosenness” and the Land, of covenantal language and its relationship to a nation state that defines itself as Jewish, and how to read the Bible in this context, especially when Christianity speaks of the abolition of the distinction between Jew and Gentile.

The possession of human dignity is something that Christianity and Islam yearn to possess and have struggled with in their attempts to universalize the particularity of Judaism. Is it the case that Jewish attempts to retain a covenantal particularity, is always problematic for Christianity that sought to universalize and replace it? Zionism merely underlines this disjunction.

How the Masadan myth has impacted upon Israeli consciousness has been something that has been of concern to numerous Israeli scholars, especially with regard to the

---

<sup>13</sup> Cragg, The Privilege of Man, p. 95

negative impact upon Palestinians. The figure of Gutman embodies the moral difficulties, for whilst he plays a critical role in the development Masadan mythology he also implicated in what the Palestinians called “the Naqba (tragedy)”, especially in the alleged ethnic cleansing of Lydda in 1948. These ethical issues were also a concern of Cragg. The implicit “holiness” in Zionism has invariably offended the ethical”, with its own sense of its “holiness” sustaining this very ethical offence.<sup>14</sup> The actions of the State of Israel – the demolition of villages, creating refugees of thousands and the casualties that resulted from its military actions – raises profound ethical questions. Thus Israel is “holy” in its own eyes and “unethical” in the eyes of others, including many of its own citizens.<sup>15</sup> The notion of the “unethical holy” that the realization of Zionism represents is, according to Cragg, a dimension of a Judaism that has been taken hostage by Zionism, <sup>16</sup> captive “to the sorrows where its own strategies have led...To be inclusive in the land or exclusive with the land was always the alternative on which Zionism would turn, whether or not its founding logic and philosophy discerned it.”<sup>17</sup>

Cragg’s honest wrestling with the persistent question of the relationship between Christian and Jewish self-understandings, reflects a wider issue regarding Christian perceptions of Judaism whether viewed with or without Zionism. In conclusion might we suggest that Zionism, far from being something that should be avoided, merely amplifies an ancient question that haunts Christianity, that the Judaism that was supposed to be replaced has continued and thrived, even in adversity? Its stepping back into history in the guise of a Judaism’s first political ideology, means that many of the old questions for Jewish-Christian dialogue are all the more critical in seeking reconciliation in the world today.

---

<sup>14</sup> Cragg, Palestine, the Prize and Price of Zionism. Cassell 1997, p.84

<sup>15</sup> For example Israel’s “new historians” which include the writings of Ilan Pappé, Benny Morris, Avi Shlaim and Hillel Cohen

<sup>16</sup> For Jewish perspectives upon ethical considerations with Judaism as they relate to the State of Israel see Sand, The Invention of the Land of Israel, op.cit; David J.Goldberg, This is not the way: Jews, Judaism and Israel, London: Faber, 2012

<sup>17</sup> Cragg, The Tragic in Islam, London: Melisande, 2004, p.152