

Palestinian Christians and the Promised Land

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Introduction

The Palestinian Church¹ takes its identity and theology from its natural and unbroken relationship with the biblical land. This is the land where Jesus was born, and where many of the biblical events took place. There is an existential relationship between Palestinian Christians and their land. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Christian pastor and theologian puts it this way:

My identity was stamped by the fact that I was born in this particular place. I feel I have something like a special relationship to David and to Christ – a relationship developed not only by way of the Bible, not only through faith, but also by way of land. I share my city and my land with David and Jesus. My self-understanding as a Christian Palestinian has a *territorial dimension*.²

Even though this statement is made in the first person pronoun, one could easily replace the “I” with “we” as in “we the church in Palestine”. In other words, the self-understanding of the Palestinian Church has a territorial dimension.

Palestinian Christians have written a lot about theology of the land. When Palestinian Christians speak of the land, they speak of their *hometown*, and the hometown of their ancestors. The theology of the land for us is not simply an academic abstract study, but a matter of existence and identity. This first part of this paper will give an overview of how Palestinian Christians read the land promises in the Bible,³ while the second part will give insights that are particular to the experience of the Palestinian church in the land today.

¹ I use the term the Palestinian Church as a representation of all the churches and denominations in Palestine today. There are about 45,000 Christians in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza, and about 120,000 in Israel, the majority of whom are Greek Orthodox and Catholic, with a few Protestants. For more, see Rania al Qass Collings, Rifat Odeh Kassis, and Mitri Raheb. *Palestinian Christians in the West Bank: Facts, Figures and Trends*. Diyar Publisher, Bethlehem, 2012, and Johnny Mansour, *Arab Christians in Israel: Facts, Figures and Trends*. Diyar Publisher, Bethlehem, 2012.

² Raheb, Mitri. *I Am a Palestinian Christian*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, p. 3. (Emphasis added.)

³ The arguments in this section are based on my work: *From Land to Lands, From Eden to the Renewed Earth*. Langham Monographs, 2015.

Part 1: The Bible and the Land

1-1 The Land Belongs to God

Palestinian Christians believe and emphasize that the original Promised Land, like all other “lands” in the world, belonged to the creator God (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 24:1; Deut. 14:10). And so when God promised Israel the land, he made it clear that the land will remain *his land* nevertheless: “For the land is mine” (Lev. 25:23). The former Latin Patriarch in Jerusalem Michel Sabbah comments:

Land has a particular status in the Bible. It belongs to God... Israel, therefore could not become the absolute owner of the land: it was only God’s guest. The worst possible thing that could befall Israel would be to forget this truth, to settle this land, and to substitute it for God in its worship and values system.⁴

Similarly, Palestinian Orthodox theologian Paul Tarazi argues regarding the allotment of the land:

It is an assigning of the tribes to certain parts of that earth, and not an allocation of land to each of the tribes as though each would become the owner.⁵

The claim “for the land is mine” comes in the context of the Jubilee laws (Lev. 25). The importance of these laws in Lev. 25 is that they are a reminder to Israel that she *does not own the land*, for the land belongs ultimately to God (25:23). Israel is not free to do with the land whatever she wants, or to claim eternal possession of it. These laws are a reminder that “land is not from Israel but is a gift to Israel, and that land is not fully given over to Israel’s self-indulgence”.⁶ Such a way of administering the land is a challenge to the “empire” concept, where the king owned and administrated the land, and the people were mere servants or slaves (1 Sam. 8:10-17).

1-2 The Law of the Land

Because the land belongs to God, we must respect the will of God for the land and not defile it. In biblical times, this applied to the nations that were in the land of Canaan before the Israelites entered the land, and it applied on the Israelites when they dwelt in it. God is the same, and he

⁴ Sabbah, Michel. Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible. 1993. Weblink: <http://www.lpj.org/fourth-pastoral-letter-patriarch-sabbahreading-bible-today-land-bible-november-1993/> (last retrieved May 12th, 2017).

⁵ Tarazi, P.N., 2009, *Land and Covenant*, Ocabs Press, St. Paul, Minnesota. p. 130.

⁶ Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2002, p. 59.

deals with nations equally. The demand of holiness by the land applies to all its inhabitants equally:

But you shall keep my statutes and my rules and do none of these abominations, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you (for the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. (Lev. 18:26-28)

The warnings in these verses are so strong and clear. The land does not tolerate ungodliness. This is why according to the OT the exile was a judgment from God for defiling the land. And we can speak of three areas that Israel had to observe if she is to stay in covenant with God. The first is idolatry. Worshiping other gods will cause Israel to forfeit its right to stay in the land. The second is justice. Perhaps no other sin in the OT was tied more directly with being expelled from the land than the sin of socio-economic injustice:

Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Deut. 16:20)

The third requirement is respecting the Sabbath (including land Sabbath) and jubilee laws. Justice is at the heart of the jubilee laws. The concept of equal distribution and equal opportunity is an important one in the theology of the land. The year of jubilee indicates setting the captives free, both people and land, and going back to point zero when things were equal. God gave the land for the good of people, and when land ceases to be a source of blessing for its dwellers it loses its purpose and design (Lev. 25:10-18).

These laws and others are a reminder that the promises of the land were always conditional to obedience and faithfulness to the covenant. The biblical covenants are the *context* or *framework* for the theology of the land in the OT. The same applied to post-exile Israel. For example, Ezekiel 33:24-26 gives a strong warning against relying on ethnicity or the past to possess the land again:

Son of man, the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess. Therefore say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: You eat flesh with the blood and lift up your eyes to your idols and shed blood; shall you then possess the land? You rely on the sword, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife; shall you then possess the land? (Ezek. 33:24-26)

Even after the exile, dwelling in the land was conditional to obedience. In short, there is no cheap grace in the Bible. God holds all those who receive his gifts accountable before him.

1-3 Why a land?

The theology of the land must ask the question: why a land? Why did God promise Abraham a land to begin with?

Why is a particular geography critical in God's plan for history? The significant role of this local geography is counter-intuitive, since the covenantal God of Abraham is the Creator of both heaven and earth who proclaims, "For all the earth is mine".⁷

The giving of a land as part of the project of redemption highlights that God is committed to his created order and to the redemption of human society. Redemption in the Bible is not merely about individuals, personal piety, or spiritual existential experiences. It is about redeeming whole societies and communities on earth, who in return make the church, and it is ultimately about redeeming the whole of humanity.

The biblical storyline could have been different: God could have given Abraham moral commandments for himself and his family. He could have instructed him to wander around in the world proclaiming the worship of the one true God. Instead, he chooses to bring Abraham to a place, to engage with humans in a certain history and a certain geography, and to create from Abraham's descendants a unique and distinct society – one that would reflect his image on earth in the midst of the nations – the church.

Finally, this pattern of choosing a nation and a land and dwelling in the midst of people underscores God's desire for fellowship with humanity. The Bible portrays God as a God who seeks to dwell among humanity and thus in the midst of communities. This is evident throughout biblical history, whether in the Garden of Eden, the tabernacle, or the temple. It is in this sense that we could describe the faith of Israel as "incarnational".⁸ The people of God always embodied the presence of God in their midst, and this becomes a part of their definition. The presence of God in the land was dependent to a certain degree on the presence of the Israelites in the land, for he dwells not merely in the land, but also in the midst of his people: "For I the LORD dwell in the midst of the people of Israel" (Num. 35:34).

1.4 The Land in Christ; The Land of Christ

⁷ E.B. Korn, 2009, Jewish Reflections on Richard Lux's 'The Land of Israel (Eretz Yisrael) in Jewish and Christian Understanding, *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, 3(1), p. 4.

⁸ See N.T. Wright, 1994, Jerusalem in the New Testament, in P.W.L. Walker (ed), *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, p. 58.

Palestinian theology insists that we must read the OT prophecies through the lens of the New Testament. The coming of Jesus brings new meaning and new insights to the story and theology of Israel:

We, Christian Palestinians, believe, like all Christians throughout the world, that Jesus Christ came in order to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and in his light and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we read the Holy Scriptures. We meditate upon and interpret Scripture just as Jesus Christ did with the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. As it is written in the Gospel according to Saint Luke: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Lk. 24:27)

A Christian theology of the land must ask: *How did the New Testament read the Old Testament?* This is indeed a very important question when it comes to a Christian theology of the land. That is why Palestinian Christians are troubled by the fact that many Christians read the promises of the land to Israel *as if Jesus never came*. Jesus is not only the center of our faith, but the point towards which the OT narrative has been going all along (Lk. 24:27).

Jesus reminded us that it is the meek, not the powerful, who inherit the land. He also emphasized that being a son of Abraham is not defined by ethnicity or nationality. It is about doing the works of Abraham (Jn. 8:39). Did Jesus here leave it open as to who can be a child of Abraham? He also claimed that the people of God will expand to include non-Israelites (Lk. 13:29-30; Jn. 10:16).

One of the most important statements of Paul in this regard is 2 Cor. 1:20: For *all the promises* of God find their Yes *in him*. This is one of the most theologically pregnant statements in all of the writings of Paul.⁹ Moreover, Walker argues that the phrase all the promises would necessarily include those concerning the land.¹⁰ In other words, the story of Israel, in its totality, including the part related to the land, must find its fulfillment; its Yes, in Jesus.

Paul goes to Abraham, and claims that the story of Abraham finds its conclusion or fulfillment in non-other than Jesus:

So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith... Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, And to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one, And to your offspring, *who is Christ*. (Gal. 3:14, 16)

This is indeed a massive statement. Paul here affirms that Jesus is the *only legitimate recipient* of the Abrahamic promises, denying in essence any other claims by any person or people group to the benefits of this covenant. The story of Israel narrows down in the thinking of Paul until it is

⁹ G.K. Beale, 2011, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 638.

¹⁰ P.W.L. Walker, 1996, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p. 117.

summed up in one person: *Jesus*. If Jesus is the only true seed of Abraham, then when it comes to the land, there is only conclusion: *Jesus inherits the Land!*

The fact that Paul does not mention the land here does not mean that we can exclude the land from the equation, for “while the Abraham image undoubtedly is transformed, it is inconceivable that it should have been emptied of its reference to land. *The Abraham imagery apart from the land promise is an empty form*”.¹¹ We can therefore conclude that Jesus inherited the land promised to Abraham. He is the only legitimate inheritor of the land. The land promises have been transferred from Israel to Jesus the faithful Israelite.

We must ask now: what land did Jesus inherit? As we have just seen in the conclusion of Matthew, the land that Jesus inherits is the whole earth. Matthew claims that Jesus has been given all authority on heaven and *earth* (Matt. 28:18). We can see this theme of the universalization of the land even more clearly in Rom. 4:13. Notice how Paul describes the geographical extent of the promises to Abraham:¹²

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be *heir of the world* did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

Abraham, according to Paul, received the world and not Canaan as his inheritance. The word Paul uses is *kosmos*, which could be interpreted as the world or even the order of the universe.¹³ *The Promised Land is in fact, according to Paul, the promised earth*. This is not an invention of Pauline theology, as if it did not have its basis in OT.

The land in Paul has been universalized. Similarly, the people of God in Paul have been universalized:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then *you are Abraham's offspring, heirs* according to the promise. (Gal. 3:16, 27-29)

Heirs According to the Promise! What a massive statement! Jews and Gentiles alike are heirs to the Abrahamic promises. We must ask: heirs to what? Again: the Abraham imagery apart from the land promise is an empty form.¹⁴ Paul here is expanding the beneficiaries of this inheritance to include all those who are Christ's. He is not denying his earlier statement that Christ is the seed of Abraham (3:16). He is expanding it by making it the basis for the inheriting by all those who are in Christ. Paul insists that Gentiles who believe in Jesus gain nothing less than the full

¹¹ Brueggemann, p. 166 (emphasis added).

¹² See K.E Bailey, 1994, St. Paul's Understanding of the Territorial Promise, *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review*, XV(1), pp. 59-69.

¹³ S. Zodhiates, 2000, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, p. 166.

inheritance that had belonged exclusively but temporarily to Israel before.¹⁵ The direct and straightforward implication of all of this is simple: *the land belongs to all those who are Christ's*.

Paul cannot be more conclusive! Gentiles have an equal share in the commonwealth of God. Eph. 3:6 declares this unequivocally:

The Gentiles are *fellow heirs*, members of *the same body*, and *partakers of the promise* in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The Church today, consisting of Jews and Gentiles, thus *inherits the story of Israel*. It is not simply that Gentile Christians share some of Israel's blessings. They joined Israel. *We continue the story of Israel through our unity with Jesus the Jew!*

This is an important interpretation for Palestinian Christians. We reclaim Scripture. Khader thus says:

The story told by the Bible is our story: we were in Egypt, we came to the Promised Land, and we were unfaithful to the Law of God. Then the All Merciful God sent his Word, Jesus Christ to fulfill the promises of the prophets. In that spiritual reading, we are the people of God; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are our forefathers, and the blessings of God continue in Jesus Christ.¹⁶

1.5 The Land Universalized: The Promised Earth

Palestinian theologians look to the land as more than just "Canaan", or modern day Palestine and Israel. The descriptions of the boundaries of the land in the OT are "fluid".¹⁷ The map in Genesis 15:18-21 speaks of universal dominion, and not merely of a specific territory in the ANE. This is confirmed by Paul's language in Romans 4:13 that Abraham was promised the "world".

Furthermore, Palestinian theologian Yohanna Katanacho argues, from the famous words in Gen. 12:1-3, that the "climax of the speech" comes in the statement that "through you all the families of the earth will find blessing". As such, "it seems that the land of Abraham is not going to have fixed borders. It will continue to expand... thus increasing in size both territorially and demographically. The land of Abraham will continue to extend until it is equal to the whole earth".¹⁸

¹⁵ Wright, p. 193.

¹⁶ Khader

¹⁷ The boundaries of the land in the OT roughly make two maps: (1) the land of Canaan, and (2) a wider territory (from the river to the river) that includes most of the ANE. We can speak of "micro borders": Canaan, and "macro borders": the Euphrates. In addition, in the different periods, the land had different shapes. The allotted land, for example, is different from the land during David's and then Solomon's reigns, and in both cases the boundaries went beyond modern Israel and Palestine.

¹⁸ Y. Katanacho, 2012, *The Land of Christ*, Bethlehem Bible College, Bethlehem, p. 80.

In the NT, the domain of this kingdom – its land – is the whole earth. The declaration of Jesus at the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel is perhaps one of the most important statements in the NT on the theology of the land:

All authority in heaven *and on earth* has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations* (Matt. 28:18).

Jesus here receives *all the lands of the earth* as his inheritance. The “promised land” has been eclipsed by the breakthrough of what we may call the “promised earth”. The land has been *universalized*. The kingdom of Israel is now a universal kingdom. It is not limited to one land or one people, because the king in this kingdom has authority over heaven and earth. This is indeed a fulfillment of the original vision regarding the kingdom of God in the OT. Ps. 2:8 is now a reality: “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and *the ends of the earth your possession*”. The risen Christ can now claim this psalm and make it his: he was appointed as the “Son of God”; the nations are his “heritage”; the “ends of the earth” are his “possession”.

In short, the theology of the land has a universal thrust. We cannot simply speak about the theology of *the land*, but instead we should speak about the theology of *the earth*. The theology of the land is ultimately the theology of the earth, and this, in turn, will take us back to the creation (Ps. 24:1).

This universalization of the land is by no means a negation of the role and importance of the land in Christian theology, but instead serves only to emphasise its importance. The universalization of the land takes shape in three ways: through expansion, through reproduction, and finally in the consummation.

Universalization by Expansion

The coming of Jesus caused the borders of the land to expand. This is particularly evident in Acts 1:8: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”. The image envisioned here is that of progression or expansion. As the gospel of the kingdom moved from Jerusalem, into Judea, into Samaria, and into the ends of the earth, the borders of the land also shifted outwards to include these new places. In this image, the Promised Land grows until it reaches the ends of the earth. In other words, the “land” grows into the “earth”.

This aspect of the universalization reminds us of the historical nature of Christianity. That is why the Jesus-event had to take place *in the land of promise*, and that is why the first church had to be a *Jerusalemite church*. The land plays an integral role in the NT biblical theology. The reign and presence of God began expanding to the rest of the world *from the land*.

As such, the Palestinian Church considers itself “the original church”. Christianity started from Jerusalem, after all, and for Palestinian Christians this is a source of pride.

Universalization by Reproduction

Secondly, and more directly related to our discussion on ecclesiology, the land is universalized in that the mission of the church establishes new “holy places” in new lands. We can refer to this as *establishing new “land realities” in new lands*. As new communities of believers in new lands embody the presence and reign of God, taking responsibility for their territory; they recreate the story of Israel in new lands. In this process, Jerusalem no longer has to play a central place in relation to the other new locations, because Jesus is now the cornerstone – the centre of the new Christian movement. The NT thus has a decentralized ecclesiology – but it is still territorial. Any place has the potential to become a “holy place”. Any land has the potential to become a holy land. Any city has the potential to become a holy city or a city on a hill – as evident by the role of Antioch in the early stages of Christianity (Acts 11:25-30). As Burge explains:

The New Testament...brings an ecclesial alternative to the problem of Holy Land. Christians in other lands, lands deeply valued by God, bring with them the possibility of bearing the reality of Christ to these places. Which explains the fundamental basis of Christian mission. This is a divinely appointed task to bring that which the Temple and the land once held – the presence of God – into the nations of the world.¹⁹

The church, however, brings more than just the “presence of God” to new lands. It speaks prophetically for God in new lands. It cares for the neighbours and sojourners in new lands. It promotes and embodies the kingdom ideals of justice and equality in new lands. As such, it creates new land realities in new lands. *The land is universalized when Israel’s model is Christified and replicated in new lands*. In addition, the new “land realities” function as a signpost and point forward to the time of consummation, when all the earth will be fully redeemed.

Universalization in the Consummation

Thirdly, the universalization of the land is intended to point towards a time in which the whole created order is renewed in the form of a “new heavens and a new earth”. This holistic and universal redemption serves to remind us of the goodness of creation. The land is part of God’s good creation. The restoration of the land is an integral part of the restoration of the earth – a moment towards which history is moving. Until this happens, however, the lands continue to groan.

These three aspects of the universalization of the land together make a complete picture. The land is universalized as it expands beyond Jerusalem into new lands. This expansion includes an element of decentralization, which no longer necessitates that Jerusalem continues to play a central role in redemptive history. Rather, new land realities are created in new lands, as Israel’s model is replicated in new places. This process culminates in a “new heavens and a new earth” when God intervenes in time and space – by bringing complete redemption to the universe.

¹⁹ G.M. Burge, 2010, *Jesus and The Land: The New Testament Challenge to ‘Holy Land’ Theology*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, p. 131.

1.6 Embodying the Presence and Reign of God on Earth

The church must take seriously the theology of being made in God's image and of being entrusted with vicegerency. The community of believers, collectively, represent God on earth. The local church represents God in a particular village, or city, or land. The believers should take this responsibility seriously. God and the land demand holiness, and the covenant that God made with his people always demands fruits of justice and righteousness.

The church in all its community-based activities, creates, as it were, a sacred arena where God can be encountered. The church community is thus the natural medium of theophany today. The community, liturgy, and sacraments embody and manifest the presence of God within a particular land. The presence of God is a sanctifying presence: it transforms individuals, communities, societies, and lands.

The church should also take its priestly task seriously. The church not only represents God within a certain land, but also represents a certain land and the people of that before the face of God. As such, it must continuously engage in prayers of intercession on behalf of the nation and the land (1Tim. 2:1-2).

A church must also recognize its identity as the "light" and "salt" of the land. A corrupt salt or a fading light is a recipe for the corruption and darkness of society and land. The church in a particular land must have a sense of accountability towards that land and the people and society of that land. With election comes responsibility.

1.7 Land, Community, and the Church²⁰

The Christian experience today is always an experienced that is rooted in time and space. To be "in Christ" is to be with him *here* and *now*, and is at the same time a *community experience*. To be "in Christ" is to be in him with the community of the believers – and this is directly related to the land of that community. The theology of the land emphasizes the role of the community:

It is very important that the Christian life demands responsibilities by and to those within the community. The social dimension of the theology of the land helps reclaim this community element in redemption. Chris Wright further proposes that ancient Israel's mission in the land can become a model for the experience of being "in Christ" today. He calls this a "typological understanding of the significance of Israel's land":²¹

The typological interpretation of the land, which relates it to the person and work of Jesus the Messiah, does not come to a 'dead end' with Jesus himself. Rather, it carries the social and economic thrust of Old Testament ethics onwards into the ethics of practical relationships within New Testament Israel, the

²⁰ This section is adapted from my book, *From Land to Lands*, pp. 366-367.

²¹ Wright, C J H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004, p. 193.

Messianic community. Citizenship of the kingdom of God most certainly has a social and economic dimension.²²

Wright's contribution to the theology of the land is immensely important. He avoids any spiritualization or heavenization tendencies by anchoring the thesis "In Christ = In the Land" in the experience of the community of believers on earth; also by linking this to a Christian version of Israel's theology of the land. As such, the theology of the land continues to be an important category of faith in Christian theology – with an important role to play in defining the mission and identity of the church.

Land matters. The biblical narrative is a story about land. Covenant, as Brueggemann stresses, never concerned only people and God, "*but the land is always present to the interaction and is very much a decisive factor*".²³ In many Christian circles, the transition from the OT to NT resulted in two dissimilar versions of redemption: the covenant in the OT between God, people, and land became in the NT a covenant between God and *individuals* – *with no reference to land or community*. However, a serious biblical theological approach to the Bible as a whole must, however, challenge such an approach – especially in the light of the fact that the NT authors so clearly present the Jesus-event as the continuation and climax of the story of Israel.

In the biblical narrative the role of the community is emphasized alongside that of the individual – perhaps even above it. The biblical context of redemption is the community. In many Christian circles, salvation has become a private matter that is not related to land and community. The focus is on God's encounters with individuals and God is relevant only as he is involved in personal and private matters. But the theology of the land shows that the covenant has always been between *God, communities, and land*. As Brueggemann powerfully argues:

It will not do to make the individual person the unit of decision-making because in both Testaments the land possessed or promised concerns the whole people. Radical decisions in obedience are of course the stuff of biblical faith, but now it cannot be radical obedience in a private world without brothers and sisters, without past and futures, without turf to be managed and cherished as a partner in the decisions. The unit of decision-making is the community and that always with reference to the land.²⁴

God is the God of nations and lands, and not just the God of individuals. The focal point in biblical theology is the community and not the individual. This is not a denial of the need for individuals to make faith decisions. God is the one who meets individuals where they are. However, once an individual believes in the gospel of the reign of God through Christ, he/she becomes a member of a community – a family. He/she is accountable to the community just as they are to him/her. *Meaning, mission, and identity can only be defined in the context of the community.* This is the true definition of ecclesiology.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 196

²³ Brueggemann, *The Land*, p. 200 (emphasis added).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

This is where the NT concept of fellowship comes into play. Fellowship is not merely a symbolic spiritual articulation of Christian unity in Christ. Rather, “the experience of *fellowship* – in its full, rich, concrete New Testament sense – fulfils analogous theological and ethical functions for the Christian as the possession of *land* did for Old Testament Israelites”.²⁵ Christian fellowship, therefore, manifests itself in the socio-economic sphere and is interpreted in socio-economic actions, such as sharing possessions, meeting the needs of the community, and maintaining a system of equality among the members of the fellowship. The experience of the community is central to what it means to be a Christian.

1.8 The Church in Context – Territorial Ecclesiology

The church is always a church in a context. For Paul Tarazi, this understanding of territorial ecclesiology is rooted in the foundational relationship between the church and the world. The church, he argues, “is not a separate entity which stands vis-à-vis the world or even in the world”. Rather, both church and world are two “faces of the same reality, which is the creation. The world is the first creation; the church is the new one”.²⁶ However, the church and world are at the same time radically different faces of the same reality. While the world is the sinful and not yet redeemed creation, the church is that part of creation which has responded to and accepted willingly salvation by and in Jesus Christ.²⁷ He then concludes:

Orthodoxy has consistently taken the New Testament expression “the church of God in such and such a place” to be a basic truth at the core of sound ecclesiology. There is no such thing as an ethereal church of God at large, but the same church of God taking different shades and colours according to its various dwelling places on this earth.²⁸

This understanding of ecclesiology is extremely important. It emphasizes the rootedness of the church in the land. *A church in a particular land exists for the sake of that land and takes her mission agenda from it.* The church, in other words, derives much of its purpose from its locale. This is not simply a matter of contextualizing the Christian gospel and making it more “relevant”. This has to do with the self-definition of the church. This requires that each church identifies its territory and claims this territory as the realm of her vicegerency. The mission of the church in the world is, after all, a declaration of the sovereignty of the Son of God over all the lands of the world. The local church needs to apply this global reign of Christ in its own distinctive locality.

Churches today are defined more in terms of doctrine and beliefs than territory. Mission is defined in reference to individuals and people groups – not territory. Yet the biblical vision of holistic redemption and the paradigm of Israel together suggest a different way of doing church

²⁵ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, p. 195 (emphasis in the original).

²⁶ Tarazi, Paul Nadim. Covenant, Land and City: Finding God’s Will in Palestine. *The Reformed Journal* 29 (1979), p 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

and mission. *The church in a particular land exists with the view that this land will one day become a new restored creation.* Therefore, the church of a particular land must embody, advocate, and implement God's agenda for that land. God's agenda for a particular land must then unify the churches that exist in a particular land towards fulfilling this agenda. *A missional theology of the land thinks territorially.*

Part 2 – The Particularity of the Palestinian Church

2-1 One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church

Palestinian Christians view themselves, naturally, as part of the “One Holy Catholic Apostolic Church”, as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed declares. In fact, the Jerusalem church was part of the first five original seats, though a small one, besides Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome.

Yet the unity of the “one church” has been jeopardized by the many divisions and conflicts Christians had among themselves, specially but in exclusively conflicts that took place in the Holy Land itself. The Jerusalem seat has been coveted over the years, and everyone wanted to have a foot in Jerusalem, the place where Jesus was crucified and risen. This resulted in the presence of many churches and bishops – even two Patriarchs – in Jerusalem.

So, what do we make of the fact the church looks different from one locality to another? And what do we make of the fact that these difference and conflicts resulted in the presence of many churches in Jerusalem today? Tarazi answers:

As to the oneness of the church, it is a delusion to think that either a centralized administration or a pseudo-theological justification of actual chaos can realize it. The church is one because the Holy Spirit is one. And it is precisely this colorful Holy Spirit who is responsible for the various shades the church takes in its different earthly dwellings, thus making it a richly vested and beautifully adorned bride to the great joy and glory of the bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ.²⁹

Interestingly, Palestinian Christians identify more in terms of their geo-political identity, and not the denominational one. We are “Palestinian Christians” first, and then Orthodox, Catholics or Lutherans. This has twofold reasons: first, the particularity of Palestine as the biblical land, and second, the historical developments and the sense of pride Palestinians feel in response to the Israeli occupation.

2-2 The Land as the Fifth Gospel

For Palestinian Christian theologians, the original Promised Land has lost its strictly *theological* and *salvific* significance. It is no longer a distinct “holy land” or even a “promised land”. The NT went beyond land – to earth, claiming that Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the OT story, and that after his death and resurrection, the land has been universalized. In this sense, the land has lost its theological significance.³⁰

²⁹ M. Isaac, *From Land to Lands*, p. 374.

³⁰ Some have suggested that the land could possibly be the theatre of the final drama in salvation history, namely the place where Christ will return. See R.L. Wilken, 1992, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and*

However, once this critical point has been granted, we can readily acknowledge that the land continues to act as a witness to God's work in history. Sabbah argues that according to the teachings of Jesus, the committed believer does not need to worship God in a particular place, be it Jerusalem or the Promised Land. True worship is in spirit and truth anywhere in the world. This, however, does not negate the importance of holy places for Christians as places of faith and prayer and destinations for pilgrimage. Rather, priority is given for faith over the place in which one practices his/her faith.³¹

The land will always be the historical backdrop or scenery in which the biblical drama took place in actual time and space: the call of Abraham, the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, the place where the church first began. So, in this sense, the Land still has a special role that it can play within Christian faith—as a witness. This is why many have called the land “The Fifth Gospel”.

Palestinian Christians are proud that their church continues 2000 years of Christians witness in the land where it all started. The Jerusalem church is unique in that matter. Tarazi says:

In digging further into their own background the [Christian] citizens of Jerusalem discover that the unique contribution of their city and their land lies in the holiness of them: Jerusalem is the Holy City and Palestine is the Holy Land. In fear and trembling we realize the weight of such a responsibility, knowing that holiness is God's attribute; still in humility and obedience we accept the fact that the same Holy God has anointed in a unique way Jerusalem and Palestine. In a way the Palestinian Orthodox have no choice, since even our own flesh and blood are products of that land: its dust, its climate, its air, its food, its water— which centuries ago produced the flesh and blood of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ.³²

The land today tells a story! It tells the story of a God who has chosen a people and land, and dwelt in their midst – eventually bringing from that people and that land a powerful redemption which can reach to all the families and the lands of the earth. It tells the story of a God who blesses but also demands holiness and justice.

It is in this sense that the land can be considered sacred, as British Anglican bishop Inge argues, “sacred places will be those which have been associated with sacred stories, places linked with divine disclosure”.³³ The land gives a testimony to thousands of years of salvation history. It can, as such, become a place where God is encountered in a special way – specially by people who find themselves in places which they are familiar with from their reading of Scripture. The land functions as a stimulus for spiritual reflection, prayer, and fresh encounters with God. That is

Thought. Yale University Press, New Haven, p. 47. However, as we have seen, the focus in final vision of the NT is on the new heavens and the new earth, and the new Jerusalem, not on the land.

³¹ M. Sabbah, *A Voice Crying Out in the Wilderness (Arabic book)*. Latin Semianry, Jerusalem, 2008, p. 31.

³² P. Tarazi. *Covenant, Land and City*, p. 14.

³³ J. Inge, 1999, Towards a Theology of Place, *Modern Believing*, 40(1), p 47. Inge argues extensively for what he called an “Incarnational” theology of the land where a place in which God is experienced in a special way can become sacred. It is important to observe that any place or land for Inge, like the Cathedral, could become sacred, and not just the original land of promise. See also his book: J. Inge, 2003, *A Christian Theology of Place*, Ashgate, Aldershot, Hampshire, England ; Burlington, VT, USA.

why over the centuries Christian pilgrims have visited this land, seeking a deeper encounter with God.³⁴

However, we must warn against idolizing the land – something to which this very same land itself testifies. The land serves as a warning against idolizing the land! As Palestinian theologian Naim Ateek says,

History teaches us that whoever concentrates heart and mind on the land will be cursed and vomited out of the land. This is what happened to the crusaders, Christians who fell into this trap. The land can, however, *become* holy to those who put their trust in the God of the whole universe, whose nature does not change – a God of justice for all, who desires goodness and mercy for all people living in this and every land.³⁵

The Palestinian Church constantly declares that *our connection is with the God of the land, the God whose story the land tells, and not with the land itself*. The Crusades and the Crimean War are just examples of how far Christians are willing to go when the land is absolutized over the God of the land. In addition, and as we have seen, there is no guarantee that a holy place will continue to be holy forever – as Jerusalem itself testifies.

2-3 The Living Stones – the Church – as the Sixth Gospels

Ateek says:

The Palestinian Christians of today are the descendants of those early Christians, yet this is no cause for *hubris*. With humility that befits their Lord, they accept it as privilege that carries with it a responsibility for service... They and their ancestors have maintained a living witness to Jesus and his Resurrection from the beginning of the Church, and they should see themselves dynamically continuing such a witness in the land.³⁶

Christians must remember that the people of the land are as important as the land itself when it comes to narrating the biblical story and the story of the land over the centuries. Christians who visit the land must have a connection not just with old stones of old churches, but more importantly, the “living stones” of the land – the community of faith where God in reality dwells. The presence of God by his Holy Spirit in the midst of the community of faith in the land is what makes this land, as indeed any other land, to be holy. The people of the land are an integral part of the witness of the land. The testimony of the land apart from the people of the land is an

³⁴ See the book by Wilken, 1992. See also P.W.L. Walker, 1990, *Holy City, Holy Places?: Christian Attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

³⁵ N. Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. New York: Orbis Books, 1989, p. 111.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113

empty testimony. If the land is the fifth Gospel, then the people of God in the land are, according to Raheb, the “Sixth Gospel”:³⁷

The Palestinian people are an important continuum from the biblical times until today is the peoples of the land and their distinct cultures. Their understanding of the context is important to understand the text of the bible. They constitute another important hermeneutical key to the bible.³⁸

2-4 The Land as a Model

For Palestinian Christians, the theology of the land has a missional role. The theology of the land of biblical Israel – modified in the Jesus-event – is a paradigm for Christian communities living in other lands. Palestinian theologian Naim Ateek argues:

The land that God has chosen at one particular time in history for one particular people is now perceived as a paradigm, a model, for God’s concern for every people and every land. As God commanded the Israelites to obey God’s law in their life in the land, so God demands the same from all peoples in their lands... Every nation can say about its own country... “This is the Lord’s land, and the Lord demands a life of righteousness and justice in our land”.³⁹

If this is true for any church in a land, then it is certainly true for the Palestinian church. It actually begins here – in Jerusalem. That is why Palestinian Christians believe that their land has a “universal mission”.

We believe that our land has a universal mission. In this universality, the meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land. In light of the teachings of the Holy Bible, the promise of the land has never been a political programme, but rather the prelude to complete universal salvation. It was the initiation of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth.⁴⁰

2-5 The Meek Inherit the Land

Commenting on Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes, that the meek inherit the earth, Mitri Raheb writes arguing that first we should read the verse as the meek inherit the land, rather than earth.

³⁷ See also Raheb, 2012, *Towards a New Hermeneutics of Liberation: A Palestinian Christian Perspective*. In M. Raheb (ed), *The Biblical Text in the Context of Occupation: Towards a New Hermeneutics of Liberation*. Diyar, Bethlehem, pp. 11-28.

³⁸ Raheb, Mitri. *Shaping Communities in Times of Crisis: Narratives of Land, Peoples and Identities*. Unpublished conference paper. The International Center of Bethlehem, Bethlehem, November, 2005.

³⁹ Ateek, *Justice*, pp. 108-109

⁴⁰ Kairos Palestine Document, section 2.3. Weblink: <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document>. (Last retrieved May 12, 2017).

He then reads the verse from a geopolitical perspective, noting how Palestine has always been occupied and ruled by Empires, from biblical times to our days today. The people and land of Palestine, he comments, has always been in the shadow of empires. For Raheb, this is understanding element in understanding Scripture. He argues that we must look at history, and biblical history for that matter, as *logue duree*. This is how we make sense of the claim that the meek inherit the land:

When occupied people face the empire, they generally become so overwhelmed by its power that they start to think that the empire will remain forever... Jesus wanted to tell his people that the empire would not last, that empires come and go... Who remains in the land? The meek, that is, the powerless! Empires come and go, while the meek inherit the land.⁴¹

2-6 Sharing the Land: The Land of Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation

It is evident that the land is a place of hostility, strife, and division. The reality in the land is one of injustice. There are oppressors and there are the oppressed. Not all the people of the land are equal. There are laws that differentiate between ethnicities and religion – against the biblical vision of equality. The resources of the land are not shared equally. Theology has been used in Palestine to justify the occupation and injustice.

Palestinian Christians emphasize that God’s ultimate vision for “the land” is that it will be like “the garden of Eden”, “a dwelling place for God with humanity, and a homeland for all the children of God”.⁴² That is why Palestinian Christians reject any exclusive claim to the land. The land belongs to God, and as such it is a land for all. As such, this is the main principle that should be the foundation for any political reality in the Holy Land:

The land belongs to God; not to any nation or religion

We all belong to the land; God land.

Palestinian Christians call for a theology of a *shared land*, which means that all the dwellers of the land share the land and its resources equally and have the same rights – regardless of their ethnicity or religion.

A shared-land theology emphasizes that there are no “second-class” citizens in this land. No one is marginalized in God’s vision of the land. *A shared land is not simply an option; it is the only way forward.* This is the biblical vision and so it must be the prophetic vision of the church in Palestine and Israel. The reality on the ground is that of “walls”, yet what is needed is a vision of “bridges”. *Palestinians and Israelis*

⁴¹ Raheb, 2014, M. Faith in the Face of the Empire, Diyar Publishing, Bethlehem, pp. 102-103.

⁴² Sabbah, A Voice Crying Out, p. 28.

*must think collectively in terms of a common future in which they cooperate – not a divided future in which they separate.*⁴³

I conclude with words of Kairos:

Our land is God’s land, as is the case with all countries in the world. It is holy inasmuch as God is present in it, for God alone is holy and sanctifier. It is the duty of those of us who live here, to respect the will of God for this land. It is our duty to liberate it from the evil of injustice and war. It is God’s land and therefore it must be a land of reconciliation, peace and love. *This is indeed possible.* God has put us here as two peoples, and God gives us the capacity, *if we have the will*, to live together and establish in it justice and peace, making it in reality God’s land.⁴⁴

⁴³ M. Isaac, *From Land to Lands*, p. 380. Most of the political discussions today center around the idea of a “two states solution”, in which Palestinians and Israeli divide the land. The practicality of this solution is now debated since it is becoming more and more impossible to define the borders of each side’s territory as a result of the Israeli settlements. This is why many academics and activists today are calling for a “one state” solution, in which there is one country and one law, but two governments. I believe that the church must not get involved in suggesting political solutions. Rather, the message should be that regardless of which political solution is adopted and implemented – the vision and ideals of God of justice and equality in the land – indeed any land – must be respected.

⁴⁴ *Kairos Palestine*, section 2.3.1. (*Emphasis added*).

Biography

Munther Isaac is a Palestinian Christian pastor and theologian. He now pastors Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, and is at the same time the Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible. He is also the director of the highly acclaimed and influential Christ at the Checkpoint conferences, and is a board member of Kairos Palestine.

Munther is passionate about issues related to Palestinians and Palestinian Christians. He speaks locally and internationally on issues related to the theology of the land, Palestinian Christians, and Palestinian theology. He is the author of "From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centered Biblical Theology of the Promised Land".

Munther has a Master in Biblical Studies from Westminster Theological Seminary, and a PhD from the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. He is married to Rudaina, an architect, and together they have two boys: Karam and Zaid.

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