

# What is Christian Zionism?

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## Beginnings: The 19th Century

Biblical prophets warn us to establish justice, yet Palestinians in the Holy Land suffer great injustice. This cuts deeply within the hearts of many Christians.

In the 1820s and 1830s, a group of clergymen from the British Isles—including Edward Irving, Lewis Way, Joseph Wolff, and Henry Drummond—held a series of Bible conferences. Named after the British village where Drummond lived, the Albury conferences promoted the idea that Jews should move to Palestine. Other organizations during this time, such as the London Jews' Society and the Palestine Exploration Fund, shared that goal. Decades later, Austrian Jewish writer and organizer Theodor Herzl spread Zionist ideas with his 1896 book *Der Judenstaat* and at the First Zionist Congress in Switzerland in 1897.

At this time Palestine was ruled by the Ottoman Turks, and it was a popular destination for Europeans and Americans. Because so many people from Christian nations were visiting Ottoman Palestine, Christian interest in it grew. In the 1880s, many of these travelers were influential preachers. One of them was Rev. DeWitt Talmage, pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York. Upon his return from a pilgrimage to Palestine, he published his *Twenty-Five Sermons from the Holy Land*. This book painted a romantic picture of a Jewish renaissance in the Holy Land and portrayed “the fingers of providence” pointing to the growth of Jewish life there. In 1891 George Adam Smith wrote his popular book *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, in which he portrayed an empty, Biblical land awaiting the arrival of Judaism.

Christian leaders in Britain urged the British government to encourage Jewish migration to Palestine. These leaders included John Nelson Darby, Charles Simeon, and Charles Spurgeon. Darby taught that God’s giving the land to Abraham meant that the future Israel



belonged to the Jewish people. Above all, he proclaimed that the creation of today's Israel would bring about the End Times.

Darby made eight missionary trips to the United States, but Americans mostly ignored him. When leading American evangelists such as Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Harry Ironside saw how his ideas influenced audiences, however, Darby's views caught on. In 1881, for instance, Horatio and Anna Spafford and 16 friends opened the American Colony in Jerusalem's Old City to watch—as they put it—“prophecy being fulfilled.”

In Britain, politicians such as Lord Shaftesbury, Lord Palmerston, David Lloyd George, and Lord Balfour saw the value of a Jewish state in Palestine. The Jewish Zionist movement also grew, largely due to British Christian leaders such as William Hechler. Zionism eventually gained international recognition through the Balfour Declaration, which in 1917 (during World War I) guaranteed a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

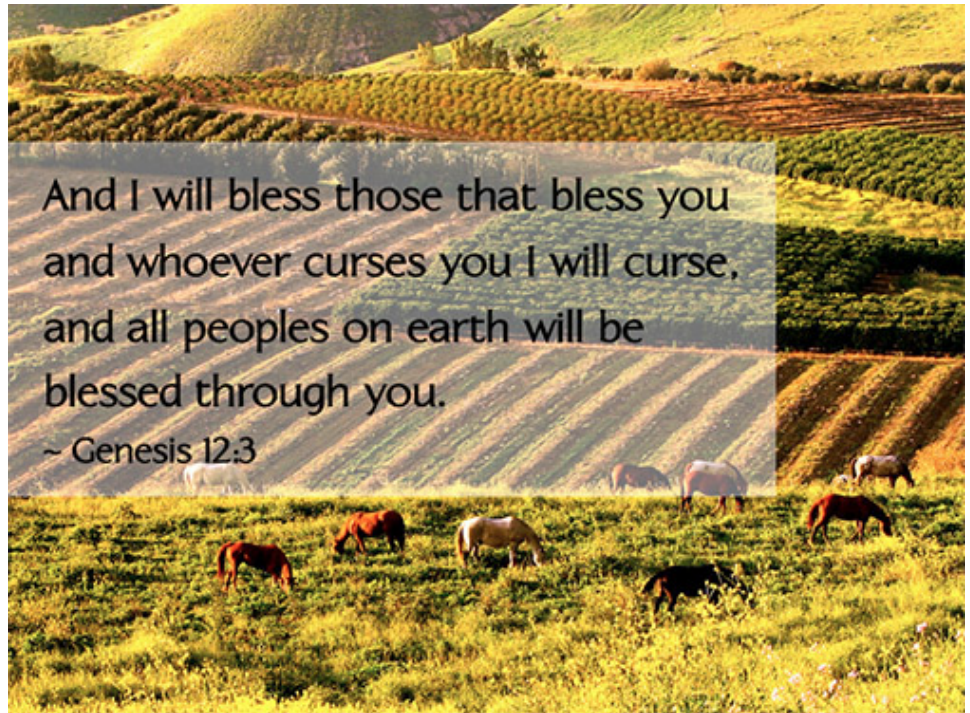
## **Growth and Development: The 20th Century**

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William Blackstone, a Chicago evangelist and a student of Dwight Moody, published *Jesus Is Coming* in 1878. This best-selling book sold many Americans on Darby's idea that God gave Israel to the Jewish people. In 1890 Blackstone visited Jewish settlements in the Holy Land and organized conferences in Chicago to transfer Jews to Palestine. He also pressured then-president Harrison to create a Jewish state in Palestine. Because of his partnership with Jewish Zionists, the Zionist Conference of Philadelphia in 1918 called him

a “father of Zionism.” In 1956 Israel named a forest in his honor.

In the first half of the 1900s, Christian Zionist teachers organized conferences promoting Christian Zionist ideas. After several devastating global events—the First World War, the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, the Great Depression and World War II—some evangelicals wanted to see a divine plan of redemption for human misery.



In 1948, when the modern nation-state of Israel was founded, many Christian Zionists believed it was divinely ordained, and the Christian Zionist movement grew significantly. When the Israeli flag was raised on May 14, they were euphoric. They felt confident that the key piece was now in place for even more of their interpretations of prophecy to be fulfilled. Israel’s swift military victory in 1967—hailed by many as a divine miracle—sparked even more zeal, as Israel now had conquered the entire Holy Land.

Christian Zionists such as John Walvoord and Charles Ryrie viewed modern history through this Biblical lens for a new generation. In 1970 Hal Lindsey published the hugely popular *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which described political events in today’s Israel as Biblically predicted. More recently, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins have sold over 50 million copies of their popular *Left Behind* books about the End Times.

## Christian Zionism Today

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Many advocates for Christian Zionism have dropped the early Christian Zionists’ idea that human history is divided into distinct eras by divine decree. But they have retained the Christian Zionist idea of the End Times, and they regard Biblical faithfulness as loyalty to the State of Israel. One widely recognized spokesperson, John Hagee, with his organization Christians United for Israel, aggressively lobbies Congress to shape American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Four themes are generally present in most Christian Zionist thought:

1. **The end of history.** The founding of today's nation-state of Israel in 1948 marked the final human era.
2. **God's plan.** The chaos in the Middle East surrounding Israel is part of God's unfolding plan. There will be a great and final war culminating in the second coming of Christ.
3. **God's promises.** God's covenant with Israel is eternal and unconditional. Therefore, the promises of land given to Abraham in Genesis will never be overturned, and the church has not replaced Israel.
4. **Blessing Israel.** The church is obligated to interpret Genesis 12:3 in a specific way regarding today's nation-state of Israel: "I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you." Failing to support Israel's political dominance today will incur divine judgment.

Some Christian Zionists have developed a different focus in their thinking. Rather than naming the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy as the basis for their loyalty to Israel, they believe instead that loyalty to Israel is simply a moral duty of Christians due to historic and present-day anti-Semitism and the unique place given to Jews in the Scriptures.

Some also believe that loyalty to Israel will help atone for the horrors of the Holocaust, in which 6 million Jews died and untold others were brutally mistreated and lost their livelihoods and their possessions. Indeed, it is fitting and necessary that we acknowledge these horrors, that we honor and remember those who suffered this catastrophe, and that we return or pay for Jewish homes and property that were seized during the Nazi era.

At the same time, it is false logic to conclude, as some Christian Zionists do, that seizing and colonizing (via settlements) the land of Palestinian families; destroying their homes, businesses, and schools; and imposing a military occupation that denies fundamental rights is an effective way to honor victims of the Holocaust. After the Holocaust, humanity cried out, "Never again!" Many people – including people of all faith traditions – believe that a more fitting way to honor victims of the Holocaust is to ensure that "Never again!" means that never again will a group of people be denied rights because of their religion or ethnicity.

## **Theological issues and new testament revelation**

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Christian Zionism has numerous critics, and their criticism has stirred plenty of controversy. Many theologians wonder if Christian Zionism reduces the importance of Christ's new covenant. Many Old Testament scholars are troubled by Christian Zionists who ignore the ethical demands of the prophets. Many New Testament scholars contend that the land promises of the Old Testament have been reinterpreted. The promise of the gospel is not tribal or local, but universal and global. And even Jews must step into this new messianic reality. In addition, these scholars reject the idea that modern Israel is the Israel of Biblical

times, or that the Jewish people have exclusive claim to the land. They believe that Jerusalem should be shared by all people. (The interpretation of Romans 9–11 is central in these debates.) Many Christian believers and their pastors are worried that the Biblical prophets warn us to establish justice, yet when they visit the Holy Land, they see Palestinians suffering from so much injustice.

Ethicists, both Jewish and Christian, have also been critical of Christian Zionism's tendency to see a divine purpose in the Israeli government's controversial and aggressive politics. This, they argue, has led to political exceptionalism for Israel and has muted the church's ability to promote justice and peacemaking in the Middle East. (Exceptionalism is the belief that one particular group possesses, inherently and inalienably, certain special privileges and a special status that are not available to any other group.)

## **Palestinian people within the Holy Land**

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Within the Christian Zionist worldview, Palestinians are regarded as alien residents in today's State of Israel. Many Christian Zionists are reluctant even to acknowledge Palestinians as a distinct people. They incorrectly claim that Palestinians moved to the State of Israel from surrounding Arab nations after Israel grew prosperous. Some of these ideas come from fear and a deep-seated hatred of Islam, as most Palestinians are Muslim. But many Palestinians are Christian, a fact that many Christian Zionists ignore, even though Arab Christians have worshipped Christ since the earliest days of the church (see Acts 2:11).

Since 2005, researchers have been studying the attitudes of evangelicals, and they are finding a divide between the younger and older generation. Young Christians are following contemporary leaders who say that it is time to be "pro-Israel, pro-Palestine, and pro-peace." Christian Zionists respond that this language is simply cover for those who oppose evangelical support for Israel.

Christian Zionism will continue to be a hotly debated issue in evangelical churches. It's driven not only by particular interpretations of the Bible but also by the circumstances of our modern political era.

# Does modern Israel inherit the promises made to Abraham?

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In the book of Genesis, God makes promises to Abraham (the father of Judaism). He promises rich blessings on Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:1–3) and makes a covenant with Abraham, promising that his descendants would inherit the land of Israel (Gen 15:18). The promise is repeated in Gen 17:7–9 and Gen 26:2–4. Abraham is told three things: He will have many descendants, they will possess a particular territory (today’s Holy Land), and they will be a blessing to all nations. In Gen 17:7 this promise is called an “everlasting covenant.” All of this happened over 4,000 years ago.

Today, some argue that Jews inherit this promise. Therefore, they argue, the modern state of Israel (which identifies itself as a Jewish state) can make a divine claim that all of the Holy Land belongs to Israel. This is not a political or historical argument. It is a theological argument, which goes like this: “God gave the Holy Land to the Jews in the Bible, and that should settle the modern political debates.”

While this thinking is popular, it runs up against some enormous problems. First, the Bible makes clear that these promises are conditional. They depend on ancient Israel's loyalty to the faith of Abraham—believing in the God of Abraham and living according to God's morals. In Deuteronomy 4:25–27 this is crystal clear. Failure to show this faith and these morals will lead to Israel “perishing” from the land. The reason the promise is given conditionally lies in Leviticus 25:23. Israel is never promised ownership of the land. Israel is promised use of the land. Why? Because the land belongs to God.

Throughout the Old Testament we see more examples of this idea. Ancient Israel's life in the Holy Land depends on faith and ethics. David's faithful, moral behavior in 1 Chronicles 21 is the ideal. Ahab's coveting and theft of Naboth's land in 1 Kings 21 is the opposite. But the strongest warnings come from the Hebrew prophets. Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and Jeremiah each repeat the warning (among many possible examples, see Isa 1, Mic 1–2, Amos 5–6, Jer 2–5). Isaiah 5:1–7 is perhaps the most fervent explanation.

What happens when we apply these covenant promises to a secular state like today's Israel? If the Old Testament prophets were to visit today and learn that more than half the Jewish population is non-religious (65% non-religious, according to an April 2015 article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*)—or that Israel is imprisoning non-Jewish residents without criminal charges against them, and stealing their land and water—these prophets would be full of criticism. The Bible puts a high premium on how ancient Israel is expected to treat the non-Jew in its communities; see, for example, Ezekiel 47:22–23.

In addition, Christians often fail to think *as Christians* about the covenant promises. In the New Testament we read that Jesus has appeared and that he has started a new covenant. And here is the key: *Does Jesus' new covenant change the covenants that came before?* Hebrews 8:13 says yes in its comment on Jeremiah 31:31–34 (regarding the new covenant). Jesus' kingdom is like new wine placed in old wineskins. The old skins break (Matthew 9:14–17). According to John the Baptist, the special privileges of being “Abraham's child” can be questioned (Matt 3:9–10). Jesus says the same thing (John 8:39–40). Moreover, in a critical passage, Galatians 3:16, Paul says that there is only one heir to

If the Old Testament prophets were to visit today and learn that more than half the Jewish population is non-religious—or that Israel is imprisoning non-Jewish residents without criminal charges against them, and stealing their land and water—these prophets would be full of criticism.



Abraham – and it is Jesus who has “redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (NIV). Therefore, those who attach themselves to Jesus become children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7, 29).

The new covenant does not amount to “replacement theology.” God’s love for Israel, manifested in the old covenant, has not been canceled. After all, the Old Testament foreshadows the new covenant. Moreover, the people of the old covenant have not been rejected or replaced; instead, the old covenant has been expanded to include all races and nations. Jews are not excluded—they are invited in to join this new community.

For Paul a great discovery is that the church is no longer tribal. This is the ethnic breakthrough of the Christian church, where Jews and gentiles find a fresh unity. And if this is the case, the answer to the question, “Who are Abraham’s children?” or “Who inherits Abraham’s promises?” becomes far more complex than we imagined. But at least no reader of the New Testament can imagine that a secular political state fulfills a Biblical vision of the promises to Abraham.



# Who owns the Holy Land?

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The promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Genesis were never limited to their descendants alone, but included people of many other races.

The region called the Holy Land, once known by such names as Canaan, Israel and Judah, Philistia, and Palestine, has been under military occupation for most of the last 3,000 years. Among the outside occupiers were the Assyrians (8th and 7th centuries BC), the Babylonians (6th century BC), the Greeks (Alexander the Great and successors, 4th through 1st centuries BC), the Romans (1st century BC through AD 7th century), the Ottoman Empire (AD 16th through 20th centuries), and Great Britain (1917–1948).

At the conclusion of World War I, Palestine (which had been governed for centuries by the Ottoman Empire) became part of Great Britain and was known as British Mandate Palestine. Then, after World War II, with significant pressure from the United States and other Western nations, the United Nations carved out territory for the modern state of Israel from British Mandate Palestine. This new state constituted 54 percent of the land of British Mandate Palestine. The Palestinians rejected this partition as a grave injustice, as they were 66 percent of the population and owned over 90 percent of the land. The state of Israel was established in spite of Palestinian objections.

The figure below is known as the “shrinking Palestine” map series. It shows how Palestinians lost land through the creation of Israel in 1948 and Israel’s later seizure of land by war and military occupation. The FIRST MAP shows British Mandate Palestine before 1948

The SECOND MAP shows the United Nations partition plan, which carved out 54 percent of the land for a percent of the land for a “Jewish state.” The land around Jerusalem and Bethlehem (shown in yellow in the second image) was designated by the United Nations as a 'Corpus Separatum,' a separate entity, open fully and equally to the three Abrahamic religions of the land and all other people as well. In the partition plan, the United Nations specified that the new Jewish state be administered for the benefit of all its residents (including Jewish and gentile) – a legal requirement that Israel has ignored. Today the State of Israel has in place more than 50 laws that discriminate against its non-Jewish citizens, including Christian Arab and Muslim Arab citizens of Israel.

The THIRD MAP shows additional lands captured by Israel during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948-49 and the boundaries created at the end of that war. The lands shown in green on this third map (what remained of Gaza and the West Bank after the 1948-49 war) were later captured by Israeli forces in the 1967 war - the "Six Day War." From 1967 onward, Israel has built settlements and roads in the West Bank. It has systematically stolen land from the rightful Palestinian owners to build Jewish-only colonial settlements. The Jewish-only roads connect the settlements throughout the West Bank.

The FOURTH MAP shows what remains today: a set of 70 isolated islands of land—like “bantustans” in the days of South African apartheid. Palestinians are permitted to live in these areas, but they must have permission from the Israeli military to enter and leave. What remains of Gaza is a tiny strip of land—a strip of land under Israeli economic embargo, with strict restrictions on imports and exports and severe limits on who may enter or leave that piece of land. Today, Palestinians are forced to live in ghettos on 12 percent of their original land.

## Palestinian Loss of Land - 1947 to Present



Map images: Palestine Israel Action Group of Ann Arbor Friends Meeting (Quaker)

Israel's leaders openly proclaim that there will never be a Palestinian state in the Holy Land. One common justification for this assertion is the "divine land grant" claim, which is one interpretation of the scriptures. Those who support this claim believe that God granted exclusive ownership of the Holy Land to Jewish people. Christians are divided on this issue, with some Christians siding with the views of the present Israeli government. Other Christians – including evangelicals and most mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Christians – hold a different interpretation.



## **One Interpretation of Holy Scripture: The “Divine Land Grant”**

Today, the state of Israel controls all of historic Palestine, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. Israel has been using the “divine land grant” claim to justify taking land from Palestinian owners in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to build Jewish-only settlements.

What is the so-called divine land grant to the Jewish people? Its Biblical basis lies in one interpretation of select passages in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Certain Biblical passages —namely, Genesis 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:18–21; 17:1–9; Deuteronomy 7:1–11; 8:7–10; 11:29–32; 28:8–11—are the primary texts for the land grant idea. Israeli officials, Jewish settlers, and Christian Zionists point to these and similar texts to support their position. They claim that these verses mean Abraham and his descendants will inherit the land forever. Christian Zionist churches and organizations around the globe promote this viewpoint by providing political, religious, and financial support for Israel.

The divine land grant interpretation has encouraged Israel to disregard international law and the United Nations partition plan. Support of the Zionist idea that God gave the land to the Jews has allowed Israel to steal Palestinian land; prevent the creation of a Palestinian state; and maintain a violent military occupation in the West Bank including East Jerusalem and Gaza.

## Another Interpretation of Holy Scripture: The Land Is Given with Certain Conditions

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Many Christians overlook a second Biblical story within the same scriptures. This story has a different Biblical theme, found primarily in the book of Deuteronomy and the writings of the Hebrew prophets. These texts state that obedience to Torah requirements is essential if ancient Israel is to remain in the Holy Land. One is Leviticus 18:24–28: It states that if Israel violates the Torah, the land “will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you” (verse 28 NIV). These texts warn that if the laws found in the Torah are violated, the land will be lost. They focus on the sin of idolatry. Biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann, in his book *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, offers a summary: “The land is given unconditionally but is held conditionally”—meaning, the land is given by God but Israel can lose the land if it violates the Torah.

Indeed, Israel did lose the land to foreign empires on more than one occasion. The first defeat was the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom, Israel, in 722 BC. Next came the destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem, when the Babylonians deported the majority of the Jewish population (587–586 BC). Several hundred years later, the Roman general Pompey conquered Judea in 63 BC; in the following century, the Roman forces squelched a Zealot rebellion, destroyed the Second Temple, and razed much of Jerusalem in AD 66–70. In AD 131–134, another Jewish revolt under Bar Kochba led to further destruction of Jerusalem, and the Romans expelled Jews from Jerusalem.

The grief of the Jews after the Babylonians exiled them is captured in Psalm 137: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137:1 NIV). But God did not abandon them, as there was a renewal of the faith—many synagogues were built during this period. In 539 BC, when the Persian ruler Cyrus allowed Jews to return to the Holy Land, Ezra and Nehemiah led the people back to Jerusalem. Most Biblical scholars believe that during this period a new understanding of God’s promises emerged. This new interpretation, the “conditional” Biblical narrative, is that the disobedience of the people brought about loss of the land. One example is Moses asking the community to be faithful to the Torah so they can stay: “Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land the LORD promised on oath to your ancestors” (Deuteronomy 6:17–18 NIV).

The same theme is found in the book of Joshua, side by side with the various stories that reflect the “divine land grant” narrative. An important text comes near the conclusion of the book of Joshua, when Joshua is at the end of his career and challenges the future leaders on the importance of covenant faithfulness: **“If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to**

**them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you" (Joshua 23:16 NIV).** This expresses an entirely different theology from that of the rest of the book of Joshua, but it is an important addition, for it reflects a chastened Israelite community's experience.

According to this "conditional" Biblical narrative, the land will be lost when the people violate God's commands in the Torah. Perhaps the most profound lessons are that the land itself must not be worshipped as a false god. Also, the Israelites' military wins should not make them so proud they become arrogant and start to believe in exceptionalism (the idea that one particular group has exclusive privileges). Land is not the priority in this narrative. Land becomes the means through which the people of God honor God and reflect God's will for Israel and the nations. They are asked to revere the great commandments: to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength; and to love the neighbor as oneself. Both of these commandments are found in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4–5; Leviticus 19:18). As Jesus noted much later, these commandments are two sides of the same coin: love of God and of neighbor (Luke 10:27–28). Jesus illustrates this teaching with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37). Torah faithfulness means faith in action regardless of ethnicity, race, or religion when someone is in need. This theology is based on obedience and righteousness, not political exceptionalism.

## **The Deeper Spiritual Lesson: The Land Belongs to God, Whose Essence Is Love**

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There is another significant lesson in these texts. Both the land grant passages and the conditional passages state clearly or imply that the land belongs to God. The land is a loan from God to people who, in turn, are God's faithful caretakers of the land (Genesis 2:10). The land is on loan for people to nurture carefully and to honor. In the Genesis 12:1–3 account, God is the initiator and author of the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. God offers the covenant as a gift of grace and love. The gift of land must be understood in the larger Biblical perspective of gifts and responsibilities—taking care of the environment, building community and relationships, and living faithfully by honoring God and one another.

In this Biblical perspective, land is never an end unto itself, nor can it become the end game. When one people conquer a land, the land becomes an object of idolatry. Land is always an instrument of the covenant relationship, and it is necessary to build communities where God's sons and daughters learn to love and honor (and never oppress) one another.

We need to learn these lessons over and over because they are easily forgotten. Jesus reminded the religious leaders of his day about the message of Jonah. The well-known story of Jonah commands not only the Jewish people but everyone to avoid exclusiveness and exceptionalism. When Jonah is called to go to the enemy (the Assyrian Empire) with the good news of God, he refuses and runs from God in the opposite direction. Jonah is turned around by a storm at sea and spit out by a whale or large fish, ending up in Nineveh,

the capital of the enemy. Jonah reluctantly preaches the message of God and salvation to the Ninevites, who in turn believe, repent, and come to faith in the one true God. Yet, rather than rejoicing for this successful preaching, Jonah is despondent. He wants to keep God exclusively to himself and his Jewish community. The book closes with God chastising Jonah about his selfishness and narrow-minded faith. Jonah's conception of God was too small. As a result, he missed the richness of a God who loves the world, even the enemy. His understanding was narrow, tribal, and exclusive. It had to change.

The lesson of Jonah speaks to all of us. God is constantly calling us to make room for the neighbor (Luke 10:25–37), including the visitor (Leviticus 18:20 and 19:10) and the poor (Amos 5:10–24). God's call is good news for everyone, including the enemy, who is perhaps our most difficult challenge. Psalm 87 gives us a glimpse of a Jerusalem where not only the Jewish people but also the Philistines, people from Tyre (Lebanon), Cush (Ethiopia), and Babylon (Iraq), all of whom are gentiles, are counted as God's people. Jesus' call to reconcile with our enemies is challenging, but it is not new. Psalm 87, Isaiah 19:24–25, Amos 9:7, and other texts throughout the prophets present this challenge, which Jesus emphasizes in the Gospels.

These are not romantic or liberal ideas. These are Biblical truths to be lived if we are to be faithful to God and our neighbors. Some say the place that is farthest from realizing these issues today is Jerusalem and the Holy Land. However, there are Jews, Christians, and Muslims all around the world who are working toward the day when Jerusalem and all of Israel and Palestine will be shared, from the Mediterranean Sea to the River Jordan. It will be a day when every citizen—Jew, Muslim, and Christian—will be honored, protected, and able to worship and glorify God as each understands and loves God. It may be what the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews had in mind for Abraham as an example of the faith journey:

*By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. . . . These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:9–10; 39–40 NIV)*

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