

A Biblical-Theological Reflection on Israel
In response to the Mennonite Church USA open letter to congregations on becoming peacemakers in Israel/Palestine July 2007



In May 2007, a Mennonite Church USA delegation traveled to Palestine/Israel to talk with Christians, Jews and Muslims and have a common conversation around issues related to divestment and Christian Zionism. Their letter, "An Open Letter to Mennonite Church USA Congregations: Becoming Peacemakers in Israel/Palestine," and related resources can be found at www.MennoniteUSA.org/peace.

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Calvin E. Shenk

From the beginning of time, God sought to be in relationship with "a people." When the people repeatedly neglected the relationship, God's harsh reminders (exile from the garden, the flood, confusion of languages) called them to return. God then called Abram away from his evil surroundings to establish a family through whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed." One family was commissioned to be God's link to all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12:3).

Even this new chosen family of Israel failed to nurture the God relationship. When they had settled in the land God chose for them they became restless, wishing to create a nation like the nations around them. God said of their desire to create a nation state, "They have rejected me" (I Sam. 8:4). God's ambition was not to form a nation like all others, but a people through whom God would become known in all the earth.

The Old Testament law and the prophets reminded Israel of their obligations in relation to God and other residents of the land (Lev. 19:33) and their calling to be a light to other peoples (Isa. 42:6). Failure in maintaining these relationships would threaten their continued residency in the land (Lev. 20:22).

In the 20th century A.D. the Hebrew people again worked to create a nation by forming the state of Israel. Many Western Christians, seeing this amazing re-gathering after centuries in diaspora, and forgetting that God's desire was for relationship with "a people," believed they should support the new nation as the Old Testament "people of God." However, God has no national preferences. The true people of God are not inhabitants of one chosen piece of real estate. In Christ all people are invited to become members of God's household (Eph. 2:11-14).

Western Christians need to examine their understandings of the state of Israel and the Palestinians, the other inhabitants of the land. Does a dominant state occupying and confiscating land while subjugating and humiliating a weaker people sound like actions of "the people of God?" Arab Christians in Israel and the occupied territories cannot understand why their fellow believers in the way of Christ continue to give support to the nation which oppresses them.

Christians should not give a "blank check" to Israel. The prophets critiqued Israel when Israel acted unethically. Oppression of Palestinians by the Israeli government calls for critique and action.

God is not a tribal God. God cares for the well-being of all people. God wished to bless all families of the earth. Israel was to be an instrument for that blessing. Justice and compassion are key themes in the Hebrew Bible.

Our empathy for Jewish suffering should not close our mouths to Palestinian suffering caused by Israeli policies. We should encourage Israel to pursue reconciliation and peace making. Christian Zionism, by

defending Israel without critique, has led to injustice for Palestinians. Christians can remind Israel that security is found not by military might but by embracing justice.

Jesus Reinterprets Jerusalem and Israel

Many Christians have an Old Testament rather than a New Testament view of land, Jerusalem and Israel. When Jesus was asked, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6), he replied, “It is not for you to know the times and periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). Rather they were to witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, and throughout the whole world. Christians should focus on Jesus rather than on Jerusalem and the state of Israel.

Prophetic Critique

Jesus, by prophetic word and action, called Jerusalem to repentance. In critiquing Jerusalem, Jesus expressed mercy and compassion. He did not criticize from a distance but entered into Jerusalem’s daily life. Jesus rebuked Jerusalem because the Holy City became unholy (Luke 13:34).

Christians are often reluctant to criticize wrongful injustice in Israel because they view Israel in light of “signs of the times.” Some Christians, instead of calling Jerusalem to repentance, only bless Israel and emphasize God’s promises, ignoring the conditional nature of God’s promises (Lev. 20:22). Jerusalem is not exempt from God’s will revealed in Jesus. Justice is required of all the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Ethical Discernment

The “sacredness” or “specialness” of Jerusalem/Israel blinds many Christians to ethical discernment. But devotion to Jerusalem/Israel without righteousness leads to unholy nationalism. Religious claims to the holiness of Jerusalem/Israel often lead to dispute and war rather than ethical behavior or peacemaking. Holiness of space must not usurp the place of ethics. Holy behavior is more important than holy places. When justice is lacking there is no holiness. Devotion to Jerusalem can become an idol. Jerusalem must not take the place of God or be revered at the expense of the values expressed by Jesus.

Reconciliation and Peace

Jesus wept because Jerusalem did not understand the things that make for peace (Luke 19:42). Can the “city of peace” discover today the things that make for peace? Can Jerusalem be a place of blessing instead of a place of division? First century Jerusalem was destroyed because it did not know what made for peace. Will Christian faith foster or hamper efforts for justice, peace and security for all? Christians need to pray (Psa. 122:6), act and hope for the peace of Jerusalem, a peace build upon the foundation of justice and peace for all people in Israel and Palestine.

Jerusalem is one of the few places in the world considered holy to several religions. Jews, Christians and Muslims all see Jerusalem in a unique way, and often their religious perceptions clash. Justice and human rights call for a shared Jerusalem for Israelis and Palestinians – Jews, Christians and Muslims. Jerusalem is not only important for the religions of each, but each of these groups inhabit Jerusalem.

A Christian Calling

Christians need to repent for inflicting horrible suffering upon Jewish people. We need to promote the well-being of all peoples and not reduce God to a tribal God. Many Middle Easterners are deeply troubled

when Christian Evangelicals in the West zealously support policies and expansionist actions by Israel in its conflict with Palestinians.

More important than prophetic fulfillment is prophetic justice. Israel is called to fulfill the covenant stipulations of righteousness. Israel was to be a blessing to the nations. God was the owner of the land of Israel; the people were tenants (Lev. 25:23). Israel was to be concerned for the other, the alien (Lev. 19:33, 34).

Western Christians should emphasize reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim. Elias Chacour, an Arab Christian clergyman in the Galilee, refers to Jews and Arabs as “blood brothers.” He insists the first step in reconciling Jews and Arab Palestinians is the restoration of human dignity for each.

Can we promote the ways that help each group – Israelis and Palestinians – overcome hatred and revenge and renounce violence in word and action? Christians should work for release from suffering, discrimination, despair and hopelessness so that inequality and injustice give way to partnership between equals. Isaac and Ishmael both belong to the land and to each other. Bridges must be built between members of the same family. Both Israelis and Palestinians must be liberated. The liberation of the one is vitally linked with the other.

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Check the Mennonite Church USA website for a news release about the Mennonite Church USA delegation visit at www.MennoniteUSA.org/news/news.html. Delegation participants included Daryl Byler (MCC Washington Office), J Ron Byler (Mennonite Church USA Executive Leadership), Ed Epp (MEDA), Kim Vu Friesen (Mennonite Church USA Executive Board), Stanley Green (Mennonite Mission Network), Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach (MCC Washington Office), Rich Meyer (Christian Peacemaker Teams), Mark Regier (Mennonite Mutual Aid), Carol Rose (Christian Peacemaker Teams) and Lee Schmucker (Mennonite Mission Network).