

INTRODUCTION

Bible, Zionism, Palestine

Michael J. Sandford

THE INTEREST THAT THE Bible, Zionism, and Palestine conference (Sheffield, May 24–26, 2012) generated suggests that there is a continuing need, in the UK, for critical discussion about the relationship between “Holy Land” theology and global politics. As several contributions in this volume highlight, North American religion and politics play a fundamental role in shaping the political structure of the region. But there was a time when the UK meddled significantly in the political organisation of Palestine—and because of this, there is a sense in which the British hold some responsibility for the contemporary situation, whatever their power to influence events there today.¹ Britons, like Americans, remain unshakably inquisitive about goings-on in Israel and Palestine, an interest that certainly derives from the Jewish and Christian bibles, as well as, specifically, restorationist, dispensationalist, and Jewish and Christian Zionist theologies. This interest is, of course, fed daily by certain media outlets which position the Holy Land at the centre of the world stage.

Happily, the Bible, Zionism, and Palestine conference in Sheffield received nothing of the attention that the more overtly political and provocatively titled Christ at the Checkpoint conference in Bethlehem received, earlier in the same month.² Yet it is considered political, by some, simply to include the name “Palestine” in the title of a conference or a book (and no doubt to omit the name “Israel”—although “Zionism,”

¹ “The Balfour Project” is especially interesting in this respect. The home page of their website states: “In responding to Jewish aspirations, Britain deliberately ignored the rights and expectations of the Palestinian Arabs who inhabited the land. Without questioning the right of Israel to exist, the Balfour Project believes it is time for British people to express our shame at this unacceptable double standard. There is evidence that healing and reconciliation can flow from acknowledging the wrongs of the past.” See <http://www.balfourproject.org/>.

² See <http://www.christatthecheckpoint.com/>.

of course, implies Israel). The jarring juxtaposition of “Christ” and “the Checkpoint” invoked by Bethlehem Bible College’s conference, and their targeting of prominent American Evangelicals may have diverted some attention away from the academic and substantially less politically charged gathering in the green and pleasant lands of South Yorkshire.

I believe that the BZP conference and publication mark a significant period for Sheffield Biblical Studies, during which several at Sheffield have been working on issues relating to Israel and Palestine. Five of the articles in this volume have been contributed by Sheffield staff and students. I have no doubt that some of these contributions, besides at least a couple of others in this volume, have been informed by the work of the former Sheffield Head of Department, Keith Whitelam. Whitelam’s *The Invention of Ancient Israel*, which explicitly highlighted the role of biblical studies and the search for “ancient Israel” in shaping attitudes towards the land in recent decades, stands as one of the most important publications on the intersection of the Bible, Zionism, and Palestine to date.³ It should be noted, however, that the present volume actually contains little on historiography in relation to ancient Israel and Palestine, besides Lester Grabbe’s contribution which, as it happens, includes a critique of Whitelam’s important book.

The Bible, Zionism, and Palestine includes contributions from three of the four keynote speakers who presented at the conference (Ilan Pappé, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, and Naim Ateek) and nine of the other speakers.⁴ To develop and enrich the conversation, we have also solicited three responses: from Amy-Jill Levine to Michael Sandford’s essay; from Keith Whitelam to Lester Grabbe’s essay; and from James Crossley, who responds to the essays which advocate for a Palestinian Liberation Theology.

These essays could, of course, be organised in numerous ways, but the content suggested three main divisions. Accordingly, Part 1 provides discussion and analysis of some of the varieties of Zionism—both historical and contemporary, both religious and secular, both Jewish and Christian. In Part 2, the volume turns to theologies of liberation, outlining some of the rationales and biblical grounds for a Palestinian Liberation Theology, its potential for forging peace in Palestine-Israel, as well as some of its limitations. The final group of papers, in Part 3, makes some initial forays into a form of biblical studies explicitly performed, as it were, in the shadow of the Nakba.

Part 1 (“Varieties of Zionism”) commences with Ilan Pappé’s paper, which elucidates the paradoxical value of the Hebrew Bible to secular Zionists in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. Mark Finney’s paper examines contemporary US Christian Zionism, including its implications for international relations. Next, Hilary Perry’s paper focuses on Cyrus I. Scofield’s annotated bible and its influence on prominent Amer-

³ Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴ Unfortunately Nur Masalha’s keynote paper could not be included, but see Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Palestine-Israel* (London: Zed Books, 2007).

ican Evangelicals today: John Hagee, Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, Charles H. Dyer, and Edward E. Hindson. Mark Gilfillan's paper discusses the failure of Scottish Christian Zionism in the late nineteenth century, examining the role of the niche organisation, the Edinburgh *Chovevei Zion*. Finally, Ron Dart's paper traces the origins of Christian Zionism in Canada, and the entry of this ideology into the highest echelons of political power, under Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006–15).

In Part 2 ("Palestinian Liberation Theology"), Dan Cohn-Sherbok outlines his vision of a Jewish theology of liberation, one which draws on the notion of the Kingdom of God and Jewish ethics to argue for the equality of all people, and the empowerment of the oppressed. Naim Ateek's contribution argues for an inclusive theology, and a solution to the conflict based on international law. Mary Grey argues that Jesus' non-violent resistance to the Roman Empire could serve as inspiration today. The response chapter from James Crossley examines negative aspects of the Kingdom of God, arguing that the Gospels are not straightforward resources for liberation.

Michael Sandford's article, which commences Part 3 ("Post-Nakba Biblical Studies"), examines the significance of the Jewishness of Jesus for Jewish-Christian dialogue relating to the land today. This is followed by a brief response from Amy-Jill Levine who picks up issues relating to liberation theology, anti-Judaism, and peace-building. Lester Grabbe's article argues that history has been manipulated not only for "Pro-Zionist" but also for "Pro-Palestinian" purposes. The response from Keith Whitelam replies to Grabbe's charges while reiterating his earlier critiques of ideological blind spots within contemporary biblical studies concerning the construction of Israel and Palestine. Michael Kok's article makes a contribution to the debate over the meaning of *ioudaios* via an analysis of Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. Kok also critiques certain Christian caricatures of Judaism and the tendency of certain liberation theologies to idealise Christianity, arguing that Christianity must confess to its own "particularity" and "exclusivity" in order to further Jewish-Christian dialogue. Lastly, Alastair Hunter examines the Old Testament notion of the "ban" (*cherem*) and relates it to the University and College Union's dealings with the Israel boycott.

The collection therefore makes useful and often provocative contributions to scholarship in all three areas: bringing to light previously underexplored varieties of Zionism, examining liberation theology's potential either to alleviate or reinscribe oppression, and doing biblical scholarship in ways which consciously foreground the voices of the marginalised in Palestine and Israel.

