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DECOLONIZING PALESTINE

The Land,

The People,

The Bible

The Land, the Bible, and Settler Colonialism

When Christian pilgrims visit Palestine, many want to reinvent the Holy Land of the Bible. They are excited about how the Bible comes alive in Palestine. Similarly, nineteenth-century archeologists digging in Palestine were looking for the Bible, and theologians today continue this search. As the previous chapter discussed, many Christian theologians write about Palestine from minds that are colonized with the Bible and a Westernized narrative. They write as if Palestine were an ancient land that exists in a vacuum; they strip it of its sociopolitical context—of its real people—and they rarely think about how this theology has and is being used to enhance settler colonialism. These colonized minds reinforce the continuing colonization of Palestine. This chapter focuses on these connections. The reference to the Temple Mount is an important example of such colonial discourse.

The Haram versus Temple Mount

A few years ago, I wanted to publish a book on Jerusalem. To that end, I approached a good friend, a theologian from the United States, to work with me on this book. When we met to discuss the table of contents and topics, it became clear to me that we had two very different perspectives on Jerusalem. For me, Jerusalem was a real city that I used to visit as a boy on a weekly basis. I still vividly recall how I used to sit with my friends on the Ottoman walls of the Old City; visit the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which dates back in part to the Byzantine era; and walk to the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, built during the Umayyad period in the seventh century. A trip to Jerusalem was never complete without buying the famous Jerusalem *ka'ek*, a local bread with sesame seeds, and eating it with *za'atar* (wild thyme). I had an aunt and many friends from the church youth group who lived in Jerusalem. For me, Jerusalem was a vibrant, living city with real people.

My colleague from the United States did not have the same connection to the city, and I soon came to realize that he was not particularly interested in the city as it is today. Rather, he was obsessed with ancient Jerusalem, with what once existed, and that alone colonized his imagination. He was intrigued by the remains of the Herodian walls and paid little attention to the existing Ottoman wall from the sixteenth century. He concentrated on the ancient roads on which Jesus walked rather than the current *souq* with its rich social and economic history. He was intrigued by the Second Temple and was less interested in the al-Aqsa Mosque that has been standing since the seventh century. He was less interested in the city as it is and as it has developed over the centuries, focusing clearly on biblical Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of the Old and the New Testament. My friend was eager to reinvent the Jerusalem of the Bible and to bring it back to life for the potential readers of the planned book. His focus on the biblical past would not have been a problem but for the devastating consequences such focus has for current realities in Palestine. My friend was not a Zionist or evangelical Christian but was a sophisticated theologian raised in a liberal environment of historical criticism. Indeed, he may not have even recognized how his focus served as a tool in the continuing colonization of Palestinian land and people.

I recognized his focus on the biblical Jerusalem in his language. He referred to the area of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock (the Haram) as the “Temple Mount.” Why would a Christian theologian call this area the Temple Mount when there has not been a temple there for the last two thousand years, and two major and ancient Muslim shrines dominate the skyline? The phrase *Temple Mount* is understandably used as a historical reference to where the Jewish Temple might once have stood or as an archeological reference to some of the remains of the Herodian wall. Yet ignoring and failing to reference two current and major Muslim holy sites, instead referring to the whole area as the Temple Mount, can no longer be understood as innocent. In today’s volatile political context, the very phrase is problematic, to say the least.

The use of the term *Temple Mount* plays into the agenda of a radical (Christian) Zionist ideology as well as settler colonialism. Christian theologians are often unaware that Zionist political claims lay behind the phrase *Temple Mount*, and using the term innocently often panders to radical Israeli settlers who are determined to colonize the Muslim shrines and turn them into a Jewish site. Over the past five decades, Israeli settlers have attempted to destroy or occupy the Haram in order to construct a Jewish temple there. This is the current *Sitz im Leben* of this term.

Following the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, an Israeli military officer, Gershon Salomon, founded an organization named Temple Mount Faithful with the goal of “building the Third Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in our lifetime in accordance with the Word of G-d and all the Hebrew Prophets, and the liberation of the Temple Mount from Arab (Islamic) occupation so that it may be consecrated to the Name of G-d.”¹ On August 21, 1969, a militant Christian Zionist and Australian citizen, Michael Dennis Rohan, set fire to the ancient pulpit commissioned by Salah ad-Din in the al-Aqsa Mosque in the belief that he had been called to burn the Muslim shrine so the Jewish Temple could be erected there.² Rohan was declared insane and later deported to Australia. Christian Zionist groups remain obsessed with the idea of seeing the third temple constructed, the Muslims defeated, and their shrines in Jerusalem destroyed as a prerequisite for the second coming of Christ.³

Starting in the late 1970s, Jewish terrorist groups attempted several times to blow up the Dome of the Rock. The first attempt took place in 1978 by Yehuda Etzion, who believed that the destruction of the Muslim mosque would trigger a Jewish national spiritual revival.⁴ He and another Israeli-Jewish terrorist and expert in explosives, Menachem Livni, studied the Haram in detail, stole explosives from an Israeli military base in the Golan Heights, and made twenty-eight precision bombs to blow up the Dome of the Rock. For several reasons, the operation had to be postponed. A second attempt to blow up the Dome of the Rock occurred in 1980 at the hands of an

American-Israeli rabbi and Member of the Knesset, Meir Kahane, followed by a third attempt in 1982 by Alan Goodman, an Orthodox Jewish American who opened fire at Muslim worshipers.⁵ By the mid-1980s, attempts to storm the Haram by Jewish settlers had become a regular practice.

During the First Intifada (uprising), Gershom Salomon, the leader of the Temple Mount Faithful, announced his intention to storm the Haram area and lay the foundation for the new temple. In 1996, Netanyahu's government authorized the opening of a tunnel underneath the Haram, giving new momentum to the Temple Mount Faithful movement. Gershom Salomon was proud to announce his goal: "We will liberate the Temple Mount, even if the political leadership doesn't want to... Instead of the Dome of the Rock and mosques, the flag of Israel and the Temple!... It's the will of Providence that we struggle to remove the abominations from the Mount."⁶ On September 29, 2000, Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon, guarded by Israeli soldiers and accompanied by members of the Israeli government, stormed the Haram, an event that triggered the Second Intifada.⁷ Such attempts have continued since then on an almost weekly basis, provoking Muslim worshipers and authorities, and leading to riots and the deaths of hundreds of Palestinians.

With a history of Jewish settler colonialism that resembles the acts of the Crusaders, theologians cannot employ the term *Temple Mount* in innocence. The crucial question for theology must be "How can we liberate theological minds from this invisible 'colonization'?" It is time to break away from language that plays into the hands of Jewish settler colonialism, Christian Zionist ideology, and Islamophobic rhetoric. What is true for the al-Aqsa Mosque is true for the entire land. How we name things is important, for naming is an exercise of power.

The Land Named Canaan

The oldest name of the land was Canaan. This ancient name referred to Southwest Asia, an area covering today's Palestine, Lebanon, and the western parts of Jordan and coastal Syria. The continuity of the Canaanite population is traced by scholars back to the eighth millennium BC.⁸ Archeological remains from the Early Bronze Age II-III (3200–2200 BC) reveal a flourishing society capable of constructing massive structures, especially temples, to which further fortifications and palaces were added in the Middle Bronze Age (1800–1550 BC). During this period, Canaan enjoyed a period of relative autonomy and prosperity. The first textual and historical evidence of Canaan dates from around 1800 BC, one millennium older than the oldest biblical text. In the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC), the land came under Egyptian rule, and the earliest textual references from this era refer to Canaan as a distinct geopolitical entity in the region. This is corroborated in the Amarna letters written by Canaanite rulers in Akkadian script on clay tablets between 1360 and 1332 BC, where Canaan and the Canaanites are mentioned twelve times. These letters give an impression of a distinct West Semitic Canaanite dialect and an agrarian lifestyle in which local rulers governed small areas with a large, walled city at the center.⁹ Their most important deities were El, Baal, and Asherah with their focus on fertility, which constituted a crucial element for their agrarian society with its dependence on rain.

The Old Testament does not shy away from calling the land by its ancient name of Canaan, and its inhabitants as Canaanites, on over 150 occasions. The biblical text testifies to the advanced culture of the “land of milk and honey” (Joshua 5:6). The name Canaan and its peoples, the Canaanites, remained in use way into the fifth century AD. The gospel of Matthew 15:22 written in the late first century AD refers to a Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:26) as a Canaanite, while the last reference to the Canaanites is by St. Augustine of Hippo in his commentary on Romans 13. Although the names Canaan and Canaanites disappeared, the Canaanites themselves did not. They continued to be the people inhabiting Palestine but with new identities. The biblical narrative that stereotypes the Canaanite as

cursed (Genesis 9:25) may have contributed to this process. In modern times and in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian struggle for historicity and legitimacy as the owners of the land, some Palestinian groups and intellectuals started referring to the Canaanites as their ancestors who preceded the Israelites. This identification is problematic and does not take into consideration elements of history, which leads to a distorted vision. The Palestinians of today are not the Canaanites, but Canaanites are without doubt part of Palestinian ancestry.

Palestine

The transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age I (1200–950 BC) is marked by the appearance of the Sea People, with their new and advanced iron weaponry on the southern and western shores of the Mediterranean, resulting in a new configuration of the region. The Peleset, known as the Philistines, who settled permanently on the southern coastal area of Canaan, were one group of the most famous Sea People. A weakened Egypt had to withdraw from Canaan, and localized kingdoms known as the Phoenicians, Israelites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites were able to fill the vacuum.

The emergence of Philistia on the southeastern side of the Mediterranean was a defining moment, and Palestine became the name used most consistently since the Iron Age to refer to the area stretching from as far north as Sidon to the Brook of Egypt, and from the Mediterranean into Transjordan with ever-changing borders. It is seen in inscriptions from Ramses III (ca. 1182–1151) with increased regional comprehension in the twelfth and tenth centuries BC. From the neo-Assyrian period (tenth through seventh centuries BCE) onward, it is the most common etic collective designation, also appearing in the Roman period (first century BC through fourth century CE).^{[10](#)}

While the Assyrians, already under Ramses III, used the name in the form of Pilishtu to describe the coastal region of the land, it was the

Greek historiographer and cartographer Herodotus (ca. 484–425 BC) who recrafted the term to become Palaistin, referring to the entire land, including even Transjordan.¹¹ With the exception of Canaan, no other name for this land but Palestine has been used continuously for almost 2,500 years, up to the present day. In addition, only this name has historically had an inclusive character. Palestine in this sense does not refer to a political, religious, or ethnic entity, but rather to a multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious region that was able to include diverse identities and peoples within its boundaries. During these 2,500 years, Palestine stood for a land with an inclusive, multireligious society. The Palestinians of today are not the Philistines of the Bible, although the Philistines are a feature of Palestinian ancestry.

Israel

Israel was another kingdom that surfaced on the land during Iron Age I. While the biblical story describes them as coming from Egypt following the exodus, most historians today believe that they were seminomadic tribes that regrouped as a result of the Egyptian withdrawal from Canaan to establish a new kingdom in the highlands with a new religious identity focused on Jahwe.¹² Their seminomadic background must have brought them into a direct clash with the Baal religion centered on the fertile regions of Palestine.

The Bible ascribes the establishment of Israel as a political entity in Palestine to King David and his son Solomon, who may have lived in Canaan in the Iron Age I period, around 1000 BC. The biblical story retroactively glorified the time of David and Solomon as the climax of “Israel.” This story has been weaponized by Jewish Zionists and Christian Zionists as the historical reference for the settler colonial narrative and practice. Interestingly, there are no historical or archeological records that correspond to the biblical story of David. Most probably, David was a guerilla fighter from Judah who rendered and sold his fighting services, and who was able to take over the twelve-acre Canaanite city of Jebus with its couple-of-thousand

Jebusite population and transform it into his political base. This small territory with a few hundred fighters was short lived, but the biblical story refers to it and to the period of Solomon as if it were an imperial power controlling all of Palestine.¹³

Historically speaking, the name Israel referred mainly to the north of the land during a relatively short period of time known as the Kingdom of Israel or House of Omri (tenth century to 720 BC). This region was later called Samaria, and was distinct and at odds with the south, called Judea. The term *Land of Israel* took root in rabbinic Judaism only after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC. These roots contextualize the singular occurrence of the phrase in scripture, in Matthew 2:21. Thus, although the name Israel referring to the Northern Kingdom disappeared, Israel as a theological concept did not and survived throughout the biblical story. It is, therefore, imperative to distinguish between history and the biblical story, between Israel as a name of the Northern Kingdom and between Israel as a theological concept referring to the “people of God.” In turn, both usages must be distinguished from the contemporary State of Israel.

The name Israel was chosen in the twentieth century by a modern political entity, the “State of Israel,” which projected an exclusive ethno-national and religious state into the Bible, now used by the current Israeli government as a pretext for land colonization.¹⁴ However, the Christian or rabbinic incarnation of the term is not identical in meaning to the term employed in the context of the Jewish connection to the territory in a modern age of nationalism. Only in the early twentieth century, after years in the Protestant melting pot, was the theological concept of the Land of Israel refined into a geonational concept. Settlement Zionism borrowed the term from rabbinic tradition in part to displace the term *Palestine*, which was widely used at the time not only throughout Europe but also by all of the first-generation Zionist leaders. In the new language of the settlers, the Land of Israel became the exclusive name of the region.¹⁵

Naming is a means to exercise power, to claim dominance over land and people, and it constitutes an important aspect of settler colonial projects. After conquering Carthage, the Romans coined the word *Africa* to refer to the conquered region, a name that was later expanded to refer to the whole continent. A Spanish conqueror renamed Anahuac as America. By evoking a biblical name, Israel, for a modern state in 1948, Jewish European settlers instrumentalized an ancient biblical story for the creation of a new exclusive national identity, while at the same time erasing the name Palestine and marginalizing its indigenous people—another important element of settler colonial practice. Four hundred and fifty-two Palestinian villages were erased from the map as if they never existed, with just the cactus trees remaining as the witnesses to this ethnic cleansing. Throughout the past seventy-five years, the State of Israel has erased as many Arabic names as possible, replacing them with Jewish and, often, biblical names. This act is intended to erase the indigenous history of the land and the identity of its native people.

Taken at face value and detached from history, the biblical story leads automatically to tunnel vision. Christians acquainted with the biblical story confuse it with history and subconsciously side with the State of Israel in seeing Palestinians as intruders on the land. Israeli settlers are often seen by Christians as the legal heirs to the land while the native Palestinians are the strangers. Some Jewish Israelis and Palestinians have Israelite ancestry, but the struggle today is one of identity. The biblical story that reflects the ancient identity of the peoples of the land is interpreted as an exclusive entitlement, and the Israelites of the Bible are confused with today's Israelis. The distortion of history and the instrumentalization of the biblical narrative by Zionism and Zionist Christians have dire consequences for the Palestinian people.

The Biblical Story and Israeli Settler Colonialism

Distorting history to advance poor biblical interpretation leaves the settler colonial nature of the State of Israel unquestioned. Rather, the

conquest of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel is perceived as fulfillment of the land promise and “a sign of God’s faithfulness.” It is celebrated as a modern miracle and as if it were a replay of the biblical conquest story under Joshua. The most important segment of the biblical story for Jewish and Christian Zionists, the Torah and book of Joshua frighteningly contain all of the elements of settler colonialism as a political practice.¹⁶ The Israelites who crossed the Jordan into Canaan are seen as having a divine entitlement to the land. They are portrayed as belonging to the land and as the legitimate heirs while the natives are described as wicked and decadent (Genesis 9:25), needing to be replaced, displaced, and exterminated (Deuteronomy 7:2), and their native deity erased (Deuteronomy 12:2–3), with their conquered cities renamed and reclaimed. The book of Joshua is the blueprint par excellence of a settler colonial ideology and theology.

While the biblical texts themselves are very troublesome, the manner in which they have been received is even more so. These biblical passages have been repeatedly used as justification for land grabs and colonization in Palestine and beyond. The Bible has been used as a tool for colonization since the sixteenth century. The land promise was used repeatedly as the pretext for land confiscation and colonization in North America, Africa, and Australia, to name a few. With the Bible as their weapon, settler colonialists robbed indigenous populations of their land and livelihood, slaughtering, expelling, or confining survivors to small territories called “reservations” in North America, “Bantustans” in South Africa, or “Area A” in Palestine. With the Bible as their weapon, settler colonialists let their might constitute what was right, legitimizing their exploitative conquest and colonization with scriptural language. With the Bible as their weapon, settler colonialists demonized indigenous populations while glorifying colonization as the civilization of the savage. Israel is no exception to this pattern and must be understood within this context of European settler colonization. When we talk today about land theology, we cannot ignore the European history of colonization or shy away from the colonialist reception history of the Bible.

The colonization of ancient Canaan by the Israelites was a topic of discussion in the newly established State of Israel in the second half of the twentieth century. David Ben Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, chose to use the book of Joshua to advance the settler colonial project.¹⁷ In 1958, the tenth anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel, which resulted in the Palestinian *Nakba* or catastrophe, Ben Gurion assembled Israeli generals, politicians, archeologists, and biblical scholars to read and interpret the book of Joshua to theologically justify the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948, and to forge an Israeli identity and Jewish essence based on ethno-nationalism and militarism. For Ben Gurion, there was no other way for the Jewish diaspora to understand the essence of the book of Joshua with its focus on military conquest and land settlements.

Occupation, settlement, tribe, nation—I doubt if a scattered and divided people that has no land and no independence could know the true meaning of these words and their full content. Those who do not engage in conquest cannot know what is involved in the act of conquest. It is the same thing with settlement. Only with the establishment of Israel in our generation did these abstract concepts assume skin, sinews, and flesh, so that we know their content and essence.¹⁸

The book of Joshua was also central for another Israeli general, Moshe Dayan. For Dayan, the real conquest and settlement of the land that resembled the conquest of Joshua did not take place in 1948 but under his leadership in the 1967 war. Dayan saw himself as the real modern Joshua. In his book *Living with the Bible*, Dayan wrote,

We are the biblical generation of the settlement, following the Joshua conquest, and the helmet and sword are essential requirements. There will be no life for our children unless we dig shelters, and without the barbed wire fence and the machine-gun we shall be unable to build a home, plant a tree, pave a road and drill for water.¹⁹

Joshua was the role model for Ben Gurion, Dayan, and for the many Jewish Zionist settlers who saw the book as a blueprint for their settler colonial project and the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. The climax of the Joshua interpretation was crafted by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1890–1982) who understood settler colonialism as divinely ordered: “The conquest of the land of Israel in order to establish our rule in it is a divinely ordained war.... Joshua made it plain to the inhabitants of the land: this land is ours. It is under our sovereignty.”²⁰

These consecutive interpretations of the book have had a lasting imprint on Israeli society and Modern Hebrew as a language. The word for the Israeli occupation, *kibbush*, derives from Joshua’s systemic war against the Canaanites in Joshua 18:1. The word for settlement, *nahalah*, is the root of today’s term for Israeli settler colonies, *hitnahalut*, and for settlers, *mitnahalim*, as attested in Joshua 19:35. The linguistic borrowing of settler colonial concepts from the book of Joshua in Israeli society today “sets the stage for lived reality insofar as figuring the Jewish citizens of Israel as the reincarnation of Joshua’s army exalts the male soldier while assigning to the Palestinians the role of the Canaanites.”²¹ In today’s Jewish messianism, settler colonialism is no longer an imperial undertaking but a divine plan that sanctions a holy war and sanctifies military operations. When settler colonialism becomes a divine order, human rights or international law becomes irrelevant since God’s laws triumph human laws.

Settler Colonialism: The Blind Spot of Land Theology

In 1977, the well-known American Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann published his book entitled *The Land*, a typical book about biblical theology that influenced a whole generation of American pastors and theologians. In this book, Brueggemann responded to an emerging American context where many people felt a “sense of being lost, displacement and homelessness.”²² This existential and sociopsychological yearning for a secure place led

Brueggemann to claim that the Land is the “central theme in biblical faith”²³ and is primarily concerned “with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place.”²⁴ Brueggemann described three important aspects of the land: as a gift, a temptation, and a task. This emphasized the dialectic between landlessness and landedness.²⁵

In the preface of the second edition of the same book, Brueggemann wrote about five major developments in Old Testament studies in 2002 that were not on his horizon at the time of the initial writing in 1977. One of them was the following:

The recognition that the claim of “promised land” in the Old Testament is not an innocent theological claim, but is a vigorous ideological assertion on an important political scale. This insight is a subset of ideology critique in the field that has emerged as a major enterprise only in the last decades. Perhaps the most important articulation in this matter is the recognition of Jon Levenson that Israel’s tradition demonizes and dismisses the Canaanites as a parallel to the anti-Semitism that is intrinsic to the New Testament. That is, Israel’s text proceeds on the basis of the primal promises of Genesis 12–36 to assume entitlement to the land without regard to any other inhabitants, including those who may have been there prior to Israel’s emergence...The shortcoming in my book reflects my inadequate understanding at that time, but also reflects the status of most Old Testament studies at that time that were still innocently credulous about the theological importance of the land tradition in the Old Testament...Most recently scholarly attention has been given to the ongoing ideological force (and cost) of the claim of “promised land.” On the one hand, this ideology of land entitlement...has served the ongoing territorial ambitions of the state of Israel, ambitions that, as I write (April 2002), are enacted in unrestrained violence against the Palestinian population.²⁶

When Brueggemann wrote his first book on the land, he was forty-six years old. That book was his thirteenth, and he was in the middle of his career. Christian theologians and others were very naïve, very

much influenced by the so-called Christian Holocaust Theology, and in awe of the State of Israel. Many went on to emphasize a strong bond between God, land (Palestine), and people (Jewish).²⁷ Brueggemann and many others of this era were what Stephen Haynes calls “liberal Christian Zionists.”²⁸

The second edition of Brueggemann’s book came out when he was at the height of his career. The political situation had changed dramatically between 1977 and 2002, and the second edition was published in the context of the Second Palestinian Intifada. Israeli tanks had invaded most of the Palestinian towns, the Church of the Nativity was under siege by Israeli troops, and President Arafat was imprisoned in his compound. Yet, Brueggemann attributes his changed perception to the emergence of ideology critique, although ideological criticism emerged around the same time that his first edition was published. In his book on the land, Brueggemann was keen to be relevant to his American context and to relate the issues of land as gift, promise, and challenge to issues existing within the American context. He failed to appreciate how this theology was misused in the founding of his own country, the United States, where biblical land theology and ideology were used in the conquest of North America and the occupying of Native American lands. Brueggemann was focused on the Bible and not on biblical reception history. I do not want to question Brueggemann’s innocence, and I am glad to see him confessing his naiveté, but did that confession lead him to altering his theology in any radical way? Unfortunately not. He continued to be a liberal Christian Zionist.

In 2015, Brueggemann published a booklet under the title *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*.²⁹ The opening of this book sounds promising as Brueggemann is open about a change in his convictions. His connection to Palestinian Christian theologians and Jewish American peace activists played a role in this conversion:

My own convictions concerning this conflict, as those of many other people, have changed considerably over time, a change that I judge responsible in the face of changing political reality. Mindful of the long history of Christian anti-Semitism and the deep fissure of the Shoah, we have surely been right to give thanks for the founding of the state of Israel and the securing of a Jewish homeland. But the issues have altered dramatically as the state of Israel has developed into a major military power that continues administrative-military control of the Palestinian territories.³⁰

But very soon after, theological claims related to Israeli settler colonialism troublingly resurface in the introduction to this booklet:

In my own thinking, which is much influenced by my work as a Scripture scholar, I begin with a focus on the claim of Israel as God's chosen people. That conviction is not in doubt in the Bible. It is a theological claim, moreover, that fits with compelling persuasiveness with the reality of Jews in the wake of World War II and the Shoah. Jews were indeed a vulnerable people, whose requirement of a homeland was an overriding urgency. Like many Christians, progressive and evangelical, I was grateful (and continue to be so) for the founding and prospering of the state of Israel as an embodiment of God's chosen people. That much is expressed in my earlier book entitled *The Land*. I took "the holy land" to be the appropriate place for the chosen people of the Bible which anticipates the well-being of Israel that takes land and people together.³¹

Brueggemann unapologetically connects the biblical promise of the land with the notion of "God's chosen people," a theological phrase that is rooted in Christian-Zionist ideology rather than the Bible. Brueggemann then moves swiftly, perplexingly, and uncritically to connect these biblical topoi with modern Judaism and speaks about the State of Israel as "an embodiment of God's chosen people."³² In his booklet, Brueggemann confuses Israel, meaning the Northern Kingdom, with Israel as a theological construct, and with the State of Israel of today.³³ Even when he appears to criticize the occupational

policies of the State of Israel, Brueggemann immediately feels a need to express his unshakable support for it. He writes, “I have not changed my mind an iota about the status of Israel as God’s chosen people or about urgency for the security and well-being of the state of Israel.”³⁴ This is pure liberal Christian Zionism.

At the end of chapter 3 Brueggemann appears to contradict himself when he asks the question: Is today’s Israel biblical Israel? To this, he answers,

Concerning any interpretive question, critical faith will resist a direct line from ancient text to contemporary claim. The land issue is no exception to that general rule for critical interpretation. Consequently, it is simply not credible to make any direct appeal from the ancient promises of land to the state of Israel. That is so for two reasons. First, much has happened between text and contemporary political practice that resists such innocent simplicity. Second, because the state of Israel, perhaps of necessity, has opted to be a military power engaged in power politics along with the other nation-states of the world, it cannot at the same time appeal to an old faith tradition in a persuasive way. Thus, the state of Israel can, like any nation-state, make its legitimate political claims and insist upon legitimate security. But appeals to the ancient faith traditions about land promise in order to justify its claims carries little conviction except for those who innocently and uncritically accept the authority of that ancient story.³⁵

There seems to be a serious disconnect here. Brueggemann is not a naïve evangelical Christian and does not connect biblical Israel with the State of Israel directly but uses the Shoah and anti-Semitism as hermeneutical keys to bridge both entities. Brueggemann is not troubled at all by this kind of theology but is concerned because “the state of Israel has developed into a major military power that continues administrative-military control of the Palestinian territories.”³⁶

Based on his theological understanding of the biblical issue of the land, Brueggemann does not question Israel's "biblical" and "unconditional" entitlement to the land; he is only troubled by the way Israel treats the Palestinians. To that end, Brueggemann finds the Israel of today to be in a similar context to that of biblical Israel at the time of Ezra. Those coming "back" to the land are developing exclusionist theologies about the other. As a result, Brueggemann sees "the question of the other" as "the interpretive key to how to read the Bible. The other can be perceived, as in the Zionist perspective, as a huge threat to the security of the state and the well-being of the holy seed. Conversely, the other can be perceived as a neighbor with whom to work at shalom."³⁷ Rabbi Michael Lerner and editor of *Tikkun* magazine commends Brueggemann for his approach of loving "the stranger/the Other."³⁸ Yet I contend that, by describing the Palestinians as the stranger or the other, Rabbi Lerner and Brueggemann dangerously reinforce the settler colonialist focus on the Bible that views the English or Russian Israeli settlers as the heirs to the land.

While both men are concerned about discrimination against Palestinians by the State of Israel, they discriminate against Palestinians theologically by calling them strangers despite the fact that Palestinians and their history, culture, and identity are deeply rooted in the land of Palestine. As a Palestinian whose roots are in this land, I hear the biblical call to be kind to the Israeli incomers, but I vehemently resist being called a stranger and being made an alien in my homeland or discriminated against politically by Israel or theologically by Christians or Jews. The othering of the indigenous people by calling them strangers is an important feature of settler colonialism in which the natives are extraneous and the settlers are cast as natives.

In chapter 3 of the booklet, Brueggemann returns to the issue of "holy" land and reiterates the words he wrote many years ago of the land as a "gift with strings attached."³⁹ He summarizes it in this way: "Thus, the land is *given (unconditionally)*, the land is *taken (by*

conquest and force), and the land is *losable* (if the Torah is not kept).”⁴⁰ Brueggemann does not question that God gave Israel the land of Palestine; he takes the militant conquest of Joshua as a biblical given without connecting it to the history of colonization. The only problem he sees is that Israel does not keep the Torah, and the Torah is equated with the human rights charters of today.

As the settler colonization of Palestinian land reaches unparalleled dimensions in the twenty-first century, equating recognizing Torah with recognizing international human rights law is unacceptable. Israeli colonies are spread throughout the West Bank, isolating Palestinian areas like the South African Bantustans and US reservation system abroad. Settlers seize land and resources, subjugating the indigenous population to apartheid laws under a political matrix of total control. Today, Israel occupies Palestinian land, air, water, and even subterranean electromagnetic fields. The expansion of Israel settlement colonies in the West Bank makes the international community largely uneasy, for they violate international law, including the Geneva Convention and Human Rights Charter. Recognizing international legal arguments, the Israeli government turns to theological claims to biblical entitlement to the land of Palestine as a final resort. In so doing, they attempt to subvert the violations of “human rights” by appealing to “divine right.”

Ignoring the reception history of land ideology in modern settler colonial history while writing about the land and the Bible is irresponsible at best. Focus on scripture that does not engage reception history or acknowledge the many ways that biblical writings have been used to justify colonial histories and actions reflects and implicitly strengthens the colonial process itself. Brueggemann sees the Christian anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust in the West but does not see the colonial history of the Christian West while it is active in North America and Palestine today. Nowhere in the booklet does Brueggemann refer to the notion of colonialism and its connection to land theology. In his framework regarding the exclusion of Black Americans, women, and LGBTQ+ people, he never refers to

indigenous people of his own continent. Why is the theology of conquest not questioned? Is Brueggemann, a descendant of a settler community, ignorant to the troubling history of the colonization of North America, especially the use of the Doctrine of Discovery to seize Native American land? How can his mind be so focused on the Bible that he does not seriously examine its use in history and today?

Brueggemann is not an exception among biblical scholars and Christian theologians. Yet it remains incomprehensible to me that the occupation of Palestinian land is seen as biblical and salvation history rather than as part of modern European colonial history. It is disturbing when theologians ignore how biblical ideology is used as a political claim with major colonial consequences. How can somebody like Brueggemann continue to ignore the current context in which land theology is used for the colonization of Palestinian land?⁴¹

In contrast to Brueggemann's land theology, I would like to look briefly at another Western theologian of almost the same age as Brueggemann who reached a different reading and conclusion. Norman Habel, a Lutheran Australian Old Testament scholar, published a book in 1995 titled *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*. As the title implies, Habel was already aware that land theology "employ[s] theological doctrines, traditions, or symbols to justify and promote the social, economic and political interests of a group within society."⁴² In his 2018 booklet *Acknowledgement of the Land and Faith of Aboriginal Custodians after Following the Abraham Trail*,⁴³ Habel went a step further. He was aware that most land theologies are used by colonizers and ignore the perspective of the colonized. This was not merely a theoretical observation but a biographical experience. In the preface, Habel writes,

I am a descendant of a Prussian migrant who can be compared to Abraham who moved from his homeland, Ur of the Chaldees, to the host country of Canaan. And the Aboriginal people of Canaan can be compared to the Aboriginal peoples in the land of Australia and other countries...Recent generations of colonial readers have viewed the

promised land tradition of the narrator of the Abraham trail as a divine justification for entry into so-called uncivilized lands of the New World: lands like Australia, America and South Africa.⁴⁴

Habel learned through an Aboriginal elder, George Rosendale, to read land theology from the perspective of the colonized. He quotes George, saying,

Little was said [by the missionaries] about the indigenous people of the land whom the Israelites conquered. No questions were asked about whether Joshua's scorched Earth policy was what God really wanted for the indigenous people. Today Joshua's mode of operation sounds to us very much like that of the British colonial conquerors. Did the British have to follow Joshua's way?⁴⁵

Habel starts his booklet with Canaan, the original land of promise, "a host country whose indigenous inhabitants welcomed immigrants such as Abraham and helped them settle peacefully."⁴⁶ Habel is, unlike Brueggemann, very conscious of his context as a German settler. He acknowledges that his settler community has often "discounted the capacity of Aboriginal people"⁴⁷ who have been custodians of Australia for thousands of years, and have dismissed Aboriginal beliefs as paganism, demoting their rich spirituality.

For Habel, there are two different land theologies in the Old Testament: the first is represented by Abraham who understands himself as a guest in Canaan, respects the faith of the indigenous people, and enters into a peaceful treaty with them; the second is represented by Joshua with its militant version of the promise. The latter "classical promised land ideology seems to reflect a bias based on a belief that one chosen people has a divine mandate to invade and possess a particular land and dispossess the indigenous inhabitants of that land as peoples without rights, peoples such as the Australian Aboriginal peoples."⁴⁸

Habel concludes his booklet by urging the church and its theologians to grasp the Kairos moment, and to follow the model of Abraham by changing their theology, attitudes, and practice. He writes,

Yes!

IT IS TIME!

In the light of the faith of Abraham,
the positive relationships between Abraham
and the indigenous custodians of Canaan,
including worship of El, the Creator Spirit of Canaan,
a covenant with the same Canaanite God,
a treaty in which this God, Abraham, the Canaanites
and the land of Canaan are partners,

AND

In the light of how Australian settlers, influenced by a promised land ideology,
dispossessed the indigenous custodians,
discounted their creation spirituality
and violated the land they held sacred.

IT IS TIME

For Christian churches
and the descendants of Christian settlers

to follow the precedent of Abraham,
to make a public acknowledgment,
a colonial confession,

AND

To promote a treaty process
that guarantees and respects the identity, rights,
sovereignty, country and spirituality
of the Aboriginal Peoples.⁴⁹

Habel's approach here fundamentally differs from that of Brueggemann. Both use the Bible and both write land theology, but they arrive at different conclusions. The Bible contains several conflicting stories like those of Abraham and of Joshua. However, what we find says not so much about the Bible but more about each of us as readers. Brueggemann's "land" interpretation says more about his political convictions than about biblical theology, and the same is true for Habel. The Bible has both texts of liberation and texts of colonization. What do our minds focus on? What is our hermeneutical key: the Holocaust or colonialism? Our keys determine to a great extent how we interpret the Bible and our focus.

We cannot separate Israeli colonial policies in Palestine from modern European colonial history. In his comparative analysis of Native American and Palestinian literary production, Steven Salaita reaches the following conclusion:

The results of ethnic cleansing have been heartbreaking in the New World and Holy Land. It is important—perhaps even imperative—to use "New World" and "Holy Land" together with "ethnic cleansing" whenever we discuss either region. One can argue convincingly that

were it not for the destruction of Native nations in North America, there would have been no destruction of Palestine. The same is true of other colonial incursions: the British settlement of Australia, the French takeover of Algeria, the European scramble for Africa. Zionism, as a European phenomenon of philosophy and execution, was produced in a culture that conceptualized foreign settlement and population transfer as viable political solutions, especially where so-called “inferior” peoples were concerned. David Ben Gurion and other prominent Zionist leaders looked to the Euro-American conquest of Native lands as a source of inspiration.⁵⁰

No one should be allowed to use “biblical rights” to violate human rights; not Jewish settlers, Israeli politicians, or naïve Christian theologians. We should not allow accusations of anti-Semitism and Western guilt regarding the Holocaust to avert our eyes from Israel’s colonial policies. Maybe the missionaries to the Americas in the sixteenth century were innocent, and maybe Brueggemann in the late 1970s was naïve, but it is time to end this theological innocence. We should confess that Christian theologians have played, consciously or subconsciously, a major role in aiding the ongoing colonization of Palestinian land and people. Land theology has been a theological tool for Palestinian dispossession and oppression. Christian theologians have failed to see that the promised land is confiscated land. The preoccupation of Christian theologians with the Bible, fear of being called anti-Semitic, and guilt about the Holocaust have disguised the ongoing colonization of Palestine. To these ends, the liberation of the Palestinian people and the liberation of theological minds are closely bound together.

Toward a Decolonial Theology of the Land

An important element that has not been given enough attention in theological treatments of Palestine is the geopolitical situation, which requires examination of the context of the land and its native people. These two elements, land and people, are the most important hermeneutical keys to understanding and interpreting scripture.

Geopolitics and the Land

Historic Palestine is a territory located at the crossroads of three continents and has an image of being at the heart of the region, the “navel of the earth.” This is myth, for, in reality, Palestine is a land on the margin, on the periphery of the Fertile Crescent, a border land for diverse empires. A close look at the map shows Palestine surrounded by five regional powers that have determined its fate: Egypt to the south, Europe to the west, Turkey to the north, and Mesopotamia and Persia to the northeast. Throughout history, Palestine has stood in the sphere of influence of one or two of these five powers, getting pulled in competing directions. Palestine’s fertile plains have been the battleground for these conflicting powers, and it is hardly by chance that Armageddon is seen as taking place in the land’s most fruitful valley.

Due to its geopolitical position, Palestine has been occupied or under the patronage of Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Ptolemies, Seleucids, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans, British, and Israelis. While these superpowers were well established politically, having accumulated a culture of political dominance, the native peoples of Palestine were powerless most of the time, constantly adjusting their identity and boundaries within a changing context. Adjustment, resistance, and liberation from occupation is a connecting thread of Palestine’s history from the second millennium BC until today.

The land often came under more than one imperial power, fostering diverse identities. The influence of regional powers over Palestine created either a buffer zone or a battlefield where regional wars were fought. None could truly survive without the support of greater patrons. To look at these features of Palestine is to see how the geopolitics of the region determine the land’s fate, a fate that is very difficult to escape. As a land under occupation, the theme of liberation was central throughout history as well as in the Bible. At the same time, control of the land and the unity of its peoples remains an uphill

struggle. We cannot understand the land theology of the Bible outside of the geopolitical reality of Palestine, and we cannot understand the biblical message without analyzing the power structures of that time and today.

The Native People and the Land

Many Christian theologians and Zionist thinkers confuse the Israelites of the Bible with the Israelis of today. These theologians shift between 70 AD and 1948 as if history stood still for two millennia and as if the land of Palestine was “without a people” and waiting to be inhabited “again” by “a people without a land.” The Israelis of today are not the direct descendants of the Israelites of the Bible, nor are the Palestinians of today the direct successors of the Philistines. Any such understanding is based on a static view of history and a fundamentalist approach to biblical literature.

Throughout history, most of Palestine’s native people never left the land. Only a small minority of Palestine’s people were deported. Empires came, occupied the land for a number of years or decades, but were eventually forced to leave. The majority of the native people remained in the land of their ancestors. They were the *am-ha’aretz*, the “people of the land,” in spite of all the empires that controlled that land throughout its history. Identities did change in accordance with new realities and empires. People changed their language from Palestinian and Phoenician West Semitic to Aramaic and Hebrew, and later to Greek and Arabic. Their identity shifted from Canaanite to Philistine to Judahite and Israelite, to Hasmonaic, to Roman, to Byzantine, to Arab, to Ottoman and Palestinian, just to name a few. They changed religion from Ba’al to Yahweh. Later they believed in Jesus as Christ and became Christians, the first Aramaic-speaking Monophysites, before being forced to become, for example, Greek Orthodox. Obligated to pay extra taxes during Islamic dominance, they became Muslims. And yet, throughout the centuries, they maintained a dynamic and flexible identity. In this sense, Palestinians today stand in historic continuity with biblical Canaanites, Philistines,

Israelites, and Judahites, and are the native people of the land. Irrespective of their religious affiliation (Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Samaritans), the Palestinian people demonstrate significant continuity from biblical times until the present, and they are the native people who survived empires and occupations. They comprise the remnants of invading armies or settlers who stayed and integrated themselves rather than returning to their original homeland.

Palestinians are the outcome of this long and dynamic history. Their context is important for understanding the Bible. It is time to listen to the narrative of the native people of the land. Palestinian Jews belong to the people of the land, and followers of the Jewish faith have been part and parcel of the region throughout the last two millennia. But settler colonial Zionists are not part of the people of the land. They are invaders and subcontractors to the empires.

The Palestinians of today are the native people of the land because they are not part of the empire. Their voice is not only unheard but often silenced. Unless their discourse falls within a European framework, they are not considered dialogue partners. The Muslims of Palestine are ignored because they are Muslims and not thought of as part of the Judeo-Christian culture. Palestinian Christians are marginalized because they are Palestinians. And native, anti-Zionist Jews and Samaritans who are neither Zionist nor Ashkenazi are ignored as non-European. Many Western theologians want to monopolize the discourse and recognize only those Palestinians who use their frame of reference.

If we really want to understand the Bible's message, it is of the utmost importance to listen to Palestine's native people. Their suffering under occupation, their aspiration for liberation, their struggles and hopes are all relevant to exegesis. For the Palestinian people, land is life. It is ancestral heritage. They belong to this land and have nowhere else to go. They experience being made into aliens at home by Israeli policies. They see how Jewish immigrants occupy their land, build settlements, and obtain citizenship, while they, the native people, are marginalized and pushed out. Palestine is their

homeland, but Palestinians in the diaspora are not allowed to enter the land of their fathers, whereas Jews are given the right to settle anywhere in Palestine irrespective of where they have come from. The land of Palestine is colonized by the use of military hardware that is justified by theological software. The natural right of Palestinians to the land of their ancestors is violated. This is not an exclusive Palestinian experience and is mirrored by many native peoples in North and South America, in Southern Africa, and in Australia. It is important to listen to the voice of these indigenous peoples. The Bible is the book that contains these voices, the voices of the colonized, not the colonizers.

Toward a Decolonial Reading of the Bible

The Bible contains books like Joshua that can be interpreted as a blueprint for settler colonialism. It also contains prophets who called for social justice. Like the bazaar in the Old City of Jerusalem, one can find many different ingredients in the Bible. There are texts that sanction colonization and texts that promote liberation. What we discover says more about us and what we are searching for as readers than about the Bible itself. For the remainder of the chapter, I offer a decolonial reading of two scriptural passages, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, to demonstrate the hermeneutic of Palestinian liberation.

1 Kings 21

Ahab, King of Samaria, had a palace in Jezreel, but he was not satisfied with his large palace and coveted the vineyard of his neighbor Naboth. Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard at any price. First, he offered Naboth a "better one," and he was also ready to pay with silver. The king acted in vain, for Naboth did not want to give away his ancestral inheritance because to keep it was something like a divine command for him. Ahab knew that, as King of Israel, he had no right to confiscate the land of an Israelite farmer; in accordance with Israelite faith, even the Israelite kings were subject to divine law. But

Jezebel, the Sidonian king's daughter, thought differently and had a different understanding of royalty. She asked her husband whether he was really the King of Israel when he did nothing about Naboth's refusal. Jezebel's models were the imperial rulers who were absolute sovereigns. It was an occupier-occupied relationship where the law serves the empire and its policy of expansion.

Jezebel asked for two scoundrels to bear false witness against Naboth and claim he had cursed God and the king. The divinity of God and security of the state represented by the king were of utmost importance. Naboth was stoned to death, and Ahab was then free to confiscate all his possessions. In this context, the Prophet Elijah intervened because an injustice had been committed, God's commandments had been violated, and the court misused.

The story of Naboth is the story of thousands of Palestinians today whose lands are confiscated to enlarge the Jewish colonies in the West Bank that exploit the water and resources of the Palestinian people. Naboth's story is taking place almost on a daily basis in the West Bank. It is a clear violation of both divine law and international law, but very few theologians dare to raise a prophetic voice and term this land colonization by name.

Matthew 5:5

One of the sentences of Jesus that requires reinterpretation is Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." This text is taken from the Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew. Compared with the other beatitudes of that sermon, this one is often neglected and seldom receives attention. The phrase "Blessed are the peacemakers" is cited frequently, but we rarely hear "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." Indeed, Luke skips this verse altogether. Interestingly, Luke likes to talk about the poor, the hungry, and the thirsty, but not about the meek!

This verse must have been largely ignored initially because it was translated incorrectly. Originally the verse was taken from Psalm 37, which does not refer to “the earth” but to “the land.” In fact, “the land” is repeated several times in that psalm. It should, therefore, read, “Blessed are the meek; they will inherit the land.” That perhaps makes better sense. Psalm 37 does not refer to land near and far but does speak about a certain land, Palestine. When Jesus said that the meek will inherit the land, everyone at the time knew what was meant by the land. He meant the Holy Land, Palestine. When the words of Jesus were translated from Aramaic into Greek, the word that means the land was changed to read the earth. In fact, in Arabic the word, *al-ard*, means both earth and land. Translation is interpretation, and earth replaced land.

The gospels were closely connected to a certain land, Palestine. For the early church located outside of Palestine, talking about the earth made far more sense. Why should somebody in Rome worry about who would inherit Palestine? They were concerned about their souls and maybe about their own land, but not about a distant one. Yet, one cannot understand the gospels if they are disconnected from their original context of Palestine.

I struggled with this text for many, many years. It simply did not make sense. I do not like to spiritualize things because I think Jesus always spoke about reality and refused to avoid it, which was the essence of his spirituality. For a long time, I thought that Jesus had been mistaken. One need only look around the West Bank to realize that 60 percent of it is controlled by the Israeli army and Jewish settlers. This glaring reality is one of the largest land thefts in modern history, worth hundreds of billions of dollars. The Israeli settlements that ring the West Bank make it obvious that the empire has inherited the land. Listening to the words of Jesus through Palestinian, Native American, Black South African, or Aboriginal Australian’s ears does not make any more sense. He must have been mistaken! It is clear that the military occupation controls the land and its resources. Everything is controlled by the empire. The empire inherits the land, not the meek.

Jesus was mistaken because the meek are crushed. Their land is being confiscated to make place for people brought in by the empire. Jesus was mistaken.

But over the last decade of struggling with this text, I have come to read it with new eyes. I discovered something more powerful than I expected. Matthew 5:5 actually speaks directly to reality in a way we would never imagine. It is necessary to use *longue durée* lenses because if the verse is read with regular lenses, we will never grasp its true meaning.⁵¹ Our mistake has been to read history only with the current empire in mind. The prevailing empire has taken all of our attention. Only attending to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from a perspective of the last sixty years, the words of Jesus do not make sense at all. But Jesus had wide-angle lenses and looked at history from a long-term perspective.

For people in the time of Jesus, the occupation began with the Romans. Jesus had a far greater understanding of the history of Palestine. He looked at a thousand years at once and saw a chain of empires. There is not a single regional empire that at some point did not occupy Palestine. The first was the Assyrian in 722 BC, which lasted for over two hundred years. The Assyrians were replaced by the Babylonians in 587, who were pushed out by the Persians in 538. The latter were forced to leave by Alexander the Great. Then there were the Romans. Two thousand years after Jesus, we can continue to recite the list of empires who ruled Palestine: the Byzantines; the Arabs; the Crusaders; the Ayyubids; the Ottomans; the British; and finally, the State of Israel. We have been trained to naively connect Israel today with the Israel of the Bible rather than with this chain of occupying empires. If we focus on the latter, the words of Jesus make perfect sense. None of those empires lasted in Palestine forever. They came and stayed for fifty, one hundred, two hundred, a maximum of four hundred years. Ultimately, they were all blown away, gone with the wind.

When occupied people face the empire, they are generally so overwhelmed by its power that they think that the empire will remain forever and has eternal power. Jesus wanted to tell his people that the empire would not last, that empires come and go. When empires collapse and depart, it is the poor and the meek who remain. Those people of the land who prosper emigrate and seek to grow richer within the centers of empire. Those who are well educated are claimed by the empire. Who remains on the land? The meek, that is, the powerless! Empires come and go, while the meek inherit the land. The wisdom of Jesus is staggering. It seems to me that we have been blinded by a theology that has failed to help us understand what Jesus was really saying.

Some might disagree, insisting that the Israeli occupation is different. They say, “Look at the settlements. How can you claim they will be gone one day? Look at the wall. How can you say it will be dismantled?” But Israel is no different from the empires of the past. The native people of Palestine who lived at the time of Jesus and saw the military checkpoints set up by Herod the Great, such as Herodian and Masada, could never have imagined that Herod and his empire would not be there permanently. To see the “settlements” built by Herod and his sons, such as Caesarea Maritima, Caesarea Philippi, Sepphoris, Tiberias, Sebastopol, Jerusalem, and others, it would have been almost inconceivable to question the durability of the Roman Empire. Jesus was telling the Palestinian Jews that the Romans who had built those colonies would not be there forever, and Palestine would be inherited by the meek. This is a direct critique of the settler colonial practice of the Romans. This is not a cheap hope in a distant future but a decolonial teaching. Jesus wanted to release the powerless from the power of the empire. The moment he spoke those words, the empire lost its power over the people, and power was transferred where it rightly belonged, with the people.

Conclusion

The land issue is not a mere theological topic but one of high political relevance. Historically, the notion of the promised land was used by Western Christian empires to colonize and exploit countries and continents. Today, no one would dare to evoke such a theology as a pretext for colonization, apart from the State of Israel. Over the past one hundred years, Israel has often used the Bible to justify the colonization of Palestinian land. The Zionist movement deliberately developed the ideology of “God, people, and land” as an inseparable unit, and this was adopted by conservative Christian Zionists, Christian Holocaust theologians, and other liberal Christian Zionists. While their adoption of this theology may have stemmed from formal anti-Judaic theologies or from guilt about the Holocaust, the result was that Israel was granted theological impunity to colonize Palestinian land. For Zionists and Christian Zionists, there is nothing wrong with settler colonialism. On the contrary, it is celebrated as the fulfillment of a divine land promise. This theology contradicts international law and is in violation of the Human Rights Charter. Yet, such theologies continue to be espoused by naïve or well-intended theologians, or others brought in by the Zionist movement.

It is high time to develop a theology that views the colonization of Palestine as part and parcel of European settler colonial history. Theologians should be troubled when the promised land becomes the colonized land, when indigenous people are robbed of their land and resources and left to be landless refugees or confined in reservations. During the last two decades, we have seen the emergence of new theological voices in Australia, Canada, and elsewhere recognizing the lawful owners of the land. Nothing like this has yet been seen in Israel. Theologians must listen to and amplify indigenous voices of the people of the land rather than being an uncensored echo of imperial colonial powers. For the current Israeli government to implement an ethno-nationalist policy of ethnic cleansing of the indigenous people based on an exclusive “biblical” myth-history should not be justified theologically or politically. Throughout history, Palestine has been pluralistic in nature. Until 1948, Christians, Jews, and Muslims shared the land and lived side by

side. What is our vision for our land? Is our vision an exclusivist ethnocentric vision or an inclusive one that respects the plurality of peoples and their identities? This question is of utmost importance for the future of Palestine and also globally in a world facing ethno-national tensions, exclusive ideologies, and religious fanaticism.

In the context of land colonization, theologians must be very careful not to supply the colonizer with the ideological tools to support their oppression.

What can hermeneutics, as we have been studying it, contribute to the *ethical* dilemmas posed when texts of power become texts of terror? Can we stand neutral as mere “academic interpreters”? Is hermeneutics necessarily a political activity? We need to be aware that the pernicious political policy of apartheid in South Africa had its beginnings in specific biblical hermeneutics that saw all things created as distinct under God, their differences to be clearly acknowledged.⁵²

We might also recall that apartheid in South Africa arose, to some extent at least, from biblical criticism and interpretation. In the postcolonial era of the present day it is easy to see how a very difficult hermeneutic pertains, and how not only is the Bible to be read in different ways in the light of political and social experience, but the power of the new reader must be turned against old prejudices that were once regarded as unquestioned truths.⁵³

We cannot separate Israeli colonial policies in Palestine from modern European colonial history. No credible theologian today would accept a land theology from the Whites that justifies settler colonialism in South Africa, North America, or Australia. Why would they accept it from Israel? Why is Israel’s colonization of Palestine seen as unique, biblical, and different from all others? We cannot be so theologically naïve to talk about “the land,” meaning Palestine, without reflecting on the current use of land ideology by Jewish colonial settlers. No one should be allowed, whether Jewish settlers, Israeli politicians, or

naïve Christian theologians, to use “biblical rights” to violate “human rights.” We should not allow accusations of anti-Semitism and Western guilt about the Holocaust to avert our eyes from Israel’s colonial policies. Maybe missionaries to the Americas in the sixteenth century were innocent, and Brueggemann in the late 1970s may have been naïve, but now is the time to end this theological innocence. We ought to confess that Christian theologians have played a key role, consciously or subconsciously, in aiding the ongoing colonization of Palestinian land and people. A decolonial theology of the land is urgently required.

¹“Temple Mount & Land of Israel Faithful Movement,” www.templemountfaithful.org.

²David S. New, *Holy War: The Rise of Militant Christian, Jewish, and Islamic Fundamentalism* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 154.

³Grace Halsell, “Militant Coalition of Christian Fundamentalist and Jewish Orthodox Cults Plots Destruction of Al Aqsa Mosque,” March 14, 2000, <https://www.wrmea.org/000-march/militant-coalition-of-christian-fundamentalist-and-jewish-orthodox-cults-plots-destruction-of-al-aqsa-mosque.html>.

⁴New, *Holy War*, 155.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 160.

⁷Joel Greenberg, “Sharon Touches a Nerve, and Jerusalem Explodes,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2000.

⁸Jonathan N. Tubb, *Canaanites*, Illustrated ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 13–14.

⁹Mary Ellen Buck, *The Canaanites: Their History and Culture from Texts and Artifacts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 30–55.

¹⁰Ingrid Hjelm, “The Palestine History and Heritage Project (PaHH),” in *The Ever Elusive Past: Discussions of Palestine’s History and Heritage* (United Arab Emirates: Dar Al Nasher, 2019), 11.

¹¹Nur Masalha, *Palestine: A Four-Thousand-Year History* (London: Zed Books, 2018), 72–73.

¹²Three theories were developed about the origin of ancient Israel. The American School of Biblical Archeology, represented by William Albright and John Bright, defended the conquest theory by stating that the conquest under Joshua was real. The German school of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth, on the other hand, advocated the peaceful infiltration theory, meaning that the Israelites were nomads from outside who infiltrated Palestine and settled there peacefully. A third school, represented by George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald, argued for a peasants’ revolt model, saying that the Israelites were Canaanite peasants who revolted against the existing sociopolitical and economic structures of their time and retreated to the Highlands to form a new society.

¹³Samuel Pagan, “The Theological and Historical David: Contextual Reading,” in *The Biblical Text in the Context of Occupation: Towards a New Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2012), 336–40.

¹⁴More on these three different uses of the word *Israel* can be found in Philip R. Davies, *In Search of “Ancient Israel”: A Study in Biblical Origins*, 2nd ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2015).

¹⁵Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Land of Israel* (London: Verso, 2012), 28.

¹⁶For more on this issue, see Pekka Pitkänen, “Pentateuch–Joshua: A Settler-Colonial Document of a Supplanting Society,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (2014): 245–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.842626>; Pekka Pitkänen,

“Settler Colonialism in Ancient Israel,” August 1, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/31712835/Settler_Colonialism_in_Ancient_Israel; Pekka Pitkänen, “Reading Genesis–Joshua as a Unified Document from an Early Date: A Settler Colonial Perspective,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, February 3, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107914564822>.

¹⁷Rachel Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 97–161.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁹Moshe Dayan, *Living with the Bible* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979), 105.

²⁰Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation*, 177.

²¹*Ibid.*, 98.

²²Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 1.

²³*Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 2.

²⁵*Ibid.*, xi.

²⁶*Ibid.*, xiii–ix.

²⁷W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

²⁸Stephen R. Haynes, “Christian Holocaust Theology: A Critical Reassessment,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62, no. 2 (1994): 562.

²⁹Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).

³⁰*Ibid.*, ix–x.

³¹*Ibid.*, xiv.

³²*Ibid.*

³³For more on this confusion, see Philip R. Davies, *In Search of “Ancient Israel”: A Study in Biblical Origins*, 2nd ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2015); Ingrid Hjelm et al., eds., *A New Critical Approach to the History of Palestine: Palestine History and Heritage Project 1* (London: Routledge, 2019); Andrew Mein and Claudia V. Camp, *History, Politics and the Bible from the Iron Age to the Media Age*, ed. James G. Crossley and Jim West, reprint ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2018).

³⁴Brueggemann, *Chosen?*, xvi.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 37–38.

³⁶*Ibid.*, x.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸Michael Lerner in his endorsement of the booklet; *ibid.*, cover page.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 8, 12.

⁴²Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies, Overtures to Biblical Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 10.

⁴³Norman C. Habel, *Acknowledgement of the Land and Faith of Aboriginal Custodians after Following the Abraham Trail* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018).

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁰Steven Salaita, *Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 179.

⁵¹*Longue durée* is an expression used by the French Annales School of historic writing that gives priority to long-term historical structures over events.

⁵²David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 123–24.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 125.