

Friends of Sabeel UK

Watlington Road
Oxford
OX4 6BZ

Tel: 01865 787420

Email: info@friendsofsabeel.org.uk

www.friendsofsabeel.org.uk



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Israel/Palestine Using the Bible Today

Four Bible Studies

by

Colin Chapman

**to accompany the Kairos Time for Action
document**

Friends of Sabeel UK



Kairos Palestine

Kairos Britain: Time for Action



Should Christians have anything distinctive to say about this ongoing, bitter conflict? Here are two peoples who lay claim to the same piece of land for different reasons and who are trying to express their desire for secure nationhood in different ways. Here are 'two groups with shared collective self-consciousness which has been traumatised' (Tony Campolo). Can the Bible help us to understand some of the issues and help us to work out genuinely Christian responses – both for those caught up in the conflict and for those who watch from outside?

These four studies address the following questions:

1. HOW SHOULD WE USE THE BIBLE IN THINKING ABOUT ISRAEL/PALESTINE TODAY?

How are we to interpret and apply what the Bible teaches? Do we simply rely on proof texts or general principles taught by the Bible? When we find different ways of interpreting the Bible, are some right and others wrong, or do we have to live with different interpretations? How can we discern what God might be saying to us through his Word about these complex and sensitive issues?

2. WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT THIS LAND?

Is it appropriate for the Jewish people to use the Old Testament as a basis for their claim to have a special connection to this land? Should Christians see possession of the land by Jews as the fulfilment in our own day of biblical promises and prophecies about 'the Promised Land'? Or are there other ways of understanding and applying its teaching about the land today?

3. WHAT IS OUR VISION OF A JUST SOCIETY?

If the Bible knows nothing of the kind of democratic nation-states that we have today, does it have anything to say about the kind of society that Israelis and Palestinians should hope to create? What might truly just societies in Israel/Palestine look like today?

4. HOW SHOULD WE FIGHT INJUSTICE AND WORK FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE?

If both sides in the conflict have experienced injustice, how should they respond to these injustices? What is our motivation in working for justice and peace?

Colin Chapman has lived with his wife, Anne, in the Middle East, mostly in Egypt and Lebanon, for 18 years in four different spells since 1968. He has worked with the Anglican Church and the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students and taught Islamic Studies at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon.

In the UK, he has taught at Trinity College, Bristol, and the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham.

During his time in Beirut Colin wrote *Whose Promised Land*, which was first published in 1983 and has seen four revisions since then. Other publications include *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam* (IVP, 2007), *Whose Holy City, Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Lion/Baker, 2004), *"Islamic Terrorism": is there a Christian response?* (Grove, 2006).



Friends of Sabeel UK supports the Sabeel Theology Centre in Jerusalem in its work for the promotion of religion for the benefit of the community, and raises awareness in the United Kingdom concerning Christians in the Holy Land.



Kairos Britain is a network of individuals, organisations and faith communities formed in response to the Kairos Palestine document, 'A Moment of Truth'.

Kairos Palestine

Kairos Britain: Time for Action



4. Working for justice and peace. Matthew 5:6,9

These familiar words in the Beatitudes perhaps sum up the most fundamental issue at the heart of all these four studies.

How is it possible in the situation of Israel/Palestine at the present time both to hunger and thirst for justice/righteousness and to be peacemakers?

Is there ever a danger in focusing so much on justice that we fail to be peacemakers? Can angry activists ever be peace-makers?

Is there ever a danger that those who focus only on peace-making, fail to address the justice issues?

What if Christians were to engage in 'sustained non-violent peacemaking' (Ron Sider)?

NOTES

How to use these studies

These studies are designed primarily to be used *in groups*, although they can also be used for individual study.

Any group of Christians studying these issues is likely to include people with different view-points. But if a group consists of people who have the same or similar approaches to the historical and political issues or to biblical interpretation, it may be helpful to encourage some members of the group to use their imagination and try to put themselves in the shoes of people who hold very different opinions. So, for example, someone who starts with a very pro-Palestinian viewpoint might consciously try to approach the discussion *as if* he/she were an orthodox Jew, a secular Jew or a messianic believer. Similarly someone starting with a strongly pro-Jewish or pro-Israeli viewpoint might try to speak *as if* he/she were a Palestinian Christian. Some role-play of this kind might help to enliven and enrich the discussion!

If you want to hear how Palestinian Christians and messianic Jews in Israel/Palestine are trying to understand and practise the teaching of Jesus in their context today, look at the presentations of Sami Awad, Munther Isaac, Salim Munayyir, Yohanna Katanacho, Evan Thomas and others at the *Christ at the Checkpoint* conference in Bethlehem in March, 2014.

1. HOW SHOULD WE USE THE BIBLE IN THINKING ABOUT ISRAEL/PALESTINE TODAY?

The 66 books of the Bible were written over a period of at least 14 centuries, and all were written in political contexts that were different from our situations today. Abraham lived in a tribal society, and the Children of Israel in Egypt were an enslaved minority in a foreign country until they escaped from Egypt and began to conquer the land. Under David and his successors they were an independent kingdom seeking to live according to the law that they believed had been given to them by God. Centuries later they were in exile in Babylon, and when they returned to the land, they came under the control of one foreign power after another. During the time of Jesus, Palestine was under Roman military occupation, and later Paul could use his rights as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. By the end of the 1st century the Roman Empire had become a totalitarian state.

The question we are dealing with therefore is this: how can a particular passage in the Bible, which was written long ago in particular political context, help us to think about the very different situation in Israel/Palestine today? The following passages have all been used at different times to point out a particular principle that may be relevant to this situation. As you read and discuss these passages together, you could ask yourselves questions like these:

Is it appropriate to appeal to this particular passage? Is it relevant, and if so, how can it be used and applied to Israel/Palestine today?

What might this have to say to Israelis – Jews and Arabs - or to Palestinian Arabs on the West Bank, in Gaza or in the Diaspora, or to us and everyone else in the watching world?

1. Living with the indignities of occupation. Matthew 5:38-48

Giving specific examples of ways in which the Romans exercised their power as occupiers, Jesus describes a new set of values – the values of the kingdom of God. Jesus must have been aware of the option represented by the Zealots, who chose the way of violence in response to Roman occupation.

What did Jesus mean by 'turning the other cheek'? Is it a response of weakness?

What if we're told 'We have turned the other cheek so many times that we no longer have another cheek to turn'?

What did 'going the extra mile' actually mean at the time for a Jew confronted by the demands of a Roman soldier?

Is it really possible to 'love your enemies' in Israel/Palestine today? What might it mean for our attitudes? How might this work out in practice?

2. Responding to evil: Romans 12:14-21

Paul is writing to Christians who are a powerless and vulnerable community in Rome.

Is there anything distinctively Christian about this teaching? In what way is it based on the example of Christ?

If revenge is ruled out, is there a place for self-defence? What is the alternative to revenge?

What does it mean for people to be 'overcome by evil'?

How in practice is it possible to 'overcome evil with good'?

What can we learn from the recent experience of Egyptian Christians in responding to attacks on them and their churches in August 2013?

3. The example of Jesus in responding to suffering of different kinds: 1 Peter 2:13-25

Peter is speaking about Christians who suffer simply because of their allegiance to Jesus.

How can 'doing good' have the effect of silencing 'the ignorant talk of foolish people'?

Why is Peter careful to distinguish between suffering as a Christian and suffering that we bring on ourselves by our own wrongdoing and foolishness?

Is it possible to forgive wrongdoing even when there is no admission of guilt and no apology?

4. HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO INJUSTICE AND WORK FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE?

In situations in our own lives when we feel that we have experienced an injustice, there is usually a way of seeking redress of some kind – e.g. through complaints procedures or through the police and the legal system. We believe in the rule of law and trust that justice can be done and be seen to be done. But when we're thinking about the behaviour of nations and the whole history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is very much harder to see what might have been the most appropriate and effective ways to redress wrongs that have been done in the past and how justice could be done at the present time. It is harder still not just to work for justice but to make peace and bring about reconciliation.

It is salutary to remind ourselves that the Zionist movement was to a large extent a response to the injustice suffered by Jewish people in Europe at the end of the 19th century. Having concluded that they could never feel totally secure and at home in European countries, Zionist leaders began to dream that the only solution was for Jews to create a homeland for themselves in Palestine. European anti-semitism reached its climax in the extermination of six million Jews in the Holocaust, which is still in the minds of Israeli Jews who are concerned about the security of the Jewish state today.

Palestinians also feel an acute sense of injustice. They would say that their land has been stolen from them by immigrants; they suffered the Nakba ('Catastrophe') and ethnic cleansing in 1948; and since 1967 have been living on the West Bank with the occupation and the Security Barrier/Fence that are illegal in international law. Some are prepared to admit that their violent responses to these injustices at times have not helped their cause, while others argue that it's only through recourse to violence that the world has been forced to sit up and take notice.

In this study we explore what the Bible might have to say about responding to injustice. We will quickly realise that there are no easy answers, and these are some of the difficult questions which we have to address:

Should there be anything distinctive about the way followers of Jesus respond to injustice? Should they always be committed to non-violence?

What if we cannot seek redress through ordinary legal processes? Are there times when the only response must be to suffer the injustice and leave everything in the hands of God?

If Christians try to practise the teaching of Jesus, Paul and Peter, can they ever expect others who don't share the same allegiance to follow the same ideals?

If Jesus expected individual disciples to follow this example and his teaching, can we ever expect a whole community, society or nation to follow them as well? Can we commend non-violence as the most effective response even for those who do not accept the authority of Jesus?

What is involved in being genuine peace-makers in Israel/Palestine today?

1. The Ten Commandments: Exodus 20: 13, 15, 17.

'Thou shalt not murder ... thou shalt not steal ... thou shalt not covet ...'

Perhaps every party that has played a role in this conflict has broken these commandments – western imperial powers seeking their own interests, settlers stealing land and engaging in ethnic cleansing, suicide bombers killing innocent civilians, and individuals and nations today seeking their own economic interests.

Might God-fearing Jews, Christians and Muslims all accept these commandments as basic moral requirements given to us by our Creator?

Can the secular world be expected to take the Ten Commandments seriously?

2. Oppressing an alien: Exodus 22:21; 23:9.

These words were addressed to the Children of Israel, who had experienced many years of oppression and slavery in Egypt and therefore should have been able to remember what it feels like to be an alien in a foreign country.

Would Israeli Jews today feel that these words have anything to say to them about their attitudes towards the 20% of Israelis who are Arabs and towards Palestinian Arabs on the West Bank and in Gaza?

What can it feel like for Palestinian Arabs, who feel that their ancestors have been living in the land for centuries, to be treated by Israeli Jews as 'aliens', strangers in their own homeland?

3. The prophetic passion for justice: Isaiah 59:1-11

Isaiah is distressed about the state of the nation in which 'justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us'. He describes how he believes God sees the nation.

What are some of the particular things described here which show that the nation has failed to live up to God's standards?

Does this description in any way fit the situation in Israel/Palestine today?

4. Predictions of return to the land: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

While in exile with his people in Babylon, Ezekiel is given this vision of dry bones coming together to form a body that is living once again, symbolising the return of the people to the land and their revival as a nation. In interpreting Old Testament prophecy of this kind, we need to ask at least four questions:

How was this prophecy fulfilled in its original context?

Has this prophecy been fulfilled in the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus?

Is this prophecy still to be fulfilled in the future – e.g. at the Second Coming?

Has anything described here been fulfilled in recent history?

These questions take us to the heart of the sharp disagreements among Christians over the interpretation of prophecy. Most, if not all, would agree that Ezekiel's prophecy was fulfilled *initially* in the return of the Jewish exiles to Judah after the Babylonian Exile. Many believe that this vision has *also* been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus, since, in Jesus the Messiah, biblical Israel is restored and renewed and becomes the church, the body of Christ. Some believe that the prophecy of a return to the land has been fulfilled literally *once again* in the return of Jews to the land since 1880 and the creation of the state of Israel.

How can this vision be interpreted as looking forward to the coming of Christ and, in particular, to his resurrection? How is Jesus related to biblical Israel?

If this is a convincing way of understanding the prophecy, can it also be seen as a prediction that was not only fulfilled in the return from Exile in the 6th C BC but fulfilled literally once again in the 19th and 20th centuries?

5. Intervening in a family dispute: Luke 12:13-21

Jesus is asked to intervene in a family dispute, taking the side of the younger brother who believes that he has not received his proper share of the family inheritance. Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus doesn't immediately take sides, and instead warns against covetousness. But who was doing the coveting: was it the older brother who was holding onto the whole property? Or was it the younger brother, who even though he had a legitimate right to his share of the property, was motivated by selfishness and greed?

Does the example of Jesus have anything to say to people looking at the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the outside?

Is there a warning about the danger of identifying ourselves too closely with one side in a conflict?

How do we engage in such a way that we're able to say something to both sides and perhaps even contribute towards reconciliation?

6. The Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 5:38-48

Palestinian Christians who live under Israeli occupation on the West Bank feel that there are some similarities between their situation and that of the Jews living under Roman occupation at the time of Christ.

What does it mean for Palestinian Christians at the present time to try to obey this teaching of Jesus? What does it mean when men, women and children face soldiers at a check-point?

What does it mean in practice in the context of Israel/Palestine to 'love your enemies'?

4. Jesus, Palestine and Roman Occupation

It is perhaps surprising that while, as we have seen, the OT prophets 'spoke truth to power' in such an uncompromising way, Jesus said little or nothing very directly about the political situation at the time. Is it possible to work out any reasons for this?

Was it because he was more concerned to talk about the kingdom of God which was a different kind of reality from any kind of political system at the time?

Was it because he was concerned with meeting the real human needs of the suffering, the vulnerable and outcasts in society?

Was it because he was talking about the spiritual transformation of individuals which would eventually lead to the transformation of communities and nations?

Or was it because ...?

In the following passages what is the particular challenge that is presented?

What might this teaching mean for Israelis, Palestinians and the watching world?

Luke 3:7-14 - John the Baptist's response to the question 'What should we do?'

Luke 4:14-22—Jesus' sermon in Nazareth, described as 'The Nazareth Manifesto', quoting Isaiah 60:1-2

Matthew 5:6—The Greek *dikaiosune* can be translated 'justice' or 'righteousness'

Matthew 22:34-40 - 'the greatest commandment in the law'

5. Christians within the Roman Empire

How do Paul and Peter encourage Christians to live in the societies in which they find themselves?

Romans 13:1-7

Paul's guidance to Christians in Rome

1 Peter 2:13-17

Peter's instruction to Christians in Asia Minor about submission to authorities.

2. WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT THIS LAND?

It is very natural that Jewish people feel a strong connection with the land. Some even feel that they are attached to it by a kind of umbilical cord. This is partly because of the many centuries of biblical history described in the Old Testament; partly because of the Jewish communities which have lived in the land since then and which played such an important role in the development of Judaism in the first centuries; and partly because of the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Palestinian Arabs recognise their own very mixed ancestry, but claim that their ancestors have been living rooted in the land for centuries - even though they have been ruled for most of the time by foreigners.

The key question we have to wrestle with in this study is this: does the Bible (both the OT and NT) give the Jewish people a special God-given right to the land for all time? Jews often base their claim to the land on scripture, history and their need for a secure nation state of their own. Some Christians support this claim because they believe that there is nothing in the NT which changes the relationship between the people and the land that is described in the OT. Other Christians argue that OT teaching about the land finds its fulfilment in the coming of the kingdom of God through Jesus the Messiah, and that OT teaching about the land therefore needs to be interpreted in the light of the whole of the NT. According to this interpretation, the Bible has little or nothing to say about whether the land should belong today to Jews or Arabs. This question needs to be decided on the basis of international law and generally accepted standards of human rights.

We start therefore with passages in the OT about the land and go on to trace the theme of the land through the NT, trying to understand the different ways in which Christians interpret this teaching today.

1. Characteristics of a just society

Underlying everything in the Torah is the idea that the way the people of God organise their society is supposed to reflect the character of God. The Children of Israel are told repeatedly, 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Leviticus 19:1).

In the following passages from the Torah what is the particular injustice that is condemned and what is the moral standard that is set?

Is it important to seek justice for others and not simply for ourselves?

What would it mean for both Israelis and Palestinians to live up to these ideals?

Exodus 20:13	murder
Exodus 20:15	theft
Exodus 20:16	false witness
Exodus 20:17	covetousness
Leviticus 19:15; 25:13-16	honesty and integrity
Leviticus 23:2-3	justice in the courts
Deuteronomy 19:14; 27:17	stealing land
Deuteronomy 16:18-20	bribery and corruption
Exodus 22:22-24; Lev 19:14	care for the vulnerable
Leviticus 19:18	love of the neighbour
Exodus 22:21; 23:9	protection of aliens
Leviticus 25:1-7	care for the environment

2. The prophetic challenge to the nation

The OT prophets did very much more than simply predict the future. They didn't hesitate to expose failure to live up to God's standards, and were very blunt in pointing out injustices in society and in the political and religious leadership of the nation and the surrounding nations.

In the following passages what are the specific personal and communal sins that are exposed?

Micah 6:6-8
Amos 5

3. A case study in exposing wrongdoing. 1 Kings 21:1-24.

The story of the prophet Elijah confronting Ahab over his theft of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21:1-24) is a valuable case-study in how a prophet responds to a very obvious injustice.

Might this have any relevance for the conflicts over land which have been at the heart of the difficult relationships between Jewish settlers and Palestinians since the beginning of the Zionist movement?

3. WHAT IS OUR VISION OF A JUST SOCIETY?

What kind of nation does Israel seek to be today? More and more Israelis realise that they face an agonising dilemma: is it possible for Israel to be *both* a Jewish state *and* a democratic state at the same time? If they want to be a Jewish state, how do they treat the 20% of their citizens who are Arabs? And how do they deal with the Palestinians in the occupied territories? If, on the other hand, they want to be a truly democratic state, are Israeli Arabs to be treated exactly the same as Israeli Jews? And what about the occupied territories and all the settlements, where many outside observers point out that Israel has created a kind of apartheid state?

And what is the vision that drives the Palestinians? Some still find it difficult to accept the existence of Israel as a Jewish state with all that this implies, and would like to see the Jewish state dismantled and in its place a single, secular state in the whole land, in which Jews and Arabs would be equal citizens with equal rights. Others are working towards the two-state solution which would involve the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Is this still a realistic vision, and if so how could it be achieved?

While the Bible cannot provide answers to these questions, the Bible must surely have something to say about justice in any society. There were no democratic nation states when the different books of the Bible were being written, and there was no such thing as international law. But if God has created all human beings in his image, he must have something to say about how any human society can function best. Thus in the theocratic state in OT times people believed that the law that God had given them gave detailed guidance about how society should be organised. The prophets didn't hesitate to expose injustice and wrongdoing in society and in the behaviour of surrounding nations. Jesus suffered under the frustrations and humiliation of Roman occupation. These were some of the different political situations in which the biblical writers were operating and encouraging people to work for a more just society.

In this study we try to find out what the writers believed God had to say about these different situations. We are looking for general principles which will help us to develop a clearer vision of what truly just societies in the context of Israel/Palestine might look like today.

1. The promise to Abraham concerning the land: Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-8.

God's promise to Abraham includes four promises: 1. **the land**: 'I will give you the land as an everlasting inheritance'; 2. **the nation**: 'I will make you into a great nation'; 3. **the covenant relationship**: 'I will make an everlasting covenant to be your God and the God of your descendants'; 4. **blessing** for all people of the earth: 'I will bless those who bless you, and all people on earth shall be blessed through you'.

Is there any reason why the promise concerning the land should be separated from the other three strands of the promise and put into a special category of its own?

If Christians today see no difficulty in seeing the second, third and fourth promises as being fulfilled in the coming of Jesus the Messiah, does this mean that the promise about the land has to be understood in the same way?

Or is there any reason to insist that it must be interpreted very literally?

Were there any conditions attached to this promise given to Abraham?

2. 'The land is mine': Leviticus 25:23.

Since it is emphasised that the land belongs to God, the Children of Israel are to see it as a gift from God.

What are the implications for the sale and ownership of the land that are based here on the idea that the land belongs to God?

How does this emphasis challenge those who believe that a particular group of people have a special right to the land?

3. Conditions attached to continuing possession of the land: Deuteronomy 4:25-27.

The children of Israel were constantly warned that if they disobeyed the law of God, they would be expelled from the land. Because of their disobedience the northern kingdom of Israel was taken into exile in Assyria in 721 BC (2 Kings 17:5-8, 18), and the kingdom of Judah was taken into exile in Babylon in 587 BC (2 Kings 24:13-14, 20).

What were the sins of the people that deserved exile from the land?

What was the role of the prophets in helping the people to understand the hand of God in their history?

4. The promise of return to the land after repentance: Deuteronomy 30:1-5.

God promises that if, in their exile, there is genuine repentance, God will bring them back to the land.

How do the prayers of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1:4-11) and Daniel (Daniel 9:4-19) express the repentance of the people?

How does this repentance fulfil the conditions described in Deuteronomy 30?

5. Predictions of a return to the land: Ezekiel 36 – 37.

These chapters use many different images to describe the restoration of the people to their land and the spiritual restoration that will accompany their return to the land.

What are some of the images that are used to describe this glorious future?

To what extent were these prophecies fulfilled when the people returned to Jerusalem in 537 BC?

How many of these images are used in the NT to describe the results of the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus?

In turning to the New Testament, the fundamental question we face is: what difference does the coming of Jesus make to OT promises and prophecies about the land? Should Christians expect to see a literal fulfilment (e.g. in a return of Jews to the land) – even in recent history? Or do the NT writers see that OT teaching about the land has been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus? These are some of the key passages in the NT.

6. ‘... the meek shall inherit the earth (i.e. the land)’. Matthew 5:5.

This is a quotation from Psalm 37:7, and seems to be the only explicit reference to ‘the land’ in the teaching of Jesus.

If Jesus said so little about the land, does this mean

(a) that Jesus affirmed all the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people concerning the land and felt no need to add to them or comment on them?

Or (b) that Jesus was saying that all the hopes of the OT were about to be fulfilled in the coming of the kingdom of God?

7. Jesus’ response to Jewish expectations concerning Jesus the Messiah: Luke 24:13-49.

The disciples had hoped that Jesus was the one who was going to ‘redeem Israel’ (24:21), and probably thought this meant getting rid of Roman rule and establishing a sovereign Jewish kingdom. But now their hopes have been dashed.

How does Jesus respond to their disappointment?

Does he (a) encourage them to believe that these hopes will one day be fulfilled?

Or (b) help them to see that their hopes have been fulfilled – although not precisely in the way that they had expected?

8. Jesus and Jewish expectations about national sovereignty. Acts 1:1-8.

The disciples were probably still thinking that the risen Jesus was going to establish Jewish sovereignty in the land in fulfilment of OT prophecy about the restoration of the nation.

How does Jesus respond to the question of the disciples?

Does he (a) accept the idea that there will one day be a sovereign Jewish kingdom, but that the disciples do not know when it will be fulfilled?

Or (b) not only correct their idea about the timing of these events but also challenge their idea that the kingdom of God would include the restoration of national sovereignty?

NOTES