



Islam in America | A Special Edition from thESource for Youth Ministry

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Whose Land Is It? | by Rev. Dr. Reed Lessing

“Toddler Property Laws” are as follows. “If I like it, it’s mine. If it’s in my hand, it’s mine. If I can take it from you, it’s mine. If I had it a little while ago, it’s mine. It must never appear to be yours in any way, because it is always and forevermore mine!”

Over the millennia numerous rulers, governments, and nations have looked at the land of Israel and said, “Mine!” The land once belonged to the Amorites (Gen. 15:16) and then it was possessed by the Israelites (Gen. 17:8). Assyrians (2 Kings 17:6), Babylonians (2 Kings 25:22), Persians (2 Chron. 36:23), Greeks (Dan. 11:1-5), and Romans (Luke 3:1) also subsequently claimed ownership. And since the end of the New Testament period Byzantine, Ottoman, and British empires have looked at this land and said “Mine!” So who’s land is it?

From the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. until 1840’s the question of who owned Palestine was answered politically; that is to say, whoever had the military might and diplomatic ability owned the land. In the 1840’s, however, a Plymouth Brethren minister from England named John Nelson Darby began teaching that the question of Palestine’s ownership needed to be answered theologically.

Picking up where Darby left off, Cyrus Scofield propagated the idea that God forever gave the land of Palestine to the Jews in his influential Scofield Reference Bible, first published in 1909. Prior to these teachings of Darby and Scofield, most Christians (including Lutherans) understood the ownership of Palestine to be a political and not a theological issue. All of that has changed. There are now millions of Christians who embrace the idea that the 1948 state of Israel is by divine decree and a sign of that we live in “the last days.”

If Scofield popularized the teachings of Darby, then Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye have taken Scofield’s ideas and disseminated them a hundred fold. Jenkins and LaHaye, authors of the Left Behind series of novels, also believe the fuse that ignited “the last days” was ethnic Israel’s return to the land of Palestine in 1948. They call this “the super sign of biblical prophecy” because supposedly now we are in the last generation before the rapture of the Church. Now, within a generation of 1948, the Church Age (the sixth dispensation) will end with the rapture. This will be followed by seven years of suffering and destruction, called the Tribulation. After this Christ will return visibly as judge and usher in the seventh dispensation, his 1,000 year reign on earth. During this time, however, unbelievers will increase. Christ will return (again) and bring all evil to an end. After this he will usher in the new heavens and new earth. The key, however, to the unfolding of these events is the belief that the land of Palestine forever belongs to the Jews.

But when Jesus speaks about the land (Luke 19:41-44) he makes no reference to it ever being restored to the Jews. Rather he taught his disciples to look forward – not a Jewish return to the land – but to the coming of Son of Man in his glory, on the Last Day (Matt. 24:30-31; Luke 21:25-28; Dan. 7:13-14).

Until the Day of Pentecost the disciples shared the same nationalistic understanding of the land as the other Jews of the First Century (cf. Luke 24:21; Acts 1:6). But after the coming of the Holy Spirit they began to use Old Testament language concerning the land in new ways. One example comes from the pen of Peter who speaks of our inheritance, which unlike the land of Palestine, “can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Peter 1:4). The book of Hebrews is filled with examples of how the New Testament reinterprets the land. Christians have the land, which is described as the rest into which they have entered through Christ, in a way which even Joshua did not achieve for Israel (3:12-4:11). In Hebrews 11:13-16 the central gospel motif is the land.



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The pilgrimage of faith is set in three scenes: (1) a land from which they set out in faith, (2) the present context of wandering, and (3) the hoped-for homeland that is a “better”, indeed a “heavenly” city.

It is estimated that 42 million Christians in the United States believe that Israel’s resettlement of the land in 1948 is the key to a correct understanding of the end times. They contend that Old Testament prophecies regarding not only the land, but also such promises as the rebuilding of the temple and the reinstatement of its sacrifices must be literally fulfilled.

It is clear from Scripture, however, that these Old Testament promises are to be read in the light of the New Testament (Col. 2:16-17). The Old Testament revelations of God’s acts in the history of Israel are shadows, images, forms and prophecies. The New Testament announces the reality, substance and final fulfillment of these promises in the person and work of Jesus Christ (John 5:39; Luke 24:44). The question, then, is not whether the land promises of the Old Testament are to be understood literally or spiritually. It is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Testament shadows or in terms of the New Testament realities.

When the New Testament is allowed to interpret the Old Testament it follows that the 1948 state of Israel is not a prophetic realization of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Furthermore, a day should not be anticipated in which Christ’s kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives, whether by its location in the land of Palestine, its capital in Jerusalem, its constituency, or its ceremonial institutions and practices. The Old Testament needs to be viewed in light of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

When people point to the 1948 state of Israel as a concrete manifestation of God’s presence they also overlook the fact that God has left visible and tangible signs indicating that he is with his people. 1 John 5:7-8 states: “For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.” God testifies to being present with his Church right now by means of the Spirit-inspired and Christ-centered Old and New Testament Scriptures, the water of baptism, as well as the true body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion. The assurance of God’s working in the world is therefore not based upon the return of the Jews to their ancestral land, but rather on the sure Word of promise of forgiveness of sins imparted in the means of grace, the Gospel and the Sacraments.

To summarize: There is no suggestion, therefore, that Jesus or the apostles believed the Jewish people still have a divine right to the land, or that the Jewish possession of the land would be an important – let alone central – aspect of God’s plan for the world. The hope of the baptized is not placed upon current events in the Middle East. Rather we are called to fix our eyes upon Jesus (Heb. 12:3), even as we long and pray for his Second and Final Advent. On that day he will raise us from the dead and usher us into the new heavens and the new earth. Then Jesus will lovingly gaze upon all the baptized and say, “I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are always and forevermore mine!” (cf. Isa. 43:1).

For a more comprehensive study of the biblical teaching about the land please see the 1989 CTCR document entitled “The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism” and the 2004 CTCR document entitled “A Lutheran Response to the Left Behind Series” along with its accompanying Bible Study.

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