

Jerusalem: The City of God in Christian Tradition
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Revd. Dr Stephen Sizer

Many Christians, especially in the United States of America, accept unthinkingly the Zionist mantra that Jerusalem is the undivided, eternal and exclusive capital of the State of Israel. However, Jerusalem existed before the time of the Israelites. Today, Jerusalem lies at the heart of three world faiths – Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Israelis regard it as their capital. Palestinians do so also. Attempts to reach agreement in the wider Arab-Israeli conflict have partly stumbled over the contested status of Jerusalem. Jewish Zionists and their Christian supporters are strongly opposed to joint sovereignty or the recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. It seems time is on their side. The annexation of the Old City, the aggressive and illegal settlement programme, the systematic demolition of many Arab homes and the construction of the Separation Barrier have all created ‘facts on the ground’ in Jerusalem. Christian and Jewish Zionists also claim a higher mandate for this agenda – the Word of God.

This paper will refute these views and demonstrate from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures that Jerusalem was always intended to be an inclusive city of peace for all who acknowledge the one true God. Practical steps will be offered for ways in which people of faith can work together to resolve the present conflict.

1. The Passion for Jerusalem: The Problem

Following the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 and the capture of Jerusalem, in June 1971, a conference took place in Jerusalem of over 1,200 evangelical leaders from 32 different countries. Welcomed by David Ben Gurion, the conference was billed as “the first conference of its kind since A.D. 59”. The capture of Jerusalem was portrayed as “confirmation that Jews and Israel still had a role to play in God’s ordering of history” and that the return of Jesus was imminent.¹

¹ ‘Prophets in Jerusalem’ *Newsweek*, June 28th, 1971, p. 62.

The wider international community saw things rather differently. In protest at Israel's unilateral annexation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the United Nations passed Resolution 242, calling on Israel to withdraw its troops to the June 1967 borders and end the occupation. Refusing to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the few remaining government embassies were closed and relocated to Tel Aviv.

In 1980, however, the International Christian Embassy (ICEJ) was founded in Jerusalem, to express solidarity with Israel and to recognise a divine blessing in the 'Reunification' of Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty. At the International Christian Zionist Congress in 1996, some 1,500 participants signed the following declaration.

Because of the sovereign purposes of God for the City, Jerusalem must remain undivided, under Israeli sovereignty, open to all peoples, the capital of Israel only, and all nations should so concur and place their embassies here ... the truths of God are sovereign and it is written that the Land which He promised to His People is not to be partitioned.²

In 1997 the ICEJ also gave support to a full page advert placed in the *New York Times* entitled, 'Christians Call for a United Jerusalem.' It was signed by 10 evangelical leaders including Pat Robertson, chairman of Christian Broadcasting Network and President of the Christian Coalition; Oral Roberts, founder and chancellor of Oral Roberts University; Jerry Falwell, founder of Moral Majority; Ed McAteer, President of the Religious Roundtable; and David Allen Lewis, President of Christians United for Israel:

We, the undersigned Christian spiritual leaders, communicating weekly to more than 100 million Christian Americans, are proud to join together in supporting the continued sovereignty of the State of Israel over the holy city of Jerusalem. We support Israel's efforts to reach reconciliation with its Arab neighbors, but we believe that Jerusalem, or any portion of it, shall not be negotiable in the peace process. Jerusalem must remain undivided as the eternal capital of the Jewish people.³

They called upon fellow Christians to 'Join us in our holy mission to ensure that Jerusalem will remain the undivided, eternal capital of Israel.' 'The battle for Jerusalem has begun, and it is time for believers in Christ to support our Jewish

² 'International Christian Zionist Congress Proclamation' International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem. 25-29 February (1996).

³ 'Christians Call for a United Jerusalem' *New York Times*, 18 April (1997), <http://www.cdn-friends-icej.ca/united.html>

brethren and the State of Israel. The time for unity with the Jewish people is now.⁴ They believe this will be achieved by the implementation of the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which legislates for the return of the US embassy back to Jerusalem. Funds have already been allocated. However, for more than ten years, successive US Presidents have vetoed the legislation for reasons of national security. Mike Evans, an outspoken critic argues,

Each time the national security waver is signed, we are saying to terrorists and bigots, 'You win.' America needs the blessings of God more than the favour with Arab bigots. Mr. Bush needs to send a signal to all the would-be Osamas that the party is over. No longer will America allow terrorists to threaten our nation into choosing political expediency over moral clarity.⁵

John Hagee, pastor of a 20,000 member church in San Antonio, Texas, says that the special status afforded the Jewish people by God supersedes the rule of international law:

A shared Jerusalem? Never! A "shared Jerusalem" means control of the Holy City would be wrested away from the Jewish people and given, at least in part, to the Palestine Liberation Organisation. I say "never" ... because the Word of God says it is God's will for Jerusalem to be under the exclusive control of the Jewish people until Messiah comes ... God doesn't care what the United Nations thinks ... He gave Jerusalem to the nation of Israel, and it is theirs.⁶

In 2003, the Jerusalem Summit, sponsored by the Unity Coalition for Israel, issued their 'Jerusalem Declaration' in which they called upon the international community to recognise:

Billions of people believe that Jerusalem's spiritual and historical importance endows it with a special authority to become a center of world's unity. Israel's unique geographic and historic position at the crossroads of civilizations enables it to reconcile their conflicts. Israel's unique spiritual experience enables it to find a golden mean between the fault lines dividing civilizations: between tradition and modernity, religion and science, authority and democracy.

We call upon all nations to choose Jerusalem, the eternal and indivisible capital of Israel, as a center for this evolving new unity. We believe that one of the objectives of Israel's divinely-inspired rebirth is to make it the center of the

⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵ Mike Evans, 'Israel does not exist!', www.freeman.org/m_online/apr04/evans.htm

⁶ John Hagee, *Jerusalem Betrayed* (Dallas, Word, 1997), p. 42.

new unity of the nations, which will lead to an era of peace and prosperity, foretold by the Prophets.⁷

So they want Jerusalem to be a place of unity for the world, but not for the people who live there! If this is representative of how pro-Zionist Christians view Jerusalem, perhaps its time we looked at what the Scriptures have to say.

2. Jerusalem in the Hebrew Scriptures: The Past

The story of Jerusalem goes way back as far as Genesis. It is possible that Jerusalem was the home of the Melchizedek the priest and king who blessed Abraham in Genesis 14. He is referred to as the 'king of Salem' which later became identified in Jewish tradition with Jerusalem. Mount Moriah, where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice, is also later identified in 2 Chronicles 3 as the same place where Solomon built his Temple. Clearly, Jerusalem had an existence long before the conquest of the land by the Israelites. In Joshua 15:63, for example, we find the Jebusites already living in Jerusalem and willing to share the city with the new Jewish immigrants. It is clear therefore that Jerusalem was a shared city long before King David turned it into his capital (2 Samuel 6:1-19). Even then, the capture was achieved with minimal casualties on either side. So when Israel celebrated the 'Trimillennium of Jerusalem, City of David', in 1996, under the banner 'Jerusalem 3000', there was legitimacy to the counter claim launched by the Palestinian Authority to 'Jerusalem 5000'

Clearly the building of the Temple in Jerusalem by David's son, Solomon, elevated the status of the city among the tribes of Israel. However, when God judged Solomon for his idolatry (1 Kings 11:9-13) and his empire was split in two by Rehoboam and Jeroboam, Jerusalem diminished in importance and became just the capital for the tribe of Judah. As Peter Walker admits, "The city designed to bring unity now pointed instead to Israel's division."⁸ Nevertheless, the belief grew that Jerusalem was invincible, because God dwelt in the Temple and his anointed king was on the throne. Prophets such as Micah (3:9-12) and Jeremiah (7:1-11) warned against this arrogance. Jeremiah highlights one of the popular mantras of the day. "Do not trust in deceptive words and say 'This is the Temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the

⁷ The Jerusalem Summit, The Jerusalem Declaration" http://www.jerusalemssummit.org/eng/declaration_full.php <Accessed March 2007>

⁸ Peter Walker, 'Jerusalem' in eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, IVP, 2000), p. 589.

temple of the Lord!” (Jeremiah 7:4). Indeed, the prophet predicted that, far from defending Jerusalem in a ‘holy war’, God would actually become her enemy (Jeremiah 21:3-10).

The prophecies against Jerusalem came true in the capture and destruction of the city by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. The catastrophic events and the consequent exile of the Jews are recorded in 2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 52 and Lamentations. The prophetic message is clear. God holds his people morally accountable and will tolerate neither arrogance or complacency.

In Psalm 87 we have a beautiful picture of a shared Jerusalem, an international and inclusive city where residency rights are determined by God on the basis of faith not race.

He has founded his city on the holy mountain. The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwellings of Jacob. Glorious things are said of you, city of God: “I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me— Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush — and will say, ‘This one was born in Zion.’ “Indeed, of Zion it will be said, “This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.” The LORD will write in the register of the peoples: “This one was born in Zion.” As they make music they will sing, “All my fountains are in you.” (Psalm 87)

As Colin Chapman has observed, “This is a message which must have challenged many nationalistic prejudices.”⁹ And one might add - still does. The Prophet Isaiah’s vision of Jerusalem is also an inclusive one. In Isaiah 2, for example we learn that people of many different nations will come to Jerusalem and put their faith in God and walk in his ways. One of the glorious consequences of this is that Jerusalem will become associated with the end of war, and with peace and reconciliation between the nations (Isaiah 2:3-5).

Jerusalem in the Christian Scriptures

So what place does Jerusalem fulfil within Christian tradition? There is both good and bad news. First, the bad news. It may surprise you to learn that the New Testament is rather pessimistic about the fate of Jerusalem. Far from promising a prosperous future at the centre of a revived Jewish state or even a millennial kingdom, Jesus lamented the impending destruction of Jerusalem. Luke’s gospel provides us with

⁹ Colin Chapman, *Whose Holy City?* (Oxford, Lion, 2004), p. 30.

several insights into the passion of Jesus for Jerusalem. In Luke 13 we find Jesus rebuking the leaders of Israel for not caring for the people in the way he does and predicting that he must die there. Evoking the language of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 12:7; 22:5), Jesus similarly laments:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' (Luke 13:34-35)

Quoting Psalm 118:26, Jesus displays the instincts of a protective mother concerned for the people of Jerusalem as if they were his very children. A little later, on Palm Sunday, Jesus expresses perhaps his strongest emotions toward the city and its fickle people:

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19:41-44)

Again, Jesus is using the language of Isaiah and Ezekiel to warn of God's impending judgement (Isaiah 29:3; Ezekiel 4:2). Now if you were there and heard Jesus make that prediction, who would you imagine he had in mind? Who were the hated enemies? The Romans of course. With the benefit of hindsight it's obvious that Jesus was warning the people about what was going to happen very soon, not events 2000 years or more in the distant future. With the total destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD, stone by stone, the slaughter of tens of thousands of Jews and the exile of the remnant as slaves of Rome, Jesus' sad prediction came true, to the letter.

The Christian scriptures instead, look increasingly to another Jerusalem.

2.1 The Jerusalem Above

But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: *'Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labour pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband.'*" (Galatians 4:26-27 – Isaiah 54:1)

The Apostle Paul is quoting from Isaiah 54:1 which refers to the earthly Jerusalem. But Paul now interprets this passage as referring to the new Jerusalem, the home of all who believe in Jesus Christ, and no longer associated with the capital of Israel.¹⁰

In the coming of Jesus, the status of Jerusalem has therefore changed irrevocably. From now on the earthly Jerusalem will be associated not with the Patriarchs or with David or with the Temple of Solomon or Herod but with a simple wooden cross and an empty tomb. "The coming of Jesus has been its undoing."¹¹ And here is at last a hint of the 'good news' about Jerusalem in the New Testament. The good news about Jerusalem has to do with all that Jesus accomplished there. Peter Walker observes:

It is Jesus himself... who gives us the warrant to view Jerusalem in an entirely new light... Jerusalem could never be the same again, now that Jesus had come... Jesus, not Jerusalem, would now become the central 'place' within God's purposes, the place around which God's true people would be gathered.¹²

2.2 The Heavenly Jerusalem

The focus of the New Testament shifts away from an earthly onto a heavenly Jerusalem which by faith in Jesus, we are already citizens. So, in Hebrews, for example, Christ followers are promised residency in the heavenly Jerusalem (see also Revelation 14:1).

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. (Hebrews 12:22-23)

Access to heaven no longer has anything to do with earthly Jerusalem. Jesus began to reveal this change in his conversation with a woman of Samaria.

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father

¹⁰ Peter Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996). p. 131.

¹¹ Walker, *Jesus.*, op.cit., p. 320.

¹² Peter Walker, 'Jesus and Jerusalem: New Testament Perspectives' in Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis and Maria Schrader, eds, *Jerusalem: What Makes for Peace!* (London, Melesende, 1997), pp. 62, 66, 67.

in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. (John 4:21-23)

2.3 The New Jerusalem

The image of Jerusalem found in the New Testament, is of a new inclusive city built by God, coming down from heaven - one in which there is no darkness – and where the gates are never shut but open to people of all nations.

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband... I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:2, 22-26).

In this one all consuming vision, God's people now embrace all nations, God's land encompasses the whole earth, and God's holy city has become the eternal dwelling place of all who remain faithful – literally the Bride of Christ (Revelation 21:9).

4. The Solution for Jerusalem: The Present

To summarize, in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, God reveals that he expects Jerusalem to be a shared, inclusive city of faith, hope and love. The Scriptures also envisage a glorious future for Jerusalem. One that impacts and benefits the entire world. The vision is of an inclusive and shared Jerusalem in which the nations, including the Jewish people, are blessed. Perhaps this is why, when Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for exploiting the international visitors to the temple, he quotes from Isaiah, "For my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." (Isaiah 56:7, cf. Matthew 21:13).

But today, we have to live with the reality of a Jerusalem that is associated with apartheid and racism, with exclusive claims that can only be sustained by oppression and injustice, by military occupation, the denial of human rights, the disregard for international law, access to religious sites and freedom of expression. Living between

Jerusalem past and Jerusalem future, what is our religious responsibility in the present?

In June 2009, I helped write the Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism endorsed and signed by the Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem.

The Declaration explains the reasons for their rejection of the exclusive Zionist claims to Jerusalem. It also outlines the response expected of followers of Jesus Christ.

Statement by the Patriarch and Local Heads of Churches In Jerusalem¹³

'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.' (Matthew 5:9)

We categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrines as false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation.

We further reject the contemporary alliance of Christian Zionist leaders and organisations with elements in the governments of Israel and the United States that are presently imposing their unilateral pre-emptive borders and domination over Palestine. This inevitably leads to unending cycles of violence that undermine the security of all peoples of the Middle East and the rest of the world.

We reject the teachings of Christian Zionism that facilitate and support these policies as they advance racial exclusivity and perpetual war rather than the gospel of universal love, redemption and reconciliation taught by Jesus Christ. Rather than condemn the world to the doom of Armageddon we call upon everyone to liberate themselves from the ideologies of militarism and occupation. Instead, let them pursue the healing of the nations!

We call upon Christians in Churches on every continent to pray for the Palestinian and Israeli people, both of whom are suffering as victims of occupation and militarism. These discriminative actions are turning Palestine into impoverished ghettos surrounded by exclusive Israeli settlements. The establishment of the illegal settlements and the construction of the Separation Wall on confiscated Palestinian land undermines the viability of a Palestinian state as well as peace and security in the entire region.

We call upon all Churches that remain silent, to break their silence and speak for reconciliation with justice in the Holy Land.

Therefore, we commit ourselves to the following principles as an alternative way:

We affirm that all people are created in the image of God. In turn they are called to honour the dignity of every human being and to respect their inalienable rights.

¹³ <http://imeu.net/news/article003122.shtml>

We affirm that Israelis and Palestinians are capable of living together within peace, justice and security.

We affirm that Palestinians are one people, both Muslim and Christian. We reject all attempts to subvert and fragment their unity.

We call upon all people to reject the narrow world view of Christian Zionism and other ideologies that privilege one people at the expense of others.

We are committed to non-violent resistance as the most effective means to end the illegal occupation in order to attain a just and lasting peace.

With urgency we warn that Christian Zionism and its alliances are justifying colonisation, apartheid and empire-building.

God demands that justice be done. No enduring peace, security or reconciliation is possible without the foundation of justice. The demands of justice will not disappear. The struggle for justice must be pursued diligently and persistently but non-violently.

'What does the Lord require of you, to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6:8)

This is where we take our stand. We stand for justice. We can do no other. Justice alone guarantees a peace that will lead to reconciliation with a life of security and prosperity for all the peoples of our Land. By standing on the side of justice, we open ourselves to the work of peace - and working for peace makes us children of God.

'God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.' (2 Cor 5:19)

His Beattitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah
Latin Patriarchate, Jerusalem

Archbishop Swerios Malki Mourad,
Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, Jerusalem

Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal,
Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East

Bishop Munib Younan,
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land

In this paper I have explained the contested place of Jerusalem within Christian Tradition, comparing and contrasting the Zionist and anti-Zionist positions. In our view, Christian Zionism, is a defective, misguided and dangerous theology. It is an exclusive theology driven by a political agenda which elevates one nation over others, rather than an inclusive theology centred on Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the

world. Christian Zionism uses the Bible to justify racial superiority, land expropriation, home demolitions, population transfer, colonial settlements, the denial of international law and fundamental human rights. What does Jesus think about all this? On Palm Sunday, the Apostle Luke tells us,

“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 19:41-42).

I believe Jesus continues to weep not only over Jerusalem, but also for all his children in the Middle East, as well as those who promote a theology of war and conquest here in the West. It is a very long way from the simple teaching of Jesus the Christ who promised “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). May God give us the courage and strength to fulfil this role.

Stephen Sizer
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