

Book Review – Colin Chapman’s WHOSE PROMISED LAND? THE CONTINUING CRISIS OVER ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

Colleagues,

Art and Mitzi Preisinger are friends from ancient days when Art and I were sem students together. Now retired from early years in campus ministry and later on Art’s professorship in theology at Texas Lutheran University, they keep on keeping on. A year or so ago it was at the Lutheran Seminary in Umpumulo, South Africa. This past Spring Semester 2002 they were in Beirut, Lebanon where Art taught church history at the Near East School of Theology. One colleague at NEST was Colin Chapman, frontline Christian scholar on Islam. Here’s Art’s review of Colin’s recent book.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***An examination of the claims and counter-claims in today’s Israel-Palestine conflict is the subject of Colin Chapman’s book,
WHOSE PROMISED LAND?
THE CONTINUING CRISIS OVER ISRAEL AND PALESTINE.***

Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2002.

347 pages.

Originally written in 1983, the book was revised in 1985, 1989, 1992, and again this year. This edition assumes great importance in light of September 11, 2001, and contains new chapters on Zionism, Christian Zionism, and Dispensationalism. An American edition (paperback – Baker Book House) has just come on the US market.

This past spring I taught at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon, where Chapman has been lecturer in Islamic Studies since 1999, as well as dean of the chapel. He is an ordained Anglican priest who has spent nearly seventeen years in the Middle East. He speaks fluent Arabic and has written "Christianity on Trial," "The Case for Christianity," "Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam," and "Islam and the West: Conflict, Coexistence or Conversion?" I was privileged to be his colleague on the faculty of NEST, if only for the semester. And I am happy to review this important book for Thursday Theology readers.

"Whose Promised Land?" is in three major sections:

- 1. Understanding the History;*
- 2. Interpreting the Bible;*
- 3. Appreciating the Issues Today.*

Chapman reviews the history of Palestine from the time of Abraham to the present – what groups occupied the land, who ruled it and when. The initial understanding, then, is based on Biblical history, canonical as well as apocryphal. But Palestine was occupied by Canaanites and others a thousand years before Abraham, and I missed that important ingredient in the cursory review. For if the legitimacy of the occupation of the land is based on who was there first, neither Israelis or

Arabs can claim it for that reason.

During and after the New Testament period Palestine had been occupied by Romans, then successively by the Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mamluks, and Crusaders. After World War I and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, it was put under a British mandate until the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. Since then there have been a series of conflicts: the Israeli-British-French attack on the Sinai and Suez after the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egyptian President Gamal Nasser; the so-called Six-Day War (1967); the Yom Kippur War (1973); the Israeli invasions of Lebanon (1978 and 1982); the first Arab Intifada ["Uprising"] (1987-1993); the invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War (1990-1991) in which Arafat's support of the Iraqi invasion damaged the Palestinian cause; and the second Intifada (2000--).

Chapter 2, as Chapman says, "is a kind of anthology of [Jewish, Muslim and Christian] quotations" mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These sources comment on the roots of anti-Semitism and Christian contributions to it; Zionism, its origin and evolution into a political movement; the British exacerbation of the problem by making contradictory promises to both Jews and Arabs. To the Jews: the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which favored the establishment of Palestine as a national home for the Jewish people, and which Arthur Koestler described as "a document in which one nation solemnly promises to a second nation the country of a third nation." To the Arabs: the Hussein-McMahon correspondence of 1915 promising the Arabs hegemony over Palestine in return for an alliance against the Central Powers.

Then came World War II and its aftermath, the creation of the United Nations, the plan for partition, and the establishment of the state of Israel. The Jews, representing one-third of the

population, were given 57% of the land, and the better land at that. The Arabs were given the hill country, the poor part of the land. Resentment and anger fueled the conflict up to, and including, the Al-Aqsa, or second Intifada.

Chapman is impartial in his use of sources. He presents an equal number of "witnesses," Jewish and Arab. But it is a somewhat tenuous neutrality. His heart is with the downtrodden and oppressed, and the Palestinians are precisely that.

The three chapters of the second section are a study of the interpretation of "the land" in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Bible as a whole. Chapman examines the development of the theme of the land as a central theme of the Old Testament. The question is do Jesus and the writers of the New Testament understand this theme differently than the narrative and prophetic voices of the Old? And what does this mean in the contemporary context?

Those of you who have evangelical friends who are pro-Israel because "the Bible promised the land to the Jews in perpetuity" will want to take advantage of Chapman's mature and sophisticated exegesis of these promises which are indeed a central theme of the Old Testament in particular.

The final chapter asks if there is any hope of reconciling the conflict. The author examines in depth Christian Zionism and its parent, dispensationalism. The dispensational view has been with us for centuries (e.g., the twelfth century exegete and mystic Joachim of Fiore), but it has been promoted in the nineteenth century by John Darby and in the early twentieth century by the Scofield Reference Bible. More recently dispensationalism has been popularized by Hal Lindsey's "Late Great Planet Earth" (1970) and Tim LaHaye's best-selling "Left Behind" series. "Rapture" and "tribulation" are key

characteristics of this apocalypticism. (Years ago we were treated to bumper stickers in West Texas which read, "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned." Initially I thought this was vaguely pornographic, but since most of the cars having these stickers were in the parking lot of the First Baptist Church, I realized that something different was afoot.)

Christian Zionism is characterized by four basic assumptions:

- 1. The Jews have divine right to the land because of God's promise to Abraham;*
- 2. the return of the Jews to the land is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies;*
- 3. The creation of the state of Israel will lead to the conversion of the Jews and ultimately to the second coming of Christ; and*
- 4. Christians should not only support the idea of a Jewish state, but support what it stands for and defend it against attack.*

These assumptions, in turn, are based on the assumption that all prophecy in the Bible must be interpreted literally. God is pursuing two distinct purposes, one related to the earth with earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. Christian Zionism, says Chapman, does not understand the nature of the conflict between Zionism and the Palestinians, it has a one-sided political stance, it lacks concern for people of other faiths, and it does not represent the views of the majority of Christians in the Middle East. It is, in fact, a Euro-American importation.

Chapman notes that Islam's relation to Palestine is a powerful symbol, abetted by the Crusaders who, say the Muslims, killed every person in sight when they entered Jerusalem, in contrast to Saladin, who killed no one. Israel's theology of the land

helped to create a new Muslim theology of the land. Muslims, like secular/nationalist Jews and religious Jews, have their problems with the PLO, which is essentially secular and nationalistic in contrast to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who refer to the Qur'an as their constitution.

Finally, the author spells out Israel's options and asks pertinent questions of the Palestinians. For Israel these options include the one-state solution. This poses the problem that if Israel were to remain a democracy all the Arabs would become citizens and be given the vote. In time they would outnumber the Jews. This is unacceptable to most Israelis, as is the creation of a single secular state.

Or Israel could crush the Palestinians militarily. World opinion would not tolerate this. Or would it?

Or in the long run, the Palestinians and Arabs will destroy Israel. This is most unlikely.

The one option that makes the most sense is the two-state solution, the original proposal of the United Nations. This was rejected by the Palestinians because they were not consulted and the division of the land was seen to be unfair. Yet this seems to be the only possible solution to the problem. The only way for Israel to guarantee its own security is to make peace with the Arabs. And this can be done only by Israel conceding to the Palestinians the right to establish their own state.

But this brings up several questions for the Palestinians. Are Palestinians willing to renounce violence and would Hamas and Islamic Jihad do the same? If you can understand the despair which has driven these people to violence, can Hamas and Islamic Jihad ever be convinced that violence simply leads to more violence? Are Palestinians really ready to accept the existence of Israel? Are Palestinians ready to accept

compromise? Do they have proper leadership to create unity among Palestinians? How important is Islamic ideology for Palestinians to express their political and social beliefs? Is it possible to reconcile Islamic ideology and human rights as understood in the West? And finally, if and when a Palestinian state comes to be, will it be a secular state or an Islamic state? If the latter, how would Muslims reconcile this with their rejection of a "Jewish" state? How would Christian minorities fare in an Islamic Palestinian state, remembering that Christian minorities have not always found it easy to live in Islamic states.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been going on since 1948. Given the precarious state of the world today we do well to pay close attention to what is going on now in that little piece of land where our Lord chose to do his salvific work. Palestine is a flash point, and Armageddon may indeed take place there. Unfortunately, it won't be the Armageddon Christian apocalypticists long for. Colin Chapman's book will bring you up to speed on events in the "Holy Land" and their interpretation as the drama of the Middle East unfolds. It's very much worth the reading.

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