

PART 3: BOOK REVIEWS

WHOSE LAND? WHOSE PROMISE? WHAT CHRISTIANS ARE NOT BEING TOLD ABOUT ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS.

by Gary M. Burge
Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003

If, after living and ministering in and on behalf of the Arab world, any of us still have lingering sympathy with Christian Zionism, then this book is a must read. Gary Burge writes to American Evangelicals, seeking to show them that it is a serious mistake to support the modern nation-state of Israel without paying attention to the historical and political realities on the ground in the Middle East. His book is a sobering wake-up call that unveils the extent to which violence and injustice were at the heart of the foundation of the Israeli state, and that their ongoing unjust treatment of the Palestinian people stands under the judgement of the God whom evangelicals seek to obey. It is an impassioned attempt to refute some of the core arguments of evangelical Zionists. It is a call to all Christians to support Israel only in so far as it practices justice and hospitality to the people from whom they have stolen the land they now dominate by force of arms.

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expresses the dilemma Christians feel as they struggle to know how to understand and respond to the modern nation-state of Israel. Burge's visits to the region began when he was an exchange student in Lebanon in 1973. In the years since he has returned frequently for visits as well as for extended research and teaching stints. His love for the people of the land is clearly visible, as is his deep sorrow over the suffering and injustice perpetuated against Palestinian Christians and Muslims in the 62 years since Israelis took possession of the land through intimidation, manipulation, slaughter and terror. He tells of having been earlier influenced by Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and of how he came to much greater insight into the land and its people through developing

In this review I will first lay out the main points in Burge's argument. Then, I will reflect on his conclusions and offer some suggestions as to their significance for ministry in the Arab world.

In a sobering preface, Burge describes some of the immense suffering happening in the Middle East and among the Palestinians and Israelis. Then, in his first chapter, Burge

friendships with Palestinian Christians in Israel and in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967.

Burge suggests that there are four main reasons why Christians have too often become paralyzed on this subject (pp. 8-12) and why Western Christians are torn when it comes to *understanding* what is happening in what we think of as 'the holy land'. First, we often bear a sense of guilt for the horrors of the twentieth century that were perpetrated against the Jews. Since this was only the most recent horror after centuries of Christian mistreatment of the Jews, we are very reluctant to criticize a people who have been so cruelly mistreated throughout history—and slaughtered in our living memory—even when they appear to be going too far in their treatment of the Palestinians. Secondly, we share the same spiritual heritage as the Jews, and we feel a sense of spiritual linkage with the Jews who worship the same God as we do. Thirdly, many of us sense God's hand in the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland and a sense that the modern state of Israel's very existence must be a miraculous work of God. We are thus hesitant to criticize this nation that we sense exists thanks to God's sovereign work. And lastly, many of us believe that this restored state of Israel has a special place in God's plan for the end times. Though we may not agree with many of the more fanciful interpretations of Revelations and Daniel being applied to the twenty-first century, we are nevertheless cautious; we do not want to be caught on the wrong side of what we expect to be the culminating events in world history that may well be worked out at the heart of the Middle East, in and around the modern state of Israel.

These four significant factors make it difficult for us to be objective and clear in our understanding of the conflict that appears to be intractable. They also tend to push us to expect the best of Israel and make us hesitant to believe the accounts of Israeli atrocities committed against the Palestinians. Thus, Burge sets the context for the rest of his book: He acknowledges that he is addressing a thorny topic, but is nevertheless committed to wade through the issues in his attempt to sound a clear call for evangelical understanding and commitment.

Burge divides the rest of the book into three main sections: (1) The Background to the Problem (Chaps 2 & 3) (2) The Old Testament and the Land (Chaps 4-8), and (3) The New Testament and the Land (Chaps 9-13). These sections are varied in length, and the categories are quite loosely applied as he covers a number of topics that do not fit clearly into these three sections titles.

In **Part One** Burge describes the physical geography of the land and gives a brief overview of the history of this piece of real estate. He details the land's possession through the past 4000 years, concentrating mostly on the past 62 years. He discusses in turn each of the eight wars that have torn through the region since

1948 as well as the many failed peace plans in between the wars. He concludes his concise and insightful historical review by arguing that Israel's seizure of the land is the core issue in this ongoing conflict. Israel came into the region and took the land from those who had lived there for generations. Israelis also occupied large territories and effectively imprisoned the Palestinians in their own land, thus rendering Palestinians unable to come, to leave, or to build a viable regional economy or life under Israeli occupation. The rest of the book explores what perspective we, as Bible believing Christians, should have on Israel's current possession and stewardship of the land of Palestine.

In his study of the Old Testament's perspective on Israel and the land in **Part Two**, Burge comes to the conclusion that *God owns both the land and the water in the land*. Within the OT, Israelite tenancy of the land was always *conditioned* on their remaining true to the covenant requirements of justice and proper treatment of the land. He argues that rather than having a legitimate claim to the land of Palestine, Israel has in fact been guilty of the sin of Ahab, who stole land that was not his through deception and force. Thus, they have no moral right to the land and instead stand under the judgement of God for their crimes against the Palestinians who still live in the land that Israel stole and occupied. He supports his argument by citing a number of OT prophets and their condemnations of the Israelite power elite and their corruption and violence and flagrant disregard for the law of God. He also describes the growing contemporary movement within Israel of Jews who are today standing in the tradition of the ancient Hebrew prophets, and are increasingly outspoken in their opposition to their government's ongoing abuse of power and oppression of the Palestinians.

Burge concludes this section with a discussion of Jerusalem. Burge conveys how the Israelis annexed to Jerusalem appropriated Palestinian villages, which Israelis have continued to steal since 1967, and how they continue to abuse and oppress most Arab residents in the city to ensure that Jerusalem has a Jewish majority. Here, too, historical perspective is significant. As Burge points out, '*For the last two thousand years, Judaism has dominated Jerusalem for only two hundred years*' (p. 118). After describing something of the current reality of life in Jerusalem, especially for its Arab residents, Burge concludes (in the last chapter) that: 'Jerusalem must be a shared city, celebrated by Jew, Muslim, and Christian, each of whom have equal access. It would be a "city set on a hill" that would directly model how the entire country might work toward reconciliation' (p. 268).

Part Three is the final and largest part of the book. First, Burge presents a concise study of the understanding of the land in the NT (he is a NT scholar). He examines how Jesus viewed the land, how it was seen in the book of Acts, and then looks at Paul's understanding of the land. The conclusion that he draws is quite clear, and is hinted at in his opening comment: 'We cannot read

the Old Testament and talk about its application today as if the New Testament had never been written' (p. 167). Jesus redefined who obtains the land—those who are humble. 'Jesus himself is in reality that which the land had offered only in form' (175). Jesus 'has forever changed the *place* of God among men and women.... Jesus is the new place of God's dwelling' (176,177).

Though those who disagree with Burge's reading of the NT on this question disparagingly call this 'replacement theology' there is no getting around the compelling reading of the NT that it is based on. Listen to Burge's forceful and clear statement of how the OT promises are fulfilled in Christ and his new people:

[Jesus]... also announced that his kingdom would give birth to a new following, a new people, a fulfilment of the Israelite community sought in the Old Testament. Selecting twelve apostles was his first signal that now a restoration of the twelve tribes was at hand. Yet, this group was a new community, a messianic community, whose *heritage* would stretch back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but whose *identity* now would be found in Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus uprooted the assumption that locale (the land, Jerusalem) was a sacred premise in God's plans, once again he implies that religious heritage or even ethnicity does not necessarily make exclusive claims on God. The benefits of God's blessing will be shared by those men and women living in concert with his dawning kingdom.

God's plan for Israel was that those who accepted the Messiah became the new Israel.... Jesus is a new Moses, he inaugurates a new exodus, and his twelve apostles symbolize the twelve tribes. His new covenant stands in contrast to the covenant of Sinai... Jesus' followers, therefore, represent Israel's remnant. They are at the center of God's new effort in the world. And if this is the case, they are heirs to the promises God has always extended to his faithful followers. (pp. 177, 178)

He goes on to look at representative views in the rest of the NT and concludes that everyone, starting from Jesus himself, is agreed that the new covenant is not connected to land.

The New Testament refers to previous covenants as "obsolete" and "vanishing away" (Heb. 8:13). Nor can Christians simply move from Abraham's promises in Genesis directly to modern Israel, skipping entirely what the New Testament says concerning Abraham's heritage... God's people no longer are called to build an empire based on the books of Genesis or Joshua. The Israeli attempt to take land forge a nation is religiously misdirected. God's people are called to infiltrate the empires of the world, bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to all, regardless of history, race, or religious persuasion. (189)

Following his look at the NT, Burge has two chapters in which he describes the ongoing presence of Christians in the land since NT times, and gives some moving portraits of Palestinian Christians living for Christ in the land today. He then describes some of what he sees as the disturbing actions, statements and commitments of Evangelical Zionists and their claims to speak for all American Evangelicals.

His final chapter asks 'Where do we go from here?' He presents what he believes to be the six essential foundations upon which lasting peace can become a reality in the land of Palestine (I do not have space to repeat those points here). He suggests that our stance toward Israel must be like the Hebrew prophets of old who decry injustice and cry aloud for redressing of wrongs. We should remind Israel that they had 'pursued nationhood at the expense of true spiritual devotion; they had pursued national religion without pursuing the demands of justice. Isaiah spares no words: God rejects all worship, all devotion, if it is not joined to righteousness' (269).

I read most of this book while Israel was bombing Hamas soldiers and installations in Gaza in January 2009. Daily I received emails from contrasting perspectives. Some roundly condemned Israel's action, while others pointed to Israel's right to defend itself against continuous rocket attacks on its territories. This newest war pushed me to dig deeper to understand this troubled region. Having long ago abandoned premillennial eschatology, I have been sympathetic to the Palestinians and due to the injustices committed by Israelis and by the Israeli Defence Force. Yet this book gave me fresh insight into the recent conflicts and fresh hope that there could be a way out, a way to see peace and stability return to the land and to the peoples who dwell in it.

As evangelicals living in and labouring amongst Muslims, especially for those of us whose primary calling is to love Muslims in this region, we'd do well to have an understanding of the role of Israel in God's plan that is based on careful and solid exegesis of the entire Bible, and not on an unhistorical reading of the Old Testament. This book helps us sort through the complex issues, and it presents deep understanding of the political and economic situation in the land now. I encourage many to read it, and I also encourage you to recommend it to pastors and other evangelical leaders whom you know. Burge writes clearly and is also empathetic with evangelicals who disagree with his perspective. Most of us working in the region would find little that we disagree with in Burge's reading of current events and of the Bible.

Visit www.emeu.net/about for info on 'Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding', which Burge has been involved with in various capacities.

Reviewed by Don Little