



GOD'S PEOPLE

A Series of Bible Studies Reflecting on the
Holy Land

GOD'S PEOPLE

A series of four biblical studies which consider the teaching about God's calling of a people, the light shed by Jesus, and then some reflections by the first Christians.

The series helps us to respond to such questions as:-

What did God promise to Abraham and his descendants?

What did God require of his people?

How does Jesus handle these promises, or fulfil them?

Does Judaism today have a special claim upon the land of Palestine?

Has the Church replaced Israel in God's purposes?

The series is designed to promote discussion and not to promote any one position. There are suggestions for further study

Written by Revd Dick Jones

STUDYING THE BIBLE

The Bible is not a simple, uniform collection of books. Its study can easily cause confusion or disagreement. But three basic rules help greatly: -

1. Respect the form of the passage. Any passage could be a poem, a prayer, an account of an event, a parable (a story carefully designed to convey a truth or challenge), a sermon, a set of laws or rules, a vision, a drama, a testimony, a reflection on some major theme, etc. We should respect the form. Thus the book of Job is drama, not a record of actual conversations. A law - say, about ancient worship - is not binding for ever and ever. A vision of the future is not a detailed programme of events to come, any more than a Monet picture gives detailed reproductions of various species of flower; it is an 'impression', and often a most effective and memorable one.

2. Scripture needs more scripture. That is, the whole teaching on a major issue is rarely captured completely in just one text or passage. It needs others so as to give us a fuller, more rounded view. Sometimes this will be a contrasting one, since some very profound matters are difficult to describe fully in only one set of words. Many insights are, then, better than one; likewise many gospels are better than one. Many texts should be consulted.

3. Jesus is Lord over scripture. If any teaching does not ring true to the mind of Christ as we can discern it from the New Testament then it must give way to Christ. Jesus Christ is

God's living Word, the supreme revealing of his nature and will. Thus Christians are not ruled by early Jewish practices which Christ now transcends (as is plain in Matthew 5); we must sharply query reports that God instigates war or violence. Thus Elias Chacour, who founded the first Christian university in the Galilee (at Ibillin, about 15 miles north of Nazareth) has a slogan posted up in many a room - "God does not kill" - very important in the Holy Land today.

Note: Different versions of the Bible. The members of any study group may well bring to it different versions. On any one text these may vary, often considerably. Beware of selecting that reading which most favours the convictions or prejudices of the group! Let all versions be considered, reminding us of the huge difficulty of getting a precise version in Modern English of some document written in ancient Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic. For instance here are four versions of God's orders to Abram as first recorded in Genesis 17.1:-

- a) "Live always in my presence and be perfect" (New English Bible)
- b) "Obey me and always do what is right" (Good News Bible)
- c) "Bear yourself blameless in my presence" (Jerusalem Bible)
- d) "Walk before me and be blameless" (New International Version)

THE HOLY LAND

What we term 'The Holy Land' - Israel-Palestine - has become one of the most frightening places on earth, locked into perpetual hostility. Peaceful resolution of the issue of the land looks remote, sending dreadful messages to the rest of the world about possible religious dimensions to conflict.

Jerusalem - precious to Christians, Jews and Moslems - seems destined to be a focus for despair, not peace.

Who lives in this land now? Israel has about 6.5 million citizens, mainly within the borders prior to the 1967 war. Over 400,000 Jews also live in 'settlements' on land taken in war, mainly the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This is land claimed by Palestinians. 80% of Israelis are Jewish, drawn from all over the world, the others being Arabs who have lived there from time immemorial and managed to remain during the wars. Altogether 3-5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, most being stateless. Another 4-5 million live in other parts of the world.

Christians once comprised 20% of the people of the Holy Land. Now they are 1.6%, declining steadily. Most are from the Greek Catholic (Melkite) Church or the Greek or Armenian Orthodox Churches. There are some Roman Catholics (called 'Latins') or Copts (linked with Egypt). There are small Protestant communities - Anglican (with a Cathedral in Jerusalem), Lutheran, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist. There is a Messianic Jewish movement; they are not orthodox Trinitarian Christians but rather Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah.

Israel is a secular state with first class citizenship for Jews only, founded by Zionists who were nationalistic. Some Israelis regard it as founded to fulfil God's promises to Abraham. Since the remarkable Jewish victories in 1967 and conquest of much more land, some Christians too see it in this light. The most extreme form of this is 'Christian Zionism', a mainly American Protestant movement, rich and powerful and much propagated by TV evangelists. It is largely based on a method of biblical interpretation called 'dispensationalism'. This is widely rejected by scholars here, who see it as a dangerous aberration. Wise reading of the Bible will definitely avoid it.

One of the most awful results of this conflict is its effects on all involved, promoting brutality and despair, corrupting the young in particular. Here is testimony from a Jewish soldier stationed in Hebron, where 1400 soldiers protect about 500 settlers:-

"There's a very clear and powerful connection between how much time you serve in the territories and how fucked in the head you get ... if someone is in half a year, he's a beginner ... all he does is just grow more bitter, angry. The more shit he eats, from the Jews and the Arabs and the army and the state, they call that numbness but I don't ... maybe it's a heightening of the senses, like getting drunk .. it's a "high", a sort of negative high: you're always tired, you're always hungry, you always have to go to the bathroom, you're always scared to die, you're always eager to catch that terrorist. It's

a life without rest .. It's simply an experience that no human being should have. It fucks with your head. It's the experience of a hunted animal, a hunting animal, of an animal, whatever ..." (from "Breaking the Silence")

Study One -BIG PROMISES

The book of Genesis is a foundation document for Jews, Christians and Moslems, setting out the great accounts of creation, the patriarchs, the early days of God's people. It is reckoned to have come from various sources, gathered over many centuries and put into final form by the second century BC. It centres upon the God who makes 'covenant' with his people - a lasting bond expressing God's commitment and the obedience called for. We look at two accounts of the covenant with Abraham and one showing this repeated with his grandson, Jacob.

Stage one. Consider Genesis 12:1-8. Harran is today in N.E.Syria, Shechem about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, Bethel midway between these (See map on back page). In Hebrews 11:8f Abram's wandering is seen as a great act of faith.

- Ask:
- a What exactly does God promise to do?
 - b What is the purpose of this covenant?
 - c What is said about other peoples?

Stage two. Consider Genesis 17:1-22. God is to be known as 'God Almighty', Abram's name is changed from 'High Father'

to 'Father of a multitude' (Abraham). Circumcision was quite common then. Ishmael is regarded now as the father of the Arab peoples.

- Ask:
- a What does God promise to do?
 - b What does God require of his people?
 - c If in some sense we are descendants of Abraham (Genesis 17: 9-10) should we too keep these requirements?
(Note. See Acts 15:1-11)
 - d What does this imply about the Arab peoples?

Stage three. Consider Genesis 28:10-17. Jacob has a remarkable dream at Bethel; God speaking to him in similar terms to the promise to Abraham but with the added promise of return to the land.

- Ask:
- a What does God promise to do?
 - b What precisely is the land being offered? Here it is 'this land', in 17:18 it was 'all the land of Canaan', in 15:18 it was 'from the Nile to the Euphrates' which today would include much of Egypt and Iraq, all of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel-Palestine.

A theological problem. If God gives land to a people irrevocably, however they treat it or their neighbours or their

poor, and evil results, has not God condoned human sin? Suppose they behave with injustice or cruelty, or worship other aims, does God still grant the privilege of that land? Is that suggested here?

A chastening story. Biram was a Christian village in Galilee but taken over by Jewish soldiers in 1948. It has now been erased from Jewish maps, like 486 other ancient Arab villages.

"In 1948 the Jewish Zionist soldiers tricked the people of Biram into leaving by telling them about an imaginary attack and giving a worthless written guarantee of return. After two weeks in the nearby fields we discovered our warm, pleasant village life was gone for ever. The soldiers had ransacked our house and ruined our food supply. Most of the village men were herded into trucks at gunpoint and driven away, old people, women and children, were left to fend for themselves. Some fled to Lebanon, others to neighbouring villages. My mother, sister, brother Atallah and I went to Jish, a village a few kilometres away. Father and my three older brothers finally returned after several months walking through Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, slipping back into Galilee to be reunited with us." (Elias Chacour. The family finally settled in Haifa but always kept the key of the old Biram house)

Study two - CLEAR CONDITIONS

An odd feature of the Bible is that its books are not arranged in some plain order - for instance, those about the first events first but then the rest in historical order. Instead they seem to jump about and those books written first (probably Amos and

other prophets) come quite late. So, strangely, the book of Deuteronomy - the fifth book - stems from a time later than most of the prophets and incorporates much of their teaching. So we look first at prophets.

God made great promises about the land to Abraham but also made very great demands upon his people in the covenant made later with Moses on Mount Sinai, featuring the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). Whilst Paul says "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29) are the blessings just as sure? Supposing God's people scorn the calling and shun the gifts? The prophets are clear. Because God is unbounded in righteousness, justice, mercy and holiness such people will be destroyed and thrown off the land. The promise to Abraham was no blank cheque - now do as you like. There are clear conditions (as seen in Genesis 18:19). This firm teaching then throbs through Deuteronomy, showing that the prophetic teaching has been taken to heart.

Stage one. Consider Amos 5:7-15 and 21-24. then 9:13-15. This is addressed to the northern kingdom, known from BC 932-722 as 'Israel'. Amos is one of the first resolute voices calling for repentance, a return to faithful living and the inevitability otherwise of destruction from God. It is a fierce word, yet there is still hope.

- Ask:
- a What exactly is the sin of Israel?
 - b What concern does God have for other peoples?
 - c What sort of hope is offered?

Stage two. Consider Isaiah 1:12-20 addressed to the southern kingdom (Judah) and its capital (Jerusalem), where the people were the most smug, most hypocritical and their religion the most corrupt.

- We ask:
- a What exactly is the sin of Judah?
 - b Can we ever expect God to say "I will hide my eyes from you"?
 - c What sort of hope is offered?

Stage three. Consider Deuteronomy 30:11-20. Here there is much more stress on God's commandments (that is, the covenant with Moses especially).

- We ask:
- a What exactly should the people do?
 - b What is the outcome if they disobey, ignoring the commandments?

A theological problem. Should we easily assume that a promise apparently made by God forever is eternally so? God promised that the throne of David would last forever (2 Samuel 7:12f) but this has not happened (unless one interprets this in some spiritual sense, Jesus now being king of Israel). Or again, an everlasting priesthood was promised to Phinehas, Aaron's son (Numbers 25:11) but after many ups and downs the priesthood faded out after AD70 when the Temple was finally destroyed. Was the 'everlasting' promise more of a very great hope dependent upon many factors,

including the people's faithfulness, rather than a total certainty? Or might the promise have been fulfilled in less obvious ways?

A chastening story from Bethlehem. The Lutheran pastor's father-in-law was taken ill in 2002.

"Observing his great pain I decided we should move him to St Joseph's hospital in Jerusalem as soon as an ambulance was available... but ambulances are not allowed to enter Jerusalem early... finally one showed up at 9am "Does the patient have a permit from the Israeli military authorities?" the driver asked. "Yes, he has a valid permit from 5am until 7pm"... He was put into the ambulance and his wife with him, and it drove to the main checkpoint. No other cars were there. Fifteen minutes elapsed ... finally the soldier signalled them to come closer. He took the permit. "This permit is not valid. It says for business, not as a patient"... the soldier was in a bad mood. We tried another checkpoint. The soldier there said the patient could enter but not the ambulance, in the end we got to the hospital where the doctors said we had left it too long. The patient died soon after" (Mitri Raheb)

Study three - JESUS' KINGDOM

Apparently Jesus made no reference to the covenant with Abraham or promise of land, whereas John the Baptist, preparing for Jesus, told the people "Do not presume to say to yourselves 'We have Abraham for our ancestor' for I say to you God is able from these stones to raise up children to

Abraham" (Matt 3:9). Jesus never seems to regard Jewishness as important but a possible exception is in Matt 15:24 where a Gentile woman is told that he has come first to the Jews (but this is expressed more gently in the parallel in Mark 7:24).

Jesus' message centres on 'the kingdom of God (or heaven)', which is here now in Jesus' ministry. All are invited to live within it, embrace its values, costs and blessings. The Jews might even miss out (Luke 13:28f). A special covenant is created in Jesus' death, rising and giving of the Spirit; it is celebrated in the Last Supper, its signs being bread and wine. Now God's people must live in that new covenant, live 'in Christ'. Whereas the law came through Moses, now grace and truth have come in Jesus (John 1:17).

Stage one. Consider Luke 14:15-24 (leaving the parallel version in Matt 22:1-10 which combines the parables of the feast and the wicked city). God's kingdom is often pictured as a feast but here the first invited guests all decline, making excuses. Is this a comment upon the religious leadership in Jesus time? The poor and maimed may signify the outcasts of the time and those in the highways may well be the Gentiles.

We ask: a On what terms does God call people?
 b Are there historical hints here - first the Jews, then the Gentiles? If so, what about the covenant with Abraham or Moses?

Stage two. Consider Matt 5:38-48 . Here Jesus appears deliberately to contrast traditional teaching with his own very radical commands. The reference to 'hating enemies' is not in the Bible but may have been common teaching. Here Jesus says we must look to God's behaviour.

We ask: a Does this totally replace the traditional view?
 b Is it possible to obey Jesus here? If so, how?

Stage three. Consider Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Mark 14:17-25. Jesus shows that the great prophecy of a new covenant has now come about. It is the climax of his ministry and teaching.

We ask: a With whom is the new covenant established?
 b What are its obligations and blessings?

A theological problem. The idea that one race is a 'chosen people' is at first sight morally objectionable. Does God have favourites to whom he panders? Nothing is more likely to make such a people arrogant and self-righteous. But is that the case in God's dealings with the Jews? Does God select them for a special task which, if they don't fulfil must then be done by others? Selection for a task is not immoral but a wise way of proceeding and often done in the Church's life.

A chastening disclosure. *In 1998 the International Committee of the Red Cross surveyed public attitudes in 17 countries. They reported that "perhaps as no other place in the world, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as the Arab states, has*

engaged entire societies and left the distinction between combatants and civilians in tatters". More so than any other country studied, Israelis and Palestinians countenance attacks on civilians in wartime. (Black Book pg 163)

Study four -THE FIRST CHRISTIANS REFLECT

Again note that the ordering of biblical books is strange. All the letters we now look at were written before those in study three, for Paul's writing came first, the gospels later. The early Church did not resolve all major issues at once; it struggled, especially on the crucial matter of Christianity's status with Judaism - was it a reform movement within Judaism or a quite new sort of faith community? It took time for it to see itself as the latter. But in that case did it replace Judaism in God's purpose (nowadays called 'replacement theology')? There are hints of this, most strongly in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Or is there something special for the Jews to do and be? Paul can be quoted on both sides of that query, as we see here. So maybe we are warned against over-simple answers...

Stage one. Consider Galatians 3: 26-29 and 5: 2-6. An early study by Paul - all who have faith are now Abraham's heirs, so circumcision is irrelevant for the new faith community. The 'Law' (that is, all the commandments of the Mosaic covenant) is superseded. The Spirit of the risen Christ is now the supreme guide from God.

We ask: a Should Christians see themselves as in any sense the children of Abraham?

b What sort of obligation should we honour now?
c For us, in our day, is the Spirit continuing in that role of supreme guide from God?

Stage two. Consider a slightly later reflection - Romans 11: 25-36: it is the conclusion to Paul's study on how God works in human history, set out in chapters 9-11. God often uses the few (or 'remnant') and both Jew and Gentile (that being a new idea). Although the Jews have rejected Christ they are not abandoned by God. The great mission is to witness to the whole world; when achieved, then the Jews will be saved. The argument is sometimes awkward, yet the conclusion is not and leads to a mighty shout of praise to God and his supreme wisdom.

We ask: a Should Christians still work for the conversion of Jews?
b In the end does Paul see everybody saved?

Stage three. Consider Ephesians 2:11-22 probably later than Paul but much influenced by him. The Church seems to be mainly Gentile now.

We ask: a What is the 'new humanity' being talked about here?
b How can the ancient Jew-Gentile enmity be resolved and are there any hints here?

c How can today's Church be a symbol of the new humanity?

A theological problem. As noted above the Church has often talked as if it completely replaces the Jews. Thereby it has encouraged anti-semitism, an awful evil. How can we now view Judaism? And now, to bring everything up-to-date, does Israel today have a right to the land of the West Bank and Gaza as some Zionists claim?

A word of hope. Audeh Rantisi was a Palestinian Anglican clergyman who had suffered much from Israel. He writes of a great moment in his life -

"I attended an international Christian conference in Athens in 1983. The participants included some Jewish Christians who had never met any Arab Christians, and vice versa. The mutual struggle for understanding brought growth as we knelt together at the foot of the cross, where ethnic divisions disappear in the light of Our Lord's presence ... as one speaker pronounced "We come together on the basis of Calvary. Christ is our common denominator. Even political disagreements, the iron fist, and the Intifada have not separated our communion. Our gatherings still reflect the shared love of our Redeemer"."

Some Notes for Leaders

This series is laid out for four group sessions but can easily be extended to six or eight meetings if the group so wishes. There is, for instance, no session designed to inform the members about the current situation and any group may like to begin with such a fact-finding time. In this case the papers produced by Christian Aid are excellent (e.g. *Facts on the Ground* or *One land and many voices*) but it is helpful to use the most recent work since the situation changes rapidly.

Then again, the biblical passages selected here are not the sum total of those which illuminate the teaching of scripture. There are two groups of teaching which are relevant but not cited here – Those visions of the prophets in which a return to the land is envisaged after exile (passages often used to justify the desire of Jews today to return to the Holy Land) and those pertaining to the Last Days (e.g. the final battle of Armageddon and the victory of God in Palestine, a theme much used by Christian Zionists). If more time is available both of these themes could well be explored.

The leader will note that each session closes with a small story; this can simply be noticed, or discussed thoroughly. But there is also a theological issue, for all these studies raise fundamental questions regarding our understanding of God and God's purposes and we ought not to gloss over such reflection. Here especially there may be noticeable differences within the group and we should be wary of any attempt by anyone to say "There is only one plain answer here." There is room for much contrasting comment.

There is little reference here to the beliefs of people of other faiths - especially those of Jews or Moslems today. That again is simply because of the need to be highly selective and to concentrate on looking at some key passages through Christian eyes.

This course has been prepared and produced by the Reverend Dr Richard G Jones and does not, obviously, express the precise opinion of the Methodist Church on all aspects of current policy or all relevant theology. It is intended to encourage careful Bible reading and provoke discussion, careful thought and informed prayer.

The Quotations used here are taken from:-

Breaking the Silence: Soldiers speak out about their service in Hebron. Published by Shovrim Shtika, www.breakingthesilance.org.il

Elias Chacour: *We belong to the Land* (Harper Collins 1992), a fine and often very funny account of a remarkable ministry in Galilee by a Melkite priest, who is now Archbishop.

Mitri Raheb: *Bethlehem Besieged*, stories of hope in time of trouble (Fortress Press 2004) describing what military occupation is like.

Israel/Palestine, the Black Book: (Pluto Press, www.plutobooks.com, 2003) edited by Reporters without Borders - a detailed account of abuses by both sides.

Audeh and Pat Rantisi: *Blessed are the Peacemakers* (Eagle 2003) the moving story of a Palestinian clergyman married to an English woman, their ministry being mainly in Ramallah. Pat is now living in England.

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For Further Study:-

The general and biblical matters studied here are very clearly handled in Colin Chapman: *Whose Promised Land?* (Lion, latest reprint in 2002). This is the clearest introduction available.

The most thorough study of Christian Zionism is in Stephen Sizer:

Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon (IVP 2005).

Several evangelical scholars have contributed to the excellent symposium *The Land of Promise*, edited by Philip Johnston and Peter Walker (IVP 2000). There is an introduction by John Stott.

Christian Aid's report *One Land and Many Voices* provides some helpful theological reflections. Other Christian Aid reports are also useful including *Israel & Palestine: a question of viability*, June 2007.

www.christianaid.org.uk

Colin Chapman's latest book, *Whose Holy City?* is again invaluable, dealing cogently with the various claims to Jerusalem (Lion 2004).

For a very different approach to all these issues, bordering on Christian Zionism, see Rob Richards: *Has God finished with Israel?* (Word Publishing, reprinted 2000).

The various bodies in the UK which identify the modern State of Israel with God's promises use the umbrella title 'Love never fails' and argue their case in *Israel, His People, His Land. His Story* (Thankful Books 2005) edited by Fred Wright.

Finally, a prayer:-

*Pray not for Arab or Jew
for Palestinian or Israeli
but pray rather for ourselves
that we might not
divide them in our prayers
but keep them both together
in our hearts.*

(from a Palestinian Christian)

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