

Situating the La

by Dorcas and Noel Gordon



Opening Prayer:

God of peace and opportunity, our Creator and Redeemer, we come to you to pray for your mercy, forgiveness, and a new start. Instead of overcoming evil with good, we have stood by while goodness has been affronted. We ask for your help to give peace a new chance to thrive in our world.

Excerpt from the Prayer of the 9th International Conference of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre.¹

Scripture:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.... God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis 1:1–4a, 31

The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world and those who live in it; for God has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.

Psalms 24:1

For the ‘earth and its fullness are the Lord’s. If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

1 Corinthians 10:26–27

This is the first of four studies on the Land of Palestine.

nd of PALESTINE

In the Corinthians passage, Paul quotes Psalm 24 as part of his response to the factionalism in the Corinthian community. In chapters 8:1–11:1 the Corinthians are arguing over whether it is right to eat meat that has been sacrificed to another god. The controversy has two parts: Can they go to an idol temple and eat the meat? Can they eat such meat sold at the market or at a private dinner?

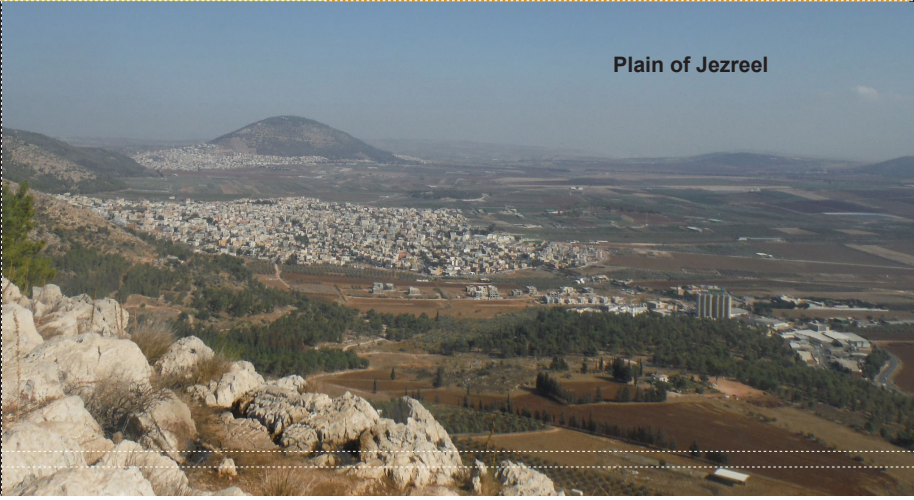
First, we should note that business transactions, weddings, funerals, etc. often took place in the context of a temple where meat (a luxury) sacrificed to that idol, was served. Just as this meat was part of the sacrifice system, so was all meat sold in the market place. In other words, only a little of the animal was sacrificed and the rest was sold or used for special feasts and business dinners.

This controversy concerns how they are to understand what God requires of them in terms of their relationship to the “world”. For Paul to say “no” to eating meat sacrificed to idols would mean that no member of the community could exercise their kinship duties or business responsibilities in a society where networking and family relationships were primary obligations. It would totally isolate the Corinthian Jesus followers from everyone in society, eventually making them a closed sect. Paul uses many arguments to advise caution about—and in chapter 9, warnings against—eating meat at an idol temple, but then, in terms of the second part of the controversy, he quotes Psalm 24 to give permission to eat idol meat sold in the market place or at a private dinner. Everything—the earth and all its fullness—belongs to God.

How do these texts help us to situate ownership of land and ourselves in a world created by God? We live in this world that God owns and declared to be “very good.”

Narrative:

The land of Palestine has a long and complex history. Since before the Christian era, Palestinians, both Jew and Arab shared the land. Together with Christians after the coming of Christ, these three peoples faced conquering empires and



battles so numerous that a large plain, the Plain of Jezreel, east of Nazareth is pictured as the site of the battle of Armageddon.² As complex as the ancient history of Palestine is, its modern history is no less so.

Our experience of this land began with Noel's arrival in Haifa in June 1967. Having just graduated from university he set out to explore the world. These travels eventually took him to Palestine, now Palestine/Israel. Here is his personal account of living in the land of Palestine/Israel for over a year:

My own first-hand experience of Palestine/Israel began early on the morning of June 15, 1967, when I landed at the docks of Haifa aboard the first ship from Greece to Israel following the ceasefire in the June 1967 war. I was on my way overland to India or so I thought, however, with the war all Israeli land borders were closed.

The Haifa harbour still contained the remains of the *Exodus*, the boat that had brought thousands of European Jewish refugees to Israel after World War II. On the docks, the Jewish Agency provided myself and hundreds of other young people, mainly Jews from North America and Europe, a warm welcome and an offer to live and work on a kibbutz. Since I planned to travel east as soon as possible, I volunteered to go to a kibbutz in the upper Galilee not far from the Syrian border.

The kibbutz, *Kfar Hanassi* (the Village of the President), assigned me a bed in a dormitory, a meal card for the communal kitchen, and instructions to report for work in the plum orchard at 5:30 a.m. the next morning. This began over five months of hard outdoor work, intensive Hebrew language instruction, and lots of stories about the early days of the kibbutz.

Photo: Chained shops and homes of the evicted Palestinians.



In November 1967, I received an invitation from the Headmaster of the Society of Friends (Quakers) Boys School to teach in Ramallah in the West Bank. I accepted and when my kibbutz friends heard they were sure I would either be murdered by Palestinians, all of whom they considered terrorists or succumb to disease from, what they were certain were, the unsanitary and primitive Palestinian living conditions.

The reality was entirely different. The staff and students welcomed me warmly and the school, I soon discovered, was among the best in the Middle East with many of its graduates winning scholarships to the American University in Beirut or entrance to Canadian and US universities.

Life in Ramallah and throughout the entire West Bank during 1967 and into 1968 was extremely difficult for the Palestinians. In the face of the occupation, Palestinians, in shock, became mute. Harsh military law was imposed by the Israeli occupation forces, which meant dusk to dawn curfews for everyone, control of civilian movement by military checkpoints, and Palestinian house demolitions. School classes often had to be cancelled at a moment's notice if the Israeli military governor so demanded.

Dorcas' history of this land is more recent. She first visited there as part of a sabbatical in 2008, but an incident in 2009 when she visited Noel who was serving as a World Council of Churches' accompanier (EAPPI)³ in Hebron has remained with her over the subsequent years:

A feature of Noel's work in Hebron was to observe every Saturday the treatment of Palestinians when a group of mostly Zionist Jews embarked on an escorted tour of the Palestinian market area (in Arabic, Suk) looking for

“We must begin within an understanding of what history is and what it is not.”

signs and symbols of ancient Jewish settlement of this area. When found, no matter how sparse, these symbols became part of their argument that Hebron belonged to them and the Palestinians should be evicted. Their escort: a dozen heavily armed Israeli soldiers. As we followed this group words and actions of derision floated back to us but it was what happened next that is seared in my memory.

An elderly Palestinian woman emerged suddenly from one of the side lanes. Immediately, with weapons drawn some of the soldiers formed a phalanx around the Jewish group, while others pushed the woman harshly against a wall. Some of those guns were aimed at those of us following behind, observers of this scene. After a few tense moments, one young Palestinian man bravely ventured forward, put his arms around the confused and frightened woman and led her back down the lane from which she had emerged. The soldiers stood down and the journey through the market continued. At the end, one of the soldiers, by my guess less than 20 years old, whose machine gun had been pointed directly at us, raised his gun to me in salute and said in English, “have a nice day.”

The Palestine Territories—the West Bank and East Jerusalem—under Israeli occupation and Gaza, under Israeli blockade, have become places of oppression and injustice. The timeline below sets out in broad strokes some of the history of this “holy” land.

An Abbreviated Timeline:

1299–1922

The Ottoman (Turkish) Empire began its conquest of the world in 1299. It gradually made its way through Serbia, Bulgaria, Constantinople, conquering Jerusalem in 1517. This empire was defeated during World War I (WWI).

1919–1948

In 1919 at the Treaty of Versailles, Britain was given a temporary mandate for the administration of Palestine with the understanding that it would work in the best interests of its Jewish and Arab inhabitants. A 1921 census of Palestine indicates



Iqirith village destroyed by Israeli army,
Christmas Eve 1951.

590,000 Muslims, 89,000 Christians and 84,000 Jews. This mandate ended in 1948 with the partition of Palestine into two states.

1947–1949

The UN Partition Plan (1947) divided the land 53% to be under Jewish control and 47% under Palestinian control (Map 2) even though in 1946, ownership of the land was roughly 7% Jewish and 93% Palestinian (Map 1). The Palestinians saw this as betrayal and refused to accept the Plan. Conflict erupted, at the end of which the State of Israel (having come into being in 1948) held approximately 78% of the land.

The Palestinians refer to the period 1947–1949 as the **Nakba**. During this time, over 400 Palestinian villages were destroyed by the Israeli military and gangs of Israeli extremists. Between 750,000 and 1 million Palestinians fled taking refuge in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan and various parts of the West Bank of Jordan not under Israeli control (Map 3).



Seperation wall in Bethlehem

1948–Present

From 1948–the present: The State of Israel has continued to confiscate Palestinian land, demolish homes, setting up illegal settlements on that land. To date Israel has approximately 261 Jewish-only settlements and “outposts” built on confiscated Palestinian land.

The June 1967 War: While there continues to be two stories as to who struck first—Egypt or Israel, clearly the state of Israel had been preparing for such a war for years.⁴ On June 12, 1967, Israel occupied Gaza, the West Bank, and the rest of Jerusalem plus the Sinai and the Golan plateau. The captured territory was three times the size of pre-1967 Israel.

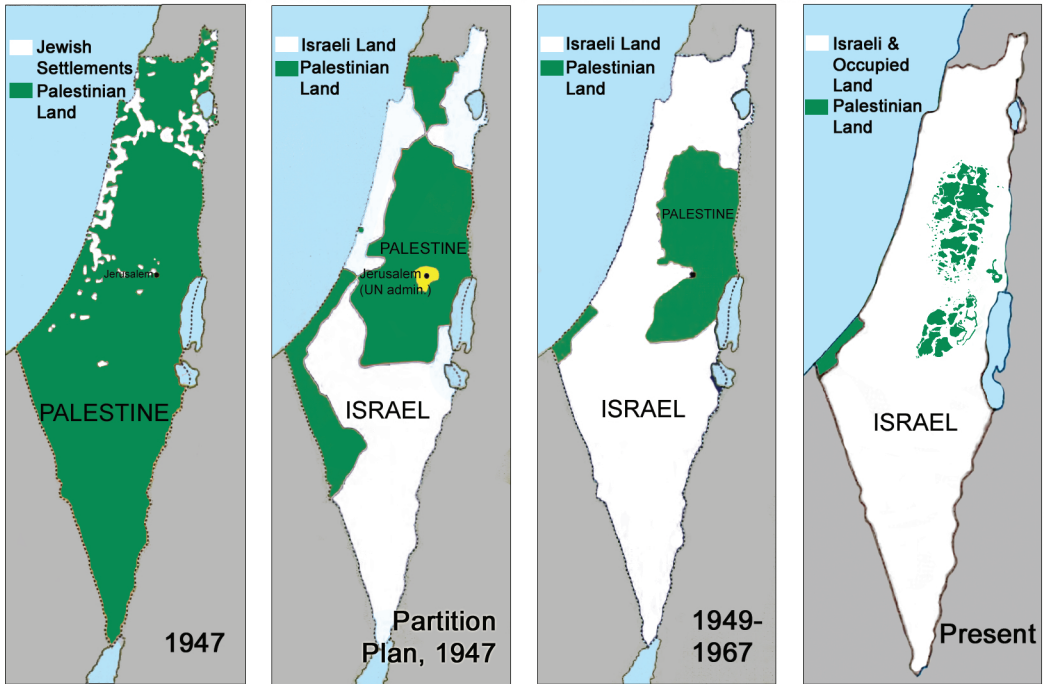
December 1987: The First Palestinian Uprising (Intifada) occurred. Basically a civilian movement, supported by women’s organizations, workers and student. It was met with a brutal response by the Israeli military.

Oslo Accords 1993–1996: The Declaration calls for:

- i. Israel to withdraw from Jericho and Gaza, and eventually the West Bank.
- ii. Five years of limited autonomy for Palestinians in those areas.
- iii. Election of Palestinian Legislative Council within nine months.
- iv. Establishment of a Palestinian police force.
- v. The question of Jerusalem was left undecided.⁵

2000 The Second Palestinian Intifada: It was more violent than the first Intifada and it was during this time that suicide bombers and Hamas, with armed guerilla fighters, emerged. Again it was defeated by the power of the Israeli military whose weapons continue to be supplied

Palestinian Loss of Land 1947 to Present



The four maps above were originally produced by the Palestine Israel Action Group. They state, "PIAG has produced Educational Resources and Tools for Activists that can be used by religious and secular organizations locally, nationally, and internationally. We invite readers to adapt these materials for use in their own communities."

primarily by the United States (in 2016, Israel received over \$10 million a day from the US in military support).⁶

2004 The Separation Wall: Israel considers it a security barrier against terrorism, while Palestinians call it a racial segregation or apartheid wall. At a total length of 708 kilometres (440 mi), 85% of it cuts at times 18 kilometres (11 mi) deep into the West Bank, isolating about 9.4% of it, leaving an estimated 25,000 Palestinians isolated from the bulk of that territory.⁷

In this first of four studies, we must begin with an understanding of what history is and what it is not. For many of us, we were taught that history deals with facts, an exact description of what took place. More recently, history has come to be understood more as a selection and interpretation of facts. In other words, whenever history is recounted it is always told from a particular perspective and from a particular social, political, and/or economic context. "That is why interpretation is critical. The one who interprets assumes power; the one who dominates the story makes it his-story, her-story, literally creating history."⁸

BALFOUR DECLARATION: Its sixty-eight words read as follows: “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other countries.”

ZIONISM: “Zionism is a political ideology; it is the set of beliefs that drove the founding of the state of Israel in Palestine and continues to drive its expansion today. Zionism serves to justify the colonization of Palestine and the dispossession of the Palestinian people through land confiscation, forced exile and massacres.”¹³

Often it is more myth or memory than fact when it is recounted in later contexts, and the Israeli narration of the history of this land is no exception. In defense of their ownership of the land of Palestine, the state of Israel claims that God gave this land to the Jewish people exclusively and in perpetuity; that the Bible is their eternal deed, and that the state of Israel is now merely reclaiming God’s promise.

This narration grew in its intensity particularly at the time of the 1967 war, when extremist settlers began, illegally according to international law, to settle in the West Bank claiming it as ancient Samaria and Judea. The “Judeaization” of the land then began in earnest with settlers building a settlement on every point of land that they claimed had a biblical antecedent.⁹ So intense has the rhetoric become that many Jewish settlers would argue that the Palestinians are aliens and should be forcibly driven out in accordance with Numbers 33:50–53. Others, a minority, would even argue they should be annihilated as God commanded in Deuteronomy 20: 16–18.

In writing about the history of Palestine/Israel, interpretation is critical. There is another narrative and after 50 years of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and suppression of Gaza, it is a story that is beginning to be heard. This story starts with a people who through successive empires—Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders,





One of the over 500 Israeli Checkpoints.

Ottomans, British, and Israelis—continue to remain on the land cultivating it as did their parents before them and those before them. Writing about how the Palestinian identity changed and developed with each successive empire, Mitri Raheb states:

They changed their language from Aramaic to Greek to Arabic, while their identity shifted from Canaanite to Hittite, to Hivite, to Perizzite, to Gergashite, to Amorite, to

Jebusite, to Philistine, Israelite, Judaic/Samaritan, to Hasmoniac, to Jewish, to Byzantine, to Arab, to Ottoman, and to Palestinian, to mention some. The people changed religion too, from Baal, to Jahwe. Later, many believed in Jesus Christ and became Christian. Forced to pay extra taxes, many joined Islam and became Muslim. And yet they stayed, throughout the centuries, and remained people of the land with a dynamic identity. In this sense the Palestinians today stand in historic continuity with biblical Israel.¹⁰

The modern chapter of this narrative speaks of a promise made during World War I to the nations of the Middle East, a promise stating that if they supported Britain against the Ottoman Empire, once it was defeated, they would be given the right of self-determination. This narrative condemns the Balfour Declaration, in which Britain, mired in a stalemate with Germany on the western front and dealing with failed efforts to defeat Turkey on the Gallipoli Peninsula, made a promise in a letter dated November 2, 1917 to Baron Rothschild, a prominent British Jewish Zionist. The aim of the British government was to gain international Jewish support, particularly in the United States with the hope that

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and those who live in it; for God has founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers.

Psalm 24: 1

this would hasten the entry of the United States into World War I. This letter stated that the British government favoured “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people....”¹¹ The Palestinians saw this Declaration as a betrayal, but their petitions, protesting the injustice of establishing a Jewish homeland without the consent of the indigenous population, were set aside.¹²

Listening to Palestinian Voices

It was only in the mid-80s, that the Palestinians began to tell their story of suffering in the years following the UN Partition in 1947 and the increasing intensity of that suffering in the present. These voices include theologians and activists such as Mitri Raheb, Nora Carmi, Jean Zaru, and many others.¹⁴ In more recent years, the international community has joined with them listening to the Palestinian voices, taking seriously the story of those from the underside of history. These writers are evangelical and main-line Christian, Jewish, Palestinian Christian, and Muslim as well as others. Jewish voices include those of Ilan Pappé, particularly his book describing Israel's policy of ethnic cleansing¹⁵, Uri Davis who in 1987 declared Israel to be “an apartheid state,”¹⁶ as well as various documentaries, such as Neta Shoshani (Born in Deir Yassin), or the YouTube presentation on the massacre of Deir Yassin¹⁷ (see study questions). These scholars and artists call upon Israel to own a story of the land that has been hidden from its own people and omitted from its educational curricula. To date, Israel has consistently and adamantly refused to engage in peace process initiatives in which the Nakba is “on the table”.¹⁸

With this increased and ever increasing support, Palestinian Christians are even more committed to telling their story of the Nakba and the Israeli occupation and to work for justice and peace, both for themselves as Palestinians and for the Israelis. Their belief is that where injustice exists it impacts the health and humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressor. Having begun this study with the prayer of the 9th Conference of Sabeel, we end with a Litany for Peace and Justice that was used at that conference. It is something that could be used in your study as you stand in solidarity with Palestinian Christians.



The separation wall and the Prince of Peace

All photos have been provided by the author or The Presbyterian Church in Canada and the Women's Missionary Society. They are from previous participants of study tours to the Middle East.

Litany for Peace and Justice

The work is hard. It is demanding, time consuming, and sometimes tedious. Will we recommit ourselves to working for peace and justice?

We will.

This work can cause tensions and rifts. This work can drive wedges between people. But this work needs us to stick together. Will we dedicate ourselves to doing our best to work together?

We will.

This work for peace and justice is more effective when we embrace and respect diversity. Will we recommit ourselves to embracing and respecting difference?

We will.

This work requires creativity. This work demands that we push ourselves to look for new possibilities. Will we dedicate ourselves to find sources of faith and hope in our lives?

We will.

This work for peace and justice requires faith and hope that a better tomorrow is possible. Will we dedicate ourselves to find sources of faith and hope in our lives?

We will.

This work for peace and justice calls us to find inner peace. Will we recommit ourselves to promoting peace both within and without?

We will.

AMEN¹⁹



Study questions:

1. Read the suggested biblical passages. How do they help you to think about ownership/sharing of the land both in Palestine and in Canada?
2. Watch the YouTube presentation *Four recollections of the massacre of Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKLucDqEeKA> –. Explore further some of the websites cited in this study. How has your understanding of the history of the land of Palestine been impacted by what you have seen and read?
3. Gather together articles from newspapers and magazines. Read them critically as to how the stories of encounters today between the Israeli army and Palestinians is told. Ask questions and try different reconstructions of the narrative. Where can you hear the minority voice in the stories?
4. Make a list of the questions about the history of the land of Palestine that remain unanswered?

-
- ¹ Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, Tina Whitehead, eds., *The Bible and the Palestine Israel Conflict* (Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre: Jerusalem, 2014), p. 301. Palestine Liberation Theology (PLT) came into being in 1988, and has been “nourished by a small group of Palestinian Christians who struggled to find a relevant faith in the midst of occupation, dispossession, and oppression. Over the years PLT has reached Palestinian Christians throughout the Holy Land as well as people around the world who together share a vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation under the sovereignty of a loving, inclusive God.” p. 19.
- ² Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 3rd printing 2014), p. 51
- ³ The World Council of Churches’ Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (WCC-EAPPI) was created in 2002 by the World Council of Churches based on a letter and an appeal from local Palestinian church leaders to create an international presence in the country. There is a continuous presence of 25–30 Ecumenical Accompaniers on the ground, serving for three months in accompanying, offering protective presence, and witness to the Palestinian suffering. Since its beginning there are now almost 1800 hundred former Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs). For more information, see <https://eappi.org/en/about>
- ⁴ Michael Prior, ed., *Speaking the Truth: Zionism, Israel and Occupation* (Northampton, Mass., Olive Branch Press, 2005), p. 193
- ⁵ www.cnn.com/2013/09/03/world/meast/oslo-accords-fast-facts/index.html
- ⁶ www.ifamericaknew.org/stat/usaaid.html#source
- ⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli_West_Bank_barrier
- ⁸ Raheb, *Faith*, p. 21.
- ⁹ Raheb, *Faith*, p. 18.
- ¹⁰ Raheb, *Faith*, p. 12-13.
- ¹¹ www.history.com/thisdayinhistory/the-balfour-declaration.
- ¹² Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 125
- ¹³ Definition is that of the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network Canada.
- ¹⁴ Raheb, *Faith*, p. 31 identifies Elias Chacour, Giries Khoury, Munib Younan, Odeh Rantisi, Rafiq Khoury, Riah Abu El-Assal, Jean Zaru, Nur Masalha, and Michel Sabbah, among others.
- ¹⁵ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006).
- ¹⁶ Raheb, *Faith*, p. 33.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKLucDqEeKA> – Four recollections of the massacre of Deir Yassin on April 9, 1948
- ¹⁸ Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*, p. 244.
- ¹⁹ Ateek, et al., *The Bible*, p. 302.