

The Bible and the

by Dorcas and Noel Gordon



Opening Prayer:

Give us the courage to expose evil thoughts and deeds, and to speak the truth. We do not believe in the right of the strong, the strength of armies, or the power of oppression. We believe in the equal value of all people, the power of nonviolence, and solidarity based on justice.

Excerpt from the Prayer of the 9th Conference of the
Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre¹

Scripture:

Micah 6: 8 “God has told you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

The background to this verse is found earlier in chapter 6 where the prophet Micah sets up God’s challenge to the Hebrew people as if in a courtroom. The mountains and hills are the jury. God speaks first reminding them of all that has been done for them. God asks “what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you (verse 3)? The people respond asking what it is that God requires of them. Is it burnt offerings? Is it the sacrifice of their firstborn? The response is found in the verse above: to do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with God.

What does that mean for us who seek to live as

This is the third of four studies on the Land of Palestine. The first study can be found in the November/December 2017 and the second in the January/February 2018 issues of *Glad Tidings*.

Land of PALESTINE

disciples today? What is our definition of what God requires of us? How does justice relate to Sabbath observance? How does justice, kindness and walking humbly with God translate into our daily life as Christ followers?

Luke 4:16–30

In this passage Luke sets out his understanding of Jesus' mission. When the scroll is given to Jesus in the synagogue, the passage that is opened is that of Isaiah 61. The interesting thing is that Luke doesn't quote Isaiah exactly but what he does quote leaves no doubt as to the focus of Jesus' ministry. It will be about an inclusive understanding of God's covenant love; it will be about privileging the poor, release to those in captivity, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. It is about living the year of Jubilee, every fiftieth year when debts are to be cancelled, slaves to be given freedom and the land to lie fallow.

When Luke has Jesus draw out the implications of this passage for the lives of those in Nazareth in the 1st century the response is to get rid of him. No





one could countenance such an inclusive covenant yet, says Luke, this is precisely what Jesus came to proclaim.

How do we understand “inclusive covenant” in our Christian witness? What does it mean for our partnership with the Palestinian people, Christian and Muslim, as well as for our Jewish brothers and sisters?

Interpreting the Bible in our time and context:

A Subordinate Standard of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Living Faith*, Chapter 5 addresses what Presbyterians believe about the biblical witness. It begins with the statement that the Bible is “given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. It is to be the standard of all doctrine.” It ends by stating that the Bible “is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God’s work in Christ,” and continues by affirming that it is “conditioned by

Living Faith

Chapter 5: The Bible

5.1 The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life. It is to be the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience. We subject to its judgment all we believe and do. Through the Scriptures the church is bound only to Jesus Christ its King and Head. He is the living Word of God to whom the written word bears witness.



the language, thought, and setting of its time,” concluding with the exhortation that we, equally conditioned by the language, thought and setting of our time, are “relying on the Holy Spirit” to “seek the application of God’s word for our time.”

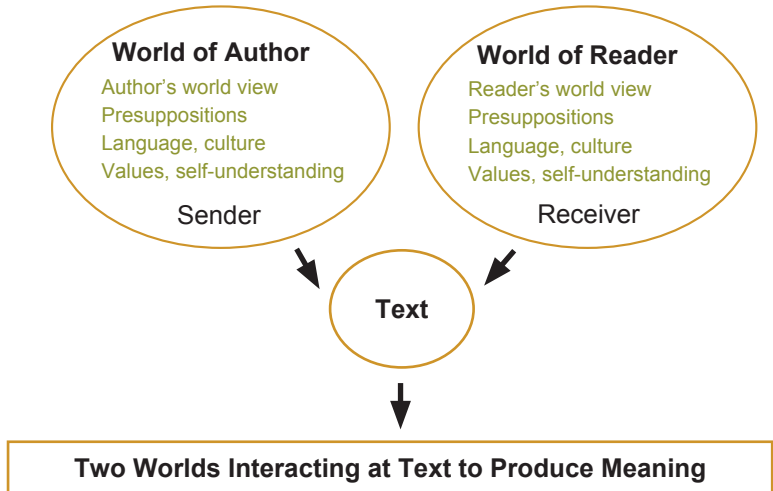
For Christians of the Reformed tradition the Bible is central to our self-understanding and sets the standard as to how we live out our discipleship. So pivotal is our interpretation of the Bible to faithful living that, over the centuries, how we interpret the Bible in any particular context has often been a site of great struggle and controversy within the church. In no case is this truer than in claims made to the land of Palestine.

An Interpretive Framework²

Every reading of the biblical text is an interpretation, in that what the text means for us combines some understanding of the world of the author—his/her social,

5.4 The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God’s work in Christ. The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators, past and present. Relying on the Holy Spirit we seek the application of God’s word for our time.

INTERACTING WITH THE BIBLICAL TEXT



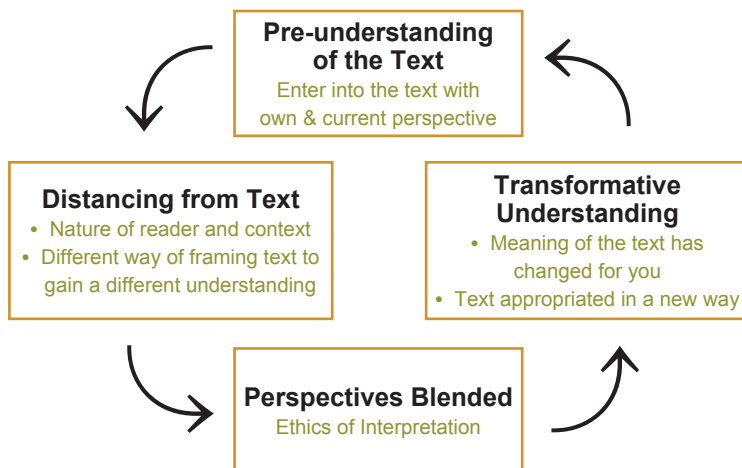
economic, and political context—and something of the values and culture from our own context. No reader of scripture can move outside their particular socialization to read the text in a “pure” way. Nor can we ever know exactly the intent of the biblical author given the differences between their social context and ours. We seek absolute truth in scripture but such truth belongs to God. We “see in a mirror dimly (or “in a riddle”) but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor. 13: 12). Now we know only in part and need to recognize the perspectival nature of our interaction with scripture.

Throughout our lifetime, we have already formed an understanding of what the bible means through hearing the scriptures read, listening to sermons, or as a child attending church school. So strong is this pre-understanding of the text that only when we come up against an interpretation that from our experience seems incorrect or limited do we ask questions. It is at this point that we need to distance ourselves from that pre-understanding and find a different way of framing the text in order to gain a new understanding of its meaning. This means asking new questions of the text.

This is precisely the work that many Christians have undertaken in the past 50 years. Those in Latin America have approached the text asking

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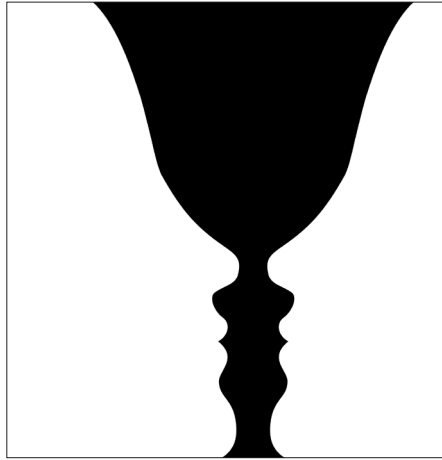
Approach to Learning Scripture



questions from the perspective of “God’s preferential option for the poor.” Women have read the texts in a way that seeks to put women back in the biblical story and have been surprised as to how much the pre-understanding they received neglected the stories of those women who were leaders among the Hebrew people and in the early church. More recent readings seek to de-colonialize the text. For example, the whole of the New Testament was written by subjected people, people under the thumb of the Roman Empire. Such readings look at the cultural and political situation of that time and new understandings of the early church have emerged.

Like the picture on page 30 in which we can see both a vase and two faces³ there can be different ways of reading scripture depending on the lens we use. These frameworks invite us to bring our pre-understanding and new frameworks into dialogue to arrive at new meaning, which then undertakes the same process again and again. This form of reading requires us to put our interpretation of scripture through an ethical lens. In other words, how we frame our reading becomes critical. If we start from the perspective that God is a God of peace and justice or that God requires us to “love God and our neighbour as ourselves” then any interpretations which deny this should be set aside as invalid.

What's the Truth?
PHOTOGRAPHIC AMBIGUITY
Two Faces or a Vase?



The Picture is Constant—The Truth of the Picture is that Both Two Faces and a Vase Exist in the Picture

Reading the Biblical text in the context of Palestine:

How we read and interpret the Biblical witness about the land of Palestine presents two very different perspectives. It is a hermeneutical exercise that can have deadly implications. An exclusivist view claims that God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants, meaning Isaac and his descendants (Genesis 13: 15) and that the modern Jewish state is the heir to that promise.

This text and others⁴ are used by Zionist ideology—both Jewish and Christian—to claim that the Bible is a deed bestowing to the Jews divine right to the land and thus the Palestinians must leave the land.⁵ With this reading of the Old Testament the program of the Jewish settlers and the Israeli government and its military to make life unbearable for the Palestinians is justified.

As early as 1942 Rabbi Samuel Goldenson preached a sermon stating that Judaism does not fare well at the hands of Zionism. He states: “For in order to find support in Judaism for its nationalist philosophy, Zionism necessarily tends

“God has told you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Micah 6:8

to stress the racial, tribal and folkish elements of Jewish history and thought....” He continues, All historical religions are composites. In the passage of time men [sic] and events contribute to such religions many and diverse elements.... The danger to Judaism in the Zionist doctrines is in its emphasis upon the earlier and narrower features of our heritage, the features that lead to separation and exclusiveness.⁶

Our experiences of such separation and exclusiveness have occurred a number of times in Palestine. In 2008 Dorcas accompanied an interfaith group, hosted by the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, to Hebron. While there the group visited the information centre of the settlement, Kiryat Arba. The settlement spokesperson addressed us and then invited questions. When asked what he saw as the solution to the Israel/Palestine situation, he replied that he was in favour of a one state solution. Surprised, we asked what he thought that would look like. The response: one state for the Jews. What about the Palestinians we asked? “... let them drown in the sea for all I care.” His response was met with absolute silence by the ministers, rabbis, imams, and others who were in attendance.

Just across the street above this information centre is a primary school, Cordoba School, attended by Palestinian children. Each day, twice a day these young children and their teachers are forced to go through a military check-point, sometimes without difficulty, but many times having their school bags searched, often mocked and even threatened by settlers who stand nearby. When Noel was a EAPPI volunteer in Hebron in 2009, one of his responsibilities was to be at this checkpoint, Checkpoint 56, twice each day to monitor the treatment of these children and teachers.

Hebron is a city south of Bethlehem where the tomb of Abraham and Sarah is found. It claims the original tree of Mamre under which Abraham sat when the angels announced the birth of Isaac. It is one of the oldest cities in the world. More recently it has been a divided city. In 1968 a group of Jews went there ostensibly to celebrate Passover and refused to leave. They were joined by others and now Hebron houses approximately 650–800 of Israel’s most violent settlers⁷ with 1500 Israeli troops to protect them, making it the most heavily occupied

“Christian Zionism as a doctrinal stance is
inconsistent with Reformed doctrine and its emphasis
on one covenant of grace for all peoples”

138th General Assembly

city in the West Bank. Palestinians were forcibly removed from this part of the city. Their homes and shops were welded shut and they were forbidden to travel on any of the roads near this Jewish settlement. It is a city of approximately 107 checkpoints like the one we have described above.

Rabbi Goldenson ended his sermon by concluding that it is these tribal ways of exclusion and separation that are causing Jews and the world at large its greatest suffering to the neglect of the higher and nobler teachings that are part of every creed and faith.⁸ His words echo the approach to interpreting the scriptures set out above. It is a matter of prioritizing the higher and nobler teachings that we adhere to as central to our faith and discipleship.

Another form of Zionism, Christian Zionism, also supports an exclusivist interpretation of the land. An example of how this is constructed in the rhetoric of Christian Zionism reads like this: Referring to verses like Genesis 13:15 and 2 Chronicles 20:7 (“Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham?”) Christian Zionism would affirm: This is a permanent possession given by God to Abraham, and all of this territory is the land of Israel. There is no such thing as a Palestine state nor has there ever been...If we ally ourselves with the enemies of Israel, we will be standing against God Almighty.⁹

Given their reading of biblical prophecy, not only do Christian Zionists support Israel’s claim to the whole land of Palestine, including Jerusalem, they also encourage the establishment of settlements on Palestinian land and the rejection of any peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Territories. President Trump’s ill-advised decision in December to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel was greeted as a great triumph by Christian Zionists. Disregarding international law, which has maintained that any decision on the city of Jerusalem must be part of a peace process, Trump’s has made a unilateral decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem.

At the 138th General Assembly, The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC)



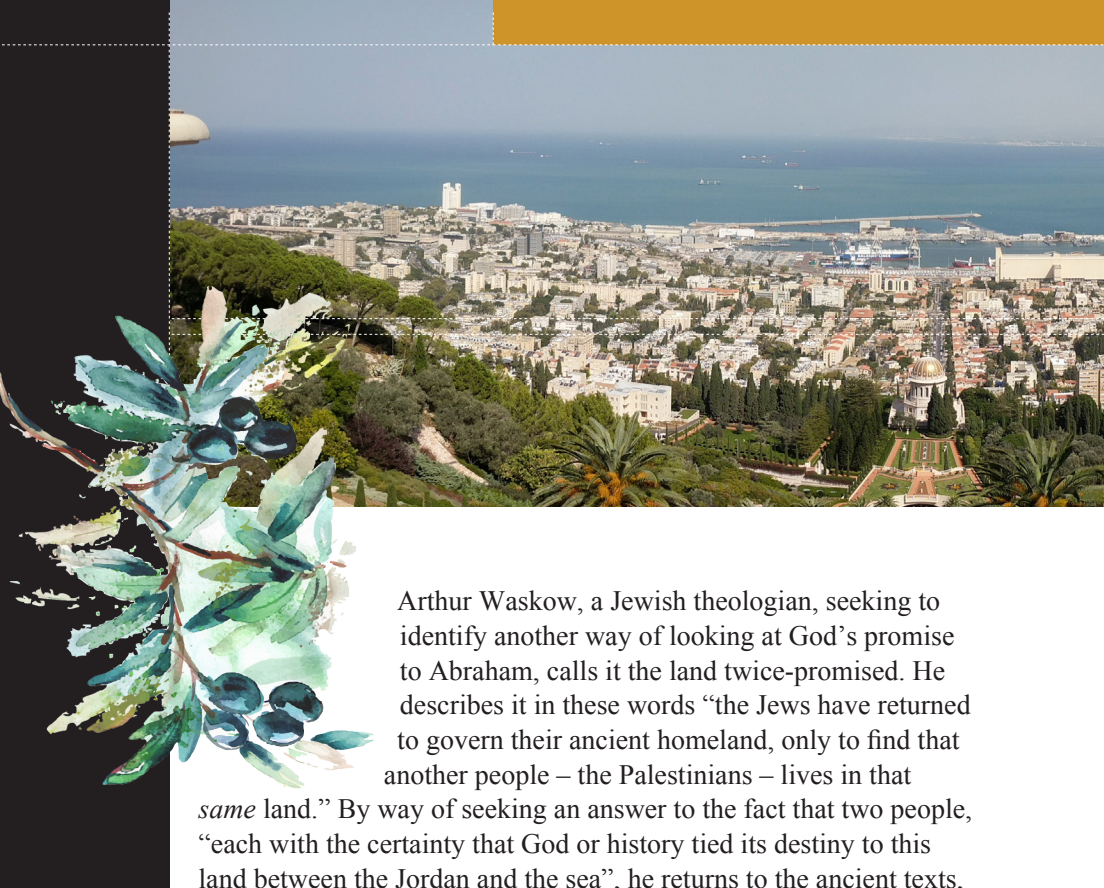
Photo: Old City of Jerusalem

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.

defined Christian Zionism and passed a recommendation that rejected “Christian Zionism as a doctrinal stance is inconsistent with Reformed doctrine and its emphasis on one covenant of grace for all peoples.” The Assembly also acknowledged “that Christian Zionism poses a significant obstacle to a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.”¹⁰

Whether Jewish Zionist or Christian Zionist, such interpretations are decidedly dangerous, in that many Palestinian people have been and continue to be killed and oppressed by the way the Bible is being used and interpreted.¹¹ Not only dangerous but such interpretations are one-sided for a number of reasons. First, they fail to recognize that both Isaac (claimed by Jews) and Ishmael (claimed by Muslims) are Abraham’s descendants.¹² Second, such interpretations fail to recognize the many inclusive claims in the Bible, i.e. God’s inclusion of other nations in this promise.¹³ Even more they fail to recognize that the biblical story is told from the perspective of one people called by God to be a holy nation. It does not mean that God loves other nations less—it simply means their stories are only told from the perspective of the Hebrew story, which we refer to as the Old Testament. What is particularly disturbing is that the story we do have in the Old Testament often affirms violence and destruction against those outside the covenant as the will of God (Deuteronomy 20:16–18; Joshua 6: 1–21).

There is a strong argument for a different understanding of the land. This understanding speaks of the land as belonging to God. Although it is found in earlier texts (Leviticus 25:23b “the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants”), it is after the Exile that a more inclusive theology of the land starts to emerge, a theology in which there is no command to drive out or annihilate, but a command to share the land with those who also inhabit it.



Arthur Waskow, a Jewish theologian, seeking to identify another way of looking at God's promise to Abraham, calls it the land twice-promised. He describes it in these words "the Jews have returned to govern their ancient homeland, only to find that another people – the Palestinians – lives in that *same* land." By way of seeking an answer to the fact that two people, "each with the certainty that God or history tied its destiny to this land between the Jordan and the sea", he returns to the ancient texts, reading there the "struggles between Abraham's two wives and their two sons as a prototype of the struggle between Jews and Arabs."¹⁴ He goes on to ask, why God would promise the same land twice to two different people. His conclusion is "...precisely because the earth has no rigid 'natural' boundaries between the lands and peoples, every people must learn to share the earth with other peoples. So the vanguard people¹⁵ must learn to share its land with another people."¹⁶

The most explicit example for Christians of an inclusive theology of the land is Luke's narration of Jesus' visit to the synagogue in his hometown, Nazareth (Luke 4: 14–30). By citing the examples of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (a Lebanese woman¹⁷) and that of the curing of Namaan the Syrian general, Luke understands Jesus as one breaking down the theology of covenant exclusiveness and extending it to include the Gentiles. The result is that the congregation who gathered that day to hear Jesus preach try to throw him off a cliff.

In a document written in 2006, *The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism*,



Photo: Haifa – a city where Israelis and Arabs live together in peaceful coexistence.

Palestinian Christians “categorically reject Christian Zionist doctrines as false teaching that corrupts the biblical message of love, justice and reconciliation.”¹⁸ In this document they set out the lens by which they read scripture. Not only do they reject an interpretation of the land from an exclusivist perspective but they name justice as the lens through which they read the biblical text. Here they explicitly name ways in which Christian Zionism is contributing to violence in the Middle East, calling upon its supporters to work for reconciliation now instead of focusing on a world yet to come. The document also contains a statement as to the principles that Palestinian Christians affirm. These include among others:

“We affirm that all people are created in the image of God. In turn they are called to honor the dignity of every human being and to respect their inalienable rights. 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 colonization, 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."¹⁹

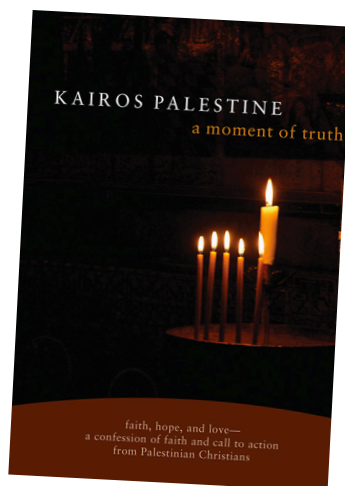
Reading the Bible from the Perspective of Justice and Peace

In *The Bible and the Palestine Israel Conflict*, Yohanna Katanacho states,

One bad biblical interpreter could be more dangerous than one hundred terrorists. We have an Arabic proverb that says one foolish person drops a stone in a well and one hundred wise people cannot get it out. It is easier to destroy or to confuse than to build or clarify, and this is exactly our experience as Palestinian followers of Jesus.²⁰

Considering this statement, Palestinian Christians have been reading scripture in a way that not only acknowledges their suffering at the hands of the occupiers, but also emphasizes justice, peace, and reconciliation.

The Kairos Document written by the leaders of the Jerusalem churches in 2009 and circulated to the international Christian community cries out to God and to us. The document describes their suffering but indicates a determination to give a word of faith, hope and love from the heart of that suffering.



For Discussion:

1. Examine the three diagrams in this study using them to reflect on your understanding of scripture.
2. Read aloud the words from the Palestinian Christians on Christian Zionism especially their commitments in the face of the support given to the occupation by brothers and sisters in Christ.
3. Read the Kairos document (<http://kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document>), viewing it as a personal cry to you, and ask what your response to its plea might be.

- ¹ Ateek, et al., *The Bible*, p. 301. For more information on Sabeel see footnote 1, study 1.
- ² W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* rev. ed. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Pub., 1997), p. 158.
- ³ Rubin Vase: This is one of the most famous optical illusions that exists. Rubin was a psychologist who created this image around 1915 who was interested in the way that images like these play around with our visual perception. <https://hubpages.com/art/Two-Faces-or-a-Vase-10-Simple-but-Wonderful-Optical-Illusions>.
- ⁴ Genesis 12:7; 15:18–21; 17:4–8; Numbers 33:50–53: This text includes the command to “drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you.” Deuteronomy 20:16–18 goes even further commanding that in the lands God is giving to you, you shall not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them.
- ⁵ Ateek, *The Bible*, p. 21.
- ⁶ Ateek, *The Bible*, p. 129.
- ⁷ Issa Amro one of the leaders of “Youth Against Settlements” August 11, 2017.
- ⁸ Ateek, *The Bible*, p. 129.
- ⁹ The 700 Club. “Pat Robertson Warns Against Dividing Jerusalem.” www.cbn.com as quoted in Ateek et al *The Bible*, p. 124.
- ¹⁰ <https://www.presbyterianrecord.ca/2012/06/07/assembly-debates-stance-on-christian-zionism-and-israel-palestine/>
- ¹¹ Ateek, et al., *The Bible*, p. 31.
- ¹² And of course the Christian claim to Abraham through Jesus Christ.
- ¹³ Deuteronomy 2:4–5; 9, 19; Book of Jonah
- ¹⁴ Waskow, *Twice-Promised*, p. 56
- ¹⁵ He defines the Jews as “vanguard people” in this way: “God wanted, wants the Jews to be a holy people, a kingdom of priests—a ‘vanguard people’ you might say. A holy people that teaches by example all the peoples how to be holy peoples.” He continues, “By ‘vanguard’ I mean a body of people that is special only because it is the first in the line of march and takes the brunt of trouble.” p. 57.
- ¹⁶ Waskow, *Twice Promised*, p. 57.
- ¹⁷ Ateek, et al., *The Bible*, pp.31–38, a sermon on Luke 4: 21 preached at the Sabeel 9th International Conference held from November 19–25, 2013 in Jerusalem.
- ¹⁸ <https://electronicintifada.net/content/jerusalem-declaration-christian-zionism/627>
- ¹⁹ file:///C:/Users/dgordon/Downloads/Ch_of_Scotland_report_on_Christian_Zionism_May_07.pdf
- ²⁰ Yohanna Katanacho, “Approaches to the Bible.” *Al-Liqa’ Journal* 37 (2011), 36–41. Also found in Ateek, et al., *The Bible*, “The Occupation of the Bible, p. 59.