

REVIEW

Gary Burge

*Jesus and the Land:
The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), xiv + 153 pp.

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Reading Gary Burge's *Jesus and the Land* while visiting Israel and the Palestinian territories with a group of Christian and Jewish clergy from Maryland last year certainly was a unique reading experience. The book prompted many conversations with others familiar with his controversial views, often introduced by the question, "Well, what do you think about it?"

In this book, two sides of the professional career of Gary Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, converge. The first side is his expertise in the New Testament, its authors, and its context. The second side is Burge's deep interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he approaches from a position strongly critical of Israel on both political and religious grounds, as seen in a number of earlier books such as *Who Are God's People in the Middle East* (1993) and *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* (2003).

The central questions for Burge in this book are how Christians should understand the competing land claims by Jews and Palestinians, and how they should respond to these claims on the basis of a New Testament theology of the land and specifically of the land of Israel. Burge realizes quite well that his theological critique of Israel and Christian theologies that support it is a minority position among his fellow Evangelical Christians to whom he addresses his book. He expects it will meet with strong opposition from the defenders of the "Holy Land" theology sympathetic to Israel who are mentioned in the subtitle of his book.

At the start, Burge introduces some fundamental complexities of the topic. He notes the importance of notions of "land" and "place" for religions and suggests that modern nation-states as well often use religious claims to legitimate contemporary political claims. He also recognizes that even one's choice of name for a place is always a challenge since few names are entirely neutral. For example, he asks if Christians should speak of the Holy Land, of Israel, or of Palestine. Any choice betrays a particular point of view (p. xiv). Burge opts for "Israel-Palestine" as the most "inclusive" term.

The first chapter of his book gives a survey of the biblical and second Temple period views that form the background against which New Testament authors forged their notions of land. Burge recognizes that there is the important biblical connection between covenant and promises of land, and there are the many stories about possession and loss of land. The experience of the exile made the notion of "land" even more central, and, he argues, it presented diaspora Jews with the question: is it possible to be a faithful Jew outside of the land? In an effort to demonstrate the vitality of Judaism "without a necessary territorial base," he points to the views of Philo and Josephus. He says they "entirely redefined" the notion of the land. Rather than actual

territory, it stands for the knowledge and wisdom of God or a stage of development for the soul on its way to God (pp. 22-24). Though he notes the continuing attachment of many diaspora Jews to the land of Israel (e.g., financial support for the Temple; a desire to be buried there), Burge emphasizes the size of the diaspora and apparent comfort of Jews there. Though Burge is seldom explicit in his exegesis here about modern political implications, the reader is of course aware that he has the state of Israel in mind when presenting ancient Jews' positive views of the diaspora.

The bulk of his study focuses on New Testament texts. His interpretations are largely intended to prompt Christians "to rethink land and its value," especially the value of the land of Israel, as part of his religious critique of Christians who support the modern state of Israel (p. xii). He analyzes the Synoptic Gospels (chapter three), John (chapter four), Acts (chapter five), Paul's writings (chapter six), and other New Testament books (chapter seven). He admits there are texts that roughly reflect an attachment to the land of Israel. He says Jesus is certainly in agreement with the "geographical consciousness" of the biblical notion of land. However, Burge also observes that Jesus is "surprisingly silent with regard to the territorial aspirations and politics of his day" (p. 28). He rejects contemporary "land theologies." This tension in Burge's interpretation appears in his discussion of a central saying in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth / land" (Matthew 5:5) (pp. 33-35). Interestingly, Burge admits that the word usually translated "earth" most likely means "land," as in land of Israel. However, he says Jesus' main point is that the meek, not nationalist or revolutionary Jews, will inherit the land. Does this mean that Jesus affirms territorialization? Burge is uncomfortable with this view but admits that Matthew's Jesus does not denounce the land itself. Burge therefore tries to minimize Jesus' interest in it and to demonstrate his break with other Jews' more favorable views: "He is reticent with regards to debates about the land. He expresses no *overt* affirmation" of it (p. 40).

Burge argues for a stronger critique of land theology in John. He focuses on passages where Jesus seems directly opposed to more favorable Jewish ideas about the land. In that Gospel, Jesus becomes the holy place of God instead of the Temple (John 4). Also, Burge gives a controversial exegesis of the "song of the vineyard" in John 15. Whereas formerly the vines stood for the Jews and the vineyard symbolized the land of Israel, John, Burge says, makes Jesus the true vine. The vineyard ceases to be the land; the vines cease to be the Jews. Jesus therefore spiritualizes the land and empties it of the meaning it had for Jews. These passages in John are useful for Burge's overall argument: "The land as holy territory therefore should now recede from the concerns of God's people" (pp. 52-56). While he admits that there is a continuing presence in other New Testament texts of some types of attachment to the land, Burge argues that the view spiritualizing—and, therefore, relativizing—the land is more prominent and takes place in different ways and in other texts in the New Testament. He strongly emphasizes texts where it is reinterpreted or abrogated, as in John's claim that Jesus has become the holy place of God, or in the argument in Hebrews that the land was "a metaphor perhaps" but that ultimately God rejects a focus on actual land (p. 100). Again, whether stated or implied, his goal is to weaken Christian religious and political support for the state of Israel by emphasizing New Testament texts that minimize any connection to the land of Israel.

I think that Burge's interpretations reflect strong traditions in Roman Catholic and Orthodox theological approaches to the concept of land, certainly more so than in the Evangelical world with which he is most familiar. In that sense, I would say that Burge provides a welcome corrective to the prevailing "Holy Land" theology in these circles. Also, his point of view has much in common with the Christological approach that is predominant among Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Christians in the Middle East: they see the land not as a material but as a spiritual reality present in Christ. But I am worried that it is the anti-Jewish theology of the Fourth Gospel that gives him

the main key for his interpretation. Also, though I sympathize with Burge's approach, both theologically and politically, I am afraid that it does not entirely do justice to the full breadth of the New Testament witnesses. When one wants to correct a prevailing misdirection, it is always difficult not to veer too much in the opposite direction. Burge's Johannine Christology certainly is useful for challenging Christian Zionists and their land theology, as he sets out to do in the final chapter. However, he selectively emphasizes this theme (unfortunately, a theme that will be further developed in an anti-Jewish direction in patristic and medieval Christianity) and barely does justice to the much wider spectrum of views in the Hebrew Bible, post-biblical Judaism, and the New Testament.