

Nicholas R. Brown
For the Nation:
Jesus, the Restoration of Israel
and Articulating a Christian Ethic
of Territorial Governance
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CHRISTOPHER M. LEIGHTON

cleighton@icjs.org

Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies, Baltimore, MD 21204

Nicholas Brown has provided a thoroughly researched and elegantly constructed volume that upends long-standing assumptions and opens up vexing questions about the land of Israel within the life of Jesus and the early Church. Brown has tightly packed within two hundred pages an argument that contests interpretative traditions that are deeply embedded in both the academy and the Church. Brown's work will most immediately claim the attention of readers who make contemporary New Testament scholarship a part of their regular diet. However, the issues that he frames carry immense significance for Christians who are struggling to come to terms with a history that continues to shape political and theological sensibilities about the current Palestinian-Israeli impasse and the ethics of territorial governance.

Brown sets the stage for his inquiry by offering a brief overview of the scholarship that emerged out of the "Third Quest" for the historical Jesus, a term coined by N.T. Wright in the early 1990s. This historical study situated Jesus and the early Church within the context of late Second Temple Judaism and helped reverse a noxious legacy that had pitted Jesus over and against Judaism and his Jewish contemporaries. Instead of dismissing Second Temple Judaism as a depleted and calcified religion, these New Testament scholars recognized an ancient community brimming with vibrant and diverse expressions. They noted that the Jesus movement emerged out of this complex Jewish matrix; indeed, the movement was unimaginable without the innovative revolutions enacted by Jewish groups, most especially the Pharisees.

This strain of contemporary scholarship provides the foundation on which Brown builds his case. He advances his investigations by training his gaze on the eschatological visions that animated Second Temple Judaism and, by extension, the hopes and dreams of Jesus and his followers. Brown charts the views of some

notable Protestant scholars who attempt to reconstruct the kind of future that these ancient communities imagined, evident in their narrative constructs about the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

Brown proceeds by systematically parsing the conclusions that W.D. Davies, Marcus Borg, and N.T. Wright reached in their surveys of Jewish literature from this period, most especially those writings that expressed the expectation of a radical transformation in the world order. Briefly summarized, the restorational themes of Second Temple Judaism include (1) the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, (2) the return of exiles from the Diaspora, (3) the re-establishment of Davidic leadership, (4) the reconstitution of the twelve tribes, and (5) the submission / salvation of the Gentiles (p. 3). Yet this vision of an eschatological kingdom where justice and peace are fully embodied was inseparable from the restoration of Jews within the land of Israel. The future that was etched into the hearts and minds of the Jewish people was barren and uninhabitable without territorial grounding.

According to all three of these NT scholars, Jesus overthrows this paradigm by uncoupling his own eschatological hopes from the reclamation of the land of Israel. They maintain that the arrival of the kingdom of God entails the repudiation of a Jewish nationalism that perpetuates militaristic violence and ethnocentrism. In contrast to the predominant Jewish blueprint, Jesus champions a path of individual transformation where compassion and inclusivity eclipse the communal demands of holiness and purity. A state of ethical praxis and mystical communion with God replaces Jewish expectations of a territorial restoration. Differently stated, the land of Israel is spiritualized, and Jesus becomes the locus of redemption here and in the world to come. Dwelling within the Body of Christ eclipses "being in the land as the ideal life" (p. 23).

This landless interpretation of the kingdom is presented as an essential achievement that distinguishes Jesus from his Jewish contemporaries. Indeed, proclamations about the kingdom of God that elide territorial expectations are presented as an indispensable reorientation that removes a central obstacle to the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles. Freed from the attachment to a particular chunk of real estate, the early Church defined a heavenly kingdom without geographical boundaries and so became radically inclusive (as illustratively reflected, for example, in Galatians 3:28).

This reading of Jesus' eschatology dominates the academy and the mainline Protestant Church, and Brown shoulders the daunting task of overturning this tradition of interpretation. His argument is multi-pronged and aims to expose the shortcomings of the a-territorial position on scriptural, ethical, and theological grounds. The centerpiece of the book is a demonstration of the depth and breadth of the territorial eschatology within Jewish literature. Brown directs particular attention to Jeremiah, Isaiah, the book of *Jubilees*, and *Psalms of Solomon*. He then scrutinizes a series of New Testament texts to demonstrate that Jesus and his early followers were aligned with these restorational visions of the future. He builds this case with his readings of the Beatitudes ("Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"), the Lord's Prayer, and Jesus' proclamation of the Jubilee in

Luke 4. Each passage is enlisted to demonstrate that God's coming kingdom is anchored to the land of Israel.

Furthermore, Brown notes that de-territorialized readings slide in the direction of a Gnosticism that denigrates the Creation and sidesteps the ethical rigors of governance in the midst of multiple ethnicities and conflicting interests. Scholars such as John Howard Yoder aim to transcend these tensions by valorizing a diaspora existence as the precondition for Christians who strive for a non-violent and peaceable kingdom. Yet a broad array of socio-economic issues revolves around the just stewardship of the land, and an ungrounded ethic swerves into spiritual abstractions far removed from the earthy challenges of adjudicating environmental and political disputes.

Finally, these interpretations are difficult to reconcile with a theology that takes embodiment seriously. Just as Christians claim that God is uniquely disclosed in the particularity of the man from Nazareth, many Jews insist that living in the land of Israel reveals dimensions of a Torah-observant life that cannot be realized anywhere else on the globe. Both make scandalous claims about the ways in which God moves through the particular to reach the universal. The coherence and integrity of the scriptural witness collapse if the particular is sacrificed on the altar of the universal. Or in Brown's words, "Paradoxically then to deny the territorial particularity of Israel's kingdom is to deny the universal sweep and scope of its covenant" (p. 111).

More often than not a de-territorialized reading of the scriptures reinstitutes a version of Christian supersessionism. Once Jesus is set up as an opponent of Israel's restorational vision, the stage is set for branding the Jewish people as idolatrously attached to the land. Justice and peace then demand that the followers of Jesus transcend the carnal bonds linking the Jewish people to the land of Israel. The Zionist enterprise is framed as the inexorable agency of injustice.

Brown is keenly aware that Protestants are becoming increasingly polarized in their assessments of the land and peoples of Israel. Those who take their lead from biblical scholars such as Gary Burge and Stephen Sizer routinely denounce the State of Israel for its failures to live up to the ethical standards of the prophets, and they repudiate any claims regarding the sacredness of the land of Israel. At the other end of the spectrum, Christian Zionists, such as John Hagee, argue that the State of Israel plays an instrumental role in ushering in God's Kingdom. Any criticism of Israel's settlement policies is therefore impugned as an act of apostasy and an expression of anti-Semitism.

How then do Christians avoid an interpretive trajectory that reinforces an enduring legacy of supersessionism without then slipping into a fundamentalist camp that endorses any and every policy of the Israeli government regardless of the consequences? Brown insists that a reading of the biblical narrative that affirms territorial aspirations offers important resources to advance an ethic of just governance. This approach resists the extremes and serves to counter political and theological polarization. He invokes the work of Michael Walzer to champion the ideal of "reiterative universalism." As Walzer observes, every nation aims to build a vibrant sense of "one out of the many." Yet "this unity can be achieved in

very different ways: by accommodating difference (as in the case of religious tolerance) as well as repressing it, by inclusion as well as forced assimilation, negotiation as well as coercion, federal or corporate arrangements as well as centralized states" (p. 197).

A preposterous leap of faith is required to imagine that the restoration of the land of Israel will serve as the site where the kingdom of God will take hold and from whence peace will reverberate outward, transforming the entire world. Brown maintains that the biblical witness cradles an extravagant promise: a vision of the future is etched into our scriptures that can inform and shape ethical conduct of both individuals and nations in the here and now.

How are we to embody this biblical inheritance so that just governance might bring the current conflict to a peaceful conclusion? Well, Brown has yet to plant this possibility on firm soil, and we'll await his next volume for greater clarification. Readers will therefore emerge from this book with more questions than they had when they began. Can the religious sensibilities shaped by a grounded reading of the scriptures mesh with the ideals and behaviors of a liberal democracy? What critical dispositions and disciplines do our scriptural ethics make possible or inhibit? To what extent can Jews, Christians, and Muslims share holy land, and how do they guard against the eruption of new crusading and colonial ventures? Yet, if the divine shows up in the most unlikely of places and among the most unlikely of peoples, perhaps this particular land and the particular peoples who battle for the inheritance will somehow, somehow serve to break the spell of cynicism and become a light to the nations. In this regard, Brown's book reinstates extravagant expectations. Our stories may begin anywhere, but they are seen as ultimately converging somewhere with a known address, a place that, judged by the world's standards, seems impossible.