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

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treatment of Matt 25:14–30 and Luke 12:13–21). Burge's work would also be helped by giving a summary of and/or interacting with various hermeneutical approaches and theological systems (e.g. various forms of dispensationalism and covenant theology; the NT use of the OT), because they play a significant role in developing a theology of land. The brevity of this work, therefore, leaves something to be desired.

Second, some will discard his NT conclusions because they lack sufficient OT warrant. Conversely, those who agree with his conclusions will likely wish he had spent more time examining how the OT develops the theme of land within itself before jumping to intertestamental literature and the NT. Many will not likely agree with his treatment of the OT (less than eleven pages!), because this is where the OT promises to Israel are given and developed. This lack of exegetical support can be seen in his treatment of Rom 4:13. The promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world finds more support than in Gen 12:3. For example, Gen 26:3–4 has the unique plural "lands" and, when read in conjunction with Gen 22:17–18, makes the connection to Abraham's seed who will possess/inherit the gate of his enemies. Thus, Paul is not spiritualizing texts when he claims that Abraham and his offspring would be heir of the world. In other words, Paul is putting together the parts of the covenant and, as a result, sees Abraham inheriting the world as people, both Jew and Gentile, come to faith in Jesus Christ. This idea is further developed across the OT with the formation of Israel, possession of the land under Joshua, and highlight of Israel's life under David and Solomon (not to mention the theme of rest). Therefore, while the Promised Land was a specific, regional territory, there are sufficient reasons from the OT to conclude that it anticipated something more, which is described with Edenic terms and imagery.

Finally, Burge does not give sufficient attention to eschatology and the biblical motif of the new creation. When popular eschatology is often speculative, sensational, and divorced from good biblical theology, there is a need to discuss the eschatological hope that will come at the end of the age, when the present creation will give way to a (re)new(ed) creation. The theme of land, then, fits nicely into the wider scope of biblical theology and eschatology. More specifically, the land promised to Abraham, which was inhabited and lost throughout Israel's history, is important because it picks up the place of God's people that was lost in Eden, thus serving as a subsequent place in God's unfolding plan. Furthermore, this place anticipates and prepares the way for the coming of Jesus Christ, in whom all of the blessings of the land are found as a result of inaugurating a new era of salvation history. And finally, those united to Christ by faith in this era of salvation history await their final place with God, the new creation, to which the land of promise pointed.

With these weaknesses aside, Burge has provides a helpful resource in understanding how the NT challenges "Holy Land" theology. No one, of course, will agree with all of Burge's conclusions. Still, we can be grateful for a work that takes Scripture on its own terms, puts forth a cohesive message, and applies it to today's world.

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Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology. By Gary M. Burge. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010, xiv + 153 pp., \$21.99 paper.

Gary Burge is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College Graduate School. He has been best known for his work on the Fourth Gospel (most notably, *Interpreting*

the Gospel of John [Guides to New Testament Exegesis; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992]; *John* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000]; and *John: The Gospel of Life* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008]). For some, though, what is not as well known is that, going all the way back to undergraduate study at the American University in Beirut in the early 1970s, Burge has had a deep passion for the Middle East and the people there, especially those in the Palestinian churches. The present volume plows similar ground to his earlier books on this subject: *Who Are God's People in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); and *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2003). More on this later in the review.

Several things attracted me to writing this review. First, my own background in relation to the Middle East goes back almost as far as Burge's. My first trip there was during seminary, in 1974. In the process, I was shaken by shelling nearby while in the airport in Beirut. Second, parallel to Burge's experience (see p. 112), I too have eaten lunch at Jerusalem University College, talking with pastors and teachers from across the United States. Third, in our earlier publishing careers, Burge and I often contributed to the same projects (e.g. *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible, Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments, and Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*). Fourth, a book to which I contributed a chapter (entitled "Israel and the Nations in God's Redemptive Plan" in *Israel, the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God's Promises* [ed. H. Wayne House; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998] 283–97) is included in Burge's annotated "Further reading" section (pp. 141–43). More about this also later in the review.

Jesus and the Land contains an introduction and eight concise chapters, followed by endnotes (pp. 132–40), two listings for "Further reading" (pp. 141–45), the latter of which is focused on "The Israel-Palestine Conflict" (pp. 143–45). The last feature of the book is an "Index of biblical and ancient sources" used in the book (pp. 147–53).

In his introduction (pp. ix–xiv), Burge helpfully illustrates how widespread is the emotional tie among humanity to land, setting up the fact that both Jews and those of Arab extraction live in the land that is known geographically as Palestine. He closes by stating that he prefers "the inclusive term, Israel-Palestine" to "Promised Land" or "Holy Land." The rest of the book explains that choice.

Chapter 1, "The Biblical Heritage" (pp. 1–14), is a sketchy overview of the OT view of land, the promise to Abraham, and what happened to the Jews long-term, due to their disobedience to the Lord. From the section "After the Exile" to the end of the chapter (pp. 9–14), Burge primarily discusses the Jewish rabbinical writings rather than Scripture, but it is not clear at this juncture where he is going with that methodology.

In chapter 2, "Diaspora Judaism and the Land" (pp. 15–24), Burge cites nothing but extrabiblical Jewish writings, notably Philo and Josephus, who muted or spiritualized the land promises to Israel. Where Burge is moving in his argument becomes clearer with this statement: "Here we see that Judaism's 'Land Theology' has been entirely redefined" (p. 24).

Since it is also the title of the whole book, I was initially confused that chapter 3 is titled "Jesus and the Land" (pp. 25–42). Yet, as I read in the book, I began to "get it." In chapter 3, Burge concludes that Jesus "expresses no overt affirmation of first-century territorial theologies. He does not repeat Judaism's call to land ownership" (p. 40; italics his).

Burge clarifies the title to chapter 3 in chapter 4, "The Fourth Gospel and the Land" (pp. 43–57). Here, Burge's long familiarity with the Johannine Literature is on display. The overall point of his discussion here is: "In the Fourth Gospel, the land is subsumed within John's theology of Christological replacement/fulfillment" (p. 57). In other words,

in Burge's view, the Gospel of John teaches that Jesus *replaces* the Temple, the feasts, and any perceived claim the Jews had to the land of Israel.

Frankly, chapter 5, "The Book of Acts and the Land" (pp. 58–72), chapter 6, "Paul and the promises to Abraham" (pp. 73–94), and chapter 7, "Developments beyond Paul" (pp. 95–109) do little to add to Burge's earlier argument—they just "Amen!" it. Simply put, Burge asserts that, since these books, making up the majority of the NT, do not lay out an obvious spotlighted "territorial theology," they must not have one.

Chapter 8, "Land, Theology, and the Church" (pp. 110–31), is hardly a typical concluding chapter. It is as long as any chapter in the book. Undoubtedly, the reason for that is, besides briefly summarizing his conclusions in "Thinking Christianly about the land" (pp. 125–31), Burge invests considerable space in describing and critiquing "Christian Zionism," especially its distinctive "territorial theology" and other troubling features (pp. 112–25).

The perceived strengths of *Jesus and the Land* are several. First, it is well written and highly readable. Second, it makes a powerful cumulative case. Third, it does so in brief compass, which means that the reader is unlikely to "not see the forest for the trees." Fourth, Burge's expertise in both the relevant ancient Jewish sources and the Fourth Gospel are impressive. Fifth, the annotated bibliography is quite helpful, even if not balanced. Sixth, to a significant degree, Burge's description and assessment of "Christian Zionism" is largely on target, even if not specific enough at certain points. Seventh, Burge's view that Jesus replaces the land promise, though the Jews still have a salvific future in God's plan (see his discussion of Romans 9–11 on pp. 87–91), offers a creative *via media* between classic covenantal "replacement theology" (i.e. the church replaces Israel in all aspects) and classic dispensationalism's insistence on the ongoing unconditional land aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Yet, *Jesus and the Land* is not without serious weaknesses. First—and possibly in an attempt to keep the book shorter—Burge employs a frustrating tendency to engage in "front-end-load" exegesis. What I mean by that is he spends more time, and gives more biblical examples, in his discussion of passages in the Gospels, only to repeatedly read earlier conclusions onto his later passages in a "we've seen this before" wave of the hand. Second—and parallel to the first concern—is what amounts to the widespread use of argument from silence. Burge effectively alleges that, because there is not a ringing obvious re-statement of the OT land promises in the NT, they must have been "replaced." However, he offers no satisfying answer to the "forever" wording of the Abrahamic promises, as what Walter Kaiser championed as "antecedent (i.e. existing, and assumed by later writers, biblical) theology." Third, Burge ignores (i.e. absent from his index of scriptural usage), or inadequately treats, numerous relevant biblical passages, the most glaring of which are: (1) Genesis 17, 25 (dealing with the Arab peoples descended from Abraham); (2) Deuteronomy 28–30; (3) Ezekiel 36–37; (4) several passages in Daniel, particularly the phrase "abomination of desolation" said to be "standing in the holy place" (i.e. most naturally understood as "in the Temple") in (5) Matt 24:15, just before the wording (6) "those in Judea" (Matt 24:16) and "at that time there will be great tribulation, the kind that hasn't taken place from the beginning of the world" (Matt 24:21), plus (7) the references to "the beautiful land" (Dan 11:41) and (8) "the beautiful holy mountain" just prior to the "great tribulation" (Dan 12:1) and resurrection at the end of the age (Dan 12:2; see 11:40); (9) Rev 11:8 ("where also their Lord was crucified" [i.e. Jerusalem]); and (10) "the *place* called in Hebrew, Armageddon" (Rev 16:16; italics mine). Fourth, at several points, Burge's citation of Jewish writers, like Philo or Josephus, or rabbinical sources, leaves the impression that they not only reflect the thought of some prominent Jews of the day about "the land," especially in regard to accommodating the Diaspora and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but

that they were *correct*. However, why does that make any more sense than to conclude that Catholic theologians of the medieval era, who developed the Catholic sacramental and scholastic theological systems, were right because they went almost unchallenged until Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, or that postmillennialism is correct because it was the prevailing eschatological view of earlier great periods of revival? Fifth, Burge—purposely or not—implies that any who defend the “forever” land promises to Israel are at least borderline “Christian Zionists.”

Relatedly, Burge’s annotation in regard to *Israel: The Land and the People*, mentioned above, surprised me. While Burge is correct that “the land promises for modern Israel [are] often used by Christian Zionists to buttress modern political theologies” (p. 142), that wording leaves open highly misleading implications. Using myself as an example, though I do see biblical significance in the modern state of Israel, I am far from a Christian Zionist. Like Burge, I believe Israel should be held responsible for the wrongness and brutality of some of their actions (though the Palestinians, particularly the terrorists among them, should also). Also, because of the secondary conditionality (i.e. the aspect of obedience) seen in the development of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 22:16–18; 26:4–5), as well as several other relevant OT passages, I conclude that Israel could easily be removed from the land again by God (then later restored and kicked out again), as they have been twice before in history, because of their ongoing disobedience and unbelief.

Before closing, though neither a strength nor weakness, it is worth asking, “Why would someone write *three* books on a topic as specialized as this?” After all, it is not like Burge is writing contribution after contribution on John for different series. My sense is that, as noted at the beginning of this review, this issue truly is a passion for Gary Burge, even much more than an academic subject. If that is correct, *Jesus and the Land* should perhaps be read more as an impassioned plea by a scholar than as scholarly argumentation.

In conclusion, despite the problems discussed above, this is a significant volume, the best I have seen of the general anti-Christian Zionist perspective currently available. I would recommend it, but with a caveat: *Expect a compact, attractively-packaged, impassioned presentation of Burge’s “Jesus replaces the land promises to Israel” theology, but not a measured objective treatment*. In saying that, however, I am concerned as to whether many students or laypersons who have not carefully studied the biblical covenants and had an extensive exegetical exposure to broader biblical prophecy will have the discernment to track Burge’s hermeneutical/expositional sleight-of-hand (“now you see it, now you do not”) and selectivity in regard to what scriptural passages he chose to treat (or omit).

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