

Editor's Note: This three-part series first appeared throughout the February, March, and April 2015 issues of our monthly paper (click [HERE](#) to subscribe). As we approach the nine-month mark of present hostilities between Hamas and Israel, which [erupted last October](#), we are reprinting this series as a means of addressing the current conflict and placing it within the much broader Biblical and historical context that is crucial for understanding the subject.

Catholic Family News remains grateful to Gary Taphorn, a retired lieutenant colonel in the United States Army, for writing this series and sharing his expertise with our readers. Mr. Taphorn served for five years in American embassies in the Middle East and has a Master of Arts degree in Arab Studies from Georgetown University. His purpose in this series, as he notes, is to “explore the Biblical and moral underpinning for the establishment and policies of the modern state of Israel, especially as they relate to the land,” and ultimately, to explain the origins and tragic consequences of Zionism, which “has not only been a disaster for the native Palestinian inhabitants but has been entirely opposed to the Old Testament covenant, not to mention the words of Christ.” — Matt Gaspers, Managing Editor

Introduction

Among the highlights of the early tenure of Pope Francis was his visit to Israel in May 2014. This relatively uneventful (some would say fruitless) trip was a recent reminder of the intractable conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, which has largely disappeared from global headlines with the birth of ISIS in Syria and Iraq and the resurgence of an irredentist Russia under Vladimir Putin. The Israelis, for their part, were perhaps hypersensitive about a number of Francis's actions, such as his decision to hold a [photo-op](#) along the Israeli-constructed security barrier against a backdrop of Palestinian graffiti.

Two weeks later, on June 8, Francis was hosting Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in the Vatican Gardens at a prayer service for peace in the Holy Land. One month later to the day, the Pope's efforts for peace would also be proved fruitless as Israel and Hamas began yet another full-scale war in the Gaza Strip. Before the cease-fire on August 26, Israeli casualties totaled 70 killed (64 soldiers and six civilians) while several hundred Jewish families displaced temporarily out-of-range of Hamas rockets. Not surprisingly, among the Palestinians in Gaza the suffering was exponentially worse. Fatalities exceeded 2,100, mostly civilians and including about 500 children. Additionally, [according to *The Guardian*](#), “at least 11,000 people were injured and more than 17,000 homes destroyed or badly damaged. Around a third of Gaza's 1.8 million people have been displaced, many now living in United Nations shelters. Schools, hospitals,

factories, farms, mosques and infrastructure such as power and water plants were hit. Reconstruction could take up to 10 years....”

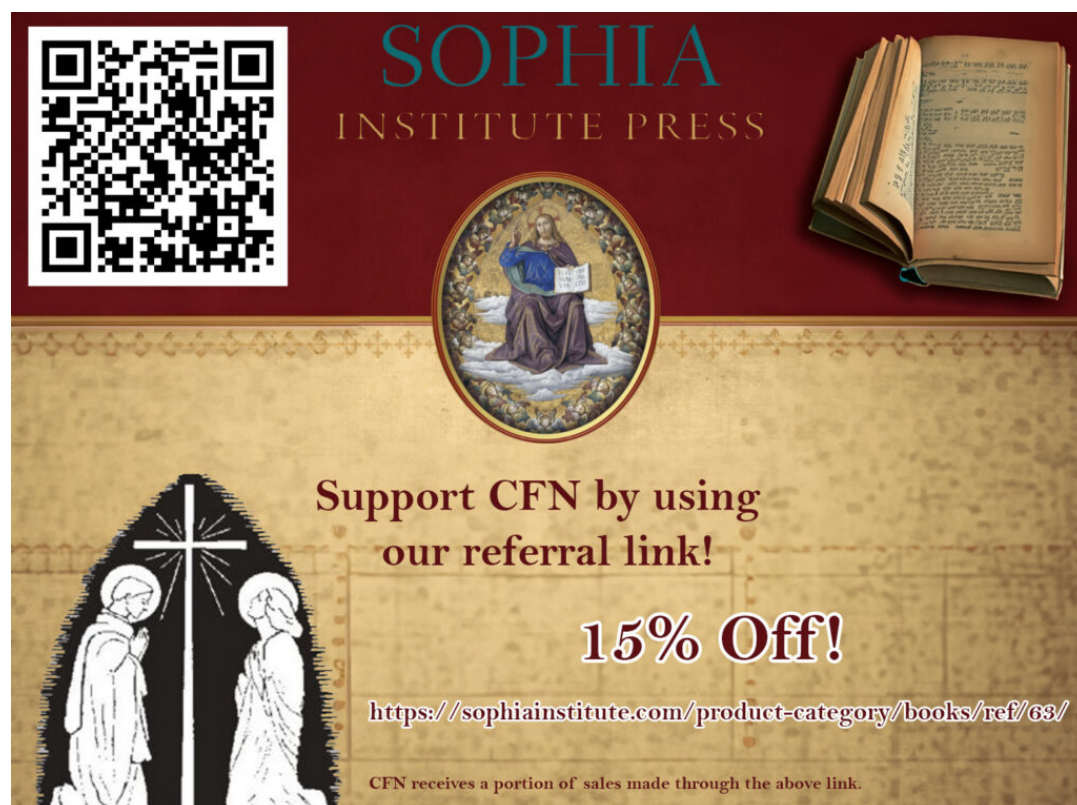
Israel’s lack of proportionality in its military actions over the decades, such as most recently in Gaza, has been widely noted. Still, no reasonable (e.g., Catholic) observer would deny in principle the government of Israel the right to use force to protect its territory and its citizens. But what exactly is Israel’s territory and who are its citizens? Or, put in Biblical terms, what is the “Promised Land,” to whom did God promise it, under what conditions, and is that promise still valid today?

This three-part article will explore the Biblical and moral underpinning for the establishment and policies of the modern state of Israel, especially as they relate to the land. Here in Part One, we will address the issue of “land” in its Old Testament roots. This term occurs over 1,700 times in the Old Testament of the English Bible, reflecting its criticality to God’s covenant with the Jews.[\[1\]](#) Next month, in Part Two, we will examine the concept of land in the New Testament and fast-forward to the birth of Zionism (a land-based movement, after all) in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Finally, in Part Three, we will survey the issue of land in the policies and actions of the state of Israel, both during its early years and after the pivotal 1967 war, which resulted in the phenomenon of “occupied territories.” Few contemporary issues are as widely documented as the creation and history of modern Israel and few topics are as contentious as Israel’s relations with its neighbors, so we will attempt to be both brief and balanced in our analysis. That said, the issue of land is hugely complex and tinted with many shades of meaning — linguistic, geographic, cultural, and even theological. Finally, we citizens of modern western societies, who typically have weak ties to the land of our family heritage, must learn to grasp the existential link between the land and traditional cultures, such as have existed in the Middle East from time immemorial.

Early Genesis

A thoughtful reading of the first chapters of Genesis will reveal the importance of land as a blessing for mankind within the divine plan. The Garden of Eden was, after all, a plot of land; we don’t know its size and we have only tantalizing clues as to its location (Gen 2:10-14).[\[2\]](#) However, we can be assured that the garden provided for every need of Adam and Eve, including their food and their security. After their original sin, God’s punishments included ostracism from this land. After Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, we note that God’s punishment entailed turning the very land from a blessing into a curse: “You are placed under a curse and can no longer farm the soil. It has soaked up your brother’s blood as if it had opened its mouth to receive it when you killed him. If you try to grow crops, the

soil will not produce anything: you will be a homeless wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4:11). Finally, in the time of Noah, we can see that the punishment of the Deluge deprived all mankind — and even the animals — of the stability, comfort, and fruits of the land (Gen 7:21-23). Thus, the Bible provides us with three early examples that man’s relationship with the land depends on his fidelity to God.



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Abraham and the Promised Land

After the great flood, God’s covenant with Noah (Gen. 9) gave “expression to the principle of the divine economy toward the ‘nations’, in other words, towards men grouped ‘*in their lands*’ [emphasis added], each with [its] own language, by their families, in their nations.”^[3] Foremost among these “nations” would be the Jews, the descendants of Abraham. At the ripe old age of 75, Abraham was summoned by God to leave his homeland in “the city of Ur in Babylonia to go to the land of Canaan” (Gen 11:31). Eventually, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham involving the land. He said, “I promise to give your descendants all this land from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates River, including the lands of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites” (Gen 15:18-21). When Abraham was 99 years old, God would renew this promise: “I will keep My promise to you and to your descendants in future generations as an everlasting covenant. I will be your God and the

God of your descendants. I will give to you and to your descendants this land in which you are now a foreigner. The whole land of Canaan will belong to your descendants forever, and I will be their God” (Gen 17:7-8). But the following verse (Gen 17:9) requires something in return: “God said to Abraham, ‘You also must agree to keep the covenant with Me, both you and your descendants in future generations.’” God would repeat the covenant promise to Abraham’s son Isaac (Gen 26:2-4) and to his grandson Jacob (Gen 28:13-15). As Protestant author Dr. Gary Burge has pointed out, in each of these instances, four themes are clear: “(a) Abraham will receive land as an everlasting possession; (b) Abraham’s posterity will become a great nation in this place; (c) this promise is directly tied to the covenant; and (d) all the people of the earth will be blessed by this promise.”[\[4\]](#)

Entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land

Following their 400-year exile in Egypt, God called Moses to lead the children of Abraham to occupy the Promised Land, no longer as a family but as a nation. As Moses prepared his people for their crossing of the Jordan River and entrance into the “land flowing with milk and honey,” he contrasted their new home with their former land in Egypt. “The land that you are about to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, where you lived before. There, when you planted grain, you had to work hard to irrigate the fields; but the land that you are about to enter is a land of mountains and valleys, a land watered by rain. The Lord your God takes care of this land and watches over it throughout the year” (Deut. 11:10-12). In other words, without a central river system, such as the Nile, to water the crops, the Jews would have to depend directly on God’s providence to send the necessary rainfall for their survival in the Promised Land. This would present another leap of faith for the Israelites, much like their dependence on manna for food in the Sinai Desert.[\[5\]](#)

After the death of Moses on the east bank of the Jordan River, the Israelites’ entry into the Promised Land, still known as Canaan, is described in the Book of Joshua. Rightly called the bloodiest book in the Bible, Joshua records the capture of “the whole land,” beginning with Jericho, and the defeat of “all the kings” and peoples of the various Amorite and Canaanite factions west of the Jordan River. On several occasions, Joshua commands that the Israelite army “put everyone to death” or “spare no one” in the cities of Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir (Jos. 10). In each instance, Joshua is following a command of the Lord given through Moses (Jos. 11:15). The Book of Joshua also recounts the settlement of the land by the Israelites, with each of the twelve tribes being assigned a certain well-defined territory, some of it east of the Jordan River, which had been the staging area for their invasion of Canaan.

God's Covenant in Context

The remainder of the Old Testament is peppered with further references to the land, some of which we will consider below. However, it may be appropriate here to note that modern Zionists and their Christian Zionist allies typically treat the Book of Joshua, in conjunction with God's earlier revelations to the patriarchs, as *prima facie* evidence of a permanent and unilateral commitment of designated land to the Jewish people, a sort of divine real estate contract. Taken in isolation, for example, Genesis 17:8 ("...The whole land of Canaan will belong to your descendants forever...") seems quite definitive. Such a simplistic view ignores the fact that the covenant with God is *conditional*, i.e., it requires a response agreeable to the divine will.

Moses himself warned the Israelites about the behavior that God would demand of them as a *quid pro quo* in the covenant. In Leviticus, he cautions the people that their possession of the land would be dependent on their fidelity to God's moral law: "Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these [immoral] acts, for that is how the pagans made themselves unclean, those pagans who lived in the land before you and whom the Lord is driving out so that you can go in. Their actions made the land unclean, and so the Lord is punishing the land and making it reject the people who lived there. They did all these disgusting things and made the land unclean, but you must not do them. All of you, whether Israelites *or foreigners living with you*, must keep the Lord's laws and commands, and *then the land will not reject you, as it rejected the pagans who lived there before you* [author's italics]. You know that whoever does any of these disgusting things will no longer be considered one of God's people" (Lev 18:24-29).[\[6\]](#)

On the eve of the Israelite entry into Canaan, the warning of Moses to his people turns into virtually a stark threat, as conveyed in Deuteronomy: "Even when you have been in the land a long time and have children and grandchildren, do not sin by making for yourselves an idol in any form at all. This is evil in the Lord's sight, and it will make Him angry. I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that, *if you disobey me, you will soon disappear from the land* [emphasis added]. You will not live very long in the land across the Jordan that you are about to occupy. You will be completely destroyed. The Lord will scatter you among other nations, where only a few of you will survive" (Deut. 4:25-27).

In summary, the Torah provides us with three crucial characteristics of the Promised Land. First, in the words of Gary Burge, "the land is not a possession that may be enjoyed without reference to God. Possessing this land is contingent on Israel's ongoing faithfulness to God and obedience to His law...It is not a possession that can be held independently."[\[7\]](#) Secondly, the land is a divine gift that has "expectations for covenant holiness and justice.

God is watching this land. He has personal expectations for this land. It is a land that should evoke memories of His own holiness.”[8] Last is the issue of ownership. “In a profound sense, Israel never ‘owns’ the land of promise. *God owns this land* [emphasis in original]. Leviticus [25:23] uses this idea to explain why the land cannot be sold permanently to others: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, *for the land is Mine* [emphasis in original]; with Me you are but aliens and tenants.”[9]



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The Land in the Writings of the Prophets

Within a few generations of settlement in Canaan, the Israelites began to clamor for a king, “as other countries have” (1 Sam. 8:5). As God instructed, the prophet Samuel did not deny the people their request, but issued a stern warning that their kings would eventually reduce the Israelites to slaves. This would happen in large measure by debasing the land from its original purpose as a divine blessing into a resource for royal wealth and power (1 Sam. 8:10-18). The advent of Israel’s kings led to a series of prophets, many of whom (e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah) emphasized the land as a crucial component of the covenant with God. But perhaps the most interesting reference to the land is recorded as a parable in Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard: “Listen while I sing you this song, a song of my friend and his vineyard: my friend had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug the soil and

cleared it of stones; he planted the finest vines. He built a tower to guard them, dug a pit for treading the grapes. He waited for the grapes to ripen, but every grape was sour. So now my friend says, 'you people who live in Jerusalem and Judah, judge between my vineyard and me. Is there anything I failed to do for it? Then why did it produce sour grapes and not the good grapes I expected? Here is what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge around it, break down the wall that protects it, and let wild animals eat it and trample it down. I will let it be overgrown with weeds. I will not trim the vines or hoe the ground; instead, I will let briars and thorns cover it. I will even forbid the clouds to let rain fall on it'" (Isa. 5:1-6). Prefiguring the explanations that Christ would provide for His parables, Isaiah then clarifies his narrative in the following verse: "Israel is the vineyard of the Lord Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted. He expected them to do what was good, but instead they committed murder. He expected them to do what was right, but their victims cried out for justice". Once again, it is clear that it is God, not the people of Israel, who owns the land and the vineyard; Jesus would later adopt the same symbolism, as we will see in Part Two.

Old Testament Decline

Israel's experiment with kingship was a disaster. The reign of Saul, Israel's first king, was catastrophic on both moral and military grounds. Saul culminated his calamitous rule with the ultimate humiliation of committing suicide in battle. The subsequent reigns of David and his son Solomon are looked upon, somewhat naively, as a sort of Israelite "golden age," especially by Christian Zionists. Yet David was frequently at war, faced rebellion within his own family, and suffered divine judgment from his adultery and his taking of a census, an apparent act of pride and ambition. After all, the people of Israel did not belong to David any more than did the land. Solomon, despite his divinely inspired wisdom, [instituted forced labor](#) on a massive scale among both Israelites and captive peoples in his grandiose building projects for the temple, his palace, and other public structures. Worse, Solomon married foreign brides (by the hundreds, according to 1 Kings 11), who led him into the worship of false gods. (The unhappy fate of the conquered peoples as forced labor under Solomon is not unlike that of the modern Palestinian day laborer, who, if only to feed his family, must work on Israeli construction projects, often on confiscated Palestinian land.)

After barely a century under kingship, and with the death of Solomon, the unity of God's people was shattered by the actions of his arrogant son Rehoboam. The tribes of Israel split into two kingdoms (Israel and Judah) and without divine protection were eventually swamped by larger and more powerful neighbors. The northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria) was conquered by the Assyrians while the southern kingdom (Judah) fell just over a hundred years later to the Babylonians. In both cases, the conquering nations enforced widespread

displacement of the Jewish people from the Promised Land; in the Assyrian case, the scattering of Jews was so widespread that the ten tribes were essentially lost to history. The *Jewish Virtual Library* neatly [summarizes](#) the disaster: “The Hebrew kingdom, started with such promise and glory by [David](#) [sic], was now at an end. It would never appear again, except for a brief time in the second century BC, and to the Jews forced to relocate and the Jews left to scratch out a living in their once proud kingdom, it seemed as if no Jewish nation would ever exist again. It also seemed as if the special bond that Yahweh had promised to the Hebrews, the covenant that the Hebrews would serve a special place in history, had been broken and forgotten by their god [sic]. This period of confusion and despair, a community together but homeless in the streets of Babylon, makes up one of the most significant historical periods in Jewish history: the Exile.” The warning of Moses in Deuteronomy had certainly come true: “You will not live very long in the land.”

The Hellenistic Era

After the return of Jews from the Babylonian exile, Israel was a mere shadow of its brief former grandeur. The Jews became a pawn in the conquests and kingdoms of such Gentile rulers as Alexander the Great, an Egyptian Ptolemy, and the Seleucid king Antiochus the Great. But the greater threat to Israel was what Gary Burge calls the allure of Hellenism, accompanied by its full range of differences, from religion and philosophy to food and dress: “...the seductions of Hellenistic life and the prosperity it offered led to more and more Jews seeking their fortunes outside the country...”^[10] The assimilation of Jews into a Gentile culture, so hotly debated in the last hundred years, had begun well before the time of Christ.

Colonies of Jews began migrating to Mediterranean coastal cities such as Antioch, Alexandria, and Ephesus and eventually to settlements as remote as central Bulgaria. The Jewish first-century writers Philo and Josephus both testify to the size and locations of the Jewish diaspora; Philo estimated one million Jews in Egypt alone. While accurate numbers will never be known, it seems probable that by the time of Christ there were more Jews living outside of Israel than within. The physical dispersal of Jews over the Greco-Roman world resulted in a gradual redefinition of the Promised Land, at least among diaspora Jews. For Philo, for example, the land is simply the knowledge and wisdom of God, not a key component of a sacred covenant.^[11] (The allure of Hellenism lives on today as, for example, in the conflicted loyalties of American Jews who consider migrating to Israel).

A final example which illustrates how heterogeneous Jews had become by the time of Christ can be seen in the experience of the first Pentecost in Jerusalem. St. Luke recounts (in Acts 2) that Jews had come to Jerusalem for the feast “from every country in the world” and

provides an impressive list of diaspora locations. Significantly, the great miracle of Pentecost — the speaking of the Apostles in a multitude of languages — was possible only because the diaspora Jews' links to the Promised Land were so weak that they did not understand Hebrew or Aramaic.

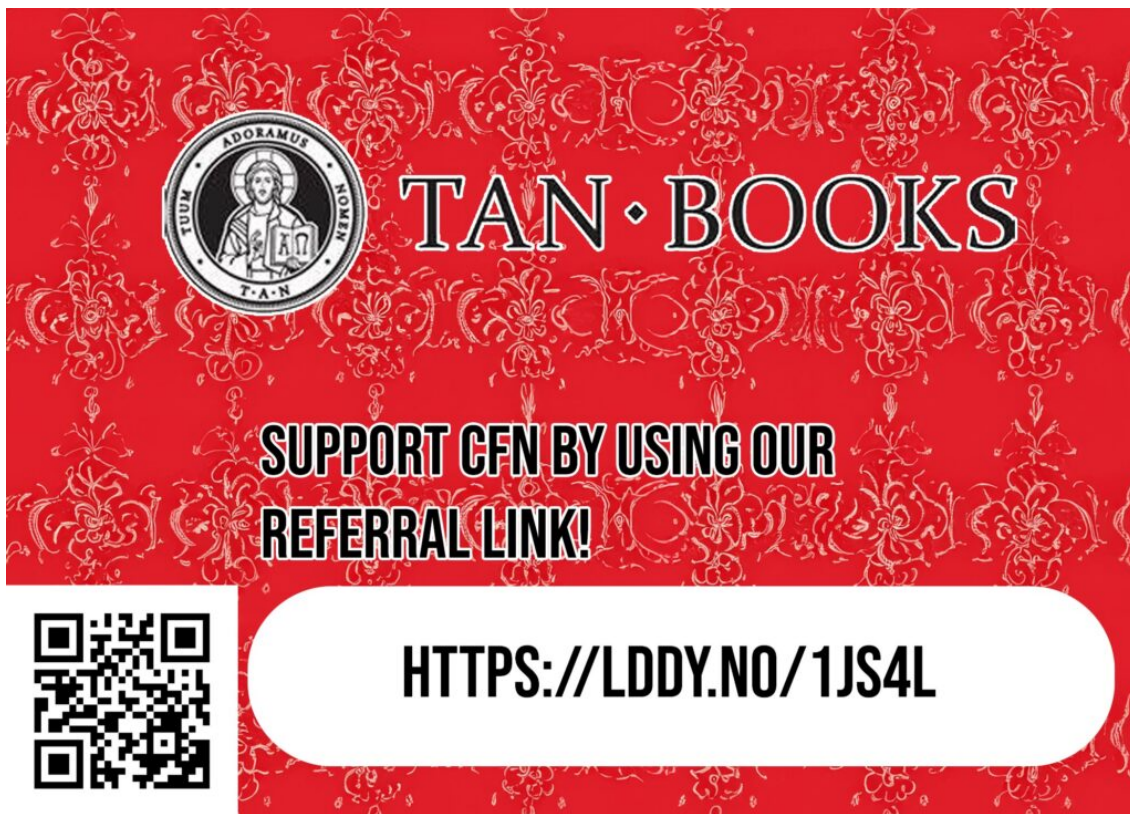
The Conquest in Retrospect

Before we turn to the New Testament, it may be useful to take a closer look at the Israelite settlement and conquest of Canaan as recounted in the Torah, Joshua and Judges. An objective reading of numerous texts must lead to the conclusion that God had not only sanctioned but commanded the Israelites' forced occupation of other peoples' land and the ethnic cleansing of the native populations. To contemporary readers who are weaned on human rights and the validity of international law, this should give cause for grave concern. In addition to the texts from Joshua cited above, two others (among many) should suffice to make the point. First, "When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you must drive out all of the inhabitants of the land. Destroy all their stone and metal idols and all their places of worship. Occupy the land and settle in it, because I am giving it to you...But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those that are left will be as troublesome as splinters in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they will fight against you. If you do not drive them out, I will destroy you, as I planned to destroy them" (Num. 33:51-56). Second, "The Lord your God will bring you into the land that you are going to occupy, and He will drive many nations out of it. As you advance, He will drive out seven nations larger and more powerful than you...When the Lord your God places these people in your power and you defeat them, you must put them all to death. Do not make an alliance with them or show them any mercy" (Deut. 7:1-2). So, were the Israelites guilty of war crimes? Of genocide?

This issue is explored in depth by a number of scholars, including Fr. Michael Prior in his books [*The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*](#) and [*Zionism and the State of Israel*](#). He observes that the "biblical narratives which deal with the promise and gift of land are potentially corrupting in themselves, and have in fact contributed to war crimes and crimes against humanity in virtually every colonized region, by providing allegedly divine legitimization for Western colonizers in their zeal to implant 'outposts of progress' in the 'heart of darkness.'" [12] Among other examples, Prior cites the conquests of the Spanish over Latin America, the Dutch in southern Africa (eventually creating an apartheid state), and the Zionist subjugation of modern Palestine which we will address in Parts Two and Three. We will not attempt here to answer the charges of ethnic cleansing or genocide by the ancient Jews. It is enough to remind ourselves that God's ways are inscrutable (Rom. 11:33-34) and that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without His consent (Matt.

10:29-30).

For now, we should note that modern Israeli society is permeated with references and analogies to the enemies of the ancient Jews, particularly the Amalekites, who are mentioned as implacable foes in several Old Testament books. With the rise of Hitler, Jewish leaders began using the term “Amalek” for Nazi Germany. But with the collapse of the Third Reich and new challenges for the Jews in the Middle East, the term began to refer to Palestinians and Arabs. For example, the prominent rabbi David Cohen, exhorting yeshiva students into combat against the Arabs in 1948, described the time as “the birth pangs of the Messiah and the Kingdom of Israel, a time in which our surrounding enemies have risen up to destroy us — Tyre, Damascus, Amon, Moab, and Egypt, all led by Amalek and Edom.”[\[13\]](#)

A red banner with a white damask pattern. On the left is a circular logo with a figure and the text 'ADORAMUS TUUM' and 'TAN'. To the right of the logo is the text 'TAN BOOKS' in a large, white, serif font. Below this, in a smaller white font, is 'SUPPORT CFN BY USING OUR REFERRAL LINK!'. At the bottom left is a QR code. At the bottom right, inside a white rounded rectangle, is the URL 'HTTPS://LDDY.NO/1JS4L' in black text.

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The Last Victim of the Conquest of Jericho

In conclusion, we see that modern Israel has been afflicted from its birth by a certain dualism about identity and loyalty. Is Israel simply one state among equals in the international community, or is it the reincarnation of God’s special covenant with His chosen people? If the former, Israel is obliged, for example, to follow the guidelines of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention which imposes restraints on one nation occupying

another's territory. If the latter, there are no such restraints and Israel may look back across three millennia for divine guidance on how to treat its non-Jewish residents and "sojourners" (such as the people of Gaza), considering itself to have *carte blanche* for whatever decision it determines to make. Many modern supporters of Zionism, both Jew and Gentile, try to have it both ways, which cannot be.

In support of this conundrum, we note the work of Israeli socio-psychologist Georges Tamarin, a professor at Tel Aviv University, who "surveyed two groups of Israeli children about the morality of genocidal conquest. To one group he told the story of Joshua's conquest of Jericho, and to the other he told the same story but substituted a [fictional] Chinese general in Joshua's place. About 60% of the Israeli children approved of Joshua's conquest, but only 7% approved of the Chinese assault." Tamarin's unavoidable conclusion was that actions of the ancient Israelites at Jericho would be regarded as "flagrant evil were it not a story from the Bible."^[14] His findings hit a raw nerve with the Israeli academic establishment, which had given the Book of Joshua a "special position in the Israeli educational system, both as national history and as one of the cornerstones of Israel's national mythology." Being forced to resign his professorship, Tamarin later wrote that he had become "the last victim of Joshua's conquest of Jericho."^[15]

Next month, in Part Two, we will take a brief look at land in the New Testament, including the words of Christ, and note the relevant actions of the early Christian community. Subsequently, we will explore the rise of Zionism in the 19th century, ostensibly as a panacea for the adversities encountered by the Jews through the ages.

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^[1] Michael Prior, *Zionism and the State of Israel: A Moral Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 170.

^[2] Biblical citations, unless within a quotation from an author, are from the *Good News Bible, Catholic Study Edition* (New York: Sadlier, 1979).

^[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 56.

[4] Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 2.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[6] For verse 28, other Bible translations famously state “that the land not vomit you out also, when you defile it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.”

[7] Burge, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[12] Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

[13] Elliott S. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 144. The author devotes an entire chapter to the use of “Amalek” among modern Israelis, especially by settlers in the West Bank and (before the Israeli withdrawal) in the Gaza Strip.

[14] Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 2012), p. 46.

[15] Prior, *op. cit.*, p. 167.