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Q&A: Dr Yohanna Katanacho

Christian Zionism, Psalms as a single book and replacement theology discussed by a Palestinian Evangelical theologian.

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Q&A

Academic Dean at Bethlehem Bible College, Bethlehem, Dr Yohanna Katanacho is the author of 'The land of Christ: a Palestinian cry and is involved in church planting activities in Galilee.

DR YOHANNA KATANACHO

Significant numbers of Western Christians are influenced by a theology that sees the current state of Israel as land that has been given back to the Jewish people by God. Do you agree?

If you believe that God gave the land to Israel I have three questions that I would like you to look for answers to from Scriptures.

First: what are the borders of this Promised Land? Is it from the Nile to the Euphrates, is it from Dan to Beersheba, does it include Jordan, Syria, Lebanon? What are the borders?

The second question: who is Israel? In Scripture, a lot of people confuse three labels: Hebrews, Israelites and Jews. These are not identical labels. Abraham, for example, was not a Jew, Abraham was a Hebrew, and he was not an Israelite. Samuel was not a Jew, Samuel was an Israelite. The term Jew is post-exilic. You can't find the term Jew in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

As I studied these texts I came to the conclusion that the label Israel in the Bible is not an exclusive label. Ruth for example joined the people of Israel, Rahab joined the people of Israel, 32,000 Midianites joined the people of Israel, all the women of Solomon joined the people of Israel, all their children joined the people of Israel. Not only that, in the last verse of Esther (chapter eight) it tells you the fear of the Jews fell upon many nations and many nations became Jews. So now it's not even anything that is defined by DNA or biology, and you find many nations who became Jews. Do these nations inherit the promises? Because they have nothing to do biologically with Abraham.

The third question is: what do we mean by 'gave' (in terms of the land)? You give something to someone but what does that really mean?

We cannot have any theology that is contradictory to the nature of God. God is merciful, God is loving, God is just. People who take prophecies without focusing on the heart of God, those who look at God's programme but not God's heart, are like Jonah. Jonah went with clear prophecies that Nineveh would be destroyed. He knew the prophetic messages but he forgot God's heart. And when he went there he was surprised, because his prophetic predictions were not fulfilled. Nineveh was not destroyed, because God is a merciful God. And I think many times we see theologies which are merciless, especially towards Palestinians. So I challenge people to have a theology that is compatible to the nature of Jesus Christ, to love and to have mercy.

And I would answer your question by saying, "for God so loved the Palestinians that he gave his only begotten son to die on their behalf". This is how I read John 3:16. Not that, "for God so loved the Jews that he decided to get rid of the Palestinians". This is what I fear so many theologies are doing, but I think God loves the Jews and the Palestinians equally.

What has Christian Zionism got right?

I think Christian Zionism is right in loving the Jewish people. I think we, as followers of Jesus Christ, should and must love the Jewish people, and I do. So I think that's great, they've got that right.

I think what they didn't get right is thinking that loving the Jewish people means hating the Palestinians. I think that we can love the Jewish people and love the Palestinians at the same time, because this is what God does, and we need to be His followers.

And I think, for my Zionist Christian brothers and sisters, I challenge them to include the Palestinian voice. Don't do your theology without reading our books, without coming to our churches and without visiting our conferences. Don't demonise, or stereotype, or marginalise or exclude us. I don't believe this is God's will, I think this is where my Zionist brothers and sisters have erred many times – they are embarrassed, not by Palestinian theology, but by the mere existence of Palestinian Christians. Often, they don't know what to do with us.

How do you feel about the term Replacement Theology?

Replacement Theology is a term that is loaded, that is dangerous and at many times used in political ways. In the West, Replacement Theology has its own history, it does not represent only a theological position, it represents a theo-political position that usually means excluding the Jewish people, oppressing them. So I don't feel comfortable with the label.

But if you want to ask me specifically, "do you believe that the Church fulfilled the role of Israel and that it is the light of the world?" then I would say yes. But I would qualify that Church is both Jews and Gentiles together in the body of the Messiah. I would say that Jesus Christ is the embodiment of Israel and in Jesus Christ I see the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises, and I see the Church as inclusive for both Jews and Gentiles. I see that the Church is at the core of the plan of God, and that the Church is actually the main plan of God. People can call this what they want, but I think that the term Replacement Theology is a little bit misleading.

What are you finding most theologically exciting at the moment?

I am very excited about reading the book of Psalms as a book. The book of Psalms, if we read it as a whole, contains a lot of theology that can really help in the Palestinian/Israeli context.

Psalms 72 ends with the phrase "the end of the prayers of David", but Psalm 86 starts with the title, "A Prayer of David", so you ask yourself, is this an editorial mistake or is it intentionally placed to raise new questions?

So what are the questions?

From Psalms 73-83, the Asaph Psalms, we have people crying out, "God, destroy the nations"; "God, what about our holy places"; "God, we are marginalised," and it is an ethnocentric reality in which Israel is basically wanting God to get rid of the nations which are their enemies. And, by the end of the Asaph Psalms, in Psalm 83, many nations come together to obliterate the name of Israel, so we see a very negative relationship between Israel and the nations.

But, in Psalm 84, the language changes. These are the Korah Psalms, and all of a sudden it is the language of all creation, not the language of just one particular group – and God, the living God, appears. Only twice in the book of Psalms does the living God appear, both of them in the beginning of the Korah Psalms, one at Psalm 42 and one at Psalm 84.

In this context David appears. He appears not as a militant king, as in Psalm 72, who wants to subdue the nations, but as a suffering servant, a poor and needy person. And this suffering servant does not pray to destroy the nations, nor does he pray that Israel will restore its land and holy space. In fact, he prays a very shocking prayer that the nations will come to God in Jerusalem. And the answer of his prayer, in Psalm 87, is equally shocking. The nations are born again in Psalm 87, and as a result, they become citizens of Jerusalem, which becomes the city of God.

The Psalm presents a vision in which God does not get rid of their enemies, but gets rid of enmity and makes the nations citizens of Jerusalem. The most holy thing of Jewish history, Jerusalem, is shared with the nations. I want that reality to capture our imaginations.

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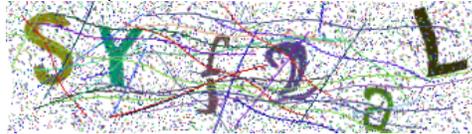
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