
In August 2014 the state of Israel announced the largest land appropriation in thirty years, just south of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. To some, this action is further evidence that a two-state solution in Israel-Palestine is no longer a viable option. In Mapping Exile and Return, Alain Epp Weaver argues that neither the two-state solution nor the unified (one-state) alternative holds any real hope for a peaceful future, because both rely on mapping models that either absorb difference or exclude otherness.

The battle of the maps is often framed as a zero-sum game in which one people’s dispossession is required for the homecoming of another. Here Epp Weaver interrogates whether there is an alternative way of mapping that disrupts the “exclusivist logic of the nation-state” (39). What other way might there be to describe, map, and implement a binational future?

Epp Weaver begins by examining the practices of counter-mapping, particularly the attempts of Palestinian refugee activist Salman Abu-Sitta to

2. See also McClendon, Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 50-62, for his evaluation of the “political” context of his theology in imperial America. Among his leading lights for theology in such a situation were King and Georgia Harkness. McClendon warned against focusing too much on context at the expense of the content of Christian theology, and accused James Cone and Mary Daly of an “unstable” mix of ideology and theology (53). This judgment bears further examination.
document the *nakba*, the forced exile of Palestinians by Zionist militias in 1948. Driven by the conviction that memory production is the only hope for return, Abu-Sitta’s cartographic productions include both the Hebrew map and the villages that the Zionist forces sought to erase. Rather than engaging in the kind of counter-mapping that excludes memory of the other, Palestinian refugee cartography typifies a palimpsest, a document in which previous renderings are still visible even as inscriptions are added or restored. These maps recognize that a binational future can only emerge “not in the smooth, homogeneous spaces of the nation-state but rather in an embrace of the heterogeneous character of the landscape and its peoples” (49).

Framing the shape of return in such a way also challenges the meaning of exile. In the second chapter Epp Weaver identifies two competing political theologies of exile (Hebrew *galut*). The national colonial theology of Zionism views the *negation* of exile as the goal of return. Rather than signifying a condition of expectant longing as it does in traditional Jewish terms, in a Zionist framework exile represents a weak or morally degenerate state. In contrast, John H. Yoder treats exile as a *vocation* that demands complete reliance on God. He argues in *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* that the failure of the church to maintain its Jewish roots is demonstrated in the loss of the theological vision of seeking the shalom of the cities in which they are exiled (Jer. 29:7), a task that rabbinic Judaism has generally performed much better than has Christianity.

The problem, according to the author, is that exile and return are placed in diametric opposition. Defending Yoder from criticisms that a theology of exile has nothing to say about what it might mean to be landed, Epp Weaver points out that exile in Babylon is not exclusively homelessness or landlessness, but “teaches God’s people that its embodied political witness need not be bound to sovereign power” (74). The goal of an exiled landedness is to build the city for others, “accepting one’s exilic status, even when one is at home, and recognizing that one truly inhabits and takes possession of particular places not by seeking to escape one’s exilic status but rather through efforts to create polities that welcome and incorporate the exiles (the refugees, the internally displaced) created by the exclusionary politics of the nation-state” (76-77). In this sense, to be landed and exiled simultaneously is the vocation of God’s people. The second chapter is the theological center of the book. Readers interested in Yoder’s theses on the Jewish-Christian schism and the responding criticisms will find Epp Weaver’s analysis insightful. This chapter alone makes *Mapping Exile and Return* well worth the read.

In the third chapter, Epp Weaver considers the important role that trees play in the mapping of land. The planting of trees signifies ownership of land and can erase prior habitation, as the Jewish National Fund has attempted to do with former Palestinian villages. But trees can also be sites of memories, and serve as metaphors for being rooted in a particular place. Father Elias Chacour, like many Palestinian clergy, emphasizes his family’s ancient roots in Palestine. But rather than serving as a claim against Israeli Jewish rootedness, Chacour’s vision of belonging is one in which “all of God’s children are ‘rooted’ in the land…ancient roots are not deployed to serve a cause of dispossession or exclusion but to insist
on his rightful place in the land” (109). Chacour employs Paul’s grafting metaphor to describe a vision of common belonging in the land.

The fear of counter-dispossession that mirrors that nakba causes many Israeli Jews to reject refugee mappings of return. But what can be the response of Israeli Jews who see a common vision of a binational future not as a threat but as a source of hope? In the final chapter, Epp Weaver points to the work of an Israeli organization called the Zochrot Association, which is dedicated to remembering the nakba in Hebrew, particularly on the site of the depopulated West Bank village of ‘Imwas. Epp Weaver uses the term exilic vigils to describe “actions in which return is shaped by the exilic commitment to building the city for others and that anticipate a coming, binational future” (128). Only a shared sense of belonging can overcome the fear of dispossession. In this sense, an exilic vigil longs for return not to a lost past but to the acceptance of the homogeneity within a particular place and the possibility of co-presence.

The novelty of Epp Weaver’s proposal demonstrates how thoroughly entrenched are the zero-sum cartographies and nationalist mappings of space that characterize nation-state models. In this logic, communal differences are a threat that must either be subsumed into the identity and rights of the individual citizen (the one-state solution) or cordoned off through policies of separation (the status quo and the two-state solution). Hope is found not at the negotiation tables in the perpetual peace process, but rather “among individuals and groups that are already now holding exilic vigils in the land and are thus through their actions mapping a shared landscape and outlining the contours of a coming community in which Palestinians and Israeli Jews find refuge in one another, recognizing one another as fellow exiles” (165).

Epp Weaver’s argument leaves the reader asking what a shared future might look like. Because of the necessarily ad hoc nature of exilic vigils, he is hesitant to describe in overly concrete terms what shape a binational political formation might take. He suggests a loose confederation of independent canons; that is, “smaller, sometimes overlapping, communal units” based on mutuality and sharing (81). Yet the question remains as to how such a future intersects with the ongoing negotiations and political processes.

This volume is a welcome addition to the growing body of work on Palestine-Israel that questions traditional nation-state models. As the former Mennonite Central Committee co-representative in the region, Epp Weaver’s firsthand experience, nuance, and sensitivity to various parties is evident throughout. Lay readers and undergraduate students may struggle with the heavily philosophical treatments of space (particularly in chapters 1, 3, and 4). But the central argument is clear and hopeful, avoiding the pitfalls of both cynicism and platitudes.

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