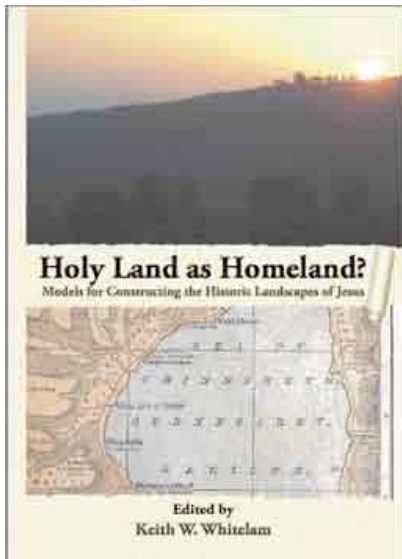


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**Keith W. Whitelam, ed.**

***Holy Land as Homeland? Models for  
Constructing the Historic Landscapes of Jesus***

Social World of Biblical Antiquity 2/7

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This volume collects papers that were originally read at a seminar held in Oslo, organized by the “Jesus in Cultural Complexity: Interpretation, Memory and Identification” project directed by Halvor Moxnes. The papers, although related to each other in some way, possess in fact thematic autonomy, and many of them could indeed be developed into full-blown monographs.

Keith W. Whitelam’s brief introduction (xi–xv) sets the “mood” of this anthology, aiming at revising the intellectual strategies for constructing or imagining the Holy Land in the sense of a distinct “homeland” for Western people in the nineteenth century “through history textbooks, geographies and maps” (xii), especially in regard to the figure of Jesus.

Halvor Moxnes’s “The Construction of Galilee as a Place for the Historical Jesus: The Heritage of the Nineteenth Century” (1–18), explains how nineteenth-century historians and geographers of the Holy Land constructed a symbolic landscape in Palestine, especially in Galilee. Colonialism, nationalism, race, and ethnicity were all shaping elements of the Victorian attempts to reconstruct biblical landscapes, especially those related to Jesus: “In terms of Galilee as part of the Holy Land, we notice how the very concept of ‘Holy Land’ was part of a colonizing attitude from Western—that is, European—powers, especially England and France” (11). Actually, the Western construction of a religious landscape was a means of establishing a sphere of political

influence in the Middle East during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire but also of producing a profound cultural connection with the land. This tradition survived in the twentieth century, especially in Germany until World War II, where the efforts made by New Testament scholars for representing Galilee and Jesus as essentially non-Jewish were notable. After World War II, the Jewishness of Jesus would eventually be recovered in New Testament scholarship.

Jonathan Birch, in “The Road to Reimarus: Origins of the Quest for the Historical Jesus” (19–47), presents a detailed résumé of intellectual history during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in relation to the works and contributions of British and French writers—neglected by biblical scholars during the Enlightenment and later periods—who were forerunners of H. S. Reimarus in the quest for the historical Jesus. Birch also affirms that, beyond opening a field of historical inquiry about Jesus as a concrete historical person in a concrete setting, this enlightened understanding of the Christian Messiah maintained, nevertheless, the vital role Jesus plays in modern Western society, since “[t]he production and reception of historical studies of Jesus have always functioned within wider discussions about religious, cultural and political identity” (47)—a statement still pertinent for the present.

In Burke O. Long’s “Landscapes of Democracy” (48–80) we find a detailed exposition of American interests in the Holy Land represented by key individuals. Figures such as E. Robinson, W. M. Thompson, W. F. Lynch, S. Merrill, J. H. Thayer, G. Barton, W. F. Albright, and J. Montgomery were certainly driven by a Christian triumphalist conviction that saw the religious and scientific recovery of Palestine as a rather obvious question. Long describes Robinson as moved by a blend of “scientific rationalism, geopiety, patriotism and Protestant devotion to the Bible” (56), but we may extend this characterization to the rest of the aforementioned group, as they all imagined “Near Eastern Palestine as [an] ancient, but vestigially present, biblical space, a mostly Christianized heritage awaiting reclamation” (48). Of course, the figure of Albright was of paramount importance in this development, as he, together with C. C. McCown, reclaimed Near Eastern and especially biblical heritage and Judeo-Christian civilization and values as intrinsic to the West (i.e., the United States) against the totalitarian threat represented by Nazism and Communism. Another important figure studied by Long is M. L. Margolies, who imagined Palestine as a Holy Land for the Zionist movement, “a physical and ideational space of reclaimed national and spiritual identity” (75).

Keith W. Whitelam’s “Nation Making: Mapping Palestine in the Nineteenth Century” (81–96) has a wider scope regarding the intellectual construction of the Holy Land through European mapmaking. In fact, nineteenth-century cartography—assumed in those days as an objective and scientific representation of a given territory—was in the

case of Palestine utterly driven by Western sentiments related to the Bible, which helped to further foreign political interests in the land. Whitelam also analyzes how modern biblical historiography was led by nationalist and ethnic parameters of description and analysis for representing ancient social realities. As an alternative for modern histories of ancient Palestine, Whitelam calls for an integrated history of the region, a history beyond national and ethnic labels attached to chronological divisions of the archaeological record—a common practice in old-fashioned biblical archaeology, which is not totally eradicated—a history beyond the concept of state and its alleged relevance for correctly understanding the “rhythms and patterns of Palestinian history” (96). Whitelam draws attention to writing a history of Palestine that recognizes the geographical diversity of the land but also its equally deep connectivity between regions. Finally, Whitelam’s criticism aims to understand Palestine, together with Jesus’s Galilee, “as a homeland for its inhabitants rather than as a Holy Land to be appropriated by foreign powers” (96), a point that implicitly forces us to reconsider Western interests in Palestine.

In “Jesus on Water: In a ‘Definite Place’ Called the Lake Region” (97–115), Rene Baergen presents a critical perspective for the study of the historical Jesus in Galilee in connection with the social construction of an ancient landscape by New Testament scholars. Baergen notes the “dislocation of Capernaum” (97) from its geological and geographical setting in mainstream Jesus scholarship, as related also to economic activities, and notes how Capernaum has been constructed as “a definite place significant beyond its ecological constraints” (110), ecological constraints that are neglected by current reconstructions of the historical context of Jesus. Building on the works of F. Braudel (1972) and more recently P. Horden and N. Purcell (2000), Baergen proposes a more ecologically accurate context for placing the historical Jesus, facing the lake region of Galilee, as one may thus correctly interpret Mark 1–8.

Leif E. Vaage’s “Diogenes of Capernaum: Jesus the Cynic in Borderland Galilee” (116–33) defends the possibility of historically reconstructing the figure of Jesus as a Cynic by attending to the geographical location of his activities in Galilee and beyond, in particular in the city of Gadara, in the Yarmouk River Valley, an important place where Cynicism flourished in ancient Syria.

In “Enoch Powell and the Gospel Tradition: A Search for Homeland” (134–50), James G. Crossley traces the intellectual and political relationship of British Conservative politician Enoch Powell (1912–1998) with the Bible. As Crossley demonstrates, Powell’s historical address of the gospel tradition and Christian origins ought to be seen and understood in the light of British nationalism and especially of his conception of the British Empire. Furthermore, Powell’s writings are not unique in connoting nationalist, cultural, and

political bias while attempting to reconstruct historical episodes from the New Testament narrative.

The final essay, Todd Penner and Davina C. Lopez's "Homelessness as a Way Home: A Methodological Reflection and Proposal" (151–76), is a lengthy theoretical consideration on method—but also about epistemology—incorporating the criticism of the linguistic turn and postcolonial studies in New Testament scholarship. The authors indicate how nationalism and the search for identities shaped current representations of early Christianity, highlighting in that way the relevance of the context of the interpreter, the particular historical situation in which the interpreter is placed, for choosing methodologies, or rather "the interrelationship between the methods that we use for the study of the past and the social and political realities in which we live" (175). Perhaps more interesting is Penner and Lopez's appeal to the notion of "homelessness" as a means of mediating between the self and the other and the relationship between them (176), meaning a way to create epistemological and methodological self-awareness (homelessness as opposed to homeboundness) to produce a critical representation of the past while acknowledging how we construct knowledge of the past.

A final bibliography (177–206) and the indexes of authors and references (207–13) close the volume.

Viewed altogether, several of the papers in this book (Moxnes, Long, Whitlam, Baergen) point toward a direction that, I think, needs to be further explored and developed in biblical studies, what could be called *a cultural and intellectual geography of Palestine*: the study of the construction of cultural and symbolic landscapes through time, in close connection to historical contexts and processes. These papers make us think about the Western intellectual and religious appropriation of Palestine since early Christianity to modern times. In fact, the book offers us but a glimpse, from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, of what can be achieved through a critical address of the polysemic concept of Holy Land in relation to the modern territories of Israel/Palestine as a religious homeland, as a national homeland, and so on. The intellectual construction of the Holy Land can certainly be traced back to the church fathers and before that to the biblical notions of *eretz yisrael* as well, but always with heterogeneous meanings, each of which is attached to religious and cultural conceptions of the land (see Sand 2012).

This anthology is therefore a most welcome addition to the stream of scholarship within biblical studies that seeks to deconstruct the social, cultural, and political contexts in which the modern interpretation of biblical stories and the writing of ancient Palestine's past take place. Actually, this deconstructive task is an unavoidable condition for those studying biblical matters in a truly scholarly manner, which clearly establishes that there

is no historical analysis that is innocent or isolated from ideological and historiographical considerations, and such considerations cannot be properly addressed without epistemological and methodological reflection. This book, in its varieties of approaches and discussions, fosters such critical biblical scholarship.

### References

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