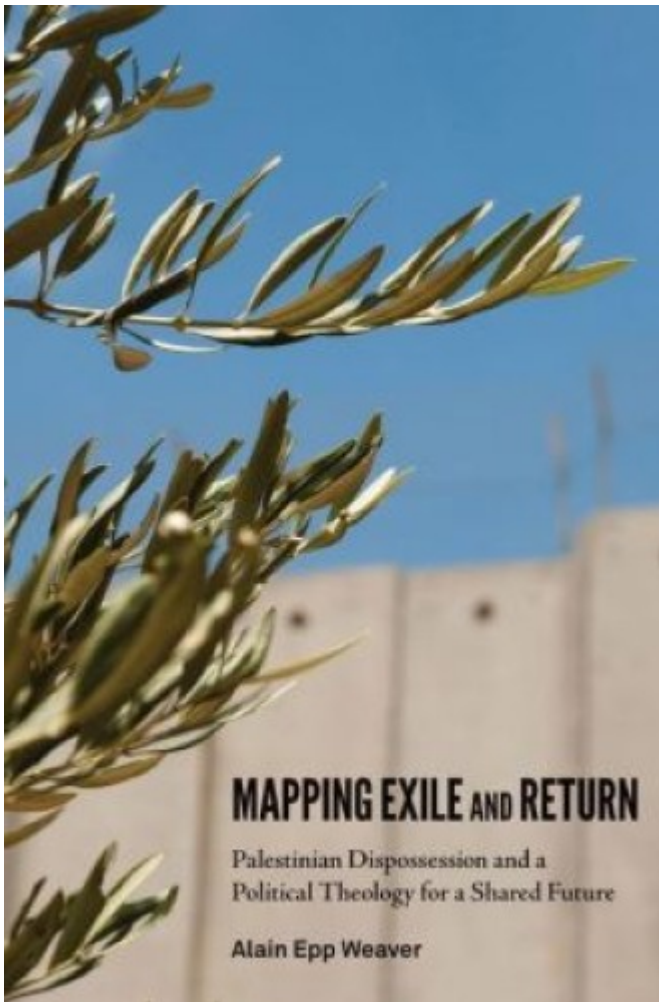


Mapping Exile and Return, by Alain Epp Weaver

reviewed by [Paul Parker](#) in the [November 26, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Mapping Exile and Return

By Alain Epp Weaver

Fortress

Every author who has written critically about the conflict between Israel and Palestine has confronted a fundamental cross-cultural problem, and Alain Epp Weaver is no exception. Israeli political ideology and social practices and the Israeli

legal system are so far removed from the typical American's experience that although the words of Israelis' essays and books make sense to American readers, their meaning and impact are often beyond such readers' grasp.

How is a reader to understand any author who writes about something that contradicts the reader's experience, yet purports to describe the real world? In Israeli-controlled lands, for instance, heavily armed soldiers check a person's national ID card to determine his or her religious and ethnic identity before allowing or forbidding the person to go home or to work or school. What would it mean to Americans if an armed soldier from China were to check their national ID in Chicago? The United States has no national ID, and certainly nothing that denotes one's race and religion. Neither the National Guard nor China's military is staffing checkpoints on neighborhood streets because there are no checkpoints. And a person of one particular religion or ethnicity is not entitled to more legal rights and privileges than a person of another religion or ethnicity. Even when accurately and sensitively described, the meanings of these experiences are simply beyond most Americans, except those who have visited Palestine and Israel.

Yet Epp Weaver refers to and presupposes the real, incongruent, and incomprehensible experiences of many persons in Israel and of everyone in Israeli-controlled Palestine. Many readers who enter this troubled territory through books like *Mapping Exile and Return* will just not get it; the chasm is simply too large between Western religious freedom, equal civil rights, and separation of church and state on the one hand and Israeli laws, mores, and practices on the other.

Nevertheless, having spent 11 years in Israel and Palestine on assignments with the Mennonite Central Committee, Epp Weaver is well suited for the task of describing the people, places, and culture of the Levant. He offers a new hermeneutic, a new way of seeing, a new conceptual bridge to explain the Israel/Palestine conflict to U.S. readers and to suggest a way forward.

Epp Weaver metaphorically uses a family of common terms (such as *cartography*, *map* and *mapping*, *space* and *place*, and *arboreal imagination*) to describe the situation and to construct a new reality in Israel and Palestine. He reminds his readers that mapmaking is not a factual drawing of territory on a blank piece of paper as some may think; rather, it is highly subjective and always a self-portrait. More precisely, mapping is a projection of the self into one's imagined world in order to bring that world into existence.

Israel's Zionist mapping has erased Palestine and many Palestinian villages from its physical maps and Palestinians from the political discussions of much of the world. It has thus imaginatively constructed the modern state of Israel without its historical antecedents, without many of its contemporary features, and without its Palestinian population. Israel does not identify its Palestinian citizens as Palestinians but merely as Arabs, thus erasing the Palestinian culture that distinguishes them from other Arabs such as those of Egypt and Morocco. According to the government of Israel, there are no Palestinians in Israel.

Virtually all Palestinian mappings oppose the privileged position of Zionist mapping, and a few Palestinian maps erase Israel just as Palestine has been erased by Israel—which is the fear of most Israeli Jews. Epp Weaver's countermapping explores and adamantly affirms the possibility that Palestinian mapping and return from exile can become reconciliatory rather than replicating the Zionist form of return from exile that erased Palestine. To break the cycle of returning exiles making new exiles, Epp Weaver argues for an explicitly Christian "theological cartography of land and return" that is at the same time a nonsectarian palimpsest of heterogeneous and interpenetrating peoples.

Epp Weaver builds on Palestinian scholar Edward Said's understanding of exile not only as physical displacement, but also as a permanent critical mentality that rejects all forms of injustice. Coming from Said's perspective, Epp Weaver rejects Zionism's negative political theology that sees exile only as a curse to be reversed through return, regardless of the cost to Palestinians. He also employs the political theology of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder to reject political exclusivism, inequality, and domination, which is the temptation of a small proportion of Palestinians.

Finally, Epp Weaver draws on the inclusive, binational, and democratic model of statehood proposed by Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, a professor of Jewish history at Ben-Gurion University. This is a theology of the land that does not negate exile but incorporates the meaning of exile into the return from exile. This kind of interreligious Palestinian countermapping is not only possible, says Epp Weaver, but has already been demonstrated by the surviving inhabitants of the ethnically cleansed village of Kafr Bir'im and its favorite son, the newly retired Melkite archbishop for Galilee, Elias Chacour.

Will Epp Weaver's readers be better able to understand the conflict between Israel and Palestine because of his innovative approach? Early in his book Epp Weaver

quotes the broadly influential French philosopher Henri Lefebvre about the relevance of new and alternative interpretations: “How many maps, in the descriptive or geographical sense, might be needed to deal exhaustively with a given space, to code and decode all its meaning and contents? It is doubtful whether a finite number can ever be given in answer to this sort of question.” There is always room for another illuminative decoding of the inscrutable. For those of us who are drawn to maps and cartography, this book will be fresh, engaging, and possibly revelatory. And for those who are not map junkies, there are still other excellent analyses.