

## Did the Words of the Scripture Change?

On Sunday May 4<sup>th</sup>, I celebrated the Divine Liturgy outside Lebanon and then met some parishioners for some coffee and one of them asked me why do we mention in our prayers the word “Zion” or “Israel”? Can’t we cancel these words and replace them with others? I was aware that he wanted that so that he doesn’t hear expressions that would remind him of the state of Israel. For the word “Zion”, I answered him that it was one of the hills on which Jerusalem stood. David came to this place with the Ark of the Covenant and therefore the hill became holy. And then when the Temple was built, the Ark was transferred to it and Zion took a wider range and included the Temple. And Jerusalem is frequently called Zion. Then, the neo-Jewish movement took the name “Zionism” in reference to their settlement in that place. When we use a verse from the Holy Scripture that contains the name of this hill, we wouldn’t be accepting Zionism because modern Jews took its name from Zion, the hill.

As for the word Israel, it refers to Jacob who gave this name to his offspring that the Scripture called “the sons of Israel”. Then the name was given to the northern kingdom of Palestine. And the prophets also used the names in a spiritual sense, and Apostle Paul differentiated between “Israel by the flesh” and “Israel by the spirit”. Also, in the Gospel of John, the word doesn’t carry any sense of nationalism but refers to the faith of the person.

When the word “Israel” is mentioned in chanting or in the readings from the prophets, an acquainted person shouldn’t think that it means the current state of Israel. The current name was found by the Jews that established their state in 1948 in order to benefit from the words as Christians recognize it from the Old Testament and in order to unite this word with the state that extorted Palestine or a part of it. This is a Jewish slyness that shouldn’t lead us to cancel the word from the Scripture. If you quoted the Divine Book, you must be faithful to its texts and explain to people why, as Christians, we don’t recognize the “land of the promise” and do not bless the adoption of modern Jews to this word to show that they are the heirs of this land.

When we say about Christ in the Vespers (taken from the Gospel of Luke): “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel”, we mean that Jesus came as a light for the Gentiles and Jews and combined both. If you said like some chanters do: “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to the faithful” – or any similar phrase – you would be changing the meaning that Luke wanted. How could you also change the phrase that we chant during the Paschal period: “The Lord from the fountains of Israel”?

Why don’t Muslims object over the usage of the word “Israel” in the Quran?

We believe in the Old Testament and that it is inspired by God and that it has no reference to any kind of nationalism and we cannot use it to support any nation. Old words stay in their place. And instead of harming our ears with the current meaning that was given to the word, we should explain our usage of the word. Our Coptic brothers, that reject the state of Israel as we do, didn't replace any word in their prayers and their scholars explained to them that mentioning the word in prayers doesn't push us to accept this state that was established with oppression towards Palestinian people. If the state of Israel vanished, do we go back to the usage of the word again?

Divine words stay as they are, and we should start understanding these words as they were meant by the Prophets and Psalms.

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