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Between Convenant and Conquest Land

Identity and the Ethics of Conflict in Abrahamic Scripture

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Zusammenfassung

Dieses Kapitel untersucht den Zusammenhang zwischen abrahamitischen Landbündnissen und der Ethik bewaffneter Konflikte in Judentum, Christentum und Islam sowie deren Instrumentalisierung in zeitgenössischer geopolitischer Gewalt. Durch vergleichende Schriftinterpretation, kritische Diskursanalyse und angewandte Politikethik wird argumentiert, dass die Landbündnisse in Tora, Neuem Testament und Koran primär spirituell und gemeinschaftsbildend sind und keine uneingeschränkten territorialen Ansprüche begründen. Ihre selektive Berufung zur Rechtfertigung von Eroberung und Gewalt – etwa im israelisch-palästinensischen Konflikt, im „Krieg gegen den Terror“ und in konfessionellen Konflikten im Irak und Syrien – stellt eine Instrumentalisierung dar. Zugleich zeigt das Kapitel eine gemeinsame Ethik der Zurückhaltung als Ressource für Konfliktlösung und Friedensförderung. Die Auslegung heiliger Texte ist damit auch ein politischer Akt mit konkreten menschlichen Folgen.

Schlagwörter: Religion, Peacebuilding, Abrahamitische Landbündnisse, Konfliktethik

Abstract

This chapter examines the relationship between Abrahamic land covenants and the ethics of armed conflict in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as their instrumentalization in contemporary geopolitical violence. Drawing on comparative scriptural interpretation, critical discourse analysis, and applied political ethics, it argues that the land covenants in the Torah, New Testament, and Qur’an are primarily spiritual and constitutive of communal identity, rather than providing unrestricted territorial claims. Their selective invocation to justify conquest and violence—as seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the “War on Terror,” and sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Syria—constitutes an instrumentalization of scripture. At the same time, the chapter identifies a shared ethic of restraint across the three traditions as an underused resource for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The interpretation of sacred texts is therefore also a political act with concrete human consequences.

Keywords: Religion, Peacebuilding, Abrahamic Land Convenants, Conflict Ethics

Introduction

Few modern geopolitical tensions are as consistently misread as the relationship between religious scripture and territorial conflict. Political actors have repeatedly pointed to Abrahamic scripture (Torah, Gospel, and Quran) as divine warrants for conquest, exclusion, and violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the sectarian wars of Iraq and Syria, and the ideological framing of the post-9/11 global war on terror. This chapter argues that such invocations represent a fundamental misreading of the textual and theological record. All three of the land covenants are spiritually constitutive rather than politically prescriptive, defining identity before God rather than sovereign entitlement to territory. The use of scripture to support modern conflict is not faithful interpretation but selective instrumentalization. This is important because conflict resolution efforts that do not address the theological aspect of territorial disputes are structurally incomplete. Understanding how scripture has been distorted and what it actually says provides negotiators, analysts, and peace architects with a more honest interpretive basis (Appleby, 2000; Johnston & Sampson, 1994). The sections that follow establish the textual evidence for this claim, trace its modern misuse, and draw out the implications for policy practitioners.

Research Context

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the post-9/11 War on Terror, and the sectarian violence of Iraq and Syria, political and non-state actors have systematically invoked the land covenants of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran as divine warrants for territorial conquest, exclusion, and armed violence. This invocation is not incidental; it is structural and recurrent. But the textual and theological evidence in all three Abrahamic faiths is clear that these covenants are conditional and relational, not unconditional grants of territorial possession.

The problem, therefore, is not what the scriptures say it is how they are read: the deliberate suppression of ethical obligation in favour of territorial promise constitutes selective instrumentalization that has directly enabled and legitimized violence with measurable humanitarian consequences. This chapter tackles that problem head-on, arguing that a vigorous comparative hermeneutic that recovers the full ethical framework of each tradition is intellectually necessary and practically urgent for conflict resolution in the twenty-first century.

Research Questions and Research Objectives

This chapter is framed by two key research questions. RQ1: In what ways have political and non-state actors selectively reinterpreted Abrahamic land covenants to justify territorial conquest and armed conflict in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the post-9/11 War on Terror, and sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria? RQ2: How much do the foundational scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share a common ethical framework of restraint in conflict, and how might that shared framework be operationalized by policy and ethics practitioners involved in conflict resolution? Two corresponding objectives are proposed to answer these questions.

The first objective is to conduct a comparative textual analysis of land covenant narratives from the Torah, New Testament, and Quran, demonstrating that these covenants are spiritually and relationally constituted rather than politically prescriptive, and that invoking them as conquest mandates is a demonstrable misreading of the source material. The second objective is to identify the convergent ethics of restraint embedded in all three traditions, and to propose a practical framework through which conflict resolution practitioners, mediators, and policy analysts can engage religious communities based on their own authoritative texts. These objectives jointly ground the chapter's progression from textual analysis to ideological critique to action-oriented recommendation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning

Studies on religion, land, and conflict in the Abrahamic traditions are substantial, but the field remains largely siloed by tradition rather than genuinely comparative. Walter Brueggemann's foundational study The Land (1977; 2002) establishes the relational and conditional character of land theology in the Hebrew Bible, arguing that the land is always a gift entailing obligation rather than a possession conferring right. This chapter builds directly on Brueggemann's framework while extending its logic comparatively into Christian and Islamic contexts that his work does not address. Regina Schwartz's The Curse of Cain (1997) offers a more polemical account, arguing that monotheism's logic of scarcity — one God, one people, one land — structurally generates violence. This chapter engages Schwartz's provocation critically: while her diagnosis of the problem is sharp, her refusal to distinguish between responsible and irresponsible readings of the same texts forecloses the recovery of restraint traditions that this chapter identifies as a peacebuilding resource. The scholarly conversation thus requires both Brueggemann's textual precision and a response to Schwartz's structural critique, and it is in that space that this chapter operates.

In the domain of Islamic jurisprudence and ethics of conflict, John Kelsay's Arguing the Just War in Islam (2007) provides the most rigorous comparative framework available, demonstrating that the Islamic tradition contains a rich internal debate on the ethics of warfare that is largely invisible in Western policy discourse. This chapter draws on Kelsay's framework while noting that his work, like much just war scholarship, tends to treat each tradition's ethical resources in relative isolation. Farid Esack's Quran, Liberation and Pluralism (1997) offers a corrective by demonstrating that Quranic hermeneutics has been used to authorize both oppression and resistance — a point that supports this chapter's central claim that interpretation, not text, is the primary site of conflict. Michael Walzer's In God's Shadow (2012) and his earlier Just and Unjust Wars (1977) provide the political philosophy scaffolding for the chapter's normative analysis. Taken together, this body of scholarship establishes a field in which textual analysis, hermeneutical theory, and policy ethics have developed in parallel but rarely in sustained dialogue the gap this chapter is designed to address.

Methodological Approach

This chapter employs a fully qualitative, multi-method approach grounded exclusively in secondary scholarly literature and primary scriptural sources, drawing on three complementary forms of inquiry. No empirical data collection, surveys, interviews, or quantitative methods are employed; the chapter works entirely from published academic scholarship, canonical religious texts, and jurisprudential traditions, situating it firmly within the qualitative tradition of comparative theological and hermeneutical research.

The first strand applies comparative scriptural hermeneutics a close reading of primary religious texts (the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Quran) within their own literary, historical, and theological contexts, interpreted and analyzed through secondary scholarly sources — to examine how land, covenant, and conflict are framed in each tradition. This involves analysis of canonical texts including Genesis, Deuteronomy, and the Hebrew prophetic corpus; the Pauline epistles, the Gospels, and patristic interpretation; and Quranic verses alongside classical Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and hadith literature, all read through the lens of established secondary scholarship including Brueggemann (2002) and Esposito (2002). The guiding principle is that no text can be responsibly interpreted in isolation from the conditions, obligations, and narrative framework that surround it, and that secondary scholarly engagement is essential to prevent the same selective reading the chapter critiques. This approach enables a historically

grounded reading that resists the selective abstraction characteristic of politically motivated scriptural use, and provides the evidentiary foundation from which the chapter's critique proceeds.

The second strand employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (1995) and applied to religious-political speech by Chilton (2004). This approach examines how political and ideological actors including state governments, armed movements, and religious institutions have publicly invoked scriptural language to legitimize territorial claims and military action. The analysis attends not only to what is said, but to what is systematically omitted: the suppression of conditional and ethical dimensions of scriptural texts in favour of their promissory elements. By foregrounding omission as an ideological act, CDA reveals the mechanism by which complex texts are reduced to slogans a finding whose implications for practitioner engagement with religiously justified violence are developed fully in Section VII.

The third strand draws on normative ethics and applied policy analysis to assess the implications of the chapter's findings for practitioners. This includes engagement with the just war tradition across all three faiths, international humanitarian law, and existing scholarship on religion's role in both sustaining and resolving conflict (Kelsay, 2007; Walzer, 1977). Together, these three methodological strands allow the chapter to progress from textual evidence to ideological critique to actionable recommendation, following an arc appropriate for an audience of ethics and policy professionals. The subsequent sections are organized along this arc.

Three methodological limitations of this approach are acknowledged. First, close reading is never a neutral enterprise: the decision to foreground certain texts and to privilege certain traditions within each religion involves interpretive choices that other scholars could reasonably make differently. Second, as an approach, CDA has its own ideological assumptions, having developed largely out of a critical-left tradition concerned with the power of dominant actors; the analysis here seeks to apply it as evenly as possible between state and non-state actors, Western and non-Western contexts. Third, the normative conclusions of the chapter — that the traditions contain resources for restraint and that these should be operationalized by practitioners — depend on a commitment to the value of reducing violence, which itself is a philosophical position and not a finding that is textually derived. These limitations do not undermine the chapter's argument, but they do define its scope and invite the kinds of empirical and comparative extensions that future research should pursue.

The Covenant Tradition: Promise, Not Deed

The foundational argument of this section is that the Abrahamic land covenants are conditional and relational rather than unconditional ethnic entitlements a claim the textual record of all three traditions supports unambiguously. The covenant between God and Abraham over the land of Canaan is embedded in a framework of divine-human fidelity in the Hebrew Bible: the land is a sacred trust rather than a permanent ethnic inheritance. Deuteronomy makes this explicit: continued possession of the land is contingent on justice, care for the stranger, and obedience to divine law. Exile is a recurring theme in the Hebrew prophetic tradition and is framed not as a military defeat but as a theological consequence — the land withdraws when its covenant obligations are abandoned (Brueggemann, 2002). Any interpretation that separates the territorial promise from its ethical obligations has already made a first-order interpretive error. This conditionality is not a minor qualification to the promise; rather, it is structurally inseparable from it. Section VII considers the implications of this for contemporary uses of the biblical covenant as a political mandate.

Christian theology reinforces this reading through a process of universalization rather than territorial specification. The covenant is reinterpreted in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's epistles and John's Gospel, as a universal inheritance based on faith rather than ethnicity or geography. This interpretation was cemented by Augustine and subsequently Calvin: the Promised Land is a type, a shadow pointing to a heavenly city not built by human hands. Christian theological consensus understands a divine real-estate reading of the Abrahamic land promise as an interpretive regression (O'Donovan, 1996). This spiritualization of the territorial promise is not a diminishment of the covenant's significance but a transformation of its register — one that places any claim to divine title over physical land squarely outside the mainstream of Christian theological tradition, a point directly relevant to religiously framed territorial justifications examined in the following section.

Islam offers a third position that further reinforces the chapter's central claim about the non-prescriptive nature of Abrahamic land theology. The Quran does not associate divine favour with any particular ethnic group's claim to specific territory. Stewardship (khilafah) of the earth is granted to humanity collectively, under conditions of justice and accountability. The concept of waqf land held in sacred trust for community benefit reflects an Islamic jurisprudence in which territory is a communal moral responsibility, not a nationalist possession. Early Islamic legal scholars consistently distinguished between the spiritual status of sacred sites and

the political questions of governance and sovereignty (Esposito, 2002; Kelsay, 2007). Taken together, all three traditions converge on a shared structural logic: divine relationship to land is mediated through ethical obligation, not ethnic or political entitlement a convergence whose full significance for conflict resolution practice becomes clear in Section VIII.

It is essential, however, to acknowledge that each tradition also contains internal voices that have used precisely these same texts to justify conquest, and that a responsible comparative analysis cannot dismiss those voices as simply aberrant. Within the Hebrew Bible itself, the Deuteronomic traditions of herem the divinely commanded destruction of Canaanite peoples — resist easy spiritualization; they are present in the canon and have been read literally by communities ancient and modern alike. Within Christianity, the Crusading tradition drew on genuine theological arguments, not merely cynical misappropriation, and strands of American Manifest Destiny theology constructed a providential narrative of territorial expansion from the same scriptural sources that others read as universal and peace-oriented. Within Islam, early jurisprudents who authorized offensive campaigns of expansion were working within a recognizable interpretive tradition, not simply inventing one. The point of acknowledging these internal tensions is not to neutralize the chapter's argument but to strengthen it: if the texts genuinely contain both conquest-authorizing and restraint-affirming trajectories, then the choice between them is an interpretive and ethical act which is precisely what makes hermeneutics, not theology, the real battlefield, as Section VII argues.

Modern Misuse: Scripture as Strategic Asset

The central claim of this section is that the modern weaponization of Abrahamic scripture follows a recognizable and demonstrable pattern of selective instrumentalization rather than faithful interpretation. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, certain strands of religious Zionism have treated the biblical covenant as an unconditional deed of ownership, ignoring the prophetic tradition's insistence that the land responds to the moral conduct of its inhabitants. On the opposing side, jihadist ideologues have misappropriated Quranic concepts of defensive warfare (jihad) and sacred territory (haram) to authorize offensive campaigns that classical Islamic jurisprudence would not recognize as legitimate (Juergensmeyer, 2000; Roy, 2004). The mechanism in both cases is identical: strip the conditional framework, elevate the territorial promise, and suppress the ethical obligations that surround it. The result is a scriptural fragment that bears surface resemblance to its source text while inverting its normative logic a point that practitioners must

be equipped to identify and articulate when engaging religious justifications in conflict settings.

The post-9/11 War on Terror extended and deepened this pattern into a broader civilizational frame. Both Western military campaigns and their jihadist opponents framed their confrontations in apocalyptic scriptural terms a clash of civilizations projected backward onto ancient texts (Huntington, 1996). In Iraq and Syria, the collapse of state structures unleashed sectarian violence in which Sunni and Shia groups deployed competing religious narratives to justify massacres, displacement, and the erasure of communities that had coexisted for centuries. In each case, the theological complexity of the original texts was flattened into slogans that served political mobilization (Filiu, 2011). The consistency of this pattern across such varied contexts is itself analytically significant: it suggests that the problem is not theological but hermeneutical — not what the texts say, but the political infrastructure through which they are read and deployed. Practitioners operating in these environments must therefore recognize that such scriptural claims are not simply beliefs to be accommodated they are arguments to be engaged, contextualized, and, where necessary, challenged on their own textual terms (Appleby, 2000), which requires the kind of shared ethical vocabulary that Section VIII identifies.

It would, however, be analytically incomplete to confine the pattern of scriptural misuse to the Israeli-Palestinian context and jihadist movements alone. The phenomenon is demonstrably cross-traditional. In nineteenth-century America, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny was constructed from biblical typology the settlers as a new Israel, the continent as a promised land to authorize the dispossession and destruction of indigenous peoples on an enormous scale (Tuveson, 1968). In apartheid South Africa, Dutch Reformed theology drew on the narrative of the Israelite conquest of Canaan to provide theological legitimacy for the racial segregation of an entire society, a reading that the tradition's own internal critics eventually mobilized the same texts to dismantle (Villa-Vicencio, 1988). These examples are not peripheral to the chapter's argument they confirm it. The weaponization of Abrahamic covenant theology is not the property of any single tradition, region, or political orientation. It is a structural possibility latent in any reading that severs the promise from its obligations, and a challenge that the cross-traditional ethic of restraint identified in Section VIII is uniquely positioned to address.

Toward a Comparative Ethics of Restraint

A rigorous comparative reading of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scripture reveals not a clash of irreconcilable mandates but a shared moral architecture of restraint, and this convergence constitutes an underutilized resource for conflict resolution practice. Jewish tradition's prohibition on destroying fruit trees in warfare (Deuteronomy 20:19), the Christian just war tradition's strict conditions on proportionality and civilian protection, and the detailed Islamic laws of war prohibiting the killing of non-combatants, women, and children, and the destruction of crops, all converge on a moral architecture that contemporary armed actors consistently violate while claiming scriptural sanction (Kelsay, 2007; Walzer, 1977). This convergence is not incidental: it reflects the same structural logic identified in Section VI, namely that all three traditions frame the use of force as subject to divine accountability and ethical condition rather than as an unconditional prerogative. That armed actors violate this framework while invoking it demonstrates precisely the selective instrumentalization identified in Section VII and makes the recovery of the full ethical framework all the more urgent.

The practical significance of this convergence lies in the cross-traditional platform it offers for conflict resolution practitioners. The three traditions do not agree on theology, but they share a vocabulary of restraint embedded in their foundational texts. For ethics practitioners and mediators, this shared vocabulary offers a platform from which religious leaders, community elders, and even combatants can be engaged on the basis of their own authoritative sources rather than through the imposition of external secular frameworks. Conflict resolution approaches that surface this shared vocabulary rather than treating religion as an obstacle or conceding its terms uncritically stand a greater chance of gaining moral traction within communities for whom international humanitarian law carries limited authority (Johnston & Sampson, 1994; Lederach, 1997). This has direct implications for how practitioners are trained and how peacebuilding frameworks are designed, a set of implications that the Conclusion draws out in full.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the Abrahamic land covenants far from serving as divine mandates for territorial conquest are fundamentally conditional, relational, and spiritually oriented texts whose ethical obligations have been systematically suppressed in the service of political violence. The same pattern appears in all three case contexts: actors extract the promise, discard the obligation, and weaponized the resulting fragment as sacred authority. This is not interpretation; this is ideological construction in the language of scripture. The comparative textual analysis presented here shows that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all have significant internal resources to resist such abuse: the conditional covenant in the Hebrew Bible, the spiritualized universalism of Christian theology, and the jurisprudential restraint of classical Islamic law all point to a basic ethical principle land, territory, and sovereignty are not unconditional divine gifts but responsibilities held in trust, subject to the demands of justice, the protection of the vulnerable, and accountability before God and community. These findings establish the evidentiary basis for the operational recommendations that follow.

For policy and ethics practitioners, the implications are both analytical and operational. A scripturally informed lens that grasps the full textual record rather than weaponized fragments yields a more accurate analytical diagnosis of conflict drivers when engaging armed conflicts. Operationally, the common ethic of restraint in all three traditions offers a legitimate cross-communal platform for dialogue, mediation, and norm-building in situations where secular frameworks lack moral authority. Two findings are worth underscoring. First, religious literacy is not a supplemental skill for conflict resolution professionals; it is a core competency. Mediators, policy analysts, and humanitarian actors working on religiously inflected conflicts must be able to engage scriptural arguments with precision, rather than deferring to them uncritically or dismissing them as irrational.

Second, the diversity within each tradition the prophetic critics of conquest within Judaism, the pacifist strands within Christianity, the restraint traditions within Islamic jurisprudence — is an underutilized resource. Amplifying these voices, rather than treating each tradition as monolithic, is among the most effective tools available for delegitimizing violence conducted in the name of God. The covenant was never a mandate for conquest, and this recognition — rooted in the textual traditions themselves is a contribution comparative religious ethics must make more forcefully and more urgently to the practice of peacebuilding in the twenty-first century.

Several avenues for future research follow from this chapter's findings. First, the framework developed here needs to be empirically tested through community-level fieldwork: how do religious leaders, mediators, and community elders in active conflict zones actually engage scriptural arguments in practice, and what hermeneutical strategies prove most effective at delegitimizing religiously justified violence? Second, the structural possibility introduced here — that authoritative texts will simultaneously authorize opposing positions, a condition of contested canonicity deserves further theoretical development as a framework applicable beyond Abrahamic religion, to Hindu nationalism, Buddhist ethno-nationalism, and other contexts in which sacred texts play a role in political conflict. Third, the policy dimension of this work requires working with practitioners to design and evaluate training programmes in religious literacy for conflict resolution professionals, an intervention whose effectiveness is largely unevaluated in the existing literature. These directions mark a research programme that is empirically grounded and theoretically generative, taking the comparative hermeneutical approach worked out here into the field where its consequences are most keenly felt.

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