

A READER RESPONDS

Jewish Reflections on Richard Lux's

'The Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisrael*) in Jewish and Christian Understanding'

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I

Richard Lux's essay, *The Land of Israel (Eretz Yisra'el) in Jewish and Christian Understanding*, as well as his recent book on the Land of Israel are welcome additions to the library of Jewish-Christian dialogue, particularly for Christian scholars seeking to understand the deep connection between their faith and its spiritual patrimony in Judaism and in the Jewish people. Serious consideration of the Land of Israel as a theological category has been largely absent from Christian writings, a fact owing primarily to the Church's long-standing supersessionist teaching that it has itself assumed the mantle of the Jewish people's role in covenantal history. Logically, when Christianity universalized the covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham, the need for a localized geographic home for the covenant's human partners became superfluous. Theologically, when the early Church fathers concluded that Jewish exile and humiliation were divine punishments for rejecting Jesus, Jewish homelessness and wandering gained a positive theological valence. The particular status of the Land of Israel was reduced to a remnant of immature theology and an exhausted Jewish spiritual history. (To see how deeply rooted this became in popular Christian culture, see Mark Twain's comments regarding the "cursed land" of Palestine in *The Innocents Abroad*.¹) It was not only Judaism that Christianity claimed to supersede, but also the biblical homeland. Thus *Eretz Yisra'el* was demeaned, replaced and dehypostasized, managing to linger positively in Christian thought only as metaphor for more spiritual categories.

Today we are blessed to live in a post-supersessionist era, when much of Christianity has come to acknowledge that the biblical covenant between God and the Jewish people still lives, that Jews bear no collective guilt for the death of Jesus and that Jews play a continuing role in sacred history. Yet the logical implications of this dramatic change in theology have not been fully explored. In rejecting supersessionism, Christianity has jettisoned the foundation for dismissing the Land as a theological category, but Christian thinkers have yet to fill the resulting void. In the post-supersessionist age, how should Christian theologians think anew about the physical land of which Judaism and Hebrew Scriptures – or more properly, the "Shared Scriptures" – make so much? "The Land" appears 2504 times and is the fourth most frequently used substantive in those Scriptures. If the Catholic Church can now admit that "the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one," and "the Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain,"²

¹ (Penguin Classics, 2002), Ch. LVI, 460-463, especially the end.

² *The Jewish People And Their Sacred Scriptures In The Christian Bible (The Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001) Preface and II:5.*

then Zion, which Jews have always considered the destination of their national redemption and the center of their messianic dream, is also pregnant with Christian theological significance.

Modernity has brought the appreciation of worldliness to our spiritual worldviews. The reality of the Jewish people's return to its biblical homeland and the robust life Jews have created today in the State of Israel should impel Christian thinkers grounded in empirical reality to consider the meaning of contemporary Zionism for Christian salvation history. If indeed Jews and Christians can co-exist as co-partners in God's covenant, does not the Jewish return to the Land of the Covenant somehow help confirm the foundations of Christianity, or at a minimum, have serious theological implications for Christian belief? This insight was expressed by the great Anglican scholar, James Parkes,³ not long after the establishment of Israel in 1948, but did not stimulate further significant Christian discussion – largely, I believe, due to its political incorrectness at that time. More recently W.D. Davies,⁴ Marcel Dubois and John Pawlikowski⁵ are among the important Christian thinkers who have articulated the need to reconsider the religious significance of “landedness” for Christian life and theology, but their overtures have not been taken up with great energy.

Professor Lux ably demonstrates the intrinsic relationship between the Land of Israel and the gift of the covenant to the Jewish people that Scriptures describe. That post-exilic return to the Land is a result of Jewish repentance is also a common biblical motif, yet the theological issue goes beyond the scriptural nexus that he presents. The aspiration of return has played a substantive role in the lives of Jews throughout their history of exile, and today *Eretz Yisra'el* is central to how nearly all religious Jews see themselves and understand Judaism theologically. Even contemporary anti-Zionist ultra-Orthodox Jews reject only the religious significance of the particular political entity known as the State of Israel, but not the essential requirement of some future Jewish polity in *Eretz Yisra'el* that will be the destination for the ingathering of the exiles heralding messianic redemption. I would argue that land is not a Jewish spiritual ideal, yet for any version of traditional Judaism it is a historical necessity in the unfolding and fulfillment of sacred history. Hence until Christianity can somehow find a positive value for *Eretz Yisra'el*, both understanding and existential identification between faithful Jews and Christians will be severely – and unnecessarily – constrained.

For the above considerations, a post-supersessionist understanding of the significance of the Land is an important theological challenge for contemporary Christians. Indeed, building such a theology could lead to a new rich salutary agenda for today's Christian thinkers. (I hasten to add that Jews, too, have the hard task today of creating a sober theological interpretation of Zionism that does not entail messianic determinism or spin off into irrational and sometimes immoral nationalistic extremisms.) Richard Lux may have given impetus to this movement; he certainly has performed a valuable service to both communities when he raises the issue of *Eretz Yisra'el* for renewed consideration by Christian thinkers in our times.

³ See *End of an Exile: Israel, the Jews and the Gentile World*, Eugene Korn and Roberta Kalechofsky eds, (Marblehead MA: Micah Publications, 2005).

⁴ *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: U. of California, 1982).

⁵ See Dubois, “Jews, Judaism and Israel in the Theology of Saint Augustine – How He Links the Jewish People and the Land of Zion,” and Pawlikowski in “The Re-Judaization of Christianity – Its Impact on the Church and Its Implications for the Jewish People,” both in *People, Land and State of Israel, Immanuel 22/23* (Jerusalem: Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, 1989) 162-214 and 60-74 respectively.

II

My observations below are not intended to critique or correct Lux' analysis, but are offered as a complement to it from a Jewish theological perspective.

Throughout his argument demonstrating the biblical insistence on the intrinsic connection between the Land and covenant, Lux does not probe an underlying theological question: *Why* is this so? Why is a particular geography critical in God's plan for history? The significant role of this local geography is counter-intuitive, since the covenantal God of Abraham is the Creator of both heaven and earth who proclaims "For all the earth is mine" (Ex 19:5).⁶ Further, God challenges Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and by extension all their covenanted descendants – no less than five times in Genesis to be the instruments of blessing for all the families of the earth, presumably in every corner of the globe. The redemptive effects of God's covenant must be felt in Rome, Athens, Damascus, Constantinople and Boston, not merely in Jerusalem. How can this focus of particular place cohere with the universal mission of the covenant? These considerations have led Jewish thinkers to reflect on the paradox of a covenantal land, and may well have been the reason why *Eretz Yisra'el* was so easily dismissed by the early universalizing Christian thinkers.

Lux focuses on what "the Land as Holy" means for Christians, and implicitly, Christian thought. He stresses that a Christian connection with the Land continued unbroken, primarily as a place of pilgrimage. The Land has been sacred in Christian thinking mostly because of its critical religious history, one that carries cosmological significance: *Eretz Yisra'el* is the place where Jesus and his apostles lived and died long ago, the context of Christ's sojourn, his Passion, and the location of the tombs of ancient holy persons who changed human history. Ontologically, God's presence in the Holy Land is rooted in the grand past; spiritually, we feel the holiness of that presence more acutely there because of its miraculous history. Christian pilgrims come to the holy Land today to be inspired by the past, one that helps them to revitalize their spiritual energies drained by the constant immersion in our modern secular world. Holiness of the Land is holiness of memory. These considerations explain why the land is holy for Christians, but not why the Bible considered this particular land holy before the advent of Christianity.

It may be that these considerations are keys to fundamental differences in how Jews and Christians approach the Land theologically. Certainly many Jews accept *that* the Land is holy because of simple scriptural affirmation, without ever asking the deeper question of why. And even more Jews – both religious and secular – treasure Israel because of its Jewish past. For them as well, holiness inheres in the ancient stones and sites of Jewish foundational history. The past confers holiness; our foremost religious challenge is to "renew our days as of old" (Lam 5:21). And if we cannot renew the past, we can at least draw sustenance and inspiration from it.

Yet there is another strain in the Bible – most clearly pronounced in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel – and in the thinking of Jewish theologians, one that points to the future as the key to sanctity. Holiness of the Land is the holiness of aspiration for the ideal covenantal future. In the biblical drama, the Jewish mission to bring blessing to the world is achieved by "keeping the way of the Lord, i.e. doing what is right and what is just," (Gn 18:19) by becoming "a kingdom of priests and a holy *people*" (Ex 19:6). For Jews, human history has not yet been redeemed, but the covenant promises that the messianic dream will be realized sometime in the future through the agency of the covenantal people of Israel. Most importantly, the Bible insists that this is a corporate agency. Israel, *qua* nation rather than *qua* individuals is

⁶ Biblical citations follow or are adapted from the NJPS translation.

called to witness, since at Sinai the covenant with Abraham was transformed to a national covenant with a collective purpose: The nation of Israel is challenged to testify to God's existence, sovereignty and morality in human history. This is the meaning of election (Ex 19:5 "You shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples.") and the function of the commandment to demonstrate holiness in the human/the nation's social order – "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev 19:2). The footsteps of the Messiah will be heard approaching when Israel fashions a society based upon the covenantal values of righteousness, justice, compassion, care of the stranger, and human dignity grounded in the creation of all human beings in God's Image. And God's covenant will blossom into complete fullness in the future when the values of that holy society radiate outward and influence all of humanity. But this eschatological development originates in the Holy Land where God's rule and values will be most obvious: "The Torah shall come forth from Zion and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Is 2:3).

It is precisely because redemption will occur in the empirical future with Israel's national life acting as the catalyst for universal messianic fulfillment that the Land is essential to the covenantal drama. Only when Israel is free in its land will Jews be able to build a society around God's covenantal values that it has adopted as its own. Hence independence, sovereignty and land assume an instrumental – but critical – meaning to sacred history. And the Bible explains why it is this particular land that is essential to the covenantal consciousness of God's presence on earth: "The Land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the Land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of the heavens. It is a Land on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end" (Dt 11:10-12). Relatively shorn of natural resources and without the Nile's constant waters of life, the residents of *Eretz Yisra'el* are ever cognizant of their existential dependency on God, His providence and justice.

If I am correct that this is the major thrust of Jewish covenantal theology, then holiness is a product of human action and is future-oriented. Land assumes spiritual importance only as a necessary condition for present and potential national covenantal behavior. I hesitate to say "only," as this usually connotes secondary and even minimal importance. Yet here it does not, since it is indispensable to the biblical drama. And certainly the long, sad Jewish experience in Christian exile has proven this biblical thesis correct: As a despised and marginalized minority, Jews were denied the ability to influence the ethos, social values, politics and God-awareness of the larger societies in which they lived. In the Diaspora, Judaism was forced to insulate itself against hostile surroundings and thus turned inward. Jews focused on what they *could* influence: home life, ritual, worship and the study of sacred Torah texts. Judaism and Jewish life became relegated to the home and the synagogue. While Jews lived in the Diaspora, the larger covenantal dream also was in exile.

This is the religious revolution of modern Zionism: The national return to the Land and its concomitant political sovereignty has generated the corporate responsibility to establish laws, social values and national ethos and gives the Jewish people the opportunity to model the lofty covenantal values of justice, peace, *tikkun olam*, human dignity and responsibility for one's neighbors, i.e. the holy society described in Leviticus 19, Isaiah 58 and Micah 4. There is no

intrinsic holiness to the Land, place or history, only sacredness as an instrument that enables the Jewish people's fulfillment of the covenant and its influence upon all of God's children.⁷

Of course, the Bible only presents the possibility of covenantal fulfillment for a given society. Place does not guarantee fidelity or holy living. So too the modern phenomenon of the State of Israel. Its holiness resides not in any historical determinism heralding a messianic era, but in creating a national life where the possibility that covenantal values can be lived. Can Israeli society today become holy under its difficult geo-political conditions of perpetual conflict and rampant hatred? Can the Land indeed *become* holy? This is the open experiment of Zionism and its success is contingent upon human striving and commitment to covenantal behavior. It is an experiment to realize a stunning and unrealistic dream. Holiness will be determined in the future, not secured by its biblical past. Like the covenant itself, contemporary life on the Land is a struggle against insurmountable odds requiring hard political realism as well as the faith that the future can be categorically different – categorically better – than the past. Only the future will tell whether Israel has the resolve to make the land holy through its commitment to the values of the covenant. The national religious experiment is both heroic and audacious, but one that the Bible and exilic history grant the Jewish people the right to perform – indeed demands that it perform.

At the end of his essay, Professor Lux draws logically nearer to the Jewish conception of holiness when he outlines the Holy Land as Sacrament of Encounter. It is an experiential 'Theology of Presence,' where holiness is not a function of history, but of the living, personal human-divine encounter: The Holy Land is a sacrament of the Christian's encounter with Christ. If so, it is on the Land that a Christian can sense and relate to God most intensely, i.e. where God is most present. Lux makes no reference here to the Jewish conception a holy society built around covenantal values, but for both Jews and Christians, the Land mediates the living and continuous presence of God. While Jews almost never talk of "sacramental experience," this idea of holiness of the Land should resonate with theologically sensitive Jews.

Faithful Jews and Christians believe fervently that God yearns to be in the world together with human beings. It seems to me this is a crucial meaning for Christians of the Incarnation. For Jews, incarnation cannot be literal, but it is no less important theologically or spiritually powerful. God's earthly dwelling is within the covenantal people of Israel, for Israel is God's earthly sanctuary: "Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (Ex 25:8). Jews, too, have "A Theology of Presence." Whether literal or metaphorical, it is the Land that is the locus of God's incarnation and ongoing life with His children.

Despite its distinctly Christological terminology, perhaps Professor Lux's "Holy Land as a Sacrament of Encounter" is an example of the partial and gradual meeting between Christian and Jewish religious experience that benefits both faith communities. If so, it is a precious gift that deserves careful nurturing.

⁷ I have tried to outline how modern Zionism and the State of Israel relate to this covenantal theology in my recent book, *The Jewish Connection to Israel the Promised Land – A Brief Introduction for Christians* (Woodstock VT: Jewish Lights 2008).