

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING**One Christian Perspective on Land and the State of Israel**

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Presented at the Gregorian University, Rome, December 11, 2007

Beginning: A Christian Perspective

In the Christian tradition, “land” is not a particularly important area of theological consideration. Indeed, there is no entry for “land” or “Holy Land” in the thirty-five volumes of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* and its supplement. So for mainstream Christians, it was certainly anomalous when, in 2002, the United States-based ecumenical Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations (of which I am a member) issued a statement entitled “A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People.” In that statement, they affirmed “the importance of the land of Israel for the life of the Jewish people,” and went on to elaborate:

The land of Israel has always been of central significance to the Jewish people. However, Christian theology charged that the Jews had condemned themselves to homelessness by rejecting God’s Messiah. Such supersessionism precluded any possibility for Christian understanding of Jewish attachment to the land of Israel. Christian theologians can no longer avoid this crucial issue, especially in light of the complex and persistent conflict over the land. Recognizing that both Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in peace and security in a homeland of their own, we call for efforts that contribute to a just peace among all the peoples in the region.¹

In this short paragraph, the Christian Scholars group – we – linked issues of Biblical theology, historical events, and contemporary politics – kind of like a daily conversation in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, while most Christians of the past have not reflected on the category of land at any length, I believe that Christian perspectives on land can be inferred from treatments of related concepts, including the Incarnation, the heavenly Jerusalem, and Christian devotions of pilgrimage and icons. Here I wish, therefore, only to outline my understanding of “land” in Christian tradition by reviewing, sequentially and superficially, New Testament, Patristic, and modern theological perspectives. From this outline, I will draw certain conclusions for a contemporary Christian theology of the land, concluding with some remarks of a more political nature.

Land in our Tradition: The Bible, the Fathers and Our History**A. The Overview**

Christianity emerged out of Judaism and, at its beginning, understood itself as a Jewish reform movement. At a critical, early moment in its life, those Jews who believed that Jesus was Mes-

¹ Mary C. Boys, ed., *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity's Sacred Obligation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), xvii.

siah – in the midst of other Jews (the majority) who did not believe that Jesus was Messiah – had to account for, and respond to, the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. And both Jewish groups had to wrestle with the loss of their land. What does it mean, they had to ponder, to be a people without our Temple, without our land? And both Jewish groups set themselves to dealing with this new situation in theologically creative ways: to be bereft of Temple and homeland unleashed one most innovative Jewish response, which we now call rabbinic Judaism. Alternatively among the Jews of the Jesus movement, new interpretations and understandings of their relation to Temple, land, and cult began to take shape. One particularly elaborate expression of this can be found in the Letter to the Hebrews where a transformation of the whole notion of Temple cult and priesthood took shape. These members of the Jesus movement drew on moments in Jesus' life and early community teaching to formulate a landless self-understanding.² I list the most significant here:

John 4:21-24:

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth."³

John 14:2-3

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Philippians 3:19-20:

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Acts 17:24:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.

Hebrews 12:22 – 24:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are en-

² For a masterful and concise account of the relationship between land and the Bible and its understanding in history, see Alain Marchadour and David Neuhaus, *The Land, the Bible and History: Toward the Land That I Will Show You* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). See also the foundational work by Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Second ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). Also W. Eugene March, *Israel and the Politics of Land: A Theological Case Study* (Atlanta: W/John Knox Press, 1994). (This book has been renamed and republished in 2007 under the title *God's Land on Loan: Israel, Palestine, and the World*, by the same publisher.)

³ All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

rolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

With these passages, we see the incipient trajectory of later Christian thought which, among other things, relativized the importance and meaning of land and the importance of a physical place of worship for this group of (Jewish) followers of Jesus, as well as the beginning of a “spiritualizing” of Jerusalem as the new “heavenly Jerusalem.”⁴

Their relationship to land and temple was only one expression of strains between Jews who believed in Jesus and those who did not. The partings of the ways developed other boundary markers as well, which, from a later perspective, clearly foreshadowed the eventual and inevitable rupture. If we use Acts 2:42 as a touchstone (“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”), we may itemize the fledgling Christian community as dependent on four practices:

- *The teaching of the apostles*: this was still Jewish (based on the Scripture), but interpreted from the center of God’s whole salvation work in Jesus the Christ. His interpretation of how to obey God’s will (in words and in his paradigmatic life) formed their way of life as a distinct one.
- *Fellowship or koinonia*: it continued the fellowship with everything-in-common that had started around Jesus, and continued to be infused by his Spirit.
- *The breaking of the bread*: continued the commensality around Jesus, now tied deeply to the presence of the Crucified and Resurrected Lord and Messiah, present in their midst and hoped for in his return.
- *Prayer*: of course this was still Jewish but offered in the name of Jesus.

Taken altogether, these markers would mean that Jewish followers of Jesus had to separate from their brothers and sisters who did not follow such practices. The early members of the Jesus movement developed their self-understanding without a land, without a temple, and with a constellation of factors which ultimately would separate them from their Jewish brothers and sisters.

As Roman persecution and marginalization made them a target in the Empire, the Christian Church more and more understood its heavenly home, not an earthly territory, as its true destiny. With the legalization of the Christian movement in the empire in the 4th century, something new emerged. After Constantine’s mother Helen traveled to Palestine to find the places made holy by Jesus’ life and teaching, pilgrimage, as a distinctly Christian religious phenomenon, gained legitimacy and popularity.⁵ Helen’s example fueled the Christian religious imagination: “If I can touch what Jesus touched, then, in a way, I can touch Jesus.” These early pilgrims, indeed, touched those places, they worshipped with their fingertips, they “tangibilized” (as one great African-American preacher put it) their faith with their bodies.

It should be noted, however, that, because the early Jewish followers of Jesus had already developed a landless self-understanding, the growth of Christian pilgrimage found quick and ready criticism: Origen and Eusebius both countered, “We do not go to a shrine like pagans to seek

⁴ E.g., Revelation 21:2, 10 .

⁵ For the most complete and compelling account about how the “land became holy,” see Robert Wilken, *A Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

God. God does not dwell in particular places.” Nevertheless, the theology and practice of pilgrimage developed.

So from the fourth century, despite admonitions from Origen, Eusebius, and Gregory of Nyssa, Christians flocked to Jerusalem not only to touch the land made holy by their Savior, but also to behold how bereft Palestine was of Jewish life. Indeed Jerusalem’s devastated condition stood for them as unmistakable evidence that God had punished the Jews for not recognizing their Messiah. Thus the divine will was interpreted, by Augustine and others, that the landless Jewish people were forever to wander this earth.

Despite the early triumph of the argument for Church pilgrimage and the costly twelfth century crusades to reclaim the holy places, many in the 16th century Protestant Reformation attacked devotions related to pilgrimage and all material expressions of faith, including pictures, statues, and relics. Drawing certainly on Biblical passages already cited and ubiquitous examples of contemporary abuse, the reformers made the case that Christians should avoid what they regarded as superstitious practices. Rather Christians should focus on the Bible, the Word of God. The Catholic reaction predictably sought to explain the *proper* use of images and related Christian devotions, even as they admitted, and tried to correct, the abuses. Indeed in the Holy City, we repeat the joke that Catholics come on *pilgrimages*, Protestants come on *study tours*. Echoes of 16th century arguments linger even today.

Finally, in some parts of present-day evangelical Protestantism, one finds not so much a Christian theology of land, but a Christian perspective on land resulting from the *Jewish* return to *all* of historic Palestine interpreted as fulfilled biblical promise and ultimate Christian triumph. The Jewish return to the land functions as a step in the eschatological scenario of Christ’s one-thousand-year reign and the conversion of all to Christ.⁶

Obviously I have oversimplified a long, complicated, and truly fascinating history on land, epitomizing its Christian distinctiveness in related attitudes towards a heavenly Jerusalem, icons and religious pilgrimage. Much more nuance is required to distinguish Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox theologies of the land and the meaning of pilgrimage. But the contours of this history, whether one follows the “Catholic/Orthodox path” or the “Protestant path,” suggest a Christian perspective on the land which, I think, is profitable for our reflection, both to contribute positively to the discussion and to contrast the Christian perspective from Jewish and Muslim perspectives.

B. A Reflection on the Survey

After this very brief survey, we may belatedly ask, Why are we here in our contemporary context concerned about a “Christian perspective” on the land? There is no doubt that the State of Israel looms in the background of our interest. But, if one steps back, a Christian reflection on land also finds its current impetus in the *Jewish* return to the land and its implication for Christian thought.

⁶ For extended considerations of Christian Zionism, see Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-Map to Armageddon?* (Indianapolis: Intervarsity Press, 2006); Naim Ateek, ed., *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (London: Melisende, 2006); and Timothy Weber, *The Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

A little over one hundred years ago, Theodore Herzl, one of the fathers of modern Zionism, approached Pope Pius X to plead for his blessing for the Jewish return to the land. Famously remembered from Herzl's diary was the Holy Father's response:

We cannot encourage this [Zionist] movement...The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people...And so, if you come to Palestine and settle your people there, we will be ready with churches and priests to baptize all of you.⁷

Many of us are shocked by this reaction, but the Holy Father's response reflected a *theological* position vis-à-vis a Jewish attachment to the land which claimed its genealogy in Augustine's already-cited apologetic about the wandering Jew. As a sign of their unfaithfulness and of God's turning his back on his people, Jews may survive, but certainly, some Christians concluded, they must remain forever landless.

In the wake of the *Shoah*, Christians have begun to reflect anew on the *meaning* of Jewish survival, especially because the single-minded effort to eliminate all Jews took place in Christian lands where the vast majority of perpetrators and bystanders were baptized.⁸ This new reflection on Jewish survival has, in turn, moved conscientious Christians to reflect on the place of the land of Israel and its meaning for the Jewish people. Maybe, some conclude, after the *Shoah*, God wills the Jewish people to survive, *precisely as Jews*, in a land of their own. But it is my conviction that Christian reflection on the land and a concern about the welfare of our Christian brothers and sisters in the Holy Land (to say nothing about a concern for the welfare of Jews and Muslims in the same region) need not, indeed *should* not lend support for particular political arrangements. Dwelling in a land is not the same as sovereignty over the land...which is not the same as determining international borders for that land. While they have always dwelt in the land, even through years of Muslim hegemony and Christian crusades, many Jews have dreamed of a time when they could have sovereignty and freedom in a land that corresponded with historic Palestine. Secular Jews and religiously committed Jews have both shared this dream, even if the calculus for determining borders and the meaning of such sovereignty have found many different foundations and solutions.

While in our contemporary political situation it is important to consider *Christian* perspectives on land, it is also critical in an *interreligious* situation to listen to the centrality of the Land in the Jewish self-understanding even if one will not adopt it as one's own. One must, therefore, distinguish recognizing – and honoring – this central Jewish self-understanding from identifying one Jewish (or Muslim) side as the only theologically justified solution in the current political situation.

Let me give one example. In the weeks leading up to the Annapolis Meeting (autumn 2007), rather pointed Jewish *theological* assertions were made in the Israeli press to be used as the foundation for particular *political* positions. I cite one illustrative advertisement from *The Jerusalem Post*:

⁷ Quoted in Sergio I. Minerbi, *The Vatican and Zionism: Conflict in the Holy Land, 1895-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 100ff.

⁸ See Michael B. McGarry, "A Christian Passes through Yad Vashem," in *The Holocaust and the Christian World: Reflections on the Past, Challenges for the Future*, ed. Carol Rittner (London: Kuperard, 2000). See also Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), which includes *We Remember*, the Catholic document on the *Shoah*.

The [Israeli] government has no right to cede the Land of the Bible and to blithely discard the Jewish People's unique heritage of thousands of years. It has no right to reverse the Biblical prophecies of return to Zion that were fulfilled in our era at such tremendous human cost.⁹

To affirm the centrality of Land in Jewish life derives from paying attention to the *many* Jewish sides of the conversation. If, as I quote from the Christian Scholars Group's statement, "both Israelis and Palestinians have the right to live in peace and security in a homeland of their own," one must resist theological solutions and justifications to political questions no matter how attractive they may appear. Jewish views on land are more complex and varied than some voices of the religious right, with their singular biblical and rabbinic justifications, would lead one to believe. Indeed one finds vigorous (if not always a majority of) secular Jewish Israeli voices speaking both for equal rights for all Israeli citizens (including Arab Muslims, Christians and Druze) and territorial compromise in working for peace – and all without reference to the biblical or rabbinic tradition. Many of the Ashkenazi Jews of Israel, recalling how they were cruelly treated in Christian Europe, work for just treatment of all in the Jewish state. Indeed, the majority of Israelis working for human rights tend to be nonobservant Jews.¹⁰ The political discourse in Israel is robust and multilayered. Christians who come to Israel are often baffled by Jewish self-understandings that are not religious, biblical, or even theistic. As Christians come to understand how Jews understand themselves, they must not ignore these secular Jewish voices as *one* authentic Jewish self-understanding. And, therefore, Christians should refrain from adopting any particular Jewish *religious* understanding of the Land as *the* Jewish understanding of the land.

When the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews addressed the relation of the land to the Jewish people, it wisely took a tack *other than a theological* one to support the legitimacy of the State of Israel. The State of Israel does not rest on a particular interpretation of the Bible, but rather on universally recognized international law. This is not unusual, for none of the nations of the world stands before others on its theological, biblical, or Quranic legitimacy. Furthermore, neither the Bible¹¹ nor a particular Christian theology enables us to conclude where Israel's borders should be:

Christians are invited to understand this [Jewish] religious attachment [to the Land] which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship (cf. *Declaration* of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, November 20, 1975).

⁹ *The Jerusalem Post*, 23 November 2007, p. 19. Days leading up to the 2007 Annapolis meeting saw numerous such advertisements, from both Jews and Christians, citing specifically *religious and biblical* support for particular political decisions.

¹⁰ Obviously there are noteworthy exceptions among the religiously observant. Cf. the Interreligious Coordinating Council of Israel, the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Interfaith Encounter Association, Rabbis for Human Rights, those in the Alexandria Process, and the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, among others. For a listing of many Israeli groups (not all religious) working for peace and/or human rights, see <http://www.icci.org.il>.

¹¹ One might note here that both within the observant Jewish community and the Christian theological community, a great range of opinion exists as to just what constitutes the biblical borders of the Promised Land (to say nothing of subsequent, significant rabbinic arguments). So all the more careful does one need to be in, on the one hand, claiming divine sanction for a particular land, and, on the other hand, saying that the boundaries are so disputed that they can be negotiated by politicians for secular reasons. Here the religious Zionists in Israel and the Christian world are consistent in affirming both the divine gift of land and its (still disputed) borders.

The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.

The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design. We must in any case rid ourselves of the traditional idea of a people *punished*, preserved as a *living argument* for Christian apologetic. It remains a chosen people, "the pure olive on which were grafted the branches of the wild olive which are the gentiles" (John Paul II, March 6, 1982, alluding to Rm 11:17-24).¹²

In other words, a Christian perspective on the land does not entail particular political decisions, whether they be the legitimacy of the Israeli state, its seeking out of secure borders, or rights to a particular land.¹³ Political decisions do not and should not come from particular interpretations of the Bible, Christian or Jewish. The Zionist movement started as, and during its early history remained, an overwhelmingly secular movement. Their descendants' voices should be included in the discussion about Israel, its borders, and its future. Clinging to Biblical interpretations, however finely crafted and argued, mutes their voices and establishes a too-narrow consideration for future Israeli political decisions.

Conclusion

One may rightly counter to all that has gone before that I have conflated the issues of loss of Temple, loss of land, the development of Christian pilgrimage, and a high sacramental tradition – all with a Christian perspective on land. Yes, I would agree. But, in the end for us Christians, a *perspective* on the land is ultimately related to our notion of being related to this world and its physicality. Therefore ultimately these themes find their moorings in a theology of Incarnation, grounded in the apostle John's claim that "the Word became flesh and lived among us."¹⁴ Recalling the early debates about the validity of pilgrimage as worthy Christian practice and the triumph in the Western Church of the use of physical expressions of their faith (e.g., sacraments, icons, statues, incense), we conclude with the Christian affirmation of the physical, the material, and its corollary flight from the Docetic. With this affirmation, the conscientious Christian may come not only to understand why the land is important to the Jewish people, but also to appreciate, and have an insight, into its meaning.

The Christian Scholars Group's affirmation of the importance of the Land for Jewish self-understanding, with which I began, was carefully crafted. It recognized the Jewish attachment to the land without entailing particular political arrangements. As important as theological perspectives might be, however, in the end it is dangerous and counter productive to provide a warrant

¹² Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church (June 24, 1985)," in Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki, eds., *In Our Time: The Flowering of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 49. See a similar statement from the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "Jewish Concern for the State of Israel" <http://www.elca.org/ea/interfaith/jewish/tp6.htm>.

¹³ One might add that this applies to Islam as well. That is, (some) Muslim claims to the land of Palestine – or Spain – might be understood but neither opposed nor supported *theologically* from a Christian perspective.

¹⁴ John 1:14 .

for, or argument against, Israel's political legitimacy on theological grounds.¹⁵ No, Christian perspectives on land may be a legitimate and needed topic for interreligious dialogue, but they are not the justifications for particular policy decisions. These must come from elsewhere.

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¹⁵ If political legitimacy depends on theology, then it can be lost by countervailing theologies. So one finds some Christians charging that Jews have lost their right to the Land of Israel because most contemporary Israelis are not living according to the covenant (for the promise of the land is dependent upon covenantal faithfulness). Or one finds the position that Jews lost their right to the Land when they denied their Messiah (remember Pius X to Herzl and much of Christian tradition). On the other side of the spectrum, one finds those dispensational Christian theologies that frame the Jewish return and right to the Land on a predictive understanding of prophecy, which, in the end, will lead to the annihilation of the Jewish people as Jews. As one Jewish observer characterized it, "According to this view, history unfolds in a series of distinct preordained periods or 'dispensations' and the return of the Jews to Israel will not only bring about Christ's return, but also their destruction." Daniel Levitas, "A Marriage Made in Heaven," *Reform Judaism* Summer (2003): 39.