



Land of Israel and Universal Salvation in the New Testament

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In December 2009, Palestinian Christians published A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian's Suffering, (hereafter referred to as Word) that gained great attention through its distribution by the World Council of Churches as "Kairos Palestine Document." Because Word emphatically, and in detail, speaks in theological terms, I will first outline its theological foundation, then discuss this in four points and, at the end, add a few comments.

1. The theological foundation of the document:

Its emphasis on universality

After an introduction and a description of the reality, as the authors of Word perceive it, they begin emphatically with a theological creed that is, in a good Christian way, trinitarian. The first article describes God as "the one God, Creator of the universe and humanity," as "a good and just God who loves each one of his creatures," from whom every human being has his/her dignity as image of God. The second article identifies "God's eternal Word" as "His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, whom God sent as the Saviour of the world." The third article understands the Holy Spirit as a companion to "the Church and all humanity." In particular, the Spirit is given a function to help "us" understand the coherence of the "Holy Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments." "The Spirit makes manifest the revelation of God to humanity, past, present and future" (2.1).

It is apparent and striking that in all three articles, [no special relationship is mentioned, transl.] only the comprehensive relationship [of God transl.] to the universe, the world and all humanity.

As an explanation of how the Word of God is to be understood, it is said, in regard to Jesus Christ and as a further statement of faith, that he "came in order to fulfill the Law and the Prophets" (2.2.1). This statement obviously refers to Matthew 5:17; however, this verse actually stresses the remaining validity of Torah and Prophets, contradicting their annulment. It is used here to serve a reading and an understanding of the holy Scriptures only in orientation and relation to Jesus Christ. After that, the newness character of Christ's appearance is emphasized by his proclamation that "the kingdom of God has come near" – by the way, the identical words here had already been part of the earlier proclamation of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:2 – this proclamation is now expanded, "He provoked a revolution in the life and faith of all humanity." This newness character is further emphasized by the fact that, in Mark 1:27, Jesus' ministry had been received as "new teaching" and explained as "casting new light on the Old Testament" and "on themes such as the promises, the election,

the people of God and the land" (2.2.2).

The foregoing foundational statements repeatedly stressed the universal dimension of this newness [through Jesus, without reference to the special relationship Jesus had to Israel, transl.] The supposedly positive newness is carried further in the first two sections under the headline, "Our land has a universal mission." In the explanation, this headline is first repeated as a statement of faith in order to conclude, "In this universality, the meaning of the promises of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity." The promise of the land should be understood, "in light of the teachings of the holy Bible," as "the prelude to complete universal salvation" (2.3). In the beginning of the next section, it is said correspondingly, "God sent the patriarchs, the prophets and the apostles to this land so that they might carry forth a universal mission to the world" (2.3.1).

In short, one can summarize: God is described as the God of all the world, Jesus has the function of throwing new light on the Old Testament, and the holy Spirit serves as hermeneut, as interpreter, who leads one to read the Old Testament only and entirely in light of a New Testament that is understood as universal in its orientation. This position is not unique to the Palestinian authors of Word. With it, they participate in a long Christian tradition which constantly played off universality against particularity and, thereby, denied particularistic Israel any theological relevancy. The difference to this tradition consists in this Palestinian document only in the fact that its presentation is possible here, without even once naming Israel and its history or aspects of its story.

In recent decades, it has become clear to many Christians that, in the history of the Church, the reversal of the particular into the universal in its interpretation of the Bible and in its theology turned out to be eminently antisemitic. These Christians have realized also that neither the Old nor the New Testament know of such a reversal of the particular into the universal, but that particularity and universality are in a relationship of productive tension. Therefore, the theological foundation of this Word of Palestinian Christians demands a critical analysis.

2. God as the God of the whole world is and will remain Israel's God

By solely emphasizing the universal aspect, the first article of the Palestinian creed neglects, as do the creeds of the early church, an essential element of the biblical witness to God. According to this witness, God is most certainly, as its creator, the God of the whole world. God is not, however, an all-purpose, commonplace God but decidedly Israel's God, whose choice it was and still is to have a special covenantal history with this people, the Jewish people. This is undeniably true in regard to the Old Testament which was, and very much still is, the Jewish Bible. It binds Christians to Judaism as to no other religion. This particular covenantal history of Israel – and therefore the identity of God as the God of Israel – was, according to the witness of the New Testament, not ended or revoked by Jesus but is still in force. This is terminologically reflected in the fact that even the New Testament speaks explicitly of God as "God of Israel" (Matthew 15:31, Luke 1:68, Acts 13:17). Above all, Paul emphasizes the enduring bond between God and the Jewish people in his letter to the Romans, where Paul has his Jewish countrymen in mind, who do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. He describes them in 9:4 to 5 with the honorary title "Israelites" and then says, "To them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Torah, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs and from them, according to descent, comes the anointed." Paul looks back at this, when he asserts in 11:29, "Irrevocable are the gifts and calling of God." Immediately before, he had evaluated those of his countrymen who ignored Jesus by mentioning one important point – which is lost in many translations in an 'It may be true – but' construct – that under this viewpoint, election is even more important than the

gospel.

In chapters 1 to 8 of Romans, Paul had twice leveled the difference between Israel and the nations, both in terms of human sin and in terms of divine grace. Regarding grace, Paul had found that God had shown his justice and his salvation also to the nations. Here happened, indeed, a universal expansion. Yet Paul never allows this peculiarity of Israel to melt into a general universalism. He remains committed to the permanent peculiarity of Israel in Israel's relationship with God. Rather, in the anointed Jesus, God is also the God of the nations, precisely as Israel's God and in God's enduring relationship with Israel. Israel is not universalized. For a number of regional Protestant churches in Germany, this had the consequence that they now wrote the continuing faithfulness of God to his people Israel into their old existing constitutions. This means, of course, no less than that the constitutive relatedness of Judaism, which exists and is alive outside the church, is also part of Christian identity. The Catholic New Testament scholar Rainer Kampling spoke in view of the post-conciliar Israel-theology of his church the "Church is bound to Israel in the past, present and future" as "a signum ecclesiae."^[1]

As little as the universal extension in the New Testament removes the special particularity of Israel, as little is the Old Testament – the Jewish Bible – completely limited to a depiction of a particular history of the covenant, presented in a universal context. This is evident in such books as the Psalms and the Prophets, in which the nations are invited to praise the God of Israel, the one God and Creator of the world. However, it is mainly found in the very construction of the Jewish Bible, where the particular history of the covenant, beginning with Abraham, is preceded by a general human history. In it, the first created human being is not the first Israelite, but simply a "human," created as man and woman. It is significant that the human is first spoken about in the singular. The ancient Jewish tradition teaches that man was created as one individual "for the sake of peace among the creatures, so that no one could say to his neighbor, 'My father is greater than your father.'" It continues, "In order to proclaim the greatness of the king of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be he: If a man imprints 100 coins with a single stamp, they are all equal. But the king of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, impressed every human with the stamp of the first human, but none is like his neighbor. Therefore, every individual is obliged to say, 'For my sake has the world been created'" ^[2] Such is the dignity of every human being, the image of God. Here, too, universality and particularity come together.

3. The Jewish Jesus and universal salvation

As God is not seen in the first article of the Palestinian creed in his covenant relationship with Israel, but only in God's relation to the entire creation, so is Jesus never seen as a Jew acting among Jews in the Land of Israel in the second article of the creed. Here, too, only the universal aspect is apparent. Jesus is "sent as the Saviour of the world" and "he came" Again, the Palestinian Word shares this detachment of Jesus from Judaism with the conventional Christian tradition. In this tradition, and in many other representations of Jesus, a great breach is created between Jesus and his Jewish tradition when it is asserted that "he provoked a revolution in the life and faith of all humanity." It sounds radical but remains almost completely vague in its content. The only content-related remark is in the phrase immediately following, "He came with a 'new teaching'" taken from Mark 1:27, without giving any consideration to the context of this verse. In this context, it is the audience of the synagogue at Capernaum who wonder whether this was a "new teaching – with authority," after Jesus had not only taught, but freed a possessed man from his demon. But in the presentation of the Palestinian Word, the phrase "new teaching" is used to serve only as a bridge for the claim that the "new teaching" throws "new light" on the Old Testament and on the "themes of promises, election, people of God and country." In plain English, this means:

These themes, which in the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament, are related to Israel, are taken through "new teaching" out of their context and claimed as now being universalized. This is done even more clearly in regard to statements of the third article of the Palestinian Word. This will be dealt with more clearly in statements regarding this third article. I will explain this more in the next section, because there, as well, the question of the relationship between the Old and the New Testament is affected. The topic of land shall then be considered as its own subject in the section following the next one.

Here I want to point out the following: Over the last decades of scholarly work on the New Testament, it has become increasingly clear that the depictions of Jesus in the Gospels belong entirely in the Jewish context of the first century. This includes not only the context of the time of Jesus around the year 30 CE, but also the context of the time of the Gospels between 70 and 100 CE, a time characterized by intra-Jewish conflict. This has two consequences, which I will mention shortly.

First, we have to reflect on the difference between our situation, belonging to a church that became a true international church, and the situation of an internal Jewish conflict, in which the texts emerged.

Second, the knowledge that the Gospels are embedded in their Jewish context causes the past rhetoric of Christian superiority (that, in some places, extends into the present) to appear fairly bland. The only thing really new in the New Testament is that people from the nations – and we with them – through the preaching related to Jesus in the holy Spirit, have come to the one God, the God of Israel, to worship and praise him, without having to become Jews. Again it is Paul, who in Romans expresses this several times (with the emphasis on "also"): also the nations (1:16, 2:9 f.; f. 4:9.11f., 9:24). Again, this "also" has been skipped in some translations. In the paraphrasing poetry of Psalm 117 by Joachim Sartorius, the "also" is memorably expressed, when the nations are challenged to offer God praise and thanksgiving, for "he has chosen you also and given to you his grace in Christ, his Son."[\[3\]](#)

4. About the Relationship of the Two Testaments to Each Other

In the third article of the Palestinian creed, it is said that the holy Spirit leads us to understand that both Testaments, the Old and New, belong together. We are not left in doubt as to how this unity is to be understood, because the traditional pattern of promise and fulfillment is taken up, according to which Jesus Christ is seen as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. This fulfillment then lets the promise appear as "the prelude to complete universal salvation." Here, too, the alleged universality of the New Testament removes all particularity. The Old Testament is seen entirely from the position of the New Testament and conceived as a precursor to it. One can find here, again, Luther's rule of interpretation that in the Old Testament is true "whatever impels Christ." But one should then also be clear about the consequences, which Luther draws explicitly. If the Old Testament can only be understood correctly "in Christ," then one must deny Jews any adequate understanding of their own Bible; logically, also the right knowledge of God and true worship; and finally – what Luther actually did – accuse them of violating the first commandment.[\[4\]](#) If one is not able or allowed to do that, then one may have to search for a different definition of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament writings themselves give us guidance.

More in passing, it may be noted that there are certainly connecting lines in the Christian Bible between promise and fulfillment. However, they should not be made into the dominant category (and certainly not into the only category) to determine the relationship between both Testaments. Also note that in the entire New Testament, the assignment of "promise" and "fulfillment" appears terminologically only once (Acts 13:32-33). Finally, when the "Fulfillment

of Scripture" is used in the New Testament, the Hebrew language background of the Greek New Testament has to be considered. Behind the Greek *plerósai* ("to fulfill") is the Hebrew *lekajém* ("to bring to pass," "to achieve," "to do", "to set up" "to put in force"). This stands out notably in the programmatic scripture of Matthew 5:17.[\[5\]](#)

It is more important to be mindful of the following truism: When the New Testament authors were writing, there was still no New Testament. What was naturally available to them was only the Jewish Bible, the sacred scriptures of their time. That they lived in and with their Bible is obvious in their own writings, implicitly and explicitly. Thus, the writings of the New Testament authors cannot be understood without their Bible. In the Gospels, for example, we find repeatedly quotations from the Jewish Bible and references to it. One would have to say outright: The evangelists tell the story of Jesus with their Bible. This happens especially in the Passion story.

By telling Jesus' suffering and death with their Bible, they draw the God of the Bible into these gloomy events. They want to know what God has to do with the events and what God is doing in them. The bare facts are not left by themselves and, as it were, with their own power. By God entering into the events, a perspective is opened that is larger than that of the devastating facts. For this, they need the scriptures; these scriptures generate the story they are telling. Therefore, the Old Testament scriptures are the 'space' [the context] of the gospel and of the Four Gospels.

This much is clear: Without the Old Testament, the New Testament hangs up in the air. For the emergence of the Church, the Jewish Bible was the distinct and obvious precondition. It was in the history of the Church never decided or even put to a vote, to make the Old Testament the first part of the Christian Bible. The Jewish scriptures were simply already present as a 'pre-gift.' Insofar as the Old Testament, is 'pre-gift,' it has a *prae*, a 'before' in time and factuality. As a non-Jew, I have, no innate relationship with the Jewish scriptures. But because the Jewish Bible was connected with the New Testament, it has become the Old Testament of the Church. This does not mean 'old' as antiquated but as the First Testament that is still and will remain in force, to which I as the non-Jew have access through the New Testament. Under the terms of access, the New Testament has therefore for me a *prae*, a 'before.' How, then, are we to determine the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments? I can show this to you in a literally hands-on demonstration with the Bible I use most often, so that you can 'grasp' this context once and for all.

I have asked a bookbinder to bind a Greek New Testament, the latest Nestle/Aland edition, together with a Jewish Bible that I purchased in a bookstore in Meah Shearim in Jerusalem. For my work I wanted to have one Bible, the whole Bible, and not just an isolated New Testament. I think the use of isolated New Testaments is tragic. It creates the impression that the New Testament is the "real" Christian Bible – as if one could “really” do without the Old Testament.

Also, my Bible is practical; I always have the original text of both parts of the Christian Bible handy in only one book. This set-up has also existed at the Bible Society for about ten years now – the Greek New Testament in the form of the Nestle/Aland edition and the *Biblia Hebraica* published by a Christian publisher, bound into one book. I had come to the idea actually before the Bible society. This here is already my second copy; the first one was worn out after eleven years. Above all, I have deliberately taken a Jewish Bible (by a Jewish publisher, transl.) for my own combination, to make it clear and accessible in my own mind: The first part of the Christian Bible existed before the second, and is also the holy scripture of another community. The Jewish Bible also reminds me of the fact that it needs a Jewish interpretation.

This Bible is highly symbolic. It has no "back" and no "front." Greek has to be read from left to right, but Hebrew from right to left. Accordingly, Hebrew books are made differently than ours. Thus, the "back" of both parts is in my Bible in the center, as seen from both directions. In other words, the center of the Bible is formed by the respective closing sections of the two parts. In the traditional Christian Bible, in the translations, the transition from the Old to the New Testament is the end of the twelve prophetic books, the writing of the prophet Malachi which, at its conclusion, looks forward to the coming of Elijah. The New Testament begins with Matthew's Gospel, where Elijah appears in the figure of John the Baptist. This can be read as a progression – but it doesn't need to be read that way.

In my Bible the two Testaments meet in quite a different way. The last book of the Jewish Bible is 2nd Chronicles, with the decree of the Persian King Cyrus that allows the Jews who so desire to go back into the land of Israel and return to Jerusalem. The last word in 2nd Chronicles 36:23 is, *v^ejáal* ("Let him go up"). At the end of the New Testament is the Revelation of John. Before the final and framing comments of the book is the great vision of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, in chapter 21:1 to 22:5. Thus, in this Bible, the end of its two parts form the middle of the whole Bible, the present and the future Jerusalem – the Jerusalem which gives the Jews, returning from exile, a homeland and refuge, yet, which also points beyond itself already in the Hebrew Bible to the coming Jerusalem, to which the peoples of the world make pilgrimage, as also in John's visionary depiction in Revelations. I consider this a beautiful Jewish-Christian perspective.

5. The Problem of the Land

The question of "the land" plays a special role in the Word of the Palestinian Christians. For this reason it shall be investigated in this separate section. I have already pointed out that in this Word – next to 'the promises,' 'the election' and 'the people of God' – also 'the land' is put into a universal perspective. In this perspective, its role is supposed to "open up to include all of humanity." Whatever this means concretely in relation to this land, however, remains rather blurry; then again, in its vagueness, it remains tragically clear. On the negative side, it is obviously separated from its bond to Israel. The "promise of the land" was interpreted as "the prelude to complete universal salvation" and the mission of patriarchs, prophets and apostles "to this land" was understood as "a universal mission to the world."

This corresponds to a long and broad Christian tradition, which was supported by New Testament research, that in the New Testament the land is no more Israel's land. This relationship of Israel to the land, referenced in the Old Testament, is supposed to be superseded by the universalization of salvation in the New Testament. But as little as the particular importance of Israel is subsumed into something general by the New Testament's universal orientation, as little has the specific bond of the people of Israel to the land of Israel been rescinded. This is already evident in the terminology of Matthew 2:20-21, where the "land of Israel" is explicitly mentioned twice. In Matthew 10:23, the term "Israel" in the phrase "the cities of Israel" also describes the land. In a number of other places, "Israel" means the unity of the people and the land of Israel (Matthew 8:10/Luke 7:9; Matthew 9:33; Luke 2:34; 4:25.27; 24:21; Acts 1:6, so also in the phrase "King of Israel" in John 1:49, 12:13; cf. Matthew 27:42/Mark 15:32).

It is important to me to draw attention to this use of New Testament language, because our own use of language, in regard to this land, was and still is largely determined by a decision of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (76 BCE-138 CE). After the second Jewish-Roman war of 132-135 CE, he had taken harsh punitive measures against the Jewish people. These measures were repealed later by Hadrian's successor – except for one, which has had a lasting effect to this day. Taking up a literary term that was sometimes used only by literati, he ordered that the

province that had, until then, been known as "Judea" should now be named "Palestine" so that, with this designation, no one would even think of Jews.

More important than this conceptual note, however, is the observation that the relationship between people and land of Israel is never abolished in the New Testament. On the contrary, it finds itself expressly used in a number of passages. It is particularly evident in the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel which, in view of John the Baptist and Jesus, continually express a very solid hope for a national-political Israel based, of course, on the land. I will here refer to only a few observations.^[6] At the end of his announcement to Miriam [=Mary] of the birth of Jesus, the angel Gabriel says, "He will be great, and he will be called Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). This is national-political messianology. The sole reference to Israel is made obvious by the explicit naming of "the house of Jacob." According to Luke 1:68-75, the priest Zachariah said, after the circumcision of his son John,

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days."

Again, the reference to Israel is obvious; the political-theological purpose is clearly stated. The liberation, respectively salvation, from the hands of the enemies and haters of Israel is mentioned twice. The considered purpose is to be able to serve God without fear. If this service is further characterized as "purity/integrity" (holiness) and "justice", it refers to a life that is appropriate to God and follows his commandments in its religious and social sphere in the community of Israel in the land of Israel. In Luke 2:38, it is said about the prophetess Anna that she began to speak about the child Jesus to all "who were looking for the liberation of Jerusalem." Jerusalem stands here *pars pro toto* for Israel in the relationship between people and land.

This awakened hope in these first two chapters of the Gospel is not fulfilled in the following narrative of Jesus' life. However, it is also not disclaimed – on the contrary. For this, I will refer for now only to Acts 1:6. There, Jesus is asked by those who came with him immediately before his ascension, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" Since they now no longer consider Jesus to be dead, once and for all, they raise the hope again that had been disappointed (cf. Luke 24:21) – namely, that Jesus would deliver Israel. Now that he is risen from the dead, will he now fulfill this expectation? Again, Jesus does not deny this hope. Neither does he promise its immediate fulfillment, "It is not for you to know the times and points in time that the Father has set in his own sovereignty" (Acts 1:7). Disclaimed is the "now" of the fulfillment of this expectation. At the same time, the expectation itself is confirmed – indeed, as one that God himself will fulfill. Jesus then goes on, telling his followers, what is important now: "Rather, you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). How do the statement about the restoration "of the kingdom to Israel" and the statement about the mission in the power of the holy Spirit that goes

beyond Israel "to the end of the earth," relate to each other? Are these statements unconnected and stand side by side or do they stand in a factual context?

This question is answered in Luke 2:30-32 where Simeon, with the six-week-old Jesus in his arms, says that he can now die in peace, "for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: a light for revelation to the nations and for glory to your people Israel." Here, at the beginning and for the first time in Luke's Gospel, the nations (Gentiles) are mentioned and they are mentioned as object of God's help and salvation. Here, he takes up the fundamental distinction between biblical Israel and the nations and brings both entities into a relationship with each other. Simeon says about the child he holds in his arms, "A light for revelation to the nations." He speaks with his Bible, because, in Isaiah 42:6-7, God speaks to the figure standing in God's service, "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you. I have given you as a covenant to the people (= Israel), a light to the nations." The same constellation is seen in Isaiah 49:6 where, in the end, it is said that God's "salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." What Simeon says here is taken from these biblical texts.

The term "revelation" is peculiar to Luke, and peculiar is its relation to Jesus. Thus, Jesus will reveal to the peoples of the world that Israel's God, as the one and only God, is also the God of all the world and therefore, also the God of the nations who, in this child, will turn towards them with help and salvation. Here, where Luke – for the first time in his work – brings the peoples (nations) into a positive relationship with Jesus as the means by which God helps and saves, Luke immediately puts Israel positively next to him. Jesus is, therefore, not just "a light for revelation to the Gentiles," but also and thereby a light "to the glory of your people Israel." How can Jesus be both, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" and, at the same time, become "the glory of God's people Israel"? I think that Luke had the following vision: If the nations, through Jesus, recognize the God of Israel as the one God of all the world and also as their God, then they can no longer harass and oppress God's people Israel and act in hostility against it. Then it would be fulfilled for Israel what was said by Zachariah, "that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (Luke 1:73-75).

If that was Luke's hope, it was bitterly disappointed by the course of subsequent history. After the horrors of the last century and the frightening realization of it, and as a consequence of the present reading, I see the necessity of a theological, practical-political and truthful perception of Israel as God's people. This means taking responsibility that this people can live in their own identity, freed from the hand of its enemies and without fear.

What is said here by Luke, Paul had already expressed in a nutshell in Romans 15:8. "For I tell you that the Anointed one has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs." Paul presents here a relationship of the Anointed one – and he naturally thinks of Jesus – with the people of Israel. In relation to Israel, he is "servant"; he has a diaconal function. He acts as servant to prove God's faithfulness. What Paul has elaborated on in Romans 9-11, is here brought into a concise statement: God is faithful to his people, regardless of its position toward the Messiah Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus as the anointed one vouches for this faithfulness. He does it so that the promises made to the ancestors are confirmed. What are the promises given to the ancestors? Of course, the promises are those which Paul knows from his Bible, especially those of descendants and land and safe and secure life in this land. As the anointed one, Jesus is servant of Israel in such a way that he does not cancel the promises or considers them not in force anymore. Though he has not fulfilled them, he has confirmed them; they continue to be inviolable.

I think it is extremely important to notice that Paul does not here connect the promises with

the category of fulfillment but with confirmation. To claim that Jesus had fulfilled the promises related to Israel would be possible only by spiritualizing the promises and the designation "Israel" as well. Doing so would take both away from the de facto existing Judaism. Obviously, this is not Paul's intention. Jesus as the anointed one has not fulfilled the promises related to Israel, but neither has he dissolved them; he confirmed them.

In this regard, it strikes me as highly problematic how the Word of the Palestinian Christians speaks about the "land." At no point are the terms "land" and "Israel" even remotely brought into relationship with each other; in relation to the "land" "Israel" appears only as occupier. In contrast, the phrase "our land" is set multiple times in relation to biblical passages.

In section 2.2, Hebrews 1:1-2 is quoted, "In ancient times God spoke to our ancestors ... by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." If one takes the address of the letter to the Hebrews seriously, then the "us," the addressees with whom the author identifies, are Jews and the "fathers" are the Jewish ancestors. However, this document introduces the above quote by saying, "We – that is Palestinians – believe that God has spoken to humanity, here in our land" (emphasis added).

In 2.3.1, the phrase "this land", into which God sent the patriarchs, prophets and apostles, is taken up in the sentence after the next with the phrase "our land". This type of writing is, to put it mildly, not protected against being understood, at least implicitly, as a claim to the entire land west of the Jordan River as "our land." I do not see how the next section, 2.3.2, can not be read as questioning the right of existence of the State of Israel. After highlighting the fact that its own Palestinian presence is "deeply rooted in the history and geography of this land", it continues, "It was an injustice that we (?) have been expelled from the country. The West (?) tried to make up to the Jews for the injustice they had suffered in the countries of Europe, but this compensation went against us in our land. Injustice was to be corrected; instead new injustice was done."

Can one understand this view of history that takes up only these very specific aspects and thus shortens and distorts the view of history in any other way, than that the whole territory of the former British Mandate is claimed as "our land" and thus the state of Israel is denied its lawful existence? Considering this, one should view the nice-sounding call in 9.1, "to seek a common vision, based on equality and sharing," with extreme skepticism as to how this call is to be understood.

6. Concluding Remarks

In the previous section, it has become clear that the theological debate here is closely interlinked with the political. For me, it is clear from Scripture that the people and land of Israel belong inseparably together. It seems also to be evident that, under current conditions, this unity must have the form of a state. However, nothing has been said about the borders of this state and no occupation has been legitimized. The right of the State of Israel to exist can never be in question.

The Word of Palestinian Christians attributes all evils they experience solely to the occupation and concludes that, if the Israelis ended the occupation, they would "then discover a new world without fear and threat, in which security, justice and peace would prevail" (1.4). The Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon and the Gaza Strip has shown that this is an illusory view of things. It is illusory because the crucial problem is the lack of acknowledgment and acceptance of Israel by powerful states in the region and militant organizations among the Palestinians that are sustained by them.

The Word of Palestinian Christians does not mention this recognition, but implicitly undermines it. In 1948, the "vision of equality and sharing" was answered by the Arab side with war. This Word does not mention it. 1948 is remembered only from the perspective of the "Nakba" (catastrophe) and, connected with it, the refugee problem held open now for seven decades. In 1948, about 860,000 Jews lived in Arab countries. Nearly 400,000 of them were expelled in 1948. Most of those who remained were expelled in the next two decades. They were all integrated in Israel and elsewhere. A partial integration of Palestinian refugees has happened only in Jordan. Rolf Schieder considers the Kairos Palestine Document as "strikingly self-righteous. A confession of their own guilt is missing. The victim's perspective stifles any self-criticism."^[7]

In all necessary criticism, one has to concede to this Word that it speaks out of a situation of experienced suffering and distress. Occupation, however it has come about, always produces humiliation, suffering and even death. Occupation may never be permanent.

The greatest scandal of this Word is, in my view, how it was spread by the World Council of Churches. Instead of making the authors aware that their theological statements participate in the worst traditional hostility to Jews,^[8] instead of expanding their view and thus helping them to self-criticism, the WCC has named it "Kairos Palestine Document" in an explicit reference to the "Kairos Document," a call in 1985 to the South African churches against the apartheid regime of their country.

In the Word of Palestinian Christians, such a correlation to the previous Kairos document is not made explicit; however, it is hinted at in three places. In 4.2.6, it calls "for the withdrawal of investments and for boycott measures of economy and trade against all goods manufactured by the occupation." It is unclear here whether the boycott is directed only against Israeli economic activities in the occupied territories or against all of Israel. That the latter is meant, can be seen in the two other passages. In 6.3, the authors mention generally a call to "boycott and disinvestment" and, in 7.1, they demand to introduce "a system of economic sanctions and boycott to be applied against Israel." In the section with the first mention of boycott measures, they speak at the end of the hope that they "will eventually reach the longed-for solution to our problems, as indeed happened in South Africa and with many other liberation movements in the world." (4.2.6).

The World Council of Churches has, as it were, encapsulated these allusions by naming the Word of Palestinian Christians, "Kairos Palestine Document." Once again, this enormously exacerbates – especially subliminally emotional – the anti-Israel bias. Israel is thereby declared to be an apartheid state. This is unbearable.

^[1] Rainer Kampling, <>Gott – sein Weg ist untadelig (Ps 18,30). Ein katholischer Blick auf Dabru emet, in: Dabru emet – redet Wahrheit. Eine jüdische Herausforderung zum Dialog mit den Christen, hg.v. Rainer Kampling u. Michael Weinrich, Gütersloh 2003 (S. 43–54), S. 47. [God – his way is impeccable (Ps 18,30): A Catholic Glimpse at Dabru Emet – speak truth: a Jewish Challenge to Dialogue with Christians, publ. By Rainer Kampling and Michael Weinrich]

^[2] Mischna Sanhedrin 4,5.

^[3] Evangelisches Gesangbuch 293,1. (Protestant Hymnbook 293,1)

^[4] Vgl. dazu Klaus Wengst, Jesus zwischen Juden und Christen. Re-Visionen im Verhältnis der Kirche zu Israel, Stuttgart ²2004, S. 30–34.79–81. (Comp. Klaus Wengst, Jesus between Jews and Christians: Re-Visions in the Relationship of the Church to Israel)

[5] Vgl. dazu Klaus Wengst, Das Regierungsprogramm des Himmelreichs. Eine Auslegung der Bergpredigt in ihrem jüdischen Kontext, Stuttgart 2010, S. 67–70. (Comp. Klaus Wengst, The Government Program of the Kingdom of Heaven. An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount in its Jewish Kontext)

[6] Ausführliche Darstellung bei Klaus Wengst, „... zum Glanz für Dein Volk Israel“. Warum Lukas nach dem Evangelium noch die Apostelgeschichte schrieb, in: „Mache dich auf und werde licht!“ Ökumenische Visionen in Zeiten des Umbruchs, Festschrift Konrad Raiser, hg.v. Dagmar Heller u.a. Frankfurt am Main 2008, S. 234–239. (Comprehensive Exposition by Klaus Wengst, „... for the glory (splendor) of your people Israel.“ Why Luke after the Gospel still wrote Acts, in “Arise and Shine!“ Ecumenical Visions in Times of Turmoil)

[7] Rolf Schieder, EKD regt Diskussion über Wirtschaftsboykott Israels an, Kirche und Israel 25, 2010 (S. 191–194), S. 194. (Rolf Schieder, EKD encourages discussion about economic boycott of Israel, Church and Israel 25, 2010)

[8] Vgl. Schieder, a.a.O., S. 192: „Es ist die geschwisterliche Pflicht der europäischen Christen, ihre palästinensischen Schwestern und Brüder nachdrücklich auf die Gefahren eines theologischen Antijudaismus aufmerksam zu machen.“ (Comp. Schieder, loc.cit. p. 192: “It is the duty of European Christians as siblings, to make their Palestinian sisters and brothers emphatically aware of the dangers of a theological anti-Judaism.”)

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