# The People of Israel, the Land of Israel and the State of Israel: A Constructive Response

01.12.2023 | John T. Pawlikowski

**It is indeed a personal pleasure to respond to Fr. Neuhaus' excellent lecture; our acquaintance goes back many years. I always have appreciated the clear and direct presentation of the major issues involved in Christian-Jewish relations in the setting of his longtime and very sensitive ministry in Jerusalem and the wider Middle East context. His work is marked both by honesty and by a spirit of reconciliation, and that is truly admirable.**

I find little in his presentation this morning with which to disagree. His perspectives are very much ones that coincide with my own. So my words today will take the form of expanded commentary on the views he has presented as well as some views on what I have termed the search for a "theology of belonging," which has appeared in the new volume *Enabling Dialogue About the Land*, a collection of essays by Western and Palestinian, Jewish and Muslim scholars.[1] I hope thereby to stimulate further productive discussion on the complicated and sometimes contested issues raised by Fr. Neuhaus in his lecture.

In the beginning of his presentation, Fr. Neuhaus quoted from the 1974 statement from the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. Its point that the vast number of Jews today regard the continued existence of the State of Israel as integral to their self-identity even if they have no desire to live there personally is central for any dialogue with Jews. The subsequent quotation by Fr. Neuhaus from the Jewish document on Christianity, *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth),[2] emphasizes that Jews largely regard themselves as a peoplehood rather than only as a religious community. This is crucial if we are to take seriously the Vatican injunction that Christians must come to understand Jews as they define themselves. This is the necessary starting point for authentic Christian-Jewish dialogue. This sense of a fundamental linkage to Israel, although expressed in a variety of religious and secular ways, is something that Catholic Christians need to comprehend if they are to engage in productive conversations with members of the Jewish community.

The second major point made by Fr. Neuhaus concerns the issue of the Jewish land tradition in the New Testament. As scholars such as the late John Townsend who taught at the Episcopal Seminary at Harvard (as well as the university itself) argued within the discussions of the ecumenical Christian Study Group on Jews and Judaism (of which both he and I were members), the New Testament itself hardly mentions the Jewish land tradition. It neither rejects nor affirms it.

The discussion of the basic silence of the New Testament on the Jewish land tradition, however, cannot be ended there. How we understand its continued presence in Christianity depends in large measure on how we view the role of the First or Old Testament in Christian self-identity. Historically, in better moments we have said that the Old Testament contains religious perspectives that were further developed within Christianity. In our worst moments we argued that the views found in the pre-Christian Jewish tradition were basically shallow in contrast to Christian perspectives, and the only purpose of the Jewish tradition is to illustrate the superiority of Christianity. Part of this classical outlook within the church was to argue that only Christian scholars could interpret the Old Testament authentically. An example of the continued presence of this viewpoint is found in the publication *The Bridge*, an annual on Christianity and Judaism

launched well before Vatican II by Msgr. John Osterreicher, who played a central role in the formulation of the fourth chapter of *Nostra Aetate* that significantly redefined the relationship between Catholics and Jews. The volumes published prior to the Council lacked any contributions by Jewish scholars because of this persistent mindset. Only Christian interpreters could properly understand Jewish biblical texts which must be read through the lens of the Christian faith. Only in the volume of *The Bridge* that appeared after Vatican II do we find articles by Jewish authors. This same perspective is found in Christian visual presentations such as the one on the façade of the cathedral in Strasbourg, France, which presents Judaism and Christianity in the guise of two people, the one bedraggled, bent over and blind holding a broken Torah, and the other a bright, vivacious young woman proudly holding the New Testament.

A second illustration of this prevalent attitude towards the Hebrew Scriptures came home to me when I was part of an international conference at the Jesuit Center in Vienna. In the rooms at the Center there was placed a copy of “the Bible.” But it only contained the New Testament. Clearly this sent a message to which I publicly objected, much to the discomfort of the center’s director. On this view, the Old Testament has at best marginal value for Christians; in the end, only the New Testament counts. The classical outlook certainly affects our interpretation of the church’s understanding of the Jewish land tradition.

Modern biblical scholarship has presented a significant challenge to the classical Christian understanding. Jesus now is seen as working in a thoroughly Jewish context, drawing upon the richness of the Pharisaic tradition, as the statement from the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews stated in its 1985 document celebrating the twentieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*.[3] Contemporary scholarship places Jesus and his teachings squarely within the Jewish context of his day. Pope John Paul II, in his speech in Mainz, Germany, said this somewhat more poetically when he insisted that when we look at Christianity, we find Judaism at its heart.[4] There was no “Old Testament” for Jesus and his early followers. There were only “the Scriptures” which constituted an integral part of their religious identity within a Jewish tent at the time which had room for a great variety of views, including conflictual ones.

So while the exact understanding of the Jewish land tradition on the part of Jesus and the early church may remain somewhat clouded, it is clear that there exists no basis for arguing that it was completely rejected by early Christianity. And as we newly appreciate the continuing validity of the Hebrew Scriptures as positive revelation within the church, we must affirm that there is no basis for its outright rejection from a theological perspective. Unfortunately, this was not the understanding that emerged among many of the Church Fathers. Many of the Patristic writers, such as Tertullian, Justin and especially Augustine, created what is often termed the *Adversus Judaios* (“Against the Jews”) perspective. This theological outlook argued that as part of their punishment for rejecting Jesus as the promised Jewish Messiah, Jews will never have a state of their own. They were relegated to being perpetual wanderers among the nations of the world, living miserably and at the margins of Christian societies. This viewpoint even became implanted in Western Christian culture, with the naming of a plant called “the wandering Jews.” I have sometimes heard people ask, “Why do Jews theologize Israel rather than seeing it merely as one of the multiplicity of nation states?” We need to respond to such arguments by reminding people that it was Christianity that in many ways theologized the land question relative to the Jews.

In recent decades, several important statements have moved away from this classical Christian perspective on Jews and the land. Pope John Paul II, in his 1984 statement *Redemptions Anno*,[5] wrote the following: “For the Jewish People who live in the State of Israel, and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies of their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and condition of life and of progress of every society.”

A critical turn in the Catholic perspective on Israel took place on December 30, 1993, when the

Holy See and the State of Israel signed what is called the Fundamental Agreement.[6] This agreement was basically a political document that established regulations between the two entities on a variety of particular issues. But it also had a wider significance. It constituted the final nail in the longstanding Catholic theology of Jewish wandering. This agreement represented an evolution of Catholic thinking on the Jewish land question over several decades. Pope John Paul II gave this effort considerable personal support, and from all indications had strongly favored such a change in official Catholic policy for some time prior to its actual realization in late 1993. Concern for the status of small Catholic communities in various Muslim majority countries kept formal diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel on hold. Only when Israel negotiated peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan did the Vatican Secretariat of State feel that it now was possible to move toward formal diplomatic recognition of Israel.

This action on the part of the Holy See declared that the notion of perpetual Jewish wandering as a punishment for rejecting Jesus as the promised Messiah developed by Augustine and his fellow patristic authors no longer could be regarded as authentic Catholic teaching. In an interesting and important exchange of letters between Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, a leading Jewish scholar and early participant in the new dialogue generated by *Nostra Aetate*, and Vatican II theologian Karl Rahner, S.J., Rabbi Borowitz, who served as editor of the Jewish magazine Sh'ma, posed the question directly: Are there any remaining theological objections to Jews having a homeland of their own after Vatican II? Fr. Rahner's response was succinct and very clear: No, such classical theological objections no longer hold after the Council. Rabbi Borowitz published Fr. Rahner's response in the magazine that he edited.

The Fundamental Agreement repudiated not only the original perpetual wandering theology in Catholicism regarding the Jews but also later theological perspectives in the period of the Crusades, which were given new impetus by powerful sermons by preachers who urged the recapture of Jerusalem as a central Catholic responsibility. While the immediate goal was purging Jerusalem of Muslim control, Jews also were targeted for murder lest they try to recapture control of the city at some future date.

Fr. Neuhaus has it right when he argues that the Crusader mentality, rooted in significant part in the Catholic wandering theology of the Jews, not only led to the actual murder of Jews and Muslims, in what was presented as a divinely mandated responsibility, but also opened the door for a merger of this theology with colonialist efforts throughout European Catholicism. As he puts it, "Explorers and conquerors paved the way for missionaries and preachers." The Patristic wandering theology of the Jews eventually led to the later linking of the flag and the cross in the church. It provided a basis for a theological validation of colonial appropriation of land. The right to possess land was seen as requiring correct belief which Catholics alone possessed.

The Fundamental Agreement also undercut the theological view that had been advanced by Pope Pius X, when Jews began to develop political strategies for the re-establishment of a Jewish homeland. When Theodore Herzl, considered the founder of this new Jewish effort, paid a visit to Pope Pius X in Rome on January 25, 1904, to ask for Vatican support for this effort, Herzel clearly was rebuked in his appeal. The Pope stated that while the Vatican could not block the Jewish return to Palestine, it also could not give it support. Pope Pius X indicated to Herzl that Catholic missionaries would be present as Jews arrived in the Holy Land. The Pope's response was clearly conditioned by the Classical Catholic outlook rooted in Augustine: The Jews have not accepted Jesus, hence the church cannot validate the Jewish return to Palestine with the intention of restoring Jewish nationhood in that region. So this initial negative papal response had to be overcome in order to allow the church to sign the Fundamental Agreement. Vatican II's affirmation of the continuity of the Jewish covenantal relationship with God after the Christ Event was crucial for this process. For, if Jews remained in a covenantal relationship after the coming of Christ, then there was no basis for the traditional notion of Jewish territorial exclusion. The view of Karl Rahner mentioned above added strength for this major theological turnabout.  The late Canadian

theologian Gregory Baum, who had a hand in the composition of *Nostra Aetate*, argued that the change in Catholic thinking on the continuity of Jewish covenantal inclusion represented perhaps the most significant change in the ordinary magisterium of the church to emerge from Vatican II.[7]

This fundamental alteration of the Catholic view of the Jewish land tradition also was buttressed by the work of Christian scholars, particularly those involved with biblical studies. Charlotte Klein, Bruce Williams, OP, and Kurt Hruby were among the first to address this. More recently W.D. Davies, Robert Wilken, Walter Brueggemann, and Richard Lux have further advanced the discussion. The views of Davies and Brueggemann in particular have generated considerable discussion in scholarly circles.

To highlight the views of Davies and Brueggemann:  Both emphasize the importance of the Jewish land tradition for Christian thought, although each has a somewhat different focus. For Brueggemann, the significance of the land tradition in Judaism remains a bedrock of Christian faith understanding. Tied as we Christians are to the Jewish land tradition through Jesus means that the church cannot be regarded as a totally heavenly reality but rather as one deeply embedded in human history and the earth it inhabits. While some of Brueggemann's views on current realities in the Israel-Palestine conflict remain controversial, there is little question about his firm commitment to the continuing significance of the land tradition in Judaism that is central to the covenantal tradition and which the church shares with the Jewish People. This significance takes on greater importance, I would add, in this time when Christians are being called by Pope Francis to a heightened sense of ecological responsibility. Brueggemann joins W.D. Davies and the late Episcopal scholar John Townsend in recognizing some ambiguity in the New Testament regarding the land tradition despite their personal commitment to its importance.[8]

Davies believes that the New Testament leaves us with a twofold witness relative to its inheritance of the land tradition from Judaism. On the one hand, Christianity cannot avoid grappling with the significance of the land tradition in Judaism for its own self-understanding. On the other hand, belief in Christ universalized that inherited land tradition. While Jerusalem and its surroundings remain a significant motive for authentic Christian belief, there is a need to recognize that the universal presence of Christ renders land everywhere as sacred. I would basically agree with Davies on this issue. As Christians, we share with our Jewish sisters and brothers an understanding of land through the Jewish proclamation of the sacredness of Jerusalem. But we also view the Christ Event as having expanded the boundaries of the original land tradition, while we appreciate the continued focus by Jews on the particular significance of Jerusalem. From Davies' and my perspective, it is not an either-or but a both-and. The Christ Event did not wipe out Judaism's special focus on the sacredness of Jerusalem. As Christians, however, we need to maintain that as a fundamental theological principle, Chicago, Buenos Ares, Rome, Dublin, and so on share in the biblical tradition of the sacredness of the land.[9]

Towards the end of his lecture, Fr. Neuhaus raises questions relative to the contemporary tensions in Israel/Palestine. I fully concur with his perspective that the land tradition discussion cannot be totally isolated from these realties. The present-day rights of both Jews and Palestinians and their territorial expression must be integrated into the more theological and theoretical discussion. The most recent proposal to advance peace put forth by the recent U.S. presidential administration, while making some important advances in Israeli-Arab relations, is totally inadequate in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. The Catholic-Jewish dialogue needs to put these issues front and center on the dialogical table. As Professor Yehezel Landau, a longtime colleague in Jewish-Christian relations, has put it to me: however valid the land claims emanating from the Jewish tradition, they must be integrated with the just claims to rights and national expression of others residing in the area today.

Finally, let me add a word about a project that has occupied my attention in the context of the theology committee of the International Council of Christians and Jews. It has to do with the

development of what I term a “theology of belonging” in terms of the original land tradition. A theology of belonging searches for texts in the respective religious traditions for grounding the presence of the other on the same land. In the case of Israel-Palestine, this would involve Jews, Christians, and Muslims. For further exposition of my developing view on this, one can consult my essay in the new volume, *Enabling Dialogue About the Land*, mentioned previously.[1]

In closing, let me once more express my sincere thanks to Fr. Neuhaus for his important reflections rooted in his lived presence in Israel/Palestine. Hopefully I have added some additional perspectives to the discussion that will generate further discussion.

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[1] See *Enabling Dialogue About the Land*, eds. Philip A. Cunningham, Ruth Langer and Jesper Svartvik (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2020).
[2] For the text of *Dabru Emet*, see https://www.jcrelations.net/statements/statement/dabru-emet-a-jewish-statement-on-christians-and-christianity.html. For the text of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, issued for the 10th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican Council II’s Declaration on the Catholic Church’s Relationship with Non-Christians, see *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, ed. Franklin Sherman (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2011).
[3] For the text of the Holy See’s 1985 statement celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the original Vatican II Declaration, see *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*.
[4] For the text of Pope John Paul’s Address at Mainz, Germany, see *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*.
[5] For the text of Pope John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Anno*, see *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*.
[6] For further reflection on the significance of the Fundamental Agreement, see *A Challenge Long Delayed: The Diplomatic Exchange Between the Holy See and the State of Israel*, eds. Eugene J. Fisher and Rabbi Leon Klenicki (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1996).
[7] Gregory Baum, “The Social Context of American Catholic Theology,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (1996), 41.
[8] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1977).
[9] W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).
[10] John T. Pawlikowski, “Towards a Theology of Belonging: A Catholic Christian Perspective,” in *Enabling Dialogue About the Land*, eds. Philip A Cunningham, Ruth Langer and Jesper Svartvik, 262-281.

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