



Theology of the Land in Judaism and Its Implications for Jewish-Christian Relations

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Edward Kessler, Executive Director of the Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge, England, explores the impact of the emergence of the modern State of Israel on both Jewish and Christian conceptions of the relation of land and covenant. An address at the 2005 International Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

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[Edward Kessler](#)

Nowhere is the subject of peace and understanding, or perhaps more realistically, violence and misunderstanding, more evident than in the Middle East, and more discussed than in the tea rooms and coffee parlours of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv as well as Ramallah and Bethlehem.

The apparent constant instability in Palestinian controlled areas is a reminder of what seems to be an intractable conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. A story is told about an Israeli and a Palestinian leader meeting with God and asking whether there will ever be peace in the Middle East in their lifetime. "Of course there will be peace," God told them. They looked relieved. "However," God continued, "not in my time". 120 years after the beginning of modern Zionism, a peaceful solution seems some distance away.

For Jews, the centrality of the land of the Bible, as well as the survival of a third of world Jewry, is at stake. Christians, for their part, not only disagree as to the place of Israel in Christian theology, but many understandably feel particular concern for Arab Christians who live in Israel and in the future state of Palestine. Israel is controversial because it cannot be viewed simply as a geographical and political entity whose emergence is like the establishment of any new state. Political, social, cultural and religious concerns all affect its place in the Jewish-Christian relationship.

The land and state of Israel are intricately related to a number of subjects in that relationship. For example, it is impossible to examine the covenant of Israel with God if no account is taken of the place of land. In the Bible, possession of the land of Israel was an indispensable condition of self-fulfilment both for the individual and for the community. When dispossession and powerlessness arose as a result of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the Jewish response consisted both of the hope of divine restoration and of the mystical idea that God was also exiled with His people. Both Jews and Christians agreed that the exile occurred partly as a result of divine punishment. Traditional Christian interpretation emphasised punishment for failing to believe in Christ, whereas Jewish interpretations explained it as a result of internal Jewish strife and argument. Nevertheless, the rabbis taught that God's Presence (*Shekhinah*) joined the exile and that there were positive consequences such as Jewish teaching being spread far and wide. The traditional Christian

emphasis on divine punishment provided the basis for replacement theology – in other words, the belief that Christians replaced Jews as the people of God. This teaching became dominant through the centuries, contributing greatly to antisemitism. The Church Fathers consistently used the historical tragedies of the Jewish people as "proof" that God had rejected them definitively because of their rejection of Jesus. As long as Jerusalem and the Temple lay in ruins, and Jews remained in exile, it appeared that Christians were correct in claiming that Judaism had lost its legitimacy.

These views have been undermined for many reasons, one of which is the emergence of the state of Israel, in which Jews are a sovereign majority and Judaism the established religion of the land. Christianity's minority status is emphasised by the diminishing number of Christians living in Israel alongside an increasing and significantly larger Muslim Arab population. Genuine contact between Arab Christians and Jews is overshadowed by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a result, dialogue between Jews and Christians (and Muslims) is often transformed into dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians or Israelis and Arabs, with national identities emphasised far more than religious differences.

In recent times, a Palestinian theology of liberation has developed out of replacement theology and the everyday experiences of Palestinian Christians living in Israel since 1948. It is not too extreme to state that the Palestinian Church has faced a major theological crisis since the establishment of Israel. A considerable part of this crisis has been due to a belief that the Bible has been used as a political Zionist text. Naim Ateek argues that "before the creation of the state, the Old Testament was considered an essential part of Christian Scripture, pointing and witnessing to Jesus. Since the creation of the state, some Jewish and Christian interpreters have read the Old Testament largely as a Zionist text to such an extent that it has become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians". The continuing problems faced by the Palestinian people have added to the crisis. Palestinian Liberation theologians ask, with some justification, for their fellow Christians not to ignore the Palestinian people, their loss of homeland and struggle for liberation.

Yet the problem remains that some Palestinian liberation theologians are politically partisan, hostile to Jews and Judaism and naive about the possibilities of dialogue with increasingly militant Arab Islam. A wholly negative attitude, held by some Christians, towards Israel on the one hand and an embrace of a radical Palestinian Liberation theology on the other are unhelpful. In fact, they are as unhelpful as some more extreme forms of Christian Zionism which view any action by Israel as wholly positive. The truth lies somewhere between the two.

For Jews, the will to survive in the Diaspora generated messianic hopes of redemption, which occasionally led to a high level of anticipation and the extraordinary claims of self-appointed messiahs such as Bar Kokhba and Shabbetai Zvi. One of the common features of these times of messianic fervour was that the Promised Land became a symbol of redress for all the wrongs which Jews had suffered. Thus, modern Zionism became in part the fusion of messianic fervour and the longing for Zion. Jews took their destiny into their own hands and stopped waiting for a divine solution to their predicament. This was a dramatic break from the Diaspora strategy of survival, which advocated endurance of the status quo as part of the covenant with God. For many Jews, the Jewish state offered the best hope not only for survival in response to the breakdown in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but also for fulfilment. This was the response of what became the major forces in the Zionist movement, the Zionism of Herzl, of Ben Gurion as well as Jabotinsky. For many Jews the establishment of a Jewish State offered the best hope not only for survival but also for their religious and cultural fulfilment.

Martin Buber explained the Jewish historical attachment to the Land of Israel in a letter to Mahatma Gandhi, written in response to Gandhi's November 1938 declaration, which was critical of Zionist aspirations. Gandhi had recommended that Jews remain in Germany and pursue satyagraha ("holding onto truth" which was the basis for his non-violent resistance to British rule) even unto death. Buber forcefully rejected this argument and explained the connection between the Jewish

people and the land as follows:

You say, Mahatma Gandhi, that a sanction is “sought in the Bible” to support the cry for a national home, which “does not make much appeal to you”. No, this is not so. We do not open the Bible and seek sanction there. The opposite is true: the promises of return, of reestablishment, which have nourished the yearning hope of hundreds of generations, give those of today an elementary stimulus, recognised by few in its full meaning but effective also in the lives of many who do not believe in the message of the Bible.

Yet not all Jews supported a Jewish state, particularly before the Holocaust. Indeed, Zionism resulted in vociferous arguments within and between all Jewish groups, secular and religious, Reform and Orthodox. Today most ultra-Orthodox Jews reject the Jewish state arguing that Israel should be a divine and not a man-made creation.

For Christians, perhaps because land is not central to Christian theology, although Christians have generally acknowledged that Jews feel tied to a particular territory, they have found it harder to accommodate the consequences. One eminent American theologian, Walter Brueggemann argues that the subject of land should move to the centre of Christian theology, and suggests that Christians cannot engage in serious dialogue with Jews unless they acknowledge land to be the central agenda. In his view, controversy over the state of Israel highlights the lack of a theology of place in contemporary Christianity.

Roman Catholicism's attitude towards Zionism changed greatly in the course of the 20th century. In 1904, Pope Pius X (1903-14) rejected Herzl's plea for support unequivocally stating that "The Jews have not recognised our Lord, therefore we cannot recognise the Jewish people." However, Vatican II and the 1965 document *Nostra Aetate*, while not explicitly mentioning Israel, began the process which eventually led to the Vatican's recognition of the state of Israel in 1994. Increasing awareness among Roman Catholics of the place of Israel became much more noticeable during the papacy of John Paul II. His acknowledgement of its significance to Jews can be seen as early as 1984 when in his Good Friday Apostolic Letter he wrote: "the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel, and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies to their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and condition of life and of progress for every society."

Ten years later the state of Israel and the Holy See exchanged ambassadors, and the process begun in 1965 reached another significant landmark with the Pontiff's pilgrimage to Israel in 2000, and the everlasting image of his visit to the Western Wall. Following Jewish tradition, the Pope placed a written prayer in a crevice of the Western Wall. The short typed prayer with an official seal read: "God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your Name to the Nations. We are deeply saddened by the behavior of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking Your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant."

Nevertheless, even though there have been great changes in Christian teaching on Judaism, a resurgence of anti-Israeli attitudes, particularly in Europe, has taken place in the last few years and the feeling remains that whilst the Church has for many years been grappling with issues related to Christian antisemitism, attitudes towards the Land and State of Israel continue, from the theological perspective, to be more difficult to tackle. Theological difficulties have made a Christian re-orientation to Israel problematic. Simply put, it has been easier for Christians to condemn antisemitism as a misunderstanding of Christian teaching than to come to terms with the re-establishment of the Jewish State. As a result, the subject of Israel has probably caused as much disagreement and division within the Church as any other topic in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Alice Eckhardt is one of a number of scholars who points out the contrast between Christian willingness to tackle antisemitism and the Shoah with Christian reticence on the subject of Israel. Rather

controversially, Eckhardt argues that Christians are more likely to think about the Shoah than the State of Israel because the former accords with the traditional stereotype of Jews as a suffering and persecuted minority. Israel however challenges this assumption, it transforms the victim into a victor.

The recent Anglican discussions concerning economic divestment from Israel, following closely similar conversations within the URC and UCC, demonstrate the urgent need for these churches to initiate a dialogue with Jewish theologians, teachers and leaders. I am concerned, for example that increasing pressures on Anglican-Jewish relations are damaging and have called on Anglican leaders to build bridges before the gulf becomes dangerously wide. It was only just over 15 years ago that the Anglican Church was a leading light in Christian-Jewish dialogue, producing a remarkable document commending Anglicans to engage in a dialogue with Judaism and to show "a willingness to listen to the partner; to try to see with their eyes and feel with their heart". At that time, the Church called for a "common mission" between Christians and Jews.

Recent documents are noticeable for their strong criticism of Israel and equally noticeable for its silence about failings of the Palestinians and their leadership points to a growing distance between, for example, Anglicans and Jew. From my discussions with Anglicans, it is also clear that many Anglicans do not agree with the Council and especially with the Anglican Peace and Justice Network which produced the document. The Archbishop of Canterbury has called a growing division within the Anglican Communion a potential "catastrophe".

It is essential for leading Anglican and Jewish thinkers to meet soon to discuss the issues that are of most concern. Jews must be prepared to discuss the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians with Christians and to listen to their concerns. At the same time, Christians must realise that Judaism is not only a religion but a people and a civilization and through dialogue work to understand the importance of the land of Israel to the majority of Jews throughout the world. An interested and informed onlooker should realise that the truth lies somewhere between the two.

The territorial distances between the Palestinians and Israelis are much smaller than the emotional gap between the two peoples. Today, the biggest problem is a lack of trust. Israelis are still angry with the Palestinians because they rejected the Camp David proposals in 2000 and returned to the use of terror. Palestinians are angry with the Israelis because they live in poverty, under the constant threat of violence.

However, there are other dangers, such as arguing that what was once an interpretation about the nature of the biblical word and promise is now in the situation of Israel concretised in a contemporary event. The challenge to Jewish-Christian dialogue as a result of an emphasis on fulfilment of biblical prophecy can be seen in the writings of some evangelical Christians as well as fundamentalist Jews.

What happened a hundred years ago to the Jews outside of Israel is considered by some as historically remote compared to biblical events, which are viewed as almost contemporary. The present becomes transformed into biblical language and geography, which leads to the danger of giving metaphysical meaning to geographical places. The fundamentalist Jew in Israel interprets the ownership of the Land of Israel in terms of a divine gift. This creates a great danger of bestowing divine importance to Israel and the vocation of the Jew becomes a dedication to the existence and the restoration of the cosmic state. Thus, the return to the Land is a fulfillment of the divine promise and reflects a return to the original fullness. However, the biblical promises do not define the same borders and by choosing the widest ones the fundamentalist abuses the idea of the promise, which is related to the Land.

There are also dangers when those who, in the name of dialogue, move from a position of commitment for the well being of Israel to one of almost Israel can do no wrong. This is not

conducive to dialogue for it is not an honest and sober conversation firmly related to present realities. For example, although Evangelical Christian Zionists strongly support Israel and especially the Settler Movement, their agenda is dominated by an eschatological timetable. Their hope, as they freely admit, is that the Jewish return to Zion will be followed by a second-coming and the acceptance of Jesus by the entire Jewish people.

David Flusser, the eminent Israeli scholar of first century Judaism, once told the following story, based on his encounter with a group of evangelical Christians visiting Israel:

“Why should we quarrel?” I asked, “You believe in the coming of the Messiah – so do we. So let us both work for it and pray for it. Only, when he arrives, allow me to ask him one question first, “Excuse me sir, but is this your first visit to Jerusalem?””

The majority of Jews feel that some Evangelical Christians who rejoice in the Jewish return to Zion are simply utilitarian i.e., the Jews are pawns on the chessboard of history, being used to fulfil the final predetermined game-plan. Many Christians also express great concern about what they regard as the evangelicals' exploitation of biblical prophecy. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States criticised such interpretations and commented that “the State of Israel is a geo-political entity and is not to be validated theologically”. The problem with this statement is that it completely removes the theological aspect of the Land of Israel from the agenda of Jewish-Christian relations. As has already been suggested, Israel cannot simply be viewed as a political entity but also needs to be viewed from a theological perspective. On the other hand the approach of dispensationalists such as Falwell is also problematic because of their reliance on the predictive nature of prophecy.

For Christians and Jews, the debate about Israel should not revolve around to what extent Zionism is an integral part of being Jewish. The vast majority of Jews and, I believe, most Christians share this position. (It is true, however, that for some Christians, joined by an even smaller number of Jews, Zionism is intrinsically incompatible with Judaism.) In the aftermath of the Holocaust and after two millennia of Christian anti-Jewish teaching, Zionism has become a pre-eminent part of Jewish identity. Rather, our passionate conversations should consider its desired future course and I hope the debate about the place of Israel among Christians and Jews will continue in the future for God-knows how long.

However, unless we intend to fulfill the story I told towards the beginning of this talk, we need to listen more than we speak – listening to each other's views with generosity would be a good place to start.

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