



Old Habits Die Hard: A Critique of Recent Christian Statements on Israel

01.05.2012 | Amy-Jill Levine *

I begin with my gratitude to

a. Professor Judith Lieu, for putting me in touch with members of the Methodist Church involved with Jewish/Christian relations and Middle East statements

b. To Joy Barrow, Inter Faith Relations Officer on the Connexional Team of the Methodist Church, for encouragement

c. To Jane Clements, director of FODIP: the Forum for Discussion of Israel Palestine, for both encouragement and corrections on British history.

d. To Ben Bernstein of the Jewish Board of Deputies for sharing his helpful views.

e. To Ed Kessler and Lars Fischer of the Woolf Institute, who have invited me to facilitate this seminar.

f. And to you here today for showing interest not only in what churches say about the Middle East, but also in how Jews and Christians can collaborate for peace.

Christian organizations globally (World Council of Churches, Global Anglican Communion), nationally (Methodist Church UK, Evangelical Lutheran Church of American, United Church of Canada), cross-denominationally (Churches for Middle East Peace; the “Heads of Churches Statement on Palestine/Israel” from Australia), and locally have made statements about Israel/Palestine.

1. Most statements advocate a two-state solution.

a. It is about these churches we will be speaking. If you support a single state (whether of Israel or Palestine) that is another question.

2. Most condemn Israeli expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and propose withdrawal

to the 1967 borders.

3. Most propose a capital of the new state of Palestine in East Jerusalem (al Quds).

4. Some go so far as to support the 'right of return,' although a few suggest monetary compensation rather than recovery of property (in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which speaks of return to one's country but not of regaining specific land).

Our concern today is not with these positions in general. Our concern is with rhetoric and example. We shall explore how churches might maintain positive relations with Jewish groups also advocating for a two-state resolution (e.g., American for Peace Now/Shalom Achshav; J- Street) and promote cooperation by attending not only to *what* is said, but also to *how* it is said, and to what is *not said*. Too often rhetoric becomes the stumbling block to understanding, and so to strategic alliance (for example, the extensive critique of the Methodist statement by the [British] Board of Deputies – much of which could have been avoided by attending to consultation with Jews, including biblical scholars).

Because I do not want presuppositions about where people *think* I stand, along the lines of “she’s Jewish; she must think...” — as if all Jews think alike— to get in the way of how my words are heard, I shall state where I stand, personally, on these issues.

1. I have consulted for “Churches for Middle East Peace,” an American umbrella organization of 24 denominations, which advocates for a two-state resolution.

2. I also consult for “Americans for Peace Now,” the U.S. branch of the oldest Israeli peace initiative, *Shalom Achshav*.

3. I am not a member of, although I have done work for, J-Street, a U.S. lobbying group also supportive of a two-state solution. All three organizations are critical of Israeli policy, especially of settlement expansion.

4. Together with Ted Smith, a Presbyterian Church-USA (i.e., the “Liberal Presbyterians”) ministerial colleague, I published in June 2010 in “Christian Century” a critical article on the Presbyterian Church USA Middle East report. At their general assembly in July [2010].

5. I believe that Israel, if it is to remain both a Jewish state and a democracy, must relinquish control in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

6. I believe that Jews, like anyone else, should be allowed to live in areas under Palestinian jurisdiction.

I'll take several examples from recent [British] Methodist statements. My intent is not to be critical of one denomination, but to show where the general pitfalls are. I approach these remarks in the spirit of a seminar, which I understand to be:

- a. A setting where ideas are exchanged rather than points scored.
- b. In which substantive critique is expected.

For convenience, I divide my observations into six rubrics – several with multiple parts. I shall list the six areas, gloss them, and offer recommendations:

1. Vocabulary
2. Historical overviews
3. Attention to presuppositions regarding the 'land'
4. Standards for assessing Israeli policy
5. Theology
6. Biblical citations

1. Vocabulary.

Francis of Assisi aptly advised, 'Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.' Words always convey both more and less than we intend. And we cannot always know how certain words can cue responses.

a. Zionism:

1. On Nov. 10, 1975, by a vote of 72 to 35 (with 32 abstentions), U.N. General Assembly Resolution 3379 'determine[d] that Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination.' The U.N. revoked Resolution 3379 by Resolution 4686 on December 16, 1991 – the only time the U.N. has revoked a General Assembly resolution. Yet the Zionism=racism equation continues to haunt some Church statements.

2. Complicating the issue is the phenomenon of "Christian Zionism," a (usually) millenarian view that sees the entire land of Israel as given by G-d to the Jews and that anticipates Jesus' imminent return (and the conversion of Jews to belief in Jesus as Lord). Some Christian Zionists deny Palestinian aspirations for a homeland; others do not – Christian Zionists do not speak with a single voice.

3. Then there's 'Zionism'; the term coined by Nathan Birnbaum in 1890, which is a movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the resumption there of Jewish sovereignty. Thus, although the reference to Zion has deep biblical roots, Zionism is comparable to the national aspirations of any ethnos, Swedes, Chechens, Tamil, Serbs, Bosnians, and so on.

Already we have several issues those composing Church statements might consider:

a. Recognition that (a) Zionism is not racism and (b) Zionism is comparable to other groups' sense of a homeland would go a long way toward eliminating misconceptions.

b. Liberal Churches that are investing time and energy in addressing 'Christian Zionism' would do well to make clear their motivations. For example, is critiquing Christian Zionism a means by which Liberals can distinguish themselves from 'Evangelicals' or 'Fundamentalists'? Is it a way of suggesting, whether intended or not, that Jewish interest in a home-land is religiously rather than ethnically or politically motivated, and indeed religiously motivated in a way that Liberals find unacceptable?

b. Palestine:

To speak today about 'Palestinians' or a 'Palestinian' state is entirely appropriate. I find arguments on the political right that are used against Palestinian national hopes, such as 'In 1948 there were no Palestinians,' both unhelpful and irrelevant.

The problem arises in several Church statements (as well as in sermons and Bible studies) that speak of biblical figures in their 'Palestinian' context. To use this phrase is to make a political statement, intended or not.

1. In speaking of Abraham or Jesus, why say 'Palestine' when the Bible does not use the term? The Hebrew text eight times mentions *Pilshet*^[1], referring to the Philistine coastal area of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gaza, Gath, and Ekron.

a. Most English translations today render the term as *Philistia*.

b. It comes into the King James Version in four instances as 'Palestina.'^[2]

2. Josephus, *Antiq.* 8:260 (8.10.2) mentions Syria of Palestine, but 305 times he uses 'Judea,' often identifying Judea as what was once called 'Canaan' – including referring to the Northern Kingdom 'Judea' (*Antiq.* 9:280 [9.14.1]).

3. Philo uses Judea/Judaea, although he does use "Palestine" three times, and as a synonym for Canaan once (*Abr.* 133; *Moses* 1.163; *Free* 75).

4. Speaking of Jesus in his 'Jewish context' conveys a different impression than speaking of him in his 'Palestinian context.'^[3]

c. Judaism and Israel/Jews and Israelis

Israel is a state; Judaism is a religion. Typically, however, Church statements elide the distinction. For example: in his *God's People: A Series of Bible Studies Reflecting on the Holy Land*^[4] [June 2007] – ‘a Bible Study series prepared by the Methodist Church,’^[5] the Revd Dick Jones identifies as a ‘theological problem’ that ‘the Church has often talked as if it completely replaces the Jews. Thereby it has encouraged anti-semitism, an awful evil. How can we now view Judaism? And now, to bring everything up-to-date, does Israel today have a right to the land of the West Bank and Gaza as some Zionists claim?’

1. Stating that anti-semitism is an “awful evil” (a tad redundant) does not exculpate one from anti-semitism.
2. Limiting anti-semitism to ‘replacement theology’ is not a helpful definition.
3. The question does not articulate how its points are related: How is Israeli policy [the use of the term “some Zionists” is gratuitous] in the West Bank a ‘theological problem’?
4. The question format – which the text uses throughout, and thus absolves itself of statements that could be labeled unequivocally anti-Jewish – leaves the impression that the state of Israel is the same thing as ‘Jews.’
5. To ask, ‘How can we now view Judaism’ and then to adduce the ‘up-to-date’ question of Israel’s actions in the West Bank is tantamount to saying: ‘We recognize Islamophobia to be a sin, but how can we now view Islam? And now, to bring everything up to date, do Muslims today have the right to blow up school busses and kindergartens?’ The language is at best slippery.

d. Occupation

1. The Kairos-Palestine document,^[6] typically lifted up for study by Churches, ‘puts forward ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and all forms of discrimination as the solution that will lead to a just and lasting peace with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Al-Quds as its capital.’
2. The problem (one of many): the document never describes what counts as ‘occupation’: from 1948? from 1967?
3. Kairos-Palestine has been critiqued by several Jewish organizations—the critiques appear in no Church study I have seen.

2. Take care with historical overviews, and be explicit as to their function

a. The problem of bias

While all history is biased, most of the Church histories of the Middle East are dreadfully so.

1. 'The Methodist Peace Fellowship' (MPF)[\[7\]](#) begins its historical recitation, 'The state of Israel was founded more than 60 years ago and involved the forced displacement and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their land and homes.'

a. What's missing: a U.N. Mandate; the calls of the Grand Mufti [a Nazi ally] to Arabs to leave their homes temporarily, so that they could gain all the land; the expulsion of over 800,000 Jews from Arab territories; the closure of Jerusalem to Jews until 1967, the attack of multiple Arab nations on the new state in 1948, and so on.

2. The Methodist website UK advertises, 'One land and many voices: strands of Christian thought about who lives in the holy land.'[\[8\]](#) The text begins, 'In October 2004, Christian AID published a report entitled *Facts on the Ground: the End of a Two-State Solution*' and then notes, 'This paper complements it by offering theological reflection on some of the issues.' Here the history is more condensed, e.g., 'In 1967, after the Six-Day War, Israel occupied the Palestinians' remaining territories, including East Jerusalem, creating more refugees.'

a. The phrase 'occupied the Palestinians' remaining territories' presupposes that Israel occupied an independent state called 'Palestine' and thus it fully delegitimizes Israel's existence.

b. The statement fails to address what prompted the war.

c. The statement not only omits notice of Jordanian control of East Jerusalem until 1967, it also omits that until 1967, Jordan denied Israeli Jews access to the holy sites in the Old City and granted only limited access to Israeli Christians.

3. All Christian statements detail Israeli oppression –maps showing settlement growth (and kudos to the Methodists for using Hagit Ofran's "Settlement Watch"), etc. Fine.

a. Then there are the personal testimonies. These serve more for emotional manipulation than for information. They typically detail Israeli atrocities. On occasion, a single testimony of a person hurt by Palestinian terrorists appears. Where are, for example, the voices from the southern Israeli city of S'derot, only a few miles from Gaza, where the bombs are almost continual? Anecdotal history is manipulative, at best.

4. The statements critique Israeli policy, but they do not generally address the Hamas charter, and given the deal brokered between the PA and Hamas for forming a coalition government, this lack becomes even more problematic.

a. The Methodist (2010) statement is one of the few that does address Hamas. Their key objections to Hamas are that

1. It had not unambiguously accepted Israel's right to exist;

2. It had not accepted previous agreements with Israel; and

3. It refused to finally and completely renounce violence.

b. This is a good start. It could be even better

1. “Not unambiguously accepted Israel’s right to exist” is understated: the Hamas charter promotes wiping Israel off the map via Jihad (see here the maps produced by Hamas as well as the PA, in which there is no “state of Israel” but only “Palestine”).

2. The charter quotes the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and slanders not only Israel, but also the Jewish people and religion.

c. It would be helpful to see in Church statements the affirmation that Jews be able to live in the new Palestinian state (as Arabs, Druze, Samaritans, Bahá’ís, etc. live in Israel) and the condemnation of the claim voiced by some Palestinian politicians that no Jew will live in the new Palestinian state. The idea of a judenrein state should be, to the Churches, anathema.

d. My point here is not that ‘balance’ be given in treatment of Israeli and Palestinian offenses – it is that problems on the Palestinian side need to be acknowledged. If they are not, Israel’s supporters can regard the reports as unremittingly biased and dismiss them.

5. Many statements attribute the exodus of Christians in the Middle East to Israeli policies. The Methodist statement reads: ‘There are currently around 125,000 Palestinian Christians in Israel/Palestine compared to about 400,000 Palestinian Christians who are living outside the country. The number who have emigrated looks set to increase as more and more Christians leave their homes in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, the Galilee and elsewhere. In Bethlehem, for example, an estimated 357 families or 10% of the Christian population left the town between 2000 and 2004. There are thus increasing fears that in the years to come, the Holy Land could see an “emptying” of Christians. The plea of the Christian community in Israel/Palestine is for visibility with Western Christians and to have their voice heard. As such, one of their most significant recent moves has been the publication in December 2009 of their Kairos Document – a cry for justice for Palestinian Christians under Occupation.’[\[9\]](#)

a. Yes, and. The comment on Kairos-Palestine – for ‘Palestinian Christians under occupation’ – suggests that the only reason for the exodus is Israeli policy. Israeli policy is a contributing factor. It is not the only one.

b. Israel is the only place in the Middle East where the Christian population *has grown* in the last 60 years, from 40,000 in 1948 to 155,000 today.

c. In 15 years *under the Palestinian Authority*, the percentage of Christian residents in Bethlehem dropped from 60% to 14%.... while in Gaza, 2,000 left in the two years of Hamas control.[\[10\]](#)

d. By criticizing only Israel and by ignoring the role of Muslim extremism, the report misleads, and misleading reports are easily dismissed.

b. Still on the histories –The Middle East and the Shoah.

1. Christian statements typically connect Israel with the Shoah – explicitly or implicitly suggesting that Israel was founded to atone for Western guilt. Here is the one place a few statements actually cite Israeli documents approvingly, since Israeli government documents draw this connection.

a. However, recognition of the destruction of Europe’s Jews as an ‘event’ (“Holocaust” finds common use only in the late 1950s; *ha-Shoah* was coined in 1955) needing to be redressed was not much of an issue in 1948.

b. U.N. documents on partition do not mention the situation of Europe’s Jews.

c. In 1947, there were already half a million Jews in ‘Palestine’ – and tensions between Jews and Arabs, as well as Jews and the British – made the situation untenable. The foundation of Israel results in part from this concern.

d. For the British, controlling Palestine had become too expensive in terms of troops, economic outlay, and public relations (internally and within the Arab world). Britain petitioned the U.N. to relinquish the mandate, and that is why the U.N. addressed the situation (U.N. General Assembly Resolution 181; the ‘Partition Plan’ [voted Nov. 29, 1947]).[\[11\]](#)

e. The issue was less ‘western guilt’ [why would the West admit ‘guilt’? – they saw themselves as having defeated Hitler] than a concern to remove the displaced Jews less they resettle in France, Poland, England, and so on.

c. Still on history: The problems of overstatement

1. The Methodist statement ‘Justice and Peace for Palestine and Israel,’[\[12\]](#) states: ‘For this report, the key hindrance to security and a lasting peace for all in the region is the Occupation of Palestinian territory by the State of Israel, now in its fifth decade.’

a. The typical Christian view is that if Israeli occupation ended, there would be peace not only in Israel/Palestine, but also throughout the Middle East.

b. There will be no peace until the jihadists give up their goal of driving all the Jews into the Mediterranean.

c. And as we’ve recently seen, the political problems in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Qatar, Syria, etc., go well beyond the matter of Israel/Palestine.

3. Attention to presuppositions regarding the 'land'

a. Failing to note historical context of statements cited.

1. As an example of how not fully studying the history can be a problem, I cite from an article on the British Methodist website. Under the category 'Peace in the Twenty-First Century: Supplementary issue only on the Internet, No. 34-A (January 2010),' David W T Brattston from Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Canada, offers an essay entitled 'War in Early Christian Ethics.'[\[13\]](#) There is much of value in this essay. There are also a few misleading statements. Here is one: 'As for God in the Old Testament commanding the Israelites to engage in war and their frequently doing so, Origen drew a distinction between the Jewish constitution received from Moses, and the Christian constitution received from Christ which G-d and Christians now seek to implement...The gospel of Jesus Christ was instituted to end war and bloodshed by G-d's people, and Christians therefore abstain from them....'

2. Origen needs to be put in his context: in 185–254 C.E., the church is not controlling the empire, but being persecuted by it. Origen was practical: Christians had no political clout, and so they make the best of it. As far as the Gospel being instituted to "end war and bloodshed," Christian history does suggest a different story.

3. Origen, as many of his fellow Christians, determined that the biblical promises of land were allegories. They could not accept a Deity who would make promises to one people, or who would see one area as more holy than any other. They claimed that God was not really promising the physical land of Israel but the heavenly Jerusalem.

4. What implications should one draw from Origen, other than one that denies a Jewish state?

a. Should Methodists therefore argue that there should be no Christian nation?

b. Should Methodists argue that there should be no nation where the head of state is also the head of the church?

c. Or should Methodists allow for Christian nations today (e.g., the Vatican, Great Britain) and Muslim nations, just not Jewish ones?[\[14\]](#)

b. Failing to note that views change over time.

1. In 1904, Pope Pius X (1904) said to Theodore Herzl, who was seeking Vatican support for a Jewish homeland: 'We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem – but we could never sanction it... the Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people.'

a. The Vatican established diplomatic relations with Israel in December 1993.[\[15\]](#)

2. Edward I exiled the Jews from England in 1290 [a point that I have not found in the Christian statements – not to be snarky, but should returning Jews have demanded, and received, their

property back?]. Hoping that the Puritan government would lift the ban, the Dutch Jew Manasseh Ben Israel (1604-1657) petitioned Cromwell. Along with a series of economic arguments, Ben Israel made the following biblical argument: Nations that treat Jews badly will be punished, and nations that cherish Israel will be prosperous, as the promises to Abraham say: 'I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12.3).

a. (This view returned in Evangelical circles after World War II to explain the defeat of Axis powers and as reason to support the state of Israel.)

b. Ben Israel then cites Daniel 12.7 to explain why England should admit Jews"[\[16\]](#); his basic argument was that for Jesus to return, Jews need to be present throughout the globe.

c. Today, many (but not all) Evangelicals see the return of the Jews to Israel as necessary for Jesus to return. Protestant views change over time.

c. Note that Jews, Christians, and Muslims understand 'the land' differently, with Jewish concerns encoded in Scripture and liturgy.

1. Jewish biblical emphases.

a. In the NRSV, the term 'land' appears 1959 times. This statistic tells us how important the concept of land is to the Bible. This is a point usually overlooked in Christian treatments of the land.

2. Jewish and Christian canons tell different stories, and the Christian canon, especially when read through the lectionary, deemphasizes the land.[\[17\]](#)

a. The Torah ends with Moses overlooking the Promised Land: readers could identify with him –knowing that if they died outside of Zion, their children would enter. Churches emphasize the prophets over the Torah and unlike the synagogue do not read Genesis-Deuteronomy as a continuous narrative.

b. The distinction between the Christian 'Old Testament' and the Synagogue's Bible, the Tanakh, is also bears on the question. The last book of the Protestant Old Testament is Malachi, which predicts the return of the prophet Elijah to herald the eschaton. The Tanakh tucks the Prophetic books in the middle of the canon and ends with Second Chronicles (26.23), wherein Cyrus of Persia tells the Jews in Babylon: 'The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him! Let him go up'; 'let him go up', in Hebrew, *v'ya'al*, let him make *aliyah*. Let him go home.

c. This distinction also continues into Jewish liturgy (which church statements ignore): Jews have for about 2,000 years been praying for the restoration of Zion, and those in Diaspora for the return.

d. Avoid recrudescence Marcionism

1. Church statements often ask ‘what does Jesus say?’ or ‘what does Paul say?’ and note they do not emphasize the promise of the land

a. From ‘One land, many voices’ (p 48): ‘In the ministry of Jesus we find a dramatic rethinking of the promise of the Old Testament. So much so that he barely mentioned the land.... In fact, the one time Jesus raises the subject of the land he makes the striking reference that it is the meek (Matthew 5:5) who will inherit it. The meek, the humble, the poor in spirit are those who will inherit the land... holy space can never again be limited to the land, to Jerusalem and its temple. Now the earth and its fullness belong to the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:26).’[\[18\]](#)

b. An argument from silence is not a good argument: what is not mentioned can be presumed rather than critiqued. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

c. Missing from this discussion of the land is Romans (9.3b-4I 11.28b-29), ‘They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises... as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.’ Paul does not mention the land (as some Christian statements note): he does not have to, as there is already Jewish nominal rule there under Herod Agrippa II.

d. The shared Scriptures [Tanakh/Old Testament] also note that all land belongs to God – and then note that God has given the land in trust to the patriarchs and their physical descendants. The exegesis is compromised by what it omits.

e. Attend to translation. Here’s an example provided by Robert Wilken in his *The Land Called Holy*.[\[19\]](#)

1. Matthew 5.5, in the New Revised Standard Version, reads: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν). The beatitude draws upon Psalm 37.11, “the meek (*anavim*) shall inherit the land (*eretz*), and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” “Inheriting the land” in Jesus’ time meant the land, the land of Israel. The word for “land” in the Psalm is *eretz*, as in *eretz* Israel, the ‘land of Israel.’ *Eretz* comes into Greek in the LXX as *ge*, which can be read as ‘earth’ or ‘land’ -- and that’s how it appears in Matthew.

2. Most English versions read, “inherit the earth” rather than “inherit the land.” Perhaps the focus on “land” seem too parochial, too Jewish. The Jewish interest in one specific land is erased, even as Jesus’ connection to it is also erased.[\[20\]](#)

f. Critique Liberation theological readings that dismiss biblical texts.

1. Naim S. Ateek, an Anglican priest who runs the Sabeel center for liberation theology in Jerusalem (Sabeel, a major sponsor of Kairos-Palestine, has been instrumental in encouraging churches to participate in BDS programs) writes: ‘The God of the Bible, hitherto the God who

saves and liberates, has come to be viewed by Palestinians as partial and discriminating. Before the creation of the State [of Israel], the Old Testament was considered to be an essential part of Christian Scripture, pointing and witnessing to Jesus. [My note: the Old Testament should have more than a propaedeutic role in Christian theology; it is more than a set of pointers to the New.] 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 fundamental question of many Christians, whether uttered or not, is: How can the Old Testament be the Word of God in light of the Palestinian Christians' experience with its use to support Zionism?'

- a. Churches should not support Ateek's dismissal of the Old Testament.

- b. Churches should not support his implicit definition of Zionism. 10

- c. The irony: Zionism is the quest of Jews for a homeland, just as Rev. Ateek seeks an official homeland for the Palestinians.

g. Attend to misleading details on the land

1. The Methodist 2010 statement reads, 'Aside from the loss of territory [speaking of 1967], all the Arab states and particularly the Hashemite King Hussein of Jordan – who was a descendent of the prophet Mohammed – mourned the loss of Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam. Muslims lost de facto control of their third holiest Mosque – the Al Aqsa Mosque – as well as the Dome of the Rock or Haram-al Sharif. To Christians, the loss of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was of great significance. Overall, the strategic balance in the region was also transformed.'

- a. The statement ignores the earlier noted point that the area was in *Jordanian control* and that Jews were forbidden to enter the old city.

- b. Christians did not 'lose' control of the Holy Sepulchre (they remain in control over it; further: the area passes from Jordanian to Israeli control – in what sense did the church lose anything).

- c. Muslims have lost sovereignty over the region, but they have not lost *de jure* control of the property and they have not lost the ability to visit their sacred sites.

h. Acknowledge Jewish views of 'holy cities'

1. The statement just cited speaks of Jerusalem, 'the third holiest city in Islam.' The Church statements rarely consider Jewish views of sacred cities.

- a. In Jewish thought, Hebron, the burial place of the Patriarchs and three matriarchs, is the second holiest site (although it was handed over to the Palestinian Authority). This point goes unmentioned in Church statements.

b. Also missing is notice of the Jewish attachment to Nablus, home of the tomb of the patriarch Joseph.

2. Failure to be consistent in understanding the concept of 'Holy Land.'

a. For example, the Methodist 2010 statement reads, '... for a land to be called holy by Methodists, it would have to exhibit civil and political institutions that delivered justice and nurtured human flourishing for all its residents. In this sense, all land and no land can be marked out as a 'Holy Land'." Yet the statement has no difficulty recognizing Muslim 'holy cities' – despite the lack of flourishing opportunities accorded to non-Muslims and to women. Nor do Church statements apply religious standards to Muslims for continual possession of/residence in holy cities.

b. More problematic, the Presbyterian Church USA statement claimed that the church 'fully transferred the locus of God's concrete presence in the world of space and time from the place of Zion—that is, Jerusalem—to the person of Jesus, who had been crucified and raised from the dead just outside Jerusalem.' Thus, for the Presbyterian report, 'covenant' no longer concerns land.

c. To allow the Muslim community to have 'holy cities' but to deny the same right to Jews (and, ironically to Christians) is patronizing, at best.

4. Be clear on the standards by which Israel is to be assessed, and do not hold Israel to standards to which no other nation is held.

a. Several Church statements acknowledge Israel as a 'nation-state' but nevertheless judge it not by international standards, but by biblical ones. Inevitably, Israel is found lacking.

b. The Methodists assert that if the State of Israel 'claims also to be the homeland for the ancient Jewish People of God, [it] must take seriously this vocation as the paradigm nation where justice and wisdom are seen to be done.' It does not, however, hold other nations to religious standards.

c. It is not the role of the Church to tell Jews how to practice their religion (especially if it limits, as it does here, Jewish religion to the 'Old Testament.')

d. On the one hand, several Church statements condemn Israel's failure to abide by biblical standards of justice; on the other, they deny that the contemporary state of Israel has biblical or theological warrant for its existence.

5. Engage in responsible theological judgment

a. Churches might determine if they see the Deity active in history.

1. Numerous Jews and Christians see the founding of the State of Israel as having religious import. For example, Christian scholar Gary Anderson, of the University of Notre Dame, writes, 'The miraculous appearance of the Israeli state just after the darkest moment in Jewish history is hard to interpret outside of a theological framework.'[\[21\]](#)

2. Can the return of Jews to their homeland be seen as part of divine will (such a claim would not preclude a Palestinian state)? Should it be?

b. Be clear on whether the Church promotes supersessionism

1. A number of Church statements mention supersessionism. They might determine if they accept it or not. At least things would be clearer.

a. The Methodist statement observes: 'Particularly relevant for reflection on Israel/Palestine is a theology of supersessionism, whereby some have believed that the Church has succeeded the Jewish people as the New Israel and inherited all the promises previously made by God.... In short, who can legitimately claim to be Abraham's descendants and hence heirs to the promises. Since the patriarch is claimed by all three monotheistic religions – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – does it follow that all three are legitimate inheritors of the covenantal promises?'

b. Similarly, from 'One land, Many Voices': 'While not denying the theme of "promise" in the Bible, the liberation theology approach stresses that the promise to Israel was to be a promise to all. The blessing of God to Abraham's "seed" is not to a particular geo-political group but, through fidelity to God, to all the nations of the world (Genesis 22:17-18). Liberation theology emphasises that there are other dominant themes too – not least, those of justice and peace:.. do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances and his statutes" (Deut 8:7,10-11)."

c. Does the Church want to deny Jews – who have been liturgically and historically connected to the land for over 2,000 years – its history?

2. Western Churches might also want to address the supersessionism that appears in Arab Christian liberation theology.

a. Melkite clerics (Gregory Lanham III, Archbishop Bustrus) claim that Christians are the true heirs of Abraham.

b. The former Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, Riah Abu el-Assal, calls Palestinian Christians 'the true Israel....'

c. Fr. George Makhlour of St. George Greek Orthodox Church (Ramallah) writes: 'What Abraham was promised, Christians now possess because they are Abraham's true spiritual children just as the New Testament teaches.'[\[22\]](#)

d. If the Churches condemn Christian Zionism on the right, where is the condemnation of Christian supersessionism on the left?

6. Biblical citation.[\[23\]](#)

a. Churches might address the promise of return.

1. Deuteronomy 30.3-5 reads, ‘the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you. Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back. The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it...’

2. Isaiah 60.21: ‘Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever.’

3. Jeremiah 31 (a notable passage on the “new covenant,” which is prominent in Christian theology): ‘Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.’ [For Matthew, the verse relates to Herod’s slaughter of the Innocents. But Jeremiah goes on (31.15-17)]: ‘Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country.’

b. Churches might address the biblical language of covenant, some of which stresses conditionality, some of which does not.

1. The Methodist statement observes: ‘Recognizing the complexity of the theological issues surrounding the Middle East and wishing to offer a proper introduction, we begin with two concepts already familiar to most Methodists: the idea of covenant and a concept of “holy land”.... What is less certain is how much Methodists seriously reflect on their identity as a covenanted people and how this relates to other communities, especially the Jews.’

a. It would be a good idea to reflect on this question with Jews, since the Methodist reflection will impinge, as the statement suggests, on Jewish-Christian relations.

2. Churches might note that some texts make the covenant with the patriarchs unconditional.

a. God tells Abram: ‘Go... to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing....’[\[24\]](#) There is no condition here.

b. The promise is repeated to Isaac (see Genesis 26.3-4)[\[25\]](#) and to Jacob (Genesis 28.13-14).[\[26\]](#)

Jacob tells Joseph that “God Almighty” [*el shaddai*] promised, ‘I will give this land to your seed after you for a perpetual holding’ [or ‘eternal possession’]. (Genesis 48.3-4). Again, no conditions.

c. God tells Moses, ‘I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens... I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession....’ (Exodus 6.4, 8). No condition.

3. ‘One Land, Many Voices’ claims: ‘This is not “ownership” in the way the modern mind might see it – Abraham could not do whatever he liked. After all, he had to purchase the very land on which his tomb was built. The promise of God was not a steal or snatch for Abraham – the promise came with obligations, for example toward the people on the land.’ [\[27\]](#)

a. It does not identify the ‘obligations’ for Abraham; this may be because none is mentioned in the original covenantal promise. [\[28\]](#)

c. The Sinaitic covenant.

1. The covenant of the land is permanent. But Sinai states that the people do not always have the right of domicile. Leviticus states that if the people violate God’s commandments, “the land will vomit you out for defiling it” (18.28), but no ‘forever’ is appended. Return is presupposed.

2. The Sinaitic covenant also indicates that non-Israelites will live in the land, and these verses might provide a locus for Jewish/Christian collaboration on seeking a two-state resolution..

a. Exodus 22.21, ‘You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.’

b. Leviticus 19.33-34, ‘When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.’

c. Deuteronomy 10.19, ‘You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.’

d. Ezekiel 47.21-23 reads: ‘So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you *they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel*. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance...’

Concluding comments:

The Methodist (2010) statement concludes, ‘a greater understanding of the theology needs

developing to inform responses to differing attitudes and actions to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, in order that theological reflection and conversations may form the basis of the attitude of the Methodist Church and Methodist people” and it recommends that “wherever possible, the work of the Methodist Church and Methodists on this issue should be done in partnership with Christians of all denominations, with inter-faith groups and with the Jewish and Muslim communities’ – Amen.

If we can hear with each other’s ears, and avoid stumbling blocks that prevent alliances, we are all in a better position to work for the peace that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all so highly value. I’ve listed several areas where caution is advised. There are no doubt more. I thank you for traveling with me on this difficult subject. The floor is now yours for comment and critique.

[1] The name of the area was *P’leshet*, as seen in Exodus 15.14: ‘pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia’ (*p’leshet*); Sargon II of Assyria (722-705) called same region *Palashtu* or *Pilistu*

[2] Exodus 15.14; Isaiah 14.29, 31; and Joel 3.4.

[3] Details on terms the Bible uses:

1. For the earlier books, it is the ‘*Land of Canaan*,’ a designation connected with the cursing of Canaan, the son of Ham, by his grandfather Noah in Genesis 9.25-26.

2. ‘*Land of the Hebrews*’ is only once, by Joseph, to explain how he came to be in an Egyptian jail: ‘I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon’ (Gen 40.15).

3. ‘*Land of Israel*’ starts to appear in 1 Samuel (13.19) during the time of King David. The term is used most often by Ezekiel, writing in Babylonian exile: it expresses the people’s trust in their God to return them to the land.

a. Land of Israel” appears also in Christian texts, such as Matthew 2.20, wherein an angel tells Joseph, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the *land of Israel*...’ Joseph relocates from Bethlehem of Judea to Nazareth in Galilee, since both Judea and Galilee are in the “land of Israel.”

b. Following King Solomon’s reign (ca. 900 B.C.E.), the United monarchy breaks up, leaving the ‘*Land of Israel*’ in the north, and the ‘*land of Judah*’ in the South (cf. Amos 7.12). Consequently, the ‘land of Israel’ changes over time. *Land of Judah* appears once in the New Testament, in Matthew’s quotation from Micah: ‘You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah....’

4. Samaria after 722 for the north.

5. Yehud for the Persian period, cf. Daniel 5.14b, ‘The king said to Daniel, “So you are Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah (*Yehud*)...?”’ This is the scene that describes the ‘hand writing on the wall.’

a. Starting in 333 with Alexander the Great, we have ‘*Judea*’ along with Samaria, although the entire region was also called ‘Judea’), hence Matthew 2.1 states, ‘Jesus was born in Bethlehem of *Judea*...’

b. Rome initially kept the term ‘Judea,’ as seen on the ‘*Judea Capta*’ (conquered Judea) coins, so called because of their inscription, minted to commemorate Rome’s victory over the Jews in the 66-70 revolt.

6. *Zion*, mentioned 196 times, such as in the famous Psalm 137.1-2, ‘By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept, when we remembered Zion. There our captors asked us for songs... saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”’ The reference is specifically to Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, but the term can connote the entire land.

7. The ‘*land flowing with milk and honey*’ is used 20 times. Milk and honey are perhaps the only two naturally produced food items that do not require anything to die or be removed from its life-source.

8. ‘*Promised land*’ –is only found in the Epistle to the Hebrews, although there is much ‘land that was promised’ language throughout the biblical tradition.

9. ‘*Holy land*’ –shows up a limited 3 times, in Zechariah 2.12; Wisdom of Solomon 12.3; and 2 Maccabees 1.7.

10. Perhaps we are safer with the designations “*southern Levant*” or South-west Asia.

[4]http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/pi_gods_people_0607.pdf.

[5]<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=opentoworld.content&cmid=1888>.

[6]<http://www.kairos-palestine.ps/?q=content/document>.

[7] An association of Methodist pacifists within the Fellowship of Reconciliation, England (FoRE), part of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. The Fellowship of Reconciliation is interested in the UK’s role in the Middle East.

[8] <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/one-land-many-voices.pdf>.

[9]<http://www.scribd.com/doc/49652507/Justice-for-Palestine-and-Israel-Methodist-Conference-Paper>.

[10] Eugene Korn, "response," (http://americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=3850). See also now Ethan Felson, 'JCPA Background Paper: The Palestinian Christian Population,' <http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5145/images/JCPA%20Background%20Paper%20on%20Palestinian%20Christians%207%202.pdf>, which reveals 'the demographic data are often distorted, sometimes significantly, in order to slander Israel. A population that is presented as drastically decreasing is, in reality, holding steady or slightly increasing.'

[11] The founding of Israel was part of a larger European concern for decolonization following WW II.

[12]<http://www.echurchwebsites.org.uk/confrep-14-justice-for-palestine-israel-170510.pdf> ((p. 180).

[13]http://www.mpf.org.uk/P21C_34-A.pdf

[14] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (119), suggests that all the promises to Abraham are really promises to the Church: 'along with Abraham we [\[that is, we Christians\]](#) shall inherit the holy land, when we shall receive the inheritance for an endless eternity, being children of Abraham through the like faith... but it is not you [\[that is, "it is not you Jews"\]](#), "in whom is no faith."

[15] See Richard Lux's *The Jewish People, the Holy Land, and the State of Israel: A Catholic View* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010).

[16] 'The man clothed in linen, who was upstream, raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven. And I heard him swear by the one who lives forever that it would be for a time, two times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be accomplished.'

[17] Studies might also consider the presentation of Diaspora.

1. According to Genesis 11.31, 'Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot ... and his daughter-in-law Sarai... from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.'
2. This deferring becomes a recurrent theme. When Pharaoh takes Sarai into his harem, Abram has no exit strategy for returning to the land: God has to act. When Jacob settles in Egypt, he has no exit strategy. G-d had to act.
3. The Bible is aware of the allure of other lands. Egypt, Babylon, Persia – or Indianapolis. But, the Bible tells us, living outside Israel has its dangers.
 - a. Move to Egypt, and your wife is taken, or your children are enslaved.
 - b. Live in Babylon, and you're thrown into a furnace or a lion's den.
 - c. Move to Persia, and there's a warrant for genocide.
 - d. The story continues: Move to Spain or England, and you'll be expelled.
 - e. Move to Germany or Russia or Poland.... You know the rest.

[18]<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/one-land-many-voices.pdf>.

[19] P. 48.

[20] 'One land, many voices' cites in large letters: '**Jesus said, "The spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"' (Luke 4:18)**. Indeed. But it fails to note that the 'year of the Lord's favour' is the Jubilee when property reverts back to its original owners.

[21] 'Does the Promise Still Hold? Israel and the Land,' *Christian Century*, January 13, 2009.

[22] See Paul Charles Merkley, *Christian Attitudes Towards the State of Israel* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001).

[23] **Be careful with biblical interpretation.**

1. From the Methodist Bible study: 'Jesus' message centres on "the kingdom of God (or heaven)", which is here now in Jesus' ministry. All are invited to live within it, embrace its values, costs and blessings. The Jews might even miss out' (Luke 13:28f).
 - a. Suddenly 'the Jews' are erased. The text is not cited, and the exegetical frontload potentially misleading.
 - b. The immediate context is a parable-type teaching (13.25-27): 'When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, "Lord, open to us," then in reply he will say to you, "I do not know where you come from." Then you will begin to say, "We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." But he will say, "I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you

evildoers!"

c. Now comes 13.28f: 'There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God...some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.'

d. There is nothing here about 'the Jews' losing the covenant. The Jewish audience would have heard 'many from east and west' as the ingathering of the exiles to Zion, one of Judaism's eschatological views (and one of the reasons why Jews do not accept Jesus as the messiah).

e. For Luke, those who 'ate and drank with him' may well be fellow Christians (Judas comes to mind).

f. Luke is not clearly making a 'Jews out/gentiles in' point– and, even if this were the case, is that what the church wants to proclaim: that Jesus eliminates Jews from any covenantal relationship with G-d, unless they come in through Jesus?

g. There are a number of other comments in this Bible study that are problematic – let the Methodists make their own critique.

[24] Abram asks no questions, which I've always found odd. My first question would be 'which land?' Indeed, why Canaan? The text never tells us; it is the land God chooses because it is the land God chooses; just as Abraham is the person God calls – and not, at least according to Genesis, because of any merit Abraham possesses. Thus the Abrahamic covenant is based on 'Grace' – on divine initiative.

[25] With Isaac, we get more details. G-d tells Isaac: 'Reside in this land [[Isaac is in Gerar, in Philistine territory](#)] as an alien, and I...will bless you; to you and your seed I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your seed as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your seed all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your seed...' (Genesis 26.3-4)

[26] The logical problem of demographics continues with God's promises to Jacob, 'the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your seed... your seed shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring' (Genesis 28.13-14).

[27]<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/one-land-many-voices.pdf>.

[28] The land belongs to G-d (a frequent point in Christian statements); missing is full consideration of those to whom G-d entrusts the land. Psalm 24.1 states, 'The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness.' Similarly, in Leviticus 25.23, God commands, 'The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.' While the Churches apply these verses to Israeli Jews, they do not extend the same verses to Palestinians – whether Christian or Muslim; they are not told that they are 'but aliens and tenants' on the land.

* Amy-Jill Levine is University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies, and Professor of Jewish Studies Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA. Affiliated Faculty: Woolf Institute, Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge, UK.

Text of a lecture given to the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, 2 May 2011. This paper is a very lightly revised version of the notes originally posted on the [FODIP website](#). The tone of oral delivery has been kept. With kind permission of the author.