



The People of Israel, the Land of Israel, and the State of Israel

01.11.2023 | David M. Neuhaus, S.J.

In 1994, the Holy See signed an agreement with the State of Israel, establishing diplomatic relations. What is the position of the Catholic Church regarding a state that defines itself as Jewish and sees itself in direct continuity with the polities of ancient Israel in the Scriptures that the Church also regards as sacred? Setting aside a “teaching of contempt,” the Church has sought to develop a “teaching of respect” for Jews and Judaism that takes seriously how Jews see themselves. How does the attitude to Israel, people, land and state, relate to this teaching?[1]

The rethinking of the relationship with the Jews has opened the eyes of many Catholics to the living reality of the Jewish people, their identity and aspirations. A 1974 document insisted that “Christians must...strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.”[2] In the post-Vatican II era, listening to Jews, Catholics become more and more aware that many Jews today define themselves more as a people than as a religion and as such many lay claim to a land they call “the land of Israel” and identify with a state, “the State of Israel,” which exists since 1948. In 2000, Jews from various religious denominations published an eight-point document, encouraging relationship with Christians, entitled *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth). The third point of the document stated, “The most important event for Jews since the Holocaust has been the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Promised Land. As members of a biblically based religion, Christians appreciate that Israel was promised -- and given -- to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. Many Christians support the State of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics.”[3]

According to *Dabru Emet*, because Jews and Christians share a language, based on the Scriptures of Israel, they also can share an understanding that the land of Israel was promised and given to the Jews. From a theological point of view, God’s election of Israel and the gift of the land are indeed central themes in the Old Testament. However, Christians understand the Old Testament in reference to the New and this is particularly true of themes like the election of a people and the gift of land. Faith in Jesus distinguishes the Christian reading of the Bible from that of the Jewish one and in the ongoing dialogue with Jews, it is important to enunciate how this affects the Christian understanding of land, and in particular, the question of boundaries.

In the Old Testament narrative, God promised the land to Abraham and his descendants. Eventually, God led Joshua to conquer the land as the place where Israel would live out the covenantal relationship with God in observing the Torah. At the center of the land was Jerusalem, Holy Zion, and at the center of Jerusalem, the Temple, dwelling place of the enduring divine presence. It should not be forgotten, however, that the land, although given to Israel in the Old Testament, always belonged ultimately to God (cf. *Leviticus* 25:23), a place where Israel would be the “light to the Gentiles” (cf. *Isaiah* 42:6, 49:6), attracting all nations to Jerusalem, coming to learn the Torah (cf. *Isaiah* 2:3). According to the language of Scripture, in particular the books of the Deuteronomist tradition, the land was lost because of the sins of Israel. Yet by grace, an affirmation of God’s fidelity, God brought the people back at the time of Cyrus King of Persia. Exile

gave way to return, death to resurrection. The Jewish canon of the ancient Scriptures of Israel ends with the words of Cyrus, addressed to the exiles, "Whoever is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him! Let him go up (to Zion)" (2 *Chronicles* 36:23).

The Church has organized the Scriptures differently, placing 2 *Chronicles* in the midst of Israel's saga in the Old Testament. Cyrus's epistle is one more event that moves the narrative towards the promise at the end of the Old Testament, the coming of the Day of the Lord in the Book of Malachi with the figure of Elijah. In the New Testament, John heralds that Day and points to the appearance of Jesus from Nazareth, who will transfigure borders between peoples and lands, ultimately leading to the dissolution of these borders. Clearly, the Christian understanding of the land changes in the passage from the Old to the New. A 2001 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission points out: "One of the beatitudes transforms the geographical and historical meaning into a more open-ended one, 'the meek shall possess the land' (*Matthew* 5:5); 'the land' is equivalent here to 'the kingdom of heaven' (5:3,10) in an eschatological horizon that is both present and future."^[4] At first glance, the land seems almost to have disappeared in the writings of the New Testament, with Christians seeing their homeland as heaven (cf. *Hebrews* 11:13-16). However, the land is not absent but rather is transfigured by the resurrected Christ, for the borders that separate one land from another, one people from another, progressively dissolve as the gospel spreads. The continuing expansion of land is evident as the gospel is preached in place after place, documented in the Acts of the Apostles, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Land is no longer exclusively the land of Israel but expands to include every land where the Gospel is preached and lived. Bringing down borders is a central aspect of Christ's mission:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So, he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father (*Ephesians* 2:14-18).

Although Jews and Catholics indeed share a common language derived from Scripture, they do not always share a common theological understanding of that language and its implications, rooted as they are in two distinct religious understandings. In fact, many Christians would be hesitant to use Old Testament texts to justify twentieth-century ideologies and politics in the Middle East today. After 1948, the Catholic Church proceeded slowly and cautiously when it came to dealing with the state of Israel, partly because of the traumatic circumstances in which the state was established. After decades of hesitation, the Holy See inaugurated full diplomatic relations with this state in 1994, a time when peace between Israelis and Palestinians seemed imminent. Yet, despite the diplomatic recognition of the state, some Jews have continued to lament the Church's continued reluctance to affirm the theological significance of the Jewish claim to the land and the existence of the state. Invited to speak alongside Cardinal Kurt Koch, head of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, at the presentation of the 2015 document celebrating the 50th anniversary of *Nostra aetate's* paragraph 4, Rabbi David Rosen commented on this issue: "Perhaps then I may be permitted...to point out that to fully respect Jewish self-understanding, it is also necessary to appreciate the centrality that the land of Israel plays in the historic and contemporary religious life of the Jewish people and that appears to be missing."^[5]

Whereas the 1965 document made no mention of Israel, land or state, the 2015 text did mention the state of Israel twice. The first time it quoted the 1985 document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews:

Christians are invited to understand this (Jewish) religious attachment (to the land) which

finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship (cf. *Declaration of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops*, November 20, 1975). The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.^[6]

The second time was with regard to justice and peace: “In Jewish-Christian dialogue the situation of Christian communities in the state of Israel is of great relevance, since there – as nowhere else in the world – a Christian minority faces a Jewish majority. Peace in the Holy Land – lacking and constantly prayed for – plays a major role in dialogue between Jews and Christians.”^[7] Some Catholics however are lobbying to promote a Catholic affirmation of the theological significance of the Jewish claim on the land and the state.^[8]

Although today the Church treads carefully, Jews are justified to retort that the Church has not always acted so hesitantly. The imperial ideology that developed once Christians had acceded to earthly power contradicted the New Testament understanding of land, at least from the time of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century onward. Christian empire promoted an enthusiasm for borders that needed defending and territories that awaited conquest in the constant attempt to expand those borders. In the Middle Ages, a militarized Christendom went to war to “liberate” Jerusalem from the Muslims, whom for some represented a resurrected form of Judaism.^[9] The teaching of contempt for Muslims has been parallel to the teaching of contempt for Jews. For many during the Crusades, the war was twofold: against the enemy within (the Jews) and the enemy without (the Muslims). The Crusaders, inspired by the Bible, saw themselves as divinely led warriors, and echoes of a Crusader mentality resound throughout the long history of European colonialism. Explorers and conquerors paved the way for missionaries and preachers. As opposed to victorious Christians, confirmed by God in their victories, Jews were depicted as defeated and subjugated, having lost the land of their forefathers because of their perfidy. Had not even Jesus supposedly prophesied this?^[10] They were seen as condemned to be a wandering people.^[11]

The realization that Jews have suffered because of Christian empowerment, often based upon the unethical reading of Biblical texts, is fundamental to post-Vatican II rethinking of Jewish-Christian relations. The mechanisms that link Christian empowerment with Jewish marginalization must be uncovered and transformed and the supposed theological principles at the basis of these mechanisms must be uprooted. Catholics have begun the important work of reformulating attitudes to the Jews, a blessing of our age; however, an equally important challenge is to ensure that the reformulation of a Christian theology, purified of anti-Judaism, and imbued with the new language of Jewish-Christian dialogue and collaboration, does not legitimate new mechanisms of empowerment and exclusion in its turn. Any Catholic reflection on the land and the state of Israel must consider the political, social, economic and cultural context in Israel/Palestine. This includes a careful examination of how Jewish claims and Israeli policies relate to the well-being of the indigenous Christian and Muslim communities, the aspirations of the Palestinian people, as well as the protection of the Holy Places of Christianity and Islam.

Whereas the Church’s concern for the Holy Places and the faith communities seems natural enough, the Church’s concern for justice and peace is not simply a political or diplomatic issue but rather is an integral part of the Church’s mission. Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* specified:

The Church, for her part, founded on the love of the Redeemer, contributes toward the reign of justice and charity within the borders of a nation and between nations. By preaching the truths of the Gospel, and bringing to bear on all fields of human endeavor the light of her doctrine and of a Christian witness, she respects and fosters the political freedom and responsibility of citizens.^[12]

The Church formulates its position on the present situation of conflict in Israel/Palestine with a sense of moral responsibility and not restricting its discourse to Biblical formulae or theological speculation.

Over the past decades, stretching back to the beginning of the present conflict, in the period after the First World War, the Church has developed a sophisticated discourse about the land of Israel/Palestine, its peoples, and its structures of governance. This language brings together Scripture, tradition, concern for the Christian communities, a commitment to dialogue with Jews and Muslims and a particular insistence on promoting justice and peace for Israelis and Palestinians. This multi-layered discourse is not an exercise in diplomacy but a dynamic project to speak the truth in a situation of division, conflict, and violence.^[13] Furthermore, the universal Church cannot promote an abstract spiritual or theological discourse about a land in which the members of the local Church confront the daily realities of discrimination and occupation, which affect Christian Palestinians as they affect all Palestinians and Jews living in the area. The local Church's attempts to deal with these realities have a very important impact on thinking about the questions of land and state in the universal Church. Jewish claims to the land that appeal both to Biblical authority and Jewish suffering in history also must be seen in the light of the exile of the Palestinian people from their homeland and their experiences of discrimination and occupation in the territories that Israel rules today. Patriarch Michel Sabbah, head of the Roman Catholic Church in the Holy Land for more than twenty years, posed the burning theological question in his 1993 pastoral letter: "Could we (Palestinians) be victims of our own salvation history, which seems to favor the Jewish people and condemn us? Is that truly the Will of God to which we must inexorably bow down, demanding that we deprive ourselves in favor of another people, with no possibility of appeal or discussion?"^[14]

According to the teaching of the Church today, the Jewish people, like all peoples, has a right to express itself in its own terms as a people. Marginalized for centuries, Jewish nationalism, Zionism, rejected that marginalization and struggled for empowerment. The Church understands the Jewish historical, religious and emotional link to the land, rejecting today the centuries of traditional teaching that condemned the Jews to a perpetual state of exile as punishment for their refusal to accept Christ. However, the Church's recognition of the ongoing specificity of the Jewish people and its respect for the Jewish attachment to the land of Israel should not be understood as legitimation for the political and ideological determination to exclusively rule the land. The Church is suspicious of a language of exclusive rights particularly when it supplants the rights of others. Instead, the Church recognizes the authority of "international law" that establishes criteria for promoting justice, equality and peace in any given context.^[15]

Furthermore, it should be noted that there is no unanimity among Jews themselves with regard to the state of Israel. Zionism has met with suspicion and even hostility from some Jews and many other Jews have been critical of the political options that the Zionist leadership adopted, especially with regard to the Palestinian people.^[16] Martin Buber, renowned Jewish thinker, wrote as early as May 1948, in the midst of the war that accompanied the establishment of the state of Israel: "Fifty years ago. When I joined the Zionist movement for the rebirth of Israel, my heart was whole. Today it is torn. The war being waged for a political structure risks becoming a war of national survival at any moment... I cannot even be joyful in anticipating victory, for I fear lest the significance of Jewish victory be the downfall of Zionism."^[17] His was a voice of anguish raised as he saw the genesis of Israeli militarism and feared it would lead to the dearth of his form of Zionist humanism. His anguish deepened as the Israeli authorities refused to relate to the Palestinian refugees and instituted military rule on the Arabs who had not fled from the territory that became the state of Israel (a situation that only ended in 1966, some months after Buber's death). He did not live to see the imposition of military occupation on the territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 War. Also prophetic in her incisive analysis of the darker side of Zionism, was the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt. Steeped in the study of totalitarianism in its modern forms, Arendt warned of the perils of Zionism for the Jewish people. In a 1945 article, Arendt wrote, "The Zionists, if they continue to

ignore the Mediterranean peoples and watch out only for the big faraway powers will appear only as their tools, the agents of foreign and hostile interests. Jews who know their own history should be aware that such a state of affairs will inevitably lead to a new wave of Jew-hatred.”^[18] Most Jews, however, do see in the state of Israel something more than just another state.

The teaching about the exile of the Jews as divine punishment indeed must be rejected as it is a betrayal of the Gospel of God’s fidelity. However, the alternative is not the theological affirmation of Jewish nationalism but rather the rejection of all forms of teaching of contempt that affirm exclusive rights for some and exclusion for others. Zionist insistence on national sovereignty, defined as Jewish, is in sharp tension with the recognition of the rights of all citizens in the State of Israel, including those who are not Jewish. The reality of more than seventy years of Israeli statehood is manifest in the experience of those citizens who encounter manifold forms of discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion because they are “non-Jews” in the Jewish state. They too must have a voice not only in the political arena but in theological conversation about the land and the state of Israel. Whatever the framework set for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whether two states living side by side or one unique state for all, the ultimate principle for a lasting resolution is the dignity of the human person and equality in rights and duties. A 2019 statement of the Catholic Bishops in the Holy Land underlined this principle:

We promote a vision according to which everyone in this Holy Land has full equality, the equality befitting all men and women created equal in God’s own image and likeness. We believe that equality, whatever political solutions might be adopted, is a fundamental condition for a just and lasting peace. We have lived together in this land in the past, why should we not live together in the future too? This is our vision for Jerusalem and the whole land, called Israel and Palestine, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.^[19]

As Jews and Catholics gaze towards the land and its inhabitants, they might not be united in a common vision, but they certainly can be united in a common prayer for peace and for the wellbeing of all who live there.

[1] See D. Neuhaus, “Popolo di Israele, Terra di Israele, stato di Israele”, *Civiltà cattolica*, 2020 (4086, 19.9.2020), 491-502.

[2] Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Orientations and Suggestions for the Application of the Council Declaration Nostra Aetate*, Preamble (1974).

[3] National Jewish Scholars Project, *Dabru Emet* (2000). See <https://www.jcrelations.net/statements/statement/dabru-emet-a-jewish-statement-on-christians-and-christianity.html>.

[4] Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001), 57. See also the classic study of W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974).

[5] Quoted in G. D’Costa, *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), 65. See also R. Langer, “Theologies of the Land and State of Israel The Role of the Secular in Christian and Jewish Understandings” *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations*, 3 (2008), 1-17.

[6] Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the correct way to present Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), VI, 1 quoted in *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, n. 5 (2015).

[7] Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, n. 46 (2015).

[8] See P. Lenhardt, “La fin du sionisme,” *Sens* 3/2004, 99-138, M. Remaud, *Echos d’Israël* (Jerusalem, Elkana 2010), R. Lux, *The Jewish People, the Holy Land and the State of Israel: A Catholic View* (Mahwa, Paulist Press, 2010), and G. D’Costa, *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

[9] Some referred to Islam as a new, powerful form of heretical Christianity mixed with Talmudic Judaism. They tended to pair Talmud and Quran as sources of error (cf. the writings of Petrus Alfonsi, the Cluniac Corpus Toletanum, Ricoldus de Montecrucis and others).

[10] Jesus, weeping over Jerusalem in Luke’s Gospel, said, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” (*Luke* 19:41-44).

[11] Church Fathers like Tertullian compared Christian landedness with Jewish exile as he characteristically wrote, “Scattered, wandering about, deprived of land and sky of their own, they roam the earth without man or God as king, a race to whom there is not accorded the right granted to foreigners to set foot upon and greet one land as home.” Tertullian, “Apology” in *Apologetic Works* (Washington DC, 1962), 7.

[12] *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Gaudium et Spes) (1965), n. 76.

[13] For a Catholic reflection on these themes, see A. Marchadour and D. Neuhaus, *The Land, the Bible and History* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2007).

[14] M. Sabbah, *Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible Today*, (1993), para 7.

[15] "International law becomes the guarantor of the international order, that is of coexistence among political communities that seek individually to promote the common good of their citizens and strive collectively to guarantee that of all peoples, aware that the common good of a nation cannot be separated from the good of the entire human family." Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, n. 434,

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

[16] One classic collection of Jewish opposition to Zionism is M. Selzer (ed), *Zionism Reconsidered: The Rejection of Jewish Normalcy* (New York. Macmillan, 1970).

[17] M. Buber, "Zionism and Zionism," in P. Mendes-Flohr (ed), *Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 198.

[18] H. Arendt, "Zionism Reconsidered," in M. Selzer (ed), Op. cit., 216.

[19] Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, *Righteousness and Peace Will Kiss Each Other*, (20.5.2019).

Rev. David M. Neuhaus, S.J., Ph.D., born 25 April 1962 in Johannesburg, South Africa, is an Israeli Jesuit from German descent and the superior of the Jesuit community of the house of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem. Previously, from 2009 to 2017, he assumed the office of Patriarchal Vicar for Hebrew-speaking Catholics in the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

This article was originally published in *Chicago Studies* 60, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2022), available electronically at: https://issuu.com/chicagostudies/docs/cs_spring_summer_2022_complete_issue.