

THEOLOGY OF LAND AND COVENANT

MAY 2003

AGREED DELIVERANCE

The General Assembly:

1. Receive the report and commend it to the Church for study.
2. Instruct the Committee on Church and Nation, in consultation with the Board of World Mission and the Panel on Doctrine, to investigate the possibility of organising a conference in Israel/Palestine to promote discussion of the issues raised in the Report.
3. Authorise the translation of the Report into Hebrew and Arabic for circulation to interested parties in Israel and Palestine.

REPORT

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Study Group, with membership from the Board of World Mission, the Panel on Doctrine and the Committee on Church and Nation, was set up by the General Assembly of 2001 in response to the section of the Church and Nation Report on Jerusalem. It declared, "*The Churches in the West, our own included, have continued to struggle to reach an understanding of the contemporary conflict in Israel-Palestine. Some of the struggle has been due to the idea that the contemporary state of Israel can be assumed to be coterminous with the Ancient Israel found in the Bible. The consequence of this is then presumed to be that as Christians we must support the modern secular state of Israel. This interpretation then colours the understanding of Israel's treatment of Palestinians and Palestinian land, asserting a special right of Israel to the land and its resources over and above the rights of all others*" (4.3.1). The Study Group was also asked to take on board a Petition, in the name of Moira Kennedy and others, presented to the same Assembly. Although not accepted by the Assembly in the form in which it was presented, it raised questions concerning the way in which Old Testament material, such as the conquest of Canaan, had been used to justify what has happened to the Palestinian people today.

1.2 Our remit had clear parameters. We were not asked to consider in general terms the history of Christian-Jewish relationships.(1) The Church of Scotland has a long record of being involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue, including its contribution to the work of the Council of Christians and Jews, at both local and national level. Nor were we asked to report on the complex political conflict in Israel/Palestine, consequent on the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. This has been kept before the General Assembly in several reports from both the Board of World Mission and the Committee on Church and Nation.(2)

1.3 Our remit is theological: to study what the Bible has to say about Land and Covenant, and to reflect on how the biblical material has been interpreted and used in the context of the present conflict. We have sought to do this by listening to as many different voices as possible, Jewish, Christian and to a lesser extent Muslim, in this country. Most of the Group also paid a visit to Israel/Palestine from the 16th to the 23rd of March 2002. Arrangements for the visit had to be modified in the light of the increasingly tense security situation at that time. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the Rev Clarence Musgrave minister of St Andrew's, the Scots Kirk in Jerusalem. He enabled us to meet with Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah, a Rabbi from a Jewish settlement, a Rabbi associated with the Rabbis for Peace movement, a Christian Zionist, and Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Haifa, as well as a Muslim from Al Quds University in Jerusalem. We became only too well aware of the ever more tragic reality of what was happening on the ground.

1.4 One thing has become clear. We have listened to a variety of different and conflicting voices, many of them seeking to justify their own position by an appeal to the Bible or the Koran. Such different voices are present within the Jewish, Christian and Islamic communities. There is not, and never has been, one agreed interpretation of Scripture in either Jewish or Christian tradition. It is worth recalling words from the conclusion to the Panel on Doctrine Report on the Interpretation of Scripture (1998). "*Within the Church, the Bible has been interpreted and used in many ways at different times. Distinctive groups, whether denominations or guilds of scholars have had distinctive interpretations. In the life of communities, the Bible has had consequences for the use of power, authority and influence ... It is important to learn to respect difference, to listen to the stranger, not least when the stranger, beyond the self-understanding of the particular group, is God*".(3) We soon discovered that there were such differences within the Study Group itself; but we have sought to journey together, to listen to each other, and to respect the integrity of each other's views. The differences remain, as they do within the Church as a whole. Our plea would be that, without comprising our deepest convictions, we should all respect what Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, has called the Dignity of Difference.

1.5 In fulfilment of our remit the Report seeks:

- to produce brief factual and non-judgemental snapshots of some of the major attitudes to Land and Covenant in Jewish, Christian and, to a lesser extent, Islamic thinking - which may provide reference points for the later discussions.
- to re-examine the major themes of Land and Covenant in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments.
- to survey 20th century and contemporary Christian theological reflection on Land and Covenant in the light of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the consequent Israeli/ Palestinian conflict.

From these studies, we then try to point to issues and questions which ought to be part of a continuing dialogue within the church as it seeks to understand theologically the situation in Israel/Palestine.

2. Snapshots

2.1 *Jewish Approaches to Land and Covenant*

2.1.1 Ever since the Roman destruction of Jerusalem the land and pre-eminently the city remained in Jewish memory and dreams. The redemption would be marked by the coming of the Messiah, his rebuilding of the temple, his reign and Israel's return to the land. Some Jews continued to live in the land as a religious calling, often in poverty.

2.1.2 Zionism was a secular movement, which believed that Jews needed a state and a land like other peoples, to protect them from anti-Semitism in Europe and to enable Jews to live as whole and free people engaged in the full range of human activity, including the physical and agricultural. The land should be Palestine, the ancient land of Israel. The few religious Zionists insisted on this; for most the appeal was that this was the scene of their historical life as a free people. The presence of an Arab population was not seen as a major factor. Most religious Jews were opposed to Zionism and the secular state, but Rav Kook, the influential first Chief Rabbi of Israel, saw this as a stage in God's purpose of bringing the Jewish people back to the *Torah*; he supported Ben Gurion and won important privileges for Orthodox Judaism. Following the 1967 war many Jews inside and outside Israel came to see Zionism in religious and redemptive terms, and secular idealism diminished.

2.1.3 Observant Jews are about 20% of Israel's population, and the religious/secular divide remains deep. The non-Zionist ultra-orthodox look for a return to the *Torah*, await the Messiah, though most are against any loss of Biblical land. The most extreme National Religious see gaining and keeping the land as the supreme religious duty to the extent that anyone, like Rabin, who would give up the claim to any part of it is worthy of death. Most religious Zionists are in less hurry and to varying extents balance the possession of the land against other duties such as the saving of life. All mainstream secular Zionists see a comparatively large and secure Jewish state as central to Zionism; the Right believes conflict with neighbours will be long-lasting and so reject compromise; the Left is more ready to trade land for peace. The majority of Israelis look above all for security, at present supporting the Right because peace appears to them impossible. There are a few post-Zionists for whom the settlement of the land is over and who seek equal relations between peoples.

2.1.4 Zionists looked for an end to the Diaspora hoping that all Jews would gather in Israel. This has not happened and the majority of Jews live outside Israel. For Israelis the existence of a Jewish state is the guarantee of the future of the Jewish people; for Jews in the Diaspora assimilation is the main threat to their future, and the health of Judaism is vital to counteract it. There is considerable depth to the debate in the Diaspora about the future of Judaism, with some seeing the state and land of Israel as central to its development, while others see the effect of acquiring and defending the land as corrosive of values essential to Judaism. Solidarity with Jews in Israel is a compelling call in the Diaspora, especially in official Jewish bodies.

2.2 *Jewish Believers in Jesus*

2.2.1 Among Messianic groups there are Jews who, while still claiming to be Jews, nevertheless believe that Jesus is the Eternal Son of God and Israel's Messiah. They have congregations in Israel and throughout the world. They do not have one theological view: they disagree, for example, about how far they should be bound by the Mosaic Law. They are united, however, in their belief that Israel's relationship to the Land is God-given and valid until the end of the present age. They see this as founded more on God's covenant with Abraham than on the Law of Moses. They firmly believe that the Land cannot be separated from God's purposes for the people of Israel.

2.2.2 Fundamental to their belief is that God made a covenant with all humankind and with the natural world. Human redemption, therefore, cannot be merely spiritualised. God - Israel - and the land of Israel are an intense microcosm of this broader covenant, and bear witness to the reality of God's costly judgement and forgiveness for all peoples and lands, fulfilled in Christ.

2.2.3 They see each exile that Israel experiences as an act of God's judgement, and similarly they see the hand of God in each of Israel's restorations to the Land. Just as God decrees that other people, while this sinful age lasts, need nation states, so they believe that Israel needs its State, otherwise it could not be a representative people. Not only the Jewish restoration to the Land, but the conflicts which surrounded the establishment of the State of Israel are believed to be prophesied in many parts of Scripture, and herald the second coming of Christ.

2.3 Palestinian Christian Approaches to Land and Covenant

2.3.1 Palestinian Christians are long established in the land, sharing a common language and culture with other Arabs. Christians played a leading role in the Arab renaissance and nationalist movements from the latter part of the 19th century, and they feel themselves to be Palestinians, part of one nation. They look for a non-religious political structure that respects the different religions. Although there is a range of churches traditionally suspicious of each other, among the people there is a strong sense of one common Christian community. That having been said, family and kinship ties are dominant among all Arabs, so that it is often hard to tell whether local disputes between Christians and Muslims have a religious basis or not.

2.3.2 In the Eastern Christian tradition there is a devotion to the holy Christian sites and, indeed, to the Holy Land, as being major icons of the faith, God-given places where heaven and earth, the divine and the human meet; in this view not to venerate them would be to deny the incarnation. The Greek Orthodox, the Armenian, the Latin (Roman Catholic) and other ancient Church hierarchies are zealous guardians in their trusteeship of the holy places. Over the centuries they have sought accommodation with succeeding rulers in order to safeguard their rights and preserve their people. The Greek Orthodox and the Armenians are notable in having acquired considerable land holdings, often property entrusted to the Church by their members for better security. Until recently church leadership in Jerusalem was mostly in the hands of non-Arabs, and this could lead to tension between the hierarchies and their people.

2.3.3 The establishment of the state of Israel and everything that accompanied and followed it entailed a massive loss of land and property by Christians and Muslims alike. This has been the cause of the deepest resentment and rejection, and it has been the major factor differentiating Israel from previous ruling powers. "*Conquerors come and conquerors go*", is a saying in Jerusalem, but Zionism is something different, as it is seen to be bent on complete and lasting dispossession. Israel has respected the Christian holy places and, generally speaking, Church property. With growing nationalist Palestinian sentiment and the indigenisation of Church leadership ecumenical relations have improved, but the hierarchies' relations with the State of Israel have become more fraught. There is a current dispute between the State and the Greek Orthodox Church, which has much to do with land since many State buildings are built on land leased from that church. Now the leases have run out, and there is immense pressure on the Church by its people not to compromise church land any further.

2.3.4 The Palestinian Christian community has seen the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in political and legal, rather than theological, terms. The community has also been free of the sort of religious fanaticism which approves violent measures and has been present in the other two religions, but this may in part be due to its smallness and vulnerability. Perhaps the basic theological attitude has been one of incomprehension as to how 2000 years of history can be expunged at a stroke, the Bible taken as referring directly, primarily and politically to the present day, Jews from America, Russia, Ethiopia and Peru as being, unchanged, the people of the Bible, and themselves being seen by so many Christians (not only dispensationalists) as enemies of the Christian God. The most interesting theological work has been done by Latin and Protestant Palestinians, coming out from the influence of their Western leaders and teachers and reacting against their teaching. Naim Ateek, an Episcopalian, and Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran, for instance, have struggled with the interpretation of the Old Testament.

2.3.5 A few Palestinian Christians have joined conservative evangelical or Messianic Jewish congregations or groups, and believe that the Land was primarily entrusted to the Jews.

2.4 Approaches to the Theology of Land and Covenant within the wider Christian Tradition.

2.4.1 There is no one monolithic view of the place of Israel in the wider Christian tradition. Rather there is a mosaic of principles, truths and insights which all contribute to the fuller picture but which ultimately demand some kind of conclusion which will inform and guide our approach. These historical and current views can be roughly summarised in the following three broad categories.

2.4.2 Replacement Theology / Supersessionism

Held by many Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, as well as some in the Reformed tradition, this view sees the church as the "new" Israel or indeed the "true" Israel, and consequently the promises in the scriptures to the "old" Israel are now ours, by inheritance, new covenant or replacement. The Jewish people have, in one sense, lost out and many of their aspirations and hopes are largely meaningless in this context. For them there is the same offer of grace in Christ as for anyone else, but their Jewishness no longer has any ultimate meaning. An extreme view of replacement theology, *ie*, that the Jews are actually rejected, has been used to support anti-Semitism over the centuries, but this has largely been replaced with the more inclusive alternative. In terms of the modern state of Israel, there is no theological significance, there is simply a state which, at the moment happens to be Jewish, but which is under the hand of God in the same way as every other state and which shares the communal responsibility inherent in a basic humanity.

2.4.3 Christian Zionism

A response to the Replacement position and its arguably horrific consequences, (the Holocaust), is found in various forms of Christian Zionism, which range from the post war acceptance of the Jews having somewhere to go for safety, to the much stronger affirmation that it is actually the sovereign will of God that his chosen people return to their homeland. The former would state the principles of the basic right to life enshrined in the scriptures and Christian traditions, whilst the latter would find in the promises of the *Torah*, the prophetic writings *etc.*, the literal word of God to return his people to the land. A more fiercely prophetic strain of this view is found in the various Dispensationalist positions developed over the last hundred years or so. These see the return of the Jews to the land as a harbinger of the last days before the return of the Messiah. For them this is a major spiritual portent, rather than a political debate about human rights. The Christian Zionist position can be summarised in three basic tenets:

- the uniqueness of the Jewish people and their continuing place in salvation history;
- the importance of the Jewish Theology of *berith* and *eretz*; (*ie* of Covenant and Land) which inextricably links the Jewish people to the land of Israel;
- the post-holocaust psyche, and the ongoing significance of Jerusalem.

For many however, this visionary approach has not always been accompanied by a sense of critical realism and the "what" has often been obscured by the "how". The result has been a tension between a perceived

"God given" gift of the land to one people, and the suffering this continues to cause to another, a proportion of whom are Christian.

2.4.4 *Liberation /Universal Models*

Historically, liberal Protestantism has tended to be anti-Zionist and universal in its concept of covenant grace, and it is a late 20th century development of this view which forms the third broad category of mainstream Christian thought. This third position often stands as a reaction to the previous one, finding an unacceptable face of "chosenness", which means the rights and hopes of another people are trampled upon and the standards of peace and justice enshrined in the scriptures are denied, even by those who call on the name of the God who initiated them in the first place. This fatal inconsistency in the face of real and ongoing suffering has caused many to question and reject any concept of a particularised divine provision, and leads them to see the need instead to denounce the holocaust and any post-holocaust suffering as equally abhorrent to any concept of a loving God. Many respond to this by having recourse to a model of Liberation Theology where hope is fused with political and pastoral concerns to form a critique which can be highly politicised and even confrontational.

2.4.5 A wider and possibly more eirenic model of Liberation, makes the point that even if God were indeed returning the Jews to the land, they were never meant to live there as oppressors or overlords, but rather as caretakers who reflect and embody the love and grace of the God who called them. Many of these themes are echoed by a Jewish response to Liberation Theology, which sees the same liberating influence for all humanity in the great events of Israel's history. The Exodus, the Passover, the teachings of the prophets and the subsequent moral guidance of the rabbis all point to an inclusive humanity which shares in the riches of a spiritual tradition and is not abused by it.

2.5 *The Islamic View*

2.5.1 Islam recognises that the Holy Land is sacred to the People of the Book (Jews, Christians and Muslims). Almost every prophet lived in the Holy Land. Within Islam Jerusalem holds a special place because the prophet Mohammed was transported here on the Night Journey, from the Sacred Mosque in Mecca to the Farthest Mosque (Al Aqsa) in Jerusalem. The Koran says that the land around this mosque was blessed, and there is much discussion about how much land this blessing covers. Early authoritative tradition shows that it is the duty of Muslims to maintain the Al Aqsa mosque, both spiritually and physically, a task increasingly difficult in current circumstances. Jerusalem is a holy place - prayers used to be said facing Jerusalem before Mecca, and a prayer said in Jerusalem is worth a thousand prayers said in other mosques.

2.5.2 For Islam a basic premise is that of trusteeship; Muslims believe that land belongs to Allah, and their job is to look after it, and not to damage it. Within the general Palestinian culture the Islamic understanding of the trusteeship of land is highly important. Land is never just a neutral economic asset. To sell one's family land is counted a disgrace, and to have it taken from one inflicts a deep wound to one's honour. The way in which land is tied up with honour can become a potent force when the political and religious dimensions are added.

2.5.3 There is no place in Islamic theology for any particular people to be special to the Land - to the abandonment of others. Jews, Christians and Muslims have all lost and regained sovereignty at different times in history. Genetic or biological descent is never in itself sufficient to merit inheritance of the Land. The only prerequisite is righteousness; and justice is the criterion for any continued sovereignty. A respected Muslim commentator has said, "*God will render the just state victorious, even if it is not Muslim.*"

3. Theology of Land and Covenant in the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible

3.1 *Promise that looks for a response*

3.1.1 The term covenant in the Hebrew scriptures (*berith*) has its origins in the language of contract between people. In political, social and legal terms it implies an agreement or a contract into which two parties enter with conditions and reciprocal obligation on both sides - *eg* David and Jonathan's pledge of friendship (1 Sam. 20. 1-17); or treaties between nations (1 Kings 5. 12). When used theologically, however, to describe the relationship between God and people, covenant is never thought of as a contract between equals. The initiative always comes from God. It is God who *makes* or *establishes* this covenant, and not people who make a covenant with God. In terms of this covenant, God makes promises to certain individuals or people, and is seen to keep these as a witness to God's own faithfulness and nature. In fact, God's reason for initiating a covenant with Israel remains a mystery to this people, seen to be ultimately rooted in the love of God (Deut. 7. 7-9).

3.1.2 It is always clear that with these promises God is looking for some kind of response. For example, God promises to make Abraham into a great nation, and Abraham responds by leaving his home to journey towards the land God has promised. The quality (or lack of it) in the response does not change the fact of the promise, but may well change the ways in which the promise will find fulfilment.

3.1.3 The people of Israel are judged by the quality of their response to God's initiative. This judgement is not so much a sudden event as it is the inevitable conclusion to a process that has been taking place, perhaps over centuries. Decisions of faithful response to God, or unfaithful rejection have a cumulative effect in the history of Ancient Israel. Hence, faithful remembering of God's promise led the people inexorably towards land and unfaithful forgetting of God's promise led just as inevitably towards exile. In particular, the *Torah* (Genesis to Deuteronomy) stresses the continuing possession of the land as being dependent upon faithfulness to God, and, conversely, disobedience of God will inevitably lead to the judgement of losing the land, even when many people, misunderstanding the covenant, thought that such loss could never happen.

3.2 What does the promise of land mean?

3.2.1 From the above it is clear that, while the substance of the promise (*i.e.* God's covenantal relationship with God's people) and the purpose of the promise (that God's nature and faithfulness might be revealed) are maintained, the exact expression of this covenant through land may change from situation to situation. While the promise is always a link between God and the people, to be expressed through land, the physical boundaries of this land are never clearly delineated, and indeed will have been interpreted differently at various stages of Ancient Israel's history.

3.2.2 Hence, what the promise of land meant to the traveller in the book of Genesis is different to what the promise of land meant to the Israelites in the wilderness, or resident on the land, or in exile. The expression of the covenant, in terms of physical land promised, occupied, or mourned varies from situation to situation in scripture, while the God of the covenant remains faithful to, and with, the people in whatever situation they are found. It is also true to say that this particular people has always understood itself in relation to God through this particular piece of land, whether they live on it, or are exiled from it. We met with one Palestinian Christian in Jerusalem who ventured the belief that the landless condition of the Israelites was met with God's promise of land, while the "landed" condition of Israel was met with God's judgement, according to the ways in which the gift of land was being used.

3.2.3 Ancient Israel's landless condition begins with the experience of travelling. To journey towards land as Abraham did, is to choose to journey with God. It is to leave the safe and familiar, precisely because it lacks promise, and to throw oneself entirely on God's provision, in order to be led to a place of promise. At this early stage, the promise of God is a two-fold one. God promises to create a people from Abraham's descendants, and then to give them a land in which to live. Abraham dies with neither, but with guarantees of both - a son, and a burial plot.

3.2.4 Ancient Israel's experience of landlessness continues with their wanderings in the desert after the Exodus. To wander in the wilderness is to dwell in a place where basic survival cannot be taken for granted. It is to discover the daily provision of God so that the place of death becomes the place where God gives life. Here, the promise of land is also God's "no" to the oppression and slavery of Egypt, and an end to wilderness wandering.

3.2.5 Ancient Israel's final experience of landlessness in scripture is that of exile. Exiled from the Promised Land to Babylon, many Jews believed that they had been abandoned by God. This traumatic experience, however, was to evoke some of Ancient Israel's strongest expressions of faith (see Isaiah 40-55). They discovered that loss of land was not the end of the covenant relationship between God and the people. Indeed, in Babylon, the people found that God had gone with them. They learned that God is not tied to a geographic piece of land, but travels with the people into exile. So, to live in exile is to realise that God continues with God's people in the very scene of disaster and failure, bringing new life and new opportunities. Yet they were encouraged to believe that the God who had travelled with them into exile was still the God who would one day bring them back to the Promised Land they thought they had lost. Here the promise of land must begin to mean something different. It is a sign of the new thing that God is going to do with the people, the beginning of a new history.

3.2.6 If Ancient Israel's experience of landlessness is not entirely negative, conversely, their experience of living on the land seems to be at times fraught with difficulties. Living on the Land brings responsibility. The promises and demands of the covenant are not merely concerned with geographic boundaries. They are given social and political context. Indeed much of *Torah* makes best sense when applied to the community life of Ancient Israel in the Land, and there are Jews today who insist that *Torah* can never be fully obeyed except in the promised Land. Land always remained God's gift; not something earned, grasped and owned. The people were reminded of this in the regulations of the Jubilee Year which lay down that family land may not be sold forever. In Lev. 25. 23, we find God's instruction "*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants*". The Land is also a threat. It is never simply an empty space waiting to be inhabited by the Israelites, nor is it ever exclusively occupied by those of the Jewish faith - it is always co-occupied with people of other faiths. Indeed, scriptural accounts of Jerusalem in the time of David indicate a city made up of people with many different religious points of view.

3.2.7 After the exile the experience of Ancient Israel in relationship to the Land in scripture was full of ambivalence and ambiguity. Many of the visionary hopes expressed during the exile of a triumphant, joyful return to the land, to peace and prosperity centring on a rebuilt Jerusalem, remained unfulfilled. The Land was reduced to a small settlement of people around Jerusalem. Attempts were made, through rigorous obedience and purity, to guarantee possession of the Land again. However, extreme purity, no more than national power expressed in monarchy, could ensure this. Here, the promise of land gives rise to a sense of ambivalence. Ancient Israelites are in the Land, but not in control of it. Increasing Hellenization accentuates this ambivalence, and creates on the one hand, Hellenistic Jews, and on the other, Jews who want to resist syncretism. This tension between the *already* of land occupation, and the *not yet* of no control over land occupied, led to an expectant Ancient Israel, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Messiah and the coming of the kingdom of God in all its fullness. The promise of land is present in part, but predominantly in the future. Much of the eschatological imagery within Jewish and Christian thought originates from this period.

3.3 *The use of scripture, understandings of prophecy, and biblical metaphors*

3.3.1 The group's discussions exposed a difference of opinion among its members regarding the use of scriptural imagery pertaining to land and covenant, and these differences should be acknowledged.

3.3.2 One area of difference centred on the understanding of the term *prophecy*. For some, this is taken to mean the application of the prophet's understanding of God's word to certain prevailing social mores, or

political conditions, enabling the prophet to criticise, from the perspective of faith, an existing situation, and indicate what judgement would inevitably befall should this situation continue. In this view the prophet, having an understanding of what God requires, sees an existing situation that falls short of these requirements. The prophet then re-imagines the situation in the light of God's word, denouncing the prevalent conditions, pronouncing God's judgement upon them, and announcing the vision of a time to come where the existing situation has ended. In the light of this understanding of prophecy questions can then be raised regarding the relevance of the prophets' teaching to similar social and political situations in the world today - not least in Israel/Palestine.

3.3.3 For others, the predictive element of prophecy is stressed, and the supernatural is emphasised. In this view, God reveals directly to the prophet, detailed information of that which is going to happen at a future date. Here, the prophet, by means of God's intervention, is shown what the future will hold, and speaks of things that would not have been known to him by other means. It then becomes crucial to try to identify such prophetic visions of the future with specific events happening in our world today, or expected in the foreseeable future, particularly in Israel/Palestine.

3.3.4 While one view does not necessarily preclude the other, significant questions are raised here. Do the scriptures predict, in some detail, and supernaturally, the return of the Jews to what is now the modern nation state of Israel? If the answer to this is "Yes", then how does this affect our understanding of the current situation in Israel/Palestine? Does the prophetic voice address its own context, and, therefore, address similar, present-day socially or politically unjust situations through a process of fair comparison? If our answer to this is "Yes", then how does this affect our understanding, not just of the current situation in Israel/Palestine, but other situations in our world today?

3.3.5 Over and above all of this, there is the larger question of how metaphor and symbolic visions in the Bible are used and understood. It is acknowledged that scripture makes free use of metaphor - indeed it has to. When faced with issues such as the nature of God and the experience of the Holy, the use of metaphorical imagery is unavoidable. It is also acknowledged that, when interpreting scripture individuals can be selective in their understanding of what is to be taken metaphorically, and what is to be taken as literal truth.

3.3.6 Several significant metaphors have already been noted in relation to the discussion of land and covenant. There is the metaphor of the journey. The question arises as to whether an individual is where God wants that person to be in life. If the individual discovers that he or she is not, in fact, where God wants them to be, then journey of some kind is necessary. This may or may not involve physical displacement, as the concept of journey can be taken metaphorically. Yet, the basis of the metaphor is the story of a real journey from landlessness to promised land, sustained on the way by God's provision. Similarly, stories of God giving God's people a land in which to live can be taken by, for example, 19th highlanders during the Clearances and used, both in their journey to the new world, and in their campaign for security of tenure for crofters.

3.3.7 Indeed, how are human beings to understand the mysteries of life and of death without metaphor? Unable to say exactly what is going to happen, imagery is borrowed from sacred texts in order to attempt to express the inexpressible. Hence, dying becomes crossing the Jordan, or moving into our final promised land, or reaching the end of our journey. And the end times become "a new heaven and a new earth", or even Zion and a new Jerusalem.

3.3.8 If this is the case, then what happens to the scripture stories that gave rise to these metaphors in the first place? Some would argue that they become the interesting historical origin of the metaphor. Indeed, to handle the metaphor correctly, they would argue for an accurate understanding of its historical origin. Others would contend that, for the promises of God to have universal application, the original story still has

to apply. Covenant, land and promise are there in scripture. The question remains as to how, having been adopted into the Judeo/Christian tradition, the metaphor of land and covenant has present-day application to the situation in Israel/Palestine?

4. The Theology of Land and Covenant in the New Testament

4.1 Jewish Roots

4.1.1 The New Testament was written at a time when Palestine was part of the Roman Empire. In various parts of that Empire there were sizeable Jewish communities, with their distinctive customs and religious convictions. Although the Jews in Palestine, and in other parts of the Roman Empire were influenced by other religions and Hellenistic philosophical thinking, the Old Testament thinking that salvation would come to the Jewish people through Messianic political and religious leadership in the Davidic tradition was strong. Messianic hopes, however, took various forms, and some thought of the Messiah as a cosmic figure offering a new world order to all humankind. Such differing strands of thought are to be found in the New Testament.

4.1.2 The ministry of Jesus, the Jewish teacher, took place entirely within the Land over which the Jews themselves did not exercise political control, and in which there were many non-Jews. In this context he demonstrated openness to others, while still seeing the Jews as the special covenant people of God. He taught of power, religious and secular, and of its abuses. For most of his ministry he seems to have resisted being identified with contemporary Messianic views, inviting people to rethink such views in the light of what they saw in him. He was relatively silent about the future of the land, though he spoke of coming disasters, including the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. After his death and resurrection his Jewish followers maintained their identity with their Jewish tradition. They believed that the covenant with Abraham represented God's special bond with the Hebrew people, and that Moses, in leading the people out of Egypt, and in giving them God's commandments on Mt. Sinai, reaffirms that covenant. They continued to worship in the synagogues and - until its destruction by the Romans - in the Jerusalem temple.

4.2 Being in Christ

With the experience of Peter in Acts 10, however, it became clear that the Gospel centred on Jesus was to transcend its Jewish boundaries. Mission to the Gentiles became the dominant force in Paul's Jewish-Christian life. He found its basis and justification in the Hebrew Scriptures. The church soon became a predominantly Gentile church, though there is evidence of continuing distinctive Jewish Christian communities into the 4th Century. There is very little specific reference to the Land in the New Testament. This is hardly surprising since the Gospel proclaims that the locus of God's presence and blessing centres on being "in Christ", not in a particular land. If being in Christ offers fullness of life to all people, regardless of race, gender or status, then for Christians the land is no longer central to their thinking. In the early days of Christianity there seems to have been little inclination to give the land of Palestine any special status. The idea of "holy" Christian places, and the "holy land" only came to the fore with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, and the designation, by members of his family, of the supposed sites of the passion and other events associated with the life of Jesus. Indeed the universal strand in the New Testament places greater emphasis upon the Scriptural claim that God is the Creator and Lord of all the earth, than upon the promise of a particular land.

4.3 The Reinterpretation of Old Testament Concepts

The Letter to the Hebrews consistently reinterprets and transforms material from the Old Testament in the light of Christ. Priesthood, the sacrificial system, sanctuaries, and covenant are all claimed to have found a new and richer fulfilment in the coming of Jesus, the sole true high priest, mediator of a better covenant (8.6) who entered the heavenly sanctuary to offer a single sacrifice for sin (*cf* chapters 8-10). Of this heavenly sanctuary any humanly built sanctuary, such as the Jerusalem temple, was a mere copy (9.24). Twice in chapters 8 and 10 Hebrews picks up the new covenant passage in Jeremiah 31.31ff, to claim that his new covenant "*has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon*

disappear" (8.13). Even in its original context in Jeremiah the new covenant passage has nothing to say about the promise of the land. It is dealing with the other side of the covenant, the people's response, or lack of it; what Jeremiah calls "*that stubborn evil*" (18.12) and what we might call the sheer cussedness in human nature. That, claims Jeremiah, can only be overcome by a new act of God. Hebrews also reminds Christians that "*here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for a city that is to come*" (13.14); and sees Abraham's temporary stay in the promised land as the prototype of this - he was looking forward "*to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God*" (11.10).

4.4 Paul: Christian and Jew

Paul in his allegory in Galatians 4.21^{ff} speaks of the two women, Hagar and Sarah, as representing two covenants: Hagar the slave corresponding to Mt Sinai in Arabia and the present Jerusalem, while Sarah, free and our mother corresponds to "the Jerusalem above". It is Paul, the converted Jew, who wrestles with the problem of the relationship between the Jews as God's covenant people, and the emerging Christian community, particularly in Romans 9-11. There he denies any Replacement Theology, and argues for Christian humility and understanding in face of the mystery of God's covenant with his chosen people, and the ultimate relationship between Israel and the Christian Church. The question of the land, however, does not feature in his argument. The argument from silence at this point can lead to opposite conclusions which were expressed within the Study Group:

- the land does not need to be mentioned since it is basic to the covenant, and thus different from the temporary signs of the covenant, such as priesthood, circumcision, and temple;
- the land is not mentioned because it has lost all its theological significance for Paul. Like other aspects of the covenant it has been reminded in the light of Christ;

Even this second view, however, must not be taken to mean that Paul is simply spiritualising what in the Old Testament is earthed in the life of a particular people. To be "in Christ" means to be a member of the body of Christ, a community earthed in the life of the Church throughout the world.

4.5 Visions of the End Time

Parts of the New Testament draw heavily on Old Testament language and imagery, such as the new heaven and the new earth, and the new Jerusalem. Particularly in Revelation, however, notably in chapters 21 and 22 no specific fulfilment in this world or in history as we know it, is implied. We are here in the realm of metaphor and symbolic visions which speak of the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes, a fulfilment which takes us beyond the limits of time as we now experience it. Whatever imagery it uses, whether it be that of a city with no temple in it "*for its temple is the LORD God Almighty and the Lamb*" (Rev 21.22), or the "*tree of life*" (cf Gen.2.9) whose "*leaves are for the healing of the nations*" (Rev.22.2) we are seeing Old Testament ideas and imagery being used in a radically new way.

5. Contemporary Christian Theological Reflection on Land and Covenant

5.1 Introduction

The relative paucity of sources in recent systematic theology suggests a reticence amongst scholars on this issue. While there has been intense interest in some quarters in Christian-Jewish dialogue and a vigorous reassessment of classical accounts of Judaism, less attention has been devoted to the modern state of Israel and disputes over its borders. Several reasons for this can be conjectured. The complexity of Biblical resources and the contested nature of claims authorised by Scripture make any simple equation of ancient and modern Israel questionable. This is compounded by the relative silence of the New Testament on the subject of the land of Israel. Moreover, the diversity of modern Israeli society renders a monolithic Christian construction of its religious identity problematic. Related to both these points is the growing awareness that Judaism is a living religion with its own integrity, texts, traditions, rituals and practices which ought not to be assimilated into earlier Christian descriptions of its status. Flourishing for many centuries in dispersion, Judaism has developed an authentic identity which may neither necessitate nor forbid a return to the land, at least in its recent form and at this time. Conversely, recognition of the integrity of Judaism demands that this question remain primarily, if not exclusively, a theological issue for Jews rather than

Christians. Moreover, in assessing theological reticence on the subject of the land of Israel, one should also be aware that much dispensationalist writing from within American conservative evangelicalism is met with unease and even disdain amongst theologians from the ecclesiastical mainstream. Apocalyptic assertions about the present and future status of the land of Israel are viewed nervously and negatively. Nonetheless, one can find some broader currents of thought about human identity, land, Israel and Judaism which suggest an approach to this topic.

5.2 Anthropology

5.2.1 Recent trends in modern theology inveigh against anthropologies which present the essence of human personhood in terms of spirit, consciousness or mind essentially distinct from the body. The human being, it is argued, is essentially embodied, finite, social and rooted in space and time. This finds support in recent exegesis of the image of God in Genesis 1 and more generally in Hebrew anthropology where the person is a psychosomatic unity belonging to communities of family, tribe and nation. In the context of the covenant, this entails a faith that is articulated in terms of land, law, temple and a socio-political order which attests the rule of God throughout the cosmos. The social and embodied dimensions of human life are further pronounced by New Testament themes of incarnation and resurrection. In the claim that the Word became flesh there is stressed both the physicality of creaturely existence and its worth in light of God's action. When life after death is described this is typically in terms of resurrection of the body, thus accentuating the theme that for us fulfilled existence takes embodied form. These twin themes set against their Hebrew background subsequently provided resources for resisting Gnostic trends in the history of early Christianity. Such trends tended to set body and soul, Old and New Testaments, Israel and Church in opposition to one another.

5.2.2 People require territory in which they can reside and flourish in communities. Requiring daily sustenance, housing and a settled existence for cultural flourishing, human persons are thus bound to the land in ways that are non-accidental. With this anthropology in view, we can better understand the pervasiveness of land throughout the Old Testament. Brueggemann's claim in "The Land" (1977), albeit with some degree of exaggeration, that land is the central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is only possible in light of recent protests against the influence of body-mind dualism in Christian theology.

5.3 Ecology

5.3.1 This turn in modern theology is further reinforced by ecological themes which stress that the land is neither disposable nor replaceable. Our bonds to it are deeper and richer than can be expressed by the rhetoric of consumption and commodification. Land is not ours to possess; it is shared with other animals for whom also it is home. Moreover, its natural features - rocks, mountains, oceans, rivers, trees, flowers etc. - are of worth in God's sight beyond their contribution to human welfare. Had human beings never appeared, the world would remain God's good creation. Thus land and our place in it is to be respected, safeguarded and shared with other life forms for whom it is also essential.(4)

5.3.2 Present in much recent writing, these themes can contribute to an awareness of how land is both required yet is also to be held responsibly and faithfully before God. This is of significance for the relationship between peoples and land throughout the world, particularly where this requires difficult negotiation amidst the recognition of legitimate but competing interests. Land is required for communities to flourish under God, yet it is also to be shared and protected. Whether God's people are to dwell in many lands and civic communities across the face of the earth, or whether some are called today particularly to live their faith in a land and society divinely set apart for this purpose remains an open question which can only be resolved, if at all, by reference to further considerations.

5.4 Supersessionism

5.4.1 Much contemporary Christian discussion of Judaism is now firmly opposed to replacement or supersessionist strategies. Indeed this is claimed as an ecumenical consensus in post-Holocaust times.

George Lindbeck has even suggested that supersessionism can now be branded a heresy, perhaps the longest running in the history of Christian thought.(5) The avoidance of replacement strategies in Christian theology will tend to be accompanied by the recognition that the divine provision of land for Israel has not necessarily been set aside, replaced or transmuted by the coming of Christ.(6)

5.4.2 In the background to this discussion lies Karl Barth's rich, complex and ambivalent discussion of Israel.(7) This has troubled commentators some of whom point to concepts which echo earlier anti-Semitic attitudes. Judas (and behind him the Old Testament figure of Saul) is the type of the rejected in whom we see mirrored our own sin, pettiness, self-righteousness and rebellion. The synagogue, in its persistence across history, attests human stubbornness before the grace and demand of God. The joyless and inglorious witness of the "ghetto" is stressed, while Barth himself once confessed to a feeling of unease when in the presence of Jews. Nonetheless, there are crucial features of Barth's treatment of Israel which overcome earlier replacement theologies. The rejection of Judas is the mirror image of the election of Paul, another Jew. The stubbornness of (some) Jewish resistance to the Messiah is symptomatic of a universal human tendency toward rebellion. In the Jew, we can see ourselves as we really are. Thus understood, the continued existence of Judaism falls under divine providence. Barth's Reformed stress on the continuity of the old and new dispensations under one covenant of grace unites both Christians and Jews as the people of God. Moreover, the overcoming of the older Augustinian-Calvinist doctrine of the double decree by a universal election in Christ has radical consequences for Barth's account of Judaism. Even Judas must be finally considered elect, his rejection being overcome by the atoning work of Christ. The ongoing existence of Israel is therefore not only a sign of temporary rejection of the Messiah but must also be placed, following Romans 9-11, within the history of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles.

5.4.3 Having exercised a leading role in the German church struggle of the 1930s, Barth would later regret that insufficient attention had been paid at that time to the persecution of Jews. Bonhoeffer was one of the few who recognised this. Towards the end of his career, Barth offered explicit support for the state of Israel, even defending its expansion following the 1967 war. He denounced, furthermore, Christian mission to Jews on the grounds that the latter already belonged to the people of God and were not in need of conversion.(8)

5.4.4 It is difficult to discern anything resembling a theological consensus on Israel in modern theology. More comfortable perhaps with historical and exegetical issues, theologians and ecumenical working parties have steered clear of politically sensitive issues relating to the land of Israel.(9) But something like the following argument can be found in several writers from different traditions.(10) If Barth's rhetoric cannot be repeated, at least his anti-supersessionism represents a major advance in Christian appraisals of Judaism. It locates Jews within the people of God and dismisses notions that their election has been abrogated.(11) Where Barth's theology is inadequate is in its tendency to perceive Judaism merely as the negative counterpoint to Christianity. The continued existence of Judaism beyond the canonical period testifies to divine grace in ways that are positive, salutary and capable of contributing constructively to the theological and ethical self-understanding of the church. This is reinforced by a keener, post-Holocaust awareness of the insidious, widespread and sometimes subtle nature of anti-Semitism, particularly in western societies. The history of Christian theology is not beyond reproach in this respect. Today the proper mode of engagement is therefore dialogue rather than proselytising or unilateral characterisation in ways that distort Jewish identity.

5.5 *The Promise of the Land*

5.5.1 In learning to listen to Jewish voices, moreover, the possibility emerges that the founding of the modern state of Israel can be discerned as a legitimate and significant expression of Judaism in the post-war era.(12) Enabling Jews to construct their own identity and culture in new ways, it prevents the imposition of negative images and stereotypes by host societies which at best concede toleration. So it is typically claimed that in the "*search for an authentic Jewish identity, the State of Israel is central.*"(13) The Christian

theological contribution to this issue is a modest though not insignificant one. It resides in the acknowledgement that for the Christian Scriptures the return of Jews to the land of Israel at this time and in this form is neither necessary nor forbidden. As Moltmann puts it, "*Still the promise of land remains. Christians have no right to deny it, and they must certainly not become champions of its fulfilment in the present State of Israel. The business of the promise of land and the State of Israel is first the matter of the Jews.*"(14) The centrality of the land to divine promise in the Old Testament is here unequivocal, although biblical scholarship must point to the different historical settings of the Old Testament passages which prevent any clear, simple and divinely authorised mandate for the delineation of Israel's borders in the twenty-first century.(15)

5.5.2 Although this specific theme is muted in New Testament descriptions, and is not central to subsequent Christian identity, the continued identity of Israel as the people of God implies that the land can legitimately persist as a focus of aspiration for diaspora Judaism. Whether and in what form a return to the land is theologically legitimate is initially a decision for Jews, although other inhabitants of the land cannot be denied an equal voice. Christians can regard this Jewish decision as appropriate and supportable since it is neither required nor excluded according to their own Scriptures and theological self-understanding. Nonetheless, since this decision is not without effect for other peoples, who also live under God's providence, it is one which is subject to those ethical norms acknowledged by Jews and Christians alike, and embodied in their scriptural traditions. Theological support for the policies of the modern state of Israel, as for every political regime, can never be unqualified or uncritical. One must add in this context that theological justifications for the modern state of Israel can sometimes lead to "spiritualised" distortions which ignore the political realities of the land. Thus the myth of "a people without land" being providentially matched to "a land without people" ignores the claims of settled communities who occupied the land for many centuries.

5.6 The Church and the State of Israel

5.6.1 From Vatican II onwards, one can detect a gradual evolution of Roman Catholic theological attitudes to Judaism. *Nostra Aetate* (1965) sets the discussion in relation to other non-Christian religions, while making clear the historically particular nature of the church's links to Judaism. In a manner not dissimilar to that of Barth, it overturns earlier supersessionist trends by maintaining that God's covenant with the Jews has not been revoked, and it importantly repudiates any suggestion of collective Jewish responsibility for the death of Christ. The Second Vatican Council, however, in face of strong opposition from Middle Eastern Christian groups, made no reference to the state of Israel. Instead, there is a tendency to separate religious and theological issues from matters which are regarded as "merely political". This has been the cause of repeated complaints from Jewish groups who argue that their religious identity is inextricably tied to aspirations for the homeland.(16)

5.6.2 Since the 1960s, in receiving Israeli ministers and recognising the importance of security issues, the Vatican has tended to treat Israel as a legitimate sovereign state. This initially stopped short of full formal recognition, partly as a result of a commitment to Palestinian self-determination and the desire to maintain the Christian-Muslim dialogue. Since the 1980s, there has emerged a consistent Catholic commitment to two states, Israel and a Palestinian homeland. John Paul II insisted in 1988 that Palestinians and Israelis "*have an identical fundamental right to their own homeland in which they could live in liberty, dignity and security, in harmony with neighbouring people.*"(17) Following the Oslo Accords, the Vatican signed an agreement with Israel in 1993 which finally granted full formal recognition of the state of Israel. This was balanced the following year by the establishing of formal links with the PLO. With the receding of hopes for peace, the Vatican has since engaged in increasingly explicit criticism of Israeli policy calling *inter alia* for implementation of UN resolutions. In his March 2000 pilgrimage to Bethlehem, the Pope spoke of the sufferings of the Palestinians, affirmed their "natural right" to a homeland, their loss of economic and cultural development, and their lack of "*a home of their own, their proper place in society and the possibility of a normal working life.*"(18)

5.6.3 A similar stance can be perceived in WCC pronouncements and policies. Much Christian-Jewish dialogue has been initiated by member churches. This tends to repudiate earlier supersessionist patterns of thought by perceiving Jews and Christians as belonging to the people of God in the world. Thus a partnership is sought which tends to replace early strategies of mission and conversion. However, in recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to the plight of Palestinian peoples. Arab Christians have been allowed their own voice while the WCC has pronounced in terms highly critical of Israeli policy. While reiterating the principle of two parallel states sharing the land, successive statements have condemned illegal settlements, infringement of Palestinian rights, and harassment of Palestinian institutions providing essential human services, particularly in East Jerusalem.(19)

5.6.4 However, these criticisms tends to be couched in the language of international law and human rights, rather than in explicitly Jewish-Christian discourse of covenant, land and promise. While understandable, this approach has the disadvantage of vacating theological space which in turn is largely occupied by dispensationalist theologies, often American in origin. These require an informed response.

5.7 *Dispensationalism and Eschatology*

5.7.1 Modern dispensationalism or pre-millennialism has its origins in the work of J.N. Darby (1800-1882), leader of the Plymouth Brethren. He offered a futurist reading of a series of Scriptural passages, particularly from Daniel and the Apocalypse, in which believers would be raptured from earth to heaven before a time of tribulation and cleansing of the earth in preparation for the thousand-year reign of Christ. In relation to Israel, it is argued that prophecies will be fulfilled before and during this millennium. Darby's dispensationalism was exported to the USA in the second half of the 19th century. It flourished within organised Christianity and not merely within the separationist groups favoured by Darby.

5.7.2 Dispensationalist theology has prospered in the USA during the twentieth century, in part through the successive editions of the popular Scofield Bible in 1909 and 1917.(20) Its tenets are now widely held and firmly established in Baptist and independent churches. Although the eschatological expectations of this movement are not tied to contemporary events or specific dates, the popular success of books such as Hal Lindsey's "The Late Great Planet Earth" have led many Christians to interpret the foundation of the modern state of Israel and its subsequent struggles as fulfilment of biblical prophecy. Similar theological views clearly inform the political vision of Christian leaders such as Jerry Falwell. The return of Jews to the land of Israel is a fulfilment of biblical prophecy and foreshadows the end of the time of the Gentiles. It will be followed by the final events of world redemption including war, devastation, pre-tribulation rapture and the thousand-year reign of Christ. In faithfulness to this Scriptural vision, support for the modern state of Israel is demanded. This entails *inter alia* support for settlements in the occupied territories, the rebuilding of the temple, the military security of Israel, and the assimilation of refugees into Arab countries. There is no support for Christian holy places - Jerusalem belongs to the Jews alone - while Catholic and Orthodox Christians are largely to be regarded as apostate. Islam is perceived as an evil, satanic religion.(21)

5.7.3 This dispensationalist approach to Scripture clearly has significant outcomes for a theology of the land of Israel. Its annexation by right-wing American fundamentalist politics, moreover, makes it a potent ingredient in contemporary world affairs. One should beware that it takes a variety of forms with regard to the rapture, our ability to decipher the fulfilment of prophecy in current world affairs, and the return of Jesus in relation to the millennium. Yet several criticisms of its approach can be made. Its use of Scripture ignores the historical context of key passages and the intention of their writers. Positioned on the margins of the canon, apocalyptic literature, especially as we find it in the Book of Revelation, draws upon a wide range of Jewish and secular images to describe in highly symbolic language aspects of Jewish and Christian hope.(22) These include the vindication of the faithful, the defeat of evil, the revelation of Christ to the entire world, and the final fulfilment of God's redemptive purposes. Replete with Old Testament imagery such visions incorporate both Israel and the church, but we misread them if we perceive them as coded

information about the precise course of world affairs. When assimilated into a Christian understanding, these apocalyptic visions bear witness to a future hope which is based upon the faith that God's purposes have already been decisively enacted in Christ. Moreover, it is a further insight of apocalyptic literature that the new age comes only through the action of God at the end of time. Thus to depict current secular events as relentlessly unfolding, in fulfilment of prophecy, to their final crisis is to misrepresent the discontinuity between this world and the next. Scripture does not furnish us with a detailed calendar of events preceding the *eschaton*; we fail to understand the proper intention of eschatological and apocalyptic literature when we seek to do this. This interpretive failure can have bizarre and dangerous consequences when Christians attempt to manipulate political events in the hope of finding there circumstances which will usher in the return of Christ, the rapture of his people and the millennium. Sight is lost of the symbolic nature of much of this language, together with the view of the New Testament writers that the promises of the Old had already found their fulfilment in Jesus.(23)

5.8 Arab Christian Voices

5.8.1 A group often marginalised and divided denominationally, Arab Christians have not commanded the theological attention they deserve. As a small minority in the land, they find themselves in some respects positioned between Jewish and Muslim poles. Since its inception in 1974, the Middle East Council of Churches has enabled Palestinian Christian voices to be more clearly heard. Although there is no single, unitary Palestinian theology, several concerns are widely shared. These include criticism of states which in privileging one religious grouping threaten the equality of citizens with different faith commitments. This critique applies to western countries in which Christianity is established, to Muslim states, and also to modern Israel. Arab Christians often perceive western support for Israel to reflect an outmoded theology of the state which is inappropriate to a religiously pluralist society. Furthermore, in an effort to assuage their guilt for the Holocaust and its roots in European anti-semitic traditions, western churches are often suspected of being unwitting accessories to a further crime, *viz.* the displacement of over a million Palestinians from their homeland.

5.8.2 The plight of Palestinians Christians has made a positive reception of the Old Testament problematic. References to Israel, the Promised Land and the conquest of Canaan are too uncomfortably close to the threatening rhetoric of some modern forms of Zionism. While Jews have difficulties with some passages of the New Testament, so also Palestinian Christians are troubled by portions of the Old Testament. In an effort to overcome this without lapsing into a neo-Marcionism which simply rejects the authority of the Hebrew Bible, Palestinian theologians have offered a critical reading of the Old Testament.

5.8.3 In his theology of liberation, Naim Ateek, Canon of St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, argues that the most authentic strand of Hebrew religion is to be found in its universalist prophetic traditions. The message of the prophets provides standards of justice by which all nations and peoples are to be measured. This surpasses an earlier tradition of Judaism by which it was primarily a tribal religion privileging one particular ethnic group. The future of Judaism is not so much as a nation, but as a global religion abiding by and proclaiming its universal moral standards for all peoples and nations. These standards are binding upon modern Israel which should regulate its life according to international law and with reference to the concerns of other groups and religions. Significantly, Ateek perceived the return from exile in Babylon in very different terms from the depiction of the conquest in Joshua and Judges. Here, for example in Ezekiel 47, a peaceful homecoming and a recognition of the need to live alongside other peoples is attested.(24) The teaching of Jesus, moreover, is perceived by Ateek to extend this universal moral strand within Judaism. Proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus was able to transcend narrower national traditions of temple and land. In this respect, some of Ateek's writings seem to move in a supersessionist direction, perhaps in reaction to concerns over Christian dispensationalist readings of Old Testament prophecies and promises.(25)

5.8.4 Tackling the same issues, Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem, argues also for peaceful cohabitation. The promise of land in the Hebrew Scriptures is acknowledged but this is qualified by recognition of two points. The borders of Israel are imprecise, being described very differently in a variety of historical contexts. Second, there is a deep scepticism about political states through the Old Testament. We see this in the history of Israel and in ambivalent attitudes towards the institution of kingship. Although this is conceded by God to Israel, it is done with acknowledgement of its limits and dangers. Moreover, with the hope of a time of peace and order for all the nations it is recognised that there cannot be peace for Israel at the expense of peace for others.(26) Regrettably many Western Christian voices have ignored the plight of Palestinian refugees from communities with deep historical roots in the Holy Land. This has led to an untenable separation of dogmatics from ethics.(27) Instead, there needs to be a recognition that the Land is the home under God's providence of two peoples (and three religions). Their task is to find a way of living together in mutual acceptance and understanding. *"The Land happens to be the homeland of two peoples. Each of them should understand this land to be a gift of God to be shared with the other. Peace and the blessing on the land and on the two peoples will depend on this sharing. Only then will the biblical promises be fulfilled."*(28)

6. Continuing Issues

Our attempt to identify one coherent theology of land and covenant in terms of Israel-Palestine today points to an evolving mosaic made up of a number of colours and textures which raise continuing questions on certain important issues.

6.1 The Witness of the Bible

There are clearly issues in the church's understanding and use of the Bible which need to be clarified if we seek to ask what the church has to say theologically about the situation in Israel/ Palestine today.

6.1.1 Within the Bible there is a rich diversity of material, not one theology or theological position. To take but two issues relevant to our discussions:

- What was the "Land" promised to God's people in terms of the covenant? There is no agreement in the Bible as to its geographical boundaries. Is it "the land of Canaan"? But that can have several meanings. Or is it Solomon's Empire, which stretched from the Euphrates to the borders of Egypt (1 Kings 4.21)? Even the description "from Dan to Beersheba", from northern Galilee to southern Judah would exclude territory now claimed to be part of modern Israel.
- What was to be the attitude towards the peoples who lived in the land before it became for the Hebrews the Promised Land? The Genesis narratives depict both Abraham and Isaac in friendly relationships with the indigenous people in the coastal plain. They made covenants with them (Gen: 21.32-34; 26.28-31). But Deuteronomy insists that God commanded his people to make no covenant with such people. They must be utterly destroyed, and shown no mercy (Deut.7.2). What is to be our response to such diverse views in Scripture?

6.1.2 It is not only diversity within Scripture, however, that we must take into account, but the extent to which any interpretation of Scripture is influenced by the context in which we live and think. This is not a new issue; it is clearly there in the Bible itself.

6.1.3 For example, the prophet Hosea declares in God's name: *"When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son."* (11:1) Hosea is recalling events at least four hundred years before his time - God's deliverance of his people out of slavery in Egypt. The "son" referred to in the second line is Israel, God's chosen people. Matthew, however, in 2.15 takes the words to refer to the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus down to Egypt to escape the clutches of Herod; and so from Egypt called his "son" - Jesus. This makes sense only in the context from which Matthew is speaking, namely his knowledge of the life of Jesus. From this he goes back to the Hebrew scriptures and reads them in a new light. This is true of the New

Testament as a whole. It does not work from the Hebrew Scriptures to Jesus; it works back from Jesus to the Hebrew scriptures and finds there new meanings.

6.1.4 It was not, therefore, surprising to discover that material in the Hebrew Bible was handled by a Lutheran Pastor in Bethlehem differently from a Jewish Rabbi in a settlement not far from Bethlehem. The difference lay not simply in the fact that one was a Christian and the other a Jew. Their respective life experiences were different, as was the present context from which they spoke. The Bible has different things to say to the one who was sharing with his people the experience of occupation and the severe restrictions placed on their lives; and to the other who was able freely to travel into Jerusalem along roads out of bounds to Palestinians, and who believed that he lived in the land promised by God to the Jewish people - with Jerusalem as its political capital and that one day its spiritual centre would be in the rebuilt Jerusalem temple. It was the sense of powerlessness, frustration, anger and despair lying behind the Petition which, though couched in a form unacceptable to the General Assembly, questioned the way in which the Bible had been used by the powerful to justify actions that Palestinians believed to be tantamount to ethnic cleansing.

6.1.5 It is always easy to see the context which other people bring to their interpretation of Scripture, what is far more difficult is to recognise the context within which we speak, and how it influences our interpretation. That is why it is important to listen to those whose understanding of the Biblical witness comes to us out of contexts very different from our own, not least the voices of fellow Christians in Israel/Palestine.

6.2 Israel - the Nation State

6.2.1 What then is to be a Christian theological response to the fact of the State of Israel? Before it came into being in 1948, there was discussion in Jewish circles as to what it should be called. When the name "Israel" was chosen a senior Israeli civil servant commented:

"There could have been no more effective introduction of our new State to the world. "Israel" on its visiting card was as eloquent as could be ... It made obvious to the world not only who we were, but what we had always been, and that if the State of Israel as such was a newcomer on the international scene, it was in fact the natural outward form in modern times of a mystery and a people whose roots went back to the earliest ages of man" (quoted in Martin Gilbert "Israel: a History" p.188). In other words the very name "Israel" is making a theological claim, that the State of Israel is the modern counterpart of Ancient Israel in the Biblical tradition.

6.2.2 There is no doubt that across the centuries Judaism, in its scriptural foundations, its history and in its liturgies, has consistently kept alive the hope of a return to the Promised Land. "Israel" in the Hebrew Bible, however, has a wide range of meanings, from a personal name (Jacob/Israel) to the covenant people of God. But it is also the name of the politically independent northern kingdom of Israel, as opposed to the southern kingdom of Judah, after the division of the United Kingdom of David and Solomon. As such it was an important player in the politics of the Ancient Near East, but was regarded by religious loyalists in Judah as an apostate kingdom. It disappeared from history when it fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. To Biblical writers this was Israel in a political, not in a religious sense.

6.2.3 The State of Israel today, like any other nation state recognised by the United Nations, is subject to U.N. resolutions and international law. It has by no means been alone among the nations in refusing to implement U.N. resolutions which conflict with what is believed to be national self-interest. Let us take but one example. At the end of the Six Day War in 1967, U.N. Resolution 242 called for Israel to withdraw from "territories occupied during the war"; and called for a lasting peace in the Middle East based on "the acknowledgement of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of every state in the area, and their right to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries, free from threats and acts of violence". Israel argued on security grounds for non-withdrawal from "territories" as long as the surrounding Arab countries refused to recognise Israel's right to exist as a nation state. Since 1967,

however, Israel has pursued a policy of establishing Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention which prohibits the establishment of civilian settlements in occupied territory. Again, the appeal to national security has been used to justify this. There has often been added, however, the theological argument, accepted in certain Christian circles, that the West Bank is the Biblical Judaea and Samaria, belonging to Israel by right as the Land promised by God to his people.

6.2.4 In this case, U.N. resolutions and internationally agreed Conventions are regarded as irrelevant in the light of this higher divinely given right, no matter how detrimental this may be to the rights of the Palestinian people. This is a dangerous principle, which may equally be used to justify suicide bombers who claim to be acting fortified by the promises of Allah. Moreover it seems to fly in the face of important elements in the biblical tradition. The opening section of the book of the prophet Amos depicts inevitable judgement coming on the nations surrounding Israel for their violation of accepted international customary law and human rights - atrocities against civilian populations in time of war, ethnic cleansing, regarding treaties as scraps of paper, brutality against women. For Amos, however, such acts raise a basic theological issue, since the God in whose name he speaks, is the creator of the whole world and the sovereign Lord of all nations. Amos, far from accepting that God's people are exempt from such judgement, argues that just because they are God's people they have a greater responsibility, and will be the more inevitably called to account for what they do (Amos 3.1-2).

6.3 *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*

6.3.1 As Christians we must be sensitive and accept that we have no right to dictate to Jews how they ought to respond to their traditions; whether, for example, they should be Zionists or non-Zionists, religious or secular. Such issues are rightly part of a lively inner Jewish debate. Judaism has its own integrity, distinctive practices and theological traditions. Central to many of these are convictions about the land of Israel, which must be recognised and respected in accordance with the Bible. There are, however, certain comments that are appropriate.

6.3.2 As Christians we must always acknowledge and rejoice in our debt to the Jewish people. We are both part of one religious family. Christianity emerged from the womb of the Jewish people. We share with them the Hebrew Scriptures. Much of the New Testament is not understandable except in the light of what we call the Old Testament, and that Old Testament is still part of the Word of God for us. It follows, therefore, that we must do everything in our power to oppose anti-semitism in any form. This is all the more important today since there is evidence of a new emerging and growing anti-semitism, not least in Europe - and this at a time when there is an increasing tendency to demonise people of other faiths and cultures. The horror of the holocaust should remind us where xenophobia and anti-semitism can lead.

6.3.3 It is in the interests of the Jewish community, and consistent with some of the theological questions we have been exploring, to recognise that criticism of certain actions of the State of Israel must not be taken as an inevitable sign of anti-semitism. If this state is to be regarded as the modern counterpart of ancient Israel then it must be judged in the light of the response expected from God's covenant people, a response which has, at its heart, an irreplaceable ethical demand. That is why not only Christians, but an increasing number of Jews, both within Israel and in the Diaspora, are raising serious questions about what is being done in their name by the State of Israel, questions which focus upon respect for Palestinian human rights and the need for the recognition of a viable Palestinian state existing side-by-side with Israel.

7. Postscript

This Report has flagged up certain disagreements within the Study Group on the interpretation of biblical material, in both Old and New Testaments. This is but a reflection of what is true in the church at large. We benefited greatly, however, by journeying together, listening to one another, learning to respect our differences as well as identifying our agreements. It is very important that in any theological response we seek to make to the present situation in Israel/Palestine, we should begin by listening: listening to Jews,

Jewish Christians, Arab Christians and Muslims, as well as to the differing voices within our own Church. Unless we do this we may settle for simplistic answers instead of being enriched by new insights through continuing questions that need to be faced.

Notes

1. For a significant discussion of Jewish Christian relations see the Report of the Leuenberg Working Party, Church and Israel (1996-2000).
2. Most recently the joint report of the Board of World Mission and the Church and Nation Committee to the General Assembly 2002.
3. The Interpretation of Scripture (1998) 11/39.
4. Cf Larry Rasmussen, Earth Community: Earth Ethics (New York: Orbis, 1996).
5. Eg George Lindbeck, "The Church", Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi, Geoffrey Wainwright (ed.), (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 179-208.
6. Suggestions that the promise of land to Israel are now invalid tend conversely towards some form of replacement theology, e.g. Colin Chapman, "Ten Questions for a Theology of the Land", The Land of Promise, Philip Johnston and Peter Walker (eds.), (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 172-187.
7. For example, Church Dogmatics II/2.
8. This is documented in Katherine Sonderegger, That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew: Karl Barth's "Doctrine of Israel" (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). See also Eberhard Busch, "The Covenant of Grace Fulfilled in Christ as the Foundation of the Indissoluble Solidarity of the Church with Israel: Barth's Position on the Jews During the Hitler Era", Scottish Journal of Theology, 52, (1999), 476-503.
9. The recent Leuenberg report offers an excellent discussion of the theology of Israel and Jewish-Christian relations. It has almost nothing to say about the land of Israel.
10. Eg Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit (London: SCM, 1977), 133-150; On Human Dignity (London: SCM, 1984), 189-217. Eugene March, Israel and the Politics of Land: A Theological Case Study (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).
11. Eg Bruce Marshall, "Christ and the cultures: The Jewish people and Christian theology," Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine, C. E. Gunton (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 81-100.
12. Failure to deal with the political state of Israel by focussing on religious and theological aspects of Judaism is itself a distortion. This is a frequent complaint of Jewish commentators, particularly against western Christian studies of "church and Israel".
13. Emil L. Fackenheim, "Post-Holocaust Anti-Jewishness, Jewish Identity and the Centrality of Israel," World Jewry and the State of Israel, Moshe Davis (ed.), (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 29.
14. Moltmann, On Human Dignity, 214.
15. This point is well argued by Eugene March, *op. cit.*
16. This is documented in Anthony Kenny, Catholics, Jews and the State of Israel (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 43ff.
17. Cited in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether, The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, 2nd edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 166.
18. *Ibid.* 169.
19. Eg Statement to the Fifth Special Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 10 October, 2000, www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/press/00/34pu.html.
20. A revised Scofield Bible was published in 1967 and continues to sell.
21. This is documented in Merrill Simon, Jerry Falwell and the Jews (New York: Jonathan David, 1984) and Rosemary Radford Ruether & Herman J. Ruether, The Wrath of Jonah, *op. cit.*, 174-182.
22. This is explored in the recent study of Craig C. Hill, In God's Time: The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Hill notes the ways in which the dividing lines between prophetic and apocalyptic literature are blurred in Scripture. He also argues that much dispensationalist writing is driven

by a commitment to Scriptural inerrancy with its assumption that texts from different writers and periods belong to a single script foretelling the future.

23. This is argued, for example, by Hans Schwarz, Eschatology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 309-336. In his criticisms of Hal Lindsey, Daniel Migliore points ironically to the latent anti-semitism in much of this literature. Cf. Faith Seeking Understanding (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 235-6.

24. Naim Ateek, "Biblical Perspectives on the Land", Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices, Naim Ateek, Marc H Ellis, Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds.), (New York: Orbis, 1992), 108-118.

25. "*So in the light of their universal fulfilment in Christ, the narrow Old Testament promises regarding the land have acquired a new meaning. They are now seen to be transitory and provisional in their intention. They are time-bound, and because of their completion in Christ, have become theologically obsolete.*" "Zionism and the land: a Palestinian Christian perspective", The Land of Promise, Philip Johnston & Peter Walker (eds.), (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 211.

26. Mitri Raheb, I am a Palestinian Christian (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 78.

27. *Ibid.* 79.

28. *Ibid.* 80.

Additional Recommended Reading:

- The Jewish State, Theodore Hertzl (H Pordes, London, 1972)
- Israelis and the Jewish Tradition, David Hartman (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2000)
- The Bible and the Land: an Encounter, Lisa Loden, Peter Walker and Michael Wood (eds.) (Musalaha, Jerusalem, 2000)
- Dying in the Land of Promise: Palestine and Palestinian Christianity from Pentecost to 2000, Donald E Wagner (Melisende, 2003)

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