

THE PROMISED LAND

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An area of religious conflict, perhaps the area of conflict par excellence, is the notion of the promised land. An interreligious dialogue cannot, therefore, disregard this topic and the first step towards a better understanding seems to be a clear statement of authentic belief from the various sides. With this object in mind we will examine in the following the Biblical and rabbinical notion of the promised land, the attitude towards non-Jewish interpretations, conditionality of the promise and grace, and finally, the meaning of the idea of promise for humanity.

Let us first make a point on the terminology. Biblical thought describes the title following from the notion of the promised land as *morashah* (Ex. 6:8), the same term describing also the title of the people over Torah (Deut. 33:4). Other terms are *nahalah* (Deut. 4:38), *yerushah* (Deut. 2:12), and the good thing which God has spoken (Jos. 21:41-43). From the beginning there exists a need to establish the right of the people of Israel, both vis-à-vis other nations occupying the land and vis-à-vis God himself. The corresponding term in Greek is *ἐπαγγελία* (Heb. 11:9; Acts 7:5).

The common meaning in the various terms is the categorical and unlimited character of the promise. The land is not only a possession of the people of Israel but a heritage. True, towards God there is no ownership of land as of anything else: (Lev. 25:23). He is the owner and man only the tenant and trustee, but vis-à-

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vis other nations the status of Israel is one of ownership and his by virtue of the divine promise.

A second point must be made concerning hermeneutics. Reading the Bible is, indeed, a subjective affair and the most we can do is to represent an authentic system of ideas without imposing it upon others. However, the holders of different views on the notion of the promised land, as well as on any other theological subject, should agree on the following methods of interpretation:

The basis of any understanding is the simple meaning of the words, as the rabbis proclaimed: The text does not allow total disregard of the simple sense (Babl. Tal. Yevamot 11b). Any additional interpretation must keep in mind this method, and not exclude its legitimacy.

On the other hand, there is never a simple meaning only; rather should the text be seen like a rock broken into many pieces by the hammer (cf. Jer. 23:29). Both concrete and abstract historical and spiritual interpretations may be found in the same text without excluding each other. Moreover, the additional sense of a text may come up only at a later stage and may have been unknown at the time the text was first spoken or written. This idea underlies the story of Moses visiting the academy of Rabbi Akiba and being unable to understand the Torah as interpreted by the latter (Babl. Tal. Menahot 29b). A spiritualized interpretation of a concrete text, by Jews after the destruction or by the Christians after their own experience, is therefore admissible. In the same way, however, the establishment of the modern State of Israel is an occasion for attempting a new understanding of the Bible.

There is only one condition for this pluralism of exegesis: Any new interpretation should be offered as an additional meaning but never instead of the original, simple one. The same hermeneutic rule should be applied in the theological discussion: there is justification for a new Christian understanding of the Bible, if it does not exclude the Jewish one.

Having said so much by way of introduction, we come now to the question whether the promise of the land was linked to a condition. Indeed, the promise of the land in the covenant of Sinai was conditional, so that Israel would lose the right over the land if she did not fulfil the commandments. However, the promise of the land is also part of the covenant between God and Abraham, and there it is unconditional. Even in case Israel had broken her part of the covenant, she still may rely on the merit of the fathers, i.e. in our context, on the unconditional promise to

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As expressed in Lev. 26:44-45, God declares: "Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with their forefathers whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt . . ."

Hosea 2:20 promises the establishment of a new covenant with the nation after it

will have been allowed by God himself to a change of heart. In Is. 7:3 the name of the prophet's son "The Rest will Return" is another promise for the future of unconditional effect.

The idea of divine grace at the end of days is especially proclaimed by Ezekiel. In Ez. 28:25 the promise is given that "they shall dwell in their own land which I gave to my servant Jacob." God speaks of the land: "I will let men walk upon you, my people Israel, and they shall possess you and you shall be their inheritance," (Ez. 36:12).

After the return from the Babylonian exile the prophet proclaimed the divine promise for the future: "Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever . . . I am the Lord; in its time I will hasten it" (Is. 60:21-22). This is understood by the rabbis as a reference to a possible redemption at the fixed time, even without prior repentance. At that stage "the Lord will inherit Judah as His portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem" (Zech. 2:16).

From the Jewish perspective the verses declare that God might punish the people for breach of the covenant, but he would not reject them nor revoke the promise. Even where the rights arising under the covenant were withheld by God, the people had at any minute the option to return to their former favoured status.

Just as Toynbee described the similar development of the various civilizations, the history of Israel should be understood as a cycle or rather as a spiralling movement towards the divine end of days. Therefore it consists of exile following redemption and vice versa, of repentance following sin and vice versa, and in general of divine as well as of human overtures.

The misunderstanding of this process led Christian theology to assume that the Jewish people had been rejected and that the Christians were "Verus Israel". It would have been legitimate to find a reference from the Bible to the nations of the world so as to let them participate in the vocation of God's people. However, once this was done in a way towards replacing the "Israel according to the flesh" it was doomed to failure.

Likewise, the attempt at spiritualization made by Christian exegesis would have been legitimate, were it not made with a claim to exclusive ownership of the truth. Judaism, too, spiritualized the laws of the Temple and of sacrifice, but it did not exclude the original and simple meaning. Christian spiritualization of the promises could represent a great truth, if limited to the belief of the nations; by imposing it upon the history and reality of Judaism it proves false. Fortunately, a number of modern theologians, such as J. Maritain, W.F. Albright, R. Niebuhr, H. Berkhof, A.R. Eckhardt and F.W. Marquardt have recently developed a more balanced view to make Jewish and Christian promises co-existent.

The tragedy of Moslem-Jewish relations lies in exactly the same claim made by the Arabs that they are the true descendents of Abraham, that they have inherited his rights (but see Sura 17 verse 104) and that the biblical promises to the Jews are a forgery. By trying to replace the people of Israel, Islam has lost the otherwise laudable claim of sharing in the truth of the Bible. There can be no spiritual succession through the murder of the biological heir (cf. I Kings 21:19).

But let us come back to the notion of the unconditional promise and its meaning at present. We may justify the Jewish people in spite of their unrepentant situation by reference to a couple of ideas.

First, the Jewish people are engaged in the service of God, even if they are to a large extent unconscious of this service. Just as Cyrus was a tool in the divine salvation history (Is. 45:4-5), Israel, according to Ezekiel, fulfilled a corresponding role for the sake of mankind: "It is not for your sake, O House of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations" (Ez. 36:22).

Indeed, Israel is called to provide the framework for the service of the whole world to God (I Kings 8:41-43; Is. 56:7, 66:21). This action on behalf and as "the first-born" of mankind gives Israel a special status beyond that corresponding with her merits. The other expectation justifying the privilege of the Jewish people is the eventual centre of world peace which is going to come about through their participation (Is. 2:1-4; 19:23-24). Thus the election of the people (Ex. 4:22; 19:5-6), as well as that of the land (Deut. 11:12) is but a means for all mankind.

Secondly, the merit of Israel and her position before divine justice seems to be based on vicarious suffering and achievement. Just as Abraham prayed for the whole city of Sodom by virtue of her righteous (Gen. 18; Babl. Tal. Yoma 38b), the people of Israel may exist by the merit of a pious minority, by the merit of the fathers (Ex. 32:13; Deut. 4:37) or by virtue of her long suffering in the past, culminating in the holocaust (cf. Is. 40:1-2).

Thirdly, only God the Creator of the world could declare the right of the Jewish people to the land (Deut. 32:8). The idea of the promised land is, therefore, an affirmation of the faith in divine creation of the world. By respecting the divine covenant with Israel everybody can perform an act of faith vis-à-vis the Creator and Ruler of the universe.

Finally, the question must be raised whether the notion of the promised land can be conciliated with the idea of peace and how this idea went together with a humane attitude towards all men.

Indeed, the war of conquest, as described in the Book of Joshua, is neither the only nor the ideal way of realizing the promise. Abraham, Jacob and David are shown to have gained title of purchase (Gen. 23:4, 16; 33:19-20, I Chron. 21:24; cf.

Rabba 79:7). Thus, if possible, the people of Israel should enter into their rights by consent rather than by the force of arms, even if it meant divine intervention on their behalf.

Likewise, Moses has been shown even disregarding an express command in order to make peace. Although he had been ordered by God to wage war against Sihon and the Amorites, he did not do so, but called on them for peace (Deut. 2:26). This example of moral resistance was accepted by God and made the law for the future (Deut. 20:10).

The rabbis, accordingly, preferred the settlement by virtue of Cyrus' decree to that resulting from the conquest at the time of Joshua. The latter was effective only as long as the political power of Israel extended over the land but not after the exile. The sanctity of the land following the return from the Babylonian exile, on the other hand, was of an everlasting effect, since it was not based on force of arms (cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:4).

Furthermore, the ownership of the land imposes a sacred trust on the people of Israel to relate humanely towards strangers and minorities (cf. Lev. 19:33; Deut. 23:16-17; Ez. 47:21-22). Again the promised land is not an end in itself but a means to fulfil the divine will and to care for others, as declared as well by Maimonides (*Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:4): "Sages and prophets did not long for the Messianic era to rule over the world, to control the nations, to be elevated by them, or to eat, drink and enjoy. Rather they longed for that time so as to become free for Torah and Wisdom."

The notion of the promised land, therefore, is first of all an important element of the history of Israel and a point of orientation as to the direction it is taking. The special challenge, however, to the Jewish people lies in the need to conciliate this idea with the equally important demands of humanity. Secondly, the notion of the promised land transcends the sphere of Judaism and provides an equal challenge to the other monotheistic religions. Eventually, it will bring about a rapprochement by allowing for the co-existence of different forms of biblical religion. To use Lessing's parable in *Nathan*, the three rings can indeed become true, if and insofar as they do not deny the truth of each other, but rather represent their common idea.