

# People and Land

by Martin Stöhr<sup>1</sup>

## I

The statement of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam in 1948 — the year of the founding of the State of Israel and the WCC — certainly is no longer valid in its unquestioned conviction concerning the Christian missionary task regarding the Jews. But it is valid in its rejection of any form of antisemitism and its confession of the guilt of Christian hatred toward Jews.

The Amsterdam statement formulated the task we must consider:

In the design of God, Israel has a unique position. It was Israel with whom God made His covenant by the call of Abraham. It was Israel to whom God revealed His name and gave His law. It was to Israel that He sent His prophets with their message of judgment and of grace. It was Israel to whom He promised the coming of His Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

The above belongs to the meaning of Israel for all the Christian world. Yet it has to be noted that in this list of God's gracious gifts, the Land is missing. In this same statement, issued shortly after the founding of the State of Israel, the WCC declared:

On the political aspects of the Palestine problem and the complex conflict of "rights" involved we do not undertake to express a judgment. Nevertheless, we appeal to the nations to deal with the problem not as one of expediency — political, strategic or economic — but as a moral and spiritual question that touches a nerve center of the world's religious life.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Adapted from an address given to the meeting of the World Council of Churches, Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, at Sigtuna, Sweden, October 30–November 4, 1988.
  2. Text in Helga Croner ed., *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations* (London and New York, 1977), pp. 69–73, quotation from p. 69.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 71, in the section entitled "The Emergence of Israel as a State."

I read these carefully formulated words as an invitation to start thinking about Israel and its land and the Christian evaluation of this problem — something that has not yet been done very intensively.

The Amsterdam statement speaks about the unsolved problems of Palestine and the surviving Jews: all victims are to get help. Behind this I see the UN resolution of November, 1947, which Israel accepted: the State is to provide shelter for human beings, but it is not an ideological or religious entity in spite of the fact that religious traditions are part of its reality. So far the two houses for the two people in the same land have not been secured.

It is inappropriate to think of the Land and State of Israel only in political, strategic or economic categories. The fact that the Jewish People has returned to its land poses a theological problem to the nations: the nations are called to acknowledge a theological dimension which becomes apparent in the history of the Jewish People and its connection to the Land.

## II

The WCC statement noted that the creation of the State of Israel “touches a nerve center of the world’s religious life.” This is no plea for a theocratic understanding of the State of Israel, nor for a pagan adoration of the earth, nor for any Jewish or Christian fundamentalism which attempts theologically to legitimize the State of Israel or its borders. But the State is not to be separated from the Jewish People — even if there are Jewish anti-Zionists and Jews who oppose the actual politics of the State. The Jewish People cannot be separated from the covenant, and the covenant has to do with the Land. The form and size of the State has varied: in the more than 3000 years of Jewish history there were only a few centuries when a Jewish state existed, and only a few years (under the rule of David) that a “Greater Israel” existed. But there always has been a Jewish presence in the Land.

The connection between the Jewish People and the Land is rooted in the experience of faith that God has chosen this people, and that this choice did not take place “in heavens or across the sea” (Deut. 30:11–14), but here on earth, in the midst of the problems of nations, in the midst of the problems of the Jewish people. Israel is not a better people than others — Israel was given the Land not **because** it kept the commandments, but **in order** to keep them:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession. (Deut. 7:5–7)

Israel is not the Kingdom of God. It lives on this earth, on a tiny part of this earth, and it lives to witness to the faith that God has not deserted the earth and to the hope that this earth will be renewed. The Land as well as the Torah are given to make life on earth possible.

All this takes place in human beings and within the structures in which human life is organized. This is not a question of angels, theocratic states or eternal kingdoms. The aim is to make known the commandments on earth, in society and among the nations:

“You will cross the Jordan to enter the land to live therein; therefore you shall obey to the commandments I lay before you today” (Deut. 11:31).

The Land is God’s gift or loan, given for life. The field of “realization and proof” (*Verwirklichung und Bewährung*), as Buber and Rosenzweig put it, is not the whole earth but a small part of it, a real land.<sup>4</sup> To fix its border lines with the Bible is a misuse of the Bible.

Many of the commandments (*mitzwoth*) deal with how to handle the Land and what is in it — human beings, natural resources, animals, plants etc. Therefore the sabbatical year was instituted to let the soil rest every seven years, debts were forgiven after fifty years, the first fruits were offered, the domination of a purely economic way of thinking and acting was done away with. God and the poor are the first to own what is produced, including, above all, the Land. This view is expressed in rabbinical wisdom which teaches that only in the Land of Israel can the Torah be kept. Rabbi Simlai once said:

Why did our teacher Moses want to come into the Land of Israel? To eat its fruits? To enjoy its goods? No, but Moses said: “Many commandments were given to Israel that can be done only in the Land of Israel. I want to enter the land to fulfill all of them.” (Sotah 14a)

God spoke to Abraham: “To your offspring I will give this land” (Gen. 12:7), and He said to Moses:

I will take you as my own people and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord. (Ex. 6:7–8)

The revelation of God cannot be separated from the history in which it takes place. The covenant and the promise of the Land, the exodus from Egypt and the Torah from Sinai, are part of this history.

If I welcome the Christian rediscovery of the Hebrew Bible and of the Hebrew background of the New Testament, then I must ask why we take the whole treasure of promises but exclude the promise of the Land. Is it because this promise belongs exclusively to the Jewish People? If so, we must respect it in our biblical theology.

Martin Buber, writing to Mahatma Gandhi, once explained the connection between the Jewish People and the Land:

You say that the call for a national home, which does not please you, is being sought in the Bible. This is not true. We do not open our Bible and look for legitimation there. It is rather the other way around: the promise of restoration, which has fed the longing of 100 generations, also moves those who do not believe in the message of the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

And part of this promise is those commandments that can be fulfilled only in the Land, in a free Jewish community. Buber then went on to explain that the Torah requires justice on earth.

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4. See Martin Buber, *Der Jude und sein Judentum* (Heidelberg, 1963), pp. 330ff.; Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung 2:3* (Heidelberg, 1954), pp. 153ff.

5. See the correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi in *Der Jude und sein Judentum* (Heidelberg, 1963), pp. 628–643.

It later was clear to Buber that the rights of the Jewish People included a state which can defend itself. And this he said as a member of the Israeli peace movement. Gandhi had asked him to suffer — it was the old demand that the Jews should play the role of the martyr. As a tiny and powerless minority, they had to defend themselves. Uri Avneri once defined Zionism by saying: “I want to survive as a Jew.”<sup>6</sup> But this self-defense must not be the final aim. In Buber’s words: “Israel loses itself if it replaces Palestine by another country, and it loses itself if it replaces Zion with Palestine.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus it becomes clear why the Zionist Buber offered theological and political reasons to maintain the connection of land and people, expressed in the term “Zion.” But he also saw the danger very clearly: the Land — not to speak of the State — must not be the final goal. For then the values of Zion, justice, peace, liberation for Israel and the nations, would be lost. This is, up to now, the main thought behind the Israeli peace movement: land has no absolute value, but its relative value is biblically rooted.

### III

There are three elements that are particularly important for Christians in this context:

1. To say that Israel is a state like any other state is to say only half of the truth. This state also includes the heritage of a faith that is the basis of the Christian faith. In the theological dimension of the Jewish People, God’s criticism leads to Jewish self-criticism: land must not be absolutized. When Israel craved to have a king like the other nations, God responded:

Hearken to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the deeds that they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt and to this day, in that they have forsaken me and served other gods, so they also do to you. (1 Sam. 8:7–8)

While we must not forget the criticism of the prophets, we also must keep in mind the basis of the State of Israel, since it combines the memory of God’s word and the prophets to yield religious and political commitment and criticism. Israel’s Declaration of Independence promises that the State

...will promote the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; will be based on the principles of liberty, justice and peace as conceived by the prophets of Israel; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of religion, race or sex; will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, education and culture; will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and will loyally uphold the principles of the United Nations Charter.

The rights of one side are bound to the rights of the other side — and this can function only if the both sides respect each other’s rights. In this the nations that are mentioned in the covenant of Abraham are reflected in a secular way.

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6. Verbally at a Middle East conference in Arnoldshain in 1979.

7. Martin Buber, *Israel und Palästina* (Zurich, 1950), p. 181.

2. If there is a faith that prohibits the identification of the penultimate with the ultimate, the relative with the absolute, it is the Jewish faith. Land and temple as well as state or Torah scrolls can be destroyed or betrayed, but God's faithfulness and choice stand firm. He always uses penultimate elements to cause His will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven." The same is true of a Jewish state: theologically the State is part of the penultimate. Therefore the 1980 statement of the Protestant Church of the Rheinland refers to "the insight that the existence of the Jewish People, the return to the Land of Promise, and also the creation of the State of Israel, are signs of the faithfulness of God toward His People."<sup>8</sup> It is not that facts of history or a state are made into confessions of faith, but they are relevant for faith — just as faith is relevant to how history is made.

If Christians take the Bible seriously, they can spiritualize or relativize neither what the Bible has to say in regard to Israel, nor the Jewish self-definition. This self-definition combines the hope for a return to the Land and the hope for a renewal of heaven and earth. What does this imply for us, given that a basic condition of dialogue is that we describe and witness to their faith in their own terms? The Vatican "Guidelines" describe dialogue in these words:

Dialogue presupposes that each side wishes to know the other, and wishes to increase and deepen its knowledge of the other. It constitutes a particularly suitable means of favoring a better mutual knowledge and, especially in the case of dialogue between Jews and Christians, of probing the riches of one's own tradition. Dialogue demands respect for the other as he is; above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions.<sup>9</sup>

If we Christians take part in God's covenant with Israel, is the connection between people and land part of our faith or part of our respect for Israel's faith?

3. Paul writes in Romans 9:4–5 that the Jewish People has "the sonship and the glory and the covenant[s] and the lawgiving and the worship and the promises and the patriarchs." After reflecting at length on why many Jews do not see the Messiah in Jesus, Paul warns the Christians against developing any feelings of superiority. The holiness of the Christian branches grafted into the tree depends on the holiness of the Jewish roots. In Romans 15:8, Paul says:

Jesus has become a servant of the circumcision on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs, so that the gentiles may glorify God for His mercy.

This is a clear rejection of any liberal or conservative statement that the Christian Church has replaced Israel as the People of God.

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8. Helga Croner ed., *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York, 1985), p. 207.

9. "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Consiliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (n. 4)," quoted from *Stepping Stones*, p. 12.

## IV

The Christian tradition has to be renewed, and especially the following points must be reconsidered:

1. Christians thought that they definitely understood God's judgment on Israel. For centuries Christians taught that where their history begins, the history of Israel comes to an end. One of the basic mistakes of this Christian assertion is that it neglects the distinction between punishment and rejection. Of course the biblical and later traditions of Judaism portray God as punishing Israel, but at the same time God's faithfulness is affirmed. Even the harsh words of Jeremiah 11 which speak of God's punishment and the fire that destroys the branches of the tree are rightly interpreted by rabbinic literature as signs of God's faithfulness till the end of time.<sup>10</sup>

All too often Christians founded their judgment of Israel in a materialistic way on the destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of the Land. They forgot the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt. 13:24–30), and that the nations will be judged in terms of what they “did to one of the least of these my brethren” (Mt. 25:40, 45). What Jews interpreted as punishment was seen by Christians — contrary to the biblical meaning — as God's final rejection.

2. Despite experiences of destruction and exile, Jewish thinking always has spoken of God's presence (*shekhinah*) joining the exile. The belief that God rules till the ends of the earth has its counterpart in the belief that God is at home in His Land.

The two centers of Jewish existence — land and exile — document the universality of God and the concrete earthliness of His choosing one people. In Jewish mysticism this thought sometimes is drawn so far as to say that God himself, His presence, His suffering in exile and waiting for salvation, and His salvation, is a universal event but bound to the Land.

The Christian tradition often has instrumentalized the Jewish People, stating that its suffering — caused by rejecting Jesus as messiah — only serves to make the beauty of Christianity shine the more brightly.<sup>11</sup>

3. The whole of Jewish history, be it under Christian or Islamic domination, repressed or tolerated, witnesses to the hope that the exile will come to an end and that Israel will return to its Land.

## V

It is not enough to understand the Jewish self-definition that God's promise is realized in people and land, in history on earth. Christians also have to ask themselves what criteria they use to select the biblical promises — when, for example, they want to claim the Exodus tradition or the messianic promises. But the Exodus is inseparably combined with the Land, and it does not help to say that the Exodus was a non-violent event while the conquest of the Land was

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10. See for example Menahot 53b.

11. Augustine, *De Vera Religione* 6:10.

a violent event and the Church is supposed to have overcome such violent thinking.

Already the early Church Fathers worked with a hermeneutics that was selective and unbiblical. They selected certain biblical texts and did not take others into account. What are the criteria for these decisions?

1. Obviously one criterion was a historical speculation in which Jesus was functionalized for the Church. He was made to function as a category that characterizes the new era as the time of the Church and the old era as the past time of Israel.

2. When the ongoing history of God (ongoing in the sense of continuity and geographical widening) is seen in a way that the starting point, the promise to Israel, is no longer valid, then this includes two mistaken conceptions:

a. It does not recognize the heated discussion of different Jewish groups. The New Testament debate on how the Messiah reaches all nations is an inner-Jewish debate. The authors of the New Testament were certain that the Kingdom of God is relevant for all nations, but they were equally certain that it definitely does not exclude Israel. But if Israel is excluded from the way to the Kingdom of God, this means that the Church has turned into a particularistic entity and has destroyed the universality of the biblical message.

b. It is impossible to conclude from the Bible that the judgment of Israel has already taken place. Against this we have to affirm that Jews as well as Christians are on the way: the word of God contains criticism as well as promise for both groups. Only Christians could claim that after the birth of Christ the judgment of Israel had not only been proclaimed, but fulfilled.

In 1933 Cardinal Faulhaber defended the Old Testament against the Nazi charge that it was a Jewish book. He represented mainstream thinking within all Christian families, saying:

We have to make a distinction between the people of Israel before the death of Christ and after the death of Christ.... Before the death of Christ ... the people of Israel had the revelation.... After the death of Christ, Israel was dismissed from serving the revelation.... They [the Jews] had rejected the anointed of God, had driven him out of the city and put him on the cross. At that time the curtain in the temple tore apart, and with it the covenant between the Lord and His people. The daughter of Zion got divorced.<sup>12</sup>

What seems a purely theological sentence is at the same time a brutal political judgment. The context gives the violence of contempt, hatred and destruction to these powerless words.

With this Christians have added — consciously or not — a fourth article of faith to the articles of faith in God the Father, in Jesus Christ and in the Holy

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12. Cardinal Faulhaber, *Judentum, Christentum, Heidentum* (Munich, 1934), p. 10. It should be remembered that in these lectures Faulhaber sought to combat Nazi racism and antisemitism in many ways. For instance, he reminded his readers that Christians were not saved “by German blood” and posed the following alternative: either the Old Testament is divinely inspired or we must recognize that the Jewish People is the most gifted one on earth, if it was capable of composing these books without divine aid. Even such a church leader, however, was uncompromising in his assertion that God had rejected Israel.

Spirit: faith in a construction of history that, in the hope for the Kingdom of God, closes this way for one nation, Israel; a construction that, in the midst of history opened by God for all human beings and all nations, closes down the history of Israel.

Here I want to say something about particularism and universalism. Judaism generally is understood as a particularistic religion, opposed to universalistic Christianity. Is this true? Often the particularism of Israel is “proven” by the fact that the covenant is limited to one nation, that it is connected with one land, and with the validity of the Torah in one people. Against this it has to be pointed out that the early history in the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 1–12) presents the universal presupposition of the election of one particular nation. The election of one nation in Abraham takes place in the reality of all nations and for their benefit. The election of Israel stands in the historical perspective that leads from creation to new creation. In the words of Karl Barth: “Creation is the outside reason of the covenant, and the covenant is the inside reason of creation.”<sup>13</sup>

The Hebrew Bible has a universal end which tells something about the earthliness of the People of God in the Land of Israel as well as about the earthliness of the non-Jewish kings who owed their might and position to the God of Israel:

This is what Cyrus, King of Persia, says: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of His people among you — may the Lord be with him and let him go up.” (2 Chron. 36:23)

The perspective of the coming messianic kingdom is universal: the people of Israel as well as Zion or Jerusalem (which represent the concreteness of the Land) have a universal meaning for all the earth. Whoever believes in this God of Israel — and Christians do — believes in His promises for Israel and for the nations. When the Bible and the New Testament speak of certain places, this is not accidental nor unimportant, but a sign of the earthliness of God’s action in Israel and the nations.

At this point I want to exclude one more view. For a long time Israel has been instrumentalized in a negative way: its suffering was used to prove the rightness of the Christian faith. Today in certain Christian Zionist circles we find that Israel is instrumentalized in a positive way — which is just as bad. I will give one example from many out of the circles around the International Christian Embassy. The London *Vineyard* wrote in 1984, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon:

God said: “To your offspring I will give this land.” And regardless of the viewpoint of fulfilled prophecy, it would be political suicide to support the powers of international terrorism in what they want to do in the Middle East. Some weeks ago I was at the Israeli–Lebanese border, while a Russian tank the Israelis had conquered crossed the border. It was a frightening machine. And I thank God that the Israelis conquered it, so that it cannot be used against us. As the PLO wants to destroy Israel, Russia wants to destroy our way of life. We were wrong when we blamed Israel for the offensive instead of thanking God for what Israel has reached. In a few months’ time Israel succeeded with the follow-

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13. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* 3:1 (Zurich, 1947), pp. 103ff.

ing: It stopped international terrorism at least for some time. It destroyed the reputation of the Soviet Union in the Middle East. It demonstrated unmistakably that the Arab world does not want the PLO. It liberated Lebanon. It opened new ways for a joint peace offensive.

In this, Israel again has been functionalized for the faith of Christians: the more Jews live in the Holy Land, the faster the Messiah will come, therefore Israel has to be as great and as strong as possible. And therefore there has to be a definite image of an enemy — again the evil is outside the Church. In this case, evil is not Israel, but communism, terrorism or Islamic fundamentalism.

## VI

Why did Christians say: Israel has been rejected, we are the heirs of Israel? Why did they say: We have loosened the connection between God, covenant and land, which is a benefit for the nations? Are these things said out of a desire to have a monopoly, being God's People alone? I believe that behind all of this there is also the desire to get rid of the strict criteria of the Bible, while at the same time these criteria are used by the Church to judge Israel.

If I do not want to express the earthliness by doing justice, then I have to spiritualize justice. Only by spiritualizing the Old Testament could Christians manage to say that the biblical message was not to be taken quite seriously. Creation and Exodus, Sinai and the Land, offerings and temple are no longer considered divine realities that stand for themselves, but receive reality and validity only within the Church that interprets them. By so doing, both Jesus and the history of Israel are instrumentalized. Jesus is instrumentalized in that he becomes the instrument of the Church's criticism against Israel, he becomes the critical counterpart of Israel, not the Church.

Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor also has no need for Christ on this earth, in the power structures here — Christ would only disturb the smooth functioning of the Church. In this way the prophetic task of Christ toward the Church is softened away. The Inquisitor asks the returned Christ: "Is it you?" He does not get an answer, so he adds:

Don't answer, be silent. What could you say? I know too well what you would say. And you have no right to add anything to what you had said of old. Why, then, have you come to hinder us? For you have come to hinder us, and you know that. But do you know what will be tomorrow? I know not who you are and care not to know whether it is you or only a semblance of him. But tomorrow I shall condemn you and burn you at the stake as the worst of heretics...<sup>14</sup>

As soon as the Church has secured its own position — by its institution, by its dogmas, by its construction of history — it can no longer be disturbed. Then the Jew Jesus is as disturbing as the Jewish People. Behind this Christian anxiety we find a double misunderstanding.

One misunderstanding is the notion that the Church is the sole receiver and carrier of God's promise, while Israel is the sole receiver of prophetic criticism. But since the Old Testament is the larger part of the Bible, since it was the only Bible for Jesus and the apostles to express the message of the King-

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14. *The Brothers Karamazov*, book V, chapter 5.

dom of God and messianic realization, then the Old Testament — which constitutes the Jewish People and its hope — is the decisive book for criticism against the Church. The promises of the Old Testament ask the Church: is it you that is to come or do we have to wait for something else?

The other misunderstanding is the idea that only the Law, not the Gospel, can be corrupted in the hands of human beings. Yet both can be and have been used against the intention of their divine author. The good gifts of creation, of election, of forgiveness of sins and of the forms of worship, the gift of the Land and of the covenant, can be perverted by human beings just as much as the Ten Commandments, the dietary rules of kashrut or the Sabbath can be perverted. What was given to allow freedom can be turned into slavery; what was given to enable life can be turned into suffocation of life. In 1937, Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an “illegal” pastor accused his church of preaching a “cheap grace” which perverted the Gospel into a meaningless attitude without praxis.<sup>15</sup>

The Church and the Jewish People are both on the way to God’s coming Kingdom. In view of this final goal, neither of the two witnesses may replace the other or define the content of the other’s faith.

### **Immanuel 22/23**

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15. E. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Nachfolge* (4th ed., Munich, 1952), pp 1ff.