The Theologian and the Land of Israel

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THE THEOLOGIAN AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

FOR centuries, theologians maintained that, in not accepting Jesus as the Messiah, Israel had broken the Covenant. Thus the special bond God's grace had woven was torn, not to be mended again. So they firmly believed as if the end of the Covenant were an article of faith. It was out of this conviction that, in January 1904, Pius X replied to Theodor Herzl's request that he support the plan of resettling Jews in Palestine, in a land they could call their own, with a brusque Non possiamo, "We cannot do it." Prior to this unmistakable rejection of the Zionist dream, the Pope had declared: "The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people."

Only thirteen years later, Benedict XV seems to have reversed that stand. In May 1917, he received in audience Nahum Sokolow, an outstanding Zionist leader of that time. The latter had come to seek the Pope's sympathy for, and moral support of, the Zionist cause. Benedict XV was fully aware that the Zionist idea was not an ephemeral one. E'molto significativo questo, he said, "This is a very meaningful idea! It's about the re-establishment of Judaea through the labor of the Jewish people, is it not?" He then continued: "How history has changed! Nineteen centuries ago, Rome [that is, the imperial Rome] destroyed your country; now you start from Rome [that is, the papal Rome] to rebuild it." Sokolow admitted that he was deeply moved by the Pope's remarks and asked to be allowed to add an observation of his own: "The Rome that destroyed Judaea was punished enough. But a little later, [the Empire] was broken up, while the Jewish people continued; it even has sufficient vitality to reclaim possession of its land." On hearing Sokolow's historical comment, Benedict XV exclaimed: Si, si è providenziale questo! Dio l'ha

voluto, "Why, certainly. This is providential. It is God's will." The Pope's affirmation seems to have embraced both Jewish survival through the centuries and the present will to resettle in the land of the fathers.

After discussing the need of a charter assuring the protection of holy sites, the Pope inquired into the condition of Jews in Poland. The Zionist leader answered that the war had worsened the lot of the Jewish masses everywhere. Moved, the Pope declared that he desired freedom for all men, and that the persecution of any weak people distressed him very much. Io voglio la liberta per tutti e sono desolatissimo ador quando so che si persegueta qualcuno fra i popoli più deboli." Sokolow expressed his appreciation for the "Humanitarian sentiments" of the Holy Father who, in turn, moved quickly from sentiment to action. "But what can We do for you?" he asked. "We only wish," Sokolow replied, "that Your Holiness accept the assurance of our fairness, lealtà, [in dealing with the Holy Sites, I assume, J.M.O.] and grant us your moral support." Going far beyond the request of the Zionist statesman, the Pope ended the audience with these remarkable words: Sì, sì, io credo che noi saremo dei buoni vicini, "Yes, indeed, I believe we will be good neighbors."2

THE ENDURING COVENANT

As I see it, no biblical or theological reasons impel a Christian theologian to deny the lasting union between God and Israel. The book of Hosea (about 750 B.C.), among others, records this promise to Israel:

I betroth you to myself forever;
I betroth you in truth and in justice,
in tender love and in mercy.

2. The conversation between Benedict XV and Nahum Sokolow is mentioned or briefly described in several books. The complete text, which I have followed, is in the form of an aide-mémoire Sokolow put down immediately after the conversation. It is entitled Memoriale Audienza Particolare, 4 Maggio 1917 and is preserved in the Archives of the Jewish Agency under the number L6/90H. A photocopy was kindly put at my disposal by Dr. and Mrs. Moshe Tavor, Jerusalem.

This is not the people I refer to. (see Ex 20:5, "the people of God") because of the promise of unconditional love before, present, and future, but a whole line of gods (12:2).

Though the Book of Hosea it is not unsurprising that the new God's mighty acts (two powerful and interpenetrating energies not at war) but rather thus when as the Covenant is as the God of the covenant's caretaking of his "children" As a companion text to the conditional promise of Hosea even the enemies of the Covenant. The Lord will release the people, if they are loved one another with Israel and Israel release the people among all the nations.

The oracles of the Lord promise: God's mighty acts animal world will not be worms crying against Israel a part.
Christians' will." The Jewish survival in the land of protection of Poland. The lot of the weak people that he desired were humanitarian quickly from asked. "We the assurance, I assume, beyond the audience with "no dei buoni"

This is not the only text to proclaim God's perpetual Covenant with "the people close to Him" (Ps 148:14); there are others as well (see Ex 17:7; Jer 31:3; Ps 105[104]:8), but this one is unique because of the circumstances in which the proclamation is made. Hosea's promise was given to an Israel the prophet had, only a moment before, portrayed as the Lord's unfaithful, adulterous wife, as nothing but a whore because she had abandoned Him and run after false gods (1:2; 2:4–10).

Though the Covenant of which the prophet speaks is permanent, it is not unconditional. If to the human mind this sounds paradoxical, so be it. This paradox is not greater than the one that binds together God's mighty grace and man's active freedom. The wedding of these two powers can be grasped only by one who lives by faith. He experiences himself to be free and, at one and the same time, moved by an energy not his own. Israel's experience is similar: Often feeling God's anger she, nevertheless, knows herself to be always loved by Him. In the Covenant the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob reveals Himself as the God of surprise, the One who cannot be fitted altogether into man's categories. The Covenant is permanent because it is God's gift. As a command, as God's summons of His creatures, however, it is conditional. The love and mercy, the truth and justice and faithfulness Hosea evokes are qualities of Him who initiated and granted the Covenant. At the same time, they are virtues to be realized in the people, if it is to be God's partner, if the bond between Him and His loved one is to endure. Still, one may even say that God's Covenant with Israel is lasting because His summons is lasting: He will never release the people from their obligation to be His "treasured possession among all the peoples" (Ex 19:5).

The oracle of the Lord that Hosea records is prefaced by another promise: On behalf of Israel, the Lord will make a covenant with the animal world, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the worms crawling on the ground; indeed, He will grant the children of Israel a paradise-like peace:
Bow, sword, and war I break
and sweep away from the land;
I make them lie down securely.
(2:18)

THE LAND OF ISRAEL, GIFT AND SIGN

This promise—that Israel will live in security—recalls that sings of God’s care for His own:

*Trust in the Lord and do good,*
*dwell in the land and pasture in safety.*

(Ps 37:3-4)

Valued so highly by prophet and psalmist, “safety” is, on the one hand, “rest from all... enemies round about” (Dt 25:19), on the other, that Sabbath-like peace which allowed Israel to give herself totally to the Lord and enjoy His embrace. Scripture never tires of calling the land the people took possession of, after they had been led out of Egypt and through the desert, the land God had sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that He would give to their descendants (Ex 6:8; Dt 4:1; 6:18, 23). To the biblical mind, then, the land is a divine pledge, a security for His presence among them. It is evidence, too, that God wished to meet man, not in the realm of ideas but in the reality of the “flesh,” in the temporality of this world: in history.

The land is called beautiful and spacious (Ex 3:8) though Canaan was vast only in comparison to Goshen in Egypt. It is said to be “a land flowing with milk and honey” (ibid, also Lev 20:24; Num 13:29; Dt 26:9)—a proverbial statement bespeaking its productivity. I wonder whether these two designations do not imply more than they say at first hearing; in other words, whether they do not ascribe a messianic quality to the land. Whether or not this is so, the land of Israel is an earnest of salvation, an anticipation of things-to-come. For Judaism, it is the miniature and promise of God’s kingdom, that is, of His reign over all the earth.

Whether the land thus points to the future or not, its primary mean-
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God wants Israel to live, indeed, to live for Him. So much

is the land part of the people that, whenever they are banished

from their own soil, God is said to desire their return. More than

that, even when they are in exile, under His judgment, He is with

them:

Thus says the Lord

who created you, O Jacob, and formed you, O Israel:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name: you are mine.

When you pass through the water, I am with you,

and the rivers, they do not bury you.

When you walk through fire, you are not burned;

and the flame, it does not consume you.

I am the Lord, your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour . . .

Fear not, for I am with you;

from the east, I bring back your descendants,

from the west, I gather you.

(Is 43:1–3, 5)

THE LAND IN THE OLD AND
THE NEW TESTAMENTS

SUCH is the vital role the land of Israel—and Zion as its center and
symbol—plays in the greater part of the Old Testament writings. In
the Gospels this role is transformed, its spiritual significance crystal-
lized. To give but a few examples: In the poem I quoted a moment
ago, a teacher of wisdom refers, again and again, to the land. Those
who wait for the Lord, those whose hope He is, those whom He
blesses, in short, the upright and just shall possess the land and dwell
in it forever (Ps 37[36]:9, 22, 29). When the same poet says that
the "humbled, the sorrowbent, will inherit the land" (v. 11), he uses
"land" literally. But when Jesus picks up this saying to make it one
of His beatitudes:

Happy the humbled, the gentle,
They will possess the earth

(Mt 5:4),
"the earth" is no longer the circumscribed land of Israel, but a realm of infinite dimension, the kingdom of God.

A substantive part of the prophetic message was Israel's delivery from exile. We read in the book of Amos:

Yes, days are coming,
says the Lord,
When the plowman will overtake the reaper and the vintager him who sows the seed.
The juice of grapes will drop down the mountains and all the hills flow over.
Then I will bring about the restoration of my people Israel;
They will rebuild and inhabit the ruined cities,
Plant vineyards and drink the wine,
Set out gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their soil;
never again will they be plucked
From the land I have given them,
say I, the Lord, your God.

(Am 9:13-15)

Of even greater vibrancy is the picture of return drawn by Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord:
Shout with joy for Jacob exult at the head of nations;
proclaim your praise and joy:
The Lord has delivered His people the remnant of Israel.
Behold, I will bring them back from the land of the North;
I will gather them from the ends of the world with the blind and the lame in their midst.
Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,
proclaim it on the far-off coasts, and say:
He who scatters Israel, now gathers them together,
He guards them as a shepherd his flock.
The Lord has ransomed Jacob,
He redeems him from his conqueror.
Into joy I turn their mourning

(VIEWS DIFFERENT)

To have a home—these two attitudes are Judaism and Christianity. The Jews have their land as a synonym for the land on any given spot, all the other towns and lakes of Israel, its sovereignty, its existence, directly related to Rome, Antioch, Corinth, and so on, have a special meaning. Finally, with Jesus "I give you rest" (Mt 8:11) and "He who scatters Israel, now gathers them together, He guards them as a shepherd his flock. The Lord has ransomed Jacob, He redeems him from his conqueror. . . . Into joy I turn their mourning" (Am 9:13-15).
In the New Testament, it is not only the remnant of Israel but Jews and Gentiles that are gathered together. From the four winds, from the farthest borders of the earth will the Lord assemble His chosen ones (Mt 24:31). Men from everywhere, from East and West, will feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Mt 8:11) and Jesus will be in their midst (cf. Mt 18:20). They do not gather in a land, Jesus is the land, He is their dwelling place, their joyous abode: “Come to me, you who are burdened and weary! I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

VIEWS DIFFERENT BUT RECONCILABLE

To have a home in the promised land and to have a home in Jesus—these two attitudes bespeak a weighty difference between Judaism and Christianity. Whereas observant as well as most non-observant Jews have their hearts set on “the land”—in rabbinical speech a synonym for the land of Israel—the Christian does not fasten his hope on any given spot. No doubt, Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and all the other towns and villages, mountains and valleys, rivers and lakes of Israel, indeed, the entire land, are dear to him. Yet, the land is in no way indispensable to his existence: Its political character, its sovereignty, its economic structure, its immigration laws are not directly related to his spiritual life. Again, though various places—Rome, Antioch, Constantinople, Canterbury, Geneva, Wittenberg—have a special meaning to him, his life neither begins nor ends there. Finally, with Jesus, a new kind of worship dawned, one “in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:23), which means, among other things, one not bound to a cultic center.

Quite apart from the fact that the vision of a worship unencumbered by a certain locale does not exhaust the meaning of Jesus’ words, it is not at all peculiar to Christianity. At the dedication of his newly
erected Temple, Solomon professed: "Can God really dwell with men on earth? Why, the heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain Him. How much less this house that I have built" (1 Ki 8:27). Again, Malachi foretells a world-wide liturgy, one whose praise joins the point of the sun's rise to that of its setting (Mal 1:11). Under the pressure of events, this vision became dominant among the rabbis. With the Holy City laid waste and the Temple razed; deprived of prophet, priest, and sacrifice, Israel is not abandoned, they taught. For tears are left to the people with which to ask God's forgiveness, and prayer to come before Him. One can pray, they held, in the synagogues, in the fields, on one's bed, and in the stillness of one's heart. For prayer is "the service of the heart."3

Close inspection shows that Judaism and the Gospel are not so far apart as is commonly held. Still, with regard to the land the difference remains. Of the nations' countries, none is holier than the others; hence, no land plays a similar role in the religious experience of the Christian as does the land of Israel in the experience of the Jew. Though this lack of experience makes it difficult for the Christian to grasp the Jewish attachment to "the land," it certainly does not forbid him to respect this attachment. There is, in my opinion, no religious tenet that imposes on him a detached or neutral stance toward the reality that Jews have regained their ancient land and now live under their own flag.

In fact, the situation he encounters there as a pilgrim should have a special appeal to him. That the places holy in his eyes because of the salvific events that occurred there are once more on Jewish soil, that they are again surrounded by a sea of Jewish life, should be most meaningful. He can now relive in a Jewish context what happened in a Jewish context.4


4. Kristor Stendahl holds a similar view: "The discussion [on the political status of Jerusalem] often centers on the access to the sacred sites. For Christians and Muslims that term is an adequate expression of what matters. Here are sacred places, hallowed by the most holy events. . . . But Judaism is different—although the Wailing Wall came to take on much of that same character, partly under the influence of the Christian example. (Judaism) is not tied to 'sites,' but to the Land, not to what happened in Jerusalem, but to Jerusalem itself" ("Judaism and Christianity: A Plea for a New Relationship," Cross Currents, XVII, 4 [Fall 1967], p. 457; the article originally appeared in the Fall 1967 Harvard Divinity Bulletin).
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Loewe, A Rabbinic to loke. Here are sacred different—although not the three evil things prevailing then: idolatry, lechery, and bloodshed. The second Temple, however, was done away with (70 A.D.), even though in those days the Israelites were devoted to Torah, kept the precepts, and practiced charity. It was destroyed because of "hatred without cause," and groundless hatred is as grave as idolatry, lechery, and bloodshed. The Siddur, the Jewish prayerbook, says with moving simplicity: "On account of our sins we were exiled from our land and removed far from our country" (Musaph of Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur). The rabbis were thus unafraid of acknowledging that God's heavy hand had been upon Israel; at the same time, they boldly believed that God had not forever withdrawn His favor from the people He loved.

Obviously, the New Testament agrees with the rabbis' fearless confession of sin, but how does it view their unshaken faith? The passages that tell of God's judgment are many. Two may suffice for our investigation. First, Jesus' prophecy about the fate of the Holy City:


6. Yoma 96; see B. Talmud, Soncino ed., p. 39. Kurt Schubert understands "hatred without cause" as "the party warfare" that, prior to Jerusalem's fall, tore the city apart. See Auf den Trümmern des Tempels, ed. Clemens Thoma (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), p. 83. The modest appearance of this book of some hundred pages belies its inner power. I gladly acknowledge the debt I owe to its contributors.
Your enemies...will encircle you and hem you in at every point; they will dash you to the ground, you and your children within your walls, and not leave you one stone standing on another, because you did not recognize God's moment when it came (Lk 19:43-44, NEB).

Second,

There will be great distress in the land and a terrible judgment upon this people. They will fall at the sword's point; they will be carried captive into all countries; and Jerusalem will be trampled down by foreigners until their day has run its course (Lk 21:23-24).

This translation, too, is the work of the editors of the New English Bible. Usually, the final clause is rendered literally: "and Jerusalem will be trampled down by the nations (gentiles) until the times of the nations (gentiles) be fulfilled." If ἄρχει δέ τι πληρῶσιν καιροὶ εἰνόν is read in the light of Romans 11:25, then Jerusalem will undoubtedly remain a city without life, a waste of sorrow, a "lonely widow" (Lam 1:1), till the end of time. The editors of the NEB do not tell why they have not used the customary rendering. Could it be that Jerusalem is in fact no longer a desolate widow; that the city of David has been rebuilt; that her "gateways are" far from being "deserted" (Lam 1:4) and that the foreign rulers are gone? Could it be that history has taught them to read the passage afresh?

If one places the two predictions cited above within the framework of Jesus' time, it becomes clear that Jerusalem was a victim of her hawkish ways—to use modern terminology; that she let herself be driven to ruin by giving free hand to the Zealots who preached that salvation was to be won only by relentless war against the Romans. The "dove-like" Jesus could have spared her the bitterness of her downfall. This, alas, He was not allowed to do. He lamented: "If you had known, on this great day, the way that leads to peace! But no, it is hidden from your eyes" (Lk 19:42). Still—words of the Lord—

*I will not accuse forever,  
nor always be angry.*  
(Is 57:16)
A Catholic theologian of our day has applied the repeated biblical assurance of divine pardon to our problem. The Lord of the Covenant, he holds, left "the land" to the people of the Covenant as their heritage. Admittedly the inheritance was not without qualification; the land can be forfeited through human unfaithfulness. Yet, God's fidelity is greater than man's infidelity; hence the forfeiture can never go so far as to eclipse the truth that the permanent bond of this people to this land is God's unequivocal will.  

AN ACT OF GOD  

Ever since 1948, the land and the people of Israel have been reunited, even though only a minority of the Jews have settled there. A Christian theologian must, it seems to me, see in the new State, founded against unbelievable odds and kept in existence against many threats and aggressive acts, a significant event. The living reality of the State will, for the most part, evoke his respect and admiration. More than that, if he understands what has happened and still happens there, he will become a champion of the State's independence and integrity.  

Yet, to demand that Israel remain unhampered and unharmed, that it be allowed to grow and prosper, is not enough. In view of Israel's quite unlikely history, it is fair to assume that her success is not altogether due to the cunning of her statesmen, the superior strategy of her generals, the bravery of her soldiers, and the steadfastness of her citizens. Rather was it the "outstretched arm" (Ex 6:6) of the Lord which once more rescued His people.  

For the theologian, Israel's future cannot be a mere political problem. Heaven forbid that he allow the cry "Politics!" to prevent him from taking a stand. Certainly, what the exact boundaries of the State should be, who would best succeed the present Prime Minister, and many similar questions are the kind of political problems that are
fully outside his special competence. Not so, however, the question of
whether the sovereign State should stay on, or be wiped off, the face
of the earth; of whether its people should be drowned in the sea
or live in peace. I, at least, cannot see how the renewal of the land
could be anything to the theologian but a wonder of love and fidelity,
how the reborn State could be anything but a sign of God's concern
for His people. To say this is not to sanction every decision of the
Israeli government, every act of the population. God's intervention
could well go hand in hand with the mistakes of those to whom He
shows favor.

I have no desire to depreciate the dispersion of the Jews—inci­
dentially, a reality even in the days of Jesus—as if it were an inescap­
able curse. A Christian cannot forget that, humanly speaking, the
Gospel would never have been spread throughout the Roman Empire
had it not been for the many synagogues and their worshippers that
had left paganism. And a Jew ought not forget that the Diaspora re­
minds him of the fact that, ultimately, he is a pilgrim on this earth,
"strangers we are before you, and passing guests as all our fathers
were," David prayed near the end of his reign (1 Par 29:15). The
probably oldest creed of Israel recalls Abraham's nomadic life. Even
the stationary farmers were to remember it as they offered the fruit of
the season in thanksgiving at the harvest festival. Thus the Torah
orders them to profess with the entire community: "A wandering
Aramaean was my father" (Dt 26:5).

A Christian must be loath to support things of this world as if they
were absolutes, lest he fall into idolatry. Yet, the relativity of this
world notwithstanding, he must make decisions, take sides lest he be­
come worse than an idolator and worship his own priority instead of
God. If God entered history, a Christian cannot but get involved in
the struggle of men to make the societies they live in more human
and thus more worthy of His name. Even less can he stand aloof as
God's chosen people wrestles to lead a life of dignity.

Today's Israel is new proof that God stands by His Covenant; that
the last word lies, not with the inventor of the "final solution," but
with Him.

Much have they oppressed me from my youth,
let Israel say,
However, the question of whether the land of Israel should be wiped off, the face of the earth be drowned in the sea for the renewal of the land with a renewal of love and fidelity, has been a sign of God's concern for every decision of the people of Israel. God's intervention has been the support of those to whom He has offered the fruit of His nomadic life. Even if it were an inescapable human situation, the Diaspora represented the people of Israel, as all our fathers were pilgrims on this earth, not yet the Roman Empire which persecuted their worshippers that they might not become one with the Diaspora represented. If the Torah is the life of the people, the Diaspora is the unity of this world as if they were nomadic people. Thus the Theologian said: "A wandering people...live in more human dignity." (Ps 129[128]:1-4)