Book Review: 'Israel: An Echo of Eternity' by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Edward H. Flannery
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

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Abraham Joshua Heschel:
**ISRAEL: AN ECHO OF ETERNITY***

THE restoration of the State of Israel in 1948 and, more recently, its dramatic victory over its enemies in 1967 have fired the hearts of Jews everywhere and added new impetus to Jewish thinking, not on Israel alone, but on the very nature of Judaism. Despite their altogether different character, these extraordinary happenings have, in effect, acted on Judaism in a way not wholly dissimilar to that in which the Second Vatican Council has moved the Church. They have also posed a challenge to Christian thought and call now for a serious reconsideration of traditional Christian thinking, again, not only concerning the State of Israel but Judaism itself.

If there is one book, Jewish or Christian, of a quality to evince the truth of these statements, it is Rabbi Heschel's *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. The book offers a moving and penetrating insight into the response of the Jewish believer to these events and lays down the challenge to Christian thinkers in clear terms. It is a book that Jews who have preserved their faith in the biblical promise will read with fervor, and that Christians will read with profit. It is more important that it be read by the latter. For many of them, it will be the first genuine introduction to what Zionism and the State of Israel mean to most Jews, and doubtless the first invitation to revise their views on the nature of Judaism. To most, it will probably come as a surprise, for few are those Christians who still see present-day Israel as anything more than a "purely political" phenomenon. If Rabbi Heschel’s book does nothing more than dispel this notion, its publication was worthwhile.

The book opens with a paean on Jerusalem, “the charismatic city.” It was here, three thousand years before Theodor Herzl, that Zionism was born. From the first, the holy mount, Zion, became a synonym

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for the city of Jerusalem, which itself came to represent the whole land of Israel. This God-given land, intersection of the divine and the human in history, the locus of God's ingress on earth, entered from the start into an inextricable trinal unity with the people of Israel and its Torah. By a process of cross-identification, the People, the Book, and the Land became inconceivable one without the other. Ereiz Yisrael and its possession became the fulcrum of the other two, a kind of sacrament of the larger unity. At its deepest root, Judaism is Zionist. Modern political Zionism rides a millennial messianic wave, of which its founders were only vaguely conscious.

In subsequent chapters, Heschel is at pains to show the depth and the breadth of Judaism's attachment to the land. His task is not difficult. The uninitiated Christian, and also those Jews who have strayed from their traditions, will learn with amazement of the level of saturation reached by the yearning for return to the land that has characterized Judaism in times of exile, whether before or after 70 A.D. This yearning is traced through the Hebrew Scriptures, Tanach, as well as the Jewish liturgy, the talmudic and later theological writings. Rabbi Heschel's style here can be deceptive. Its poetic and lyrical quality can blur the solid historical demonstrations and persuasive argument the book contains. The surprise of the reader, Christian or Jewish, in discovering all this can, to some point perhaps, be explained by those efforts of Reform and other segments of Judaism which, following the Emancipation era, undertook to de-Zionize Judaism to suit modern tastes—efforts that are now practically at an end. Once again attachment to the land takes full possession of the Jewish soul.

The Jewish soul? Heschel would say the biblical soul, and thereby opens a door. The impression is constant throughout the book that he is speaking to all who read the same Book, whether they call it Tanach or Old Testament. Bemoaning the "eclipse of the Bible" in our time, "man's increasing failure or inability to take the Bible seriously, his growing alienation from the Bible," he insists that it is a "renascence of biblical events that we witness in our days" (pp. 47-49). He writes, "To abandon the land would be to repudiate the Bible" (p. 44).

Sensing here that he may have left the Christian reader behind, he addresses the meaning he cannot but only is it an the Promise... Writing as say No:

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But Heschel ized tradition Isaac has called al l's Testament, a Allegorization use of the all origin) has he hopes, expect land to para mental results made many what the Ho of the Hebrew more (italics early apologi
he addresses himself frankly to the Christian perspective. Sounding
the meaning of the extraordinary return of the Jews to Israel today,
he cannot but see in it the action of God, the Lord of history. Not
only is it an answer to Auschwitz, but still more a realization of
the Promise. And he challenges the Christian to see it thus.

Writing as follows, he makes it difficult for the Christian to
say No:

It is dangerous to regard political affairs as religious events; yet since
the time of Abraham we were taught that political affairs are to be un­
derstood within the orbit of God’s concern. We must not expect the history
of politics to read like a history of theology. Instances of God’s care in
history come about in seeming disarray, in scattered fashion—we must
seek to comprehend the unity of the seemingly disconnected chords.

To the eyes of the heart, it is clear that returning to the land is an event
in accord with the hidden Presence in Jewish history. It is a verification
of a biblical promise. It has saved so many lives, it has called forth so
much dedication and sacrifice, it has revived hope. Returning to the land
is an event in which the past endures, in which the future is foreshadowed.

His thoughts are not our thoughts, His ways are not our ways. ...
(p. 137)

But Heschel is conscious of the thesis of rejection that has character­
ized traditional Christian theology on Judaism and Israel. (Jules
Isaac has called it a “teaching of contempt.”) He believes this theology
is made possible only by circumvention of much of the Old
Testament, and considers the problem in a chapter entitled “The
Allegorization of the Bible.” He believes, further, that the radical
use of the allegorical or spiritual method of interpretation (of Jewish
origin) has helped Christian theology to “reduce concrete narratives,
hopes, expectations connected with a living people and a geographic
land to paradigms of church dogma,” and that this has had “detrimental results for Christian theology” (p. 139). It has, he concludes,
made many Christians “incapable of understanding or empathy for
what the Holy Land means to the Jewish people and to the authors
of the Hebrew Bible.” In order to see the Old Testament as nothing
more (italics mine, E.H.F.) than a foreshadowing of the New, the
early apologists were forced to allegorize it “while,” Heschel adds,
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"taking the words of the New literally" (p. 141). This double-handed treatment of the sacred text he cannot accept. For the biblical man, he believes, the Bible is a reality not a symbol.

With those critics of present-day Israel who see it as a "purely secular society" in mind, he recalls the lack of dichotomy between the religious and the secular in Judaism and the fact that religious life is not limited strictly to prayer, ritual, and observances.

In a section called "The Christian Approach" (pp. 161–167), he turns to the New Testament and concludes with Christian commentators that nothing in it precludes a return of Jews to Palestine. He makes much of a generally allegorized text of Acts (1:6–7) in which Jesus, in reply to His disciples' question when the Father would restore the kingdom of Israel, answered: "No one can know the times and seasons which the Father has fixed." He interprets Jesus' answer "not as a rebuke of the Apostles' hope, but rather as a discouragement of Messianic calculation." Pursuing the point, he refers to Jesus' assertion in Luke that "Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (21:24)—a passage less easily liable to a purely spiritual interpretation. With these few theological nudges he terminates his discussions of Christian views.

In Israel: An Echo of Eternity Rabbi Heschel has, to my mind, made a positive contribution to the renewal of the Christian theology of Judaism, particularly in his insistence on the necessity of including the land of Israel in theological considerations of Judaism. He could have gone further, but has discreetly left this to Christian theologians. Perhaps too conscious of Paul as a hellenized Jew and of his negative strictures on Judaism, he failed to pursue the Apostle's extension of Jesus' thought. Now well within the New Dispensation, Paul spoke (in the present tense) of Israel's retention of the covenants and promises (Rom 9:4) and reiterated Jesus' reference to the fulfillment of the times of the gentiles (Rom 11:25), thus making clear the ongoing participation of the Jewish people in God's election and Covenant.

The Second Vatican Council, repudiating the deicide tradition and, at least implicitly, the theme of the Jewish people's total rejection and replacement by Christianity, has opened the way to a new and positive consideration of Judaism's continuing role in the divine plan of salvation. Heschel's contribution comprises a demonstration of the biblical necessity of the land of Israel on solid ground that is still valid for us to be understood by Rabbi Heschel's land. The burden of a continuing contribution.

Admittedly the traditionalist in the Vatican Council, his great contribution has been an important response to the Sionists in our time in thinking, secular and Christian.

Rabbi Heschel has been aware of Arab enmity and Muslim kinship, the common background, as well as a contribution to bring Arab and Jewish "leaders" of the Middle East to see eye to eye. Sensitive to the Middle East as Israel and the land in its correct position with the encroaching political strata, he renunciation in the Middle East.

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Israel: An Echo of Eternity

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biblical necessity of neither eliminating nor minimizing the part the

land of Israel plays in the Covenant and promise. Here he appears

on solid ground. If Israel's participation in the election and Covenant

is still valid for the Jewish people, the Covenant and promise should

be understood in their original meaning and, therefore, as defined

by Rabbi Heschel. They should, in other words, include Israel as a

land. The burden of proof seems to rest on him who holds that Israel's

continuing Covenant must be a landless one.

Admittedly, this theological reclamation of the land revolutionizes

the traditional Christian conception of Judaism. But so does the

Vatican Council's statement on the Jewish people in other equally

important respects. Then, too, the repossession of Palestine by Jews

in our time is of a magnitude which invites revision of much think­

ing, secular as well as religious.

Rabbi Heschel does not ignore the bitter strain of Arab-Israeli

enmity and confesses his pain and chagrin. Conscious of Jewish-

Muslim kinship, he dreams of reconciliation. His hope is that a

common background and history, and an earlier fruitful symbiosis as

well as a common heritage of suffering and humiliation, will finally

bring Arab and Jew together. He places heavy guilt on "reckless

leaders" of Arab nations who prevent the reconciliation (p. 174).

Sensitive to the plight of the Arab refugees, he is anxious to have

Israel and the world community solve the problem. But he places

it in correct perspective: It was born of assaults on Israel and even

with the encouragement of Arab officials, and remains unsolved as a

political stratagem of the Arab leadership. His final vision is one of

the cultural and economic blessings that will follow in the wake of

renunciation of hatreds and the espousal of a policy of cooperation

in the Middle East.

Rabbi Heschel has given us another rich book that invites medita­

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is rich in biblical faith , rich in literacy, and rich in intelligence.

Christians as well as Jews should be grateful that he has turned his

great talent and spiritual discernment to so vital and difficult a subject

as Israel—a new modern state and an echo of eternity.

EDWARD H. FLANNERY