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Towards the Ends of the Earth
Land in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*, the longest paragraph in the document, bears witness to one of the greatest revolutions in the 20th century, the transformation of relations between Jews and Christians, from suspicion and contempt to respect and collaboration. According to *Nostra Aetate*, Christians need to be constantly reminded of “the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.” Furthermore, the Church “cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles.”¹

Foundational to the revolution was the awakening of Christians to the fruits of a “teaching

increasing openness of Christians to Jews and Judaism and the third of the eight paragraphs explicitly formulates their position on the Land:

Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel. The most important event for Jews since the Holocaust has been

- *Reading the Bible*⁷

After the Shoah, the new relationship with the Jewish people was stimulated by a renewed interest among Christians in the Old Testament and the story of Israel. The Catholic Church reminded its faithful at the Second Vatican Council:

The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable.⁸

Meditating again on the long chapters in the history of salvation as contained in the Old Testament, refocused attention on Israel, the people and the land. God's election of Israel and the gift to Israel of the land are central themes in the Old Testament, understood by Christians as preparation for the coming of Jesus, son of Israel. Traditionally, Christians had generally assumed that Jews were blind in their reading of the Old Testament

Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion. Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible.¹¹

An integral part of the revolution in Jewish-Christian relations is the realization that Jews and Christians share a language and a spiritual heritage that is based on the Scriptures they share – called the Old Testament by Christians, the TaNaKh by Jews. Implicit in the understanding of *Dabru Emet* is that because Jews and Christians share a language, based on the Scriptures of Israel, they can also share an understanding of the Land of Israel as promise and gift to the people of Israel.

However, is the understanding of the land in the Bible indeed part of the vocabulary that Jews and Christians share? Faith in Jesus distinguishes the Christian reading of the Bible from the Jewish one. A consequence of this faith touches upon the issue of land and boundaries. The Land of Israel is undoubtedly central in the Old Testament.¹² The land is promised to Abraham and his descendants and eventually conquered as the place where Israel is called to live out the covenantal relationship with God in observing the Torah. At the center of the l

widening circles tends towards every place where the gospel is preached and lived. The writer of the Epistle to the Ephesians underlines the newness of Jesus Christ's mission in bringing down borders and expanding the concept of land:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have acce

The gradual adoption of Christianity as the official religion of an empire transformed the understanding of land and borders. The rise of empowered Christianity, first tolerated and then dominant in the Roman Empire, promoted an awareness of borders that needed defending and territories that awaited conquest. Christian emperors had Christian armies at their service. In the Middle Ages, Christendom went to war to liberate Jerusalem from the Muslims. For many during the Crusades, the war was a double one: against the enemy within (the Jews) and the enemy without (the Muslims). The Crusaders were inspired by stories in the Bible and saw themselves as God inspired conquerors. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, in a homily preached to promote the Second Crusade, proclaimed:

Fly then to arms; let a holy rage animate you in the fight, and let the Christian world resound with these words of the prophet, "*Cursed be he who does not stain his sword with blood!*" (Jeremiah 48:10).¹⁹

Echoes of the Crusades can be heard throughout the long history of European colonialism and the treatment of indigenous peoples. European conquest often went hand in hand with spreading the Christian religion, explorers and conquerors paving the way for

“premillennialism”.²⁷ God would then use Israel as a divine instrument in the punishment of the unbelievers. In this kind of thinking, Jews remain tools and means of Christian salvation.

In November 1917, an alliance between Christian and Jewish Zionists gave birth to the Balfour Declaration, published by the British government, the first official formulation of recognition for the Jewish claim to the land, providing for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”. Lord Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary in a cabinet headed by Christian Zionist Prime Minister David Lloyd George, explained:

For in Palestine we do not propose even to go through the form of consulting the wishes of the present inhabitants of the country ...the Four Great Powers are committed to Zionism. And Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires or prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land ...²⁸

A week after the publication of the Balfour Declaration, Britain occupied Palestine and in the decades that followed Jewish migration to Palestine was facilitated.²⁹ Since the end of the Second World aFour

- *Working for*

Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Document *Nostra Aetate* n. 4". However, the document did insist:

Christians must therefore strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.³³

Many Jews with whom Catholics dialogued were insistent that Jews defined themselves in the modern age as intimately tied to the Land of Israel and demanded that Catholics take this into consideration. The General Secretary of the World Jewish Congress, Gerhart Riegner, expressed this to Pope Paul VI at the 1974 meetin

When the Fundamental Agreement was signed between the Holy See and the State of Israel in 1993, the document underlined the new relationship between the Church and the Jewish people but clearly stated that the Church was not affirming any religious interpretation of claims to territory:

The Holy See, while maintaining in every case the right to exercise its moral and spiritual teaching-office, deems it opportune to recall that, owing to its own character, it is solemnly committed to remaining a stranger to all merely temporal conflicts, which principle applies specifically to disputed territories and unsettled borders.³⁶

In fact, the Church's commitment to dialogue with the Jewish people to advance reconciliation developed alongside her awareness that the Palestinians were demanding justice. Pope Paul VI became the first Pope to explicitly affirm the Palestinians as a people rather than simply a group of refugees. In his Christmas message in 1975, he said:

Although we are conscious of the still very recent tragedies which led the Jewish people to search for safe protection in a state of its own, sovereign and independent, and in fact precisely because we are aware of this, we would like to ask the sons of this people to recognize the rights and legitimate aspirations of another people, which have also suffered for a long time, the Palestinian people.³⁷

In 1987, Pope John Paul II appointed the first Palestinian Arab Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Holy Land's highest Catholic authority. Patriarch Michel Sabbah became an outspoken voice inside the Church, proclaiming the injustices that his people had suffered as a result of the establishment of the State of Israel and its continuing occupation of Palestinian lands. In a 1993 pastoral letter, Sabbah wrote:

Could we be victims of our own salvation history, which seems to favor the Jewish people and condemn us? Is that truly the Will of God to which we must inexorably bow down, demanding that we deprive ourselves in favor of another people, with no possibility of appeal or discussion?³⁸

It was the beginning of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians in the early 1990s that provoked the Holy See to establish diplomatic relations with both the State of Israel (in 1993) and the Palestine Liberation Organization in lieu of a future State of Palestine (in 2000). Further development of a teaching on the Land was provided when three pontiffs visited the Holy Land, Israel and Palestine, in 2000, 2009 and 2014. In examining closely the gestures and discourses of the Roman Pontiffs during their visits to

reference to Scripture, concern for the Holy Places and the indigenous Christians, the dialogue with Jews and with Muslims and the promotion of justice and peace.

Pope John Paul II's visit to the Holy Land in 2000 was ground breaking as it set in place the gestures that were repeated by the pontiffs who followed in his footsteps. More than diplomatic tightrope walking, John Paul II was concerned with expressing the

Palestinians, Jews and Muslims. A short time after his return to Rome, Pope Francis hosted Israeli President Peres and Palestinian President Abbas and at the “invocation for peace” held in the Vatican gardens, he explained this insistence on being brothers:

We know and we believe that we need the help of God. We do not renounce our responsibilities, but we do call upon God in an act of supreme responsibility before our consciences and before our peoples. We have heard a summons, and we must respond. It is the summons to break the spiral of hatred and violence, and to break it by one word alone: the word “brother”. But to be able to utter this word we have to lift our eyes to heaven and acknowledge one another as children of one Father.⁴¹

Ultimately, the Church is called to preach pardon and reconciliation rather than endorsing a theology of bordered land.

Conclusion: Land in the Dialogue with the Jews

Dabru Emet considers that “Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people