

# STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

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## *Reinhold Niebuhr's Approach to the State of Israel: The Ethical Promise and Theological Limits of Christian Realism*

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Reinhold Niebuhr was the most prominent liberal Protestant theologian to support Zionism in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Only a minority of theologians, clergy, and laity in the mainline churches ever supported Zionism. Some argue that because Niebuhr's Zionism was not grounded in dogmatic theology and Biblical exegesis, it was not transmitted to the next generation of Mainline Protestants. Furthermore, the structure of his thought left open the possibility of an anti-Zionist approach. This article assesses the tensions between theology and ethics in Niebuhr's Zionism, and links it to his conception of both Israel and America as messianic nations with civilizational missions. First, it assesses Niebuhr's support for a Jewish return to Palestine in relation to Protestant and Jewish relocation of the Promised Land. The second section argues that Niebuhr's Zionism was integral to his Christian realism. The third section probes his shift from viewing Jews as a messianic people to understanding America as a messianic nation, subsuming Israel under America's civilizing mission. The fourth section argues that Niebuhr's natural theology, which was the basis for his understanding of history and divine transcendence, constrained what he could say concerning the "Biblical myths" of covenant and election regarding Israel. The final section argues that Niebuhr located his Zionism within his reconstruction of natural law and subjected it to his critique of nationalism and religion. As his Zionism was not theologically grounded, his support for Israel could not be persuasive theologically for subsequent generations of Mainline Protestants.

### 1. The Promised Land as Zion: Relocation from America to Palestine

The relocation of the idea of Zion, the Promised Land, from America to Palestine occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century among American Protestants and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century among American

Jews.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr's Zionism is located midway between the two. The Congregationalists and Puritans who came to New England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century saw America as Zion.<sup>2</sup> Many American religious people changed from seeing America as the Holy Land to seeing the Land of Israel as the Holy Land. American Congregationalist missionaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed the second coming was imminent, and set off in 1819 to found missions, despite Catholic and Muslim Turkish opposition.<sup>3</sup> Nineteenth-century American Congregationalist missionaries "helped replant the sacred territory of Scripture from America to the Land of Israel, including its eschatological ramifications."<sup>4</sup> This approach was an important source for American Evangelical attitudes to Israel. However, liberal Protestants interpreted the issue differently. Gershom Greenberg compares Reinhold Niebuhr's attitude to that of two other prominent liberal Protestant churchmen of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Adolf A. Berle, Sr. and Harry Emerson Fosdick. The distinctions between them, and between Niebuhr and Fosdick in particular, correspond to the subsequent divide among Mainline Protestants over Israel.

Berle was an American Congregationalist pastor from Boston, who penned a volume entitled *The World Significance of a Jewish State* in 1918.<sup>5</sup> In it he idealizes Jews and Judaism as superior to Christianity, which had failed both to avert the

1. I am indebted to the account of Gershom Greenberg for the basic tenets of this section. See his *The Holy Land in American Religious Thought, 1620-1948: The Symbiosis of American Religious Approaches to Scripture's Sacred Territory* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994).

2. Greenberg, *Holy Land*, 15-45; Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), chs.1 and 2.

3. Greenberg, *Holy Land*, 113-141.

4. Greenberg, *Holy Land*, 132.

5. Adolf A. Berle, Sr., *The World Significance of a Jewish State* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1918); Greenberg, *Holy Land*, 281-282.

First World War and mitigate its consequences. He looked for the religious rehabilitation and unification of Jews and the formation of a Jewish state on this basis. He envisioned a Hebrew commonwealth in which the Hebrew language and literature would thrive. This would enable the renewal of ancient Israelite law and national structures. The Jewish state would display its national traditions and idealisms, which had made the politics of the Israelite prophets such an integral part of Christianity. As a result, anti-Semitism would be eliminated. Jewish return to Israel would be the occasion for “world instruction in the religion of Israel, which has never been vouchsafed to any other cult in the history of mankind!”<sup>6</sup> Berle considered Judaism as “the barometer of civilization,” a future moral paradigm. In this, he represented a shift away from seeing America as the world’s exemplary nation. Placing responsibility upon a future Jewish state for “improving the world” due to disenchantment with Christianity was a significant move, as it opened the door to later liberal Protestant disenchantment with Israel for not being morally perfect.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a prominent New York Baptist minister, toured Palestine in 1920.<sup>7</sup> Fosdick was disappointed with the land, and disagreed with Theodor Herzl’s slogan that it was “a land without a people,” given that there were more than half a million Arabs living there. Fosdick, like many American liberals, sympathized with the Arabs’ view that they had been betrayed by the British when they were not granted autonomy in return for winning the First World War against the Ottoman Turks. Fosdick sympathized with the Arab fear that Jews would try to rebuild Solomon’s Temple, thus provoking conflict with Islam. (This was somewhat disingenuous given that he knew most Jews to be secular.) He wanted to restrict the number of Jewish refugees allowed into Palestine, but like Berle, he also

wanted Jews to reside in the land in a way that would somehow “benefit mankind.” Fosdick spoke about Zionism to staff and students at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1927. Zionism for him was a form of nationalism and as such an idol. He would only support a Zionism that was a cultural and educational revival such as that espoused by Rabbi Judah Magnes (1877-1948), then chancellor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This influenced subsequent Mainline Protestant attitudes, for Magnes and other intellectuals at the Hebrew University were convinced anti-Zionists, favoring the idea of a binational Jewish-Arab state. The most important proponent of this view was Martin Buber, who advanced the concept of the “true Zionism” of the soul.<sup>8</sup>

From the time of his critique of liberalism onwards, Niebuhr differed from both Berle and Fosdick in placing fewer moral expectations upon Jews to redeem the human race. He eschewed moralism, mounting a sharp critique in the early 1930’s of the liberal Social Gospel movement and its perceived optimism concerning human perfectibility and the gradual progression of history. Niebuhr saw Palestine as a home for the Jews, not as a project that was supposed to “benefit mankind” (Fosdick) or “improve the world” (Berle). Thus he did not tend to hold Jews and Israel to a higher standard than other nations. He definitely did not want to see ancient Israelite law revived, and was almost paranoid about Israel’s becoming a theocracy. Israel for Niebuhr was neither a displacement of Christian hopes for worldly redemption and progress onto Jews, nor a displacement of Christian hopes for religious resurgence. His secularized Zionism was an alternative to more evangelical forms of Christian support for Zionism.

6. Berle, *World Significance*, as cited in Moshe Davis, *America and the Holy Land* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1995), 64, fn. 5.

7. Greenberg, *Holy Land*, 282-284.

8. Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. Paul R. Mendes-Flohr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 220-224. For strong Zionist criticism of Buber’s role in Israel, see Yoram Hazony, *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel’s Soul* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 181-193, 267-283.

Niebuhr would grasp the “creational” aspects of Zionism, as opposed to its soteriological and eschatological aspects. In this respect, his thinking was closer structurally and substantially to that of Reform and secular Jews than to that of fellow Protestants. Louis Brandeis’ case for Jewish assimilation in the United States along with the founding of a Jewish state influenced Niebuhr, as both men shared a commitment to the United States as a liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> Brandeis’ argument was that nations have rights and duties to develop and promote the higher goals of civilization, because they are just as “individual” as persons. Niebuhr also agreed with his friend Justice Felix Frankfurter that Palestine would rescue Jewish national identity.<sup>10</sup> Frankfurter had been recruited to American Jewish Zionism by Brandeis even before Woodrow Wilson led America into the First World War.<sup>11</sup> His unofficial diplomacy would prove to be both significant on the Jewish side and supportive of Niebuhr’s efforts.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Niebuhr’s Zionism Expressed as Christian Realism

Early in his career Niebuhr encountered American Jews. His friendships with them nourished a belief that Judaism’s sense of social justice was superior to that of contemporary American Protestantism. As a result he became a convinced Zionist, expressing this conviction through his method of “Christian realism.” The Israeli political theorist Eyal Naveh has recently argued that Niebuhr’s support for Zionism formed part of a “non-utopian liberalism.”

9. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Jews after the War: Parts I and II,” in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. Robertson (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 133-134, 138-139.

10. Greenberg, *Holy Land*, 341.

11. Paul Charles Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism, 1891-1948* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), 87-88.

12. Daniel F. Rice, “Felix Frankfurter and Reinhold Niebuhr, 1940-1964,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 1, no. 2 (1983): 325-426.

As one who always opposed any simple identification between historical events and the divine cosmic structure, Niebuhr refused to give any religious meaning and redemptive significance to the destiny of the Jews. He considered Zionism as a legitimate political movement; a possible, not necessarily inevitable solution; one, not necessarily exclusive, remedy for the Jewish problem in the twentieth century. He admitted, however, that “the ideal of a political homeland for the Jews is so intriguing that I am almost willing to sacrifice my conviction for the sake of it.”<sup>13</sup>

Niebuhr’s Zionism was central to his Christian realism, which itself was deeply rooted in his favoring what he considered to be the “Hebraic” moral aspect of the western Christian tradition over its “Hellenic” metaphysical aspect.

The development of Niebuhr’s Zionism reflects the continued co-ordination of Christian realism’s three components: political, moral and theological.<sup>14</sup> *Political realism* involves taking into account all the different kinds of forces involved in making political decisions. Accordingly, the human condition is too complicated to allow pure moral idealism to affect such decisions, as it risks disempowering political agents through lack of worldly wisdom. Niebuhr’s subtlety on this matter has been overlooked, both by critics and supporters. John Howard Yoder accuses Niebuhr of introducing into Christian ethics extraneous concepts that found his political realism upon national self-interest rather than on any Christian

13. Eyal Naveh, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism: Beyond Illusion and Despair* (Brighton/Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2002), 83, citing Reinhold Niebuhr, “Judah Magnes and the Zionists,” *Detroit Times* (December 28, 1929): 16.

14. For this categorization, see Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3-24.

moral considerations.<sup>15</sup> The influential International Relations theorist Hans Morgenthau, on the other hand, read Niebuhr in a reductionist fashion, as if he were denying the importance of moral values for politics and implying that they are reducible to self-interest.<sup>16</sup>

This matters because Niebuhr was committed to an underlying *moral realism*, a conviction that moral statements are true or false independent of the individual or community that espouses them. This rules out ethics solely guided by self-interest as well as moral relativism. Niebuhr formulated his version of moral realism by reconstructing Protestant natural law theory along the lines of “ethical naturalism.” This will receive further attention below in section 5. For now it is enough to say that a proper understanding of human nature is necessary to make right action possible.

Niebuhr’s *theological realism* is intertwined with the morally realist pursuit of justice. This rests on a belief that God is love, and that this love requires justice of human beings. Deflecting fears of moral authoritarianism whereby all theological realists would be required in advance to know or agree on the content of ethics, Niebuhr implies that due to God’s transcendence over creatures, no one has complete knowledge of the divine will and purpose on any particular issue. This feeds his critique of religion in relation to nationalism, which will also be considered below in section 5.

Niebuhr’s key writings on Zionism demonstrate his application of this threefold realism. He started speaking and writing publicly in support of American Jewish Zionism in the

1930s, as he realized that the situation of Jews in Europe was worsening. European Jews were attempting to flee Nazi persecution by emigrating to British Mandatory Palestine. In 1938 Niebuhr addressed Hadassah, the women’s Zionist organization, supporting a Jewish home in Palestine. Admitting the real difficulty of this occurring on land claimed by Arabs, he first compared it to other situations across the world affected by heavy migration. He assumed the realist perspective that “nothing in the realm of politics can be done without friction.” He concluded that “Palestine must not be abandoned,” not only due to lack of an alternative location for Zion, but also “because the years of expenditure of energy, life and treasure...must not be sacrificed.”<sup>17</sup> Addressing the 44<sup>th</sup> annual convention of the Zionist Organization of America in Cincinnati in September 1941, he said that when all had been said about the problem of relating Diaspora Jews to the Land of Israel, the justice of Zionism enters because “there is no spirit without a body, and there is no body without geography.”<sup>18</sup> This is the single most important Zionist statement that Niebuhr made, because he connected the Land of Israel with creaturely embodiment and statehood, as they were in the Bible. It also articulates in a nutshell his reconstruction of natural law theory to incorporate freedom, here expressed as “spirit.”

Niebuhr’s most important publication on Zionism was his 1942 article “Jews after the War.” It demonstrates a far-sighted approach unmatched by other Christian ethicists. Reintegrating Jews into Europe would be unrealistic due to prospective post-war impoverishment and endemic anti-Semitism. Assimilation alone would be ethically unacceptable as this would bring about the disappearance of Jews as a nationality. Nationality, not

15. John Howard Yoder, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Pacifism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 29, no. 2 (April 1955): 101-117.

16. See Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 10; Daniel F. Rice, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau: A Friendship with Contrasting Shades of Realism,” *Journal of American Studies* 42 (2008): 255-291.

17. Reinhold Niebuhr, “My Sense of Shame,” *Hadassah Newsletter* 19 (Dec. 1938): 59-60.

18. Reinhold Niebuhr, September 9, 1941, cited in Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 142.

religion, represented that which is unique to Jewish life.<sup>19</sup> Jews render no service either to democracy or to their people by seeking to deny this ethnic foundation of their life, or by giving themselves to the illusion that they might dispel all prejudice if only they could prove that they are a purely cultural or religious community.<sup>20</sup>

In this, Niebuhr reflects Louis Brandeis' arguments for Zionism. He astutely observes that poorer Jews had not been able to enjoy the benefits of emancipation and assimilation as richer Jews had, because "majority bigotry" always falls much harder on the poorer members of an ethnic group. Poorer Jews thus had a very strong need to return to the Land of Israel.<sup>21</sup> Zionism was therefore seen as the socialism of poor Jews. Due to Niebuhr's Christian realist critique of Marxism as a myth or religion capable of corrupting politics, he never carried this argument to the logical conclusion expressed in Marxist strands of early Zionism. Those saw emigration to Palestine as necessary for poor Jews to win the class struggle against their more privileged brethren.<sup>22</sup> Christian realism is articulated *in nuce* in his statement that Zionism represents "the wisdom of common experience against the wisdom of the mind, which tends to take premature flights into the absolute or the universal from the tragic conflicts and the stubborn particularities of human history."<sup>23</sup>

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19. Niebuhr, "Jews after the War," 134.

20. Niebuhr, "Jews after the War," 135.

21. Niebuhr, "Jews after the War," 136.

22. On Niebuhr's use and subsequent critique of Marxist ideas, see Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 33f. On Jewish Marxist Zionists, see David J. Goldberg, *To The Promised Land: A History of Zionist Thought* (London: Penguin, 1996), 113-134.

23. Niebuhr, "Jews after the War," 137.

Niebuhr viewed Israel as an outpost of western civilization in the Middle East. Indeed, this seems to have become intertwined for him with the idea of a Jewish refuge from persecution as Israel's *raison d'être*. As primary spokesman of the American Christian Palestine Committee, Niebuhr favored free immigration, unlimited settlement by Jews and the development of a Jewish majority in Palestine empowered to establish a democratic government. He advocated that Palestine should be "set aside for the Jews," and that the Arabs should be "otherwise compensated." It is vital to understand this through the prism of Niebuhr's own German descent, which enabled him to have contact with German Zionists during the Nazi era. This deepens the impact of his painful acknowledgement to American Jews that he was ashamed that "an allegedly Christian civilization" could stoop to the level of systemic anti-Semitism.<sup>24</sup> What surfaces is awareness of the deep cultural link between western Europe and the United States. Proper appreciation of this very American sentiment is necessary to grasp the importance for Niebuhr of Israel as carrier of western civilization, specifically one not tainted by the currents that fed Nazi ideology.

In order to defend Christian realism and advance the Zionist cause, he founded the journal *Christianity and Crisis*, soberly telling his American audience that the Nazi regime really intended to annihilate the Jewish people and to destroy Christianity as well. In 1942, forty mainline church leaders and scholars, including Niebuhr, formed the Christian Council for Palestine to support Zionism. On January 10, 1946, Niebuhr appeared before the Joint Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, formed after the war ended, on behalf of the Christian Council for Palestine, making the following statement:

There is in fact no solution to any political problem. The fact, however, that the Arabs have a vast hinterland in

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<sup>24</sup>. Niebuhr, "Jews after the War," 137.

the Middle East, and the fact that the Jews have nowhere to go establishes the relative justice of their claims and of their cause.<sup>25</sup>

He supported transfer of Arabs out of Palestine, including Herbert Hoover's idea that they should be resettled in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> Building upon the critical defense of democracy as the only seriously viable form of government that he had developed in his 1944 book *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr then continued:

Christians are committed to democracy as the only safeguard of the sacredness of human personality...The opposition to a Jewish Palestine is partly based on the opposition of Arabs to democracy, western culture, education and economic freedom. To support Arab opposition is but supporting feudalism and Fascism in the world at the expense of democratic rights and justice.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst Niebuhr did not explain what he meant by "fascism," the available historical evidence strongly suggests that he has in mind the active support for Hitler, the *Shoah* and instigation of Arab attacks on Zionist Jews in Palestine by Haj Muhammad Hamin al-Husseini, appointed the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem in 1921 by Sir Herbert Samuels, the British

governor.<sup>28</sup> There are no other serious explanations possible for Niebuhr's use of the term "fascism" here. The fact that Niebuhr would later complain of the Eisenhower Administration's combined influence with the USSR in the United Nations to keep General Nasser in power in Egypt and carry on with "Nazi measures," i.e. intention to destroy Israel, corroborates this judgment.<sup>29</sup>

In 1947 Britain followed Ernest Bevin's advice and referred the issue of Palestine to the United Nations. In November of that year, the UN passed a resolution calling for the land to be partitioned into Jewish and Arab states—the first instance of a "two-state solution." Britain was to evacuate the land by May 1948. Niebuhr supported this two-state solution against the idea of a binational state, which was popular with Mainline Protestants as well as Jewish anti-Zionist intellectuals such as Martin Buber and Hannah Arendt.

The decision of the United Nations Assembly to partition Palestine and to create a Jewish and an Arab state brings several interesting and perplexing chapters of contemporary history to a conclusion. On the purely political level it represents the first real achievement of the United Nations...The "right" of the Jews to Palestine is established partly by the urgency of the problem of their collective survival and partly by ancient claims and hopes which found their classical expression before the Jewish dispersion...The right of the Arabs is quite simply...the

25. Merkley, *Politics*, 171, citing "Statement to Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry," Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress; also, Central Zionist Archives/box F40/file no. 59; both references in Merkley, *Politics*, 201, fn. 34.

26. Raphael Medoff, "Communication: A Further Note on the 'Unconventional Zionism' of Reinhold Niebuhr," *Studies in Zionism* 12, no. 1 (1991): 85-88. The British Labour Party also supported transfer.

27. Niebuhr, "Statement"; cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 84-104.

28. See Jeffrey Herf, "Convergence - The Classic Case: Nazi Germany, Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism during World War II," *Journal of Israeli History* 25, no. 1: (March 2006): 63-83.

29. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Seven Great Errors of US Foreign Policy," *The New Leader* 24-31 (December 1956): 3-5. On Niebuhr and Mainline Protestants in relation to post-war US foreign policy, see William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

right of holding what one has and has had for over a thousand years.<sup>30</sup>

He went on to say that the Arabs lagged behind the Jews in terms of cultural development, such that “this whole Near Eastern world has fallen from the glory where the same lands, which now maintain only a miserable pastoral economy, supported the great empires in which civilization arose.” In response to the argument for a binational state, Niebuhr simply pointed out that the United Nations had already rejected this “primarily because the Arabs were unwilling to grant the Jews any freedom of immigration in such a bi-national state.”<sup>31</sup>

Niebuhr defended Israel’s wars against its Arab neighbors as defensive wars against intentions to annihilate the Jewish state.<sup>32</sup> Commenting on Israel’s victory against the attack of its Arab neighbors upon it as soon as it had declared independence, Niebuhr said:

It now seems probable that the new state of Israel will be able to establish itself the hard way, by an armed defense of its existence against Arab attacks...The Arabs were, of course, intent upon preventing this new political force from challenging their sovereignty, and also their pastoral-feudal social organization...One cannot speak of this victory as a morally unambiguous one. No political victory can be so described.<sup>33</sup>

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30. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Partition of Palestine,” *Christianity and Society* 13 (Winter 1948): 3-4.

31. Reinhold Niebuhr, editorial note, *Christianity and Crisis* 8 (March 15, 1948): 30.

32. For a lucid defense of Israel’s wars as necessary to defend the country’s very existence, see Yaacov Lozowicz, *Right to Exist: A Moral Defense of Israel’s Wars* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

33. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Future of Israel,” *Messenger* 13 (June 8, 1948): 12.

He recognized that Christian missionaries to Middle Eastern Arabs had opposed Zionist goals as “unjust invasions of the rights and securities of the Arab world.”<sup>34</sup> At the same time, he wanted America to lift its embargo on supplying Zionists with arms, noting that army strategists opposed it for fear of an Arab embargo on oil. Niebuhr seems to have been willing for America to risk losing oil for the sake of arming the Zionists (cryptically saying that lifting the arms embargo would allow Arab self-defense to be organized). He believed such a policy “would have more meaning in preventing a larger war.”<sup>35</sup>

The plight of the Arab refugees who fled or were driven out during 1947-1949 concerned Niebuhr, who saw it as a tragic outcome of the foundation of Israel. He was aware of missionary reports of atrocities never reported in American newspapers.<sup>36</sup> In 1951, he endorsed a proposal to resettle these refugees in the surrounding countries, in areas that were controlled by the United Nations. The proposal also included the development of waterways and other material resources in those Arab countries. The funding would have come from Israel and other United Nations member states. The Arab countries refused this offer.<sup>37</sup> Raphael Medoff provides evidence that the prominent American Zionist leader, Rabbi Stephen Wise, privately thanked Niebuhr for publicly supporting the idea of Arab transfer. Jews could not articulate this view publicly for fear of reprisals. Medoff suggests that Niebuhr’s support for transfer was part of what Naveh calls his “anti-utopian liberalism,” as well as being part of the post-war ethos by which the superpowers effected the transfer of Germans from Eastern

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34. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christians and the State of Israel,” *Christianity and Society* 14, no. 3 (1949): 3.

35. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Palestine,” *Christianity and Society* 13 (Winter 1948): 5.

36. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christians and the State of Israel,” 3, 4.

37. “\$800, 000, 000 asked for Arab refugees,” *New York Times* (December 19, 1951): 1, 20, cited in Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 142.



European countries for the sake of peace.<sup>38</sup> Critics may argue that Niebuhr's support for the foundation of Israel, even of a two-state solution, constituted a flight into idealism, but it is consistent with his threefold realism. The combination of European anti-Semitic persecution and Arab hostility had pushed Niebuhr to a morally and politically realist support for Zionism alongside liberal Jewish assimilation in the Diaspora.

Responding to the Suez Crisis of the mid-1950's, Niebuhr consolidated his support for Israel's survival as a Jewish-majority state. The central issue was saving Israel from annihilation by its Arab neighbors, especially by Egypt under Nasser. Niebuhr never let go of this central moral goal. He argued that the very existence of Israel was offensive to the Arab world for three reasons. First, Niebuhr argued that "it has claimed by conquest what the Arabs regard as their soil." However, this is simplistic reasoning. The early Zionists legally purchased land from absentee Arab landlords during the time of Turkish and later British rule. Niebuhr may be conflating this with the flight and expulsion of Palestinians in 1947-1949.<sup>39</sup> He believed that the second reason Israel's existence was offensive to the Arabs was his own discovery that the Arab states refused to resettle these refugees, and that Israel could not reabsorb them without endangering its security as the refugees were intrinsically hostile. This problem continues to this day. Niebuhr believed that the third reason for Arab hostility to Israel was the strongest.

The state of Israel is, by its very technical efficiency and democratic justice, a source of danger to the moribund feudal or pastoral economics and monarchical political forms of the

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38. Raphael Medoff, "Communication," 88.

39. See Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Islamic world and a threat to the rich overlords of desperately poor peasants of the Middle East.<sup>40</sup>

He believed that the survival of Israel "may require detailed economic strategies for the whole region and policies for the resettlement of Arab refugees." Recommending economic development as a remedy for Arab grievances against Zionism was ironic given that in his visit to the USSR in 1930, Niebuhr had worried that industrial efficiency was elevated above other values.<sup>41</sup> His approach to the Arab question betrays lingering traces of his employment of certain Marxist concepts originally used to criticize the Social Gospel movement for its progressivist view of history.<sup>42</sup> Stone gives a thorough analysis of Niebuhr's engagement with Marxism. He argues that "some ideas from his Marxist philosophy remain" in his later writings "but they have found independent justification in his thought."<sup>43</sup> Niebuhr's hope for economic development also was naive in ignoring the fact that the process of Israel's foundation dealt not only a socio-economic blow to Palestinian Arabs, but constituted Jewish emancipation from centuries of Islamic rule over territory claimed by Islam.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Niebuhr compared the Six Day War to the combat between David and Goliath. Like many other observers, Niebuhr understood the war as motivated by a serious intention

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40. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Our Stake in the State of Israel," *New Republic* 136 (February 4, 1957): 9-12.

41. Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 61.

42. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 55.

43. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 91.

44. Hyam Maccoby, *Antisemitism and Modernity: Innovation and Continuity* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), "Muslim Antisemitism," 150. On Palestinian support for *Zionism*, see Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917-1948* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2008).

by Israel's neighbors to annihilate it. He bluntly proclaimed that "a nation that knows it is in danger of strangulation will use its fists." At the same time, the survival of Israel was "a strategic anchor for a democratic world" and "an asset to America's national interests in the Middle East."<sup>45</sup> This "special relationship" was to be cloaked in the theologically ambiguous notion of national messianism.

### 3. America as a Messianic Nation

Niebuhr drew on the myth of America's election, which stretches back to the colonial era of US history, to forge his notion of America as a messianic nation with a mission. This myth of America as "God's New Israel" has been expressed in two different versions.<sup>46</sup> The first claims that God called people out of the old nations to America, which, from the Puritan period onwards, became the "Promised Land" given to this people and their descendants as a place suitable for the growth of a free society. America was to be "a light unto the nations," an example of a free society for other nations to emulate. Drawing on Puritan roots, this version was important in the American Revolution and lies at the root of isolationist tendencies in American politics. The second version expresses the belief that America is required to spread the fundamental values enshrined in the Bill of Rights and to spread democracy globally. This underlay nineteenth and twentieth century American Christian missions and has influenced generations of American foreign policy. Cherry argues that it has "unlovely manifestations" such as imperialism concealing national self-interest and the myth of Anglo-Saxon superiority.<sup>47</sup> Niebuhr's sense of American messianism is a critical reworking of this

second version, one that he did not originally espouse. His theology of American messianism was not closely tied to or driven by active interest in American Christian missions abroad.<sup>48</sup>

Early on, Niebuhr had taken a similar view to Berle in viewing the Jews rather than Americans as a messianic people. This was because they embodied for him the values of the Social Gospel movement better than did Protestants. The Social Gospel movement promised redemption within history through moral progress.<sup>49</sup> The reason Niebuhr dropped the link between Messianism and Jews was his encounter with Orthodox Jews who regarded literal Messianism as blasphemous. This coincided with Niebuhr's disenchantment with the whole idea of the Social Gospel as built on an overly benign understanding of human nature.<sup>50</sup> In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr denied that the Kingdom of God would ever be brought to earth.<sup>51</sup> This represented a clear repudiation of the postmillennialism of the Social Gospellers, or the premillennialism of the Evangelicals and Fundamentalists. Niebuhr never demurred from this conclusion, and this also explains why he remained silent about any possible theological significance to

45. Reinhold Niebuhr, "David and Goliath," *Christianity and Crisis* 27 (June 26, 1967): 141.

46. Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 19.

47. Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 20.

48. By contrast many other American Mainline Protestants connected foreign missions and foreign policy. See James H. Moorhead, "The American Israel: Protestant Tribalism and Universal Mission," in *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*, ed. William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 145-166. Niebuhr repudiated Christian mission to Jews in a sermon preached on 10 January 1926. This discovery was made by Dieter Splinter and is recorded in Franklin H. Littell, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Jewish People," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 6, no. 1 (1991): 45-61, citing the Reinhold Niebuhr papers, Library of Congress, Container XIV, 1, Folder 15.

49. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebooks of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Willett Clark and Co., 1929), 187-188.

50. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Return of Primitive Religion," *Christendom* 3 (Winter 1938): 1, 6.

51. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 19-21.

the foundation of Israel in 1948 or its victory in the Six Day War, as these were regarded by premillennialists as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and as signposts towards the coming millennial kingdom.

The Social Gospel movement held that Israel's end had come in the universalism of the Christian religion, reiterating the traditional Christian understanding of Israel's national supersession.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless it was impossible for any subsequent nation to be the exact counterpart to ancient Israel. James H. Moorhead articulates this attempt at balancing notions of Israel's and America's election:

Individual nations might, by providential circumstances, play a unique role in the advancement of God's purposes, and the Israel of the Old Testament might function as a paradigm for the righteous nation in covenant with God. In this sense, analogies between America and Israel were deemed legitimate and were frequently made; the comparison, however, could never be exact.<sup>53</sup>

What Moorhead does not demonstrate is that the difficulty of making and sustaining the analogy is due to the fact that whilst Israel's election is a doctrine rooted in traditions of biblical exegesis, notions of America's election obviously cannot be directly based on exegesis, but are built upon speculative providential interpretations of American history. Failure to make this distinction is also a problem in Niebuhr's own writing on the subject. In his 1943 article "Anglo-Saxon Destiny," Niebuhr spoke of America as a nation with a mission to spread democracy and international justice around the globe. This was required by the new Anglo-American alliance which "must be the cornerstone of any durable world order;" its

position was only intelligible for Niebuhr as a manifestation of "destiny."<sup>54</sup> Fleshing out the ethical implications, he compared Amos' view that Israel's destiny as elect gave it a "special peril," not a "special security," to America's supposed destiny as chosen. "God has chosen America in this fateful period of world history...The real fact is that we are placed in a precarious moral and historical position by our special mission."<sup>55</sup> Here Niebuhr's notion of America's being "chosen" by God seems to be a belief in temporary rather than eternal election, as well as based on a political and cultural rationale rather than an inscrutable divine decree. This is evident from the fact that Niebuhr utilized the notions of "chosenness" and "destiny" to account for the fact of Anglo-American global power and influence.

Niebuhr's writings from the post-war period leave the door open for the national supersession of Israel, i.e. its replacement by another nation in the providential divine economy. This is closely tied to the aforementioned increasing tendency to view America as a chosen nation. In the winter of 1948, Niebuhr questioned whether the Jewish prophets' universal salvific vision betrayed the Jewish claim to the Land.<sup>56</sup> However, he did not support this with an exegetical argument that could have opened up ecumenical and interfaith dialogue on the issue.<sup>57</sup> Addressing the First General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, he spoke of the task of Christian mission to entire nations, noting that "Jesus wept over Jerusalem and regretted that it did not know the things that

54. In *Christianity and Crisis* 3 (October 4, 1943), reprinted in Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 296.

55. Niebuhr, "Anglo-Saxon Destiny," 3.

56. Niebuhr, "The Partition of Palestine," 3.

57. Niebuhr has been criticized for not really engaging in exegetical discussion in his ethics. See Jeffrey S. Siker, *Scripture and Ethics: Twentieth-Century Portraits* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

52. Moorhead, "The American Israel," 149.

53. Moorhead, "The American Israel," 149.

belonged to its peace.”<sup>58</sup> This wording echoes the Lucan account of the Lament over Jerusalem.<sup>59</sup> This is an odd choice, given that he included no discussion of parallel Lucan passages readable as references to the sack of Jerusalem, the end of Gentile rule over it and final Jewish acceptance of Jesus. Niebuhr only reiterated traditional Christian teaching that the second Jewish exile was a punishment for rejecting Jesus, without introducing the hope and promise of a second return. By not grounding his support for Jewish return theologically, he left the door open for covert and overt Christian views that Jewish return was unjustified.

In his 1963 volume, *A Nation So Conceived*, Niebuhr unashamedly says that America is a messianic nation. Most of the nations, in Western culture at least, have acquired a sense of national mission at some time in their history. Our nation was born with it. England acquired it after the Revolution of 1688 and viewed the Magna Carta retrospectively in the light of its newly developed democratic mission. Russian messianism was derived from its consciousness of being the “third Rome.” Like Israel of old, we were a messianic nation from our birth. The Declaration of Independence and our Constitution defined the mission. We were born to exemplify the virtues of democracy and to extend the frontiers of the principles of self-government throughout the world.<sup>60</sup>

He does not acknowledge that these older nations’ sense of mission derived from national supersession of ancient Israel. Niebuhr does not provide an adequate understanding of

the convergence and divergence between older European and American notions of national election to a mission. His failure to provide theological and exegetical warrant for American messianism is a problem, because omission of theological and exegetical sources for his position deprived him of the possibility of connection and debate with other western Christian and Jewish notions of messianism. These include various interpretations of the Messiah and/or Israel as God’s suffering servant (based on Isaiah 53), Christian belief that Jesus is the Messiah anticipated by the Jewish prophets, the succession of Jewish individuals claiming to be the Messiah through the centuries, political hopes for a Messianic Age, and hopes that a contemporary restored Israel would be a messianic nation.<sup>61</sup> Given his critique of religion in relation to nationalism, Niebuhr would not have endorsed religious Messianic strands of Zionism.<sup>62</sup>

Niebuhr’s view of Israel as an outpost of western civilization in the Middle East is linked to its being a democracy, an important element of his understanding of America. He observed that the “messianic consciousness” of America was “very robust” because of the covenant in the Constitution, as well as Puritan millenarian and Enlightenment influence. America would fulfill the Reformation of Christendom. The notion that America’s national mission was to safeguard republican democracy became part of the deep fabric of national consciousness, encapsulated by Woodrow Wilson’s view of the First World War as intended “to make the world safe

58. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Witness in the Social and National Order,” in his *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), 112.

59. Lk 19: 41-44.

60. Reinhold Niebuhr, *A Nation So Conceived: Reflections on the History of America from Its Early Vision to Its Present Power* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 123.

61. For a comprehensive survey of Jewish forms of messianism, see Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Jewish Messiah* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997). For studies on biblical material and the early centuries of the Common Era, see William Horbury, *Messianism among Jews and Christians: Twelve Biblical and Historical Studies* (London: T & T Clark, 2003). On pre-Enlightenment Jewish methods of calculating the coming of the Messiah, see Abba Hillel Silver, *A History of Messianic Speculation in Israel: From the First through the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

62. Cohn-Sherbok, *The Jewish Messiah*, 153-158.

for Democracy.”<sup>63</sup> However, Niebuhr warned that such a missionary and messianic self-belief can be confusing, because nations then hide from themselves “the will to power” that they possess, behind “the veil of ideal purposes.” The danger is that the nation conceives of its mission purely in terms of its original content, a comment that reflected his strong pragmatism. Nevertheless, with a self-confidence that many today would find difficult, Niebuhr said that “fortunately the substance and content of our national sense of mission, namely the preservation and extension of democratic self-government, is more valid than other forms of national messianism.”<sup>64</sup>

Niebuhr was also troubled by Wilson’s view of the war because Wilson omitted to give clear notions of how democracy may be universally valid and neglected to inquire “in what sense it was an achievement of European culture, requiring political skills and resources which may be beyond the reach of primitive or traditional cultures.”<sup>65</sup> Still relevant is Niebuhr’s question as to whether all countries have “the elementary preconditions of community, the cohesions of a common language and race,” which helped prepare the way for democracy in Europe. The question loomed large over whether and to what degree traditional cultures had acquired the skills to “put political freedom in the service of justice.” Finally, Niebuhr was aware that around the world, peoples “desire national freedom, but have no knowledge of, or desire for, individual freedom except as it has validated itself as a servant of justice and community.”<sup>66</sup> With regard to Palestinian nationalism as well as Israel’s other neighbors, this continues to be a serious theological, ethical and political question.

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63. Niebuhr, *A Nation So Conceived*, 126.

64. Niebuhr, *A Nation So Conceived*, 127.

65. Niebuhr, *A Nation So Conceived*, 139ff.

66. Niebuhr, *A Nation So Conceived*, 150.

Ultimately Niebuhr’s cautions about American messianism ring hollow when applied to Israel because he perpetuated national supersessionism. As long as American Mainline Protestant theology ignores the doctrines of election and providence in relation to Israel, it will also be incapable of repairing this problem. These factors combined to open the door to something that Niebuhr himself would not have wanted, namely one of his students suggesting removal of Jews from the Middle East, should support for Israel conflict with American interests.<sup>67</sup> This brings us to inquire into the adequacy of Niebuhr’s theology for supporting his ethics.

#### 4. Natural Theology as the Basis of Niebuhr’s Ethics

Niebuhr’s ethics is undergirded by a natural theology,<sup>68</sup> meaning, a realist acceptance of the world external to the psyche that is bound up with a religious acceptance of transcendence, creation and historical events. In order to understand this, though, we must first understand his theology of revelation. This presumes the classic Christian distinction between natural and dogmatic theology, or in Niebuhr’s terms, general and special revelation. General revelation is learned from observation and is constituted by experiences that are inescapable in worldly terms. These experiences lead one to comprehend the presence of a transcendental reality, leading to a sense of moral obligation, a desire to be forgiven and a sense of awe and dependence. Special revelation is required to illumine general revelation. Forms of special revelation correlate with the three elements of general revelation. The sense of moral obligation corresponds to Yahweh’s covenantal relation with Israel, and the human desire to be forgiven with the life and death of Jesus Christ. Both “answers” to the human

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67. Ronald H. Stone, *Prophetic Realism: Beyond Militarism and Pacifism in an Age of Terror* (New York/London: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2005), 163-64.

68. This is set out in Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), I: 141-160.

moral sense and desire respectively are historical events in which the eyes of faith perceive divine self-revelation and demonstrate God as Judge and Redeemer. The human sense of awe and dependence grows from perceiving God as the Creator.<sup>69</sup>

Niebuhr also expresses the distinction between general and special revelation (and therefore natural and dogmatic theology) more politically as private versus public revelation. Public revelation is historical and corrects the ambiguities of general or private revelation. However, private revelation came first historically and is bound up with apprehension of external reality. There is a *dialectical* relationship between public and private revelation. This experience is what enables people “to entertain the more precise revelations of the character and purpose of God as they come to them in the most significant experiences of prophetic history.”<sup>70</sup> The nature and significance of this political division between the two forms of revelation has not been noted by Niebuhr’s critics. It is part of his overall repudiation of mysticism and pietism as anti-political and, as such, irresponsible. Clearly, for him, the history of ancient Israel constituted public or special revelation, yet he does not seem to view the rise of modern Zionism as its continuation.

Two major contemporary Christian readers of Niebuhr, Robert Song and Stanley Hauerwas, have criticized the natural

theology that underlies his ethics.<sup>71</sup> Song finds it insufficiently Trinitarian, and therefore inadequate for generating a proper Christian ethic and defending the meaningfulness of history. He thinks that Niebuhr declined to use the strongest theological case for this, namely a full account of the Incarnation as the divine assumption of human flesh.<sup>72</sup> Turning to Niebuhr’s eschatology, Song argues that its structure, coupled with Niebuhr’s reluctance to espouse a doctrine of the general resurrection, means that his theology “is ultimately focused not on God, but on the project of giving significance to human finitude,” and in particular to prompting people to “accept their historical responsibilities gladly.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, ethics and politics are driving theology. Song concludes that Niebuhr’s God is “more a principle of transcendence than the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”<sup>74</sup> Song thus unsubtly assumes that a theology that is not fully Trinitarian cannot be a witness to the God of the Old Testament; rather, it is necessarily reduced to being a philosophy.

At the root of Song’s criticism is inattention to Niebuhr’s Hebraic turn to the Old Testament as source for Christian realist ethics, in contradistinction to what he perceived as the unworldly asceticism of Jesus. Niebuhr taught his students that the Old Testament had given rise to two ethical tendencies: prophetic messianism, fulfilled by Christianity, and legalism, which he believed to have been both resurrected by secular Jewish Zionism as well as fulfilled in the coming of Christ and

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69. Noting that for Niebuhr these historical events are the key to history’s meaning, Robert Song correctly refutes Paul Ramsey’s charge that Niebuhr’s theology was simply derived from anthropology. Robert Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 54, citing Paul Ramsey, *Speak up for Just War or Pacifism: A Critique of the United Methodist Bishops’ Pastoral Letter “In Defense of Creation”* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 114.

70. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man I*: 127, 70.

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71. Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, 114; Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (London: SCM, 2002), 115-116, n. 6.

72. Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, 79.

73. Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, 82, citing Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, II: 332.

74. Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, 83.

the eschatological promise of universal peace.<sup>75</sup> Jesus himself was for Niebuhr “presented more as a messianic figure rather than as a teacher of ethics.”<sup>76</sup> There is a sharp distinction between the perceived legalism and realism of the Old Testament, and the prophetic messianism and unworldly asceticism of Jesus and the New Testament on the other. Essentially, Niebuhr wants to say that legalism was fulfilled both in the coming of Christ and in secular Jewish Zionism. His belief that Jews do not need to become Christians meant that he was unlikely to use the doctrine of the Trinity to undergird his support for Zionism, e.g. by arguing that its legalism was part of a hidden work of Christ as fulfillment of the Old Testament law. Niebuhr’s reluctance to use the doctrine of the Trinity a lot is probably also due to apologetic reserve, deemed necessary when speaking publicly about matters of social justice with non-Christians, including and especially Jews.

In his Gifford Lectures on Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas makes the charge that Niebuhr’s “god” was merely William James’ sense that “there must be more.”<sup>77</sup> Hauerwas thinks Niebuhr has not adequately responded to Gustave Weigel. Weigel had criticized Niebuhr for believing in the Trinity “symbolically but not literally,” accusing him of believing that the Trinity is little more than an idea attempting to describe our “experience” of God. Hauerwas expresses surprise that in his pastoral work, Niebuhr did “use trinitarian language without apology.”<sup>78</sup> He refuses to take Niebuhr entirely at his word when he wrote that he was incompetent in “nice points of pure

theology.”<sup>79</sup> The reason is that he insists that Niebuhr *really* assumes these are “Jamesian over-beliefs that cannot be true or false.” This is necessary for Hauerwas’ “Barthian” strategy of rendering Niebuhr a Feuerbachian whose theology is really reducible to anthropology. Hauerwas later makes the revealing admission that Niebuhr’s doctrine of creation signifies that “the world in its totality [is] a revelation of His majesty and self-sufficient power.”<sup>80</sup>

Niebuhr observes, and I confess I have never understood what he means, that the biblical doctrine of creation is itself not a doctrine of revelation but the *basis* for the doctrine of revelation. He attempts to explain this claim by observing that the doctrine of creation perfectly expresses the basic biblical idea that God is at once transcendent and in an intimate relation to the world. But why do you need the doctrine of creation to express the transcendence and immanence of God? All you need is [William] James’s account of the “more.”<sup>81</sup>

What Niebuhr most likely means is that the doctrine of creation expresses his notion of general revelation, and that our apprehension of special revelation (what Hauerwas calls in Barthian fashion “the doctrine of revelation”) depends on our prior acceptance of general revelation in history. Hauerwas is being both mischievous and cynical when he proceeds, despite professing not to understand Niebuhr on this matter, to defend to the hilt his view that Niebuhr is only really a Jamesian. This is his way of discrediting Niebuhr for adhering to a natural theology. It should be obvious that “the Jamesian ‘more’” is not enough for Niebuhr, because he does not want to support mystical and pietistic versions of Christianity with their desertion of history and politics. This is why he cites Romans 1:20 to

75. Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 58ff.

76. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr*, 62.

77. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 122.

78. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 128, n. 31, citing Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Hazards and the Difficulties of the Christian Ministry,” in *Justice and Mercy*, ed. Reinhold Niebuhr and Ursula M. Niebuhr (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1974), 129-130.

79. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 114.

80. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, I: 132.

81. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 123, n. 22.

defend his dialectical notion of revelation as both private and public, which Hauerwas himself cites! The relevance of Hauerwas' critique of Niebuhr for Zionism is that Hauerwas wants to set up a parallel with the debate between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner on natural theology in the 1930s.<sup>82</sup> Hauerwas plays the role of Barth with Niebuhr cast as Brunner. This has obvious political resonance, because whilst Barth feared that Brunner's theology could be used in complicity with the anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist Nazi regime in the 1930's, Hauerwas' tendency is to worry that Niebuhr's natural theology is used to underwrite certain kinds of Christian ethical support for the American state and notions of western civilization.<sup>83</sup>

Robert Song argues that Niebuhr's theology is dubious because it is serving "the less than ethical requirements of civilization."<sup>84</sup> This requires further elaboration, for the concept of civilization can be linked back to a reading of Genesis as being concerned with the twin rise of agriculture and civilization. In reality, both Genesis and historical research show that agriculture and civilization rose together, and are thus ethically intertwined. Debates over the foundation of contemporary Israel included debates about the viability of developing Israeli agriculture. This matters theologically because in speaking of the return of the Jews to the Land, Ezekiel speaks of the Gentiles saying, "This land that was desolate has become like the Garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified."<sup>85</sup> This is how the Gentile nations will know that the God of Israel is the Lord of all

creation. Eden is here a type of the Land of Israel. As a garden, it is inextricably linked to the project of civilization. Song's critique misses the real problem, which is lack of serious attention to the very concept of civilization by Christian ethicists. Niebuhr would have been very suspicious of its rejection, given his lifelong view that America is "spiritually a part of Europe," and that the fall of European *civilization* would adversely affect it.<sup>86</sup> Christian ethics would in his eyes need to absolve itself of the charge of retreat into the sphere of the church as community of virtue.

The "Barthian" rhetoric of Song and Hauerwas' criticisms promises more than it actually delivers. Unlike Niebuhr's contemporaries, these critics show little awareness of Niebuhr's Hebraic turn. Also, Song and Hauerwas are respectively British and American ethicists unhappy with any Christian ethic that will support "civilization" and the state. In practice it means that Niebuhr tends to be repudiated on methodological grounds without an adequate appreciation of the link between his method and his substantive commitments.

Niebuhr saw Jewish nationhood as one of the oldest and most legitimate in history, and that it was granted in "a religious covenant experience."<sup>87</sup> This contradicts Eyal Naveh's view that Niebuhr's Zionism was only based on pragmatism.<sup>88</sup> It was based on respect for an ancestral claim, not on a dogmatic belief. Niebuhr argued that Christian doctrines were based on "biblical myths" that had universal significance: creation, fall,

82. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 115-116, n. 6; 123, n. 23.

83. The fact that Niebuhr supported Zionism on the basis of his natural theology, whereas Barth supported Zionism on the basis of a doctrine of election and opposition to the kind of natural theology espoused by Niebuhr, goes unnoticed by Hauerwas. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/3* (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 211-226.

84. Song, *Christianity and Liberal Society*, 84.

85. Ez 36: 35.

86. Reinhold Niebuhr, "America and Europe" in *Young Reinhold Niebuhr: His Early Writings, 1911-1931*, ed. Willam G. Chrystal (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1977), 141.

87. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow* (New York, 1946), 75-76; *The Self and the Drama of History* (New York, 1955), 40, 87; *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (New York, 1959), 161-162.

88. Eyal Naveh, "The Hebraic Foundation of Christian Faith According to Reinhold Niebuhr," *Judaism* 41, no. 1 (1992): 42.



redemption and love. Myth was the dialectical counterpart of logic and rationality, expressed as story, proposition, image or symbol, grasping “the world as a realm of coherence and meaning without denying the facts of incoherence.”<sup>89</sup> The covenant was not one of these myths. Perhaps he believed that its being connected both to the particular history of ancient Israel and to the church threatened to disrupt the universal appeal and intent of his apologetic theology. Proof of this is found in his book *Faith and History*, published in 1949, where he compares Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation with whom Yahweh made His covenant, with Abraham Lincoln as the “father” of America,” thus relativizing the uniqueness of the Jewish Abraham and of the covenant made with him. He also criticizes the Jewish prophets for being unswervingly nationalist.<sup>90</sup> This echoes his supersedionist shift from Israel to America as the messianic nation.

### 5. The Critique of Natural Law, Nationalism and Religion

Conceiving of Jewishness and Zionism in secular national terms enabled Niebuhr to circumvent debates about the covenant of righteousness that Christians had traditionally used to deny theological validity to Jews returning to the Land before first becoming Christians. Niebuhr managed to connect Zionism to what he perceived as the ethics of the Old Testament, which held nationalism and internationalism in tension. Consequently, the texts themselves require a theological realist reading that does not claim that the entirety of the divine will for Israel’s history can be worked out in advance. Basing Zionism on Jewish nationality also enabled Niebuhr to set aside potential Christian theological demands for a coherent system justifying the movement.

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89. Naveh, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Non-Utopian Liberalism*, 34.

90. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 23-24, 106.

Niebuhr begins his essay “Coherence, Incoherence and Christian Faith” by stating the realist claim that “the whole of reality is characterized by a basic coherence. Things and events are in a vast web of relationships and are known through their relations.”<sup>91</sup> He argues that coherence must not become the basic test of the truth of an intellectual system for four reasons. First, some things and events are unique, and thus cannot fit into any system. Unique moral situations exist “that don’t simply fit into some general rule of natural law.” We may understand the founding of Israel as one such situation, given that Niebuhr’s theology did not adequately account for the promise of the Land to the Jews and that Niebuhr realized that Zionist and Arab claims to the Land clashed. The second reason that coherence must not be the main criterion of truth is that “realms of coherence and meaning stand in rational contradiction to each other.”<sup>92</sup> Here he has in mind theological doctrines such as Trinity and Christology, philosophical attempts to relate being and becoming, essence and existence. This gives away Niebuhr’s anti-metaphysical “Hebraic” tendency and shows why he shied away from developing a fully-fledged systematic theology for his work. Third, some things stand above every system, so man is both in and above nature. Fourth and related, genuine human freedom does not fit into any system. In line with my argument for the first reason given above, a fitting instance of this can be seen in the reality of Jews declaring independence in 1948 and exercising genuine freedom outside the bounds of “Christendom.”

Niebuhr’s suspicion of metaphysics accords with a reluctance to formulate a doctrine of providence, the doctrine Christians often used to deny Jewish aspirations to return to the

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91. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), 165.

92. Niebuhr, *Christian Realism*, 166.

Land.<sup>93</sup> Providence could easily be joined to natural law thinking to defend the socio-political *status quo* as based on the divine will. John Milbank has criticized Niebuhr for allegedly appropriating Stoicism into his reconstruction of natural law.<sup>94</sup> John Burk astutely refutes Milbank on this, noting that Niebuhr actually wanted to pull Protestant ethics away from the excess of Stoicism found in older orthodoxies.<sup>95</sup> This was precisely because he perceived “Hellenic” thinking as more cosmic and static, less interested in the historical dimensions of human life. Niebuhr had already written in 1935 that the law of love actually “suggests possibilities which immediately transcend any achievements of justice by which society has integrated its life.”<sup>96</sup> Given that at this time Niebuhr was becoming supportive of Zionism, his very support may be viewed as an instance of the “law of love” at work. As Burk explains, Milbank erroneously understands Niebuhr as positing a conflict between the essential (love) and the existential (human life), in a replay of the Stoic conflict between what is ideal and what is real. Actually what interests Niebuhr are conflicts within the real historical realm of human life. This is precisely why his support for Zionism cannot be dismissed as a flight into idealism based on passionate personal conviction.

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93. Niebuhr nevertheless insisted on positing providence in order to remind Christians that history is not within our control. However, avoiding a fully-fledged doctrine comports with his theological realist refusal to understand specific events and programs as unfolding a single divine purpose. See his “Providence and Human Decisions,” *Christianity and Crisis*, (January 24, 1949): 185-186.

94. John Milbank, “The Poverty of Niebuhrism” in his *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 233-254.

95. John Burk, “Moral Law, Privative Evil and Christian Realism: Reconsidering Milbank’s ‘The Poverty of Niebuhrism,’” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 2 (2009): 221-228.

96. Burke cites Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 144.

Niebuhr’s ethical critique of religion and nationalism aids our understanding of his approach to Zionism. He himself acknowledged Israel’s right to choose to be a secular or religious society. He preferred the former because he feared religion’s ability, especially when it was espoused as “true belief,” to identify itself with God’s exclusive will on a particular issue.<sup>97</sup> Niebuhr did not give a theological grounding to his ethical criticism of nationalism, because he feared that introducing religion into the conflict would absolutize the issues and render compromise impossible. In other words, it would compromise his threefold realism. He became conscious of this in the 1930’s when, as part of his reconstruction of natural law theory, Niebuhr went beyond Marxism in allowing that the interest of the dominant economic classes within nations accentuate conflicts, but are not the only reason for them. Niebuhr saw the conflict between Jews and Arabs in British Mandatory Palestine as an example of such a conflict. There were two key factors: the natural will-to-live of two collective nationalities and religions; and the economic differences between the feudalism of the Arabs and the technical civilization which the Jews were able to introduce into Palestine.

The participants cannot find a common ground of rational morality from which to arbitrate the issues because the moral judgments which each brings to them are formed by the very historical forces which are in conflict. Such conflicts are therefore sub- and supra-moral.<sup>98</sup>

Niebuhr’s analysis here is clear-sighted, for he recognizes the mutually exclusive nature of the each party’s claim to the land. He also demonstrates how a realist approach would need to be pragmatic, requiring his reconstruction of

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97. Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 97-98.

98. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 126-127.

natural law precisely because the liberal tendency to ground natural law only in reason will not succeed in this conflict. He even prefigures contemporary dimensions of the conflict.

The effort to bring such a conflict under the dominion of a spiritual unity may be partly successful, but it always produces a tragic by-product of the spiritual accentuation of natural conflict. The introduction of religious motives into these conflicts is usually no more than the final and most demonic pretension. Religion may be regarded as the last and final effort of the human spirit to escape relativity and gain a vantage-point in the eternal. But when this effort is made without a contrite recognition of the finiteness and relativity which characterizes human spirituality, even in its moments of yearning for the transcendent, religious aspiration is transmuted into sinful dishonesty. Historic religions, which crown the structure of historic cultures, thus become the most brutal weapons in the conflict between cultures.<sup>99</sup>

Here we arrive at the limits of Niebuhr's legacy for supporting Israel. He was insufficiently immersed in theology, as opposed to ethics, to be able to imagine ways in which the different parties could envisage mutual coexistence by at least partial use of religious discourse. His reconstruction of natural law privileged individual freedom, yet this is precisely what is so problematic to Israel's neighbors where Islamic fundamentalism now thrives.

Niebuhr placed modern Israel and Zionism outside his theology, because he wanted to communicate with several audiences who did not share similar theological beliefs. Consequently, the centrality of Zionism to his Christian realism has not been appreciated and his reasoning for Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state has not been passed on to the Mainline Protestant churches. Instead the idea of the binational state

has reappeared, this time on the grounds of Palestinian Liberation Theology. In addition, Ronald H. Stone, a prominent student of Niebuhr, has suggested that should the long-envisaged two-state solution not succeed in abating Islamist terrorism, Jews should be removed from the Middle East and live in the United States.<sup>100</sup> This contradicts Niebuhr's threefold realism, which was *moral* and took into account America's relation to Europe as well as the Middle East. It is incredibly naïve to think that dismantling the state of Israel would succeed in lessening Islamist terrorism. Terror would still strike against western countries, precisely because abandoning Israel would be perceived as the "defeat" of the alleged "Zionist-Crusader conspiracy." America would presumably still need to learn that Niebuhr's vision of her as "messianic" was heretical. Christians and others supportive of Israel's existence living in Middle Eastern countries would face innumerable problems. Unfortunately prominent Niebuhr scholars have simply ignored his Zionism; so far I have not found rebuttals of Stone's argument in academic literature. Ultimately, Niebuhr lost the opportunity to articulate a non-supersessionist Christian theology that could undergird Mainline Protestant support for the State of Israel. One result is today's Mainline Protestant ambivalence towards Israel.

99. Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 126-127.

100. Ronald H. Stone, *Prophetic Realism*, 165.