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The Land of Israel (*Eretz Yisra'el*) in Jewish and Christian Understanding

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Since the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948 and especially since the end of the Vatican Council II and the 1993 Fundamental Agreement between the Vatican and the State of Israel, the topic of the Land of Israel has played a critical role in the dialogue between Christians and Jews. The focus on the State of Israel is partly predicated on the importance of the Land in our two traditions. In an effort to clarify the role of the Land of Israel in a religious perspective, it is necessary to examine the sources of a land tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures. This study focuses on this issue from a Roman Catholic perspective, but has implications for the broader Christian community. At the end of this essay, a proposal is made for a sacramental understanding of the Land in the Catholic tradition.

Land Tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures

Our search for an understanding of the Land of Israel must begin with the Scriptures.¹ For a Catholic, the Hebrew Scriptures are “an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture. Its books are divinely inspired and retain a permanent value” for God’s covenant with Israel “has never been revoked.”² Furthermore, since the 1965 Vatican Council II declaration *Nostra Aetate* affirms that the eternal covenant of God with Israel is unbroken and remains valid, we Catholics view the Jewish people in a new light. Subsequent church documents – e.g. Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 (1974) and Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Ro-

¹ The following is a development of my article, “Biblical Land Traditions,” *The Catholic World* 234 (Jan/Feb, 1991), 4-10.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2nd ed. 2000), 121, which also cites the Vatican Council document, *Dei Verbum*, 14. The Catechism adds: “Christians venerate the Old Testament as the true Word of God. The Church has always vigorously opposed the idea of rejecting the Old Testament under the pretext that the New has rendered it void (Marcionism)” (123).

man Catholic Church (1985), both from the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews; the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), and the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001) – cause us to take to heart, even more intensely, the American Bishops message in their Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations (1975), that Christians should learn “by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious tradition.” The *Notes* cite John Paul II, who calls upon catechists and preachers “to assess Judaism carefully and with due awareness of the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today.”

The Vatican *Notes* also speak of the religious attachment between the “Jewish people and the Land of Israel as one that finds its roots in the Biblical tradition and as an essential aspect of Jewish covenantal fidelity to the one God.” If, as the *Notes* claim, this bond is in the Biblical tradition, the question we need to ask of the Hebrew Scriptures is: Is there an essential territorial dimension to “Judaism”?³ That is, is there a special relationship among the God of Israel, the People of Israel, and the Land of Israel? And is that relationship primary and essential or is the territorial claim of Judaism accidental and peripheral?

Let us begin to answer these questions by noting that some of the ideas about land in Hebrew Scriptures are common to early Ancient Near Eastern religions as well as to archaic religious beliefs; other ideas about land are particular to Israel. We will look first at what Israel shared with other Near Eastern religious traditions.

³ Strictly speaking “Judaism” is the development of Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. This transformation of Jewish life was initiated by the Pharisees under the leadership of Johanan ben Zakkai. See Jacob Neusner’s popular treatise, *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

The belief that there were sacred and profane spaces and that the god(s) dwelt in one particular land and place was common to all archaic peoples. That there were certain privileged spots where the gods manifested themselves, be it a hill-top, a stream, a grove of trees or through a person as an oracle or shaman was also common to the archaic peoples of the Ancient Near East. Post-biblical Judaism ultimately came to believe that Israel was the center of the earth, Jerusalem was the center of Israel, Mt. Zion the center of Jerusalem, and the holiest place of all was the foundation stone of the earth whereon reposed the Holy of Holies and the Holy Ark. Of course these assignations of holy places are not the exclusive custom of Israel; other peoples similarly considered places to be holy to them.⁴ In the modern age we have fugitive instances of this tendency, now secularized, as, the “sun never setting on the British empire.”⁵

If the concept of the holiness of a land and the holiness of a place is not exclusive, from whence derives the uniqueness of the God of Israel and the identity of the People of Israel and its Land? One scholar contends that the “*land theme* is so ubiquitous that it *may have greater claim to be the central motif in the OT than any other, including ‘covenant’* [emphasis added].”⁶

⁴ See Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 12-17, and his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (World Publishing Company, 1958, 1963), 367-387.

⁵ As a secularized “center of the earth,” all clocks are calibrated on Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) in England. Also, the word “China” means “center of the universe.” Examples could be multiplied from the Babylonians, Canaanites, Assyrians, et al.

⁶ W. Janzen, “Land,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 4:146; see complete article for extensive coverage of the topic and bibliography, 143-154.

The first theme to be distinguished in the Bible after the “pre-history” of Genesis 1-11 is that of *the Land as a promised land*.⁷ Abraham is promised the land five times, beginning with an account in the earliest written tradition, the Yahwist (or J) tradition, dated in writing from the time of the Davidic and Solomonic empire in the tenth century BCE.⁸ God says to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-4a:

Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you. Abram went as the LORD directed him.

⁷ For a more comprehensive treatment of the Land in the Hebrew Scriptures, see “The Land in the Old Testament,” in Alain Marchadour and David Neuhaus, *The Land, the Bible, and History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 9-62.

⁸ Traditional dating from Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, translated by Bernhard W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 263. See treatment/development of the traditions in the Pentateuch in Noth’s *A History*, and for an excellent, more popular yet sound treatment, see Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, Second Edition (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), which also contains the history of the development of multiple authors and traditions in the Pentateuch and presents the best modern rationale for the documentary hypothesis. Friedman says that the J narrative “might conceivably have been written as early as the reign of David or Solomon” (86), but he thinks it more likely the J author wrote between 848 and 722; whereas the E narrative was probably composed between 747-722 (87, 265). Some other modern authors hold to the traditional dating of a tenth century J and a mid-ninth century E: Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26, and Bernhard W. Anderson, et al., *Understanding the Old Testament*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2007), 20, 266. John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) delineates the history of the documentary hypothesis with its dating and the challenges to the traditional point of view, but ventures no opinion of his own (59-64).

The second promise, also from the J tradition, is given after his return from a sojourn in Egypt and his separation from Lot (Gn 13:14-17). In a later passage, Gn 15, probably a redaction of the J tradition and the Elohist (or E) tradition (a tradition from Northern Israel put into writing sometime after J), recounts a covenant that is made between God and Abraham:

When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking brazier and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces. It was on that occasion that the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River (the Euphrates), the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gishathites, and the Jebusites (Gn 15:17-21).

The same covenant relationship is reconfirmed in the E tradition in the story of the "sacrifice of Isaac" (Gn 22:1-18).⁹ What is essential in these passages is "the recognition that that promise [of the Land of Israel] was so reinterpreted from age to age that it became a living power in the life of the people of Israel." It operated "as a formative, dynamic, seminal force in the history of Israel."¹⁰

⁹ Although traditionally attributed to E, the story is a redaction of the E and J traditions inasmuch as YHWH occurs in verses 11-14 where Isaac is saved and again in verses 16-18; in the rest of the passage God is referred to as Elohim. See Friedman, *Who Wrote The Bible*, 256-257. In the Jewish tradition this story is called the *Akedah*, the binding of Isaac. See how the various traditions have interpreted this story in Robin Jensen, "How Jews and Christians See Differently [Gn 22:1-18]," *Bible Review* 9 (1993) No. 5, 42-51. In the earliest Muslim tradition, found in the *Qur'an*, the son is unnamed and for the first three centuries opinion was divided over whether it was Isaac or Ishmael. Present-day Muslims contend it was Ishmael.

¹⁰ W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 18.

The content of the promise to Abraham (Gn 12) consists of progeny, blessing, and a land. A later redactor may have joined the theologies embedded in Gn 12 and 15 to connect the Abraham and David traditions; many have argued that in King David the Abrahamic covenant found its fulfillment in the creation of the Davidic empire and the secure establishment of Israel as a people on a land.¹¹

The next stage of development occurred when the Deuteronomistic (or D) tradition joined together the promise of the Land made to the patriarchs with the tradition of the Law given at Sinai. The commandments (Hebrew: *mitzvot*) are regulatory, that is, they provide for how one lives on the Land. They are also conditional, that is, if Israel the People disobey the commandments she can be expelled from Israel the Land (see Dt 28-29). The redemption of Israel begun in the Exodus experience finds its completion in the possession of the Land, i.e., God's mighty acts wrought in Egypt have as their conclusion the entry into and settlement on the Land. As von Rad comments, "in this work [Dt] the land is undeniably the most important factor in the state of redemption to which Israel has been brought, and on this basis the nation is to expect an additional gift from Yahweh – 'rest from all enemies round about.'"¹² Many times Deuteronomy stresses that Israel did nothing to deserve this Land; it was only God's desire to give her the land and because of His faithfulness to His promises that Israel possesses it. Therefore,

¹¹ The covenants with Abraham and David and their interrelation are paralleled in other ancient near eastern practices and documents from the second and even third millennium. See "The Covenantal Aspect of the Promise of the Land to Israel," in Moshe Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹² Gerhard von Rad, "There Remains Still a Rest for the People of God: An Investigation of a Biblical Conception," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. by E.W. Trueman Dicken (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 95.

one must not fail to recognize the theological justification given for Israel's possession of a land inhabited by others—and thus also for her dispossession of the former inhabitants. Their wickedness and God's gracious gift of the land in fulfillment of his promises form a rationale for Israel's possession of it. At the same time and over against this, however, is the Deuteronomic self-criticism of Israel's life and obedience and the assertion that Possession of the land is not automatic or eternal . . . Israel cannot justify her *original* possession of the land on the basis of her behavior; she must, however, *justify or preserve her continuing and future possession on the basis of her behavior both in terms of the worship of God and a proper use of the possession which is her salvation gift* [emphasis added].¹³

In Deuteronomy there are found two strong traditions: 1) a *nomadic* model¹⁴ based on the figure of Abraham, who is the

¹³ Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "The Gift of God: The Deuteronomic Theology of the Land," *Interpretation* 21 (1969) 461.

¹⁴ Irrespective of how one interprets the "historical" Abraham and the validity of the antiquity of these traditions/promises, it is clear that the Book of Deuteronomy so understands Abraham in this way. Doubters of Abraham's historicity and antiquity of these traditions include Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, BZAW, 133 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel. I. The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1-23*, JSOT Supp., 55 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), and John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). For rejoinders to these positions, see "Face to Face: Biblical Minimalists meet their Challengers," *BAR* 23 (July/August, 1997), No. 4, 26-42, 66 (an exchange between Niels Peter Lemche and Thomas Thompson in disagreement with William Dever and P. Kyle McCarter). The issues are sketched out in the perceptive article by Hershel Shanks, "The Biblical Minimalists: Expunging Ancient Israel's Past," *BR* 13 (June, 1997), No. 3, 32-39, 50-52. For a detailed articulation of the issues see William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). Dever holds that the ancestors of the "Israelite Peoples" were Canaanites along with some pastoral nomads and small groups of Semitic slaves escaping from Egypt. An excellent source of information on these issues is in the recent book by

model of a wandering people, leaving home and land to go to a place promised by God, and 2) a *sedentary* model, based on an image of Israel as a people enjoying the gifts of God and living a life of particular service in this particular land. These two traditions overlap, with the consequent result in Deuteronomy of the requirement that Israel continue to justify her continued existence in the Land by doing good deeds – especially those of a proper religious worship and the building of a community of justice including both the Israelite and the resident alien (*ger*) in their midst.¹⁵

In the Priestly (or P) tradition, put into final written form during the exile in Babylon between 587-539 BCE,¹⁶ the promise to Abraham in Genesis 17 takes on a different cast. In the covenant of circumcision God says:

Between you and me I will establish my covenant, and I will multiply you exceedingly. When Abram prostrated himself, God continued to speak to him: My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a host of nations. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you. I will maintain my covenant with you and your descendents after you. I will give to you and to your descendents after you the land in which you are now staying, the

Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). The views of Thompson and Van Seters remain marginal and unconvincing to most Catholic and Jewish biblical scholars.

¹⁵ Many authors (including Miller, n. 12) attempt to apply this Deuteronomic theology to the current conflict between Israelis and Palestinians; while the biblical traditions do have a voice in promoting justice in the Land, one cannot make a facile application of continued land-tenure to the perceived behavior of present-day antagonists (see n. 18 below).

¹⁶ Freedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, convincingly locates the origin of the written priestly tradition at the time of the Judean King Hezekiah (715-687 BCE), see 162-173; 210-216.

whole land of Canaan, as a permanent possession; and I will be their God... Thus my covenant (of circumcision) shall be in your flesh as an everlasting pact. (Gn 17:2-8,13)

God's words to Abraham in this Priestly tradition are *an unconditional statement*. The Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 17 means that Israel's election and its possession of the Land can never become conditional upon obedience to the Law; it cannot be annulled by human disobedience.¹⁷ These covenant promises of land and blessings are repeated with each of the succeeding patriarchs.

In contrast with the last two patriarchs there is no question of personal merit or reward. The covenant with Isaac is explicitly rooted both in the promise to and the merit of his father (Gn 26:3-5 [J]). Isaac in turn conveys "the blessing of Abraham," that he "possess the land which God gave to Abraham" (Gn 28:4) to his own son. And, in the subsequent covenant-making encounters between Jacob and God, the

¹⁷ This biblical view is in obvious contradiction with what was just said about the Deuteronomic tradition. As Catholics we hold that all of Scripture is inspired, i.e., that it is all God's Word and speaks to us. We do not hold to a canon within a canon (i.e., that certain portions of Scripture are more God's Word than other parts of Scripture), nor that certain parts of the Bible are not (or no longer) God's word. This heresy was condemned long ago. What then are we to make of contradictory statements? Because the Scriptures (both Hebrew and Christian) were conditioned by the historical situation of the time, they were God's Word for the particular needs and situation of the community. Applying this understanding to these texts, we could say that the promise of the absolute possession of the land probably came in periods when Israel's ownership and possession of the land was threatened or when she was in exile and needed encouragement, reassurance, and the consolation that their God was still with them and that they would be returned to or preserved in the land. Conversely, threats of deprivation of the land were given by God in times of hubristic certainty of their possession of the land – when Israel is feeling invincible and sure of itself on its own power.

first two patriarchs again serve as the point of reference for transmission of the Land of promise.¹⁸

Thus the tradition of the Land as promised and given to Israel is attested to in the traditions embedded in the Torah in all the major periods of Israel's life from the time of David and Solomon (10th century BCE) through the period of exile in Babylon (586-539 BCE). Whether one can trace it back prior to David depends on the position one takes on the historical reliability and age of the patriarchal narratives. The most ancient promise, that of Genesis 12:1-4a, can be reasonably associated with a (semi-)nomadic life style: promises of land, progeny, and protection (blessings and curses) are essential for this type of existence. That land-promise put into writing during the time of David, associated with earlier promises to Israel's (presumed) ancestors indicates, at minimum, their belief in their God's ownership of the earth and all the lands thereof, and His beneficence in giving Israel this gift.¹⁹ But it is clear that God's *unconditional gift of the Land* does not carry with it the *unconditional right to live on the Land*: because both Deuteronomy and numerous prophets make Israel's continued residence on the Land dependent upon certain ethical requirements.²⁰

¹⁸ Betsy Halpern-Amaru, "Rewriting the Bible: Land and Covenant" in *Post-Biblical Jewish Literature* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 12.

¹⁹ Israel's origins before David are beyond the scope of this treatment. For current discussion see: William G. Dever, *Recent Archeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), especially Ch.1: "Artifacts, Ecofacts, and Textual Facts," 1-36, and William G. Dever, "How to Tell a Canaanite from an Israelite," in Hershel Shanks, ed. *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (Washington: Biblical Archeological Society, 1992), 26-85. For a maximalist view, see Provan-Long-Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) and the opposing minimalist view in Philip R. Davies, *The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007). For a comprehensive collection of essays on all sides of this issue, see V. Philips Long, ed. *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

²⁰ This is the view of the biblical authors; it does not provide an easy resolution to the right to reside on the Land in the post-biblical period.

The first distinctive characteristic of the concept of Israel's Land in the Hebrew Scriptures is that it is the *Promised Land*; the second is that the Land is *cultic*, it is God's own possession, and religious obligations flow from this fact. As Leviticus 25:23 says: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; and you are but aliens [*ger*] who have become my tenants." The Hebrew Scriptures also tell us that the offering of first fruits to God was because He was the true owner of the Land; that the Land should keep a Sabbath-year rest once every seven years; and that the Land was holy because it was separated out ("chosen") and consecrated to the LORD.

One of the reasons given in Scripture for the displacement of the "native" inhabitants in the Land (Canaanites, Amorites, Jebusites, et al) is "rooted in the moral quality of the occupants' life in the Land rather than in the patriach's merit."²¹ But what applied to these prior inhabitants applies to Israel's life in the same Land. Because of the wickedness of the "natives" the LORD drove out the former inhabitants and gave this land to Israel (Dt 1:8). Yet Jeremiah says, during the time of King Josiah of Judah (ca. 627 BCE), "when I brought you [Israel] into the garden land to eat its goodly fruits, you entered and defiled my land, you made my heritage loathsome" (Jer 2:7). The LORD further says that He "will at once repay them [Israel] double for their crime and their sin of profaning my land with their detestable corpses of idols, and filling my heritage with their abominations" (Jer 16:18). However, those who take the Land away from Israel by conquest fare no better in the prophet's denunciations!

[The LORD] speaks jealously against Edom and other nations "who gave *my* land to themselves as a possession" (Ez 36:5). Joel 1:6 speaks of "a nation that has come up against *my* land." Enemies will attack the land in vain. Thus we read

²¹ Halpern-Amaru, *Rewriting*, 16.

concerning Assyria in Is 14:25: "I will break the Assyrian in *my* land, and upon my mountains trample him under foot." Jl 2:18 says: "[the LORD] became jealous for *his* land, and had pity on his people." And Jl 4:2 (3:2) predicts that the nations will be judged in the valley of Jehoshaphat "because they have divided up *my* land." It is said by God, "I will bring you [Gog, a symbol of Israel's enemies²²] against *my* land, that the nations may know me" (Ez 38:16).²³

The primary thrust of the pre-exilic prophets was that the people would be punished with exile for the sins of covenant-infidelity in the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah. But although punishment and exile were deserved by Israel for her sins, it was also unthinkable to the prophets that Israel should be permanently deprived of her Land. The exilic addition to the end of the Book of Amos promises a return:

I will bring about the restoration of my people Israel; they shall rebuild and inhabit their ruined cities. Plant vineyards and drink the wine, set out gardens and eat the fruits. I will plant them upon their own ground; never again shall they be plucked from the land I have given them, say I, the LORD, your God (Am 9:14-15).²⁴

²² Gog may have been a reference to an historic enemy in Anatolia; even during Ezekiel's lifetime it became a symbol for the attack against Israel of its enemies, whom God would intervene to defeat. See *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* 19:15; 20:89-90.

²³ Ottosson, *erets* [land], *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) vol. 1, 402. See entire entry for thorough discussion, 388-405.

²⁴ The prophet Amos, from the (southern) Kingdom of Judah, preached to the (northern) Kingdom of Israel ca. 760 BCE; however, the end of the Book (9:11-15) is generally held to be a later addition by disciples of Amos, redacted during or soon after the exile in Babylon. See James Mays, *Amos: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 13-14, 163-168; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos*, Hermenia, trans. Waldemar Janzen, et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 350-355 and Francis I.

The most eloquent prophet of a return to the Land of Israel is Ezekiel, who prophesied during the exile in Babylon. His vision of the dry bones coming back to life bespeaks Israel's return to her land. The LORD says:

I will deliver them from all their sins of apostasy, and cleanse them so that they may be my people and I may be their God. ...They shall live on the land which I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where their fathers lived; they shall live on it forever, they, and their children, and their children's children, with my servant David their prince forever. I will make with them a covenant of peace; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them...My dwelling shall be with them: I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Ez 37:23, 25-27).

After the return from exile, Israel never enjoyed the glorious reign of peace, prosperity, and in-gathering of all exiles that the prophets had proclaimed. Israel's history continued to be one of domination by foreign powers – Persian, Greek and Roman. Yet even in exile the entity of the Land continued to play a central role in Judaism.

W.D. Davies concludes his study of the territorial dimension of Judaism by noting that “just as Christians recognize ‘the scandal of particularity’ in the Incarnation, in Christ, so for many religious Jews...there is a scandal of territorial particularity in Judaism. The Land is so embedded in the heart of Judaism, the Torah, that – so its sources, worship, theology, and often its history attest – it is finally inseparable from it.”²⁵

Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *Amos*, Anchor Bible, 24A (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 885-926. For the contrary view that 9:11-15 comes from Amos, see Shalom M. Paul, *Amos*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 288-295.

²⁵ W.D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 125.

Land Tradition in the Christian Scriptures

At this point it is clear that the Land of Israel was a basic component of Jewish belief and religious practice as found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Walter Brueggemann argues that “Land is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith.”²⁶ As a Catholic Christian I am certainly called upon to acknowledge this bond between the People Israel and *Eretz Yisra'el* and their continuing attachment to the land through post-biblical history up to the present. A two-fold question still remains for us Christians: Does Christian Scripture sever this bond in light of the Jesus experience or does this bond endure, and does the Land have any special significance for us as Christians?

Most Christians believe that we have passed beyond the claims of and need for the particularity of and commitment to any particular land – our commitment is to the person Jesus, and *not* to a Land. Without yet attempting to affirm or deny this frequently held belief, let us examine the references in the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, regarding the Land.

The earliest existing writings from Jesus' first followers are the letters of Paul dating from 44 to 58 CE.²⁷ These letters are particularly interesting because Paul is a Jew born in Tarsus, the Hellenistic capital of the province of Cilicia (in modern day

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 3.

²⁷ Earl Richard argues for a conflation of two letters to the Thessalonian community (our canonical I Thess) with the earliest probably written in 44/45 and the later letter in 49/50; see his “Early Pauline Thought,” in Jouette M. Bassler, ed., *Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 39-51, and his commentary, *I Thessalonians*, in *Sacra Pagina Commentary Series*, ed., Daniel Harrington, SJ. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996). Paul's last writing was his letter to the Roman(s) community while he was in prison in 58 before he was taken to Rome. The seven certainly-authentic letters of Paul are: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians and Romans, probably in this order, with Philemon written (perhaps) in the mid-50's.

Turkey). He describes himself as having been a Pharisee (Phil 3:5) before he became a follower of Jesus. He probably had been a follower of Rabbi Shammai (d.30 CE), one of the most rigorous interpreters of the Torah in his day.²⁸

Nowhere in Paul's writings is the idea of the Land of Israel *explicitly* mentioned. This is not surprising, since one of Paul's primary concerns was with the bonding together of his Gentile converts with the Jewish followers of Jesus. But Romans 9-11 gives an eloquent defense of the continuing validity of God's covenant with Israel and its continuing election. He tells the Gentile Christian community in Rome that they are wild olive shoots grafted on to the cultivated tree which is Israel. It is the roots that support the branches and not the other way around (Rm 11:11-24).

Thus, it is Israel that supports the Gentile community grafted on to the olive tree and not the reverse. In an earlier passage Paul says that his own people "are Israelites; theirs is the adoption, the glory, the covenants [emphasis on plural added], the giving of the law, the worship, and the *promises* [emphasis added]; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah" (Rm 9:4-5). Foremost among the "promises" are the Land promises made to Abraham in Genesis as well as the prophetic messianic expectations, including the rule of the Messiah, the return of political self-rule over the Land of Israel, and a great age of peace for all humankind – and including the acknowledgment of the importance of God's rule and His presence on Mt. Zion in the Temple.

Paul also places great stress upon Abraham as the paradigm for our faith in Romans 3-4 and Galatians 3-4; his primary

²⁸ See the development of the proposal that Paul was a follower of Shammai in Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 28. Of course, the most rigorous interpreters of all were the Essenes.

thrust is to assure his pagan converts that it is by faith in Jesus the Jew, as Christ [Messiah, anointed one], that they become members of the covenant community and children of Abraham, and not by circumcision and food laws. As a first-century Jew, Paul approaches the biblical text in the Torah in a linear historic mode; namely, he posits that since the Law was given on Sinai many centuries after the time of Abraham and since Abraham's faith made him righteous in God's eyes (Gn 15:6),²⁹ Paul's pagan converts become members of the covenant community of Israel through faith, and not by circumcision.³⁰ Because Abraham's faith affirmation is the key for Paul to our relationship with God in Christ and because constituent to this faith affirmation are the promises of progeny, land, and protection, the importance of the Land of Israel remains part of the Abrahamic faith and promise. Brueggemann couldn't state it more strongly when he says:

Abraham imagery apart from the land promise is an empty form. No matter how spiritualized, transcendentalized, or existentialized, it has its primary focus undeniably on land. That is what is promised, not to the competent deserving or to the

²⁹ It is two chapters later, in Gn 17, that circumcision is required as a covenant sign in Abraham's flesh and in the flesh of his whole household. It is interesting to note that although Ishmael was also circumcised (Gn 17:26 [P tradition]) indicating that he is in covenant with God and even though he, too, is given the blessing of progeny and nationhood, implying territorial possession, the P tradition implies that God's covenant will be "maintained" only with Isaac (Gn 17:21 [P]; 26:12-16 [J]).

³⁰ This is why, in the Christian tradition, Abraham is the model of our faith and our father in the faith: Abraham was bonded (covenanted) with God in an act of faith (Gn 15:6) and not by doing the "deed" of physical circumcision (Gn 17). Since according to Paul's historical understanding, Abraham's act of faith preceded the act of circumcising it is not necessary to circumcise Gentiles (since Abraham himself was a Gentile called by God). Although Paul claims that God directly revealed this to him (Gal 1:11-12) he also makes the above scriptural argument for his practice (Gal 3:11-12).

dutifully obedient, but freely given (as in the beginning) to one who had no claim. . . .³¹

On other occasions Paul was at pains to demonstrate that no division existed between the Christian-Jewish community at Jerusalem and his diaspora non-Jewish Christian communities. Paul exhorts the Gentile community at Corinth to set aside monies and when Paul arrives he will send emissaries with the collection to the Jerusalem community (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9). This action probably was based upon 1) an understanding that Paul would preach to the non-Jews while Peter, James and John would minister to their fellow Jews in Jerusalem (Gal 2:6-10), and 2) Paul's contention that his Gentile converts were in complete communion with the Christian-Jewish community in Jerusalem. We also know that the Jewish Jerusalem followers of Jesus continued their distinctive Jewish practices, including daily praying in the Temple (Acts 2-3).

Although Paul did not require pagans to become Jews through commonly accepted Second Temple conversion practices before they accepted Jesus as Messiah,³² he was at pains

³¹ Brueggemann, *Land*, 166. Not all agree with this position. W.D. Davies says that "The Gospel substituted for the Torah, Jesus, the Christ, who was indeed born and bred in the Land, but who became the Living Lord. . . . Thus, once Paul had made the Living Lord rather than the Torah the center in life and in death, once he had seen in Jesus his Torah, he had in principle broken with the land. 'In Christ' Paul was free from the Law and therefore, from the land" (Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 219-220).

³² The plurality of Christian-Jewish/Gentile missions is far more complex than most interpreters imagine. See Raymond E. Brown, "Not Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity, but Types of Jewish/Gentile Christianity," *CBQ* 45 (1983), 74-79. His theory can be explained briefly as follows: There are four groups of Christian-Jews with their Gentile converts, from the most strict and demanding in their requirements to join this community of followers of Jesus, to the most "lax" in their requirements. **Type 1** required full observance of the Mosaic law including circumcision; originated in Jerusalem and found success in Galatia, Philippi, and perhaps elsewhere (see Gal, esp. ch. 2; Phil 3 and Acts 15, esp. vss. 1 and 24). This group were opponents of Paul. **Type 2** did

to ensure that there was a common covenant bond between Jesus' Jewish believers and his pagan converts. The content of this religious identity is made explicit in Romans 9:4-5 and Gentile converts, by virtue of their bonding with Israel, are heirs of this same content. Included in this identity as people of the covenant is a religious (and political) bond to the Land of Israel for all Christians – both Gentile and Jewish believers.

After Paul's death³³ Christian perspective toward the Land of Israel changes radically with the four Gospels. Mark's Gospel's final composition was ca. 70 CE and probably written in Rome

not require circumcision, but did require some Jewish purity laws and the food laws (see Acts 15:20; Gal 2:12 on marriage; 1 Cor 5:1 = Acts 15:20, 29). It originated also in Jerusalem with James (the brother of the Lord as the leader of the community) and Peter as the leader of the twelve along with John as the "pillars" of the community (Gal 2:9). It was dominant in Antioch (thus Saul/Paul's earlier opposition to the "Way" since they did not require circumcision), Rome, Pontus, Cappadocia, and sections of the Province of Asia (see Gal 2:7 versus Acts 15:7), the Cephas party in Corinth (see 1 Cor 12:12; 9:5); also 1 Pt to Gentile Christians in northern Asia Minor. Note that Peter acquiesced in the food laws and they were enforced at Antioch (Acts 15:23). This type of "evangelical missionary program" was a middle ground between type 1 and type 3. **Type 3** did *not* require circumcision nor the food laws, but probably did require other purity laws especially regarding marriage (1 Cor 5:1 = Acts 15:20,29). It originated with Paul and his companions who departed from Antioch. After 49 CE Barnabas and John Mark aligned themselves with Type 2 and broke with Paul. In the Pauline Type 3 Gentile mission, there was *no* break with the cultic practices of Judaism (Feasts, Temple, etc.), *nor* were *Christian-Jews* who were part of Paul's mission required to abandon the TORAH and CIRCUMCISION. **Type 4** did *not* require circumcision, food laws, or any abiding significance to the Jerusalem Temple. They spoke only Greek and were thoroughly acculturated to the Greco-Roman world. It probably originated in Jerusalem and spread to Samaria with Philip (Acts 8:4-6) and to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19-20) in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. It developed into a more radicalized type of Christianity found in John's Gospel and the Book of Hebrews, where "Judaism" is treated almost as another religion.

³³ Paul died in Rome, probably by beheading which was the form of death for Roman citizens, in the year 62.

for the persecuted Christians there.³⁴ It has as its focus the coming of the Kingdom of God. It was Jewish expectation that God's lordship would be definitively manifested at the end of history with a universal acknowledgment of His rule by all peoples and nations. In order not to inflame the Roman authorities, the author was careful not to emphasize the political and military functions of the expected Jewish Messiah. In fact, he goes out of his way to make clear that Jesus conceals his messiahship during his earthly life.³⁵ Although in this Gospel, Galilee becomes the place of revelation and redemption while Jerusalem is the place of Jesus' rejection, there are no grounds given to elevate Galilee to a land of central importance to Christians.

The Gospel of Matthew was written in the late 80s CE by a Jew who accepted Jesus as Messiah. This person was probably a leader in the local community – perhaps in Caesarea, the capital of Roman government of the province of Judea.³⁶ This Gospel represents a predominantly Christian-Jewish perspective;³⁷ thus, we would expect to find great theological impor-

tance given to the concept of the Land of Israel. However, two events intervened which negated this possible development. First, in the year 70, after four years of Jewish revolt against Roman rule, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Roman general Titus and his tenth legion. We know that at that time the Christian-Jews fled from the city and refused to defend it against the Romans. Second, after this catastrophe, the Pharisaic leaders gathered at Javneh to develop what has become Rabbinic Judaism – a religious way of life that now functioned without the Temple, priesthood, and sacrifices. They met as a rabbinic academy from about 75-135 CE, in this period becoming less amenable to the theology and community of the Jewish/Gentile messianic sect of Jesus' followers.³⁸ It was in this milieu that Matthew attempted to assert

the law" (Mt 5:18). This Gospel is a sustained polemic against the synagogue "down the block" which probably threw out the Christian-Jews from their midst and this "tract" was written in defense of their orthodoxy as followers of the Halakah of Rabbi Jesus. See the excellent commentary on these issues by Harrington, *Matthew*, 17-22, 81,83-84.

³⁸ Earlier views of the so-called "Council" of Javneh considered there to have been a definite decision and split with the nascent Christian-Jewish sect shortly after 70 CE. Recent works have suggested that this split wasn't complete until after the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE). See Vincent Martin, *A House Divided: The Parting of the Ways between Synagogue and Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995). Martha Himmelfarb demonstrates that even in the late fourth century and beyond, there were positive relations between Jews and Christians in Eastern Christianity; see her "The Parting of the Ways Reconsidered: Diversity in Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations in the Roman Empire: 'A Jewish Perspective'" in *Interwoven Destinies: Jews and Christians Through the Ages*, ed. Eugene J. Fisher (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 47-61. In a related essay, "The Parting of the Ways: A View from the Perspective of Early Christianity: 'A Christian Perspective'" in the same book, 62-73, John G. Gager agrees with Himmelfarb, saying: "The hostility that characterizes much of early Christian literature on Judaism does not tell the full story – though it does tell the official one...[that is, it follows] the contours of power and authority within early Christian circles" (71). He continues: "But among early Christians of an ordinary sort, many seem to have experienced no difficulty in combining allegiance to Jesus with respect for Judaism that sometimes took the form of direct participation in the life of the synagogue. Ultimately...inevitably, those in positions of power and authority won out" (72).

³⁴ Although there were certainly earlier stages of composition of this Gospel and some authors identify its place of origin as Alexandria, Egypt, or perhaps in Northern Syria, or even in the Galilee. See discussion in John R. Donahue, SJ, and Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina, 2 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 44-46.

³⁵ Biblical scholars have called this perspective the "Messianic Secret" in Mark's Gospel. See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 153.

³⁶ Although most commentators place the composition of Matthew in Syria, Harrington makes a good case for its composition in Caesarea Maritima or even one of the cities of the Galilee [Sepphoris?]. Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), 8-10. For the history of Caesarea and Sepphoris and the roles they played in the Jewish Revolt of 66-70 CE and later, see *The Archaeological Encyclopedia of the Holy Land*, eds, Avraham Negev and Shimon Gibson, Revised and updated ed. (New York: Continuum, 2003), 102-107, 454-456.

³⁷ It is only the Jesus of Matthew that says he has "come not to abolish [the Torah or the prophets] but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17) and that "until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from

the Christian-Jewish community's Jewish roots and to demonstrate its continuity with the Torah, the prophets, and the tradition. Both because of Roman rule, and new directions the Pharisees were beginning to take at Javneh, the Land becomes a moot question for Matthew's Gospel.

The Gentile author of Luke-Acts addressed a primarily Gentile audience when he wrote from Antioch in Syria between 85-90 CE. The main theme in his work is the relationship of Christianity to Judaism – especially Christianity's growth from a small Jewish sect to reaching (in the Book of Acts) "the ends of the earth." By the time of Luke's writing Gentiles greatly outnumbered Jews in the Church. This fact underscores the reason why there is little interest in the theme of the Land of Israel: The Gentiles had no roots in Jewish tradition and religious practice and thus no attachment to the Land. Luke does not explicitly separate the Christian message from the Land or consciously negate it, but the end result is the same: its absence from his Gospel. Luke concentrates on the Word of God coming from Jerusalem and from the Land of Israel to the Gentile world focused in Rome, and from there to the "ends of the earth." Jerusalem and the Land of Israel are only important because they are the place of origin for Jesus and God's Word; they have no abiding significance for Christians.

Of the Christian Scriptures, the Gospel of John is probably the most radical in its severing of the importance of the Land from Christian belief. Written in the late 90s CE, this Gospel presents special problems to interpreters because of its apparent hostility to Jews, their practices, their Temple, and Jerusalem. The prologue (Ch. 1) of John establishes Jesus as the incarnate Word (the Logos) of God. This Logos is no longer attached to the Land, as was the Torah, but to the Person who came to His own land, and was not received. The abandonment of any special relationship with the Land is seemingly completed in the Gospel of John.

It is clear from our brief survey that in the Hebrew Scriptures the importance of the idea of the Land plays a central role but that in the Christian Scriptures the role the Land plays is at best ambiguous. Why? Because, at a very early date Gentiles, for whom interest and commitment to the Land had no previous history, became a majority in this Jewish messianic movement. With the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Christian-Jewish communities declined in the Land of Israel and with the diminishing of these believers there was no voice for the enduring bond with the Land of Israel.³⁹ Also, although early Christian-Jews proclaimed the advent of the Messianic Age and the future return of Jesus as Lord, before this came to pass a new reality appeared on the scene. Before the New Israel on Mt. Zion and the earthly and cosmic rule of Jesus in his return took place there "emerged a community, in response to Jesus, the Messiah, which dispensed with the Oral Law as unnecessary to salvation. Outside the land, outside the Law there was a messianic activity."⁴⁰ Although Christian-Jews tried to reconcile this activity with traditional expectations (a struggle reflected in Paul's letters and Matthew's Gospel), Pharisaic/Rabbinic Judaism ultimately rejected this new movement. Early Christians, probably by the time of Luke, if not earlier, and certainly by the time of John, were moved by the question: "What shall we do now that the End is delayed? How are we to understand our Faith in the light of the emergence of these Gentile Christians, who are without the Law and outside the land but yet share in the redemption?"⁴¹

³⁹ Nevertheless, Christian-Jewish communities continued to exist well into the 2nd century. See discussion of the Pseudo-Clementines by J. Neville Birdsall, "Problems of the Clementine Literature," in James D.G. Dunn, ed. *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Way A.D. 70 to 135* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 347-361.

⁴⁰ Davies, *Gospel and the Land*, 371.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 373.

Was the ultimate result the breaking of the link between covenanted peoplehood and the Land of Israel⁴² for the Gentile Christian movement? Or, rather, did the Land take on a different kind of importance for this Gentile Christian movement?

Land as “Holy Land”

The focus of this section is to consider the meaning and significance that the Land of Israel has had for Christians; it is not our concern to consider the meaning that the Land has had and continues to have in the Jewish tradition.⁴³

Surprising, our story does not end at the time of the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE) with the separation into “Church” and

⁴² It is possible to continue to establish a continuous link with the centrality of the Land in Jewish life from the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE until the present. Lawrence A. Hoffman demonstrates how this link continues in Jewish blessings and prayers, especially in the prayers before and after meals; see “Introduction: Land of Blessing and ‘Blessings of the Land’” in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) 1-23. Other articles in this volume trace the theme of Land from the biblical, hellenistic, tannaitic, medieval, and modern periods. Also see the extensive bibliography by Lena Skoog, “Selected Bibliography on the Land and State of Israel,” *Immanuel* 22/23 (1989) 215-229 for articles, books, and documents by Christians and Jews on this topic. My particular interest here is the Christian (not Jewish) attachment to the Land of Israel; while the theology of the Hebrew Scriptures forms part of the Christian confession, my primary focus is our attachment (or lack thereof) to the Land from the period of the Christian Scriptures to the present.

⁴³ There are many excellent articles and books that treat this subject. See, e.g., Harry M. Orlinsky, “The Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel: Cornerstone of the Covenant between God and Israel” in Hoffman, *The Land of Israel*, 27-64, and other articles in this collection; Martin Buber, *Israel and Palestine: History of an Idea* (London, 1952); Ze’ev W. Falk, “The Notion of Promised Land: Searching for Clarity,” *SIDIC* 12:3 (1979), 23-25; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967); Dan Bahat, ed., *Twenty Centuries of Jewish Life in the Holy Land: The Forgotten Generations*, 2nd edition (Jerusalem: The Israel Economist, 1976); Uriel Tal, “Jewish Self-Understanding and the Land and State of Israel,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 26 (1971), 351-363.

“Synagogue,” and the dismissal of any importance of the Land of Israel in Christianity. Even though the link with the Covenant/People/Land of Israel appeared to be sundered, a Christian connection with the Land continued unbroken. From the beginning there were permanent Christian communities established in the Land and very soon it became a place of Christian pilgrimage.

As true as it is to say, as does Fr. Edward Flannery, that most Christians are ignorant of the history of anti-Semitism,⁴⁴ it is even more true to say that most Christians are ignorant of the history of Christian presence in the Land of Israel – even in this present century!

The first known pilgrim to the land of Israel for whom we have documentary evidence is a bishop from western Asia Minor, Melito of Sardis, who in the second century made a journey to this land “to the ‘place where these things had been proclaimed and accomplished.’ His purpose in going there was to obtain ‘precise information’ about the books of the ‘Old Testament.’ He wanted to know the number as well as the order of the books that Christians shared with the Jews.”⁴⁵

Even prior to the beginning of the Christianization of the Roman Empire at the time of the emperor Constantine and the building of churches in the Holy Land at sacred Christian sites under his orders, pilgrims were journeying to the Holy Land. In the third century “pilgrims had begun to visit Palestine ‘for prayer’ and ‘investigation of the holy places.’”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Edward Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*, revised and updated (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 1-2.

⁴⁵ Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 109.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, citing places of pilgrimage prior to 320 CE in H. Leciery, “Pelerinages aux lieux saints,” *Dictionnaire d’Archeologie Chretienne*, 14.1, cols 68-70.

Both Origen (185-254) and Jerome (340-420) took up residence in the Land of Israel to study the Scriptures, compile manuscripts of biblical texts, write commentaries, and live out their lives there. The first historian of Christian history, Eusebius (260-339), Bishop of Caesarea, also wrote “a book on biblical place names (*Onomasticon*), several other biblical studies, a commentary on the book of Psalms (fragmentary), and a complete, verse-by-verse exposition of the book of Isaiah.”⁴⁷ With the discovery of the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem, “located not in the heavens but in Judea,”⁴⁸ Eusebius was the first to sense a “profound shift in devotion that was taking place in his day and to lay the foundations for a Christian idea of the holy land.”⁴⁹

While this work of scholarship and study was going on, Christian pilgrims were undertaking the difficult journey to the land of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection. As it was clear to them that “Christ’s sojourn on earth, it seems, had sanctified not only the specific places where he lived and died, but the very soil of the land itself.”⁵⁰ Consequently, we have a substantial record of journeys made by pilgrims from the fourth to the eleventh century.

Some of these writings are first person accounts and others are secondhand reports of pilgrim journeys. What is clear is that in the first thousand years of Christianity, irrespective of how the Land was understood from the Scriptures, there was a continuing importance given to journeying to the Land as a pilgrim. And this has continued to the present day.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 125.

Although, unlike Judaism and Islam,⁵¹ Christianity does not mandate its adherents to make a pilgrimage to any place, Christian pilgrims have come to the Holy Land from the early centuries to the present day.

In viewing contemporary Catholic pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Catholic groups come to the Holy Land throughout the year, and while many come as individuals or in families the larger proportion come in groups active as organizations – often-times in parish communities. In a study of modern pilgrimages Glenn Bowman notes:

In large part Catholic pilgrimage is inspirational;...[that is, people] come to the Holy Land to be renewed in their faith so that they can subsequently reengage their ordinary lives with renewed energy and a renewed sense of purpose. The idea that pilgrimage serves as a revitalization of spiritual energies drained by involvement in the labors of the secular world makes Catholic pilgrimage much more individuated than that of the Orthodox; instead of a cosmological celebration of the community of mankind in Christ, Catholics engage, as individuals or in groups bound by a shared purpose, in a process of being repossessed by the power that gives meaning to their personal lives and labors.⁵²

⁵¹ “The Jewish Law demanded that every male should make pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year (Passover, Feast of Weeks, and Tabernacles; Ex 23:7; Dt 16:16). During the Second Temple period even diaspora Jews sought to observe it (*Mishnah Aboth* 5.4; *Mishnah Ta’anit* 1:3; Jos. Wars 6.9). After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD pilgrimages to the [Western] Wall became occasions of lamentation. In Islam it is a sacred duty, [once in one’s lifetime,] to make the pilgrimage to Mecca (Qur’an 2.196; 3.97).” Michael Prior, “Pilgrimage to the Holy Land Yesterday and Today,” in Michael Prior and William Taylor, eds., *Christians in the Holy Land* (London: World of Islam Trust, 1994), 170.

⁵² Glen Bowman, “Contemporary Christian Pilgrimage to the Holy Land,” in Anthony O’Mahony, ed., et al, *The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land* (London: Scorpion Cavendish, 1995), 302-303.

Bowman goes on to note that Catholic groups are generally given great amounts of secular and historical information about the holy places, both inside and outside them, by knowledgeable Catholic and Israeli guides who instruct the pilgrims and speak of the significance of what, by tradition, is believed to have happened on that site. For Catholics the most significant act is to celebrate the Eucharist at the holy sites. Though these liturgies of the Eucharist do not differ in essence and structure from Eucharists celebrated in their own home communities (save for perhaps special commemorations or readings associated with the site), in the Eucharistic celebrations on these holy spots God is felt to be especially and intensely present in ways that do not occur when the Eucharist is celebrated in their home churches. The power of these celebrations would seem to imply a sacramentality connected with the sites and thus inextricably to the Land itself also, making more intense the reality of God's presence.

So, the question arises, how might we consider the "Holy Land" in light of a theology of presence? How might we re-image its meaning in light of the history of Christian presence in the Land and the experience of pilgrimages to the Land?

"Holy Land" as Sacrament of Encounter

Catholics have often been called "sacramentalists," which means that we are a church based on sacrament and word.⁵³ "The Church' is the People that God gathers in from the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ's Body."⁵⁴ What is the meaning of Christ's presence here, and how does this take place in the Church?

⁵³ That is, the Word of God – found in the Scriptures, proclaimed to the Church and lived out in our daily lives.

⁵⁴ *Catechism*, no. 752.

The early Greek and Latin literature spoke of *mysterion* and *sacramentum* from which we get our modern term, sacrament. Originally *mysterion* "meant something secret, something hidden, something not fully manifest. This sense of *mysterion* is retained in both...Testaments. In the Book of Daniel *mysterion*⁵⁵ refers simultaneously to the plan of God for the end times and to some obscure revelation of this plan. In Paul *mysterion* refers to the divine plan to save all...in Christ, a plan determined by God from the beginning and kept secret, but now revealed through the Spirit, through the prophets, through the apostles."⁵⁶

The third century Alexandrians, Clement and Origen, first began to adapt the mystery language to ritual practices of Christians, and by the fourth and fifth centuries this language usage was fully established. The Latin translation of the Greek word, *mysterion*, was *sacramentum*, which referred to sacred realities proclaimed and realized in symbols in general and particularly in sacramental symbols.⁵⁷ This development continued through Augustine (fourth century) until it was more precisely defined in the twelfth century by Hugh of St. Victor as a sign that signifies something while also efficaciously conferring it because "by a visible reality seen externally, another invisible, interior reality is signified."⁵⁸ It was Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, who gave the definition and explanation of sacrament that continues in the Church until the present day.⁵⁹

Following the Second Vatican Council's decree *Dei Verbum*, describing "the sacramental character of revelation" and implic-

⁵⁵ As found in the LXX of Daniel 2:28, 29 and 47.

⁵⁶ Michael G. Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 29.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-45.

itly also the “description of the sacramental character of the whole economy of salvation”⁶⁰ many modern theologians have attempted to expound the fuller implications and meaning of the direction of the Council. We can now say that in

contemporary Catholic theology the use of the word sacrament has been extended. It is applied to Christ, who is described as the sacrament of God [Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*]. It is applied also to the Church, which is described as “a kind of sacrament” [*Constitution on the Church*], “the sacrament of unity” [*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*], “the universal sacrament of salvation” [*Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*]. The application of [this] word to Christ and to the Church and to the individual Christian is an analogical use of the word. Christ, the Church, the Christian and many elements of the Christian life are called sacraments, legitimately, insofar as they are in some way akin to but still quite different from the ritual sacraments, signs and instruments of the grace of God mediated to men and women. The growing extension of the analogical use of the word sacrament marks a *renewed emphasis on the traditional Catholic theme that the grace of God is mediated to men and women in created reality* [emphasis added]...God always speaks and communicates himself, the Catholic tradition holds, in created “deeds and words.”⁶¹

Each of the traditional seven sacraments has been re-examined in light of the new understandings and insights of modern theology, biblical studies, and other modern disciplines. More recently some sacramental theologians have begun to look at sacraments “based less on the history and theology of the rites than on the actual experiences of women and men at

⁶⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁶¹ Ibid., 47.

prayer.”⁶² This approach, used in the early Church and practiced most extensively in the fourth century is called *mystagogy*.⁶³ This practice is “a form of instruction that attempted to plumb the depths of the rites that had been experienced for their spiritual import. First the experience, then the teaching...”⁶⁴ While this approach is found in the great teachers of the fourth century, it is ultimately grounded in Scripture. St. Paul is using the approach we have called mystagogic when he challenges those who died to sin in baptism to no longer live in sin (Rm 6:1-4) and to the Gentile Christian community in Corinth to properly live out their Eucharistic experience in the way they treat the poor in their community (1 Cor 11:17-33).

In this approach “the experience of participants is also always in the forefront.”⁶⁵ The primary focus of mystagogy is the community’s sacramental life – especially baptism, confirmation and Eucharist, but the whole sacramental life of the community is appropriate for mystagogical reflection.⁶⁶ “Personal experience is [an] indispensable focus of mystagogy. Thus, imagination and memory are critical to the mystagogical process.”⁶⁷

Applying this mystagogical process to a re-examination of the Eucharist includes an attempt to understand the sense of real presence in terms more meaningful to, and resonant with, our present-day experience of personal communication. These views in no way deny the reality of Jesus’ presence in Eucharist

⁶² Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ, *Saying Amen: A Mystagogy of Sacrament* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), xx.

⁶³ The golden age of mystagogical preaching is exemplified in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose of Milan, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom and sometimes even in Augustine. Ibid., 10.

⁶⁴ Hughes, *Saying Amen*, 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.

as risen Lord, but are a modern attempt to explicate the meaning of Christ's real presence in contemporary idioms.

In this purview Schillebeeckx posits "that the real eucharistic presence cannot be isolated from the real presence of Christ in the whole liturgical mystery and in the souls of the faithful.... [Thus] the eucharistic presence in the consecrated bread and wine is ordered to the *ever more intimate presence of Christ* [emphasis added] in the assembled community and in each member of the church."⁶⁸

These new ways of reflecting on sacraments, especially that of the Eucharist, led Pope Paul VI to issue his encyclical *Mysterium Fidei*, in which he says that he wishes "to review at greater length the...doctrine which was briefly set forth in the constitution *De Sacra Liturgia*,"⁶⁹ of the ways in which Christ is present in His Church. Those ways are, in order: 1) the presence of Christ first of all in the Church at prayer ["where two or three are gathered in my name"]; 2) in the Church performing works of mercy; 3) in general, with us and in us on our pilgrimage through life; 4) as the Church preaches or proclaims the Word of God; 5) in the governance of the People of God through pastoral care; 6) "in a manner still more sublime" as the Church

offers the Sacrifice of the Mass; 7) as the Church "administers" the sacraments; and finally 8) "there is yet another manner in which Christ is present in His Church, a manner which surpasses all the others; it is His presence in the Sacrament of the Eucharist." Then Paul VI adds a very important note on Eucharistic presence vis-à-vis other forms of presence: "this presence [in the Eucharist] is called 'real' – by which *it is not intended to exclude all other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too* [emphasis added], but because it is presence in the fullest sense."

If indeed there are multiple senses of Christ's presence, as the *Constitution on the Liturgy* and Paul VI teach, let us reflect upon what this might mean regarding a new Christian imaging and understanding of the "Holy Land."

At the level of personal communication there are various degrees of presence. For example, when we think of someone dear to us and bring them to mind there is a sense in which they are present to us. There is a more intense sense of presence when we receive a letter or an e-mail from them, and an even more intense sense of presence when we speak to them over the phone. The most intense experience is, of course, a person-to-person meeting with someone. If, as we have demonstrated, a sacrament is the mediation and encounter of a Christian with God (in fact, Schillebeeckx speaks of Christ as *the* "sacrament of our encounter with God"), then perhaps the different kinds of encounter with Christ, as well as the degrees of intensity of these encounters as described above, have a parallel with a pilgrim's experience in the Holy Land. When one brings to mind the Land where the great events of our redemption took place – whether by reading scripture or meditating – there is a sense of the presence of these events and an experience of Christ's presence being brought about by the Land. Seeing pictures of and reading books about the Land can also increase the sense of Christ's presence being mediated

⁶⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, "Transubstantiation, Transfinalization, Transignification," in R. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB, ed., *Living Bread, Saving Cup* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 179-180. Schillebeeckx clarifies his thought in this article, originally delivered in French during the fourth session of Vatican II to Fathers of the Council at *Domus Mariae* in Rome. Regarding these new theories Schillebeeckx says that they "do not deviate from the [Tridentine] dogma [of real presence] itself. Rather, they try to present that dogma in existential categories that are at once ontologically profound and more intelligible to the people of our day" (Ibid., 184).

⁶⁹ Paul VI cites the "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," 1:7. Interestingly, all eight types of presence the Pope cites are also in the Vatican Document on the Liturgy, but in a different order. The order he gives in his encyclical appears to be in ascending order of intensity since of the last he says that the Eucharistic presence is in "a manner which surpasses all the others."

through the Land. The most intense sense of presence, of course, is making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, visiting and praying at the sites where Jesus lived and walked and the early Church took root. (It has been said that tourists pass through the Land, but the Land passes through the pilgrim.⁷⁰)

From this description of our experience of reading, reflecting, viewing pictures, and finally personally visiting the Holy Land, we can experience the essential role that the Land plays in making Christ present to us. In a re-imagining of our relationship to the Holy Land we can say: *As Christ is the sacrament of our encounter with God, the Holy Land is a sacrament of our encounter with Christ.* As surely as Christ is mediated in multiple ways and present in multiple ways as taught by the Second

Vatican Council, Paul VI and various theologians, so he is most assuredly present and mediated in the Land we call Holy. We can call this mediation of Christ in the Holy Land, a sacramental encounter; thus, *the Holy Land, itself, becomes for us a sacramental experience.*

This sacramental experience neither invalidates nor supersedes the Jewish experience and covenantal connection to the Land of Israel, but adds a new dimension of experience and meaning specific to Catholic Christians, who, since Vatican Council II, are called upon to understand, appreciate, and affirm the reality of the Jewish experience in the 21st century. This, I would argue, is especially true of the Jewish experience of their connection to the Land of Israel.

⁷⁰ A slight adaptation of the statement attributed to Cynthia Ozick, "A visitor passes through a place; the place passes through the pilgrim" in Wilken, *Land*, 110.