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The Bible and the Holy Land: Pastoral Letter from Jerusalem

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The Bible and the Holy Land: Pastoral Letter from Jerusalem

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I. Hope in the Midst of Conflict

Spirits burdened by the wars or conflicts between peoples and nations have been uplifted in recent months, especially in the Near East. A new peace process between Israel and its neighbours, including direct negotiations with Palestinian leaders, requires consummate statesmanship and also an adjustment in the hearts of all, moving from fear and hatred to hope and generosity. The Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and Israel (December 30, 1993) has implications for Catholics and Jews everywhere. Within this context, the Latin-rite Patriarch of Jerusalem has promulgated a lengthy pastoral letter in November 1993. An English version is published in *Origins* 23 (January 20, 1994) pp. 541-555. In the context of an interfaith conference held in Jerusalem from February 1-4, 1994 the Patriarch gave an address entitled "Religious Leadership in the Holy Land." This text will be studied at the end of the essay.

In the pastoral letter Patriarch Michel Sabbah celebrates explicitly the new hope for "peace and reconciliation between our two peoples, Jewish and Palestinian, and with all the Arab world" (#1). The sad events of prolonged conflict "must not consume the past and present . . ." but now the struggle will be to maintain and build peace with justice (#1). This letter about the Bible intends to encourage reading and understanding of God's Word, "in order to make it the object of meditation and prayer" (#2).

The poignancy of praying in the Eucharistic liturgy the psalms and readings about Israel and its neighbours has been particularly graphic for Christian communities in the Near East over recent decades. "He smote the Egyptians in their first-born, for his mercy endures forever" (Psalm 136:10). Imagine praying such texts in an Egyptian Church or monastic community during the times of war in 1967 or 1973!¹ In past centuries the trick was to make all accounts of conflict into an allegory of the soul's struggle in the service of God. Modern biblical scholarship

has eschewed such methods because there are virtually no controls to guide the interpretation of texts. Although some scholars show little interest for the implications of their work for the community of faith today, the Church's leaders must be attentive to the needs of the faithful. The clergy and teachers everywhere should be reminded frequently of the responsibility to be sensitive when speaking of Jews and Judaism lest "they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ" (Vatican II, Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* #4). Any pastoral letter on the Bible should interest all Catholics, but especially one from Jerusalem, where people live in such close proximity to biblical revelation and to the Jewish people in their own state. Patriarch Sabbah is very conscious of this privilege and of the challenge to foster an understanding of the Bible that will be faithful to the Church's teaching and responsive to the special needs of his community. Committed to the goal of unity among Christians, the Patriarch believes "that the Church of Jerusalem and the Holy Land . . . has a unique contribution to make together with the Churches in the region and with the universal Church" (#5). He hopes to be heard "by Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters as a contribution to coexistence and peace, respecting the beliefs of each person . . ." (#5).

II. Central Questions for Palestinian Christians

The letter addresses three questions: What is the relationship between Old and New Testaments? How is violence that is attributed to God in the Bible to be understood? What influence do the promises, the gift of the land, the election and covenant have for relations between Palestinians and Israelis?

After sketching the history of salvation, Patriarch Sabbah rejects the ancient Marcionite heresy that rejected the Jewish Scriptures; he stresses the unity between the Testaments, stating that the Old Testament does not lose its value. At the same time, it receives "a new light through this fulfilment by Christ, the incarnate Word of God" (#35). At this point there might have been a paragraph on the continuing importance of the Jewish Scriptures for the Jews, with an indication that Christians can learn from them.²

How can one deal with the topic "violence in the Bible" in a few pages? Cases with an image of divine violence are given: the death penalty for violation of certain laws and the *herem* (literally it means "consecration") which demanded the extermination of defeated peoples. Unfortunately, references in the letter to the "cursing psalms" fail to note that usually the setting of the prayer is a court case wherein

false witnesses threaten the life of an innocent person; the given psalm is a cry for divine intervention against the persecutor.

The next paragraphs show condemnation of violence and correction of its perpetrators in texts from the Jewish Scriptures, perhaps hinting that Israelis today should look to their Torah and prophets for guidance. Certainly, gentle reminders of such passages have been shared in Christian-Jewish dialogues over the decades. At the same time, we remind ourselves of the ease with which we find the right passage to put another in his place! But do we apply the same standards to ourselves?

None of us can be exempt from such a self-examination. An effort to be honest is undoubtedly present in this letter, along with a poignant query whether the biblical message seems to be “stacked” against the Palestinian Christians.

Acknowledging that the letter is considering “deep and complex truths” (#39), the Patriarch appeals to “the progressive character of revelation and its fulfilment in the New Testament” for understanding. The golden rule (Matt 7:12) is shown to be anticipated in Tobit 4:15. The law whereby retaliation is limited to “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” improves greatly over the unbridled violence of “might makes right” (see Gen 4:23-24) and then gives way to the command of love in the face of violence (Matt 5:38, 43-44).

Citing the beatitude for the meek as coming from Matthew (however, 5:4 cites Ps 37:11), the Patriarch links gentleness and strength in the service of love for one’s brothers and sisters. Through the example of Jesus, the cross “becomes the strongest and most definitive means of reconciliation between human beings and with God” (#42). Only a high level of dialogue would provide the possibility for Jews and Muslims to listen appreciatively as a Christian expounds on the peace-loving and non-violent dimensions of the Gospel. Both communities recall in their history European attacks on their homes and lives as expressing God’s will. Nonetheless this section of the pastoral is extremely important for Christians themselves. We need to be challenged by the words and deeds of Jesus as we seek prayerfully to cope with issues crucial for our daily life.

“Some people in the Holy Land today” (#46) are committing acts of violence in the name of the Bible. The oxymoron “holy war” should be banished from our religious/political pronouncements. “To all we say that forgiveness and conversion of hearts are two elements needed in our land at this time” (#46). And, one might add, universally! The Church’s message during each Lenten season is being echoed here.

The letter has prepared for the third question in its review of

salvation history, but the intricacies of the themes "election and land" still require considerable reflection. "The history of God with the Jewish people is the model of the history of God with each of us as individuals and as peoples" (#23). Invoking this as a principle "is the only way to find an adequate response to the questions concerning the concrete realities lived today by the two peoples, the Palestinian and the Jewish" (#47). One might ask: Why is "the Jewish" mentioned in second place? We recall the order maintained by St. Paul. "There will be glory, honour, and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and then the Greek" (Rom 2:10). The Second Vatican Council stated: "Nor can the Church forget that she draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (see Rom 1:17-24)" (N.A. #4).³ The pastoral letter defines election as "a gratuitous act of love on God's part, and on the part of the chosen people, a responsibility before God and humankind" (#48). The text develops the challenges involved in that responsibility and commitment to serve the nations. This would have been an appropriate context for a reflection on Jesus' statement to the Samaritan woman: "Salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4:22; note that 4:21, 23-24 are cited in #52). Gratitude for the treasures of faith and spirituality that the Church received from the Jewish people could be the beginning of a new relationship. Indeed, that is the hope expressed at the end of this section: in humility and sharing a common vision of God's activity in history they will come together in love, justice and finally to reconciliation (#49).

In the context of covenant and promises we find a discussion of the land. The historical sketch from Abraham to the Babylonian exile speaks of God's liberation of his people and the return to *their* land. Then comes an ambiguous statement. "But now God would intervene directly in history, *creating a new people in the land*, giving them a new heart to conform to his teachings and to his commandments (referring to Jer 31:31-34, already quoted in #21 and again in #52). One would hope that the meaning intended is "creating the people *anew*;" the rest of the passage quite clearly refers to the Jewish people at the beginning of the Second Temple period and, using prophecies, points to the Messianic age.

The land belongs to God; "Israel, therefore, could not become the absolute owner of the land" but was only God's guest. "The worst thing that could befall Israel would be to forget this truth, to settle this land and to substitute it for God in its worship and values system" (#51). From the context, the reader notes use of the present tense and has a sense that this section is addressed to the Israelis of our time. If the land

(or any created object) becomes a substitute for God the result is idolatry! The danger of focusing all our attention on creatures is a danger to all, Christians included.

The new covenant announced by Jeremiah was inaugurated by Jesus and transferred the Kingdom of God to the spiritual order. "The earthly Jerusalem becomes the image and symbol of the Promised Land which is our heavenly home with God . . . Jerusalem is no longer a land and earthly heritage. It is in a special way the spiritual heritage of humankind in need of a salvation" (#52). The prophetic promises are understood to refer directly to the work of Jesus without any discussion of a renewed covenant for post-exilic generations of the Jewish people in the land. What of the message of Zechariah chapters 1-8, which describes the return to the land and rebuilding of the Temple in terms of a covenant that is "enlarged" to include "many nations" (2:10-12; 8:20-23)?⁴ Although every brief survey of salvation history is bound to be selective, the omission of certain passages will lead to a distortion of the message. Unconsciously perhaps, the readers will be led to conclude that nothing of significance happened between the return from Exile and the coming of Jesus.

The prophets and other teachers of Israel explained the divine pattern in salvation history by making reference to the Exodus-Sinai experience. The historical events, persons and institutions had a meaning in themselves and also provided a key for understanding later events and the eschatological future. Thus Jerusalem and the Temple become a foreshadowing of future realities while retaining their inherent meaning for the people of Israel. The pastoral declares that "Jerusalem become the image and symbol of . . . our heavenly home." One would hope that this does not imply that Jerusalem has lost its meaning for God's plan and for the Jewish people. The statement "Jerusalem is no longer *only* a land and an earthly heritage" (#52) leaves open the possibility that the interpretation allows for a legitimate link between the Jewish people and Jerusalem.

"The concept of the land had then evolved . . . beginning with the physical, geographical and political concept and ending up with the spiritual and symbolic meaning. The worship of God is no longer linked to a specific land" (#52). Is the implication that Jerusalem and the land are deprived of special meaning for the Jewish people? No. The next section offers a summary of what the land means to them; promised to Abraham and his descendants it is a place of "security from the nations that have persecuted them in the diaspora" (#53). But there is a dilemma for the Jews: "For centuries this land has belonged to another people, the Palestinian people." If one were to argue from

the level of political entities, it might be noted that the Palestinians never had sovereignty. However, prolonged residence under any circumstances does include inherent rights. Moreover, the perennial presence of both Jews and Christians in the land bears witness to the spiritual significance of the land for both communities.⁵

The problems caused by the presence of two peoples is compounded by their adherence to three religions (#53). The fact that all trace their heritage to Abraham may yet be the basis for reconciliation. In the meantime, the conflict of religious visions can be resolved only when legal and political decisions are in accord with the principles of international law. The letter dedicates several paragraphs to religion and politics in the state of Israel, stressing the responsibility of seeking justice for all. Should the Palestinians gain autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza, the Christian community would find these reflections very useful for its discussions within the new situation.

“Religious Jewish people today identify themselves with the Bible revealed by God . . . We respect this relationship by which the Jewish people identify with the religion revealed to them by God. But we do not believe that this religious identification implies in itself a political right” (#55). This point is clarified with reference to the universal providence of God. The divine presence in ancient Israel was different, because “God wanted to make the instrument of revelation and the salvation history of humankind emerge from the biblical history. That is the difference between the history of biblical Israel and the history of contemporary Israel” (#55). Indeed, from the Christian viewpoint, “God is present in every moment in the history of peoples,” so divine guidance may be perceived “in the contemporary history of the Jewish people, as well as of the Palestinian people” (#55). For both Jews and Christians, the public revelation of God’s teaching is complete and the canon of Sacred Scripture is closed. However, both communities can continue to learn from each other as their members strive to live according to God’s commandments. The institutes in the land dedicated to Bible study are challenged to persevere in this task in a spirit of collaboration among themselves and with the local Church (#62). This echoes the call of the Council Fathers for recognition of our common spiritual heritage with the Jewish people; they encouraged the search for mutual understanding “by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions” (N.A. #4). May this work flourish in Jerusalem and its environs!⁶

The Patriarch’s distinction between biblical and contemporary Israel cited above ends the discussion of the third question. Does it seem abrupt? To overcome this impression, we draw attention to points

in the conclusion (#56-64). Exasperated by the abuse of the Bible in the present conflict, some people have rejected the Jewish Scriptures. To do this is tragic. "Already deprived of the land, you would allow yourselves to be deprived of your sacred Scriptures, and from the light shed by the Bible that helps you to come out of the darkness and to overcome all difficulties" (#56). Suspicious that the Bible can be interpreted to give an advantage to the Israelis, the letter declares that faith in the Bible is "an invitation to both sides who believe it to see God inviting them to grant each other justice and reconciliation. In the present circumstances, the Bible is a word of God, a word of justice and forgiveness directed to the two peoples, the Palestinians and the Jews." The biblical message calls for self-mastery, so "to seek to dominate others in the name of God leads to one's own condemnation" (#57).

III. Freeing the Faithful

The letter calls for people to "free the religion from the social confines that are stifling it . . . Religion should help us to correct ourselves, to free us in order to be able to dialogue with others and to share with others in a common action of reconciliation and construction" (#58). Throughout the centuries, Christians teachers and preachers have used the biblical texts to paint dismal pictures of legalism, hypocrisy and corruption within the Jewish community of the New Testament era and then to attribute these same vices to Jews of their own day. This type of generalization ignored the "family quarrel" dimension of the Gospel's exhortations and debates. When this happened, the Christian listeners or readers would make a facile link between the faithful and Jesus, not allowing the words of the Master to become the basis for self-examination. Our faith indeed comforts us in the trials of life, but the Patriarch rightly links true liberation with personal conversion and growth within the Christian community. This honesty with one's own limitations is an aspect of the humility that opens us to God and neighbour. Then a fruitful exchange with others, within the Christian churches and beyond, will lead to activities fostering understanding, healing and peace.

"We hope that some of our brothers and sisters will share with us their reflections on this subject" (#64). This reading of the pastoral letter and reactions to its message are offered in a spirit of prayer and hope. May many turn to the text and unite in the bond of our common faith and desire that all God's children live in peace!

IV. Religious Leadership in the Holy Land

Dated February 4, 1994, before the tragic crime in the Hebron mosque, this address celebrates the new hope born through the political initiatives of the local and international negotiators. "If that hope be shattered multiple frustrations will increase, a catastrophe looms" (#2).

Patriarch Sabbah describes the Jerusalem experience of extremists who try to monopolize religious leadership. Christian fundamentalists come from powerful societies outside the region; they try to impose simplistic solutions which are exclusive. "Also in Judaism, religious extremism presents its own way of liberation based on exclusivism. In Islam, fundamentalism projects itself as the liberating force, as the answer to other religious extremism, or to current political and economic injustices or oppression" (#4). To answer such perversions of God's Word and human authority, religious leaders must "deal with all forms of oppression and injustice, among all peoples, in order to share actively in the realization of the liberation of the human being and communities which religious extremism pretends to promote and to fulfil" (#4).

The Patriarch calls for the groups in tension with each other to move beyond "the cycle of claiming or defending their rights" (#5). "In these days we are living a period in which history has a chance to be rethought, and to be redirected towards mutual knowledge, respect and more human and religious coexistence, towards better shared love of the same city and the same land" (#6). What is the role of religious leaders? They must move beyond partisan concerns, to teach that each person's dignity as a child of God is the basis for sharing "in this city and land of God. Exclusiveness or oneness will harm both sides; it will harm the process of peace, the land itself and its vocation as teacher and bearer of salvation for all humankind" (#6). Conscious of the universal vocation of this land, shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims, Patriarch Sabbah calls for religious leaders worldwide to help them in responding to this ideal.

The situation is tense but the beginning of a new process brings hope, "once peace with justice and security have been established politically" (#7). True equality and respect among all partners will lay the foundation for authentic dialogue. Listening to each other's stories, including the pains and fears, will become the basis for hope that the two peoples can live together on the same land. Religious leaders must bring people to faith in the one God (#8), to respect the religious freedom of each person and community (#10-11). Only then will the local communities be able to face the social and scientific challenges discussed in the workshops of the conference.

Members of all three Abrahamic faiths witness the exploitation and manipulation of religion to foster fanaticism. "All of us have to rediscover the holiness, the transcendence of God and his love which is our authentic guide towards mutual acceptance and respect, in our daily life, and in renewing the face of our Land and Jerusalem our City, the mother and the spiritual homeland of all believers" (#13).

This paper addresses the specific question of leadership in much more detail than the pastoral letter. A few themes are common to both, especially the appeal to the Decalogue and the Golden Rule. However, this reader noted that the Patriarch does not challenge the Israelis specifically to live up to their own Scriptures, in contrast to the tone in portions of the earlier document. Talking to his peers, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem shows great ecumenical and interfaith sensitivity. We pray that his work and example will be fruitful in marvellous ways over the coming years!

- 1 It must be noted that, in its context, any verse of Ps 136 indicating a divine action against nations is paralleled by a positive gift to Israel. Thus the litanic refrain ("For his mercy endures forever") always shows a link between judgement and salvation.
- 2 Reference is made to centres of biblical studies in the land, "in the bosom of our Church in Jerusalem" (#62).
The Patriarch might have profited from a reflection on Pope John II's words to the Jewish community in Mainz in 1980: "The first aspect of this dialogue, namely the meeting between the people of God of the old covenant, which has never been revoked by God (cf. Rom 11:29), and the people of God of the new covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our church between the first and second part of its Bible."
See Norbert Lohfink, *The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991).
- 3 Another passage of N.A. #4 is quoted in #31 to emphasize continuity between Old and New Testaments: "The Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take (back) the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made." This and other citations of N.A. are taken from Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975).
- 4 Zech 8:3-9 and 9:16 are quoted in #50, shortly after the text about "creating a new people," so the omission of Zechariah's vision of Jews and non-Jews in a renewed covenant is striking.
- 5 See John M. Oesterreicher and Anne Sinai (ed.), *Jerusalem* (New York: John Day, 1974) and Robert L. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). The first contains essays on all periods whereas Wilken's excellent study goes from the Bible to the Moslem conquest of the Holy Land.
- 6 See David Burrell and Yehezkel Landau (ed.) *Voices from Jerusalem: Jews and Christians Reflect on the Holy Land* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992).