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The God of Abraham

Israel

ALL NIGHT DEPTH BOMBS sent booming vibrations throughout our ship. It was March 1947. We were anchored just off the port of Haifa, Palestine.

Our troop ship, the *Marine Carp,* now converted into a postwar passenger carrier, was filled with Jewish people seeking entrance into Palestine. All day British gunboats circled our ship, ready to shoot any who tried to swim ashore. The nighttime depth bombs would kill any who swam in the darkness.

My father was a Christian pastor and enjoyed many hours of discussion with Jewish passengers on that ship. On one occasion he and a Jewish gentleman wept together as they explored the meaning of the promises of God through Abraham and their confirmation through the prophets. My father and the Jewish acquaintance bonded in friendship.

Both had a quaint first name—Jonas!

A year later Israelis and Palestinians locked in combat following the May 14, 1948, inaugural of the state of Israel. Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Transjordan (Jordan) joined in battle allied with the Palestinians against the Israelis. That war defined the boundaries of Israel as recognized by the United Nations armistice agreements. (Yet many Israelis were convinced that these boundaries were incomplete for they were not congruent with those of biblical Israel.)

Other wars followed—1956 with Egypt; the 1967 Six-Day War in which Israel occupied Syria's Golan Heights, Jordan's West Bank including Jerusalem, the Gaza, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula; the 1973 Yom Kippur War with Egypt and Syria, which led to an oil embargo; the 1982 military occupation of southern Lebanon. Endemic violence has been a sad aspect of life in Israel.

Yet for Israel negotiating any land for peace has been exceedingly stressful. The May 1994 transfer of Gaza and Jericho to Palestinian self-rule after twenty-seven years of Israeli occupation involved tremendous political commitment and persistence. There are theological as well as security reasons for these difficulties. This chapter is especially concerned with the theological dimensions of the peace process.

The emergence of this Israeli peoplehood in the Middle East within the bonding of a modern nation-state in 1948 is one of the great surprises of the twentieth century. This region—the land bridge between

Asia, Europe, and Africa—is critically important for the whole world. The well-being of humankind is affected by the relationships between Israel and her neighbors.

The 1973 oil embargo by enemies of Israel against friends of Israel reminded the whole earth of how intricately interrelated is the global community and how the volatility of the Middle East can and does affect us all. Israel is at the center of the drama. Even the tragedy of the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was perceived by many in the region as authentically linked with the issue of Israel.

On a visit to Israel and Jordan in September 1990, at the commencement of the embargo against Iraq, I experienced little love for Saddam Hussein among the Palestinians with whom we conversed. Yet he was their hero. Why? Because in the summer of 1990 Hussein was the only credible counterbalance to Israeli power. Many Palestinians hoped that a victorious Iraq would invest the revenues from the oil fields of Kuwait in the cause of liberating the Palestinians from Israel. It is not surprising that those who experience Israel as the regional oppressor felt hope for their liberation evaporating as the one hundred thousand sorties of the Desert Storm bombardment pulverized Iraq's military, communications, and industrial infrastructure. The increase in Islamic militancy is one consequence of that loss of hope.

The Covenant

Officially the state of Israel is an Orthodox Jewish nation. Although many modem Jewish citizens of Israel are secular or even atheistic, the orientation of this state is Orthodox Judaism.

There are similarities between Judaism and Christianity. These include a common understanding of God, humanity, and the universe. For this reason these two expressions of faith and peoplehood are often linked as the Judeo-Christian tradition. The spiritual mooring of Israel is the *Torah*—the first five books of the Tanach, which are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. The previous chapter also described Christian roots which draw spiritual nourishment from the Torah and the Tanach (Old Testament).

For Christians, Jesus is the glasses through which they view the Torah and the Tanach. The previous chapter noted that the Christian church is a people who believe that Jesus is the Son or Messiah whom the Old Testament prophets anticipated. Therefore, Christians interpret all Scriptures, including the Tanach, in the light of the one whom they believe is the ultimate truth, Jesus of Nazareth.

On the other hand, the Jewish people as a whole have never believed that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Thus they interpret the Tanach in the light of their own history and worldview. There are, therefore, significant differences between Judaism and Christianity in their interpretations of these ancient Scriptures. These divergencies do inform

their respective understandings of their peoplehood in fundamental ways.

The intention of this chapter is to focus on the Jewish experience as it relates to global community. The profile of their primal story as recorded in the Tanach has been described in the previous chapter. Now our exploration looks at that story anew, with particular concern for the manner in which these biblical events inform the worldview of modem Israel and her relationships with her Arab neighbors.

Abraham and Sarah

Abraham and Sarah are the beginning point. Recall God's call to Abraham and Sarah. He commanded Abraham to leave his father's household in Haran and "go to the land I will show you."[1] The couple obeyed God. He led them into the region of present-day Israel, and after the family had walked through the land, God appeared to Abraham and promised, "To your offspring, I will give this land."[2]

Sometime later Abraham and his nephew Lot needed to part ways because their respective herds of cattle had become so large they could not graze together. Abraham permitted Lot to seek out the best land in the valley. Immediately after that generosity God renewed the land promise to Abraham with these words:

> Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.[3]

Muslims, Christians, and Jews, all of whom may be aware of this promise, ponder, Who are these descendants of Abraham to whom God has promised the land? The Muslims claim spiritual descent from Abraham through his oldest son, Ishmael. Arabs may even claim direct genealogical descent through Ishmael.

Christians also ponder. Does God's promise to Abraham refer to the Jewish people, to Arabs and Jews, or to all who claim to adhere to the faith of Abraham? That would include Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In that case the promise of land for his descendants is an assurance that God will always provide a place for all who believe in God, who are scattered throughout the nations.

For Orthodox Jewish people the promise is focused and clear. The land refers to Palestine. It is their land, promised by God. They point out that the promise was reaffirmed and clarified to Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah with this assurance: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the heaven and will give them all these lands, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed."[4]

There are some Jewish people whose view of Scripture does not give much credence to such prophesies or ancient promises. Yet for pragmatic or identity reasons, they may still strongly support the right of Israel to exist in Palestine as a state. They point out that history dictates that the location of the Jewish state must be Palestine, because for millennia that is where the Jewish people lived.

The biblical account explains that the promise of God to Abraham and Isaac is the reason their descendants occupied Canaan (modem Palestine) beginning about the sixteenth century B.C. Regardless of how one views Scripture or the promise, the reality is that the biblical account of God's promise to a man called Abraham and his spouse, Sarah, who lived about 4,000 years ago has contributed significantly to the creation of the modern state of Israel in Palestine. The mid-twentieth-century developments in the Middle East lie within the long shadow of the Sarah and Abraham story.

On the eve of the October 30, 1991, commencement of Madrid peace talks between Israel and her Arab neighbors, Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir commented that for thousands of years Israel has had a right to the land of Palestine. He was referring to the Abraham account. Then he added that perhaps the Arabs also believe that they have a right to the land.

On what basis do both Arab and Jewish people claim the land of Palestine? The claim goes much deeper than rights because of

occupancy. The roots of the conflict which Shamir was referring to derive from a struggle in the home of Abraham.

Ishmael and Isaac

The ancient biblical story is tumultuous. When God called Abraham, he promised both land and descendants. The couple waited ten years for God to fulfill his promise of progeny. The previous chapter described a discouraged Sarah asking Abraham to sleep with Hagar, Sarah's maid, hoping that the maid would conceive a son for the barren couple. Abraham agreed. A son was born to Hagar and Abraham. He was Ishmael. Even before his birth, jealousy invaded the home. On one occasion Hagar fled into the desert to escape the vindictiveness of Sarah.

God promised Hagar, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."[5] Several years later God made a similar promise to Abraham concerning Ishmael with these words: "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers."[6] Later God reaffirmed, "I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring." [7] We also read that God was with Ishmael.[8]

These promises tucked away in obscure antiquity may seem insignificant to modern scholars of religion. Yet they are core issues in the modern Middle Eastern context. For people who have been schooled to believe that every word of Scripture is inscribed in heaven and can never be modified, such statements are exceedingly important and affect

the formation of entire worldview systems.

Even in Muslim centers of learning far from the Middle East confrontation, there is an "aha" of appreciation when these passages are examined. This is perceived as evidence that both the biblical and Qur'anic accounts agree that Ishmael is blessed. Muslim scholars insist that it has to be so, for in all Semitic traditions the eldest son receives the blessing. Muslim theologians would see the blessing of God on Ishmael extending into the present. Islam and the Arab nation are thereby blessed.

This brief excursion into Islam anticipates a later chapter. Nevertheless, at this point it is important to recognize how intertwined the whole Abrahamic tradition is with the self-perception and peoplehood identity of Islam and Judaism, not to mention Christianity.

Although Ishmael is a son of Abraham, God still insisted to the amazed Abraham that Sarah would also bear a son. Prior to the birth of Sarah's son, the account describes intense anxiety in Abraham's home concerning the issue of covenant and blessing. Abraham and Sarah had waited twenty-five years for the promised son. There seemed to be no possibility that the ninety-year-old Sarah would ever give birth. Ishmael was now a teenager.

Amidst this spiritual turmoil Abraham pleaded, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"[9] The Lord enthusiastically agreed to bless Ishmael. "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac," insisted the

Lord. Yet this promised Isaac was not yet born and Sarah was turning ninety![10]

When the son was finally born, it is no wonder they called him Isaac, which means laughter. Throughout the centuries people have always laughed as they heard the story of the incredulous Sarah giving birth to a son at age ninety.

In the biblical Genesis account, Ishmael is blessed indeed. Yet the covenant promise is with Isaac, whose conception by the ninety- year-old Sarah is an astonishing event. Just as Isaac's birth is the fulfillment of promise, so God will establish his covenant of blessing with the nations through Isaac and his descendants.

Nevertheless, the promise is always a gift that cannot be grasped but only received. God communicated this truth by commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on an altar on the mount where the temple of God was later built and where the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem stands today. Abraham obeyed. But just before he killed his son, God intervened, commanding Abraham to substitute a ram for his son. Thus Abraham learned anew that the promise of God could not be seized, it could only be gratefully received. It is God's gift.

At that time God promised Abraham,

Freedom and Land

About four thousand years ago the drama of the land began to unfold.

Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob were completely dependent on the hospitality of the peoples of ancient Canaan to have any place in the land. The previous chapter describes how difficult this was for Isaac because his neighbors pushed his herdsmen away from the wells either he or his father Abraham had dug. Yet in due course, God provided a place in the land for these covenant people by giving them favor among the inhabitants of the land.

Recall that the same theme of God himself defending his covenant people is central to the drama of deliverance from slavery in Egypt. It is important to remember that the peoplehood of Israel was decisively formed in the event of this deliverance. This is their core "root experience" creating "abiding astonishment."[12]

Every year since that event some 3,500 years ago, the Hebrew families gather in their homes on Passover night to remember and celebrate that great deliverance through the mighty hand of God. They reenact the meal which Hebrew families shared together the night of their deliverance from slavery. This simple commemorative meal consists of a Passover lamb and unleavened bread.

The lamb is a reminder that, on the night of their deliverance, each Hebrew family slew a one-year-old lamb and daubed their door frames with the blood. That night, as the families gathered to eat the roasted lamb, the angel of the Lord passed through all the land. The angel avoided every home marked by blood on the door frame. But he entered

all other homes and slew the firstborn of cattle and humans throughout the land.

In anguish Pharaoh and the whole country sent the enslaved Hebrews from Egypt. Their exodus that night was so unexpected that they did not have time to leaven their bread. The yeastless bread eaten by Jewish people today during Passover is a reminder of the haste with which the people left Egypt on the night of their deliverance.

This people of the covenant can never forget their miraculous deliverance from slavery. They can never forget the renewal of the covenant in the desert at Mount Sinai shortly after their departure from Egypt. These events of deliverance and Sinai are described in the previous chapter; it is not necessary to reiterate here.

Yet it is important to recognize that the whole development of the Torah is grounded in three fundamentally significant events which have formed this covenant peoplehood:

1. the call of Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac,
2. the deliverance from slavery in Egypt,
3. the covenant at Mount Sinai.

The core commitment and confession of the Torah which pulls together the central meaning of these acts of God is the *Shema*.

> Hear, O Israel:
> The Lord our God,
> The Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all
your heart and with all your
soul and with all your
strength.[13]

Righteousness and Generosity

Faithful Jewish people recite the Shema many times daily. It is the soul of their faith and covenant peoplehood. The Ten Commandments which form the heart of the ethical system of this peoplehood are firmly grounded in the Shema. Righteous living is a loving response to the one whom they believe to be the only true God, the one who has called them to become his covenant people.

A commitment to the well-being of the neighbor is central to their whole ethical system. These people, who had experienced being foreigners in a strange land, who knew the heartbreak of slavery, were to be considerate of the stranger and alien in their midst. They were never to forget that God had delivered them from slavery. In gratitude and joy they were to treat the stranger, slave, orphan, widow, and poor with kindness and generosity. They were to receive and accept the alien as one of their own. They were to live with the same generosity toward others that they had experienced from God.

Jubilee and Joviality

The year of Jubilee pulled together into a social institution these

themes of joy and generosity. Although the year of Jubilee came only once every two generations, the generosity of Jubilee was to penetrate every aspect of community living, day by day and year by year. This celebration theme develops from the creation narrative, in which Yahweh is described as resting on the seventh day after completing his work of Creation. We are also invited to pause and enjoy the good gifts of our labor.

Each Sabbath has always been a mini-jubilee. Even today, as they have for several thousand years, on Sabbath eve families gather for the lighting of the Sabbath candles and a meal. The Sabbath is a day of rest, a day to enjoy the good gifts of life. The faithful participate in synagogue worship. Then when the Sabbath is over, Jewish communities participate in festivities. In Israel the streets of the cities fill with joyful people. The mood is festive. Laughter, dancing, song, and fraternity fill the streets of West Jerusalem and all the Jewish cities and towns of Israel.

Everyone in biblical times was to take an annual vacation and save a tenth of their yearly income for the vacation bash. During the annual seven-day Feast of Tabernacles after harvesttime, each family was to join the whole nation in a central location to enjoy the bounty of God with feasting, celebration, and recounting the story of the mighty acts of God. They lived in shelters made of tree boughs during this festive national outing. They were also commanded to give generously to those who were

poor to strangers so that no one would miss out in the celebrations.

People were also to provide rest for the earth. Farmers should let their fields rest once very seventh year. People should avoid exploiting the earth and not squeeze all the profit possible from the land. For example, the olive trees should be harvested, but not beaten until every olive has been gleaned. The land, animals, trees, and the people were to enjoy the rest and celebration of Jubilee.

The purpose of labor was not greedy gain or the uninhibited acquisition of wealth. Rather the purpose of work was to develop and receive from the good earth the gifts needed for human well-being. Regular times of rest enabled perspective—rejoice in the fruit of your labor; live generously; take gentle care of the good earth, remembering that it also needs rest.

God's intention was that these themes of generous and joyful participation in his bounty break forth in a crescendo of joy in the year of Jubilee. That event was to happen after every cluster of seven weeks of years, that is every fifty years. The year was to be inaugurated by the blowing of trumpets. At that moment all Hebrew slaves were to be set free. All debts were to be forgiven. Any land which one might have purchased was to be returned to the original owner. Jubilee was to be an equalizing revolution which helped to level the disparities of wealth and position which had occurred during the previous half-century.

In all these encouragements to live joyfully and generously, there was

the foundational recognition, ":Remember that you were slaves in Egypt!"[14] Therefore the prophet Moses commanded, "Be joyful at your Feast—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns!"[15]

Can these themes be practiced in a nation—the themes of generosity, of ministry on behalf of the oppressed? Even Israel in biblical times experienced a failure of will in practicing the institution of Jubilee. It was a wonderful plan but perhaps never really implemented.

Yet the intention of Jubilee did exert significant influence on the society. The prophets reminded the people who enjoyed political and economic power to consider the plight of the poor and the alien. In the word of the prophet Amos,

> You trample the poor and force him
> to give you grain.
> Therefore, although you have built stone
> mansions,
> you will not live in them; though you
> have planted lush vineyards, you will not
> drink their wine.
> For I know how many are your offenses
> and how great your sins.
> You oppress the righteous and take bribes

and you deprive the poor of justice in the

courts.[16]

These biblical Jubilee themes have significantly influenced many modern societies. In most modern nations employees rest from their employment a minimum of one day in seven. There are now systems of graduated income tax which tax the wealthy proportionately more than the poor. Inheritance laws in many modern societies attempt to level wealth somewhat by preventing all the wealth in a family from accumulating from generation to generation. Bankruptcy laws permit those hopelessly in debt to receive a dispensation from their creditors.

The United Nations partners with many nations in providing humanitarian support to refugees around the earth. Slavery is now universally prohibited. Nations with adequate food share with the hungry. Many of these humanitarian commitments within modem societies have their roots in the Jubilee themes of compassion for the dispossessed and poor.

Even though Israel may never have fully implemented the social institutions of Jubilee, the Jubilee ideals have always been a conscience in Jewish society. Furthermore, they have become an ideal for many other societies as well, which have been influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Covenant and War

Just as Israel lacked the will to fully implement Jubilee, so they also had a failure of nerve in fully relying on God's promise concerning military defense. After the miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the Sinai covenant, these descendants of Abraham and Sarah began a pilgrimage across the desert toward Canaan (Palestine), the land which God had promised for the children of Abraham and Isaac. The journey took them forty years!

On the journey across the desert, God instructed them how to conduct battle after they became a settled people in Canaan. The priests were to lead off with trumpets and choirs praising the Lord. Anyone recently married or engaged to be married, anyone who had recently bought a house or a field was to go home to enjoy the acquisition, for it would be tragic if a person died before enjoying these gifts of God. Anyone fearful was to return home. After all, the Lord would fight for his people. They were not to take a census of men of military age, lest they trust in the number of their soldiers rather than in the Lord. They did not need a great army and had no reason to fear the chariots and horses of any enemy.

The Scriptures assured Israel that in all likelihood the enemy would already be destroyed even before the army arrived on the battlefield. Going into battle was to resemble more a songfest than war. Before the battles for the land began, God promised,

> I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every

> nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites out of your way.[17]

The manner in which they overthrew Jericho, the first major city across the Jordan River, is an echo of this promise of God. They marched around the walls of the city for seven days. On the seventh day they circled the city seven times, singing as they went. On the seventh circle, they shouted and the walls collapsed. Then they destroyed and plundered the city.

Yet as they became settled in the land, and as their political institutions developed, militarization became a serious temptation.Could a people in the center of Middle East international pressure survive without an army or military alliances? Was trust in God alone sufficient to preserve their nation?

One of the most perplexing enigmas of biblical faith is the paradox of the people of Israel, called by God to be a blessing to all nations, using violence to secure a place and survive as a nation among nations in the Middle East. In biblical times, whether it was God who fought the battles or Israel or both, the occupation of Canaan by these descendants of Abraham and Sarah was horrendously violent.

The wars highlighted a negative side of God's promise to Abraham. In addition to the promise that all nations would be blessed by Abraham's descendants, there was also the stern warning: "Whoever curses you, I

will curse!"[18] The invading people of Israel believed that all who stood in their way or who opposed them were cursed. When judged by the Ten Commandments, biblical accounts describe the inhabitants of Canaan as exceedingly wicked and fit for extermination. The inhabitants of whole cities, such as Jericho, were obliterated.

Israel believed God had promised this land to them; they were the descendants of Abraham to whom God had promised the land along the banks of the Jordan River. Thus those whom they found already in the land were really there without divine mandate, unless they became members of the covenant community. Indeed significant numbers of the Canaanite people did unite with the community of the covenant. Yet for centuries the battles raged with the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan as Israel occupied the land and subdued or eradicated entire societies.

Between 1400 and 1000 B.C., Israel became a settled people along banks of the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee extending through Canaan to the Mediterranean Sea. As their nation developed, the nature of the battles shifted to colossal engagements with other nations and empires in the region who confronted Israel mercilessly. Israel developed a powerful army. King David disobeyed God by taking a census which showed that he had 1,300,000 men capable of battle. King Solomon had 1,400 chariots and 12,000 horses. Israel was a people who prepared for war and knew warfare.

Occasionally God intervened in a manner which reminded Israel of

their deliverance from Egypt many centuries earlier. An example is the time King Jehoshaphat was confronted with the massive armies of Moab and Ammon, who were preparing for battle against Jerusalem. The whole city gathered before the Lord God seeking counsel. Then God spoke through the prophet Jahaziel. He proclaimed, "Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the Lord says to you: 'Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. The battle is not yours, but God's.' "[19]

God commanded them to sing as they advanced against the enemy. Obeying God's command, Jehoshaphat and his army went into battle with the priests leading the way and with trumpeters and choirs praising God. They sang as they marched,

> Give thanks to the Lord, for his
> love endures forever![20]

The enemy army self-destructed when the soldiers from these several nations turned against one another. By the time Israel's army arrived at the battlefront, the enemy were all dead bodies. It took Jehoshaphat and his army three days to gather the loot. When they returned to Jerusalem, the multitudes gathered at the temple for a praise service before the Lord.

A brief diversion into modem confrontations with several repressive regimes is enlightening. The dramatic challenges of unarmed people

against the military might of communist Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is a modern example of the manner in which the people of the covenant in biblical times sometimes confronted enemies. Hundreds of thousands of peaceful demonstrators in the Soviet Union brought to naught the August 1991 coup which attempted to enforce continuation of the communist regime. The same kind of essentially nonviolent confrontation overthrew the Marcos regime in the Philippines and exposed the futility of apartheid in South Africa. Such events remind us of the biblical confidence that God himself fights for the oppressed.

In an era of horrendous weapons for killing people, many within the global village are learning the futility of war and violence. A more potent weapon for authentic confrontation is the exuberance of an unarmed people movement, confidence in God, prayer, persistence, and the voice of conscience such as that of Pope John Paul II in his alliance with the workers movement in Poland against the excesses of Soviet power. Of course, this sort of confrontation is not always immediately effective. It took years before the system in Poland began to crack. And the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in China significantly delayed the movement toward a more humane society in that country.

The Covenant and the State

The prophets had always been skeptical about the nation-state. The prophet Samuel, who did finally anoint Israel's first king, resisted the

idea of a king in every way he could. He finally bowed to popular demand. Samuel believed that the development of the state would deflect Israel from her mission in the world to be a covenant people among the peoples.

The nation was incongruous with being God's people. It might be a pragmatic necessity, but it was not God's highest plan for his people. To develop political and military institutions like those of the surrounding nations was a compromise of the ideals of covenant peoplehood.

In the previous chapter we discovered that by 586 B.C. this four- and-a-half-century experiment of being the people of God *and* a nation-state ended when the Babylonians overwhelmed Jerusalem, the capital city of the Southern Kingdom, Judah. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, had collapsed under Assyrian pressure 135 years earlier. The magnificent temple which had been dedicated by King Solomon in 960 B.C. was razed.

Although some of the covenant people were permitted to remain in their homeland, most were forcefully scattered to foreign lands. Many were taken to Babylon. This was a time for weeping. In their great sorrow, some of their prophets helped the people catch a fresh vision of what it means to be the people of God. Temple and monarchy were not essential to being the covenant people who blessed the nations.

The prophet Isaiah wrote in those tragic times,

"I will praise you, O Lord.

Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away and
you have comforted me.
Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
The Lord, the Lord, is my strength
and my song;
he has become my salvation."
With joy you will draw water from
the wells of salvation.
In that day you will say:
"Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he
has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted."[21]

All these ancient issues of the relationship between nation-state and the meaning of being God's covenant peoplehood converge in the modem state of Israel. The issues of being God's covenant people among the nations are as persistent today as three thousand years ago.

Some nations and peoples may not be acquainted with the biblical story and consequently do not really comprehend the nature of the issues as they affect world community and Israel's self-perception. Others may wish Israel would cease to consider herself a covenant

people. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the perceptions concerning the meaning of God's covenant with Abraham have been and continue to be powerfully relevant to the creation and continuation of the state of Israel and to Jewish people everywhere.

Judaism

The principle characteristics of modem Judaism were significantly formed during the exile in the sixth and fifth century B.C. and then the gradual return of some Jewish people to the homeland of their parents in Palestine. Prior to the exile, the people of Israel are best characterized as a faith people in pilgrimage and discovery. After the exile they had become a clearly defined religious community.

Exile and Renewal

The trauma of exile, with the concurrent crisis of identity, made the community less open to others than before. Ethnicity rather than covenant increasingly defined peoplehood. They received the name Jews during this era, and Judaism as a religious system developed to define and nurture their religious identity. The exile into Babylon refined and redefined their perceptions of the covenant. The same dynamics have been in process over the centuries since the exile. A brief review of that process is necessary.

The synagogue developed during the Jewish exile into Babylon in the

sixth century B.C. In the absence of the temple or any central locus for worship, the scattered Israelites built worship centers where they could convene every Sabbath day for the reading of the Torah, singing, homily, and fellowship. This development is the forerunner for the weekly church service as experienced by millions of Christians worldwide today and the Friday assembly in the mosque for Muslims. For the Jewish people the synagogue has been vital in nurturing faith and continued identity as a peoplehood throughout the many centuries of their dispersal among the nations.

The exile also nurtured a much greater interest in Scripture. The Torah, history, poetry, and writings of the prophets became the spiritual food which nurtured faith, hope, and identity during this crisis period. The collecting and organizing of their Scriptures became an urgent need during the exile and during the revival of faith which they experienced in the postexilic period. During the culmination of this era of renewal, their priest and leader Ezra gave special attention to the role of Scripture in the life of the people. Ezra is called the second Moses.

After their seventy years in exile, the benevolent Persian king Cyrus enabled many of the Jewish people to return to Palestine, where they rebuilt the temple. Imagine the incredible difficulties of a people who have been in an alien land for seventy years, now returning to the land of their parents and attempting to reestablish community with those Jewish people who had never left the land. It was an awesome feat—

forging a common peoplehood out of such diversity, carving out homesteads and a living from the ruins of the past, and rebuilding the temple. The effort was exhausting, and spiritual malaise sapped the energies of the Jewish communities in Palestine.

A century after the rebuilding of the temple, renewal came under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, who journeyed from exile in Mesopotamia to join the Jewish community in Palestine. They came with a mission: the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the renewal of faith and covenant. It was a dramatic and awesome mission, culminating in a renewal of covenant which has placed a definitive imprint on the Jewish people to this day.

The post-exilic renewal which took place under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah focused on the return to place (Jerusalem and the temple) as well as a commitment to obedience to the law of God, the Torah. Never again did this community compromise with idol worship. They were convinced that their flirtation with the worship of false gods had invited the anger of God on them, leading to the dispersal of their nation.

Israel also believed that their forefathers had been exceedingly careless in obeying the revealed laws of God. They believed they had intermingled indiscriminately with aliens, even intermarrying with them. The people longed for renewal, for a deep cleansing of their sin which had grieved God.

Some time after Ezra and Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem, they convened a seven-day convocation. It was the traditional Feast of Tabernacles, which had been neglected for many years. For seven unforgettable days Ezra read the law of God to the people. The assembly wept in repentance and joy as they heard the law of God. They renewed this covenant to never again depart from his way.[22]

How could the people preserve the fruit of this remarkable renewal? How could they be confident that they were really in obedience to the law of God? For example, the law commands them to avoid work on the seventh day. Yet what is work? How far may one walk on the Sabbath before one becomes guilty of violating the law? These kinds of questions troubled a people who believed that the terrible tragedies of their exile had been God's vengeance on them for neglecting his laws. Those questions pushed Judaism toward increasing fixation on right codes of conduct.

The struggle for faithfulness was not all marked with sobriety. Joy permeated their Scriptures. During the annual festivals, they renewed community, remembered and celebrated the goodness of God, and rejoiced. In the midst of the traumas of the exile and post- exilic period, the annual festivals were renewed and invigorated.

In the first month of their lunar year, which begins in March or April, there was the week-long Feast of Unleavened Bread with the Passover. Then they enjoyed the Feast of Weeks which culminated in Pentecost, a

time to celebrate the first fruit of the harvest.

Three feasts adorned the seventh month—the Feast of Trumpets or Rosh Hashanah, which is the feast of New Year; Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement; and finally a seven-day harvest home festival, the Feast of Tabernacles.

Throughout the centuries and in these modern times, the annual Jewish festivals, respected in their homes and communities around the earth, have nurtured their global peoplehood as they have celebrated the goodness and faithfulness of God revealed in creation and their history.

During the centuries which followed the renewal of covenant under Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jewish religious teachers (rabbis) worked energetically to clarify the meaning of the Torah and its application in everyday living. For the next eight centuries, that process developed, culminating in the Talmud; its development is described later.

Not only the Torah and other Scriptures influenced the development of Judaism in this postexilic period. Other systems of thought, especially Persian and Greek religions and philosophies, were also influencing the Jews. The religion of Zoroastrianism among the Persians may have contributed to a growing appreciation for angels and the last judgment at the end of the age. The Pharisees championed these ideas. Hellenistic philosophy from Greek centers such as Alexandria also influenced Judaism toward rationalism. The Sadducees drank from these wells. Groups formed in Judaism reflecting different responses to alien

influences.

Although the Jewish people drank from the diverse cultural and philosophical streams of the peoples with whom they interacted, they did not become syncretistic. All these new streams were judged and evaluated and assimilated in the overall and foundational commitment to the one true God and the Torah which God had revealed through the prophet Moses. All alien ideologies and practices were absorbed and honed in the framework of their uncompromising commitment to God and their covenant with him.

A Scattered People

This commitment to being God's covenant people created occasional crises between the Jewish people and the surrounding peoples and nation-states. We cannot detail the whole story, but several of these tragedies have been especially significant in defining Jewish self-perceptions concerning their place in the global community.

A horrible event occurred in the second century B.C. The Syrian Antiochus Epiphanes determined fully to absorb all Jewish people into a homogeneous Syrian empire. He placed an image of the deity Zeus in the temple and offered swine as sacrifices. The swine is considered an unclean animal by Jewish people. All Jews throughout Palestine were commanded to offer similar sacrifices of swine to Zeus in their home communities. The Jews were forbidden to keep the Sabbath, own any

Scriptures, or practice circumcision. Death was the punishment for disobedience.

In revulsion and outrage, the people rallied around Mattathias and his son Judas Maccabeus. They rebelled massively against their oppressors. In 165 B.C. they gained freedom from Syrian rule.

Two centuries later it was the Romans who ignited a Jewish conflagration in Palestine. For a century the Romans had ruled Palestine; gradually they developed policies which indicated less and less respect for Jewish religious commitments. Revolt erupted throughout the area in 69 A.D. Amidst unbelievable bravery and carnage, both the temple and Jerusalem were razed. The brave Jewish defenders of Jerusalem never surrendered. All were killed. Hundreds of thousands of Jews scattered to other lands.

Southeast of Jerusalem, Jewish defenders fortified themselves on the mount known as Masada. For several years they resisted the Roman siege. When the Romans finally overwhelmed the fortress, they discovered that all 960 defenders were dead. They had committed mass suicide rather than surrender their freedom to the Romans. To this day Israel reflects with pride and determination on the "spirit of Masada." Jewish people vow that never again will a Masada be their plight; they will defend themselves against all who would seek to determine their destiny.

Masada and the destruction of the temple have become events for

Israel almost as formative as the deliverance from Egypt. Shortly we shall describe the development of the Talmud and modem Zionism; these developments are rooted in this first century A.D. calamity. This experience is a root reason for the theological and political turmoil in modem Israel as the nation struggles to find the way with her surrounding Arab neighbors and the Palestinians.

Sixty years after the destruction of the Jewish temple, the Roman Hadrian determined to build a temple to Jupiter on the mins of the old temple. Again there was a conflagration. Palestine was ruined, depopulated. All Jewish people were deported from Jerusalem and the name of the city changed to Aelia Capitolina. The temple to Jupiter was built on the temple site. Jewish people could return to the old temple foundation wall once a year on the anniversary of its destruction to lean against the wall and weep. Hence the name, Wailing Wall.

Even in Babylon and Egypt, to which many of the Jews fled, they occasionally experienced persecution. In the first century, genocide exploded against Egypt's one million Jews. In the third century in Babylonia, Zoroastrian Persians forbade Jews from lighting their Sabbath candles. The Jewish people could not submit to a prohibition of a practice so precious in their faith. The result: riots and massacres.

In later centuries, similar tragedy followed the Jewish migrations to Europe. The Constantinization of Christianity mentioned in earlier chapters led to a terrible distortion of Jewish-Christian relations

throughout Western Christendom. The Constantinization of the church meant that in time there was little or no room for religious pluralism in Europe.

It was expected that everyone in a Christian nation should belong to the church. Alternative faiths such as Judaism were severely circumscribed. The Jewish communities were severely harassed. Gentile Christians accused the Jews of responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus. These attitudes toward Jews have planted in the soul of Judaism a profound suspicion of the intentions of Christianity.[23]

The distortions of Jewish Christian relations have been expressed in dreadful ways. The European Crusades beginning in the eleventh century triggered backlash massacres of Jews in Germany and elsewhere. In the following decades, a number of European countries issued orders of expulsion for Jews. By 1492 Spain, which had once been a significant center of Jewish culture, learning, and enterprise, expelled all Jews. In other areas of so-called Christian Europe, Jews were confined to ghettos encircled with high walls. In some countries they had to wear a distinctive Jew badge whenever they ventured out of the ghetto. The pain of this rejection lives on and on.

Several years ago I joined in a Sabbath morning conversation between Jews and Christians in the synagogue adjoining the University of Nairobi in Kenya. The conversation drifted to the experience of the Jewish people in European Christendom. A young Jewish businessman

was explaining the awful pain of this rejection and persecution. Suddenly he began weeping. We waited somberly until he regained some composure.

Then he took a piece of unleavened bread such as is used in the sacred Passover meal and said, "In some communities the Gentile Christians took our Jewish babies, slaughtered them, then forced us to mix the blood of our own babies in the flour used to bake the sacred Passover bread."

Most of us joined in weeping with him.

The Holocaust commenced on the night of November 9, 1938. That infamous night is remembered as Kristallnacht, the "night of broken glass." Throughout that night gangs hurled projectiles through the glass windows of Jewish synagogues, shops, businesses, and homes. In forty-eight hours in Germany and Austria, thirty thousand Jews were sent to the gas chambers at Dachau and elsewhere. Two hundred synagogues and 7,500 Jewish businesses were destroyed. That was only the beginning.

During the next seven years, seven million Jewish people perished in the Holocaust. That event, as no other, mobilized Jews around the world to commit themselves to the formation of the state of Israel.

The Talmud and Peoplehood

How can a people, scattered throughout the nations of the earth for two

millennia, a people with a kaleidoscope of cultures and languages, come together in Palestine during the mid-twentieth century and discover that they are indeed still one people?

What has nurtured this family of faith over the centuries; what is the basis of their cohesiveness? The Torah and their Scriptures? Yes, that is a significant unifying reality. The synagogue and their annual festivals? Yes, the weekly gathering for worship on the Sabbath and their annual festivals have provided cohesiveness and identity for these scattered people. A common faith and Scripture, common worship patterns and festivals—all these have helped to nurture and preserve Jewish peoplehood scattered among the nations.

Yet superseding all of these is the Talmud.

> Its six major parts and sixty-three volumes have been as meat and drink to the tragic Jews who fled from east to west and back again during the long ordeal of the Middle Ages. Its physical bulk has had—and this constitutes a rather exceptional circumstance—no little relation to its spiritual inexhaustibility. It has served as a rampart of moral resistance that rose higher and stood firmer than the brick and stone of the ghetto walls that Europe raised to hem the Jew in. Though condemned as magic and as devil's lore, burned in the market places by angry civil authorities, or torn apart page by page and thrown on the waters, the Talmud always survived to feed the souls of a persecuted people determined to live by its

> regulations or have no further part in life. Others might laugh at what was contained in it, but to the Jew it was the wisdom which is of God.[24]

The spiritual perspectives which produced the Talmud were present in embryo in the renewal of faith and peoplehood kindled by Ezra and Nehemiah during the fifth century B.C. At that time the people renewed their covenant with the Lord and committed themselves to obey the law of God as revealed in the Torah.

Yet they experienced difficulty in faithfully obeying the instructions of the Mosaic Torah, for times had changed considerably in the millennium since Moses had led their nomadic ancestors through the deserts of Sinai. This felt need for current interpretations and applications of the Torah was the fertile spiritual soil which nourished the four centuries of effort which culminated in the completion of the Talmud.

Rabbinic oral and written traditions and sermons which comprise the Talmud were developing long before the actual written compilations began. The event which catalyzed the vision and the effort was the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. At that time a rabbi, Johanan bin Zakkai, escaped from the conflagration in Jerusalem and settled in the little town of Jabneh by the Mediterranean Sea.

With astounding foresight, Rabbi Zakkai focused energy in two directions. First, he gathered around him a renewed council who could

function in place of the defunct Sanhedrin which had governed Judaism for many centuries. For nearly four centuries this reconstituted council guided Judaism. Second, he and the scholars around him began the incredible task of collecting, recording, organizing, and codifying traditions and opinions concerning the Torah which had been handed down through the centuries.

The traditions were *Halakah;* the opinions of the rabbis were *Midrash.* After the razing of Jerusalem under Hadrian, the whole school at Jabneh moved into Galilee, where several centers developed to continue this effort. These scholars worked intensely, often needing to move to new locations because of violence and upheaval. Generation after generation they labored; for 150 years they worked. Finally their voluminous effort was completed; it is called the *Mishnah* (Repetition).

Yet this was only the first part of talmudic writing. As the Galilean effort came to a conclusion, the Babylonian scholars received the baton, and proceeded also recording the *Haggadah* (the oral teachings of the rabbis). These traditions were interlaced with anecdotal and historical wisdom. For another two hundred years, these Babylonian scholars labored. Like their Judean and Galilean predecessors they often needed to move secretly to new locations to avoid anti-Jewish rabble or other forms of civil violence and upheaval. This two-century effort culminated in the completion of the *Gemara.*

The Babylonian Gemara and the Judean-Galilean Mishnah together

comprise the Talmud. This enormous effort reveals the awesome commitment of Jewish people to live in full obedience to the laws of God which are revealed in the Torah. The Talmud is a fence around the Torah, which minutely defines right conduct so that there may be no transgression of the laws of God.

Heroic Jewish scholars invested at least 350 years developing this monumental volume. Scores and scores of scholars invested entire lifetimes in this effort. As one generation passed from the scene, another generation received the baton and pressed on. These scholars worked with urgency.

They believed that their work would help the Jewish people survive as the covenant people of God among the nations of their dispersion. Their people were deprived of a place. The Promised Land was theirs no more. The temple was obliterated; only an idolatrous pagan image stood where the temple had once been. Scattered and persecuted, the very survival of Jewish peoplehood was in question.

Israel had a mission to the nations. They were called by their covenant God to be a light to the nations, and a blessing among all the peoples. This mission could only be accomplished as they lived in obedience to the laws of God. The Talmud which these scholars wrote over a period of three and a half centuries defined the peoplehood and mission of Israel in the global community. The Talmud was life-giving and life-sustaining nourishment for a suffering people in diaspora and in

mission among the nations.

Promise and Hope

Why should these people remain faithful to the Torah, when the cost of obedience to the covenant so often involved suffering, displacement, and death? The answer is hope. Hope in the promise of God has always helped to nourish and sustain their faithfulness.

Recall again God's promise to Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed because of you!"[25]

In various ways this promise was affirmed again and again through the prophets of God. They spoke and wrote of a Son who would come some day; he would be Messiah, the anointed one of God. During the exile and postexilic period, the messianic hope reached a crescendo.

The prophet Isaiah eulogizes that hope.

> The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord— and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
>
> He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
> or decide by what he hears with his ears;
> but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
>
> with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;

with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.[26]

Christians and Muslims believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of the messianic promises. Judaism as a religious system does not accept that Jesus is the Messiah. Herein is the great divide between Judaism and Christianity, as well as a divide between Islam and Judaism.

Jesus was Jewish, and all of his early disciples were Jewish. During his ministry many Jews were persuaded that he was the Messiah. During the first formative years of the church, nearly all the members were Jewish, and with the exception of two books, the whole New Testament was written by Jewish people. It is clear that many Jewish people did believe in Jesus as Messiah.

Yet Judaism as a religious community never accepted Jesus as Messiah. The fundamental reason is that he never established a viable, politically identifiable kingdom. His ministry did nothing to encourage the urgent felt need of the Jewish people to form a nation under God which would be independent of Rome which ruled Palestine at the time of Jesus. Their vision was that the Messiah would establish a worldwide Pax Israel, somewhat like Rome, which by the time of Christ had established the Pax Romana.

From the perspective of many Jews who chafed under Roman imperialism, the formation of the church as a community committed to the kingdom of God seemed to be an irrelevant and insignificant substitute for the urgent need for political independence from Rome. Even from the distance of two thousand years, the objections of Judaism to Jesus as Messiah are as clear and crisp today as they were in first-century Palestine: the Messiah will free Israel from oppression and will bring peace to the earth. Peace has not yet come. Therefore, Jesus cannot be the Messiah.

Yet the messianic hope has sustained Jews throughout the centuries of persecution and diaspora. That hope undergirded their commitment to the Talmud. Just as Ezra and Nehemiah over 2,400 years ago assured the people that God would fulfill his promise to them as they submitted to his law, so talmudic Judaism has sought to obey God faithfully so that he would indeed fulfill his promise of Messiah.

The State of Israel

Although Jewish orthodoxy hopes for a personal Messiah, other Jews speak of the time when the Jewish nation will bless the earth through being a people of peace. Still others speak of a worldwide messianic age. That people of blessing is Israel. The hope for Messi-
ah nurtures this peoplehood whose patriarch, Jacob, was named Israel by the Lord their God.

Zionism and Palestine

Hope for the Messiah is a core theme undergirding the commitment to form the state of Israel in Palestine. For centuries Orthodox Judaism had lived in the hope that when the Messiah appears he would lead the Jewish people back to Palestine and establish their nation, a nation which would bless the world with peace. That peace would bring to consummation God's intentions for history. Century after century they waited, but the Messiah did not appear.

The periodic persecution of these people in diaspora gave many Jews an intense longing for a homeland in Palestine, even before the Messiah came. They had waited long enough! Israel needed a theology of action. It is therefore not surprising that a century ago Zionism emerged as an invitation to prepare the world for the Messiah's coming by taking action. Zionism proclaimed the hope that the Messiah would return *after* Israel had taken the faith step of establishing their nationhood in Palestine.

Arthur Hertzberg of the World Jewish Congress writes concerning Zionism that the "deepest undercurrent is the conviction that the Zionist state is the transforming event of Jewish history and that it is, at the very least, a preamble to the end of days, in this world."[27]

In 1896 Theodor Herzl published *The Jewish State*. This was a watershed. The seeds of Zionism had been planted in fertile Jewish soil. In 1947, just over half a century later, the United Nations took action

recognizing the right of Israel to form a nation-state in Palestine. Israel was formed in a convulsion of violence which displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

What of the Messiah? The hope for the Messiah lives on. The Orthodox Jews who form the official religion of Israel plead for faithfulness to the Talmud, for defense of the Israeli peoplehood and nationhood. These commitments are a preparation for the Messiah. They live in hope.

Of course, not all Jews are Orthodox. There are also the Reformed and Conservative Jewish communities. Reformed Judaism is a significant movement in North American Jewry. For these Jews the formation of the state of Israel may be justified for pragmatic reasons; it is necessary to assure the survival of this peoplehood. Conservative Jewry has broken free from talmudic restrictions and mostly anticipates that the Messiah is an era of peace. They hope that the state of Israel will contribute to the establishment of that peace. That is Israel's mission to the nations.

Yet peace has not come to Israel or the earth. Israel's survival has depended on armed might. In the wake of Israel's fortieth anniversary, violence in the West Bank and Gaza increased as the Palestinian *Intifada* (the shaking off) gained momentum. It was tragic and ironic that a state birthed by a people who had suffered so much had become the oppressor of others. Thousands of Palestinian children had been maimed through

beatings, homes had been demolished, death had become a regular occurrence.

Biblical Israel was to be an open society. All others were welcomed into the covenant community. The ideal was a community not bonded by ethnicity but covenant. And the peoples came. Indeed modern Israel is remarkably elastic in absorbing Jewish pluralism; when in Israel recently I was told by Jewish leaders that over 130 Jewish nationalities have already immigrated to Israel.

However, modern Israel has experienced difficulty absorbing peoples whose ancestors are not Jewish. Palestinian Arabs who have lived in the land more than one thousand years cannot become full citizens of the Jewish state. Israeli Supreme Court decisions question whether it is possible for a Jew who believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah to become a citizen. Israel as a state and pluralism in Palestine are in collision.

The Israeli approach to pluralism is similar to that in all other countries in the Middle East. The dominant religious community defines the rights and privileges of the minority communities. In this region of the world, a secular state in which religion and the political institutions are separate is a most difficult aspiration. At its best the Israeli form of pluralism and that of other states in the region is a benevolent consideration of the interests of the minorities. Yet any pluralism which does not accept all communities as equal participants in every aspect of

national life has in itself the seeds of potential abuse.

In Lebanon, on the northern borders of Israel, a political system which recognized Christian dominance worked fairly well. That is the perspective of Lebanese Christians; Muslims would perceive otherwise. Then the demographic balance between Muslims and Christians tilted in favor of the Muslims. That happened during the 1970s, and the consequences of the need to rearrange power in the light of changing demographic realities have been catastrophic.

Israel has also studied demographic trends in her nationhood with anxiety. However, as the 1980s came to closure, massive Jewish immigration from the former Soviet Union commenced. The hundreds of thousands of new Israeli settlers from the former Soviet Union assured Jewish demographic dominance well into the twenty-first century.

Painful Peacemaking

A generation after the creation of Israel, the nation had become tragically divided in spirit. The 1967 war and the subsequent expansion of Israeli control over Jerusalem, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank created a severe impasse in the soul of Israel.

Different theologies collided. Israel could not remain true to her calling to live justly and continue forcibly and violently occupying the lands acquired through conquest. Even leaving conscience aside, the community of nations would not tolerate Israel sinking deeper and

deeper into the quicksand of fascist-style atrocities against the Arab peoples. Yet to surrender the occupied lands threatened to eradicate God's ancient guarantee of land and security for Israel; some of Israel's Arab neighbors vowed the destruction of Israel.

In that crisis two significant spiritual and faith themes competed in this tiny nation hugging the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. Both themes derived from biblical roots. One theme drew from the vulnerable patriarchs, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob (Israel), receiving the land as a gift of God's grace, sharing the land with others.

That vision worried about the potential for evil in any state and the potential evils of excessive reliance on military power. The vision opposed expansion of Jewish settlements in occupied territories and policies of oppression against Palestinians. This theme championed the biblical insistence that all people are created in God's image and are therefore worthy of respect and justice. Proponents called on decision makers to take the risks necessary for peace and justice.

The second theme insisted that the land belongs only to the Jewish people. These Jews believed that occupation of the land by Israel was central to God's promise to Abraham. All other people were guests in the land. The rights of the outsiders needed to be respected as long as they cooperated with those to whom the land belonged. The formation and continuation of the state of Israel was by divine mandate. Eventually the boundaries of modem Israel had to approximate those of biblical Israel

after they had occupied all the land God had promised to Abraham.

These descriptions are caricatures. Yet they reveal the dialogue. At the center of the conversation are these questions: What does the call and promise of God to Abraham mean for the people of Israel who are his descendants through Isaac? What is the role and mission of Israel among the nations?

The next two chapters explore Christian and Muslim perspectives as well. The faith perspectives of the Christian church, the Muslim *ummah,* and Israel have confounded this region of the world with pathos and tragedy and hope. The theological issues are always there; everyone realizes that faith perspectives are either the rock on which the peace must be established or the boulder on which all peace efforts will fragment. The faith questions which confront the spiritual progeny of Abraham in the Middle East are whimsically similar to the question Abraham himself wrestled with all his life—how does God accomplish his promise of blessing to his people and to all nations?

These faith issues were a core consideration during the 1978 Camp David peace discussions. For nearly two weeks, President Jimmy Carter of the United States (a Christian), President Anwar Sadat of Egypt (a Muslim), and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel (of the Jewish faith) dialogued about peace in the very lands the nomadic herdsman Abraham traversed. Middle Easterners have told me that only an American president who was a man of faith could have given leadership

to that peace process, for it is only through faith that one can enter with empathy into the underlying issues which divide and unite this region.

All three of these leaders were men of faith. Their first joint action, as the thirteen days of marathon negotiations commenced, was a call for prayer for peace to the global community of Muslims, Jews, and Christians. Carter describes using his personal Bible in some of his conversations with Begin concerning the issues of land and peace. At one point when the negotiations were at an impasse, Sadat held forth a vision of Jews, Christians, and Muslims meeting someday at Mount Sinai as a sign of the consummation of a regional peace process.

Implicit in their discussions was an awareness of the significance of the Abraham faith pilgrimage for the Middle East today.[28] In the years subsequent to the Camp David accords, others have persistently believed that peace is the will of the God of Abraham for the peoples of the Middle East. Clusters of Muslims, Christians, and Jews have patiently worked and prayed for peace. Yet the obstacles to peace have been overwhelming. Peace requires an awesome paradigm shift in the worldview of both Arabs and Israelis. Peace requires contrition, forgiveness, and vulnerability.

Thirteen years after Camp David, on the eve of the 1991 Madrid conference for Middle East peace, a British Broadcasting Corporation World Service newscaster said it well: Many of the participants coming to the conference believed that only divine intervention could bring

peace among the nations meeting in the Middle East Peace Conference.

The rightful place of Israel among the nations was the core of the national debate and agony as Israel faced the Arab nations on October 30, 1991, in Madrid. What a frightful event! For the first time in forty-three years, Israel met the official representatives of her neighboring Arab nations. The issues of land for peace are in the soul of both Israeli and Arab self-understanding, an understanding informed by several thousand years of history.

The self-understanding of the participants at the astonishing commencement of the 1991 Middle East Peace Conference was also informed by their respective scriptures—the Qur'an of the Muslims, the Tanach of the Jews, the New Testament of the Christians. It was indeed a meeting of the genealogical and spiritual descendants of Abraham. Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucianists were not present, although the whole global community is affected by the tensions in the region. It was a gathering of representatives of nations and peoples whose heritage has been the family of Abraham: Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

Nearly two years later, on September 13, 1993, the whole world paused in wonder. The world witnessed another peacemaking event on the White House lawn in Washington, D.C., an event which terrified multitudes of Israelis and Arabs. There the prime minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, and the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasir Arafat, signed an accord as a first step toward peace in

Palestine/Israel. The two thousand people representing the global community of nations who gathered on the White House lawn for the event realized that this was only the beginning of a long and difficult journey toward a secure peace. They hoped and prayed that the God of Abraham would prosper this act of courage, faith, and hope.

Peacemaking is very hard work. Only a little over two years after the signing ceremony at the White House, Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in November 1995, by a young Israeli who opposed the peace process. The road ahead was fraught with pitfalls. Numerous efforts to push the peace process forward floundered. Then on September 28, 2000, Ariel Sharon, now the prime minister of Israel, appeared at the Tempel Mount accompanied by about one thousand armed Israeli soldiers. He explained to the world that the purpose of this show of force was to demonstrate Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount as a Jewish holy place.

That event ignited a new Palestinian *intifada* (rising). In response, Israel reoccupied much of the Palestinian controlled West Bank and Gaza. One peace initiative after another unraveled. About a year after Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, on September 11, 2001, Muslim jihadists flew hijacked planes into the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D. C. The reasons for the rage that energized these atrocious crimes were multiple, but certainly a key grievance was the Israeli-Palestinian/Muslim impasse over Jersualem

and the Temple Mount.

Nevertheless, even amidst the turmoil and endless cycle of violence and reprisal, unexpected and specific grassroots for reconciliation and justice have emerged among some Jewish, Muslim, and Christian people. Some of the accounts are amazing and heroic. In modest ways these brave and persistent peacemakers have salted Israelis and Palestinians with a more reconciling spirit. These peacemakers have nurtured the kinds of risk-taking commitments to peace that the September, 1993, accords demanded.

We note some of these communities of reconciliation. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, a surprising development in Israel has been the emergence of the messianic communities. These Jewish fellowships in Israel and among Jews worldwide believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah.

In Israel itself, a few of these messianic congregations include Arab Palestinian Christians. Some people hope that the reconciliation between Jews and Arabs taking place in these congregations or between Arab and Jewish congregations is a sign in the Middle East of the possibility of a new way. They hope that these modest expressions of peace between Arabs and Jews can subvert animosities and plant the seeds of trust necessary for the difficult political processes of peacemaking.

Yet these signs of hope are miniscule. And neither is strife a foreigner

to Arab Christians or messianic Jews, nor are these communities immune to the political polarizations in Israel and among the Palestinians. Nevertheless, Jesus does reveal a remarkable approach to reconciliation.

At dinner one evening with a messianic Jewish couple from Israel, we began talking of reconciliation. Soon I noticed that one of them, David, was weeping quietly. Then David spoke, "I have been thinking that probably every family in the region has lost a son in
battle during the decades of Israel's existence as a state. I may lose my own son, Joshua."

After a long stillness he continued. "Yet there is hope. The hope is in Jesus. He is the reconciler, because when he was dying on the cross, he cried out, 'Father, forgive them!' I believe he can break the cycle of violence by enabling us also to forgive our enemies.

"I hope that we Jewish people who believe that Jesus is the Messiah can reveal that kind of suffering, reconciling love. Yet we fail so often. We also are trapped in the polarizations of our region."

Several years later I had a similar conversation, but this time with a Palestinian Arab from Bethlehem, whose people had suffered catastrophe under Israeli military occupation. It was one of those sad weeks in early 1991, when several Israelis and Palestinians had been killed.

"Do you see any hope for peace between Israel and the Palestinians?"

I asked.

"Of course!" he responded energetically.

He continued, "Jewish believers in the Messiah are meeting in Joppa monthly for prayer with Palestinian Arab Christians. I tell you, that is a miracle. It is only a seed of hope. Yet these seeds can become a tree of healing for our whole society."

Such efforts are infinitesimal. They are tiny, hardly observable seeds of hope. Yet they are so radically other than the spirit of the region that people notice and ponder. Is there a better way?

"Middle East Christians are the glue that hold this region together," exclaimed King Hussein of Jordan in a conversation on October 16, 1986, with Professor Raymond Bakke, director of International Urban Associates, Chicago.

Perhaps the king was reaching for the possibility of a better way when he surprised Bakke with that comment. Of course, the followers of Jesus are not always very good glue; in the Middle East the tragedy of Christian violence in Lebanon has poisoned the society. Yet the ethics and life of Jesus do invite his followers to become communities of reconciliation even in the most hostile environments.

There are other signs of hope as well. Occasionally Muslim, Jewish, secular, as well as Christian people seek opportunities for reconciliation and understanding.

The Peace Now movement in Israel seeks to influence Israeli political

processes. This group has been a conscience prodding the government toward surrendering control of occupied territories in exchange for peace. The September 1993, accords were a small step in that direction. They have favored direct negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, a goal finally realized as the post- Madrid peace process progressed. Peace Now has perceived of the peace accord with Egypt as a first step in a process toward peace with all Israel's neighbors.

The Rapprochement Group in Beit Sahour, near Bethlehem, is a community seeking reconciliation. They are a tiny cluster who seek to provide opportunities for conversations between Palestinian and Jewish people. These conversations are often electric with tension, yet they persist in the hope of finding a better way. The Beit Sahour group occasionally convene joint Jewish and Arab vigils for peace. They participate in festivals and joviality together. Slowly seeds of trust are planted. These are little-noticed efforts. Yet political peace must have these kinds of grassroots support. Otherwise peace would be an illusion.

The world was grateful that the 1978 Camp David conversations led to a peace accord between Israel and Egypt. Thirteen years later, broad-based conversations began in the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference. Quite unobtrusively the Norwegian government nurtured trust by hosting informal conversations between representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel. Finally in September 1993, the PLO and Israel signed accords in Washington. Were these beginnings

authentic steps toward peace? The obstacles nurture despair.

Yet there are those Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers who have always lived with the conviction that the God of Abraham is the God of hope.

Israel and the Nations

The conclusion of chapter 7 summarized ways in which the biblical Scriptures speak to modem global issues. This chapter has explored ways in which the modern Jewish community, and especially the state of Israel, reflect on and express those biblical Scriptures known as the Tanach. In addition to the themes described in the previous chapter, we have explored several new themes which are important for global community.

1. Abraham is the spiritual father of both the Muslim and Jewish community. In fact, many Arabs and most Jews consider themselves to be Abraham's genealogical descendants as well. The division between Ishmael and Isaac in the home of Abraham some four thousand years ago is projected right into the modem Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The conflict has global significance for in various ways all nations are affected—witness the 1973 oil embargo.

2. Land has been a key issue. God promised this land to Abraham and his descendants forever. Does that promise extend to the descendants of both sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac? How should the land be

acquired? Should the community of promise receive the land through the generosity of those already living in the land as was true of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Or may those seeking the Promised Land acquire it through violence, as Joshua did when Israel first occupied the land several thousand years ago?

Palestinians insist that it is not right for the Jewish immigrants to equate the Palestinians with the polytheistic Canaanites of Joshua's time; after all the Palestinians also fear the God of Abraham.

3. Israel lives in the memory of Masada and the Holocaust. All of world Jewry insists, "Never again!" Consequently during the first decades of nationhood, Israeli insecurities invited increasing repression. It was sadly evident that a people who were once violently oppressed and had come to Israel to escape such tragedy had also become oppressors.

4. The Palestinians and Israelis are global communities. For Jews everywhere the survival of the state of Israel is vital to their security as a peoplehood. Prosperous Jewish people in other lands often send generous donations to Israel. In some circumstances they influence political processes in their nations of citizenship, encouraging expressions of support for Israel. This is especially so of the Jewish community in the United States.

Most Palestinians likewise enjoy global connections with Arab communities, be they Christian or Muslim. They are capable of marshalling enormous support, as evidence in the 1973 oil embargo.

Palestinian-Israeli conflict has affected political systems globally and sometimes has eroded the peace in regions elsewhere.

5. Israel as God's covenant peoplehood is called to be a blessing to the nations. For many years the security patrols in Israel and in the occupied territories as well as the belligerent spirit between Israel and some of her neighbors indicated that the nations bordering Israel had often not experienced Israel as a blessing. Is there a fundamental conflict between the exigencies of statehood and the calling to be a covenant people of blessing?

The prophets of ancient Israel were not pleased with the development of the state as expressed in the emergence of monarchies. Modern Israel struggles with the same tensions. Is it really possible to merge the institution of statehood with the invitation of God to become a people of blessing to all peoples? Yet the ideals which Israel at its best embodies are a blessing.

6. The Jubilee theme in Israel is one expression of a blessed vision: celebrating one's work, forgiving the debts of others, releasing all captives, providing for the needs of the alien. These themes which have blossomed from the spirit of ancient Israel have significantly influenced modern societies.

These Jubilee influences include the principles of one day of rest out of seven, paid vacations, pension plans, bankruptcy laws which let the person burdened with debt go free, abolition of slavery, parole for the

imprisoned, asylum for refugees, tax systems which redistribute the wealth of a society, and citizenship which is open to all people.

Reflection

1. Consider this comment: Israel and her neighbors live in the memory of God's promises to Abraham concerning Ishmael and Isaac.

2. What are the potential areas of tension between statehood and being God's covenant people?

3. Account for Israel's continued identity as a people among the nations.

4. In what ways did the Constantinization of Western Christianity distort Jewish Christian relations?

5. The peoplehood of Israel commenced about four thousand years ago. During all these millennia, in what ways has Israel been a blessing to the nations?

6. Consider ways in which the Jubilee themes have percolated into the laws and practices of your society.

6. Consider the different theological perspectives that have influenced Israel's stance toward Jerusalem and the peoples of the occupied territories in the aftermath of the 1967 war.