Israel and God's promises: Readers respond to Gary Anderson

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I first thought it must be a joke when I saw the cover emblazoned with the line, “If the promises of God are inviolable, then Israel’s attachment to the land is underwritten by God’s decree” (Does the promise still hold? Jan. 13). I double-checked the date of the issue, thinking perhaps it was from last April Fool’s Day and that a delightful tongue-in-cheek satire was in store.

But no, to my utter amazement Gary Anderson expounded on that premise in all seriousness, as though the theological perceptions of some tribe of believers (of which I count myself one) actually had standing in affairs of contemporary national sovereignty. Can’t you just see it now, the stream of petitioners from all manner of religious persuasions flocking to The Hague, presenting the World Court with claims that their particular deity gave them title to certain real estate?

This is lunacy—Exhibit A for how far out of touch with reality the ivory tower of academe can become. Fortunately, Walter Brueggemann’s response to Anderson reels in this flight of fancy: “It strikes me as enormously hazardous to cite a supernatural right in the midst of realpolitik.” He continues: “What is claimed to be supernatural does not and cannot carry weight in the world of political-military reality.” That thought should have been the cover story.

Eliot Daley
Princeton, N.J.

I don’t understand Anderson’s argument. Stealing other people’s land is evil. Stealing other people’s land and blaming it on God is even more evil. When Anderson gives his land to Israel and moves into a Palestinian refugee camp, then he might have some standing to prattle on about God’s promises. Otherwise, I have to believe his article is one more sad example of European racism.

Palestinians are children of Abraham too. Genesis does not say that God will steal land from God’s non-Western children and give it to God’s European children. Chris

tian guilt about the treatment of Jews will not restore the lives of any of the Palestinian dead in Gaza.

Whitney Shiner
Reston, Va.

The theology espoused in Anderson's article has been eclipsed. The eschatologies that it puts forward, both Christian and Jewish, no longer stand up to the challenges of our world—this despite Anderson's setting up of the straw man of millennialist thinking. Clearly you don't have to go to Pastor John Hagee to find full-blown Christian Zionism. It's in the mainstream. Anderson's qualification that Israel's "supernatural" claim to Canaan is conditional doesn't wash: despite God's wrath, in Anderson's view the Jews get the land. Exile implies return.

Increasing numbers of Christians on individual, congregational and denominational levels are joining Jews of conscience around the world in calling to account the government of Israel and its U.S. supporter for actions, past and present, that threaten the security and well-being of Israelis, Palestinians and all of humankind and likewise betray enduring Judeo-Christian values.

After the Nazi Holocaust, Christianity to its credit repudiated supersessionism. Why cannot the archaic, destructive theology of the election of the Jewish people and the accompanying deed to the land of Palestine be likewise consigned to history?

Mark Braverman
Bethesda, Md.

Anderson's statement that "the miraculous appearance of the Israeli state just after the darkest moment in Jewish history is hard to interpret outside of a theological framework" cannot be defended in light of the secular origins of Zionism that grew out of the nationalistic and imperialistic spirit of 19th-century Europe. The Jews who worked for the creation of the state of Israel were secular Jews.

Furthermore, plans to remove Palestine's indigenous population belie Anderson's claim that the appearance of the Israeli state was "miraculous." The Jewish leadership in Palestine in the 1930s and '40s was clear that the Arabs of Palestine would need to be expelled in order for there to be a state of Israel. Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, for entirely pragmatic reasons wrote in his diary in 1895: "We shall endeavour to expel the poor population across the border unnoticed, procuring employment for it in the transit countries, but denying it any employment

in our own country. . . . The process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly."

To place the state of Israel in a theological framework makes it all the more difficult to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Newland Smith
Evanston, *Ill*.

How to love Israel? Sharpened by every death, every wound, whether Arab or Israeli, the question is prompted by the Century's groundbreaking exchange on Israel and the land. Amid all the other issues in the spiral of despairing violence, it's a question unforgettably raised.

But suppose we accept Anderson's theological conclusion—as I am willing to do: Israel is God's chosen people and Canaan is (however conditionally) its homeland, not surely "for all eternity"(Anderson) but as long as humans live on earth. But then, to put it bluntly, so what? Any attempted application entails political choices, for which Anderson's scripturally based "moral ethos" gives no sure guide.

Similar problems apply to Israel's declaration of independence. Unlike Ander son, it makes no divine claim but credibly appeals to the "historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz-Israel." It pledges a state based on "freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel" and to "foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants." But the application of these principles requires political choices—always imperfect, always contested. Is anyone able to evidence how Israel's principles enlighten its actions?

Then how best to love Israel? I'm committed to nonviolence and the view that what is sauce for the Israeli goose is sauce for the Palestinian gander. In other words, what Israel needs in order to be a viable state is what its Palestinian neighbors need. No more, but no less—no Bantustans, no ghettos. Tough love includes going beyond verbal hand-slaps to stop settlement expansion and collective punishment. Tough love would rethink the U.S.-Israel "special relationship" whereby our taxes fund $3 billion annually in military aid, including transport planes, attack helicopters, Patton tanks, munitions, bombs, missiles, artillery and F-16 fighter aircraft. Tough love means considering the Palestinian push for boycott, divestment, sanctions.

We hear the objections: *Economic pressures alienate rather than persuade*. But persuasion hasn't stopped settlement expansion and the strangulation of Gaza. The

European Union seems to agree. It responded to the Gaza assault by suspending plans to upgrade an Israel-EU trade agreement.

Israel is not South Africa. True. Yet travel restrictions, house demolitions, forced displacements, requirements for identity papers and wearying checkpoints are structurally similar. The South African experience shows that boycotts, divestment and sanctions can get results when words fail.

We need more dialogue, *not less*. Boycotts provoke outbursts, objections and discussion—in other words, communication.

Economic measures really hurt. Sadly, yes. But they are a much lesser evil than inaction or violence, and as soon as they bring about change they can be reconsidered. It's refreshing nowadays to consider South African wine with a "Hmm" instead of a "No."

Boycott measures against Israel are anti-Semitic. Columnist Naomi Klein reports that during the Gaza assault, some 500 Israeli Jews—including well-known artists and scholars—wrote to foreign ambassadors stationed in Israel and called for "the adoption of immediate restrictive measures and sanctions." Only a racially twisted logic could claim that it's anti-Semitic for a gentile to support these Jewish dissenters.

Brian Wren
Chilmark, *Mass*.

Anderson's concluding point that criticism of Israel rather than Russia and China by mainline Christians reveals an underlying anti-Semitism demonstrates instead that the point of his article is political smoke rather than theological clarity. The U.S. shelters Israel politically at the United Nations and subsidizes its budget with $4 billion per year, allowing military purchases and indirectly involving the U.S. in settlement activity on the West Bank. None of this is true of the American relationship with Russia or China.

It is perfectly sensible that many of us are far more critical of situations that the U.S. government is aiding and abetting than of situations about which we actually can do little. The effort to tar reasonable criticism with the anti-Semite slur simply shows how weak Anderson's case really is.

William F. Davnie
Minneapolis, *Minn*.

Anderson and his three commentators fail to address the basic question regarding God's promise to the Jewish community: Who wrote down these promises? The undebatable answer is Jewish priests, prophets, and scribes—hardly disintersted neutral observers. For example, God's promise to Abraham that Anderson discusses was apparently written by a member of the priestly caste during the Babylonian exile to reassure the flock for which he wrote that the future would be better.

Recognition of the historic nature of scripture would be a major step toward resolving the problems that the world has created in Palestine. Once the emotion and the religious fanaticism are set aside, reasonable accommodation might be possible.

Peter E. Kane
Canandaigua, N.Y.

The Century's discussion of Israel and the land founders on two fundamental mistakes. The first is the assumption that divine claims to land, whether by Jews or anyone else, are relevant in the realm of international affairs. Israel is simply one nation among many, politically speaking, and any claim of a divine grant of land is totally irrelevant. The claim is not theologically irrelevant, but it is theologically, biblically and ethically problematic.

The second mistake is to simply assume, as Anderson does, that the biblical people of God and the modern state of Israel are one and the same. This is to sacralize the state itself, which is theologically problematic in the extreme. To say that there is no connection at all may be a mistake, but the connection is a theological puzzle for both Jews and Christians. Israel has yet to arrive at an agreed definition of who is a Jew. If Israel, the state, is the people of God, then all its citizens must be people of God, including Palestinian Muslims and Christians as well as nonreligious and atheist Jews. The assumption is not only absurd but dangerous; no state is a sacred entity.

Finally, Anderson's claim that "the miraculous appearance of the Israeli state just after the darkest moment in Jewish history is hard to interpret outside of a theological framework" is nonsense. Historians may disagree on many details, but they have not had to resort to claiming divine action to explain the origin of the Israeli state

Arland Jacobson
Moorhead, Minn.

No archaeological evidence exists supporting the narratives that lead to Judaism's exclusive claims on the land. The evidence that does exist, however, points to a populist uprising over the royal and elite classes of Canaan. Over time the Abrahamic and Mosaic narratives arose and gave these revolutionaries their Hebrew identity and collective purpose. But the most likely facts are that at least initially, the Jewish people never came from anywhere else, but were the brothers and sisters of those whom they now oppress.

When esteemed journals such as the Century engage in pseudo-scholarly debates that pretend such narratives are literally true, all they manage to do is ignore the hard evidence in order to perpetuate the lie. This allows the "theology of the land" discussion to hang over the present tragic conflict and in the process justifies oppression, a sustained program of ethnic-religious cleansing, and death.

Perhaps it is time for responsible scholarship to unmask the lie by making it clear that although ancient Hebrew narratives (as do all religious narratives) give a certain faith community its identity, they do not provide a framework for claiming superiority and exclusivity over a culture whence they most likely came. If this new narrative forced a people to face the fact that they are oppressing their own brothers and sisters, perhaps together they could start imagining what makes for peace in the same family. Perhaps then they would give teeth to one of their most sacred narratives: Esau and Jacob weeping upon one another's necks.

Jeffrey DeYoe
Worthington Presbyterian Church,
Worthington, *Ohio*

The Century's stimulating exchange on Israel and the land set me thinking about analogies between Israel's chosenness and Jesus' chosenness. Jesus was tempted to use his chosenness in a closed way, either to promote himself or to protect his own people, the Jews. Instead he used his chosenness as a gift to open himself to others, to become a door through which all could enter into the kingdom of the one God. There are rich hints in the "Israel and the land" articles about how Israel might use its chosenness in the same way.

Judaism has always had within itself a tension between exclusivism and universalism. It takes a willingness to risk, to sacrifice, in order to move in the direction of universalism—an Israel that offers itself as a light to the nations in a way that opens doors rather than erects walls. The cost of sacrifice in this case might be

the loss of the original Zionist vision of a Jewish nation, but that loss might lead the way to far greater gain for all of us—and not least God's chosen people, the Jews. For all religions in this global age there is the challenge of keeping our distinct identities while eschewing violence toward and exclusion of others. What Israel might do would help Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others.

John McCausland
Weare, N.H.

Gary Anderson replies:
These letters are disappointing, because only a few of them engage the theological issue that I wished to put forward. Simply put, the issue was this: if the biblical promises (canonically considered) to Israel are inviolable, as St. Paul claimed, then what is the Christian to do with the fact that the Old Testament makes the promise of the land to Israel one of its most salient and nonnegotiable points?

Letter writers Peter Kane and Jeffrey DeYoe simply disqualify the right of the biblical text to speak to this issue. There is not much to say in response to their viewpoint; without a scriptural premise, I have no argument to make.

A couple of other respondents thought that my intended audience was the public square. But my very first sentence makes clear that I was addressing the person in the pew, not judicial officials at The Hague (as supposed by Eliot Daley and Arland Jacobson).

Newland Smith rightly points out the problem of the secular origin of Zionism. For this point, I would urge him to read my longer piece in *First Things*, which dealt with that problem extensively. Smith and Whitney Shiner do not understand the theological force of Uriel Simon's argument about Israel's supernatural claim to the land. Shiner misunderstands it as support for a unilateral land grab; Smith sees it as a divine underwriting of whatever Israel wants to do. Smith might be surprised to know that Uriel Simon has long been active in the Israeli peace movement and is very sympathetic to Palestinian claims to a land. Nevertheless, for Simon the way forward is decidedly theological.

I thank Brian Wren and John McCausland for their thoughtful reading of the theological dimension of my piece and grasping its main point. I regret, however, that Wren ends with a one-sided and quite vitriolic critique of Israeli politics. No doubt there are many things that the modern state of Israel has done and continues to do that are worthy of public critique. But one hopes that Wren feels an even

greater outrage for the policies of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran and that the constraints of time and space prevented him from a more balanced approach. One-sided vitriol is often a good barometer of an underlying anti-Semitism.