

Does the promise still hold? Israel and the land: A response to Gary Anderson

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

Professor Anderson takes up what must be the most vexing problem facing us wherein faith collides with political reality. I agree with Anderson and would not presume to instruct or challenge him, though I would make the accent somewhat differently. I understand the large claim of his statement to be that the land is providentially and eternally promised to Israel, and no amount of Christian supersessionism or political realism can vitiate that claim. So far so good.

Anderson's appeal, not surprisingly, is largely focused in the promises to Abraham. As Anderson well knows, the primary narrative of the Hebrew Bible runs all the way from Genesis through 2 Kings, so that the full narrative is about land gift and land loss; it is, in my judgment, an open interpretive question about where to place the accent. It is conventional to accent the Abraham traditions, but the force of the primary narrative might seem to be on land loss, a quite remarkable claim in the normative text.

It is when we move from a theology of providential fidelity to political reality that the vexations become acute. Anderson recognizes this, but does not give full weight to it. Simon's statement that he quotes with approval, moreover, speaks of "conditionality." This is where the discussion needs to focus. What are the conditions whereby the land may belong to Israel, especially when contemporary Zionist ideology tends to regard the land as given unconditionally? Anderson refers to the "moral ethos" but does not spell that out in terms of the "natural claim" of the Palestinians to the land or how they are to be treated since they are there.

It strikes me as enormously hazardous to cite a supernatural right in the midst of realpolitik, especially when the right is entwined with military ferociousness and political exclusivism. While such a right may serve self-identity, it makes sense only

inside the narrative. Outside the narrative it is no more than ideology, and so offers no basis for the hard work of peace and justice. The capacity to hold together a theological claim (that I as a child of that narrative take not to be in doubt) and the summons of political realism is tricky indeed. Anderson tilts much more to the supernatural claim that would I. I take it that the right of Israel to exist (the ultimate issue vis-à-vis the Palestinians) is not in doubt. But that right is situated in the midst of other rights, and what is claimed to be supernatural does not and cannot carry weight in the world of political-military reality. I am grateful that Anderson has made the point, but, as he knows, all of the hard work remains after that point. That hard work involves political realism, water rights, access to jobs, and the scarred reality of bodies that a wall does not make less acute. But this the post-587 BC Jews already knew—that hard work is the inescapable requirement of serious faith.

[Gary A. Anderson's essay](#)

[Marlin Jeschke's response](#)

[Donald E. Wagner's response](#)

[Gary Anderson's reply](#)