

IS THE BIBLICAL LAND PROMISE IRREVOCABLE?: POST-*NOSTRA AETATE* CATHOLIC THEOLOGIES OF THE JEWISH COVENANT AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL

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Abstract

This article studies the various ways that Catholics have interpreted the biblical promise of the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants after *Nostra Aetate*, which affirmed the continuing legitimacy of the Jewish covenant containing this promise. Specifically, it analyzes the range of views regarding the religious significance of the land promise in Catholic statements on Jews and Judaism. These official Vatican statements affirm the covenant in general but decline to offer any theological legitimacy to this particular aspect of it. I argue that their perspective on the covenant is circumscribed and self-referential. By contrast, other statements, despite beginning with nearly identical texts (both biblical and Catholic) and theological assumptions, not only affirm the covenant generically but insist that the land promise is itself an integral and legitimate part of the covenant.

Introduction

Modern Roman Catholic teachings on Jews and Judaism dramatically broke with a long tradition of supersessionism by rethinking the status of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. After centuries of denying any legitimacy or positive significance to Judaism, the central claim that has emerged in the wake of the issuance of *Nostra Aetate* (NA) in 1965 is that, even after the coming of Jesus, the biblical covenant with the Jews is unrevoked.¹ The original Jewish covenant has not been

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¹E.g., NA 4: "[T]heirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh' (Rom. 9:4–5) . . . God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues," in *Nostra Aetate*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20161024_nostra-aetate-4_en.html (accessed 20-March 2017). Note the use of the present tense ("is. . . are") in the first sentence, which is not required by the Greek. On post-Vatican II views of the covenant in general, see Mary C. Boys, "The Covenant in Contemporary Ecclesial Documents," in *Two Faiths, One Covenant?: Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other*, edited by Eugene B. Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 81–110, at 82–95; Philip

replaced by a new, Christian covenant; rather, this covenant remains in effect, thus maintaining the relationship inaugurated with the call of the biblical patriarchs. Among other influences, this shift was prompted by, and in turn has prompted, creative and sometimes new readings of Scripture, now read not just Christologically but with attention to its historical and literary features. Passages describing God's love for Israel or celebrating the commandments as integral to the relationship, for example, are no longer read only as allegories of God and the Christian Church, their original meaning discarded.²

However, while the covenant is not an abstract concept and necessarily contains particular aspects, in official Vatican teachings on Jews and Judaism the actual content of Israel's covenant has been almost entirely ignored. God's covenant with the Jews is simply affirmed in a generic sense. The rich and detailed constellation of covenantal images and assurances to the people of Israel starting with the call of Abraham, such as progeny, renown, and especially the promise of the land of Israel, are themselves almost never given any attention, let alone any ongoing theological significance.³ This is surprising, for these aspects are embedded within a covenant that is now strongly and repeatedly affirmed by Catholics as itself having ongoing theological significance. When the land of Israel—arguably the most prominent aspect in the biblical passages that are cited in Catholic statements on this covenant⁴—is mentioned at all, it is usually in expressions of hope for peace in the region.⁵

This trend in discussions of the land of Israel, found in Vatican texts on Jewish-Catholic relations (e.g., in papal speeches and writings and in statements by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews), is given a more formal status in the Commission's statement *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church (Notes)* from 1985. Guided by the fundamental claim that the "Old Covenant . . . has never been revoked,"⁶ its authors address some of the profound issues that were raised for Christians starting with

A. Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom: The Journey to Right Relationship between Catholics and Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 154–80.

²E.g., Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html (accessed 20-March 2017) 2:3–8; Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/287-pbc-1993 (accessed 20-March 2017) I:A. When used on its own, in this article "Israel" refers to the *people* of Israel (i.e., the Jews).

³In addition to the original divine call and promise to Abraham in Gen. 12:1–3, one could note for example Gen. 13:17; 15:7, 18; 26:4; 28:4, 13; 35:12 (land); 13:16; 15:5; 17:2–8; 26:4 (numerous progeny); 22:17 (military success), among other passages elsewhere in Genesis and in other biblical books.

⁴"The land theme is so ubiquitous that it may have greater claim to be the central motif in the OT than any other," in Waldemar Janzen, "Land," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:143–54, at 4:146. See also Richard C. Lux, *The Jewish People, the Holy Land, and the State of Israel* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010), 41–8.

⁵For example, see Pope John Paul II's statement from 1984: "For the Jewish People who live in the State of Israel and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies of their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and condition of life and of progress of every society," in Pope John Paul II, "On Jerusalem and the Middle East (Apostolic Letter *Redemptiois Anno*)," www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/301-jp2-84apr20 (accessed 20-March 2017).

⁶*Notes* 1:3, citing what is called John Paul II's "theological formula."

Nostra Aetate, such as the status of the Hebrew Bible and soteriology. This statement also contains an explicit discussion of the land of Israel. However, as Catholics they consider but then decline to offer any theological legitimacy to this particular aspect, affirming only the biblical covenant in general. Their perspective on the land illustrates this circumscribed perspective on a central theme of the covenant.⁷

The *Notes* is a prominent statement and reflects the overall position of official Vatican statements on Jewish-Catholic relations regarding the covenantal promise of the land of Israel. Though it was issued more than three decades ago, no subsequent statement or papal presentation has developed the topic any further. However, there are other Catholic statements that differ from the *Notes*' circumscribed view. Though not issued by popes or the Vatican office charged with Jewish-Catholic relations, they too were intended to contribute to the post-*Nostra Aetate* trajectory of reforming Catholic views of Jews and Judaism. They employ a different approach to Scripture and the land of Israel, both exegetically (i.e., how they interpret biblical passages) and hermeneutically (i.e., how the affirmation of an irrevocable Jewish covenant influences their interpretation of Scripture). They are: the draft of a major Vatican statement that was never issued, "Reflections and Suggestions for the Application of the Directives of *Nostra Aetate* 4" ("Reflections"), from 1969; *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (JPSS) from the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), issued in 2001; and two statements by national Catholic bishops' committees, from France in 1973 and from Brazil in 1984. The PBC statement alone has received much scholarly attention, but its views on the land promise have been almost entirely overlooked; the other three have received little to no scholarly attention. Though the status, length, and genre of the four vary, and of course some predate the *Notes*, they illustrate alternative Catholic interpretations of the covenant and the land promise it contains. Importantly, they do so using many of the same biblical sources and based on the same fundamental beliefs about the continuing legitimacy of the covenant with the Jews as those found in the *Notes* and subsequent official Vatican statements.

Scope and Purpose

This study has an interreligious context. It considers the different ways the biblical promise of the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants is interpreted within the post-*Nostra Aetate* Catholic context in these five statements. Closely reading statements with very different approaches, I critically analyze the arguments they make for or against the religious significance of the land of Israel for Catholics, the tensions this raises for their views on Judaism, and how the authors seek to reduce these tensions. By considering both exegetical and hermeneutical issues, my study yields insights into broader trends in Catholic thought generally about biblical interpretation and about Jews and Judaism.

Before turning to the statements, it is important to note that there are of course serious political sensitivities that can influence Catholic theological discussion in general, and certainly about the land of Israel. Theology does not occur in a vacuum, disconnected from its context. This is especially true for the Vatican, which has both

⁷On the authority of the *Notes*, see the discussion below.

a religious and a political identity.⁸ The two symbiotically influence each other. For example, this was evident during the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*. Concerned that positive theological statements about Judaism might suggest that the Vatican was taking sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the drafters insisted that the declaration had a “purely and exclusively religious character” (4).⁹ They saw *Nostra Aetate* in these terms, and sought to ensure that others—especially Arabs and Israelis—did as well, and not draw unwarranted conclusions from it. The converse is also true. The *Fundamental Agreement Between the Holy See and the State of Israel* (1993) led to official Vatican recognition of the State of Israel.¹⁰ While officially an “agreement” between two governments, it was seen by some as making a theological statement (here, indirectly repudiating the Christian theological tradition that unbelieving Jews are meant to be homeless and subjugated wanderers).¹¹ In both examples, the Church was balancing competing interests, a task made all the more challenging because of its prominence and the worldwide scope of its claims (in contrast to, say, those of a national bishops’ committee). In some cases, scholars can reconstruct in detail the views of the various parties seeking to influence Church decisions.¹²

I therefore recognize the relevance of both the context within which theology is done and the (often political) forces on the authors. However, the focus of this article lies elsewhere. It mentions the contexts of the different statements but does not explore what non-theological or political concerns may have influenced their authors. This would require not just a longer but a different type of study, which would, among other things, need to reconstruct the (often unstated) concerns of the authors, to consider the political conditions at the time, and to assess earlier and later statements from the same authors or bodies. This is a worthwhile but largely historical endeavor, one that would range far from this article’s focus on theology and biblical interpretation.¹³ This study is narrower and its conclusions are therefore more

⁸The Vatican is both the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church, with offices devoted to religious and theological affairs (such as the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews), and also a political entity that engages in relations with other countries through its Secretariat of State, an office within the Holy See. This is relevant to Church relations with Jews and with the State of Israel, for example; see below.

⁹See Raymond Cohen, “Catholic-Jewish Reconciliation: From Theology to Diplomacy,” in *Religious Stereotyping and Interreligious Relations*, edited by Jesper Svartvik and Jakob Wiren (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 137–52, at 141; Yehezkel Landau, “Pope John Paul II’s Holy Land Pilgrimage: A Jewish Appraisal,” in *John Paul II in the Holy Land: In His Own Words with Christian and Jewish Perspectives*, edited by Lawrence Boadt and Kevin di Camillo (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 129–56, at 136–8. On the political context of *NA*, see most recently John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews 1933–1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 249–50.

¹⁰See www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/archivio/documents/rc_seg-st_19931230_santa-sede-israele_en.html (accessed 20-March 2017). This is formally a political agreement between the State of Israel and the Holy See.

¹¹John Pawlikowski, “Land as an Issue in Christian-Jewish Dialogue,” *Cross Currents* 59 (2009): 197–209, at 199, 203.

¹²For example, we know about some of the deliberations and disputes between various parties inside and outside the Church over what became *NA* from detailed intermediate notes and reports; see www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-debate (accessed 20-March 2017).

¹³Some relevant studies of the Church’s attitude toward and involvement with Zionism and the State of Israel include Paul Charles Merkley, *Christian Attitudes Towards the State of Israel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 134–60; Raymond Cohen, “Israel and the Holy See Negotiate: A Case Study in Diplomacy across Religions,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 5 (2010): 213–34, at 213–27; Lux, *The Jewish People*.

limited, though I do not think they are consequently weakened. Rather, I expect that this other type of study would provide valuable insights into some of the reasons *why* the authors make the claims they make. That is, for the most part, not a question I seek to answer. (In some statements, the authors explicitly discuss both the complex political and religious issues raised when discussing the land of Israel. In those cases, I do note their concerns, and how they relate to the claims they make.)

This study begins with the *Notes*. It then turns to the four other statements, first commenting (in chronological order) on the “Reflections” and *JPSS*. Finally, it considers the two statements issued by national bishops’ committees, from France and Brazil.

***Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews**

In official Vatican statements on Jews and Judaism, including from popes and relevant offices (especially the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews [CRRJ]), there is almost nothing about the theological significance of the covenantal promise of the land of Israel, despite extensive discussion of biblical passages on the covenant within which it appears. Three of the four official theological statements issued by the Commission omit the issue.¹⁴ The one exception is the *Notes*, which offers the only explicit discussion of the land of Israel as it relates to the biblical covenant. The formal authoritative status of the statement is established primarily because of the Church office that issued it.¹⁵ Perhaps more revealing of the widely held perception of its status, and also highly significant for my discussion in this

¹⁴ There are two post-*Notes* statements as well as an earlier statement. In 1974 the CRRJ issued *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (n. 4) (*Guidelines*), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19741201_nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed 20-March 2017). In 2015 it issued “*The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29): *A Reflection on the Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of “Nostra Aetate”* (No. 4) (*Gifts*), www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html (accessed 20-March 2017). The Commission’s statement *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998) was not intended to address issues relevant to this study; see www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html (accessed 20-March 2017). It is not perhaps entirely correct to say the *Gifts* omits the issue of the land of Israel; the authors do mention the “land of the forefathers” but do not offer any comments of their own and simply quote a few sentences from the *Notes* (the same ones I discuss below) (5). Furthermore, in the many detailed and substantial presentations by Cardinal Walter Kasper during his time leading the CRRJ (2001–2010) he offered extensive discussions of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. He sometimes devotes entire presentations to this topic. However, he makes only a single brief reference to the land promise. In a 2004 discussion of the multiple covenants God made in the Bible, he refers to “the covenant with Abraham containing the pledge of the Promised Land and numerous posterity (cf. Gen 17),” in Walter Kasper, “The Relationship of the Old and the New Covenant as One of the Central Issues in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” www.cjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/kasper/652-kasper04dec6-1 (accessed 20-March 2017). Otherwise, he says nothing about this aspect of the covenant in more than a dozen presentations.

¹⁵ “The ecclesial authority of the ‘Notes’ rests on several facts: its promulgation by the competent Vatican dicastery (with the approbation of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith) charged to continue the implementation of a conciliar declaration; together with its quotations of previous authoritative documents (*Nostra Aetate*, the 1974 ‘Guidelines’) and the papal pronouncements of John Paul II,” in Philip A. Cunningham, “Official Ecclesial Documents to Implement the Second Vatican Council on Relations with Jews: Study Them, Become Immersed in Them, and Put Them into Practice,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 4 (2009): 1–36, at 21. See also Alan Brockway, “Reflections on ‘the Common Bond,’” *Christian Jewish Relations* 18 (1985): 48–54, 57–8, at 48.

essay, is that after more than three decades, the topic of the land of Israel cautiously raised by the Vatican in the *Notes* (see below) has never been raised again in a theological context.¹⁶ Even the comments in the *Notes* are terse, though also theologically rich and sophisticated. In a few sentences it compresses the results of extensive committee discussions. While the genre of the *Notes* is not that of a formal theological treatise, its statement on the land of Israel in particular, and its major contribution to Catholic statements on Judaism in general, have given it lasting influence and prominence.¹⁷

Before looking at the *Notes* on the land, it is essential to establish the covenantal context of the authors' views. They explicitly affirm that contemporary Jews are in a vibrant and living covenant, a claim they ground in the revolutionary shift begun with *Nostra Aetate*.¹⁸ They insist this relationship between God and the people of Israel remains in force. Jews are still an "elect" and "chosen" people (1:1; 2:1–9; 6:1). They cite Pope John Paul II's distinctive formulation: God has never "revoked" his promises to them (1:3). This of course has implications for their view of Judaism in general. As a living tradition, they say, "the history of Israel did not end in A.D. 70" when the second Jerusalem Temple was destroyed. They encourage Catholic engagement with topics such as Jewish religious practice and liturgy, study of which can enrich the Catholic tradition, as well as the Shoah and the land of Israel (5:1; 6:1).

They incorporate John Paul II's language of "covenant" when naming the Jews "the people of God of the Old Covenant" (1:3). This establishes their status, from biblical times through the present. The authors note the original inauguration of this covenant in the biblical narrative, in God's first communication to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). However, their presentation is circumscribed. While the biblical covenant is fulsome and contains promises of land, progeny, a great name, and divine blessing, the authors of the *Notes* ignore these aspects and discuss only one other aspect: the promise of a future incorporation of Gentiles (i.e., Christians) into the patriarchal blessings. This began with the coming of Christ, so that "it can be said that Jews and Christians meet in a comparable [religious] hope, founded on the same promise made to Abraham (cf. Gen 12:1–3; Heb 6:13–18)" (2:10). The covenant should therefore be read "not as concerning only the Jews but also as touching us personally. Abraham is truly the father of our faith" (2:2). They avoid supersessionism, for this is not an either/or covenant. Rather, they say, the covenant began with the "singular nation" of the Jews as the original locus of the divine plan first revealed to Abraham, yet its "history concerns the whole human race and especially [Christian] believers" (2:1). In this interpretation, the covenant, which was originally focused on the call of the biblical patriarchs and emphasizes distinctive, Israel-centric aspects, is here given an incomparably broad scope.

¹⁶The topics of the land and State of Israel have been raised in other contexts, most prominently in the *Fundamental Agreement Between the Holy See and the State of Israel* from 1993. Other statements, as noted above, repeat excerpts from the *Notes*.

¹⁷See Anthony Kenny, *Catholics, Jews, and the State of Israel* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 44; Alain Marchadour and David Neuhaus, *The Land, the Bible, and History: Toward the Land That I Will Show You* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 165; Lux, *The Jewish People*, 9; Cunningham, *Seeking Shalom*, 165–70.

¹⁸It is cited often in the *Notes* (Pref.; 1:1, 8, etc.).

Otherwise omitting any comment on the content of the covenant, they note only that it transcends the Jews.¹⁹

Having strongly affirmed the unrevoked covenant in general but having only addressed those aspects relevant to non-Jews, the authors cease to explore the covenant any further. They then take an additional, and more explicit, step. They instruct Catholics not to attribute any theological significance to the aspect of the covenant that includes the biblical land promise. Unlike Jews, they write, who have long “preserv[ed] the memory of the land of their forefathers at the hearts of their [religious] hope,” the authors endorse a strictly secular perspective on the land of Israel (6:1). In an important but complex sentence, they say “Christians are invited to understand [Jewish] religious attachment which finds its roots in Biblical tradition [i.e., the covenantal promise of land], without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship” between the land promise and the Bible. They address Christians, not Jews, even though the topic is how Christians should theologially view the land presented in the “Biblical” tradition as promised to Jews beginning with the patriarchs (“forefathers”).²⁰

The quoted sentence must be carefully unpacked in order to discern the scope of the authors’ opposition to Catholics “mak[ing] their own any particular religious interpretation.” This phrase can be read in two ways. According to the first reading, which has a more limited scope, they might preclude for Catholics not religious interpretations of the biblical land promise to Israel in general but only certain “particular” objectionable interpretations. They do not say what these are, but perhaps have in mind strongly conservative or so-called fundamentalist interpretations that directly link biblical promises to the land today and especially to the modern political entity of the State of Israel. Eugene Fisher explains the statement this way:

The caveats to this affirmation (“without, however, making their own any *particular* religious interpretation” and “not in a perspective which is *in itself* religious”) preclude for Catholics [only] a biblical fundamentalist approach to the questions of boundaries etc., but do not in any way deny ... the “religious significance” of the Return [of the Jews to the land]. The Catholic argument here is with [fundamentalists such as American-Israeli rabbi and politician] Meir

¹⁹ The covenantal promise that Abraham’s blessing will come to encompass all the nations is extensively discussed in Church statements because it is linked to the spread of faith in Christ to the Gentiles. Most often, it appears in discussions of the Abrahamic promise that focus only on the phrase “in [Abraham] all the families/nations of the earth shall be blessed” (referring to Christians, and quoting Gen. 12:3) and on variations on this passage that appear later in Genesis. For a few examples, see Pope John Paul II, “General Audience,” w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20001129.html (accessed 20-March 2017); Pope John Paul II, “Address to the Representatives of the Jewish Community,” w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/november/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861126_com-ebraica-sidney-australia.html (accessed 20-March 2017). Even the comment in NA 4 that the Church “professes that all who believe in Christ—Abraham’s sons according to faith [Gal. 3:7]—are included in the same Patriarch’s call” clearly alludes to this theme of a blessing to the nations through Abraham but without commenting on any other aspects of the same promise for the Jews. (The next verse in Galatians after the quoted 3:7 includes the phrase in Gen. 12:3 about a “blessing to the nations.”)

²⁰ In this section of the *Notes* the authors draw from and sometimes quote a 1975 statement of the American bishops; see National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations*, www.cjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/us-conference-of-catholic-bishops/479-nccb1975 (accessed 20-March 2017). On the American statement see Marchadour and Neuhaus, *The Land*, 168.

Kahane and [American minister and leader of the so-called Religious Right] Jerry Falwell.²¹

According to this limited reading, this statement correlatively may also make space for particular acceptable (presumably non-fundamentalist) statements that do posit a religious interpretation.

However, I believe a second reading is more convincing. One should read the scope of their opposition broadly, as a *general* statement against Christians as Christians giving the land promise to the Jews any religious significance. While Jews, they admit, do view the promise of the land in theological terms, Christians should not look upon the same promise from a “religious” perspective. There are a number of reasons I read their statement as having a broader scope. If they were only opposed to prominent and problematic “religious interpretation[s]” of the land promise, one would expect them to offer some guidance for determining how one knows what is unacceptable and hence which claims about the land promise should not be made by Christians. However, their statement offers no specifics; on the contrary, they appear to speak generally about “religious interpretation” as such. The limited interpretation discussed above, viewing the authors as opposing only some (“particular”) unstated interpretations, implies that they write euphemistically and vaguely on such a vital issue. However, it is highly unlikely that readers—not only Catholics but Jews—would discern in this brief phrase just what constitutes bad exegesis of biblical texts on the promise of land. Brockway is rightly doubtful: “It is difficult to understand how even most Catholics should be expected to be able ‘properly’ to read [the *Notes*], or any other such document, if such proper reading requires a thorough knowledge of all the sources cited [i.e., topics addressed, such as so-called fundamentalist interpretation]. Neither *Nostra Aetate* nor the ‘Guidelines’ required such careful exegesis in order to comprehend precisely what they were saying.”²² It seems questionable that a reader (Jewish or Catholic) could perceive such a specific object of critique without any guidance in either text, and therefore unconvincing to posit an intentional decision to preserve such ambiguity here.²³

The next sentence of the *Notes*, in which the authors shift from the land of Israel to the State of Israel, buttresses my claim that the authors generally oppose assigning religious significance to the land. This sentence likewise appears to be based on this general approach regarding the land, now extended to this related topic of the State: “The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law” (6:1). Their explicit opposition to the attribution of any inherent religious significance to the State reads like a corollary to or logical deduction from the previous claim against attributing inherent religious significance to the land promise. Speaking generally about the State as Catholics, they reiterate in

²¹ Eugene Fisher, “Reflections on ‘the Common Bond,’” *Christian Jewish Relations* 18 (1985): 54–7, at 57. Emphasis in original. See also Eugene Fisher, “The Evolution of a Tradition: From *Nostra Aetate* to the ‘Notes,’” *Christian Jewish Relations* 18 (1985): 32–47, at 45.

²² Brockway, “Reflections,” 58.

²³ While the *Notes* here uses similar language to that used in the 1975 American statement (“Appreciation of this link is not to give assent to any particular religious interpretation of this bond”), it is questionable whether the unstated views implicitly criticized in the American statement are the same as the unstated views (what Fisher calls “fundamentalist”) criticized in this Vatican statement from 1985.

parallel fashion the same general position formerly applied to the land. Perhaps some Jews might have a religious view of the State of Israel (just like Jews have a religious view of the land of Israel). Catholics, by contrast, should view both the creation and the policies of the State in exclusively secular terms.

Further evidence in favor of a broad reading of the scope of their opposition to assigning religious significance to the land is found in statements issued after the *Notes*. If this phrase is read in a limited way—as a rejection of only some “particular” claims for the religious significance of the land (e.g., fundamentalist)—it necessarily carves out space for other, acceptable claims. In the language of the statement, logically Christians could both not “mak[e] their own” some claims and “mak[e] their own” others. Yet nothing of the latter has happened. On the contrary, after this statement was issued more than three decades ago, the topic of the religious significance of the land disappeared from all official Vatican statements on Jews and Judaism. When John Paul II in a speech in 1987 partially quoted from this complex section of the *Notes*, he dropped the phrase addressed to Catholics. He spoke only about what applies to Jews directly: “Catholics recognize among the elements of the Jewish experience that Jews have a religious attachment to the Land, which finds its roots in biblical tradition. After the tragic extermination of the Shoah . . .” There is no engagement with the idea that Catholics themselves might see such attachment in religious terms.²⁴

After decades of dialogue and the issuance of formal and papal statements, there has been no indication of any interest in (re)considering the theological significance of the land promise raised in the *Notes*. It is of course possible this position may only be temporary and will give way to future reflection. Major political changes, for example, might spur a reconsideration of these views, especially if the non-theological issues that impact and perhaps limit Catholic theology become less divisive. However, it is undeniable that this statement in practice (and I argue in intent) has marked both the first and until now last effort to consider this topic in official statements.²⁵ In contrast to diverse forms of Jewish attachment, they stress only their “understanding” of Jewish views of the land. As Catholics, they see no religious implications in the land promise in Scripture. They are in the realm of making broad judgments, against adopting Jewish affirmations (religious or otherwise) about the land as religious affirmations of their own.

I next want to discuss some of the unresolved tensions in the authors’ rejection of any religious significance of the biblical land promise for Catholics. They frankly admit that the promise of the land *is* grounded in the Christian (and Jewish) Bible. It has “its roots in Biblical tradition,” that is, in the Scripture held sacred by Christians and Jews alike. It is not the case that the Jews’ religious connections to and claims about the land are post-biblical, and hence without direct relevance or significance to

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, “Address to the Representatives of the Jewish Organizations,” w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870911_organizzaz-ebraiche.html (accessed 20-March 2017). The context—a speech to a Jewish audience—cannot explain this focus on Jewish theological attachment alone. To such an audience he is otherwise comfortable speaking about what Christians should believe, for example, that they have an obligation to “preach Jesus Christ to the world” and that through God’s promise to Abraham “all the nations [i.e., Christians] shall find blessing.”

²⁵ The repetition of the section in the *Notes* about the land of Israel in *Gifts* without comment, noted above, buttresses this interpretation.

Christians. Yet despite the authors' recognition of these genuine biblical roots, we saw above opposition to the idea that the biblical land promise has inherent religious relevance to Christians.

The authors seem to be making an (unstated) hermeneutical distinction in their interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, they insist throughout the *Notes* on the authority of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, which includes the affirmation of the ongoing covenant between God and Israel. As noted above, the covenantal promise that includes and also transcends Israel (e.g., Abraham as the patriarch of the Jewish people and as the "link" between the Jews and the nations [1:1]) is an aspect that they fully embrace. The narrative of God's election of and promises to Israel should be read "not as concerning only the Jews but also as touching us [Catholics] personally" (2:2). On the other hand, in the case of what they admit *is* a biblical tradition of a promise of land, they nonetheless deny it has any religious significance or relevance to them. Despite its foundation in their own (shared) Scripture, they ask Catholics only to "understand" that Jews view the land in religious terms and connect the promise of it to the same patriarchs revered by Christians. They are like sympathetic outsiders who should "understand" Jewish attachment to the land of Israel much as they "understand the meaning for the Jews" of the Shoah (6:1).²⁶ With such identical language, they draw no qualitative distinction in the object of understanding between the latter (a horrific historical event) and the former (a religious promise embedded in a covenant they insist remains legitimate and which appears in Catholic scripture). Wigoder puts this hermeneutical tension in stark terms: "If, as is now indicated, the Old Covenant has never been revoked, does not this have to mean that it retains its validity as a whole? It is surely not being suggested that part of God's word is upheld and part is cancelled ... The divine promise of the Land to the patriarchs and their descendants is an essential element of the covenant. The Notes reject the concept of a people punished so that the exile of the Jews should not be interpreted theologically. So how do we lose the Promised Land and why are Christians adjured not to see religious significance in the link of the People and the Land?"²⁷

Their characterization of Jews' "religious attachment" to the land seems to minimize the biblical "roots" they mention in the next sentence. They speak of Jewish "memory of the land of their forefathers," highlighting Jewish *perception* of a link. While not incorrect, this connection is cast in almost nostalgic terms, as a communal sense of longing. They do not use the precise language of the biblical promise of the land that undergirds Jewish "memory" and explains this ongoing Jewish religious connection. This has the effect of distancing this connection from the shared Scriptures of Jews and Catholics.

The authors' views are also paradoxical. While the biblical promise of the land to the people of Israel has no religious significance to Catholics, the experience of the same people of Israel *outside* the land "in a numerous Diaspora" over many centuries

²⁶ By contrast, Msgr. Jorge Mejia, who chaired the CRRJ when the *Notes* was issued, moved beyond this outsider status and asked his co-religionists to consider the "significance for the Jews, but also for us [Catholics]" of the Shoah; see Fisher, "Evolution," 43.

²⁷ Geoffrey Wigoder, "Israel in the Dialogue," in *Jewish-Christian Relations since the Second World War*, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 104–22, at 117–9. See also Brockway, "Reflections," 53.

does (6:1). Exiled Jews have a unique religious, even revelatory, status: “The permanence of [the people of] Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God’s design.” The authors break with a tradition of supersessionism and insist that the “permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity.” The authors are precise about how other peoples benefited historically from Jewish dispersion. Jews were able “to carry to the whole world a witness—often heroic—of [their] fidelity to the one God and to ‘exalt him in the presence of all the living’ (Tobit 13:4).” By publicly living out their deep faith, these exilic Jews were of value to the non-Jews amongst whom they lived.²⁸

However, this positive religious assessment is sharply separated from (one might say contrasted with) Jewish life in the land of Israel and most recently Jewish political sovereignty. On the one hand, as just noted, they think Catholics should affirm as theologically significant Jewish life in one place (i.e., the Diaspora). On the other hand, they think Catholics should not affirm as theologically significant Jewish life in another place (i.e., the land of Israel). The contrast is stark, and puzzling. It is not as if the land (and the State) of Israel, where Jews interact far less often with Gentiles, are “faulted” for removing Jews from those Diasporic settings where they could demonstrate to others the nature of religious faith. The distinction is unexplained, though the conclusion is clear. The authors say, in essence, that *as Catholics* they think that when outside the land of Israel God wills Jews to live and to live as Jews. By contrast, Jewish life inside the land of Israel is given no religious significance.

In a more direct sense, this celebration of exilic Jews’ manifestation to the world of their “spiritual fecundity” seems not to influence the authors’ view of the religious significance of life in the land of Israel. That life in that land, and even more the accoutrements of statehood, might reflect God’s “design” (about which they otherwise speak openly) that the Jews have secure opportunities for such religious experiences—especially if they are potentially shielded from threats to their existence—is not considered. Rather, the authors treat political sovereignty and religious vibrancy (“fecundity”) as entirely unrelated. There is an awkward juxtaposition in this section, for the authors themselves discuss precisely these dangers and threats after discussing the topic of the land. After rejecting any religious approbation of Jewish life in the land or sovereignty over it, as noted above, they then affirm God’s will for Jewish life and existence and recall with sadness both past Christian persecution of Jews and “the extermination during the years 1939–1945, and its consequences” (6:1).²⁹ The divinely-willed vitality of the Jewish people, especially in light of this history, is a theological desideratum. However, it has no connection to

²⁸ This is an inversion of the traditional claim that emerged early in Christianity that Jews, living in the Diaspora and subject to the (harsh) rule of others, were to serve as a witness and warning to Christians of the penalty of disobedience to God. On the origins of this view, see Adam Gregerman, *Building on the Ruins of the Temple: Apologetics and Polemics in Early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 19–136. On the development of this view in the medieval period (especially in Augustine’s writings), see Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 28–41. For a broad overview of this tradition, see Stephen R. Haynes, *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

²⁹ See David Neuhaus, “Engaging the Jewish People: Forty Years since *Nostra Aetate*,” in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, edited by Karl Joseph Becker and Ilaria Morali (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 395–413, at 402.

the only other modern event besides the Shoah—the creation of the State of Israel—they discuss in this section.³⁰

To highlight alternative interpretations of the covenant and its promise of the land, I next want to consider four other Catholic statements. None are official statements of the Vatican (and its Committee for Religious Relations with the Jews) or from popes on Jewish-Catholic relations, though two are from national Catholic churches. All illustrate in some degree a different approach to that of the *Notes*, one that engages with the content of the biblical texts on the promise of the land in light of modern Catholic non-supersessionist theologies of Judaism.

As might be expected, they all take as their starting point the dramatic changes inaugurated at the Second Vatican Council. The theological claims made in *Nostra Aetate* guide subsequent developments. However, these statements differ from the position in official Vatican statements on Jewish-Catholic relations. Their authors consider the implications of a non-supersessionist view of Judaism and especially of the Jewish covenant. They all link general affirmations of the covenant first made with Abraham and extended to his descendants up through the present with the specific aspects of the covenant, including the promise of land. Not surprisingly, they note the complexity of the topic, as if wading into a murky realm of unsettled and puzzling claims. They are quite tentative when approaching the present and anything related to political disputes. Some implications of their presentations are left in need of fuller development.³¹ Nonetheless, unlike the authors of the *Notes*, they deal with this issue not only in light of its relevance to Jews but to Catholics as well.

Draft, “Reflections and Suggestions for the Application of the Directives of *Nostra Aetate* 4” (1969)³²

In 1969 the Vatican’s Secretariat for Christian Unity—the office then responsible for Jewish-Catholic relations—composed a draft of the statement “Reflections and Suggestions for the Application of the Directives of *Nostra Aetate* 4.” Although intended to offer more detailed guidance than is found in *Nostra Aetate*, it never became an official Church statement.³³ Rather, its fate was mixed. Parts of it were

³⁰ Initial Jewish responses to the *Notes* were critical. For example, a statement from the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee shortly after the publication of the *Notes* (dated June 14, 1985) says “Modern Israel is emptied of any possible religious significance for Christians. Even Israel’s profound religious significance for Jews—surely the paramount fact to be considered in any document that purports to instruct Christians about Jews and Judaism—is mentioned in such recondite fashion as to be unrecognizable.” P. 79 MS-603 in the Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945–1992; Series C: Interreligious Activities (1952–1992); Box 26, Folder 6, International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, 1985. See also Geoffrey Wigoder, “A Jewish Reaction to the ‘Notes,’” in *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, 1970–1985: Selected Papers*, ed. Johannes Willebrands, International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), 255–69, at 265–7; Kenny, *Catholics*, 1–2, 10–11.

³¹ Marchadour and Neuhaus, *The Land*, 163.

³² The statement is available in “Excerpts from the Vatican-Approved Document on the Improvement of Roman Catholic-Jewish Relations,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1969. See timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/12/11/88869828.html?pageNumber=14 (accessed 20-March 2017).

³³ The precise circumstances of its release remain murky. See the short account of a drafting meeting in Rome and of its release “by mistake in the USA” in 1969 in “Jewish-Christian Relations,” *The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service* 9, no. 1 (1970): 1–26, at 4. In an unpublished paper, Raymond Cohen suggests that it was leaked by Cardinal Lawrence Shehan of Baltimore, who was not authorized to publicize it. It is not clear what the official title was; I use the name given to the

subsequently incorporated (with some alterations) into later official statements (from 1974 and 1985), and parts of it were rejected (and contradictory views inserted). While almost entirely unknown now, it received national news coverage when it was made public.³⁴ It offers insights only a short time after the Second Vatican Council into Catholic thinking at the highest level on significant issues, including those not addressed in *Nostra Aetate*.

It builds on what is perhaps the most significant and far-reaching claim of *Nostra Aetate*. The covenant originally made between God and the ancient Israelites—the forerunners of those who then became the Jewish people—remains in force even after the time of Jesus. The statement reads, “Cognizance is increasingly being gained in the church of the actual place of the Jewish people in the history of salvation and of its permanent election.” As God is faithful, the divine promises were not broken because of Jewish disbelief in Jesus but are everlasting (“permanent”): “This same God has revealed himself to his people Israel and made to it the gift of the Torah. And he has confided to it a word that ‘endures forever.’” This marks a dramatic break with traditional, pre-*Nostra Aetate* supersessionist claims. As the statement admits, it is challenging for Catholics to totally reject traditional hostile views and to affirm that Jews have “encountered the living and true God, the one God who established with that people a covenant” that continues through today.

I want to focus on the authors’ understanding of the implications of interpreting the biblical land promise that arise from an affirmation of ongoing Jewish covenantal life. These can be seen by viewing the authors’ argument in terms of two shifts: from the general to the specific, and from Jews to Christians/Catholics. In the first shift, directly after affirming the covenant generally, the authors turn to one aspect of the covenant, specifically the promise of the land. The latter is included in the former, for the covenant itself contains multiple aspects: “Fidelity to the covenant was linked to the gift of a land.” They insist that one cannot ignore the specific land aspect of the covenant. Rather, Christians “must attempt to understand and respect the religious significance of this link between the [covenanted] people [of Israel] and the land.” The emphasis on a “religious” perspective is important, for it illustrates the hermeneutical stance of the statement. Beginning with an assessment of the covenant itself as theologically valid, the authors then assess the land promise contained within the covenant as theologically valid as well. Not only can the biblical covenant not be abrogated (thus they break with supersessionism), neither can its aspects, they argue. The covenant needs to be understood comprehensively and inclusively, which necessarily includes “the land promised to [the Jews’] ancestors from the days of Abraham’s calling.” As implied in the flow of the argument, a correct reading of Scripture naturally leads the interpreter from covenant generally to land specifically.

statement by Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 128.

³⁴See “Vatican Proposes Closer Ties to Jews; Joint Prayer Seen,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1969; “Synagogue Council Sets Meeting to Consider Vatican Call for Closer Jewish Ties,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, December 12, 1969. The statement has received little scholarly attention; brief discussions appear in Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, 128–9; Michael Pragai, *Faith and Fulfilment: Christians and the Return to the Promised Land* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1985), 155–6; Fisher, “Evolution,” 35; Pawlikowski, “Land,” 201–2; David Rosen, “‘Nostra Aetate,’ Forty Years after Vatican II: Present & Future Perspectives” (paper presented at the Conference of the Holy See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Rome, October 27, 2005).

The authors advocate a second shift in interpretation. Beginning with a need to understand what Jews think about the land, they then insist there must be changes in what Christians think. First, they discuss what Catholics should seek to know about Jews and Judaism. Jews, they note, have long felt a deep connection to the land of Israel, for myriad reasons. The statement speaks of a “thousand ways” by which they have expressed their connection. Using a key interreligious principle, Catholics, they say, must be open to learning the views of the other (in this case, of Jews): “The condition of dialogue is respect for the other as he [sic] is, for his faith and religious convictions.”

However, the authors next go beyond a generic respect for difference. Even more relevant than respecting *Jewish* attachment to the land is *Christian* affirmation of the essential linkage between covenant in general and the aspect of the land in particular. Addressing Catholics directly, the statement, after noting the “religious significance” of the land for Jews, says, “The existence of the State of Israel should not be separated from this [religious] perspective” for them either. Catholics are enjoined not just to try to understand Jewish religious attachment to the land (a sort of second-order form of “respect” or understanding, as seen in the *Notes*); they are enjoined to find religious significance in the promise and, most strikingly, in the contemporary State of Israel for themselves. The authors insist that “Christians, whatever the difficulties they may experience,” cannot avoid grappling with the covenant and the land promise. It is not just addressed to and relevant to Jews alone. Both peoples have “encountered the living and true God” and have “common forms of prayer (texts, feasts, rites, etc.) in which the Bible holds an essential place.” This connection is multifaceted and profound, necessitating a Catholic response that engages rather than rejects or ignores this shared, biblically-based tradition.

They are understandably eager to avoid controversy. The authors admit how complex this topic of the land promise is, and how Jewish and Catholic views can differ. They therefore separate Catholic affirmations of the religious significance of the land and State of Israel from Catholic “judgment on historical occurrences [or] on decisions of a purely political order.” The latter, they imply, have a qualitatively different status which, not surprisingly, limits the extent of the religious claims that can be made. Not every state policy or national event should be seen in terms of the covenantal promise of land.

Because the statement, like others, is terse, the full implications of this distinction between religious issues and historical and political issues are left unexplored. Many questions therefore remain, for example, “How does one make the distinction?” and “At what point if ever does it become appropriate to speak of the land and the state not in secular but in religious terms?” Despite grappling frankly with the theological issue, one wishes for more clarity both regarding the distinction between religious and political views and regarding their claim that the unrevoked covenant with Abraham and his descendants can neither be ignored nor circumscribed so as to preclude the land promise.

Significantly, the draft was close to being accepted. By the time it was publicized, “the final text . . . [had] been submitted for approbation to the supreme authority of the Church.”³⁵ It got no further than this stage. We can surmise that opposition

³⁵ “Jewish-Christian Relations,” 4. Perhaps this refers to the pope (Paul VI in 1969), though this is not made explicit.

(likely both inside and outside the Church) led to the rejection of the views in the "Reflections."³⁶ Despite this, the *Notes* took up precisely these issues. In some cases it clearly echoes the language of the "Reflections."³⁷ However, as seen above, it also has a very different approach to the land (and State) of Israel. When these topics were treated a decade and a half later, the Vatican no longer considered this earlier position.

The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible (2001)³⁸

The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible (JPSS) is a lengthy and sophisticated statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission from 2001. It was intended to offer guidance to Catholics in reading and interpreting the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, especially as they relate to each other.³⁹ It was not issued by the CRRJ, for it is not about Jewish-Catholic relations as such. Most importantly for this discussion, it presents a detailed and nuanced discussion of the land promise in the biblical covenant. The authors insist that this aspect cannot be ignored by Catholics when studying Scripture, and they situate this particular topic within a broader study of the ongoing Jewish covenant. On the issue of the land, there is nothing remotely similar in official statements on Jewish-Catholic relations, nor does this statement seem to have had any influence on later statements.⁴⁰

Beside its authorship, this statement differs most strikingly from the other statements I discuss in its length and genre.⁴¹ The authors say their remit is largely limited to biblical studies, and their project is primarily exegetical and hermeneutical. Therefore, the statement focuses on "the current state of research in the field of biblical exegesis" (1). Specifically, they grapple with "very complex" issues in Christian theology that emerge from the retention of the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture (Pref.). This does not undermine its relevance to contemporary Jewish-Catholic relations. The statement, they say, was "composed in this spirit [of *Nostra Aetate*, which] ... laid the foundations for a new understanding of our relations with Jews" (86). Their biblical study contributes to this trajectory, and some of their claims have

³⁶ Raymond Cohen, in an unpublished paper, cites contemporary news coverage about opposition to the statement from Arab Christians and from Arab governments, which, he says, led the Vatican to oppose its release.

³⁷ One could cite many examples where the *Notes* (and the 1974 *Guidelines*) draw upon the "Reflections," which clearly influenced these later statements.

³⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popoloebraico_en.html (accessed 20-March 2017).

³⁹ On the circumstances of the release of *JPSS*, see John R. Donahue, "Joined by Word and Covenant: Reflections on a Recent Vatican Document on Jewish Christian Relations" (paper presented at the Immaculate Conception Seminary, Huntington, Long Island, March 16, 2003). On the Commission's purpose and authority, see Henry Wansbrough, "Can Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation? A Reply to Jon D. Levenson," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 2 (2005): 86–93, at 88. On the contents of *JPSS* see the summary in Donald Senior, "Rome Has Spoken: A New Catholic Approach to Judaism," *Commonweal*, January 3, 2003: 20–3. For some of the responses to *JPSS*, see Amy-Jill Levine, "Roland Murphy, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Jews, and the Bible," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 33 (2003): 104–13, at 106; Jon D. Levenson, "Can Catholicism Validate Jewish Biblical Interpretation?," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 1 (2005): 170–85, at 185; Joan E. Cook, "The New P.B.C. Document: Continuity, Discontinuity, and Progression Revisited" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association, San Francisco, August 5, 2003).

⁴⁰ It is, however, influential in general, and cited in subsequent Church statements.

⁴¹ In book form it is over 200 pages long.

prompted extensive discussion.⁴² Senior writes, “The Pontifical Biblical Commission added another milestone to the church’s official teaching [on Judaism and the Jews].”⁴³

As expected, the authors share the views found in other official statements regarding the covenant: “Israel continues to be in a covenant relationship with God, because the covenant-promise is definitive and cannot be abolished” (42).⁴⁴ Strong affirmations of the irrevocable covenant are buttressed by quotations from *Nostra Aetate* and from Pope John Paul II (86). However, the authors’ presentation of one aspect of the covenant, the biblical land promise, has no precedent. While surveying diverse and sometimes competing ideas in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and Christian theology, they insist the biblical land promise is an integral part of the ongoing covenant. It concerns an actual geographical place, is not to be spiritualized away, and is central to the biblical message. By contrast, there is simply nothing like this in official Vatican statements on Jewish-Catholic relations.

The land of Israel receives sustained and detailed attention. Building on their affirmation of the continuing legitimacy of the old covenant, they unhesitatingly affirm an unrevoked land promise. It is an essential aspect of the covenantal promise to the biblical patriarchs. The authors insist that in the Hebrew Bible “a specific land was promised by God to Israel” (57). The covenant had (and has; see below) real-world referents, including “posterity (promised to Abraham) [and] living space (a territory)” (64). The authors look favorably upon this promise, not just because it is narrated in Scripture but because it satisfies a genuine human desire not to be a stranger or a refugee: “Every human group wishes to inhabit territory in a permanent manner” (56). Because of its centrality to the biblical covenant between God and Israel, they consistently affirm that it is ongoing through the present, in line with contemporary Catholic theology of the ongoing Jewish covenant.

In their analysis of prominent biblical passages on the land promise, the authors highlight two themes in particular, especially in discussions of Genesis: unconditionality and eternity. Without denying that in some passages God makes heavy demands on the people, they insist on the unconditional nature of the promise.⁴⁵ It remains valid even if the people are disobedient: “According to Gn 15, [God] makes a promise to Abraham expressed in these terms: ‘To your descendants I give this land’ (15:18). The narrative makes no mention of a reciprocal obligation ... The promise of a *berît* [covenant] follows (17:2) and includes promises of extraordinary fecundity (17:4–6) and the gift of the land (17:8). These promises are unconditional” (37). They do not depend on what the people do. Rather, the authors stress both the graciousness of God in choosing the people and the commitment of God to maintain a relationship with them. Though the people can be punished with exile for disobedience, they cannot entirely lose their connection to the land promised to the patriarchs. Even the harshest prophetic denunciations do not alone fully reveal the divine will, for prophets “always leave open a way to return to a new occupation of

⁴²Their comments on messianism (21) and the value of Jewish interpretation of Scripture (22) have been seen as especially significant. Most recently, see *Gifts* 31.

⁴³Senior, “Rome,” 20.

⁴⁴See also 36. This does not foreclose critiques about, for example, “the insufficiency of the legal covenant of Sinai” and other comparative weaknesses of the Old Covenant vis-à-vis the New Covenant (41).

⁴⁵E.g., 38, citing Exod. 19; 56, citing Lev. 18 and Deut. 28.

the promised land" (56, citing Amos 9:11–15, Micah 5:6–7, Jer. 12:15, and Ezek. 36:24–28).

In exile, say the authors, the Jews can always hope for return. They have divine reassurance, extending into the future. This is expressed in covenantal terms. Always, "the ancient promises made in Israel's favour are confirmed" (58). Long after the first patriarchs, their descendants will receive the fulfillment of this divine gift of land. The authors affirm that the land promise remains in force despite being first given to those who lived in the past. The passage of time does not undermine the covenant. Though centuries go by, "[t]he temporal distance between the generations is abolished" (38, citing Deut. 5:3). It is equally valid for later Israelites and Jews.

They make this point about the covenant repeatedly, both generally and regarding the land specifically. The Bible speaks of God's "special grace for the people, present and future . . . and the laws revealed at that moment in time are their lasting pledge" (43). The offer of land to Abraham in Genesis 17 is especially important, for at that time "an everlasting bond is created between God and Abraham together with his posterity" (37). Rather than limit it to the past, God's promise affords to "the chosen people wonderful future horizons," including "a territory" (64).

The authors' emphasis on eternity is noteworthy in two ways. First, it is based on their hermeneutical commitment to "respect the original meaning" (20) and the "original, obvious meaning" (54) of Scripture. When done properly, they say, contemporary Christian exegesis does not dispense with the "literal sense" that, in this case, focuses at length on the land promise within the context of an eternal covenant (20). Second, this claim complements the authors' bedrock presupposition of a covenant never revoked. Buttressing a post-*Nostra Aetate* rejection of supersessionism, they view the covenantal relationship, and its land promise, as legitimate and vibrant not only in the past but in the present and into the future.

As Catholic exegetes, the authors of *JPSS* also insist that the biblical covenant, with its specific promise to one people (Abraham and his descendants) and focus on one place (the land of Israel), gets transformed in Christian thought. With the coming of Christ, a new perspective on the covenant—yet with roots in the original promise—was unveiled, as is shown in the New Testament (e.g., 28; 41; 54; 70). They acknowledge that there are very real "tensions" between the Hebrew Bible (and Jewish interpretations) and the New Testament (and Christian interpretations), on the issue of land as on many others (1).⁴⁶ They do not, however, privilege one interpretation over another, but insist both have validity. Spiritualizing trends in Christian thought on the promise of the land "are only deepening a symbolic process already at work in the Old Testament and in intertestamental Judaism" (57; see also 42; 65).⁴⁷ They refuse to empty the promise of its actual "geographical and historical

⁴⁶On attempts in *JPSS* to balance claims of continuity, discontinuity, and fulfillment (or progression) between the Old Testament and the New Testament, including the land promise, see Roland E. Murphy, "The Biblical Commission, the Jews, and Scriptures," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2003): 145–9, at 146–7; Marchadour and Neuhaus, *The Land*, 156–7; Levenson, "Can Catholicism," 171–6; Michael O'Connor, "Scripture and Its Fulfillment," *The Bible Today* 41 (2003): 154–9, at 155–7; Levine, "Roland Murphy," 109; Donahue, "Joined."

⁴⁷While it is not necessary here to analyze this argument, in general they downplay the tensions between a promise of an actual land and a Christian spiritualization of the land by gathering precedents in the Hebrew Bible and post-biblical Judaism for the latter types of Christian "symbolic" interpretations.

meaning." God's promise to Abraham and to his descendants of land really refers to the small West Asian territory called in Scripture "the land of Canaan" (56). God's "call addressed to an individual chosen from all the rest of humanity, Abraham (Gn 12:1–3)" was a real call addressed to a real people and including a real place, and is also part of God's plan for the world, to be "realised in history" (85). The authors' commitment to a "historical-critical" method, which seeks to discern the original meaning of a passage, mandates this interpretation (7).

In this concern with elucidating the status of the "Old Testament" and "Old Covenant" after Christ (86), *JPSS* has much in common with official Church statements on Jews and Judaism. Notably, its authors are engaging with many of the same biblical texts. Yet by affirming aspects of the biblical covenant—specifically the land promise—otherwise ignored in official statements on Jewish-Catholic relations, *JPSS* illustrates alternative hermeneutical choices made by different authors about how to read Scripture.

Pastoral Orientations on the Attitude of Christians to Judaism (1973)⁴⁸

The statement *Pastoral Orientations on the Attitude of Christians to Judaism* was issued by the French Bishops' Committee for Relations with Jews in 1973.⁴⁹ It echoes themes in *Nostra Aetate* concerning the rejection of the deicide charge (IV:a), the Jewish roots of Christianity (II), and opposition to antisemitism (IV:a; V:d). It also breaks new ground in important areas, especially regarding Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation (IV:c-V:a) and in its positive view of Jewish belief and practice (V:c). The brief mention of the ongoing relationship between God and the Jews in *Nostra Aetate* is here explored in more detail. In addition to Paul's writings in the New Testament, the authors draw upon the Hebrew Bible when affirming the relationship between Abraham and his descendants. It is an "eternal" and "irrevocable" covenant, rooted in the Bible but in effect long after the biblical period (III; VI, citing Gen. 17:7 and Rom. 11:29). Judaism should not be seen as "a relic of a venerable and finished past but as a reality alive through the ages" (III). The nature of God is at stake in the covenantal promise made to the Jewish people. Having "constituted this people," God did not reject it even for unbelief nor was it ever "deprived of its election" (IV:b; see also III). Life under the covenant is celebrated, its lasting vitality seen in study, prayer, and observance of the commandments (III; V:b-c).

After affirming the living covenant between God and the Jews, the authors of the *Pastoral Orientations* offer a complex interpretation of the biblical promise of the land of Israel and its continuing relevance not just to Jews but to Christians. Their concluding statement clearly summarizes the centrality of this topic: "How could Christians remain indifferent to what is now being decided in that land?" (V:e). There are profound issues at stake for Jews, of course, and, the authors insist, for Christians as well. Beginning with an argument from the Hebrew Bible, they recognize the promise of land cannot be separated from the covenant generally: "In this [theological] context, we Christians must first of all not forget the gift once made by God to the people of Israel, of a land where it was called to be reunited." Having

⁴⁸ French Bishops' Committee, *Pastoral Orientations on the Attitude of Christians to Judaism*, www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/french_bishops.html (accessed 20-March 2017).

⁴⁹ On this statement and responses to it, see Marchadour and Neuhaus, *The Land*, 164–5.

already rejected supersessionism generally, they here include the land promise in the covenant that is still valid. They break with Christian teachings that the Jews' disbelief and opposition to Jesus severed this connection.

Jewish life in the land of Israel, they say, should be seen positively not only by Jews but by Christians. The people's "partial gathering in the land of the Bible ... can enlighten the life of Christians and add to a more profound understanding of their own faith" (I). Christians must grapple with the religious implications of recent events ("partial gathering"), presumably referring to Zionist immigration and ultimately the creation of the State of Israel. Recalling God's gracious blessing to the patriarchs in Genesis ("the gift once made by God to the people of Israel"), the authors start with the biblical period but do not end there. Rather, the biblical message is not time-bound or incidental, nor is it passé. It concerns events happening in the land "now," which have import for Christians too.

This formulation is quite precise chronologically, as can be seen by the tenses of the biblical verses they cite for support. These include verses referring both to the original promise of the land (Gen. 12:7; 26:3–4; 28:13) and, more importantly, verses from prophets referring to a future return for those exiled from the land (Isa. 43:5–7; Jer. 16:15; Zeph. 3:20). The latter verses were not just forward-looking in their original context (the seventh and six centuries BCE, when Judah faced military threats and exile).⁵⁰ As cited in this statement addressed to contemporary Christians, the prophets' messages of hope for a return to Zion by the people of Israel could be seen as relevant to the modern (i.e., the authors') period as well. This is implicit both in the grammar (the second group of verses use the Hebrew future tense) and in the context of the statement, which interprets the land promise for Christians in the present. Whether the promise of land in the prophets and elsewhere actually finds fulfillment in the events of the present—Jewish residence and ultimately statehood—is unclear. Note however that this is also hinted at in the authors' citation of these promises in their description of the land as a place for Jews to be "reunited" (as has recently happened, long after the biblical period).⁵¹

As the statement progresses, it increasingly evinces tentativeness and ambiguity. The authors are clearer when discussing secondary issues (e.g., Christians cannot ignore or reject the biblical land promise) than they are when discussing primary issues (e.g., interpreting and applying the land promise). Unquestionably opposed to supersessionism, the authors are wary of saying too much constructively about a politically divisive issue: "Today more than ever, it is difficult to pronounce a well-considered theological opinion on the return of the Jewish people to 'its' land" (V:e). Shifting to legal and moral (i.e., non-theological) standards, they recognize that there are competing "claims for justice" by Jews and Palestinians.⁵² A "legitimate [political] divergence" in the needs and desires of the two communities is juxtaposed to a theological affirmation of the Jewish attachment to the land. They attempt no reconciliation between the two. In this more political section (V:e), their attempt to limit such theological attachment to Jews alone—who "according to their faith" view

⁵⁰ The verbs of return are in the future tense; e.g., "At that time will I bring you in, and at that time will I gather you" (Zeph. 3:20).

⁵¹ Emphasis added.

⁵² The language is elliptical, for the latter are never actually mentioned by name.

“ingathering [as] ... a blessing”—sits in tension with earlier statements that insist Christians should affirm similar claims.

Notably, they consider not just the past and the present when discussing the land promise but the future as well, even gazing toward the eschaton and the coming of God’s justice on earth: “It is an essential question, faced by Christians as well as Jews, whether or not the ingathering of the dispersed Jewish people—which took place under pressure of persecution and by the play of political forces—will despite so many tragic events prove to be one of the final ways of God’s justice for the Jewish people and at the same time for all the nations of the earth.” A religious perspective on the possible fulfillment of the land promise appears, with implications for Christians (and all humanity) as well as for Jews. With this shift, the authors, somewhat awkwardly, veer between limiting the religious significance of the land promise and affirming it, depending on the time period being addressed. This is explicable, in light of undeniable murkiness about the implications of a break with supersessionism for a full appreciation of the Jewish covenant and all its aspects. While open to initiating such a discussion, they nonetheless resist a deeper exploration of the implications for their theological views in the region. Their theological claims sit uneasily alongside tentative claims about the current conflict and hopes for political progress.⁵³

*Orientations for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue (1984)*⁵⁴

A similar perspective to the French one is offered in a 1984 statement issued by the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, *Orientations for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue*. It is short but wide-ranging, delving into topics such as the Shoah, liturgy, education, Jesus’ Jewishness, and eschatology. As with the statements discussed above (and many others both before and after), the starting point is the covenant between God and Abraham: “according to biblical revelation, God himself constituted the Hebrews as a people. The Lord did this after having made a covenant with them” (4, citing Gen. 17:7 and Exod. 24:1–8). The authors affirm “the vitality of the Jewish people, which has continued throughout the centuries to the present” (5). This is a religious vitality, with implications for all time: “Israel continues to play an important role in the history of salvation.” The unbroken covenant grounds a positive assessment regarding Jews and Judaism. Catholics should not consider Judaism “a purely social and historical reality or a leftover from a past which no longer exists.”⁵⁵ Breaking with earlier supersessionist claims that the Jews, once chosen, were then rejected by God and had their covenant cancelled, the authors begin with the biblical call of the patriarchs and extend the divine promises up through the present. Their theological perspective is based on, and in some ways more explicit than, the views first articulated in *Nostra Aetate*.

⁵³Parts of this statement are incorporated (with alterations) into a 1979 statement by the Division of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese of Detroit, “Guidelines on Ecumenism,” www.notredamedesion.org/en/dialogue_docs.php?a=2&id=623&categoria=cattolici (accessed 31-March 2017).

⁵⁴National Conference of Brazilian Bishops, *Orientations for Catholic-Jewish Dialogue*, www.cjcr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/interreligious/760-ncbb1983 (accessed 20-March 2017). See also Kenny, *Catholics*, 132; Wigoder, “A Jewish Reaction to the ‘Notes,’” in *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue, 1970–1985: Selected Papers*, 257.

⁵⁵The statement here appears to allude to the 1973 French statement.

The authors insist that God's grant of land is included in this theological affirmation of the living covenant generally. In the Hebrew Bible, they note, this is prominent: "In regard to the land of Israel, it is well to remember that, as the fruit of his promise, God gave the ancient land of Canaan in which the Jews lived to Abraham and his descendants" (10). Building on their discussion of the living covenant, valid up through the present, they interpret the land promise so as to highlight its continuing legitimacy long after the period of the patriarchs. Employing a hermeneutic of unbroken promises, they include Abraham's "descendants" (i.e., Jews) as recipients of the gift of land, much as they are recipients of the covenant made long ago. Interestingly, only this specific aspect of the biblical covenant (and not, for example, progeny) receives their attention.

They are aware this is controversial, and the statement hints at underlying tensions. Reflecting a familiar discomfort with the possibility that a religious affirmation might have political implications, they seek to circumscribe their statement. They refrain from making any religious claims about the State of Israel as such. Using legal rather than biblical terminology, they "recognize the rights of the Jews to a calm political existence" in Israel. This shifts from a religious to a secular perspective, foreclosing any political consequences of their earlier affirmation of the land promise that might connect it not just to contemporary Jews but to the State of Israel. They are clearly wary of where the affirmation might take them on such a fraught topic. Thus, just as in the 1969 and 1973 statements (above), this statement, while affirming the land promise, also leaves complex issues unresolved, such as a linkage between the land promise and the modern state. They begin to openly consider the implications of a new view of Judaism for their reading of Scripture but then are cautious not to go too far.

Conclusion

There has been a stunning shift in Catholic teachings about Jews and Judaism since the Second Vatican Council. This should be recognized and indeed celebrated. There are few if any precedents in religious history for such a sharp break with a long, entrenched history of theological (and other forms of) hostility. The rejection of supersessionism has prompted Catholics to ask difficult yet vital questions about the nature of God and God's relationship with the people first welcomed into a covenant. Nonetheless, in official Vatican statements on Jewish-Catholic relations we find a circumscribed approach to the biblical covenant. This is apparent either when ignoring the land promise (and nearly all other aspects) included in the covenant or when opposing claims of the land promise's theological significance to Catholics. This latter approach is represented by the *Notes* and not altered subsequently, even in the most recent statement of the CRRJ, *Gifts*, which is otherwise detailed and wide-ranging. We see here the Catholic Church struggling to recognize Jews as the covenantal other and to fully respond to these dramatic theological changes. It has some way to go in doing that thoroughly or consistently. Though the covenant itself "retains its own value as Revelation,"⁵⁶ when an aspect of the covenant is discussed at all it is only the one relevant to non-Israelites/Jews. By focusing on the singular

⁵⁶ *Notes* 2:7.

aspect of blessing the nations, these statements reveal a post-*Nostra Aetate* theological trajectory still at a circumscribed, relatively early, and self-referential stage.

The other statements—"Reflections," *JPSS*, and the two documents from national bishops' committees—illustrate other approaches. Despite variations (in genre, length, etc.), these reflect different possible interpretations. They begin with nearly identical texts (both biblical and Catholic) and nearly identical assumptions as the *Notes* but move in different directions. They are sometimes tentative and more suggestive than conclusive, but they evince a willingness to consider particular aspects of the covenant despite the theological and political challenges. As noted earlier, I recognize that in addition to the perspectives studied here, one would need to consider other factors in order to fully explain why these authors make such claims. The relationship between theology and politics, especially regarding Catholic views of the land and State of Israel and of Jews and Judaism, deserves further attention. My goal in this article is to illustrate this range of exegetical and theological perspectives, and to offer new insights into approaches to Scripture and Judaism in the context of the modern Jewish-Catholic relationship.⁵⁷

⁵⁷I want to thank Gavin D'Costa, Edward Kessler, John Pawlikowski, and especially Philip A. Cunningham for their wise advice and for their help in the editing and writing of this article. I alone am responsible for the views expressed here.