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Lecture to the 5th International Sabeel Conference „Holy Land and Holy People“ Jerusalem

Das Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre bezeichnet sich als eine ökumenische befreiungstheologische „grassroot“ Bewegung unter palästinensischen Christen. Ihr Programm umfasst die Stärkung der lokalen Gemeinschaft in drei Bereichen: christlich ökumenisch durch gemeinsame Bibelarbeiten, Vorträge und Austausch; christlich-muslimisch in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Al-Liqa-Zentrum in Bethlehem besonders zum Thema der Gewaltlosigkeit in Theologie und Praxis; der Austausch mit israelischen Juden zu politischen Fragen wie Gleichheit und Menschenrechte als Bürger Israels umfasst den dritten Bereich. Zur fünften Internationalen Sabeel Konferenz in Jerusalem hält der Erzbischof von Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Wiliams einen Vortrag zu einer Israeltheologie, die Gedanken einer palästinensischen Befreiungstheologie aufnimmt, ohne die Frage nach einer theologischen Sicht auf die Situation des Staates Israels auszublenden. Dabei verknüpft Wiliams die Rede von Israel als Volk Gottes mit der Rolle, die der Staat Israel politisch, aber auch theologisch spielt. Ausgehend vom Bund, den Gott mit Israel geschlossen hat, sieht Wiliams hier einen paradigmatischen Anspruch an Israel auch als Staat. Nämlich danach zu streben, Gottes Willen für das Zusammenleben der Menschen auf der Erde, umzusetzen und ein Vorbild zu sein. Gleichzeitig sieht er, dass der politische Staat Israel in erster Linie und aus vom Christentum mit verursachten schlimmen Gründen, in erster Linie den Juden eine garantierte Heimat gibt. Eine christliche Theologie der Befreiung soll nach Wiliams im Dialog mit Israel die Rolle der aus den Nationen Dazugerufenen einnehmen. Der Kreuzestod Jesu Christi wird von Wiliams als auch für Juden bedeutungsvoll bewertet, denn hier zeigt sich der an den Menschen handelnde Gott Israels. Gott greift erneut in die Geschichte ein und erweitert den Bund auf die Nationen. Ein Dialog muss nach Wiliam auf Augenhöhe diese Aspekte besprechen und auch das Zusammenleben von Israelis und Palästinensern kritisch hinterfragen können.

Keywords: Anglikanische Kirche, Theologie, Befreiung, Christen, Palästina, Juden, Bund

A lecture by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, at the 5th International Sabeel Conference in Jerusalem.

The subject of this consultation is one that goes deeper than simply the critique of a deeply eccentric form of Christian theology; and it should take us further than yet another analysis of the cyclical patterns of violence and injustice in the conflicts of the region. It should also be an opportunity for us to clarify something of what as Christians we can say about Israel, as one dimension of a 'liberation theology' that will carry the good news to all in the Holy Land and more widely. The two extreme positions we are wearily familiar with fail to carry such good news. At one end of the spectrum, there is the view that argues for unconditional support of any decision made by an Israeli government that furthers maximal claims for territory and security, on the grounds of an apocalyptic myth whose relation to both Hebrew and Christian Scripture is tenuous

(to put it mildly). At the other end is the view that there is essentially nothing to be said about the Jewish people and the state of Israel from the standpoint of Christian theology, a view which runs up against the complexities of much of Christian Scripture, not least Paul's great and tormented meditation in Romans 9 to 11.

In other words, I am not at all sure that we best respond to distorted theologies of Israel by denying that there could be a good theology of Israel. But what does 'Israel' mean? In these remarks, I shall be speaking of two distinct but overlapping realities: 'Israel under God', the Jewish people considered as bearers of the covenant and witnesses to God's revealed justice, and the state of Israel, a contemporary and secular political reality which is also seen as the homeland for 'Israel under God', the sole place in the world where the Jewish people have guaranteed place. Jewish-Christian dialogue has been trying for decades to find a way of talking about all this without colluding with uncritical attitudes towards Israeli government policy; and part of this discussion has naturally focused upon the theology of covenant, the heart of any account of 'Israel under God'. 'I am not saying that the promise of God has failed', says Paul in Romans 9.6, as he seeks to explain the sense in which the primordial alliance between God and the Hebrew people is fulfilled and extended in the work of Jesus. What is the role of this promise that does not fail? If it is simply a matter of a covenant with Israel being overtaken or replaced by something else, we do not do justice to Paul's argument; but no more do we do justice if we suppose that the covenant with Israel exists sealed off from what has happened in God's dealings with the rest of humanity in Jesus.

It helps to ask what the covenantal promise is thought to be *for* in the Hebrew Scriptures. And the answer, given in various forms in parts of Leviticus, in many strands of the prophetic tradition, especially the Second Isaiah, in aspects of the Wisdom literature, might be summarised by saying that Israel is called to be the *paradigm nation*, the example held up to all nations of how a people lives in obedience to God and justice with one another. This is how a nation is meant to be: living by law, united by a worship that enjoins justice and reverence for all, exercising hospitality, with a special concern for those who have fallen outside the safety of the family unit (the widow and orphan) and those who fall outside the tribal identities of the people (the resident alien, the 'stranger within the gates'). What is more, as Deuteronomy insists (4.5-6, 32-34, 7.7-8), this is a people, a community, that exists solely because of God's loving choice; they have been called out of another nation specifically to live as a community whose task is to show God's wisdom in the world. Already there is the hint of what becomes a powerful theme in some later Wisdom literature, that this is a people in whom divine wisdom has chosen to be at home – which in turn foreshadows the later speculations about how the Shekhinah, the divine glory, is present in people and temple and land, when the people are living by law and wisdom.

It is because this is a people called to embody wisdom in the form of justice that the covenant is also the principle of the most severe critiques in scripture of the prevailing habits and structures of power in the ancient Hebrew kingdoms. The prophecy of Amos is perhaps the most sustained expression of such critique. Of course, God has chosen and worked with other peoples; but this people alone has been given the explicit vocation to justice, has been known and recognised by God and allowed to know God's purpose in a specific way. Therefore this people is *accountable* in unique measure. The visions of Ezekiel dramatise this by showing divine presence and glory departing from a temple and a territory where idolatry and injustice prevail.

A biblical theology of Israel under God has to begin here. Gary Burge, in an important study of the situation from an evangelical point of view (*Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians*), stresses the fact that if biblical arguments are used to defend the state of Israel, biblical principles must be used in defining what makes the people itself distinctive and in assessing the common life of this people, instead of moving seamlessly from biblical Israel to the modern state and bracketing out the prophetic challenge to biblical Israel. The Israel of Scripture is a community whose identity is bound up with a calling to show wisdom and justice, a calling which successive modes of government for the people fulfil in very varying degrees; the land of Israel is not a gift given in the abstract to the Hebrew tribes: it is a territory given as the necessary backdrop of stability for a law-governed community to flourish. It is, so to speak, 'leased' to the people for their use (Lev.25); God remains the true owner of the land. The prohibition against selling off or diminishing the land inherited in any family is not in the least meant to be a reinforcement of absolute possession; it is rather a warning against using God's land, into which the people are invited, as a means to build up private wealth, instead of using it as the means to secure just provision for all for whom God has made you responsible. It is extraordinary that such texts can be deployed as they sometimes are by self-styled conservative Christians in arguments about land exchange and settlement patterns with such total disregard for their actual wording and purpose.

The implications of the theology of covenant in Hebrew Scripture include two salient points for our task of finding an appropriate liberation theology. First, the identity of Israel under God is 'missionary': it is to manifest not God's supreme and arbitrary power in choosing and shaping a nation, but God's wisdom and justice as the pattern for human society. In Deuteronomic terms, God chooses a small and oppressed people to demonstrate this, lest his justice be confused with the interests of a powerful and successful nation. Take away this vocation, and the history makes no sense. A 'chosen people' that has become not only powerful but oppressive in its practice has made nonsense of God's calling to them. But secondly, if the land is to be understood in and only in this context, as a condition for stable, hospitable law-governed life together, anything that makes the land a cause of radical instability undermines the basic point. That is, if the land has to be defended by ceaseless struggle which distorts the very fabric of the common life, it ceases to be a 'sacramental' mark of God's calling. There is a well-known halakhic argument that the defence of land does not *of itself* justify the taking of life; and this is, understandably, a point much argued in Israeli religious controversy in the last two decades, as people seek to define what constitutes an ethic of self-defence.

A biblical theology of covenant, then, begins to define something of what a liberation theology for Israel would mean. The modern political reality of Israel is not biblical Israel; but it is ideally one of the conditions for biblical Israel's message and witness to be alive in the world today – a context in which God's people can manifest God's justice. The community of faithful Jewish people committed to justice and wisdom in the world today, as a community consciously living before God, has its rationale in the calling to embody justice and wisdom; to have a homeland in which to exercise the political virtue this involves is an intelligible requirement, especially in the light of a history in which this liberty has been systematically denied for so many centuries by Western Christians. To be hospitable, you must have a home. But what if a point comes at which the location of Israel under God in a national home becomes bound up with policies which undermine the possibilities for others of a stable homeland, the kind of

setting which alone makes political virtue possible? I am not here discussing the rights and wrongs of binational or unitary solutions to the tormenting problems of the region, but simply raising the question of how the conditions under which God's people can exercise their calling are to be held together with the rights and liberties of other peoples, especially neighbouring peoples, to their own integrity. Without stable and agreed borders, neither internal stability nor the universal service of external witness to justice can be sustained. The land becomes a prison, not a gift. The state of Israel has had to sustain its existence against enemies who would not grant its right to exist. But the problem increasingly lies less with aggressive neighbours than with a failure to tackle the underlying issues about regional stability. Which is why so many Israeli commentators will say that life in Israel today threatens to become just such a prison, as the spiral of overwhelming violent reaction to the indiscriminate violence of suicide bombings and the consequent desperate anxiety over security creates more and more barriers and walls.

The theology we need, in other words, will reinforce the insistence that security for Israel and security for its neighbours in the contemporary setting are absolutely inseparable: good news for one is good news for the other. There can be no more important matter to insist upon at present; which is why – apart from the simple human awfulness of these acts for their direct victims – every suicide bomb in Israel is an appalling injury to the Palestinian people, and every demolition of a house, every collateral death of a bystander or child in the Palestinian territories, is a wound to Israel in the long run. There is no good news for Palestinians in the proclamation of a programme to humiliate and destroy Israel; there is no good news for Israelis in a 'security' that sets in stone the impotent anger and resentment of Palestinians.

So a biblical theology of Israel, simply on the basis of how the Law and the Prophets conceive Israel's identity and destiny, cannot support an uncritical approach to extreme policies about territory and security; quite the contrary. But we need to add a further point to avoid misunderstanding. Scripture presents us with many texts about how God chastises his people through the intervention of other nations. Yet it is always clear in the prophets that others should beware of assuming a divine right to chastise on God's behalf. Attacks on the existence and liberty of the Jewish people as such are likely to arise from aggression and hatred. God can use this evil, but does not create it. Thus, in the scriptural context, any attempt in the non-Jewish world to set oneself up as the judge and punisher of God's people is, like any act of self-righteous aggression, to be condemned. More significant is that tradition in the Bible of acts and histories which involve non-Jewish people reflecting back to Israel its own true vocation – the records of righteous Gentiles like Ruth and Job, the ready repentance of the Ninevites in Jonah compared with the rebelliousness of the Prophet himself. What the Gentile can do under God is not to undertake aggressive or punitive violence against the Jewish people as such, but to offer back to Israel-under-God its own gift of the ideal of wisdom and justice, and, in proper solidarity and love, refuse to collude if Israel settles for less than its own deepest wisdom. It is the point made by a good many serious Jewish thinkers – that Jewishness itself becomes altered and diminished when bound to political priorities and strategies that are never challenged. Thus to question the political reality that is the state of Israel in the name of the calling of Israel-under-God is not an assault on that state's rights or integrity, but a witness to the fact that part of the very rationale of that state is to be a home for that different kind of political reality which is the Jewish people as called by God to manifest his justice.

Fear and instability erode law; which is why indiscriminate slaughter, the suicide bombs, are so terrible for the soul of Israel (as well as the soul of Palestine), pushing it further towards a defensiveness that sits light to national and international law and inexorably undermines 'wisdom' in its policy and polity. The question for both Israeli and Palestinian must be how each encourages lawfulness and stability in the other. It is meant to be Israel's gift under God to the nations; other nations aware of that have the responsibility to reflect this back and to hold Israel accountable to itself and its God; and engagement with the concrete difficulties of the policies of the state of Israel is part of that, as is the whole enterprise of continuing Christian dialogue in solidarity with the Jewish people.

Practically speaking, the implications of what I have been saying are that the existence of a homeland for the Jewish people remains a theologically positive matter if we agree that the existence of the Jews as a people is a theologically positive matter. The horror of the twentieth century history of European Jewry is, of course, pertinent here. One of the things that might be said theologically about this is that when the Jewish people have an identity only as dispersed minorities, the witness of a nation existing solely because of God's call to wisdom and justice is weakened; and sooner or later the nations around will begin to lose awareness of their moral accountability. At its highest level, the decision about the creation of a Jewish state was a recognition that its very existence would be a warning against the nightmarish extinction of political morality in modern totalitarianism – not because the modern state of Israel is in some way the heir of biblical promise in a literal way, but because it is the condition for Jewish people of faith and conscience to be able to exercise their historic calling. Israel's existence as a state ought to be a mark of the recognition that God's justice stands in judgement over all secular and self-interested political and nationalist systems. It would be the bitterest irony if the state of Israel were simply encouraged to subvert its own moral essence in order to survive, encouraged and enabled to become not a paradigm for the nations but a nation deeply caught in the same traps of violence and self-interest that affect us all. But if this is not to happen, we need far greater political will in engaging Israel in the most searching and critical reflection on its practice, and involving those, Jewish and Palestinian, who acknowledge what their responsibility in faith and conscience is for the creation of peace. I have no doubt about defending the right of the state of Israel to exist, and the right of that state to protect its identity as a place statutorily safe for Jews. But so few inside or outside Israel have helped it work out how to sustain its existence in partnership with it neighbours and in accountability to the wider community of nations. Hence my attempts here to argue for the essential place of accountability in a biblical theology of the identity and meaning of Israel under God.

Thus I am suggesting that we cannot properly confront distortions about the theology of Israel without trying to understand why in biblical terms Israel's being as a people is still, and in spite of all a gift to the community of nations; and also that we cannot do this without taking seriously the question of how the state of Israel as a concrete political agent is to be engaged with – not because it should not exist but because, in the light of the biblical vision of justice, it should. This is more and more the theme of the best critical minds in the internal Jewish debates; it should be more and more the theme of Christian discussion of this question.

But this raises issues about the whole theology of Jewish-Christian relations, and I need to add some thoughts on this. The alternatives are often seen – as I suggested earlier – as either an uncritical affirmation of Israel's abiding unique status in a way that

raises real questions about the work of Christ, or the classical 'supersessionist' or 'replacement' approach, in which there is no positive assessment at all of the special role of the Jewish people and a simple affirmation of the Church as the 'new' people of God. Once again, the biblical picture denies us these simplifications. If we read Paul in Romans 9-11 carefully, it seems that what he is saying is something like this: Israel has not responded to its vocation as it could and should; only in connection with Jesus can Israel fully be itself, becoming a transforming and inviting sign of God's justice and ultimately extending the realm of justice and wisdom to all peoples of the earth, so that all may be incorporated into God's people. The paradigm nation becomes the kernel of a renewed community without ethnic boundaries, united by God's justice; and for Paul, that justice is made possible only by the gift of God *creating* justice through the death and resurrection of Jesus, in whom Israel's calling is perfectly realised. What is contested between Jew and Christian is whether this dramatic divine intervention in Jesus of Nazareth to bring Israel's calling to its climax is essential to the story of God's people or not – and so whether that calling is or is not extended beyond the ethnic limits of Israel to the enlarged 'nation' that is the Church.

If the answer to that is Yes, as it has to be for the Christian, this does not imply that Israel-under-God loses significance; it remains the core of the whole story, the primary sign of God's free election and God's gift of wisdom and justice. The Church cannot say to the Jewish people either, 'You must abandon Jewish identity, which has now been overtaken by the new people of God', or 'You are forever absolutely unique and isolated, accountable to no-one because chosen by God'. It is rather that Jew and Christian share a conviction that they have one calling – to be the place where wisdom and justice make their home in history, on earth; in the light of that, they have the freedom to call each other to account, despite their differences. Something of this enters in also to the relation of Jew and Muslim, to the extent that they too partially share some common history of covenant and prophecy; but I cannot do anything like justice to this matter in a short reflection here. When they are able to do this, it is a mark of maturity in the relationship, of the acknowledgement that we are not talking about a God who abandons his people and changes his self-definition with the passage of time.

In our present Western historical context, the right of the Jew to call the Christian to account has, understandably, been uppermost in the minds of most thoughtful Christians. The Church's claim to be the extension or universalisation of the Jewish calling is profoundly challenged by the unspeakable betrayals of wisdom and justice that have so often prevailed in the Church, especially in its history in respect of the Jews. For a European approaching the question of Israel, this is simply an irremovable fact; I am aware that for the non-Western Christian, or indeed the Muslim, this is felt differently; but I have to say that the Jew is entitled to call these groups to account also, to the extent that lying and hateful attitudes have sometimes been allowed in to their talk about Jews and Judaism, even if this has not involved the depth of betrayal the westerner recognises in the Holocaust. And whatever deliberately feeds the mentality that produces suicide bombings must be confronted in the name of justice and humanity; as so many have repeated, this is a nightmare distortion of another great religious tradition and its commitment to divine law and divine compassion. The demand for Jewish honesty requires honesty from all of us too.

The difficult moment comes when the Christian, western or eastern, or for that matter the Muslim, has to call the Jew to account. But it is essentially a matter of treating

Jewish people as adults who are responsible for how they act out the calling they proclaim – not as perpetually damaged people who are too weak to be challenged, too wounded to be responsible. What could be more patronising and oppressive than this mythological attitude to a people who have, out of indescribable suffering, created a society that is in so many ways immensely powerful? But no-one disputes that the critic has to earn the right to be heard; a criticism that does not recognise the full and complex reality of the other and is not prepared to stand in solidarity with the other will never earn that right.

Part of wisdom and justice as God gives them is the ability to stand with the other and understand something of the depth of their suffering. The Israeli who senses something of the outrage of Deir Yassin, for example, and the Arab (Palestinian or non-Palestinian) who is prepared to be honest about the Holocaust and about the demonisation of Jews in some Arab media are the people who are capable of making a difference. When my colleague and friend Bishop Riah suggests that the mothers of children killed on both sides of the conflict exchange photographs of their children across the security fence, he is giving intensely dramatic expression to the challenge of solidarity. If such an exchange happened, those making it would be showing what might be needed for the two communities to grow into the right to call each other to account, in justice and mercy.

Anyone trying to reflect on the present situation is bound to do so with some of that mental anguish that St Paul describes in his meditation on Israel; we are caught in the profoundest tensions. I find it inconceivable as a Christian that the freedom of Israel as a people under God to be a people with a home should be challenged in the name of a Christian universalism that tries to dispense with the specifics of the history of revelation. I cannot understand any attitude that assumes the calling of the Jewish people is not still a calling to be special, by God's gift and grace. Hence the distress felt by many of us who share such a conviction when we see what looks like a refusal in the state of Israel to think around and beyond policies of control and containment to justice for all and mutual reinforcement of welfare and safety and dignity. I have no patience with those who speak as though the *fact* of the state of Israel is the source of anti-Semitism, as though Israel's extinction would spell the end of anti-Semitism. It is important to hear and to understand what such language sounds like to those who listen from within the Jewish community across the world. Nor do I think we can ever helpfully suggest that the legitimacy of the state of Israel's political existence depends on her meeting specifications imposed from outside. The tragedy that threatens, as many within Israel see it, is that this state's welfare and stability are undermined not simply by pressure from outside, but by its own inner tensions and its inability to face the imperatives of shared security. That is why a proper theology of liberation in the region is something that is necessary for Israel's life as well as Palestine's.

It is because I believe all this that I want to pursue the question of how Israeli policy is called to account in a way that is spiritually as well as politically sensitive and constructive; that is why I think we have to develop a good alternative to bad and collusive theologies of Israel, as part of the liberation theology we all need. We all need: that is to say, we in the Church need it also. We need liberation from uncritical triumphalist attitudes, of which anti-Semitism is always a sign. Thomas Merton, forty years ago, noted in his journal that Western Christendom was always most anti-Jewish when it most identified *itself* with the militant and irresponsible episodes in Old Testament history, when it became most aggressively confident of itself as the new

chosen people, without any of the critical nuance of the prophetic tradition. The real agenda for our work is how we come to regard each other as sufficiently adult for critical exchange to take place. That depends on trust; and trust depends on tangible signs of commitment to each other.

Any theology of liberation is a challenge about how trust is created by commitment – by taking risks for each other in a way that decisively breaks down barriers because it demonstrates a solidarity of welfare and vision and hope. In the seventeenth century, the ninth guru of the new Sikh faith was executed by a fanatical Indian ruler seeking to impose Islam on all his subjects; but he was martyred not for professing Sikhism but for defending the rights of Hindus. That is commitment; that is the liberated conscience at work. If we repudiate an attitude to Israel that is unwilling to confront its own darker and more fear-driven elements, we need to ask how we can show a commitment to it that will cost something; as we need also to ask Israel for signs of its commitment to the security of its neighbours – signs both positive and negative, positive in investing in stability and good government in Palestine, negative in recognising the dangers of fundamentalist obsession about unsustainable boundaries and the unjust practices that they involve. Throughout this brief essay, I have been asking what it is that liberates Israel as a community under God to give the gift God has called it to give; and this is to ask how the modern political reality that is the state of Israel nurtures and honours the historical and theological Jewish identity that is dedicated to manifesting wisdom and justice for the sake of the whole human community. Bad and unscriptural Christian theologies become part of the problem, theologies that collude with the violence of either side. We can do better; and if we succeed, we shall have learned practically how we exhibit mutual commitment and common belonging in and with God's just and compassionate project for all his human creation. If only this city could be, in the full biblical sense, a sign lifted up among the nations, not of nationalist rivalry but of common belonging! It seems almost unimaginable; but our job is to imagine, day by day, and to pray and work and risk for that end and for all that goes with it. I hope this conference will feed that prophetic imagination.

Quelle:
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