THE PROMISES MADE TO ABRAHAM AND THE DESTINY OF ISRAEL*

GERALD BRAY
OAK HILL COLLEGE, LONDON

It is clear that the question of the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12-24 has always occupied a place of central importance in the thinking of any student of the Scriptures. Even the reader who feels no particular personal interest in the matter is obliged to recognise that they provide an unparalleled basis for that feeling of common identity which forms the indispensable foundation of the existence of any historic nation. It hardly matters if the events described in the narrative are historical or not; after all, mythology can sometimes exercise a magical power of attraction which real history fails to offer.

But for the believer, whether he is a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim, recognising the importance of these events goes far beyond defining their historicity – it becomes a matter which touches the content of his or her own personal faith. If one believes that one is a son and heir of Abraham, either by physical descent or by spiritual relationship, it is obvious that the content of these promises will matter in a very special way. The New Testament, and above all Romans and Galatians, recalls the religious importance of these promises, and the way in which St Paul interpreted their meaning constitutes one of the decisive elements of the separation between Jews and Christians which was taking place at the time

Later on, we realise how, with the Reformers, and above all with the followers of Calvin, the development of a Covenant theology and the new awareness of unity of the two testaments under the banner of the election of a particular people, inaugurated a period in the life of the Christian Church when it became quite natural to tie Christian spiritual experience in with that of the Jews of the Old Testament, going through Christ – perhaps – but ending up at the common source of both religious traditions – the faith of Abraham, and the promises which were made to him at the moment of the calling which determined his subsequent career.

It is to the legacy of this awareness of the unity of the Chosen People that we owe the special interest which we find among Christians today in the fate of the Jewish people. In the Middle Ages, for instance, or even today in a Catholic, Orthodox or even

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Lutheran environment, this interest is much less evident, although it does actually exist to some degree. By contrast, in those circles which have been affected by systematic Calvinism, there is a certain feeling of identity with the Jewish people which inclines us, in a very special way, towards a consideration of the possible application of these promises to the Jewish people today, and above all to the destiny of the State of Israel, which since 1948 has been established in the Holy Land.

The existence of this State, the imperialism of which it is accused, and above all the seemingly endless duration of a conflict concerning Israel in the nuclear age - and therefore in a time which many regard as apocalyptic - all this gives the promises recorded in Genesis a new relevance which goes beyond the purely religious dimension and affects the whole of modern political life.

The problem of the promises thus presents itself today in three dimensions which correspond to three different aspects, or hermeneutical levels, in dealing with the texts. The first of these dimensions is *exegesis*. What should we say about the texts themselves? What is (or was) the intention of those who redacted the cycle of the patriarchal narratives? Is it possible to discover in this redaction a particular tendency which has falsified the primitive facts in favour of what might have been called Israelite propaganda? What, in fact, are the links between history and the narrative?

The second dimension is that of *theology*. Having done the exegetical groundwork, can we find in it something of use for the practice of our faith today? How should we understand – or, better, receive – the element of God's revelation of his plan which in theory is the main point of the narrative? For the Christian there is yet another question – how can one link the teaching and the work of Christ to these promises? Does the theology of St Paul, as expounded in Romans and Galatians, exclude the modern Jews from any share in the promises made to Abraham? How far can or must the Christian support the position of the Zionist state, on the grounds that it is the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy?

The third dimension is that of *politics*. There is an extraordinary measure of agreement between fundamentalist dispensationalism, on the one hand, and Israeli strategic and political aims on the other, an agreement which goes so far as to exercise a considerable influence in American government circles. We must not forget that the feeling of kinship with the Jews which developed among seventeenth century Calvinists appears today in the form of two pressure groups, or lobbies, around the White House, which make common cause in favour of Israel, a fact which maintains the military strength of that state and, in the final analysis, guarantees its very existence. How can one explain this odd alliance of extremely conservative Christians

and virtually atheistic Zionist Jews? Should the Biblical Christian be expected to subscribe to the almost fascist policies which these groups not infrequently adopt? And what about the fate of millions of Palestinian refugees, many of whom would call themselves Christians, and some of whom are evangelicals? Can we accept, for example, that a state which rejects Christian missionary work and which maintains only the correctest of diplomatic relations with the different churches is fulfilling the will of God to the point that Christians outside the country ought to support it even when it occupies the whole of Palestine and oppresses its Arab Christian population? And all this, let us not forget, because of a dispensationalist interpretation of the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12-24?

The Evidence

Let us first consider the texts quoted as proofs of the promises, and see how they fit into the overall pattern of the covenant which God made with Abraham. There are in all about 20 Biblical verses, scattered over eight chapters of the Patriarchal narrative, which contain promises made to Abraham. There is no point listing them all here, since they are mostly formulaie in character and therefore highly repetitive, but it is useful to list their basic content and examine how they developed in the course of Abraham's lifetime.

We begin with Genesis 12: 2-3, at the very start of the narrative, which gives us the essential ingredients of the promises as a whole:

1. I shall make you a great nation
2. I shall bless you
3. I shall make your name great
4. You will be the source of blessing
5. I shall bless those who bless you
6. I shall curse those who curse you
7. All the families of the earth will be blessed in you.

By looking at the commentaries, it would be possible to find other ways of dividing up these verses, apart from the seven blessings proposed here. The number is not that important in itself, though it does, in fact, correspond to the formula of blessing which was in general use in the Near East during the period in question, and it also offers us the most detailed analysis of the text. The presence of the words *blessing/bless,* as well as of their opposites, *cursing/curse,* is very important, because it underlines the fact that the Covenant establishes, first and foremost, a personal relationship between God and Abraham. The exact content of this blessing/curse remains extremely vague, and ends up being little more substantial than a

promise of national grandeur – the concept of the name and the nation being more or less the same.

Nevertheless, I think we have to admit that there is a division of principle between the first three formulae, which affect only Abraham himself, and the last four, which introduce the dimension of inter-tribal and international relations. This double-sidedness is an aspect of the Covenant which marks its development right up to and including the New Testament period, and which retains a certain measure of relevance among Jews, and possibly even among Christians, right to the present day.

The personal and exclusive blessing is that of the greatness of the nation and of the name of Abraham. But what does that mean? The Judaeo-Christian reader, influenced by the reality of the development of the Jewish people, thinks immediately of the seed of Isaac, son of the promise, and of Jacob, who received the name of Israel. And certainly, the combination of these three names is repeated often enough in the Old Testament for us to feel perfectly justified in coming to this conclusion. But, in fact, the actual development of the Abrahamic narrative itself is much less clear about this. Quite apart from the son of the promise, God repeats this blessing in the case of Ishmael (Genesis 16:10) and – a great surprise – in Genesis 17:4-6 God says to Abraham: 'This is my Covenant which I shall make with you. You will become the father of many nations. You will no longer be called Abram, but you will be called Abraham, because I shall make you the father of many nations. I shall make you multiply without limit, I shall make nations of you and kings will come forth from you.'

Once more the grandeur of the nation is intimately linked to the personal name of Abraham. But note that the change in his name is also a change in the original promise. Abraham, as his new name makes plain, will be the father of *many* nations, each of which will receive a portion of the heavenly blessing. Of course, the priority given to the main line, the line of Isaac and Jacob, is in no way compromised by this change. Isaac remains the legitimate heir, the son to the promise, who will stay in his father's house and inherit the largest portion of his goods, whereas the others, Ishmael and the children of the concubines (Genesis 25:6) will be rejected and excluded from the patriarchal company, which will follow the main heirs right up until their descent into Egypt.

But in spite of all that, the descendants of Ishmael, whom we might perhaps call the secondary line (a kind of Stuart Pretender line which will enter into competition with the main line but never be recognised by it as in any way legitimate), not to speak of those other sons of Abraham whose exact identity remains something of a mystery – these other nations, according to the Abrahamic narrative,

received and no doubt would continue to receive a portion of Abraham's blessing. Their exclusion should not be interpreted as a categoric refusal on God's part (or on Abraham's part) to consider them as brothers of Isaac and therefore also as supplementary heirs of the divine blessing.

The content of this blessing, like the nature of their exclusion, is revealed in the events associated with the inauguration of the Covenant. When God gave Abraham the rite of circumcision, at the moment when Isaac was born, as a sign of the promise, Abraham circumcised not only Isaac but also Ishmael, which means that from then on the two sons shared the sign of the Covenant which was to become the hallmark of Judaism and the *sine qua non* for anyone wishing to be recognised as belonging to the Chosen People. We should never forget that it was precisely this question at the time when the Gospel was first being preached to the Gentiles which provoked so much trouble in the Church. Converted Jews could scarcely accept uncircumcised Gentiles as members of God's people, but Ishmael, the rejected son, *was* circumcised! So, logically, these same Jews ought to have granted his descendants, if not full recognition, at least a certain tolerance with regard to the Covenant, which they were not prepared to accept in the case of the uncircumcised.

The promise of the multitude of children, which was a major element of the Covenant and really essential to it if it is conceived above all as the prolonging of the family line 'according to the flesh' – to use New Testament terminology – is also granted to Ishmael (Genesis 16:10), and in the same terms as those used for the posterity of the son of the promise. The effect of the exclusion is thus limited to two main elements. First, there is the gift of land. The fate of a large family without income or resources is always tragic, and makes fertility more of a curse than a blessing. We realise this perfectly well today when we look at the Third World, but the principle can be applied equally well to any society. Desert nomads are condemned to a migratory life and the more numerous they are the more often they have to move. They have neither the security of a fixed abode nor the opportunity to develop the rudiments of a civilised way of life. The sons of Isaac, firmly installed in the Promised Land, would later develop a culture which would eventually spread across the world, whereas the descendants of Ishmael would remain at the level of Bedouin, living now very much as their ancestors did 4000 years ago.

One should never underestimate the importance for the development of a people and the growth of its sense of identity of possessing territory, whether it is flowing with milk and honey or not. But the promise of the land is also tied up with the eschatological destiny of Israel, which brings us naturally to the

question of the blessing which the nation will bring to the world in general. In this promise of the land there is the seed of the future promise of a kingdom – remember that God says to Abraham that 'kings will come forth from you', and that it would be the hope of fulfilling this promise above all, which would draw the crowds to follow Jesus. This is therefore, in this promise of the land, a political element which was to play a not inconsiderable role in the ministry of Jesus Christ and which would finally be crowned with thorns when the King of the Jews was crucified. The promise of the kingdom to be established at Jerusalem is also the basis of the blessing on the nations, because it is from Zion that 'the law will go forth, and from Jerusalem, the word of the Lord' (Isaiah 2:3), and also from Zion that Israel's deliverance would come (Psalm 53:7). The nations would go there with joy, and there worship the true God, according to the eschatological vision of the Old Testament.

We can therefore sum up the promises made to Abraham and confirmed by the law as follows: the circumcision and the posterity (the one is tied to the other!) are given without distinction to Isaac and to Ishmael, and perhaps also to the other sons of Abraham mentioned in Genesis 26:5, but the ownership of the land and its resources, as well as the power to bless the nations, are reserved for the son of the promise alone.

The Obligations

Before considering the possible interpretations of the promises in the light of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and modern times, I think it would be useful to recall that the revelation given to Abraham includes also certain obligations on his part, which would later become the obligations of the Covenant and form the spiritual and theoretical basis of the Jewish religion. At bottom there is the demand of *obedience,* the mainstay of all worship and of all spiritual life. This obligation is perhaps more implicit than explicit in Genesis 12: 1-2, when God calls Abraham to leave his country, his homeland and his father's house. But the implication becomes certainty a little later on, for example in Genesis 18:19, where the Lord says: 'I have chosen him in order that he might command his sons and his house after him to keep the way of the Lord, by practising righteousness and justice, and so the Lord will fulfil the promises which he made to Abraham. . . .'

The extent of this obedience is made clear a little later on, in chapter 22, when Abraham is called on to sacrifice his son Isaac, even though he knew perfectly well that Isaac represented the blessed seed (Genesis 22:17-18). We need hardly underline the importance of this subject, whose interest for the Christian is self-evident, but before thinking of Jesus in this context let us consider the role of sacrificial

worship involved. First of all, in Genesis 12:7, the granting of the land is linked to the building of an altar. Same thing again in Genesis 13: 14-17, and again in Genesis 15:7. After that, it is the Covenant in general which takes the place of the altar and the sacrifice up to the moment where the identity of the two with each other is plainly revealed by the sacrifice of Isaac.

Let us remember also that this theme of obedience, which is tied to and manifested by the sacrifices of the Covenant, would later dominate not only the cultic life of Israel but also the preaching of the prophets, to whom would be given both the right and the responsibility to preserve the purity of the Jewish religion. It is astonishing to note that, apart from the Pentateuch, the name of Abraham occurs only 21 times in the whole of the Old Testament. Compare this with the gospels, where it occurs 34 times, or with Romans, Galatians and Hebrews (taken together) where it occurs 28 times, and you will see just how far the figure of Abraham faded out of post-Mosaic Jewish tradition. But who could begin to count the number of times some prophet or other denounces the disobedience of the people, where he more or less openly blames the periodic catastrophes which the people have to suffer on this disobedience, or where he criticises the corruption of the priests and the official cult?

The importance of this condition of obedience, which is so clearly stated in Genesis 18-19, grows as time goes on, whilst the figure of Abraham diminishes and even disappears behind that of Moses. And, above all, let us not forget that it is just this condition of obedience which will be recalled by Jesus in order to condemn the Jewish opposition to his own teaching, and which will be cited by the Apostle Paul as the main reason why Israel was subsequently abandoned in favour of the Gentiles.

We must, therefore, conclude that the obligation of obedience was not optional, or supplementary to the promises made to Abraham. On the contrary, obedience to the law of God manifested in a cult in which sacrifice was the main element, would provide the basis for the social and religious context in which the promises would be fulfilled.

The interpretations

The importance of this last remark becomes clearer when we try to sort out which of the many interpretations which have appeared during the course of history is the best. First of all there are the exegetically-based interpretations, which scarcely go beyond the Old Testament text. By this I mean those interpretations of the promises which may have influenced either the process of redaction, either in its final form or at some intermediate stage, or the commentary

which we call the Prophets and Writings – the Old Testament apart from the Pentateuch.

Everyone knows that the liberal critics of the past century believed that propagandists of a later period – it scarcely matters whether they lived during the time of the monarchy, of the exile or even after the exile - placed their own political and theological ideas in the mouths of more or less mythical patriarchs who had supposedly lived in some remote and inaccessible past. Today, however, the research of specialists and archeaological discoveries have shown almost conclusively that the Patriarchal Narratives have a historical basis which is not – and, more important, cannot be – the product of later propagandists. The formulae used to express the promises are typical of the period and had on the whole disappeared from common usage by the time the Davidic monarchy was established.

This more-or-less assured result of modern criticism has forced the vast majority of commentators to accept that the promises are primitive in origin, even though many would still say that there has been a certain redactional influence in the final formulation. For instance, one might say, as the American scholar Brevard Childs does, that the promises in their present form contain an eschatological element which was absent from the originals. According to this form of reasoning, Abraham would have understood that the promises were made to him and to his immediate family, but not necessarily beyond that. The fact that he moved from Ur to Canaan would guarantee, in Childs' mind, that the promises underwent subsequent modification as the nation realised that they had still not been fulfilled.

Childs outlines an argument which is interesting, but not particularly useful for contemporary interpretation. All we need retain from it is the eschatological emphasis which, by the time of Jesus, after innumerable defeats at the political level, had become the keystone of the messianic hope. Never during the political history of Israel can one say that the territorial limits defined in Genesis 13:14-15 were reached, because even at the time of David and Solomon there were still areas – Philistia, for example, the Phoenician coast and also a large part of Syria – which were not under the control of the king at Jerusalem. Moreover, the basic fragility of this crowned republic is well known. One might even say that the feeling of belonging to a single nation was not highly developed among the Hebrews at this period, and it was only the centralisation of the religious cult at Jerusalem, which was not finally achieved until the Samaritans were expelled from the nation after the return from the Exile, which produced this feeling of unity.

It is, therefore, clear that Jewish tradition did not regard the promises made to Abraham as having been fulfilled in the course of Israel's political development. One might even add that the idea of a

future accomplishment of the promises became somewhat narrower as time went on, especially as regards the blessing on the nations. The cultural openness which was tolerated and even encouraged at the court of Solomon was already being condemned in the time of Ahab, and after the exile it virtually disappeared. New Testament Judaism is distinguished by its exclusiveness, which went even to the extent of snobbishness in its relations with the outside world, and the name 'Jew' had become scandalous among the Gentiles. The difficulties which St Paul encountered with his mission to the Gentiles would hardly have been conceivable had the Jews of the time really been conscious of their mission, and, in spite of the research of certain scholars who try to demonstrate the opposite, proselytism never played a role among the Jews comparable to the role it placed and continues to play among both Christians and Muslims. One might say, as do certain modern apologists of Judaism, that the promise made to Abraham with respect to the nations is now being fulfilled by Judaism's daughter religions, but the involvement of the Jewish people itself in this is tiny, and this has been the case since the second generation of Christians.

In the time of Jesus, therefore, those who still believed in a future accomplishment of these promises tied to their belief to the coming of the Messiah. But we need to add that Jewish messianism was not really based exclusively on these promises, which are never mentioned in the Gospels, in spite of the discussions which Jesus had with the Pharisees on the subject of Abraham and their applicability after the events of the life of Jesus.

We shall return to this theme, but for the moment, let us just say that during the nineteen centuries of the Second Exile, the vast majority of Jews never thought of these promises as having a political dimension. 'Next year in Jerusalem' may have been the traditional Passover greeting, but almost nobody took it literally. The Jews had neither the convictions, nor the means, nor the sympathies of the world which they would have needed to succeed in such an enterprise. When Eliezer Ben-Yehuda went to live in Palestine in 1880, when he started speaking Hebrew to his children, when at last he succeeded in forming a small community of *aliyahs, i.e.*, of Jews who had returned to Palestine, nobody paid him any attention. Palestine at that time was a virtually unknown country which had been impoverished by centuries of Ottoman rule, where the population was 99.9% Arabic-speaking (more or less equally divided between Muslims and Christians). A colony of idealistic Jews impressed nobody, and Ben-Yehuda's venture was thought of at the time as quite eccentric.

In reality though, his adventure might have found a certain response among a group of Evangelical Christians of the time, if only

they had been aware of it. Here we are speaking, of course, of the dispensationalists who followed the wave of apocalypticism, modified by a mildly Calvinistic theology, which followed on the French Revolution. We are not very aware of this nowadays, but the Revivals of the last century were part of a spiritual movement which, to some extent, was motivated by the fear of revolution. Of course, it would be wrong to deny their many positive achievements, but we must also recognise that in Restoration Europe there was a conservative climate which tended to fear any innovation. In the century of progress, one had to accept that the wave of technical and industrial development represented a force whose full potential was far from being exhausted or even understood. But, to many minds, it represented the destruction of those familiar values which had been accepted without question since the triumph of the Cross in the fourth century, and thus came to be regarded as a sign of the end of times.

This new apocalyptic awareness led some Christians to develop a new understanding of the Biblical prophecies. From medieval times it had been regarded as normal, in certain circles, to look at the events recorded in Daniel and in Revelation as prophecies of contemporary events. One could even say that millenarianism, before the time of Augustine, was the generally accepted eschatology of the Church as a whole. But this millenarianism saw little role for the Jewish people. The attitude of the majority of Christians is revealed by the 'Three Languages' controversy, in the ninth century. Faced with the missionary activity of Cyril and Methodius among the slaves, which included a translation of the Bible and the Liturgy into Slavonic, some Carolingian theologians reacted as follows.

According to them, the Bible recognised only three sacred languages, the languages inscribed on the cross of Christ. But Hebrew had fallen into disuse because of Jewish impiety; Greek had also been rejected because of the heresy of the eastern churches (to which Cyril and Methodius belonged, of course!). Only the Latin language continued to enjoy God's approval – a nonsense which continued to play a role in Roman Catholic circles until the 1960s!

A dispensationalism of this type had no room for contemporary Jews. It was only in Calvinist theology, the theology of the Covenant, that they were once more introduced into Christian eschatological thinking. The new dispensationalism of the last century thus regarded contemporary Jews as members of the Chosen People. The promises made to Abraham, not to speak of the other Old Testament promises, had not been fulfilled during the period of the old covenant, but the continued existence of the Jewish people in Christian times indicated that these promises had not been repealed. Some remarks of St Paul's in Romans 11, whose precise meaning is

still a subject of debate, served as a pretext for the development of a complete eschatology, in which the Jewish people played a role of the first importance.

According to this eschatology, the Jewish people was destined to return to its ancestral homeland, understood as the territory delimited on Genesis 13: 14-15, where they would recreate the Davidic monarchy. after this was established, the Jews would undergo a mass conversion to Christ, the nations would rise up in arms against the restored Israel, and the crisis of the end times would culminate in the great battle of Armageddon, which was sited at Megiddo. Further details can be added to this picture, but they are extras to the main story and unimportant. The main thing is the general picture, with its own inherent theological presuppositions and methods of reasoning.

The main lines of this new dispensationalism soon began to penetrate Evangelical circles almost everywhere. Of course, there were extremists like John Nelson Darby, for example, but we must realise that the impact of these new ideas went far beyond the circles which gathered to form Plymouth Brethrenism. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, for example, were influenced by them, and the memoirs of people like Bismarck and Gladstone show that they, too, were interested in the subject. The end of the last century was a time when religious romanticism went hand in hand with the new industrial might of the Protestant countries of Europe and America – with results which are now obvious.

The coming to power of a generation of politicians influenced from childhood by Sunday School teaching is of the greatest importance for our understanding of the political development of Palestine in the early years of this century. The American writer, Barbara Tuchman, has documented the progress of Zionism in political circles in England in her book, *Bible and Sword* (New York, 1956). Speaking about David Lloyd George, she says that when he met the leader of the Zionist movement, Chaim Weizmann, in December 1914, he realised that the names of places in Palestine were better known to him than the names of the battlefields of Flanders. Of Lord Balfour, the main architect of the Declaration of the British Government which, in 1917, permitted the Jews to establish a national homeland in Palestine, she adds that he acquired his interest in the Jewish people in childhood, when his mother read to him every night from the Bible. Apparently he was forced to recite the entire text aloud, chapter by chapter, before going to bed at night, and to cover the entire Bible in this way during the course of a single year.

This kind of education, which is reminiscent of the rabbinical schools, shaped an entire generation. Lord Shaftesbury, who is still honoured as a great social reformer, was also the president of an

Evangelical movement for the restoration of the Jewish State in Palestine, and the moral influence of his example extended to many circles which had little time or sympathy for his religious views. Given the fact that it was this milieu which, after 1917, became the instrument for achieving the aims of the Jewish Zionists, we can hardly ignore the role played by dispensationalist Evangelicalism in the history of events.

But Christian millenarianism could not have created a Jewish State in Palestine if it had not received the co-operation of Jews themselves. The nineteenth century had witnessed the emancipation of the Jews in most countries of Europe. They acquired all the rights of citizenship, and many of them came to occupy important positions in social circles. But the legal progress made by the Jews had no corresponding development in the minds of the majority of the population. The Dreyfus affair in France showed the Jews just how precarious their position really was, and in some places – Vienna, for instance – there were anti-Semetic riots long before 1914. We must never forget that it was in circles like these that the young Adolf Hitler learned his anti-Semitism! But in spite of all that, most official opinion accepted that this anti-Semitism was just an ultra-conservative reaction which would have to be fought by the forces of democracy. In France, for example, it was not the Jews but the forces of reaction – the monarchists, the ultra-Catholics, and so on – who were discredited by the Dreyfus affair, and the cultural life of Austria continued to produce its stream of Freuds and Kafkas.

The only country in which anti-Semitism could be called official government policy was Russia. There, the reaction which followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 quickly hit the Jewish population. This had always been strictly controlled, being limited to a Pale of Settlement on the Western Borders which was largely inhabited by Ukrainians, Poles, and even Germans – not by the Russians themselves. But, in spite of restrictions, they had managed to create, by their own efforts, a complete Russo-Jewish civilisation, and in some places, like Vilna, Kishinyov, Odessa and perhaps even Kiev, they formed the majority of the inhabitants.

The Tsarist persecutions, or *pogroms*, hit a population which was already divided over the question of religion. The Jews of Vilna had developed the mystical tendency which is known as Hasidim, and this soon became the receptacle for Jewish eschatological and messianic ideas. The Hasidism responded to earthly persecution by inward escape, a pattern of behaviour which would later lead them to reject Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Even now in Jerusalem there is a Hasidic community which does not accept the Israeli Government, and which is even said to have collaborated with the Arabs in 1948, to prevent the triumph of the Zionists!

But the Hasidim were never more than a small minority of the Jews in Russia. Among the rest, it was a secularist ideology which was making the greatest progress towards the end of the last century. Exposed to Socialist ideas – let us remember that Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* was translated into Russian long before it appeared in English – these Jews looked for a political solution to their rather wretched condition. They organised themselves into a *Bund* (League) which became a revolutionary political party. But pure socialism rejected national and religious distinctions, and the *Bund* was not always made welcome in Russian revolutionary circles generally. Lenin struggled against it, and his promise of equality for all in an atheistic state attracted the support of some Jews – notably of Lev Bernstein, better known to us as Trotsky.

But the majority of Jews were not willing to abandon the concept of being a distinct nation. They knew that a large part of the contempt which they suffered was due to the fact that they were perceived to be a people without roots, without a national homeland they could call their own. In the climate of nineteenth-century nationalism, they were, therefore, seriously handicapped. The answer, however, was clear – it was necessary to find a place where they could settle as a nation-state, which would make them the equals of all the other peoples of the world. At a time when European domination stretched almost everywhere on the globe, and when mass emigration to virgin lands had become the social phenomenon of the century, this dream was not as fantastic as all that. Even the Bolsheviks eventually recognised it, and in their social programme of 1912 they granted to the Jews the right to establish a national homeland where their culture might develop freely. After the revolution they kept their promise by establishing, in 1934, a Jewish Autonomous Region in a distant corner of Soviet Manchuria, where the official language is Yiddish. The only problem is that the region contains almost no Jews – at last count they were barely 5% of the total population!

Most Russian Jews, however, had already begun to look in quite a different direction. In 1897, the Russian Jew, Theodor Herzl, founded the World Zionist Congress, whose aim was to establish a Jewish State in Palestine. General antipathy to Tsarist repression gave Herzl a sympathetic ear in many Western governments, and in 1905 Great Britain offered him Uganda as a potential colony. Herzl refused this offer, which would only have led to another South Africa, and said that only Palestine, which at that time was still under Turkish rule, could fulfil the conditions required for the foundation of a Jewish State. But why Palestine?

For the faithful reader of Scripture, the answer is obvious. But the Zionists were not religious – at most they were agnostics, and many

of them were openly atheistic. Their attachment to Palestine was therefore more romantic than theological, and their conception of Jewishness should be compared to ideas of Pan-Slavism. Pan-Germanism and even Pan-Celtism which were doing the rounds at the time. One might add that wherever this kind of racism has triumphed – in Germany, for example, or even in Ireland – the results have not been happy. It is true that before 1914 Zionism was not racist in the modern sense of that word, but the basis for the development of such a racism was already in place. One ought to compare the early Zionism not with Hitler, but with Patrick Pearse and the men of 1916 in Ireland, who later became the harbingers of a more widespread European Fascism in the 1930s.

Romantic, without practical consequences – that just about sums up Zionism as it was in 1914. As we now know, it was the entry of Turkey into the First World War, and its subsequent defeat, which created the conditions needed to fulfil the Zionist dream. And it was the alliance between the persecuted Jews of the Russian empire and the Biblical conscience of the leaders of the British Government which conquered the Holy Land, which produced the post-war situation in Palestine.

We cannot recount the entire history of the British mandate in Palestine, but we need to underline the fact that it was the period from 1918-1948 which prepared the way for all that has come since. The British had concluded an alliance with the Arabs in order to defeat the Turks, and had promised them their independence after the war. But neither Britain nor France wanted to see the creation of an Arab state which could serve as a model for the independence of their colonial territories in general. They tolerated Saudi Arabia which at that time was too remote and too poor to challenge European domination, but they carved up the rest of the Arab world into distinct territories, controlled in theory by the League of Nations, but in practice by the colonial power to whom the League's mandate was given.

In Palestine, the conflict between the idealism of the Balfour declaration and the demographic realities of the Near East produced a permanent crisis during the years 1930-45. After 1945, this crisis became a catastrophe. The revelation of Hitler's genocide created a wave of sympathy for the Jews among Western governments and peoples , which helped the Zionist cause . Then too, there was a mass of homeless Jews in Europe who needed somewhere to go. These people began to get to Palestine illegally, the government could not and often did not want to stop them, and intercommunal warfare broke out amid scenes of mounting chaos. On 14 May 1948, the British abandoned Palestine, and a new Jewish State was proclaimed in Tel Aviv. The next day it was at war with the Arabs.

We know that the Jews won, but the land which they occupied covered only about two-thirds of British Palestine. In 1947 the Jewish population was still a minority in this territory, and it was only the expulsion of the Arabs, followed by a mass influx of Jews from other Arab countries which altered the balance. But even now, the proportion of Jews in Palestine is not above 67%, and it is probably more like 60% or even less. Moreover, the demographic trend favours the Arabs, which partly explains why Israel is so opposed to the repatriation of Arab refugees who fled abroad in 1948.

The new state enjoyed a honeymoon in the Western Press until the Six Day War in June 1967. Israeli propaganda spoke glowingly of the return of the Jews to their ancestral homeland, of the transformation of the desert in the light of Biblical prophecy and of the rebirth of the Hebrew language. If anyone asked the question as to why the potentially rich Biblical land had become a desert, the answer was easy. It was the Arabs which made it like that after they destroyed the Graeco-Roman aqueducts and the irrigation systems, after they introduced the grazing of goats. The modern experience of decolonisation produced many unhappy memories which reinforced support for Israel. After Suez and Algeria, how could one not admire this European-style democracy which stood loyally by France and Great Britain in 1956, and which was to all intents and purposes an economic satellite of the United States?

The Six Day War was hailed as a miracle by the entire world. With the precision of a German blitzkrieg, the Israeli forces completely destroyed Arab armies which were several times larger than their own. They took the Old City of Jerusalem and the entire territory of Palestine. Fundamentalist Christians, as well as Zionists, were overjoyed. Now, they believed, the Biblical prophecies would be quickly fulfilled. One young zealot even decided to steal a march on events by setting fire to the Al Aqsa mosque, which together with the mosque of Omar, dominates the Temple Mount.

With greater historical distance we can now see that the events of 1967 signalled not the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham but a new period of political crisis which has endured to the present time. How, after all, can one justify Jewish occupation of territory which is 100% Arab? What should be done with those Jewish extremists who want to occupy the whole of Palestine by expelling, or even killing, the native inhabitants? How, in the final analysis, can the peace and security of Israel be guaranteed?

Up to 1967 it has to be said that the ideology of Israel was not religious. American fundamentalists were always embarrassed to realise that the Zionist leaders were practically atheists. The Old Testament, which gave the Jews their claim to Palestine, was considered to be a document of historic and cultural interest, no

more. But after 1967 the climate changed. World opinion, which until then had been pro-Jewish, started to have some understanding of the plight of the Palestinians. The occupation of the West Bank led to injustices, and even atrocities. Palestinian terrorism, as well as the rise in the price of oil, changed the political atmosphere. Egypt's partial victory in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 destroyed the myth of the invincibility of Israeli arms.

Faced with a new situation, the Israelis started to change. The immigration of Sephardi Jews from Arab countries added a more conservative element to the population, one which was religious and near-eastern in its thinking. Religion, which in the final analysis had been the only real justification for the occupation of Palestine in the first place, began to play an ever-increasing part in social life. The Law of Moses, interpreted and updated by the rabbis, more and more became the rule of everyday life. Israel thus became an ideologically Jewish State for the first time, with the result that freedom of worship for other religious groups was called into question and evangelism, for example, was declared illegal. At the same time, attitudes towards the Arabs hardened considerably. At the present time, even Christian fundamentalists are starting to ask themselves what the fate of this Jewish State will eventually be, and the future seems almost as uncertain as it did 40 years ago. The United States continues to support Israel, but for how much longer? And if this support should cease, what would happen to the Zionist state then?

The New Testament

The Christian who wants to remain faithful to Biblical teaching must therefore ask himself certain fundamental questions about the place of Israel in the modern world. Can we really accept that this state represents the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham? I think our answer has to be NO, not only because we are not in favour of certain Israeli policies – that does not matter – but because the New Testament teaches us something else. It is remarkable, in fact, to what extent dispensationalists rely on certain Old Testament texts, and on Revelation, but more or less ignore the very clear teaching of the apostle Paul. Let us take a closer look at that teaching, which is found in Galatians 3-4 and in Romans 2-4 and 9-11. How did St Paul understand the promises made to Abraham?

First, he thought that the story of Abraham offers us a typological lesson. The two wives and their children are two Covenants, the covenant of law and flesh, and the covenant according to the promise and the Spirit. Paul does not mention that the Ishmaelites were identified with the Arabs (or with Muslims in general), although this identification was later to become the rule for

Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. For him, the Ishmaelites were the Jews of his own time, who were preaching slavery to the law of Moses. In contrast to this, the sons of the promise and the brothers of Isaac are those who are justified by faith. This is what he says in Galatians 3:8: ' Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by their faith and announced the Good News beforehand to Abraham: All the nations will be blessed in you!, so that those who believe are blessed together with Abraham, who believed', and again, he says in Galatians 3;13-14: 'Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us . . . so that the blessing of Abraham might be fulfilled towards the Gentiles in Jesus Christ.'

The centrality of Jesus is reinforced again in the following verses (Galatians 3:16): 'Now the promises were made to Abraham and his seed. It does not say, and to his seeds, as if there were many, but it refers to a single one, and to your seed, that is, to Christ.' A Judaism which is defined in terms of the law makes no sense any more – the function of the law has come to an end; the distinction between Jews and Gentiles has been abolished, Paul concludes in Galatians 3:29: 'If you belong to Christ you are the seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise.'

It is clear that the main problem in all this discussion is the question of the right to share in the inheritance of Abraham. It is not just that Jews according to the flesh will inherit the promises, including the promise of land, and that Christians according to the spirit will inherit the same promises in another way – a heavenly kingdom instead of a Palestianian Holy Land. No! Paul does not agree that there are two types of covenant which are equally valid. If there really are two covenants, it is only because one of them is *false*. The fact that he places his emphasis on the salvation of the heathen by Christ does not mean that he is somehow excluding the Jews from this privilege. On the contrary, the Jew who follows the law is only following the schoolmaster who will lead him to Christ, so that he, too, may be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24). If the Jew has some special status, it is only because he has had the privilege of hearing the Gospel in advance – to the Jew first – but his refusal to accept this Gospel makes him liable to an even greater condemnation. The Jew who does not accept the revelation of Jesus Christ is rejected by God because, in fact, he is not a son of Abraham by faith.

In saying this, Paul is only following the teaching of Jesus himself. Let us not forget that it was this same question – the right to the inheritance of Abraham – which divided Jesus and the Pharisees (John 8:39, 44): 'Jesus said to them: If you were the children of Abraham, you would do the works of Abraham . . . your father is the devil, and you want to do the works of your father.'

I think that it is clear from the texts that the Jewish people, apart from Christ, have no special right to the promises made to Abraham. It is surprising how, and to what extent, dispensationalist Biblical interpretation never considers the role of Jesus with regard to the Chosen People. The fulfilment of the promises in him, and their transformation into spiritual realities seems to escape their notice entirely. The marriage of convenience between them and the Zionists is thus due to the fact that it is the Christian fundamentalists who have betrayed the teaching of the New Testament by relying on certain texts of the Old Testament and interpreting them as if Christ had never existed.

The only New Testament text – apart from Revelation, of course – which they use, because it seems to fit their requirements, is the discussion of the fate of the Jews in Romans 9-11, and especially in chapter 11. Let us recall that the heart of this discussion takes us back to the principles which Paul had already expounded to the Galatians. For example, Romans 10:4: 'Christ is the end of the law, for the justification of all those who believe. there is no exception for Jews.' Romans 10-12: 'There is no difference, in fact, between the Jew and the Gentile, because they all have the same Lord, who is rich towards all those who call upon him.' Paul does not envisage any other type of salvation, or any fulfilment of the promises apart from the one which is offered to the Gentiles as well.

All that he seems to be prepared to recognise is that the rejection of the Jews is not final, that God has not yet said the last word on them. To make himself better understood, Paul quotes the example of the 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal (Romans 11:4). He insists that ' in the present age there is a remnant, according to the election of grace' (Romans 11:5), and that 'if they do not continue in their unbelief, they will be grafted in again to their own olive tree' (Romans 11:23-4). For the moment, though, and until the ingathering of the Gentiles, a part of Israel has been hardened, but even this part is beloved by God for their fathers' sakes, because God does not go back on his gifts and his calling (Romans 11:25-29). At the end of time, says Paul, quoting Isaiah 59:20-1: 'the Deliverer will come from Zion and will turn away the impieties of Jacob, and this will be my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.'

This Deliverer is, of course, none other than Jesus Christ and his work among the Jews will be the same as it is among the Gentiles; his covenant will be the same covenant sealed with his blood. When Paul says in Romans 11:26 that all Israel will be saved, he means that the Jews according to the flesh and the believing Gentiles will share a common salvation, a common destiny in Jesus Christ.

The return to an earthly Zion, the reconstruction of the Temple, the re-establishment of the Old Testament state – all this has no

meaning any more. Christians who think like that are nearer to Seventh Day Adventists and to Jehovah's Witnesses – two sects which do not accept that the law has been fulfilled in Christ – than they are to Biblical, and especially Pauline orthodoxy. The Evangelical Christian above all has no mandate to favour the Israelis against the Arabs on account of the Israelites of the Old Testament. It is not now the flesh but faith which makes us children of Abraham and heirs of his promises, whether we are Jews, Arabs, Europeans or whatever it may be.