

## What can we learn from Bonhoeffer concerning the churches facing Palestinian suffering?

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### Abstract

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's essay on "The Church and the Jewish Question" (1933) inspired already two ecumenical processes. The first one was the decision of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 1977 declaring apartheid a *status confessionis*, the second was the call of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) to engage in a *processus confessionis* "regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction" (1997). This led the LWF (2003), the WARC (2004) and also the World Council of Churches (WCC in 2013) to formally reject imperial neoliberal capitalism. Now it inspires the church actions against the state of Israel, depriving the Palestinians of their civil and political rights and the justification of this by misusing the Bible in (Christian) Zionism. This amounts to apartheid according to all relevant human rights organizations and the UN. There are important consequences for Christian-Jewish relations in Germany and the West today. After Western antisemitism and the horrific genocide by German Nazis against the Jewish people it was extremely necessary to overcome this past by intensive Christian-Jewish dialogue. However this has become a deal to silence critique of Israel's constant violations of international law and human rights, as pointed out by the Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis. In order to overcome this a theology of land respectful of human rights is needed. Churches are being called to a process of study and discernment leading to action. A special responsibility lies with the churches in Germany and the USA because their governments must link their cooperation with the State of Israel to international law and human rights.

### Keywords

*Bonhoeffer; apartheid; Israel; Palestine; human rights; international law*

## Introduction

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), in its General Council 2017, “affirms that with respect to the situation of injustice and suffering that exists in Palestine, and the cry of the Palestinian Christian community, that the integrity of Christian faith and praxis is at stake.”<sup>1</sup> The Resolution continues by instructing the General Secretary to “undertake study and discernment, using the resources available from member churches and the ecumenical movement, regarding theology that has been employed to legitimize the oppression of the Palestinian people, recognizing that such a study might result in the need for prophetic action.” These sentences do not directly use the categories “status confessionis” or “processus confessionis”, but they employ language leading to such categories. “Christian faith and praxis are at stake” and “theology ... employed to legitimate oppression” means that the suffering of the Palestinian brothers and sisters, and theologically legitimating the cause of this suffering is not just a political or ethical question – it touches the very being of the church. Can Bonhoeffer help to clarify whether we have to embark on another process of confession concerning the oppression of the Palestinians and the theological justification of this injustice?

Referring back to Bonhoeffer Kairos Palestine (KP) and Global Kairos for Justice (GKJ) released the *Cry for Hope: A Call to Decision and Action* on 1 July 2020. With the motto “We cannot serve God while remaining silent on the oppression of Palestinians!” it states:

We call on all Christians and the churches at the congregational, denominational, national and global ecumenical levels to engage in a process of study, reflection and confession. At issue is the historical and systemic disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people and the misuse of the Bible by many to justify and support this oppression. We call on churches to reflect on how their own traditions can express the sacred duty to uphold the integrity of the church and the Christian faith in relation to this issue.

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1 [http://www.palestineportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WCRC\\_July2017\\_PalestineAnUrgentIssue.pdf](http://www.palestineportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WCRC_July2017_PalestineAnUrgentIssue.pdf).

With this formulation it is also clear that not only churches of the Reformation should respond to this call in the tradition of “status confessionis” but all churches in their way to express the integrity of the church and the Christian faith.

### **A brief pre-history of learning from Bonhoeffer regarding *status (processus) confessionis***

When I was called in 1970 to serve as director of the Department of Studies of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the suffering of the majority of the people of South Africa and Namibia under apartheid soon moved to the center of our concern. As we were embarking on a decentralized Ecclesiology Study including people from that region, we reread Bonhoeffer’s article “The Church and the Jewish Question” in view of the situation in South Africa (Bonhoeffer 2009:361–370).<sup>2</sup> This essay was written in April 1933, several months after Hitler took power. It is amazing in its clarity already at that early stage of the Nazi period.

Bonhoeffer’s argument is the following: Normally the church does not intervene directly in matters of the state. But there are situations where it must “not just ... bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but ... seize the wheel itself” (2009: 365). According to Bonhoeffer, this does not apply when the state simply commits a wrongdoing, but when it violates the God-given mandate of the state, which is to keep law and order. If it systemically fails to do this, it endangers its own existence. This may happen when the state “has created either too much or too little law and order ... There would be too little if any one group of citizens is deprived of its rights. There would be too much in the case of an attack, coming from the state, on the nature of the church and its proclamation, such as the obligatory exclusion of baptized Jews from our Christian congregations or a ban on missions to the Jews”. This is exactly what happened at that time when the state deprived the Jews of their civil rights (not yet their right to live) and forced the church to dismiss their Jewish pastors (the “Aryan Paragraph”). According to Bonhoeffer, this constituted a *status confessionis*

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2 An excellent interpretation of Bonhoeffer’s article in the context of human rights issues is Zorzin (1997: 236-257).

for the church. This means that the church in word and action – even at the cost of being persecuted – *must* say a clear “No” to these laws and actions of the state and to those “Christians” who support the state in its perversion. And the church *must* say a clear “Yes” to resistance and to alternatives.

In the process of our ecclesiology study in the 1970s we learned to apply this argument to the deprivation of the rights of “black and coloured” people in southern Africa and to the justification of apartheid using pseudo-theological arguments. The result of our work was that the LWF, in its Dar-es-Salaam Assembly in 1977 decided:

Under normal circumstances Christians may have different opinions in political questions. However, political and social systems may become so perverted and oppressive that it is consistent with the confession to reject them and to work for changes. We especially appeal to our white member churches in southern Africa to recognize that the situation in southern Africa constitutes a *status confessionis*. This means that, on the basis of faith and in order to manifest the unity of the Church, churches would publicly and unequivocally reject the existing apartheid system (Lutheran World Federation 1977:179f.).

In 1984 the LWF suspended the membership of the white Lutheran churches in southern Africa because they did not ratify the decision of Dar-es-Salaam. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), in their General Council in Ottawa declared apartheid a heresy.

Later, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) under the leadership of its General Secretary Milan Opocenský, elected in 1989, dared to pick up my proposal to also declare the global capitalist economy a case of confession (Duchrow 1987). This set in motion a series of regional consultations, of which the African one, held in Kitwe/Zambia, stated in 1995:

It is our painful conclusion that the African reality of poverty caused by an unjust economic world order has gone beyond an ethical problem and become a theological one. It now constitutes a *status*

*confessionis*. The gospel to the poor is at stake in the very mechanism of the global economy today.<sup>3</sup>

In its next General Council meeting in Debrecen in 1997, the WARC followed up the African appeal with the following call: “We now call for a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction.”<sup>4</sup>

This process eventually led to the Accra confession, issued by the WARC in 2004, containing the key sentences:

18. We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24:1).

19. Therefore, we reject the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism ... We reject any claim of economic, political, and military empire which subverts God’s sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God’s just rule.<sup>5</sup>

When now the WCRC, as the successor to the WARC, affirms that the integrity of Christian faith and praxis is at stake in regard to the sufferings of the Palestinians, and when it calls for a process which might lead to “prophetic action,” we can assume that these are other words for a *processus confessionis*. Has Bonhoeffer anything to say concerning this call and a possible process of confession in regard to the Palestine-Israel issue?

### **Can Bonhoeffer’s criteria inspire a process of confession regarding Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians?**

John W. de Gruchy proposes that we hear the cry of the Palestinians in the Kairos Palestine Document with ears informed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s essay on “The Church and the Jewish Question” (De Gruchy 2012:67–80). He asks the question: “Who are the victims in the Israeli-Palestinian

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3 Cf. <https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/WARC-Kitwe-Statement.pdf>.

4 Cf. <https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/WARC-Debrecen-Call.pdf>.

5 Cf. <https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/WARC-Accra-Confession.pdf>.

conflict today from the perspective of *Bonhoeffer's* legacy?" (ibid. 70). De Gruchy rejects making comparisons between the suffering of the Jews in the Holocaust and the suffering of the Palestinians under Israeli oppression. Both have to be recognized as victims in their own right and context. "Bonhoeffer's solidarity with the oppressed or victims of injustice whoever they might be, and his preparedness to speak out and act on their behalf, was unequivocal ... he did not *only* have the Jews in mind when he spoke about the victims of his day" (ibid. 71).

De Gruchy makes another important observation with respect to the frequent call to listen to "both narratives" – that of the State of Israel and that of the Palestinians. He quotes from a sermon Bonhoeffer preached while in London, probably in 1934: "Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power and with its apologia for the weak ... It should give much more offense, more shock to the world, than it is doing. Christianity should... take a much more definite stand for the weak than to consider the potential moral right of the strong" (Bonhoeffer 2007:402–3.). De Gruchy's comment on this quote is very pertinent: "The concluding sentence is critical. Bonhoeffer is making a distinction that is often not considered when debating the 'Palestinian question'. The strong have rights, just as they can also become victims, both actual and potential, but this has to be evaluated in relation to the rights of the weak" (De Gruchy 2012:72). This means that, of course, we have to listen to both narratives, particularly in this very complex case with several historical and actual layers, but not without always analyzing the asymmetry of power. Certainly, the State of Israel has reasons to fear attacks. Hamas and splinter groups have not renounced counter-violence methods as the majority of the Palestinians have by endorsing the non-violent approach of the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS).<sup>6</sup> But Israel has also to ask, what is it doing to bring on violent resistance? Furthermore, the State of Israel is not weak, and far from defenseless. It is very strong militarily, in fact equipped with a substantial nuclear arsenal. And it would be even more secure by offering a just peace. De Gruchy says: "In short, the Palestinians at this historic moment are undoubtedly the victims whose voice has to be heard above that of the

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6 [www.bdsmovement.net](http://www.bdsmovement.net).

spin-doctors of the powerful” (ibid. 73). He closes his article by showing how the Kairos Palestine Document speaks the language of Bonhoeffer – in love and resistance.

But how do Bonhoeffer’s categories and arguments in “The Church and the Jewish Question”, unfolded above, apply to the case of the Palestinians concretely, if we are to make the case that a *processus confessionis* is called for? Does the withdrawal of rights of the Palestinians by Israel meet Bonhoeffer’s criteria of “too little law and order”? One can argue that the discrimination against Arab citizens living in the State of Israel is not yet a “withdrawal of rights” in the full sense but can be regarded as what Bonhoeffer calls “a formally permitted minimum of rights”. The *Basic Law: Israel – the Nation State of the Jewish People*,<sup>7</sup> enacted in 2018, relegated the Arab citizens of Israel to second class status, with a diminution of rights. However, Bonhoeffer’s “withdrawal of rights” can clearly be identified in the occupied territories of the West Bank and especially the Gaza Strip. The State of Israel has not implemented a single UN resolution and it is constantly violating the human rights of Palestinians. In 1948 Israel signed UN resolution 194, requiring the right of return or compensation of Palestinian refugees. If it had not, it would not have been admitted as a member of the UN. But Israel has never implemented this resolution, putting the state in clear violation of international law. Zionist terrorists even went so far as to murder the special UN Security Council mediator Folke Bernadotte in 1948 when he tried to enforce that right. The State of Israel has occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights since 1967, establishing colonies of Jewish settlers in those territories in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the occupying power from transferring its civilian population into occupied areas. Despite being a signatory to the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel has now effectively legally affirmed its right to do this in the recent Jewish Nation State Law.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile there are more than 700 000 colonists in the Occupied Territories, Israel has built roads “For Israelis only”, often committing acts of violence against the Palestinians such as building the separation wall on Palestinian land in violation of international law, blocking Palestinian

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7 <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/BasicLawNationState.pdf>.

8 That the Geneva Convention IV has to be applied to the Israeli occupation was ruled by the International Court of Justice in The Hague on July 9, 2004.

freedom of movement through a system of checkpoints, demolishing houses as a form of collective punishment, detaining children through nighttime raids (approximately 1000 children every year), committing murder of civilians arbitrarily – particularly in Gaza – and other human rights violations.<sup>9</sup>

Conclusion: From the point of view of Bonhoeffer’s criteria “too little law and order” the “withdrawal of rights” of the Palestinians by the State of Israel in the occupied territories clearly constitutes a *status confessionis* for the Christian churches, requiring a *processus confessionis*, organized by the ecumenical organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Much more complicated and sensitive is the question of the way Bonhoeffer’s criterion of “too much state” may apply to the State of Israel’s intervention into matters of religion and religious identity. In Bonhoeffer’s case it was the state interfering with the affairs of the church by prohibiting people of Jewish descent to serve as pastors (The “Aryan paragraph,” legitimized by the Deutsche Christen/“German Christians”). During the anti-apartheid struggle it was the state and the white churches misusing the Bible to legitimize apartheid. In the case of Israel – what would be the analogy?

Zionism is clearly becoming a nationalistic, exclusivist movement with the State of Israel’s recent adoption of the Nation State Law. Along with the ongoing occupation, this law clearly reveals that de facto apartheid has

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9 See the latest report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 (June/July 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A\\_HRC\\_44\\_60.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A_HRC_44_60.pdf)). As to the emotional terror of these practices see Šalhub-Kifurkiyan (2015). For the International Law questions see Quigley (2005; 2016).

10 Bonhoeffer, in his speech 1934 at the Denmark conference of the *World Alliance for International Friendship Through the Churches*, one of the roots of the World Council of Churches (WCC), called for an Ecumenical Council to require the conscientious objection of all Christians to the policies of the Nazi state. At that time he issued this charge to the participants of the conference: “The Ecumenical Council is in session; it can send out to all believers this radical call to peace” (Bonhoeffer 2007, 309). This means: there should be as many churches as possible in the ecumenical council for such key decision. But the idea is not to wait until all are gathered. Then never would there be a decision. Rather any ecumenical body can start the process. The LWF did so in 1977 concerning apartheid, and the WARC in 2004 with the Accra confession rejecting imperial capitalism. With regard to the WCC, looking ahead to the 2022 Assembly in Karlsruhe, the *processus* can begin right now in response to the 2019 Bethlehem call and the “Cry for hope” (see below).



become de jure apartheid, depriving Palestinians of their fundamental rights to life, livelihood, dignity, equality, freedom, and self-determination. For critics of Israel, this is key to Israel's qualifying as an apartheid state, particularly now that the Nation State Law appears to legalize discrimination against non-Jewish citizens.<sup>11</sup> Thus the State of Israel is misusing the Bible to legitimize injustice, and by this very act, in Bonhoeffer's terms, intervening in church matters. When Christians support this, it is heresy. It is relatively easy to prove that straightforward Christian Zionism is a heresy.<sup>12</sup> To legitimize the ethnic cleansing and oppression of the Palestinians with the pseudo-biblical argument that the existence of the State of Israel presages the second coming of Jesus can easily be refuted by exegesis. However, it is necessary to also question some of the forms taken by Christian post-Holocaust theologies, which represent a kind of implicit Christian Zionism. This task cannot be taken up sufficiently in the frame of this essay. It needs a broad academic and ecclesial process of debate. This is precisely what would be undertaken in a *processus confessionis*, and it is the necessary and appropriate response to such a kairos. Here I offer only some provisional considerations in view of the situation in Germany and the West more broadly.

## Consequences for Christian-Jewish relations in Germany and the West today

It was absolutely necessary after the horrific Nazi crimes against humanity to repent of and correct the anti-Judaism in the Christian traditions, which had substantially contributed to the persecution of Jews, leading up to the Nazi genocide. The results of the process of Christian self-examination following World War II have been remarkable. Socio-historical exegesis has shown that all the books of the Second Testament are built on the

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11 Cf. the UN report: [https://electronicintifada.net/sites/default/files/2017-03/un\\_apartheid\\_report\\_15\\_march\\_english\\_final\\_.pdf](https://electronicintifada.net/sites/default/files/2017-03/un_apartheid_report_15_march_english_final_.pdf). Meanwhile (2023) all relevant human rights organizations have issued reports about Israel qualifying as Apartheid State, the latest being Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/>)

12 Cf. e.g. Prior, 1997; Masalha, 2007, esp. 85., including extensive literature; Sizer, 2007. See also the video strips of the Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzHGNHkpptsSvRuicXkdMpQ/playlists>.

foundation of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>13</sup> This means that all of Christian theology has to be aware that Jesus created a movement, the purpose of which was to implement the expected just world of God (kingdom of God). Paul took this to the nations of the inhabited world (*oikumene*) by creating messianic communities of Jews together with people of all nations (*gojim*) – without masters and slaves and the domination of males over females (cf. Gal. 3:28). Thus the Christian messianic vision of a new world of justice and peace emerged directly from its origins as a Jewish movement– in Paul’s words, like branches grafted on the Jewish trunk (Rom. 11:17–20). This Christian revision of exegesis in the effort to create bridges of understanding and connection with the Jewish people went hand in hand with the emergence of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the aftermath of the war. Unfortunately, this dialogue project, indeed post-Holocaust theology itself, has taken a problematic turn, as analyzed by Marc Ellis, a Jewish liberation theologian (Ellis 2017:59–74):

The “deal” aspect of the Jewish-Christian dialogue is simply put, Christians repent for your sins, hold fast to Israel and be silent on the Palestinian question. Silence on Palestinians is demanded, otherwise the accusation is that Christians have returned to their previously abandoned anti-Semitism (2017:61).

There is a particular way in which this applies to the German experience, Ellis explains:

The German comeback/rescue from its defeat in World War II has been paid for by Germany, it is true, but with much help as well. Repentance for the Holocaust has been essential. How else could Germany demonstrate its (once again) civilized status in the global community after the Holocaust? Does Germany think that its renewed affluence, political clout and status can proceed unnoticed by continually bowing before the Holocaust and the Constantinian Jewish establishment? Paying billions in reparations to the state of

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13 Up to this day we profit from the work of biblical scholars in Germany like Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann, Gerd Theißen, Luise Schottroff, Frank and Marlene Crüsemann, Rainer Keßler, Ton Veerkamp and others. There is even a new translation of the Bible in German, called “Bible in Just Language” (Bibel in gerechter Sprache), where three liberation perspectives are taken seriously: justice towards Jews, women, and the poor.

Israel and arming it to the teeth with military hardware continues to be German state policy. But the question must be asked: Do the German political and economic elites think that repentance for the Holocaust and enablement of a conquering Israel forgives its past and present empire proclivities? ... Here we move back into the theological arena. Does Christian theology in the Jewish-Christian dialogue/deal especially in the West, America and Germany, pursue its reconciliation with Jews as a way of forgiveness and to hide its empire accountability in the present? Obviously Jewish Holocaust theology does this empire-hiding for Jews, at least for now. Like the Jewish-Christian dialogue, in the beginning Holocaust theology was an insurgent force overpowering the various orthodoxies of its time. Now its concentration on the Holocaust is regressive. Holocaust theology seeks to permanently discipline and banish Palestine and the Palestinians. Likewise, it seeks to discipline and banish the Jewish prophetic exploding in our time (2017:62).

These reflections expose the fact that both the Germans and particularly the Christians in Germany have allowed the Palestinians to assuage their guilt while Israel uses the guilt feelings of the Germans to render Israel innocent of its violations of international law and human rights. But what is the theological basis for legitimizing the land grabbing and oppression.

### **Toward a theology of land respectful of human rights**

The key to the problem is the ambiguity in the understanding of the biblical land promise to “Israel” in post-Holocaust theology. This could be easily solved by a consideration of international law. The International Court of Justice has rejected a concept of original, or ancient, title indicating that this concept would lead to perpetual war (Quigley 2005:69). Moreover, even if ancient titles were to have legal standing today, ancient Israelites were not the first to inhabit the land of today’s Palestine – rather, it would be Canaanites, Philistines and others. So it should be clear even to theologians that identifying ancient Israel with the present *state* of Israel is simply impossible. Another matter is the historical claim of continuity between ancient Israel and Jewish people all over the world. According to

the Bible, this may be interpreted as God’s faithfulness to this people. We shall come back to this.

Let us first turn to the beginnings of the kind of theology confusing the “promised land” with the State of Israel. One of the main initiators of a Christian Zionist post-Holocaust theology was Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt. He summarized his previous texts regarding this issue in his book on Eschatology, vol. 2, under the title: “What may we hope for, if we might hope?” (1994). His thesis is that the land is an integral part of the promises. This is why the Canaanites had to be disinherited – either by serving the Israelites or by expulsion. Marquardt makes the same claims for the Palestinians – they should serve Israel or leave (1994: 275ff.). His pseudo-biblical argument for this ideology is God’s election of Isaac and the disinheriting and even rejecting of Ishmael. Marquardt does not hesitate to quote even Jesus for this opinion: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt. 5:5).

Yes, in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible the land is an essential element of the promises (Westermann 1964:11ff.). But this promise is bound to the universal purpose of the election: to implement God’s justice on earth in order to be a blessing to all nations. This is present from the beginning in the promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac points out:

We must not lose sight of the purposefulness behind the promises of the land. Keeping Torah and being faithful to God take precedence over any claim of entitlement. This is why Israel was given a land as an inheritance. Furthermore, the obedience of Israel and her keeping of the covenant mark Israel as a distinct covenant community – God’s chosen people. God brought Israel to the land so that they model a different and distinct community, set apart from the other nations.<sup>14</sup>

That is also why most biblical passages concerning the land are formulated in the context of the exile, asking: why did we lose the land? The answer is,

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<sup>14</sup> From an unpublished paper of the Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac, given to a conference in Woltersburger Mühle, Germany, in 2015 (summarizing his doctoral dissertation, 2015).

always, because we have broken the covenant (Bechmann 2008). Moreover, at the end of the exile, after the return to the land, at the time of formulating the Torah, there was a debate among the Jewish communities in the land and in the diaspora about including the Book of Joshua in the Torah (Albertz 2018:65–92; id., 2015:54–74; id., 2013:220–233). The decision was to not include Joshua, creating a “Hexateuch”, but to remain with the five books of the Pentateuch. The land was included in the Torah in Numbers 25–36, as a future perspective in the framework of the covenant. Therefore, according to the Hebrew Bible, a state does not replace the Torah as constituting the identity of Judaism.

Socio-historically the settling of the Hebrews in the promised land was not an ethnic undertaking but a cooperative project of different socially marginalized groups (“Hebrews”) in order to build up a society independent of empires and city states (Gottwald 1979; Albertz 1992; Duchrow 1995:142ff.). When Deuteronomy speaks of separation from other peoples and other gods it means a rejection of a social order of injustice, exploitation, and slavery, not an ethnic separation. In the situation of return from the exile, which is the historic context of Deuteronomy, this coincides with the goal of reconstituting the Jewish just society in distinction from the other peoples and cultures who now also inhabited the land (Veerkamp 2012:126). The people were extremely vulnerable and in a weak position. So in order to defend their alternative project of a society without slaves and injustice they had to strengthen family solidarity. Therefore, in the original biblical context, emphasising peoplehood and specialness is the opposite of playing the ethnic card out of a situation of extreme strength with the purpose of illegally overpowering another people, as in the case of today’s Israel. Furthermore there is no textual support for Marquardt’s claim that Ishmael was disinherited.<sup>15</sup> Ishmael is heir to the same promises as Isaac – the land does not need to be mentioned because they live in different areas (Gen. 16). Ishmael is in covenant with God even before Isaac – like Isaac, he was circumcised – and receives the promise of many descendants (Gen. 17 and 25). Ishmael and Isaac coexist in friendship and fraternal harmony. They bury their father Abraham together. So Marquardt’s theses are

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15 Cf. the monography on Ishmael: Naumann, 2018. Marquardt even draws a parallel between Esau and Ishmael as “disinherited”. This is even more displaced, but not relevant here, because Esau belongs to Isaac’s line.

simply wrong exegetically. For the future of West Asia it would be crucial to overcome these misinterpretations of the Bible and intensify rather a dialogue between the three Abrahamic traditions.

A detailed academic discussion on the question of the land is offered by the dissertation of Munther Isaac, “From land to lands” (2015). He shows clearly how the covenant community of Israel is to be a paradigmatic community, called to show to all peoples the way of justice. It aims at the “sanctification” of the whole earth (Ex. 19:5–6). The particular mission of ancient Israel, therefore, has a universal perspective from the beginning. Jesus appears to be making a similar point when he calls the disciples “the light of the world” and “salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13f.). His mission to the “twelve tribes of Israel” does not aim at the restitution of the State of Israel, as the disciples on the way to Emmaus misunderstand him (Lk. 24:21), but at the restitution of the people of Israel to fulfill its mission to all nations by implementing God’s justice (Kingdom of God). Paul offers a similar vision. The land is very important because it is the locus, the concrete context, for the implementation of God’s law of love and justice<sup>16</sup> – not just for one land, but to the ends of the earth. In Paul’s fundamental reflection on Israel in world history in the well-known chapters of Rom. 9–11 God’s faithfulness to his promises to Israel relates to the people, not to the particular land of Palestine.

Isaac maintains that the theology of the land is ultimately about restoring the whole earth to God. The theology of the land acknowledges that (1) the land mediates the presence of God and demands holiness; (2) the land is covenanted, it is, always, a mandate and not a possession, and as such it requires accountability; and (3) the land is where the reign of God takes place, calling for God’s agenda to be applied through his vicegerents (Isaac, 2015, 24ff.). The current situation in the territory of historic Palestine is far from this biblical vision. It is characterized by oppression and violence.

Having made these observations, we must ask, what is the theological meaning of the State of Israel? In 1980 the Synod of the Rhenish Church in Germany claimed, “that the continuing existence of the Jewish people,

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16 Concretely this means: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

its return to the promised land and also the establishment of the State of Israel are a sign of the faithfulness of God to his people” (“...daß die fortdauernde Existenz des jüdischen Volkes, seine Heimkehr in das Land der Verheißung und auch die Errichtung des Staates Israel Zeichen der Treue Gottes gegenüber seinem Volk sind”<sup>17</sup>). There is no theological problem confirming, as a faith statement, that the continuing existence of the Jewish people is a sign of God’s faithfulness. However, this is not linked to a specific land, as the whole Rabbinic tradition shows, but to the observance of the Torah. One may allow that it is possible for Jews to settle in Palestine and to live in peace with the Palestinians as, for example, Martin Buber envisaged. But theologically it is simply impossible to confer legitimacy to a given state, and particularly a racist state, on the basis of God’s direct action.

The Hebrew Bible and the Second Testament are very critical of the formation of states as such. When the Israelites wanted “to be like other nations and have a king” (1 Sam. 8), God warns them through the prophet Samuel that they would become slaves again. And after the exile they never had an independent state. With regard to today, even a liberal German Jew, Micha Brumlik, criticizes the formulation of the Rhenish church regarding the State of Israel as a sign of the faithfulness of God as “a classical piece of political theology in the sense of Carl Schmitt” and historico-philosophical speculation (Brumlik 2017:20–23; 2019:100–110). In other words, linking the State of Israel with God’s faithfulness confuses the state with the Jewish people. One can say as a faith statement that God is faithful to the people, not the state. The Rhenish church and other churches as well must correct this.<sup>18</sup>

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17 <https://www.ekir.de/www/service/2509.php>.

18 One of the key theologians in the Rhenish Church, Bertold Klappert (2019:204ff.), touches this concern in a differentiated argumentation. He regards both the original Zionism and the struggle of the Palestinians as legitimate liberation movements. However, the enduring chosenness of the Jewish people of Israel has been corrupted by turning it into a nationalist privilege. In the tradition of the Bible it must rather be a blessing for the Palestinians, sharing the land with them.

## **Conclusion: Calling the churches to a process of study and discernment leading to action**

This does not mean putting the State of Israel as a state into question. Rather, it is to challenge its racist character in defining itself as an exclusively Jewish state. Its existence as a state can be justified only as a matter of international law. The UN decision in 1947 to recognize Israel is understandable because after the extreme persecution of Jews in the East as well as the West, the UN member states wanted to provide a safe place for the Jewish people. For this very reason, Israel must honor international law and redefine itself as a state for all its citizens in borders that are recognized by international law. This is the basis for its existence. And that means that justice to the Palestinians is the basis for the lasting existence of the state of Israel.

This brings us back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. According to the criteria set out by Bonhoeffer in the 1933 essay discussed above, Israel's deprivation of the rights of the Palestinians, justified by the heresy of Christian Zionism, constitutes the interference into matters of the church through the misuse of the Bible and would thus constitute a *status confessionis* for the church. In Bonhoeffer's language, the church is called "not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself" (2009:365). In Bonhoeffer's understanding, this is the way in which the church supports the state exercising its power in the true sense, namely in caring for law and order. The church, therefore, by challenging the state in this way, contributes to the lasting existence of the state.

This is only possible and called for if the church sees the state to be failing in its function of creating law and order, that is, if the church perceives that the state, without any scruples, has created either too much or too little law and order. It must see in either eventuality a threat to the existence of the state and thus to its own existence as well (cf. Bonhoeffer, 2009:366).

One may ask, why are not only the directly affected churches in Palestine, but churches all over the world being asked to join the resistance against the deprivation of the rights of the Palestinians and the misuse of the Bible by Zionism? First of all, we understand the church as the body of Christ. When one member suffers, all suffer. But also very concretely: Israel can only continue to occupy and oppress the Palestinians because



governments, particularly the US, Germany and the EU, finance and provide diplomatic cover for the State of Israel. They provide Israel with weapons and obstruct the implementation of UN decisions. They refuse to implement international law with regard to the State of Israel while responding with sanctions in other cases even when there is no UN mandate but because it serves their interests, as in the cases of Russia or North Korea. So the churches, especially in the West, face governments who are in fact supporting the deprivation of the rights of the Palestinians and the misuse of the Bible. This means that the churches have to reject this and work for justice as an act of confession.

This is exactly what the “Cry for Hope: A Call to Decisive Action”, mentioned above, is asking for. The document calls on the churches of the world to “initiate processes at local, denominational and ecumenical levels that recognize the present kairos and the urgent requirement for decisive action regarding the denial of Palestinian rights and the misuse of the Bible.”<sup>19</sup>

Bonhoeffer said: “Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants” (Bethge 2000:607). This today means: “Only those who cry out for the Palestinians may also sing Jewish psalms”.

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