

A Response to
Peter A. Pettit, “Towards a Critical, Constructive Theology of the Promised Land”
by
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First, I sincerely thank the organizers of the conference for their efforts and sacrifices. At the same time, I’d like to start by praising Dr. Pettit:

- (1) For his good intentions for he wants to stimulate a robust and trusting, committed interaction, among a broad spectrum of perspectives (Jews, Muslims, humanists, Buddhists, and others), a daunting goal for many of us. Indeed, he is courageous.
- (2) For he wants to contribute to peace-building via providing a Christian theology of the Promised Land as well as moving Christians and hopefully all of us into the path of “humility and self-critique that befits a servant community grounded in repentance and grace.” Further, his model is motivated by loving your neighbor and affirming their place in the neighborhood. This is a praiseworthy model.
- (3) For his interaction with Brueggemann who points out the value of seeing land as a gift and challenge.¹
- (4) For his well organized paper that is skillfully composed and adorned with apt illustrations and similes.

Furthermore, Dr. Pettit has provided four principles in his paper. For the sake of time, I will focus my interaction on certain elements pertinent to these principles. So I start by commenting on Dr. Pettit’s perception of a critical reading of the Bible. I have three comments on his first principle.

- A. (1) Dr. Pettit sees this critical reading through employing historical criticism. However, in light of Leo Perdue's forceful arguments, I point out that the dominance of historical criticism is collapsing.² Biblical as well as theological scholars are now rightly asserting the need not only for a critical reading of the Bible but also for a critical reading of culture. The importance of cultural criticism is tantamount to biblical criticism. The interpreter and in this case Dr. Pettit comes like all of us with a pre-understanding that shapes his or her perspective. At the cost of overstating my case, the Jewish context has changed from a Pre-Palestinian context or the context of the horrible holocaust to a post-Palestinian context in which there is a Jewish state and a Palestinian Christian minority. A true Christian-Jewish dialogue about land must engage Christian Palestinian points of view and I am afraid that Dr. Pettit has not reflected this engagement in his paper. My paper on Palestinian Protestant

¹It is worth noting that Dr. Pettit has not pointed out that Brueggemann changed his understanding of land. Brueggemann now asserts the importance of ideological criticism. See the conclusion of my response as well as Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

²For further details, see Leo Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Leo Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

Theological Responses to a World marked by violence outlines four different Palestinian Responses to their world of conflict.³

(2) My second point that is pertinent to the first principle is the following: Dr. Pettit argues that "the biblical sources testify always that there is a specific, delimited, GPS-locatable place that is "this land."" His observation that there are several borders within one Bible is definitely true and has been already pointed out by Zecharai Kallai, Jeffrey Townsend, and Moshe Weinfeld.⁴ These authors understand the existence of different borders in a different way. It would have been helpful if Dr. Pettit has engaged their works. However, for the sake of brevity, I would like to add that Dr. Pettit has considered the different borders under a construct called "this land." The idea lacks sufficient textual support, downplays the huge territorial differences (hundreds of kilometers), ignores the final form of the text in which the word "this" should be read not only in light of one specific text but multiple texts and borders in one coherent Bible. The word "this" could mean something specific. Even Shoshan provides 2504 occurrences of the word Eretz. None of them has a demonstrative determiner i.e. the word "this". Obviously the expression "this Land" is not a common one in the Hebrew Bible, if it exists. However, the expression (Hamakom Haze) occurs 62 times in the Hebrew Bible especially employed by the Deuteronomist. It would have been helpful if Dr. Pettit has studied these texts and provided a biblical perspective based on his findings.

However, a better alternative would be considering the theology of the land starting from the book of Genesis and all the way through revelation. Since I have done this in my essay "Christ is the owner of Haaretz," I suggest that God did not intend to have fixed borders but expanding ones until the whole world is under the Abrahamic banner. This concept is supported not only by the existence of multiple borders but also by God's promise to Abraham in Gen 22: 17 in which God says to Abraham: "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies."⁵ It is also supported by Paul's words in Rom 4: 13: "It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith."

(3) Dr. Pettit insists on seeing the theology of the land in a construct called "Promised Land". However, this construct has many limitations such as overlooking the contribution of the wisdom literature for our understanding of land; or highlighting the importance of creation theology in relation to land. It focuses on one land ideology without reading the pluriform land ideologies in the

³See Yohanna Katanacho, "Palestinian Protestant Theological Responses to a World Marked by Violence." *Missiology* (2008), forthcoming.

⁴Zecharia Kallai, "The Patriarchal Boundaries, Canaan and the Land of Israel: Patterns and Application in Biblical Historiography," *Israel Exploration Journal* 47 (1997): 69-82; Jeffrey Townsend, "Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca sacra* 142 (1985): 320-337; Moshe Weinfeld, *The Promise of the Land: The Inheritance of Canaan by the Israelites* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 52-75.

⁵All the biblical quotations are taken from Kenneth L. Barker and Donald W. Burdick, eds., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).

Bible or closely considering their contexts. For example, the promises in Genesis were part of restoring all of creation into peace with God. The land ideology in the Deuteronomist was intimately related to obeying the Torah. Further, the Deuteronomist informs us that violence led to possessing land but ends with the assertion that counter-violence led to losing it.

B. Let us move now to Dr. Pettit's second principle. (1) Dr. Pettit says that "God's covenant with Israel is neither superseded by Christianity nor withdrawn from the Jewish people"

He adds saying that "the affirmation of the continuing covenant of God with Israel beyond the emergence of Christianity is a bedrock element in the new relationship between the two communities" i.e. the Christian and the Jewish. So as a Palestinian Christian Dr. Pettit is telling me that a proper basis for my relationship with Jews entails a commitment to a belief that God promised them my land. Frankly, I find this very difficult to accept especially in light of the God of Justice advocated in the Bible and the Arab-Israeli wars as well as struggles in the last century.

He believes that "Just as land for Israel is gift, promise, and challenge, so too for every nation it is so." Does this include Palestinians or the nations that Joshua expelled? Does the cross have any contribution to make to the nations that were excluded from the "promised land"?

C. Realistic History and Politics: In his third principle, Dr. Pettit is right in stating that his use of the word "Israel" raises several questions.

Indeed it does! But Dr. Pettit fails to define membership in Israel. He uses the terms "Israel" and "Jews" without a biblical study defining these terms and distinguishing between them. Again we ask: who is Israel? What is the difference between Biblical Israel, the state of Israel, Jews, Hebrews, and how can we define membership in each one of them? Is it biological membership or something else? By insisting on seeing "Israel" as a symbol, Dr. Pettit overemphasizes the role of the reader and downplays the role of the text which is not passive but intentional in presenting a pluriform Israel in one book.

(2) My second observation on Dr. Pettit's third principle is that Dr. Pettit focuses on the Eucharist as an analogy for Israel as a symbol. However, he fails to point out that the Eucharist cannot be separated from the sacrament of Baptism i.e. joining the NT covenant community via the cross or circumcision in the OT covenant community. By overlooking Baptism as a pre-requisite of the Eucharist, Pettit has overstated his case. The road to God's blessings does not start with the Eucharist but with Baptism i.e. joining the covenant community and obeying its stipulations.

D. (1) Commenting on Dr. Pettit's fourth principle: I agree that we can speak for ourselves but I don't like the polarization of the terms Christian and Jewish especially in light of Seelisberg's ten points that Dr. Pettit rightly accepts.⁶ But

⁶I was not able to locate the quotation that Dr. Pettit employs in Seelisberg's ten points. He says, ". . . since the ICCJ's promulgation of the Ten Points of Seelisberg, which called for a "vigilant willingness to avoid any presentation and conception of the Christian message which would support antisemitism under whatever form," and which recognized that it was a failure of Christian faithfulness that had

he forgets that the context is now different. The Jews in Israel are no longer the minority or the helpless oppressed. In fact some might argue exactly the opposite i.e. Palestinians including Palestinian Christians are the oppressed ones.

(2) The issue is not just land; it is also justice. This is clear in the writings of Naim Ateek.⁷

Moreover, Pettit is addressing the issue of the Promised Land without discussing the promise, the context and co-text of the promise, the God of the promise, the recipients of the promise, the role of the cross/resurrection in the promise, and the way Palestinians might perceive this promise.⁸ Thus, I suggest that although Dr. Pettit's paper might stir some discussion, this discussion will be marked with reductionism and will be futile as long as it does not involve the writings of Palestinians and their concerns. Further, by excluding an explicit discussion on the centrality of the cross [and resurrection], a Christian theology of the land might be only an intellectual discussion but it is not a spiritual encounter with the living God. Also, it is helpful to notice that Deuteronomy informs us that loving God precedes living in the Land (Deut 30: 15-20)

Last, Brueggemann wisely says, "the understanding of land we have discerned in the Bible is never just about land . . ." (204). It is "not an innocent theological claim, but a vigorous ideological assertion on an important political scale" (xiv). The thick reading of the ideological layers must be considered from the final form of the text and a critical as well as an ideological understanding of the interpreter.

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allowed monstrous antisemitism . . ." Seelisberg's ten points are found on the following URL: <http://www.iccj.org/en/index.php?item=102>.

⁷See for example, Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

⁸The word "resurrection" was not part of the original response but was added later due to Father David Neuhaus comments. Father David was the moderator of the meeting.