

1 **Towards a Critical, Constructive Theology of the Promised Land**
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4

5 Introduction

6 My intent with this presentation is to stimulate discussion – discussion that will
7 be distinctive and especially valuable in my experience because of the wide range of
8 participants in this meeting. Rarely do I have the opportunity to discuss issues of the
9 promised land and the theology that accompanies it in our Jewish and Christian
10 communities with individuals who represent as broad a spectrum of perspectives as we
11 have here in the conference. Those who have lived all their lives in this land, and those
12 who come to it only recently, and only as visitors, perhaps even for the first time. Those
13 for whom it is a central orienting symbol either for themselves or for those they care
14 about, and those for whom it is an overburdened symbol, what has been called the
15 “much too promised land.” There are some for whom a theology of the promised land
16 cannot but touch on their own lives and hopes and fears, and others for whom the
17 discussion will be much more abstract and remote, even if its profound importance is
18 fully recognized. I am reminded of the pig’s hesitation when the hen proposed to her
19 that they go into business together selling ham and eggs: “So you’ll make a regular
20 contribution”, said the pig; “but for me it’s a total commitment!”

21 I appreciate the fact that, at least for the organizers of the conference, residency
22 here is not a prerequisite to talk about a theology of the promised land. Part of what I
23 would like to propose today is that such a theology demands of us a robust and trusting,
24 committed interaction among those who are far off and those who are near. We will
25 achieve the most in our endeavor to comprehend a theology of the promised land when
26 we do so as a whole Christian community. Those who live here in the midst of conflict

27 over the land can help assure us of a relevant, realistic, meaningful engagement and those
28 with more distant perspective and different context will be able to contribute
29 assessments and insights that are obscured or unavailable from the close quarters of a
30 conflicted land. Indeed, without such partnership, we are all liable to suffer a blinkering
31 of horizons that can dull the effectiveness of our theology. I therefore look forward as
32 much to the response and discussion that will follow as to laying out for you some of the
33 thoughts that lead me towards a critical, constructive theology of the promised land.

34

35

I.

36 I will say more in a bit about why I refer to this consistently as “the promised
37 land,” when we all know it is both much more and somewhat less than that. Before I
38 do, however, let me outline for you the several principles that will guide my reflections
39 and undergird my efforts to contribute to an adequate theology. In keeping with the
40 conference theme, my first commitment will be to bring the lessons of the Jewish-
41 Christian dialogue to bear on the issue of such a theology. I believe that a clear,
42 coherent articulation of a Christian theology of the promised land can be, for reasons I
43 will detail shortly, a significant contribution to peace-building in this land, in these lands.
44 Such a theology, in our day, will be built in part on the insights into Christian self-
45 understanding that have emerged from the changed and changing relationship with Jews
46 that has marked the past six decades – not since the founding of the State of Israel,
47 exactly, but since the ICCJ’s promulgation of the Ten Points of Seelisberg, which called
48 for a “vigilant willingness to avoid any presentation and conception of the Christian
49 message which would support antisemitism under whatever form,” and which
50 recognized that it was a failure of Christian faithfulness that had allowed monstrous

51 antisemitism to take root and come to expression among Christians. Quite beyond
52 Seelisberg, the now-familiar story of the new Jewish-Christian encounter has been
53 undertaken by Christians at least in part in a self-corrective spirit, a spirit that
54 acknowledges the pitfalls that spread before Christianity when it enjoys social hegemony,
55 cultural dominance, alliance with political power and triumphalist pretensions. The work
56 of the Jewish-Christian dialogue has been, for many in the Christian church, the work of
57 humility and self-critique that befits a servant community grounded in repentance and
58 the freeing grace that forgives. Such humility cannot lead to hesitancy, however, about
59 writing the theology that will express and guide the church's identity in this new era, and
60 a theology of the promised land is a crucial element in that theology.

61 Four principles can be drawn from the dialogue to help us move toward such a
62 theology. Others may well also be pertinent, but for our current purposes these four will
63 more than occupy us, I believe. First, a critical reading of the Bible and tradition is
64 essential to the enterprise. The tools of biblical and historical criticism have been put to
65 use time and again to seek to understand more fully and accurately how the scriptural
66 witness, the historical record and traditional forms have refracted and not merely
67 reflected the place of Jews in the life and worldview of the church. They will be equally
68 critical in developing a theology of the promised land.

69 Second, a key finding of the study of Paul, in particular, and of the history of
70 rabbinic Judaism sets another key principle for undertaking this project: God's covenant
71 with Israel is neither superseded by Christianity nor withdrawn from the Jewish people,
72 but continues in its full force and effect with them until the final fulfillment of God's
73 kingdom for which both Jews and Christians hope. The third principle is that
74 theologized interpretations of history and politics cannot be expected – and perhaps

75 cannot be allowed – to substitute for the realistic engagement of communities in the
76 give-and-take of human interaction in all its complex dimensions. In the pluralist world
77 we have come to recognize as our own, any theological reading of history must be
78 recognized for the faith-assertion that it is and must yield space in the public square to
79 those who would assert their own faith with their own narratives and readings of the
80 same, shared moments. To do otherwise is to betray the pluralist character of our
81 canonical witnesses and the dignity of a complex humanity as the image of God.

82 Finally, the fourth principle is that we speak for ourselves in all things, and allow
83 others to speak for themselves. For me, this means that the work I will do here and
84 whenever I move towards a theology of the promised land will be Christian work,
85 grounded in Christian sources and habits and disciplines and community. It will not be
86 an effort to lead Jews to a particular theology of their own, nor a try at blending Jewish
87 and Christian perspectives into a new theology. I believe that our Christian theology is
88 sharper, clearer, more thought-through and responsive when we do it in the presence of
89 others – Jews, Muslims, humanists, Buddhists, or any one or several of many more
90 others – and so I welcome the presence and the conversation with those – with you –
91 who are here today. But my task is with my fellow Christians, to move towards speaking
92 as clearly as we can about the things we believe and confess in relation to the promised
93 land. That is task enough – and I only suggest that we may move towards it today – and
94 trouble enough, as well, I suppose. I hope you who accompany us will find joy and a
95 measure of your own fulfillment if you help us be as good as we can be in doing it. And
96 please don't get embarrassed if we get a bit contentious among ourselves along the way;
97 it's part of what helps us know that we are still vibrantly embodying the apostolic
98 tradition.

123 up the promise of the land. For all the change and variability in its shape and size over
124 time, the biblical sources testify always that there is a specific, delimited, GPS-locatable
125 place that is “this land.” Not perhaps, the land you presently occupy, or that your
126 ancestors ever did occupy, nor even perhaps a land that you can ever realistically hope to
127 occupy – it may be none of those. But never is it imaginary, or fantastical, or other-
128 worldly or sublimated into personal or communal space apart from the real world. One
129 may not be able to determine which dirt is in and which is out, but there is always a clear
130 understanding that it is, somehow, “this land” – and not some other. The specificity,
131 despite the obvious impossibility of rendering a coherent and compelling account of
132 borders, mitigates against spiritualizing or idealizing the land right out of this world and
133 sets the stage for a vital theological step on our own part.

134 “This land,” moreover, is never merely a possession. As Walter Brueggemann
135 sharply defined the breadth of biblical images already 35 years ago in his book, *The Land*,
136 this land is encountered by Israel as gift, as promise, and as challenge. It is gift, in that it
137 is consistently named by God as “the land that I give you/show you,” and the
138 Deuteronomist made clear that Israel lives in the land not by dint of any deserving, but
139 because God has chosen to give it to them. It is promise, in that it represents the place
140 where Israel can be fully Israel, where God assures Israel of future redemption and
141 fulfillment of all God’s promises. It is challenge, in that when Israel is given the land it
142 comes with the calling to be fully God’s people, to embody the Torah in personal and
143 corporate life to the greatest extent possible, and to risk expulsion if that calling is not
144 heeded, that challenge is not met.

145 Most often, the accounts of the land spring from the aspirations of those who do
146 not have it; read critically for their context, the land texts most often can be situated

147 either entirely outside the land, as in the Babylonian exile, or within the land at times
148 when it is in grave jeopardy, as with the Deuteronomist. Thus it seems to me that we
149 speak most often of land encountered as promise, and why I believe the most helpful
150 term for describing it is the promised land. Reflection on the loss of land, whether
151 imminent or actual, reinforces its image as gift and prompts the urging of renewed
152 attention to the call of Torah faithfulness. It seems first and last to be promised, and
153 that promise is what defines its character as gift and challenge. From such a critical
154 perspective, moving towards a theology of the promised land would entail caution
155 against steps that give priority to either gift or challenge. That is, steps that would either
156 absolutize the gift in such a way as to make of the land an entitlement, or steps that
157 would give such priority to the challenge as to make it an unattainable object of desire.
158 Rather, the promised land remains God's land to give and to define as the setting of a
159 call, neither guaranteed to possession nor set beyond an insurmountable barrier.

160 In the New Testament, it is well recognized that there are limited references to
161 the promised land in the same sense as we find it in the Old Testament (in using this
162 term I follow Paul Van Buren of blessed memory in distinguishing with all due respect
163 between the Old Testament that draws its hermeneutical character and significance from
164 its relationship to the New Testament within the church, and the Jewish Bible, Tanakh,
165 or Hebrew Scriptures, which have their proper settings in either the Jewish community
166 or the a-religious academic community). The theme of the land as promise is powerfully
167 present in the Apocalypse of John, of course, and one might note that its vision in the
168 time of fulfillment is known as "the heavenly Jerusalem," signifying the ongoing place of
169 this city, in this land, for the meaning of the promised land in Christianity as well as in
170 Judaism.

171 Furthermore, the ties of the Gentile Christian community to the Jews of
172 Jerusalem, both gospel believers and non-gospel-believers, is evidenced by a comparison
173 of two epistolary texts. In Ephesians 2:11-19, the author reminds the Gentiles that they
174 were once alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, without Christ, strangers to the
175 covenants of promise, indeed without hope or God. Now, however, they are in Christ
176 no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the
177 household of God. Clearly in the prior condition they were separated from Israel, but
178 now are citizens with the saints, which must be the Jews, with whom the readers are now
179 members of God’s household in common. In Romans 15:25, Paul notes that he is going
180 to Jerusalem “in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to
181 share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to
182 do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their
183 spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.” While I
184 am among those who doubt the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, I believe it is plausible
185 to see a Pauline tradition in this use of the term “saints,” and thereby to establish that
186 within Pauline circles there was no separation between the Jews and Jerusalem and there
187 was no separation between the Gentile churches and the Jews of Jerusalem. Rather, as
188 he awaited the imminent second coming, it was important for him to enable the
189 Gentiles, who had come to share in the spiritual blessings of the Jewish people, to be of
190 service to them in material things, in turn.

191

192 *B. Covenant with Israel*

193 The affirmation of the continuing covenant of God with Israel beyond the
194 emergence of Christianity is a bedrock element in the new relationship between the two

195 communities. It has as a principle corollary the renunciation of all claims of Christian
196 supersession of Israel, whether by greater fulfillment of that which Israel knew in part or
197 by replacement of that which Israel held in error. It seems therefore self-evident that the
198 relationship of Israel, and hence of Judaism, to the promised land is one that continues
199 without interruption as a component of the covenant, and nothing in the church's
200 experience either negates Israel's bond to the promised land or relegates it to a marginal
201 position. This is what stands at the core, for me, of the Christian necessity to make
202 sense of the land in theological terms. To do otherwise is to imply supersession of this
203 aspect of the covenant – and it is as central to the covenant as anything could be. For all
204 its ambiguity and difficulty, the ideal and the promise are that Israel will live its covenant
205 life in the promised land; for all its value and vitality, Israel as a diaspora community is
206 always incomplete because it is without the land. I will have more to say about how this
207 may work out and what it could mean today, and I remind you that this is meant as a
208 contribution to Christian theology, not an effort to explain to Jews their own
209 understanding of the covenant.

210 It is crucial to note, just as we establish this point about Israel and its promised
211 land, that the biblical witness includes affirmation that God has dealt similarly with other
212 nations, as well. Israel does not imagine that God has only brought Israel into a
213 promised land and that other nations and peoples have scattered haphazardly across the
214 globe. The tradition behind Amos 9:7 affirms that the Philistines and the Arameans, and
215 presumably the Ethiopians, have also been brought into their lands by God, just as Israel
216 has been. Within its prophetic setting, this certainly comes to counter arrogance on
217 Israel's part regarding the relationship with God, but the prophet could not use the

218 tradition credibly or effectively if it were not a recognized value that God's land-
219 promises extended beyond Israel to other peoples, as well.

220 From this it is reasonable to suggest that all that we learn in Israel's case is
221 applicable to other nations of the world, too. Just as land for Israel is gift, promise, and
222 challenge, so too for every nation it is so. Having made the move toward a universal
223 application of the dynamics embodied in God's covenant with Israel in regard to the
224 land, we cannot then vitiate the model and still uphold the counter-images it has
225 informed. Israel, too, must be granted participation in the dynamics of God's land-
226 covenanting, if those dynamics are to be applied in our world at all. For if the model for
227 those dynamics is undercut, then the model itself and any application it may have in our
228 world collapses utterly.

229 It is this affirmation of the continuity of God's land-covenanting with Israel that
230 guards against and counteracts any tendency toward supersession. For to move directly
231 to the universal scale of "all nations" without noting Israel's particular place and
232 dynamics supersedes God's covenant with Israel and replaces it with one grounded in
233 another vision, however noble. And to focus only on Israel and this land promised in
234 God's covenant, making it the centerpiece of an end-time hope and narrative from a
235 Christian mold, likewise supersedes God's covenant with Israel as it has continued in
236 history apart from Christian hope and ignores the role other lands might play in the
237 scenario based on Israel's character as a model for all. As with so many things, it is
238 Israel's particularity that becomes a touchstone for Christian faith, a litmus that signals to
239 the church its penchant for straying from the complexity of God's gracious, life-
240 sustaining ways into a simplistic formula for security and clarity and simplicity. And yet,

241 to say that the land is a theological issue for Christians, that Israel's particularity is a
242 litmus to signal our hubris, does not yet afford any direct political mandate, whatsoever.

243

244 *C. Realistic history and politics*

245 By now it may well be that my continuing reference to "Israel" is becoming
246 problematic – whether simply because of its grating repetitiousness, or because of its
247 clear, immediate referent in the nation-state that hosts us this week, or because of the
248 insistent ambiguity of the term as one that connotes land, people and state
249 simultaneously. That we face such an issue is one measure of the challenge that faces us
250 as we move towards a theology of the promised land. Do I mean this land, or don't I?
251 Does the promise attach to the state mechanisms that are currently in place in the land,
252 or doesn't it? If the land-promise bonds God with various peoples, is there a place
253 within this land for two peoples, or must each have its own land? When the scriptural
254 criticism and analysis and the theological affirmations are all complete, what will it say
255 about this land, these peoples? Whom does it help, and whom does it hurt? There are
256 real politics and real history to be reckoned with, after all.

257 It is rare in the Christian theological tradition for there to be just one, bright,
258 shining resolution to ethical issues – and I don't think that is only an affliction of my
259 Lutheran dialectical heritage. It was a Lutheran theologian who taught me, however, that
260 theology might best be thought of as a remote country road. Or rather, not the road
261 itself, but the guardrail protecting us from driving into the ditches on either side of the
262 road. Our theology, Lyman Lundeen said, thinking back to the farm roads in his native
263 Minnesota, sets out what the limits are. When we go beyond those limits, we lose touch
264 with something vital, something that grounds us, something essential to us a people of

265 faith. But within the lines, between the ditches, inside the guardrails, we have a great
266 deal of flexibility and freedom to organize the life of faith and to work out its ethical
267 particulars in response to the times and places where we find ourselves.

268 As I read and listen in this arena of land theology, what strikes me most is what
269 implicitly lies beyond the limits, in the ditches. For nearly everyone, it is death itself,
270 whether individual, collective, national, religious, physical, metaphorical – the theology
271 all gets worked out as a life and death exercise. And the death that threatens – the name
272 in the ditch that teaches me where to draw the line – is my own death: my own
273 annihilation, or maybe my whole family, or culture, or people – and any memory of it, as
274 well. So the reading I give to scripture, the narrative I relate about history, the
275 possibilities I am willing to entertain, the language I use for places and events and
276 movements and people and even God, are all chosen to draw the line against my own
277 extermination. As in any life and death struggle, every tool within reach becomes a
278 weapon, and we wield them even in theological exchanges.

279 There are realities behind this that cannot be denied – the realities of history and
280 felt present-day threat for everyone involved in the conflict. You who live here can tell
281 us better than I ever could, as you live with the realities day by day. And the ethical
282 choices will have to come, will have to be made, in the midst of those realities.

283 But what of our theology as we go about the task? Do not both Judaism and
284 Christianity carry traditions that set the life of the other higher than one's own? What if
285 we used our theology to draw the line against losing something else that is precious,
286 against losing the other. One cannot expect too much from any temporal arrangement,
287 any ethical solution, given our nature and the limits of goodness. But if we recognize
288 that what has all the participants up in arms, literally, and seizing even minor rhetorical

289 openings to avenge losses and insults long past as though they took place just this
290 morning, if we recognize this is the cold meeting point of mutual antagonisms, would it
291 be impossible to start by drawing the line that says, “you will not be destroyed?” This
292 need not be a zero-sum game, there can be enough for all – we affirm you and your
293 place in this neighborhood, and we will defend you and your place here against assault?
294 One need not reach a point of sharing mutual narratives and singing songs in common
295 but neither must one see every gain for the other as a loss for oneself. With the survival
296 issue addressed by the assurance that I will have your back and defend your interests, I
297 can offer you freedom from the death-grip on symbols and language and history that has
298 been needed to hang on against annihilation. Then respective memories and meanings
299 can be respected, if not shared, and a different road can open up ahead.

300 The issue of the promised land as symbol is a key element here, because there are
301 ditches that lie in the ways of both romanticizing and materializing. If the promised land
302 is wholly romanticized, idealized, we cease to deal with the real inhabitants and the real
303 resources and the real issues that confront all people in a world of limited resources, and
304 instead “hold on” and pray for the ultimate fulfillment of the ideal. If the promised land
305 is reduced to its material reality, however, only the actual real estate with its buildings and
306 wells and crops and barbed wire and the like, then there is no possibility for unclenching
307 the fist to seek even imperfect accommodation.

308 That is why I have insisted on saying “Israel” so consistently – because it
309 maintains the ambiguity of the symbol. It speaks of land and people and state in one
310 breath, acknowledging both the ideal of the gift and the reality of challenges not met.
311 For the promised land as symbol, embodying the history and heartache while also
312 opening to a different, promised fulfillment, affords the richness that can sustain

313 differing narratives and aspirations – as long as they do not threaten the other with
314 annihilation.

315

316 *D. Christian Theology of the Promised Land*

317 Finally the most that we can do as a Christian community is to develop our own
318 theology of the promised land in ways that are authentic and meaningful for us. We
319 cannot write Jewish theology or teach it, we cannot constructively judge it or credibly
320 propose revisions to it. Our theology of the promised land as we read our Bible is not a
321 Jewish theology of the promised land, and it cannot be. And yet, given our common
322 rootedness with Judaism in biblical Israel, we must speak of the promised land in two
323 modes: the model of Israel in its land and the counterimage of all other peoples,
324 including the Palestinian people, in their lands. These cannot be identical, or the
325 specificity of Israel loses its grounding function; yet neither one can finally take
326 precedence over the other, or the dignity of the counterimage is maligned. And our
327 theology must account for both.

328 In Christian theology, it seems to me, the category that best accounts for this
329 kind of relationship is that of sacrament, particularly as we have come to understand it in
330 the Eucharist. I do not suggest that the land is a new Christian sacrament, and I am
331 adequately familiar with other ideas of sacramentality applied to the land and/or to the
332 people Israel – indeed I have contributed one such idea elsewhere. It is not my aim here,
333 nor do we have time, to address the works of Marcel Dubois, Gregory Vall, Richard Lux,
334 and others, though some of my comments have obviously already addressed at least
335 some of Fr. Dubois' approach (i.e., romanticizing the land and the people in it). Rather,
336 I would like to conclude by suggesting the ways in which the category of sacrament

337 might be a helpful contribution to peace-building in this conflicted land. It is not to
338 invest this land with the heightened Christian spirituality and affect of a Christian
339 sacrament, nor to take the turn of Robert Wilken, now also seen in Marchandour and
340 Neuhaus and in Bishop Younan's writings, of focusing on the people rather than the
341 land. It is, rather, to suggest that Christians understand this land as a kind of Jewish
342 sacrament. Let me hasten to add that I do not expect that Jews will eagerly embrace this
343 language, but if the dynamics that inform it seem at all familiar, then we may have room
344 for fruitful ongoing dialogue and mutual edification.

345 One of the key characteristics of the sacrament is the specificity of its elements,
346 bread and wine, for the simple reason that this is what the biblical tradition records as
347 the original. So for the land, it is "this land," the land of Zion, that God has promised,
348 in reality and as symbol. And yet, like the sacrament, there is no specific recipe for the
349 bread or designation of the wine's vintage. (I recall that in Los Angeles when I lived
350 there the Roman Catholic archbishop had authorized 116 wines for Eucharistic service.)
351 So while one cannot say that it is this wine or that bread, specifically, one also knows that
352 it is bread and wine, and not something else. And while one may not yet be able to
353 designate on which side of a line a particular house or village or field will fall, one also
354 knows that it will be in this land, and not some other.

355 Furthermore, what is true in the sacramental elements becomes in a related way
356 true in all other bread and wine. Paul has already pointed us in this direction in 1
357 Corinthians with his concern about discerning the body of Christ, not only in the bread
358 and wine but equally so in the community of Corinth. Feasting on the sacrament implies
359 that all food has its purpose in the feasting of humanity, with enough for all. And so
360 with the land, there must be land for all, with the same political autonomy and national

361 dignity and developmental potential that accompanies Israel on its land. Israel as symbol
362 becomes the model for all lands and peoples, full well recognizing that Israel as state and
363 territory will often fall short of its own ideal, as will every land and state that chooses to
364 pursue the same ideal.

365 Thirdly, the sacrament of the altar is not intended only for one's own indulgence
366 and satisfaction, but comes with a calling and an empowerment. In it we are called into
367 service for the sake of the world; by it we are nourished for that very calling. So with the
368 land, which becomes for Israel the challenge point of living out its calling as God's
369 people of Torah, including the frequent reminder to take note of those in the land who
370 are not of Israel, the most frequent commandment in the five books of Moses.

371 These are things that we as Christians discern about Israel and its bond with the
372 land. But it is not our land, nor is it ours to determine how the Jewish community will
373 understand its own bond. Rather, with an understanding of this land as Israel's
374 sacrament, we recognize it as the land promised by God to Israel, not to us. Thereby we
375 learn both to honor God's promise and to learn from that promise what God's promise
376 is to us and to all people in relation to the lands in which we live. I daresay as an
377 American that a serious engagement with this theology of the promised land would have
378 profound repercussions in the American churches and American society as we might
379 consider its significance for our use of the land and our relationship to those in the land
380 who are not American or who were not seen as American while America grew. It also
381 could have interesting implications for those Christians who live here in Israel, looking at
382 it both as Israel's sacrament and as the counterimage that is their own land of residence.

383 Moreover, as I have suggested, to the degree that Jews recognize, in their relation
384 to the land, the dynamics that I have described above as characterizing the Christian

385 sacrament, there awaits us in the dialogue a compelling new chapter about land-promise
386 and life in the land that can be mutually edifying. And to the extent that our theology
387 leads us down the road to advocate in particular ways with all states about issues of
388 concern in their lands, so we would anticipate advocating with Israel just as we would
389 with all other states.

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391

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III. Conclusion

393 As I reach my conclusion I am well aware that this has been more essay than
394 examination of circumstances, more reflection than *Realpolitik*, more suggestion than
395 solution. In order to bring us to a basic theological model that may be constructive in
396 building peace, I have bypassed many detailed arguments both for my assertions and in
397 response to others'. In laying out principles, I have been sparing in my application of
398 them. In sketching the sacramental model, I have made elliptical reference to volumes
399 of theological development and deep warrens of historical and political complexity. All
400 these are now available to us to explore in greater depth, if the principles are clear and
401 the general line of development has been fair. I look forward to your own insights and
402 challenges, extensions and cautions as we move towards a critical, constructive theology
403 of the promised land. Thank you.