

Does the promise still hold? Israel and the land: A response to Gary Anderson

by [Donald E. Wagner](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

Gary Anderson rightly reminds us that Christians must be conscious of anti-Semitic traditions in Christian theology. I affirm the importance of this context and at the same time would highlight the need for a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as essential for the security of Israeli Jews and Palestinian Christians and Muslims. Both theological frameworks are necessary for a theology of the land, but Anderson fails to mention the latter one. This oversight tends to weaken the central role that Torah and justice play for those in the land, a matter that is inherent in the covenant itself.

Anderson argues that Romans contains “a full-throated affirmation of God’s promises to the Jews”—a point I affirm, but not without affirming an equal demand for Torah obedience, to which Anderson makes only two brief references. Walter Brueggemann, in *The Land*, points to such foundational theological principles as “God owns the land,” and Israel is a “steward” in the land and must simultaneously honor Yahweh and protect the neighbor. Brueggemann adds that “the land is filled with temptations” (covetousness, idolatry, injustice, neglect of the poor). “Land with Yahweh brings responsibilities. . . . The same land which is a gift freely given is a task sharply put.”

With Israel being the dominant power in the Holy Land, should not its obligations be underscored, including prohibitions against confiscating land and constructing exclusive Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem? These same Torah restraints can be applied against Palestinians, including a categorical rejection of suicide bombing.

Anderson points to Romans 11 as a basis for God’s unique affirmation of the Jewish people in the covenant, which is “irrevocable” (11:28-29). He correctly states that on

the basis of this text, there is no place for replacement theology (supersessionism). But at the same time he may be falling on the slippery theological slope of exclusivity, particularly as he invokes Uriel Simon. Simon sees Israel as having an exclusive, divine claim to the land (“Israel’s [claim] is of a supernatural order”). This perspective moves in the direction of a “divine land grant” with limited constraints on how one deals with the indigenous people already in the land.

Anderson sees in Romans support for the argument that the covenant with the Jewish people includes the land as an inheritance. Yes, the covenant with the Jews continues, but Paul never states in Romans that the land is part of the inheritance. Evangelical Christian New Testament scholar Gary Burge of Wheaton College notes that Paul’s education as a Pharisee taught him that the Jewish people had a divine claim to the land—which makes it even more instructive that Paul never mentions land as part of the covenant inheritance. Burge claims that Paul is pointing to a “new relationship” with Yahweh that has opened up as a result of the Christ event, wherein the mystery of God’s covenant with the Jews continues, with Christians being “grafted in.” Perhaps there is a theological opening here that could be expanded and help the three communities to transcend particular exclusive land claims and to recognize God as the land giver, realizing that the Holy Land in particular is God’s land and should reflect the presence of the one true God, and that men and women are God’s stewards (termed vice-regents in the Qur’an), whose primary responsibilities are to honor God and protect the neighbor.

[Gary A. Anderson's essay](#)

[Walter Brueggemann's response](#)

[Marlin Jeschke's response](#)

[Gary Anderson's reply](#)