

To restore a light unto the nations: Israel, Palestine, Scotland and the charter of the land

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Abstract

This paper extends but retains its original form as a verbal delivery to a conference, 'Land, Nature, Justice', convened by the solidarity group 'Highland-Palestine', at which the author shared a platform with the Palestinian natural historian, Professor Mazin Qumsiyeh of Bethlehem University. It compares the historical loss of biodiversity and culture (including linguistic) in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland with biblical prophetic exposition from the Holy Land. It treasures how, ranging from Gaelic bardic laments of the Highland Clearances to modern Scottish land reform, a biblically-inspired indigenous liberation theology has widened the aperture of imagination and strengthened political legitimacy. And it asks whether, in discipleship to the Jewish ethos of *tikkun olam*, the same theology might minister as 'a light to the nations' in such as Gaza too.



Good afternoon, friends.

I know that the sudden winter's snow has forced this event online, but I will proceed as if we are gathered together in this moment at Boat of Garten in the Scottish Highlands. We are honoured to be here with our



To restore a light unto the nations

distinguished Palestinian guests, Professor Mazin Qumsiyeh and his wife Jessie Chang, who co-founded the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability at Bethlehem University.

Normally I speak extemporaneously, but for precision today I will speak from a prepared text.¹ Jessie and Mazin are attached to a Catholic university. They live in what is often called the Holy Land. That is, admittedly, a contested term that I will use both with and without irony, loosely to cover Israel and Palestine from between the River Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. I understand that they are Christian. It surprises many that when modern Israel was established in 1948 following UN Resolution 181 in 1947, about 10% of Palestinians living there were Christian. Today, that figure has collapsed to a remnant of between one and two per cent.²

I have been invited to speak on ‘Land, Nature, Justice’ – to themes that connect Scotland, Palestine and Israel, and Mazin’s and Jessie’s work around ecological renewal. I will do so through a reading of Scottish Highland history and Hebrew theology, which is to say, the Jewish scriptures. These have framed and condition Israel’s sense of having a land charter. They carry ethical imperatives, and as I will indicate, they have also conditioned our land reform history here in Scotland.

Land theology is central to the Hebrew tradition’s prophetic framing of its peoplehood and nationhood. According to the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ‘The land theme is so ubiquitous that it may have greater claim to be the central motif in the Old Testament than any other, including “covenant”’.³ Within that framing (and this is crucial to my argument today) Israel is to be ‘a light unto the nations’; or as other translations have it, ‘to the gentiles’ (Isaiah 42:6; cf. Isaiah 56:1–8 and Luke 2:32).⁴ That sets a moral bar that is at least equal to, if not higher

¹ Event held 23-XI-2024: all talks are on Highland-Palestine’s YouTube portal: *Land, Nature, Justice: What Palestine and the Scottish Highlands can learn from each other*, <https://bit.ly/H-P-Justice>. See also <https://highland-palestine.com/>.

² “Palestinian Christians”, *PalestinePortal.org*, <https://bit.ly/3WM9eD8>.

³ W. Janzen, “Land”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. IV (Doubleday, 1992), 143–54, at 146.

⁴ Most translations have ‘to’, ‘for’ or ‘of’ the nations or the gentiles. Colloquially, ‘unto’ is often used for rhetorical effect, as I did here for verbal delivery. See David S. Ariel, “Chosen People: Some Modern Views”, *My Jewish Learning* blog, undated, <https://tinyurl.com/4wcannwh>. For the same rhetorical

than, any other nation. Indeed, should Benjamin Netanyahu appear before the International Criminal Court (ICC) following his arrest warrant issued this past week, his teeth might be set on edge if seated in The Hague before a bench made up of Hebrew prophets such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel or Zephaniah.

That said, I am mindful of the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' uplifting description of a higher social and ecological vision and mission, that is summed up in the Hebrew expression: *tikkun olam*, 'to heal a fractured world'. It is, as he explains in the eponymous book, 'a vision of cosmic catastrophe progressively healed by individual deeds which, though they seem small and local, "mend the world"'.⁵

May that be our guiding star today.



From Highland Clearances to Nakba

I want to start 'small and local' with my own positioning, as if right here from Boat of Garten. It is not irrelevant to Highland-Palestine, and not in the least atypical of Scottish people.

My grandfather on my father's side was born illegitimately, as they'd then say, in 1880, to Catherine Grant Gordon Alexander, the 21-year-old daughter of the crofter-postman of Ardcloch and Glenferness on the River Findhorn. That is just twenty miles straight north from where we meet today. It seems she was in domestic service, and Grandpa's birth certificate leaves his biological father's name blank. My mother told me it was Fraser and that he was the gamekeeper (or head ghillie) of a 'Big house'. The child was subsequently adopted. In corroboration, the 1881 census has Grandpa, a baby of just nine months, listed as a 'boarder' with his mother's aunt in Edinburgh, Annie McIntosh. Fraser was his surname, changed when she adopted him soon after.

Notice how that cameo is framed by landed power; perhaps too, by gendered power whereby the woman took the greater part of shame and pain. Notice, also, how Grandpa, like so many of his compatriots in

reasons, I use a variety of Bible translations; most often the NRSV for scholarship or the KJV for its poetry.

⁵ Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (Continuum, 2005), 75.

To restore a light unto the nations

today's world, became detached from the fulness of his Gaelic culture, whether also Gaelic-speaking or not.

As for Catherine, the 1881 census lists her back up north as a domestic servant and 'nurse' (or nanny) to a family with two small daughters at a certain Blervie House, just south of Forres. One can only wonder how the poor lassie felt. She died at the age of twenty-five from 'galloping consumption' in 1884. Grandpa was just three, and late in life wrote that his natural father (Fraser, presumably) died around the same time. Tuberculosis (or 'consumption') was a disease of poverty, and Grandpa himself had macrocephaly, suggestive of childhood rickets. Such a social sketch is hardly ancient history, and Catherine's resting place remains clearly marked in the old Forres cemetery on Cluny Hill, thirty miles straight north from where we meet today.

In my mind, that year of her passing, 1884, is mainly associated with the Napier Commission of Inquiry into the condition of Highland crofters; that is to say, of tenant smallholders. And if you swing round fifty miles north-west of here, you'll come to my paternal grandmother's people on her mother's side, the MacLennans of Strathconon. Here we look straight in the eyes of the Highland Clearances, the colonising process by which, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the peasantry, including my twice-great-grandfather's immediate forebears, were evicted from their ancestral lands: usually first for sheep ranching, later to make way for vast sporting estates of salmon, deer and grouse.

In *A History of the Working Classes in Scotland*, the onetime Secretary of State for Scotland Tom Johnston recounts:

The evictions of the Clan M'Lennan from Strathconan by the Balfour trustees were carried out in a most barbarous manner, and to this day the spot is shewn where the dispossessed men and women crouched together, praying rather for a merciful death than that they should be driven farther from the strath of their birth. When the father of the late leader of the Conservative party fell heir to the estates [...] he directed prompt eviction of another twenty-seven families, and today a parish, which in 1831 had a population of 2,023, carries only 445 people, mostly ghillies and

their dependants on a London brewer's hundred square-mile deer forest.⁶

That said 'late leader' was Arthur Balfour, British prime minister from 1902 to 1905. Later, in 1917 as foreign secretary to Lloyd George's government, he signed the Balfour Declaration for '[...] the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people'. This, 'being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine [...].'

It would have been nice had the Balfours applied the same regard to their Highlands holding. As the *Nakba* or ethnic cleansing of indigenous Palestinians from Israel that followed from 1947 showed, scant regard was accorded in the Holy Land either.

I recall, during the first Gulf War in 1991, meeting with the Iranian scholar Reza Sabri-Tabrizi. He worked just a few doors along in Buccleuch Place from where I taught at the Centre for Human Ecology, then in Edinburgh University. I'd gone to discuss *GulfWatch*, a daily news bulletin of the war that I was curating with Alastair Hulbert of Scottish Churches' Action for World Development. Drawing on the fledgling internet, we set out to circumvent the British government's stated option of deploying media censorship including news of 'opposition to the war'.⁷ Sanctioned by, thus shielded by and initially intended for Scottish church leaders, it acquired a worldwide readership through GreenNet online bulletin boards and email newsgroup circulation.

Devastated at where the war would leave the Middle East, Sabri-Tabrizi spoke of his love of Scotland, his respect for its widespread solidarity for reconciliation in Israel-Palestine (as was the most widely used term), and the depth of friendship and acceptance that he had found here. 'You see,' he said, with a nod to the Highland Clearances in words that echo through the chambers of my mind, 'we are looking at a common history.'

⁶ Thomas Johnston, *The History of the Working Classes in Scotland*, 2nd edition (Forward, n.d.), 203. (M' for Mac and Strathconan are antiquated usages).

⁷ Alastair Hulbert and Alastair McIntosh, "The GulfWatch Papers", *Edinburgh Review* 87 (1992): 15–71, <https://bit.ly/4gxFUbc>.



Ecological and linguistic psychohistory of Highland Clearances

Accounts abound of the cultural trauma of Scotland's mass evictions from the land. For example, the eighteenth-century North Uist bard, Iain MacCodrum:

Look around you
and see the nobility
without pity to poor folk,
without kindness to friends;
they are of the opinion
that you do not belong to the soil,
and though they have left you destitute
they cannot see it as a loss.⁸

These people were stripped of what the Gaelic community calls their *dùthchas*, that is to say, their identity with the land both in utilitarian respects, and to mythic and spiritual levels of 'deep ecology' in the psyche. With it went a weakening or loss of their *dualchas*, an overlapping term that refers more to their social, cultural and intergenerational family connections.⁹ As both their *dùthchas* and *dualchas* – placehood and peoplehood – became diminished, the poets testify that ecological decline followed.

From Ireland, under similar colonising circumstances, Daniel Corkery's study of eighteenth-century verse cites a Killarney bard who sorrowed: 'Woe, your woods withering away' (*Is dith creach bhur gcoillte ar feochadh*). Thus, concludes Corkery: the downfall of indigenous Gaelic society, and 'the downfall of the woods – these two went together in their verses.'¹⁰

⁸ James Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands* (Birlinn, 2014), 15, with my 'Foreword' to the 2014 edition, xv–xxxix, <https://bit.ly/3TaGFOj>.

⁹ *Dualchas*, in Lewis pronounced like 'dooal-chh-as', the 'chh' as in 'loch' or the guttural Jewish name Chaim; *dùthchas*, like 'doo-chh-as': pers. com. Agnes Rennie, Galson, verbal 2023, email 15-XII-24.

¹⁰ Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (Gill and MacMillan, 1967), 35–36.



To restore a light unto the nations

In Scottish Gaelic poetry, it is common for the land itself (or landscape features) to be addressed as if personified. A mid-nineteenth century composition by Donald Mackinnon decries the ecocide brought upon the Morvern peninsula by vast flocks of white-faced Lowland sheep belonging to the Ardtornish landowner, a London distiller by the name of Octavius Smith:

Green Morvern of the Hills [...]
There was a time
When great were your castles, where kings could be quartered
Though wretched today the rabble
Who are strutting about in their place. [...]

They used to call you the lands of woods
And there was a time when you deserved it
Though now your thickets have been stripped bare
By the ones with the white faces.¹¹

As psychohistory (psychological history), such experience impacts upon both the outer and the inner lives of those affected, be they left behind or leaving under force of eviction or related economic constriction. My own family were incomers in 1960 to Leurbost in North Lochs, Isle of Lewis, albeit with some prior family island connections. It was not uncommon to hear it said around dad's surgery of those who were hard of hearing or had respiratory trouble, 'He was in the shipyards.' The Leurbost bard, Murdo MacLeod (1837–1914), adds an inner dimension to such outer diagnosis in his celebrated song, *Eilean an Fhraoich*, 'Isle of the Heather':¹²

Dear isle of all others, a thousand times blest,
That bountiful nature has stored with its best,
'Tis there my devotion shall be till I die,
And Gaelic be spoken till ocean run dry. [...]

¹¹ Iain Thornber, "Favourite Old Signature Songs", *The Oban Times* (12 March 2020), 18–19, <https://bit.ly/4iDUO1t>.

¹² Murdo MacLeod, *Bardachd Mhurchaidh A' Cheisdeir Laoidhean Agus Orain: Songs and Hymns by Murdo MacLeod (the Lewis Bard)* (Darien Press, 1962), 3–4, selected verses.

To restore a light unto the nations

Oh! fain 'mid the haunts of my boyhood I'd roam,
A-scaling the rocks to the birds' hidden home;
'Twas the thick gloom of Glasgow my happiness stole,
For the din of her hammers has deafened my soul.

We can glimpse here concerns ecological, psychological, spiritual and linguistic. It is common for the poets to depict the coloniser's tongue as rude, in contrast to Gaelic as 'the language of Eden'.¹³ Nature also mourns, as it were, this towering Babylonic Fall. In Gilleasbuig MacIain's bardic declamation, we're shown the bens (or mountains) and all that they survey grieving with the remnant indigenous people at the linguistic suppressive measures of the Anglicising 1872 Education Act: here, with the opening verse first in Gaelic, then a selection from Michael Newton's translation.¹⁴

*Ochan nan och! an caochladh truagh / 'S a' Gàidhealtachd thig
's gach taobh mun cuairt / Ma théid a cànan chaoin 'na suain /
Le cion an t-sluaigh a labhras i!*

Alas and alas! What terrible change could come into the Gàidhealtachd from all sides if its delightful language is laid to rest because of the lack of people who speak it!

O inhabitants of the glens and peaks, the Lowland tongue can't pronounce the names for things and places in our homeland: it can't understand or recognise them!

¹³ The Gaelic mythological origins of this are discussed (p. 61) in my "Saint Andrew: Non-violence and National Identity", *Theology in Scotland*, VII:1 (2000), 55–70, <https://bit.ly/St-Andrew>. Even into my days our primary school class was told to be proud of our Gaelic heritage, but the other children were urged to emulate the three of us (out of nineteen) who were fluent in English. Older islanders still tell of being lashed with the two- or three-fingered leather strap or 'tawse' for speaking in their mother tongue. It was said that 'the English' was necessary if you were 'to get on and get out', i.e., to be able to leave the island and, thereby, 'succeed' in life.

¹⁴ Michael Newton, *Warriors of the Word: The World of the Scottish Highlanders* (Birlinn, 2009), 301–03. Commentary also in Ruairidh Maclean (MacIlleathain), *Ecosystem Services and Gaelic: A Scoping Exercise*, Research Report No. 1230 (NatureScot, 2021), 48–53, <https://bit.ly/3ORiemnn>.



To restore a light unto the nations

It is not surprising that jagged Ben-y-Gloe has a broken heart and that she keens sadly, since she cannot hear the sweet, gentle language of her beloved Atholl-folk.

And Ben Lawers will be incensed – she will be angry at the educational authorities since they deceived people treacherously, putting them into English chains.

Every craig, precipice, peak, and cliff, they will raise a wailing, sad chorus in their sorrow because the tongue of the homeland perished.

This is a biblical quality of lamentation; even, a traumatic inversion of the buoyant animism of Isaiah 55:12, KJV, whereby: '[...] the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.'

On which tenor, around the turn of the millennium, a Free Presbyterian retired policeman and lobster fisherman, the late Norman MacLeod of Bridge House in South Harris, put it to me that Exodus 20:12 should be understood as honouring your 'father and mother' *as your heritage in the land*.¹⁵ Such liberating exegesis invites a double translation of the Mosaic commandment; one that expresses an indigenous Hebrew and Gaelic human ecology: 'Honour your *dualchas* that your days may be long in the *dùthchas* which the Lord your God is giving you.'

At which point, let us pivot to the Holy Land.



Israel's land charter

Some peoples have lived in their lands since time immemorable. Others claim a more recent right of charter: and so, in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, the Holy Land is *covenanted* to a migrant, Abraham of Ur. Ur was a Mesopotamian city in what, today, would be southern Iraq. Abraham became the founding patriarch of all three 'Abrahamic faiths': Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Genesis has God tell him: 'I will give to

¹⁵ Alastair McIntosh, *Island Spirituality: Spiritual Values of Lewis and Harris* (Islands Book Trust, 2013), 148, <https://bit.ly/Island-Spirituality>.



you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan [...] and I will be their God' (Genesis 17:8, NRSV [cf. 15:18–21]).

Note Abraham's 'alien' status. Note too, 'and I will be their God'. Note also that, elsewhere, God remains the feudal superior. Ultimately the land is loaned, not owned in perpetuity: 'for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me', sayeth the Lord in Leviticus (25:23, KJV). Even that is hedged with periodic redistribution every fiftieth year – the Jubilee, or Acceptable Year of the Lord – to re-level the social inequalities that inevitably grow in human hands, and this ethos gets carried forward to the Christian Bible as the bottom line of Christ's opening mission statement in Luke's gospel (4:19).

Why does God retain superiority? The answer frames the very tenet of Israel's claim to tenure. Three times, Genesis states the divine intention that 'all the nations [or families] of the earth shall be blessed' (12:3, 18:18, 26:4, KJV). *All the nations*. This is not just a deal for Abraham and his cronies. The prophets consistently show that the warp woven to the weft of God's blessing is the 'preferential option' for what the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff calls, 'the Quartet of the Vulnerable'.¹⁶ Namely:

1. The widow (or more generally, the bereaved)
2. The orphan (or the bereft)
3. The alien (or 'foreigner' as the 'stranger in your midst', devoid of social standing)
4. And the poor (both as destitution, and poverty of spirit).¹⁷

But right from the outset the covenant goes wrong. God-granted human freedom is abused. The 'reset' button had already once been pressed with Noah's flood. Why so? Substantially, because 'the earth was filled with violence' (Genesis 6:11, NRSV). Next, Sodom and Gomorrah: twin cities rained upon with fire and brimstone. Was it because their men had threatened to rape angelic guests? Such a narrow reading might suit some. Ezekiel offers a more generally challenging

¹⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 75–76, my capitalisation, <https://tinyurl.com/mryvxjpf>.

¹⁷ Within Christianity, compare Luke 6:20 with Matthew 5:3.

To restore a light unto the nations

explanation. Their citizens had become ‘arrogant, overfed, and complacent; they did not help the poor and needy’ (Ezekiel 16:49, BSB). There we see the Quartet of the Vulnerable kicking in.

But what’s up with this supposed God of love discharging terrible punishments? Does God ordain crippling violence? Or are such holocaustic texts, often exaggerated beyond historical and archaeological likelihood, to be read more metaphorically than literally, more Mythos than Logos?¹⁸ Rather than a literal Six Days of Creation, Garden of Eden, Noah’s Ark, Tower of Babel, or Great Balls of Fire, might such spiritual teaching stories reveal an evolving human understanding of God, both conditioned by and speaking to the capacity of the times and of the present reader? Scripture itself nudges us so. Consider the imagery of Ezekiel’s lamentation over the King of Tyre (28:11–20, NRSV).

You were in Eden, the garden of God [...]
[But] In the abundance of your trade you were filled with
violence [...]
You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendour [...]
So I brought out fire from within you; [...]
and I turned you to ashes on the earth [...]
All who know you among the peoples
are appalled at you;
you have come to a dreadful end [...]

Explicitly here, the fire ‘brought out’ was of their own avarice. God is not the Great Cosmic Health & Safety Officer. God doesn’t coddle us in cotton wool. Rather, God permits free choice and wrong turnings. True love must be free love. Therefore, Deuteronomy (30:19, NRSV):

I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose
life so that you and your descendants may live.

And as Renton riffs in Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*:¹⁹

¹⁸ Cf. Origen, *On First Principles: A Reader’s Edition*, trans. John Behr (Oxford University Press, 2019), 4.2.4–9; 4.3.1: 252–64.

¹⁹ *Trainspotting*, directed by Danny Boyle, screenplay by John Hodge (adapted from the book by Irvine Welsh), 1996. (Ergo, ‘... but deliver us from evil’).

To restore a light unto the nations

Choose life. [...] I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?



Liberation theology

This, then, is liberation theology. Liberation theology is *theology that liberates theology to liberate*. All theology should liberate. To specify as 'liberation', is necessary only where theologies, and their corresponding institutions of religion, fall short of serving the spiritual life in community one with another. Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru summed it up:²⁰

To liberate = to give life

In its allusion to Deuteronomy, *Trainspotting* mainlines into ancient history, and cold-turkeys into current affairs. As contextual theology, it speaks in archetypal truths from the context of its time and to the contexts our times.

In his Drummond Lectures in Stirling, 1995, Gutiérrez emphasised such liberation theology as '*doing theology*'.²¹ Where is God? God is where the suffering is: both with the Israeli massacred and hostages, and with the Palestinian bombed. Like Sabeel, the Jerusalem-based Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, God is found with 'the daily lives of those who suffer under occupation, violence, injustice, and discrimination'.²²

To the Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann, the prophets were firstly (and remain) 'poets of enormous freedom, courage, and imagination', who assumed a 'pastoral responsibility'. Mastering the power of living metaphor, they communicate a freedom to read scripture *imaginatively*: to '*enter into exile, to be in exile, and depart out of exile*'.²³

The Book of Jonah is one example of such liberation out of lostness. So, too, has been the pattern and example of Germany's post-war

²⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, revised edition (SCM, 1988), xxxvii, cf. John 10:10.

²¹ *The Drummond Lectures* (University of Stirling: 1995), MP3 audio files, <https://bit.ly/Gutierrez-Scot>.

²² Sabeel, "Mission", <https://sabeel.org/>.

²³ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Fortress, 1986), 1–7.



confessional processing of the Holocaust. For as the Hindu-Christian Panikkar reminds us, ‘only forgiveness [...] breaks the law of karma.’²⁴ Only grace-given forgiveness, breaks the knock-on effects of an eye-for-an-eye. This is ‘the real Easter’, said Paulo Freire of Brazil. We hunger and thirst for the rebirth of ‘righteousness’, which is to say, cosmic justice, because, he continues, ‘the old Easter of rhetoric is dead’ with ‘no hope of resurrection’. Instead, ‘I can only experience rebirth at the side of the oppressed by being born again, with them, in the process of liberation’.²⁵

None have rebuked Israel more trenchantly than its own prophets. That is the greatness of the Jewish faith. The prophets pointed to an opening of the way, an opening whereby ‘He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’ (Micah 6:8, NRSV). For those so moved, this too is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ of Christ.



Ecopsychology of the prophets

If we forget that the *dùthchas* (placehood) of the land is God’s blessing, if in pursuit thereof we neglect what Dorothy Day championed as ‘the Works of Mercy’,²⁶ then the outlook for our *dualchas* (peoplehood) is bleak. Outer ecological collapse and inner psychological collapse mirror one another. The prophets are incisive. With a bleak nod to biodiversity indicators, Isaiah warns (10:17–19, NRSV):

The light of Israel will become a fire,
and his Holy One a flame,
and it will burn and devour [...]
The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land [...]
The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few
that a child can write them down.

²⁴ Raimon Panikkar, “Nine Sutras on Peace”, *Interculture* 24, no. 1 (1991): 56, <https://bit.ly/3wASLF5>.

²⁵ Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education* (Macmillan, 1985), 122–23. Freire is better known in Scotland for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin, 1972) and his 1980s–90s visits to Dundee and Edinburgh to share his principles of popular education.

²⁶ Dorothy Day, “Doing the Works of Mercy” (Plough, 2023 blog), <https://tinyurl.com/4kxku2at>.



To restore a light unto the nations

He continues, in the bardic register of apocalyptic declamation (24:4–13, NRSV):

The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed laws,
violated the statutes, [and]
broken the everlasting covenant.

Such is what comes to pass if we make our ‘God’ a political ideology, one that sanctions callousness, extortion and the ‘cracked cisterns’ of consumerism that ‘can hold no water’ (Jeremiah 2:13, NRSV). Another prophet, Samuel, saw it coming. The Israelites wanted a king (1 Samuel 8, MOT).²⁷

‘Choose me!’ said God.

‘No!’ shouted the people. ‘We want to be like all the other nations. We want a king to lead us out and fight our battles!’

‘Very well,’ said God, exasperated. ‘Have your human king: but he will take your best fields and give them to his hangers-on, and your young men to be his soldiers, and your daughters to be perfumers, cooks and bakers.’

Women have been trying to undo the damage ever since.



Honouring the othered

If we accept the view of most non-Arabic and non-Islamic members of the UN that Israel has a right to exist, what then of the perceived ‘aliens’, foreigners, or strangers in a nation’s midst? These are the Quartet of the Vulnerable most likely to be ‘othered’. This goes not just for Israel, but also for the UK, being constitutionally framed within a Judeo-Christian construct. It might also apply to Muslim states: for the Qur’an presents

²⁷ MOT – My Own Translation (abridged, I’ve based it on the NRSV).



To restore a light unto the nations

itself as ‘in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety.’²⁸

Leviticus exhorts the Israelites to remember their time of slavery in Egypt (19:34, NRSV):

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

And then the Psalms, taking care not to confuse ‘the Lord’ (as the Ground of Being) with the landlord (146:9, NRSV):

The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

And then Jeremiah, whose Jeremiads lambast the Israelites with a biting conditionality (7:5–7, NRSV):

For if you truly amend your ways [...] if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.

And then Ezekiel’s conclusion, ramping up the ethical bar still higher. To assure the next generation of its place in the community, *equal* land and citizenship rights are to be granted to those incomers who have children (47:22, NLT):

[You shall] distribute the land as an allotment for yourselves and for the foreigners who have joined you and are raising their families among you. They will be like native-born Israelites to you and will receive an allotment among the tribes.

²⁸ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, trans. *The Holy Qur’an* (Islamic Education Centre, 1946), Surah V:51 (V:48 in other numbering systems).

For as the Gaelic proverbs have it, ‘Blood to the twentieth, fostership to the hundredth degree.’ Or, ‘The bonds of milk (nurture) are stronger than the bonds of blood (nature).’ Notably, Jesus could only answer to the prophecy that the Jewish Messiah would be born unto the house of David because Joseph, who was of that lineage, adopted him.

Spiritually, a person belongs to a community of place inasmuch as they are willing to cherish, and be cherished, by this place and its peoples. Ultimately, ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek’ (Galatians 2:28, KJV), and by extension, neither Jew nor Palestinian: for the narratorial arc bends towards what Martin Luther King fostered as ‘the beloved community’.²⁹ Therefore, ‘Thy kingdom come’; or to contextualise that for today, ‘Thy *community* come’. And note the plurality of the Lord’s Prayer. It is ‘give us ...’, ‘forgive us ...’, and not a prosperity gospel that wallows in a personal salvation of the ‘me’ or ‘my’ (Matthew 6:9–13). This is the ‘communion’ that, in mysticism, means to be participants in, or ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4, KJV). As the South Korean liberation theologian Chung Hyun Kyung reminds us: ‘Asian women view God not as an individual but as a community.’³⁰



A word from the Rabbi

Within the above framing from both the ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Testaments, how Israelis, Palestinians, or any other might treat one another is the acid test of their legitimacy. Therefore, we might ask not just the security question – *Can Israelis feel safe?* – but – *Can Palestinians feel and function ‘like native-born’?* Perhaps Ezekiel could pop that question to Benjamin Netanyahu at the ICC. At the same time, and lest I risk sidestepping ‘Christian’ culpability, let me place on record a communication with the late Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of the now-defunct but once-pivotal progressive Jewish magazine, *Tikkun*.³¹ In a personal email of 15 November 2016, he expressed his grief and anger at:

²⁹ The King Centre, “The King Philosophy – Nonviolence365®” (The King Centre, undated blog), <https://tinyurl.com/4tpphfs>.

³⁰ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology* (Orbis, 1990), 48.

³¹ Tikkun archives, <https://www.tikkun.org/archives/>.



[...] the Christian tradition for not teaching its adherents how the ways that the New Testament represents Jews led to a long history of murder, rape, expulsions and finally genocide, which then culminated in distorting Jewish consciousness so badly that now the Jews become oppressors to Palestinians.

To accept his point renders Ezekiel's hypothetical question to Netanyahu at the ICC a challenge to many, not least to Britain as the nation that stands in the lineage of the 'Balfourian manner'. Through its offshoot into Christian apotheosis, the Hebrew tradition invites all to participation in that 'light unto the nations'. Thereby, 'my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations' (Isaiah 56:6–8, NIV). As Rabbi Lerner wrote on *Tikkun's* website when publishing some remarks that I had sent him: a 'New Bottom Line' of 'radical amazement at the grandeur and preciousness of every human being and all of Nature' can come about 'only if we militantly pursue a society based on love'.³²

Such is the political theology that underlies the realisation of a 'holy land'.



Healing of the nations

When James Hunter published *The Making of the Crofting Community* in 1976, he took for an epigraph Isaiah 5:8 from the Gaelic Bible. In the English (KJV): 'Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place [...]'. A decade later Professor Donald Meek, expanding on Hunter, would show that nineteenth-century crofter land rights activists had drawn vision and legitimacy to a striking degree from 'the development of a Highland theology of liberation'.³³ This has rolled on, albeit more subtly, even into the current century.³⁴

³² Michael Lerner, "Meet Violence with Love", *Tikkun* blog (4 February 2015), <https://www.tikkun.org/meet-violence-with-love/>.

³³ Donald E. Meek, "'The Land Question Answered from the Bible'; The Land Issue and the Development of a Highland Theology of Liberation", *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 103, no. 2 (1987): 84–89.

³⁴ Rutger Henneman and Alastair McIntosh, "The Political Theology of Modern Scottish Land Reform", *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 3, no.3 (2009): 340–75, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jsmc.v3i3.340>.



To restore a light unto the nations

In closing my address, let me culminate with how Ezekiel arrived at his remarkable vision of a restored inclusive, just and life-giving society. Earlier in the chapter cited above, the prophet had a mighty vision. He saw a swelling stream flow from underneath the threshold of the temple: ‘Wherever the river goes every living creature that swarms will live.’ In this rapture of biodiversity restored, trees grow on both sides of the banks, of which ‘their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing’ (Ezekiel 47:1–12, NRSV). They grow on *both* sides, not just our own side! The Christian scriptures extend this imagery. In their final chapter, Saint John tells that ‘the leaves of the tree are for *the healing of the nations*’ (Revelation 22:2, NRSV, my emphasis).

Cut to earlier this week, and I was in conference with Maria Latumahina of West Papua Province, Indonesia. We were working on community capacity-building.³⁵ One of the online sessions was with Megan MacInnes, a former Land Commissioner to the Scottish Government and a board member of Community Land Scotland.³⁶ Megan shared from her experience where Scotland now has some 500 community land trusts, with local residents democratically accountable unto themselves controlling very nearly 3% of the nation’s 19 million acres. Maria’s colleagues quizzed Megan as to what sustains their *vision, motivation and cohesion*. She spoke of the importance of the rule of law for community landholding, of revenue-generating assets, of volunteer willingness and capacity, and of the imperative of *creating space* to think and act *for the community*, and not just for ourselves in survival mode as individuals. It made me wonder: ‘Might *space* and *prayer* converge?’

West Papua consists of animist and Christian communities, with some Muslim presence. After our Zoom call was over, Maria elaborated on Ezekiel’s image. She exclaimed: ‘Water is a cycle! It flows out, but evaporates and cycles back. Only if we face the temple where it comes from can it keep on flowing!’ She went on to share how her Muslim colleagues in Indonesia are very worried about Palestine, and I reflected on how, in a public meeting at the GalGael Trust in Glasgow, she had got up and said: ‘It’s not enough just to shout about Palestine. I want to see what you are doing for social justice, *right here in Glasgow!*’

³⁵ Training for Transformation (TFT) Papua, <https://papatransformation.org/>.

³⁶ Community Land Scotland, <https://www.communitylandscotland.org.uk/about-us/our-board/>.



Blessed are the *gentle strong*

This is what it means to ‘face the temple’, and to do so in the ‘sacrament of the present moment’ *right here* and now. To face the temple is to face the inner wellspring, the source of healing grace, that perhaps shockingly renews and sustains our *vision, motivation and cohesion*. This was, as we saw earlier, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ vision ‘of cosmic catastrophe progressively healed by individual deeds which, though they seem small and local, “mend the world”’. This, flowing out as it does into *The Waste Land*, in which poem T. S. Eliot riffs on Isaiah 38:1 to King Hezekiah, and asks: ‘Shall I at least set my lands in order?’³⁷ This is ‘a new thing’ happening (Isaiah 43:19, KJV), if as communities and nations (as communities writ large) we will but *re-member* that which has been dismembered, *re-vision* that which gives life, and *re-claim* that which it takes to make our rebirth, our resurrection, our ‘Easter’ real.

Khawla Badwan is a Palestinian refugee poet who has collaborated in *Keep Telling of Gaza* with Alison Phipps, the UNESCO professor of refugee integration at Glasgow University. Khawla’s re-visioning is:³⁸

To love the land,
Even when it’s burnt.
To love freedom,
Even when it looks impossible.
To love justice,
Even when it’s far away.
To love the old house,
Even when it’s just rubble....
Such is to practice love.
In a loveless world,
Daily.

And so it is, far from that Highland spot where Balfour’s MacLennan tenants prayed for a merciful death, can we find new life in heeding higher registers of the prophetic call? With such as Khwala, Alison and

³⁷ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Michael North (W. W. Norton, 2001), 19, line 425.

³⁸ Khawla Badwan and Alison Phipps, “Radical Love”, *Keep Telling of Gaza* (Sídhe Press, 2024), 83, <https://bit.ly/Tell-Gaza>.



Maria, and the organisers of today's event with Highland-Palestine,³⁹ can we beat swords into ploughshares, so that 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore'? (Micah 4:3; Isaiah 2:4, KJV)

Whether as Jews, Christians, Muslims or otherwise, do we have any less of a mandate than to know the land, ultimately, as belonging to God 'who has made for you the Earth like a carpet spread out' (Qur'an, XX:53, Yusuf Ali)? Do we have any less of a mandate than to accept 'all people who on earth do dwell' as equals one to another; equally 'strangers and sojourners' whose legitimacy hinges mutually on walking paths of righteousness as right relationship?

A Scottish government project and a corresponding Church of Scotland report of 2011 was titled *One Scotland, Many Cultures*.⁴⁰ Wherever we come down in the world, is it beyond our visionary capacity to evolve a shared sense of peoplehood and polity, one that respects the land – all land – as Holy Land, where 'blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5, KJV)? That beatitude's point of departure in Psalms 37:11, 22 (NRSV cf. KJV) explicitly points to the earth as *land* for the oppressed.⁴¹ Moreover, the Greek translated 'meek' suggests a God-given restrained strength: thus might we say, *blessed are the gentle strong*.⁴²

Lest we forget, such is the *tikkun olam* that heals a fractured world. We can but dig from where we stand. For with Adrienne Rich in *The Dream of a Common Language*: 'I am choosing / not to suffer uselessly'.⁴³

³⁹ Thanks especially to Sarah Hobbs, Mairi McFadyen, Joanna Rodgers and Viktoria Stelikou of Highland-Palestine. Thanks also to Kenneth Macleod of Sheshader, a Hebridean student at the Highland Theological College, and Professor Phipps for casting their eyes over this text.

⁴⁰ Church of Scotland, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3Q53voc> & <https://bit.ly/42IcN14>.

⁴¹ W. Domeris, "Meek or oppressed? Reading Matthew 5:5 in context", *Acta Theologia*, Suppl. 23 (2016): 131–49, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v23i1S.7>.

⁴² Friedrich Hauck and Seigfried Schulz, "Παῦς, Παῦτης", in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Ronald E. Pitkin; ET trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (W. B. Eerdmans, 1964–1976), Vol. 6: 645–51.

⁴³ Adrienne Rich, "Splittings", *The Dream of a Common Language* (W. W. Norton, 1978), 10–11.