

Fourth Pastoral Letter
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"Reading the Bible Today In the Land of the Bible "

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"For He is our peace; in His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... that He might create in Himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body" (Eph 2:14-16).

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INTRODUCTION

To our diocesan priests,

to all men and women religious,

and to all our faithful.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. "Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord" (11 Tim 1:2).

A new hope has just been born in the history of our country, opening new perspectives for peace and reconciliation between our two peoples, Jewish and Palestinian, and with all the Arab world. The pursuit for justice will continue, but from now on it will be through collaboration and no longer through confrontation. For that we give thanks to God and we invite you to share, through your prayers, your presence and your action, in any initiative which aims to strengthen this peace and reconciliation, based on justice and security for all.

This new phase in the history of our country follows sad events which all of us have experienced, and which some of us are still experiencing. Anguish and fears as well as human suffering are still present, due to the long situation of conflict between two peoples. However the past must not consume the present and the future and make them immovable. We now have to struggle in order to maintain and to build peace with justice. The spiritual struggle will always be necessary for the Christian who wishes to remain loyal to his/her faith, to his/her Church and to society.

The purpose of our letter: the Bible

2. In order to support your loyalty to Church and society, we address to you this letter, which is about the Bible, the way to read and understand it, in order to make it the object of meditation and prayer. Indeed "the Word of God is living and active" (Heb 4:12). It is our spiritual food, our light and our guide in the action we have to take in the circumstances of our daily life in the Holy Land.

In the recent past of confrontation, many among you were seized by anguish and assailed by doubts when confronted with the Bible, because it appears to be directly linked to the difficult situation which we have experienced and the new period of peace which we have to build together.

It is in the Bible and in our faith that we seek our comfort, according to what is said in the second letter to Timothy: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (11 Tim 3:16-17).

Sharing in the building of peace and justice in the land of the Bible is certainly a "good work". Therefore we must share in the building of a more fraternal society, founded on dignity and mutual recognition of rights and responsibilities for everyone and every people in the same country of the Bible. Throughout this process, the Word of God will be our best guide, even in the midst of doubts and denials. Therefore we are invited to read the Bible, to study it and to live it.

Humility before the Word of God

3. It is not easy to read and understand the Bible. It is a task that requires a particular effort on our part and a special grace from God. It is, therefore, of prime importance to know how to read the Bible in order to discern the authentic Word of God in it. This cannot be done by one's own strength alone. Only together, in community, in the Church, in the light and strength of the Holy Spirit can such a task be undertaken.

Before God's Word, we must humbly acknowledge that this Word is not our own. We must confess that we are frequently unable to understand what God wishes to tell us with this Word. Therefore we have no right to set ourselves up as judges of this Word of God, according to our own views, as to our stand in a quarrel of the recent past which has not fully disappeared, or even according to the stand of the adversary regarding the Word of God. We have no right to reduce the Word of God to the demands of our own positions and human struggles.

Reading the Bible, the Word of God, is a difficult, sensitive and delicate task, since the matters to be tackled are related to our daily life. They even concern our very national and personal identity as believers, because unilateral, partial interpretations run the risk for some people of bringing into question their presence and permanence in this land which is their homeland

To whom is this letter directed?

4. The questions to be raised are many. We wish to deal with them in our capacity as pastor, thinking of our responsibility to our faithful, but also to all Christians living within the area of our Patriarchal diocese which includes Israel, the Occupied Territories of Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus. All of the faithful are directly affected by the past conflict (already described in our 1990 Pentecost letter), by the reconciliation which has just started and by the problems raised. The great majority of them are Palestinians or Jordanians who speak Arabic and whose cultural heritage is Arabic. A small community in our diocese is Hebrew speaking and is part of the Jewish people or lives in the midst of the Jewish people.

In our reflection, we shall endeavor to be attentive to the different points of view. Dialogue and sharing, along with prayer and meditation are essential elements for a better mutual knowledge, in the hope that together, we may become sowers of peace.

Common witness and dialogue with all

5. In the framework of the Middle East Council of Churches and with all the Churches of the region, we are committed to seeking complete unity and a common witness. We dare to hope that these reflections might contribute in some way towards this end. We also believe that the Church of Jerusalem and the Holy Land, through her experience and reflection, has a unique contribution to make together with the Churches in the region and with the universal Church. The Church of Jerusalem will be pleased to have been listened to by the others and to receive their response.

We also hope that our message might be heard beyond the Christian community by our Muslim and Jewish brothers and sisters as a contribution to coexistence and peace, respecting the beliefs of each person, while at the same time, we are open to dialogue with all because the most difficult path still lies ahead.

Pastoral character

6. This letter is first and foremost pastoral in nature. Hence, it will not be possible here to show explicitly at every stage of thought, all the studies and theological approaches which have been taken into account and which form the basis of these statements. It should be realized that these pages have been prepared by prolonged reflection of a group of priests and theologians of the Church of Jerusalem, each of whom is a witness to the sufferings and expectations of the different communities. They have pooled their experiences of pastoral ministry, biblical studies, and ecumenical and interreligious reflections.

I. THE QUESTIONS RAISED

The Palestinian Christian confronted by the Bible

7. For the Palestinian Christian, the Bible is an integral part of his faith and religious heritage. One reads it and meditates upon it individually or in community (catechesis, liturgy, prayer groups). During the time of conflict, the questions raised by such reading and prayer have been numerous. These questions persist until now as we journey and build together.

a. How is the Old Testament to be understood? What is the relationship between the Old and the New Testament?

b. The Bible narrates stories of violence which have a striking resemblance to our present history, and which are attributed to God. How are these to be understood, when "peacemakers are to be called children of God"? (cf. Mt 5:9).

c. What is the relationship between ancient Biblical history and our contemporary history? Is Biblical Israel the same as the contemporary State of Israel? What is the meaning of the promises, the election, the Covenant and in particular the "promise and the gift of the land" to Abraham and his descendants? Does the Bible justify the present political claims? Could we be victims of our own salvation history, which seems to favour the Jewish people and condemn us? Is that truly the Will of God to which we must inexorably bow down, demanding that we deprive ourselves in favour of another people, with no possibility of appeal or discussion?

Though many other Jews have different views, some of them, by what they say and sincerely believe, seem to confirm the fears and anguish of the Palestinians. They maintain that the land has been given to them by God. Such is their title to the exclusive ownership of the whole of the Promised Land.

Some Christians, too, would say the same thing. Indeed, fundamentalist Christians would go so far as to directly link all of the present history with the fulfillment of specific biblical prophecies. They even accuse local Christians who do not agree with their views as being "unbiblical" and not true believers.

It is understandable that such positions should lead to spiritual confusion and religious rebellion among those who have been driven away from their homes and their land, who have lost their loved ones in a succession of wars, or we have experienced prison and torture for having de-sired to reclaim their rights.

Outline of the letter

8. The questions which we will try to answer can

be summarized under three categories:

a. "at is the relationship between the Old and the New Testament?"

b. How is violence that is attributed to God in the Bible to be understood?

c. What influence do the promises, the gift of the land, the election and the covenant have for relations between Palestinians and Israelis? Is it possible for a just and merciful God to impose injustice or oppression on another people in order to favour the people He has chosen?

This last question in particular is addressed to the faith of every believer in this Land of the Bible: the Jew, the Christian and the Moslem. It is addressed to whomever would wish to justify all modern political facts by the Word of God revealed in the Bible. This question is a challenge to the local Church and to all Churches throughout the world, and to every person who is sincerely seeking peace and justice in this Holy Land.

It is in order to strengthen the journey towards peace that the answers to these questions of the past must be given. The journey towards peace must be at the same time a journey together to discover the "truth which sets us free" (cf. in 8:32).

Before answering these questions, we have to explain what the Bible is for the Christian and how it can be understood by him/her. We will first say that the Bible is the Word of God. Second, it is a history of salvation. Third, it is our salvation history. Fourth, the Christian can understand the Bible only in the light of Jesus Christ.

II. WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Christian Bible

9. For the Christian the Bible, or Sacred Scripture includes the Old and the New Testaments. The Hebrew Old Testament contains 39 books, divided into the books of the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. The Old Testament, in the Christian Tradition, (Catholic and Orthodox), contains these same 39 books, and the eight Deuterocanonical books, written in Aramaic or Greek. The Protestant Tradition has only the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible.

The New Testament contains 27 books: the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the 14 Letters attributed to St Paul, the 7 Catholic Letters, and the Apocalypse of St John.

For the Christian, the two Testaments form a single book, containing the whole of Revelation given by God for the salvation of humankind. No part of the Old or New Testament can be separated from it for any reason, whether political or otherwise. All of Sacred Scripture is the Word of God.

II. I The Bible is the Word of God

How is the Bible to be understood?

10. God has revealed Himself in the history of the world and in the history of the people He wished to choose in view of the salvation of humankind. This is why the Bible is a collection of facts and words recounting divine events which are to be discerned in human deeds. The latter have been lived and then handed on first of all orally, and then by the written word (cf. DV 2).

The Bible is therefore not to be seen as a rigid, dead text, but as a history of salvation accompanying the history of the whole of humankind. It is a living, dynamic history, unfolding throughout the centuries within every event, and God makes use of it to reveal Himself and to make known His message.

For this to be fully understood and accepted, it is necessary to have faith. And those who believe must be grateful for the faith they have received.

The sacred writers are inspired by the Holy Spirit

11. At different periods of time, this salvation history was written down by writers inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that "with Him(God) acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted. Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error, that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (DV 11). Therefore the author of the Bible is at the same time God and the sacred writers.

God has spoken through human beings in a human way

12. These writers did not receive God's word by way of material dictation, word for word. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they expressed themselves in their language, according to their intellectual ability, in accordance with their customs, culture and the different literary genres and styles proper to each person.

"However since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter Of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writer really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words" (Dv 12).

Progressive Revelation

13. Concerning Revelation, the Second Vatican Council said: "In His goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will" (cf. Eph 1:9) "by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature" (cf Eph 2:18; 11 Pt 1:4) (DV 2).

Through Revelation, God wanted to reveal Himself to us, so that we may be able to know Him and to share His divine life. This is the salvation of humankind: to know God and share His divine life. The fullness of Revelation was reached in Jesus Christ, the Word of God who became flesh for our sake.

This revelation was progressive. This means that the truth concerning God and the message of salvation was not communicated only at one time, once and for all. God adapted Himself to the history of humankind and its ability to understand His revealed Word (cf. DV 12). A level of knowledge and understanding of God's Word corresponds to each stage of the history of the people of God.

Understanding Revelation in the light of Tradition

14. God's people have never separated the sacred book from the oral tradition, i.e. from its living liturgical, cultural or historical interpretation (~f. DV 8-10). For us, too, the Word of God is inseparable from the life of the people which received it. We also must follow the same path as we try to understand this Word. Today, we can develop a true understanding of Scripture only in communion with the Church, in the light of Tradition, and through the living liturgy and progress in Biblical studies.

"Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit, the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers... " (DV 10).

II. 2 The Bible is a History of Salvation

Salvation is the fullness of life

15. The Bible is our history of salvation. This history is that of God with the whole of humankind. It is in that the historical facts recounted by the Bible must be read and understood. In the history of our salvation, all the events are a model and a guide for us: "Now these happenings were examples, for our benefit.. and they were described in writing to be a lesson for us" (I Cor 10:6,11).

Pope Paul VI wrote: "The kernel and center of Christ's Good News is salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man, but which is, above all, liberation from sin and the evil one, in the joy of knowing God and being known by Him, of seeing Him, and of being turned over to Him " (Ev. Nunt. 9).

In fact, each and every one of us, as individuals and as communities, aspires to the total liberation of our being, from everything that prevents us from being truly free in all areas of our life, the economical, political, social, and cultural, and, above all, spiritual areas. We aspire to total liberation from everything that separates us from God and God's children, in order to be with God and to enjoy the fullness of the divine blessings. This is the salvation history we must read and understand in the Bible, God's Word, and the Good News of God to each of us and to each of our peoples.

Stages of salvation

16. The history of salvation revealed in the Bible is situated between two visions which form the beginning and the end of the human drama: the vision of paradise lost and the vision of the new Jerusalem which descends from God. We come from God, and we return to Him. These two visions are the two beacons which shed their light on everything that comes between them concerning the history and fate of humankind made up of human suffering and

joy. Messianic times, i.e. the journey towards the New Jerusalem have already begun. The Spirit dwells among us. From him we take our strength, in spite of the evil which is in us or around us. This vision affirms that history has a meaning and that the world is not absurd. The last word will be God's victory over evil.

The history of salvation passes through a number of vital moments which reveal the divine pedagogy dealing with humankind according to its ability to accept and understand His Word. They are marked by the succession of the different covenants deepening and comprising each other, yet not annulling one another. Every covenant goes beyond a stage deeply marked by the weakness and sin of humankind or of the chosen people, and begins a new stage of conversion to God and the process of reconciliation between human beings.

The Covenant with Noah

17. Since creation, human beings live in communion with God (cf. Gen 2:15; 3:8) Adam and Eve already live in a state of salvation and blessedness. After the fall, a first promise of salvation was given to them. The first covenant was established with Noah, and through him, with humankind. It comes after a new rebellion against God, and shows God's kindness and the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise of salvation. With the image of the rainbow, Noah, representing humankind, is assured that God binds Himself "for all generations" to "every living creature of every kind that is found on the earth", in particular to every human being, "for in the image of God man was made" (cf Gen 9:1-17;1:27). In this covenant, God takes the whole creation, the work of His hands as witness, as St. Paul says in the Acts of the Apostles: God "has not left himself without a witness in doing good, giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with good and your hearts with joy " (Acts 14:17).

The Covenant with Abraham

18. In order to gather this dispersed humanity, God calls Abraham "from his country, his kindred and his house " (Gen 12: 1). In him, He begins to prepare for Himself a people, the Hebrew people, to be His witness among the nations, the bearer of God's promises and judgments and the herald of universal salvation for all. At the same time, God promises to make Abraham "the father of many nations" (Gen 17:5) and a "blessing for the nations of the earth" (cf. Gen 12:3). In stressing the relationship of the Ishmaelite in particular with Abraham, the biblical genealogies recall that the other peoples will benefit from the blessings given to Abraham. That is Why Jews and Muslims today venerate together Abraham as their common "father of faith" in the one God who blesses all peoples.

The Sinai Covenant

19. After Abraham, God renews the same covenant with Isaac (cf Gen 26:1-5) and Jacob (cf Gen 28:10-22). Before the Exodus from Egypt, God "remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (cf.Ex 2.24). The Sinai covenant consecrates God's choice. By submission to the Law, a community is formed around Moses, whom God orders to serve Him. This community includes persons like Caleb (cf. Jos 14:6-14) or Rahab (cf Jos 6:22-24), who are not descended from Jacob.

Israel then finds its identity in being the people submitted to the Law of the covenant given on Sinai, and the people who bear the Name of the Lord (cf. Dt 28: 10). This election made

by God is an act of gratuitous love, and not because of the merits of Israel (cf. Dt 4:37f; 7:7; 9:4f). It is an election to responsibility and obligation, not to privilege or favoritism.

The Covenant with David

20. The establishment of Israel in the promised Land is the historical and figurative fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham and Moses. The covenant is concentrated in the house of David (cf. 11 Sam 7:16). The culminating point in the life of Israel as a nation is the reign of David, followed by that of his son Solomon. The royal throne and the temple are the two signs of God's presence in the midst of His people. Their disappearance will lead to the tragedy of the exile.

Messianic expectations

21. By their disobedience God's people earned God's judgment. The exile means exclusion from the land. Israel no longer has a king nor a Temple. But Israel has the Word of God and lives in God's covenant, through changes of political regimes and among other peoples. Just as it was for them in the desert, so too now: salvation can come from God alone.

The prophets look beyond the trial: they announce the restoration of David's throne. They announce a king who will be anointed. But their visions transcend the framework of an earthly restoration; they become a sign of the messianic times, the day when God will establish His reign. They announce a new covenant, when God will put His law in human hearts: "Then I shall be their God and they will be my people" (Jer 31:33; cf Ez 36:26).

After the trial of the exile, a remnant regains the promised land. The nation is reduced to a religious community for whom the Law is the centre. A new establishment without any political independence takes place in the land promised to the Fathers. It is accompanied by a spiritual renewal. The community passes through many crises which reveal the faithful and unfaithful Israel. The faithful or the remnant of Israel lives in expectation of the Messiah whose coming will inaugurate the Kingdom of God. They await the consolation of Israel.

The sorrowful experience of the exile transformed the poverty that had been experienced into a lived religious ideal. The "poor of Yahweh" place their trust in God alone. Apart from God there is no salvation. This renewed and purified Messianic hope awaits the coming of the Kingdom of God, not only as an era of political glory, but as a manifestation of justice, peace and goodness towards the poorest of the poor.

We find among these small groups of the "poor of God" people like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon. They, too, awaited the Kingdom of God through lives of simplicity and trust.

Fulfillment of the promises and the new covenant

22. With the coming of Jesus, the times are fulfilled (Mk 1: 15). The Kingdom of God has come. Jesus triumphs over the powers of evil and begins to fulfill the promise of the Old Testament. He is the Chosen One of God, the Messiah. He promises the earth to the meek. Before His death, Jesus institutes the Eucharist as a sign of the sacrifice which fulfills the covenant. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you" (Lk 22,20, cf Mt 28:26). By His resurrection from the dead, His ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus

calls believers to a new birth, in the community of the New Covenant which is His Church and the new people of God. God does not belong exclusively to one people but He acquired for Himself a people from those who "were once no people", and has made of them "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (I Pt 2 9,10, Catech. Cath.Ch. 782) .

The Church, convoked by the word of God was indeed prepared in a marvelous way through the history of Israel and in the Old Covenant. Then it was founded in these times that are the final age and manifested by the gift of the Holy Spirit. At the end of times, it will be accomplished and achieved in glory.

Meanwhile, the chaff still present in the Father's field will not be burnt until the end of times, when Christ will come again to judge the world and submit all things to His Father. This time of waiting is the time of the Church, of God's patience (cf 11 Pt 3:9), given to us to convert ourselves to God, to proclaim God's salvation to all nations, and to witness to His love by our life, and, if it is God's will, by our death.

II.3 The Bible is a History of our individual and communal salvation

Sin and conversion in our lives

23. Biblical history is the history of our own salvation. In our lives as individuals and as a people, we encounter the same elements and the same processes: Revelation and the progressive discovery of God in the framework of our personal lives. We, too, follow the same stages of repeated sin and conversion or turning over to God. This is the same experience of different idolatries that we associate with our faith in our lives as persons and as peoples. It is the temptation to reduce God to our own point of view or desires, the need to purify these points of view or desires by listening to the prophets, and by meditative, attentive reading of the Word of God.

The history of God with the Jewish people is the model of the history of God with each of us, as individuals and as peoples. Our personal history is also lived in response to God's ever renewed call to holiness and forgiveness in the midst of our continuous sinfulness and repentance .

Biblical stages are the stages of our history

24. The creation of Adam and Eve is our creation. Their fall is our fall. The way God points out to them is our way.

The calling of Abraham and the choice of the Hebrew people implies both a particular dignity and a particular responsibility. But the choosing of a people is also the beginning of our own election. God also calls us, and Jesus opens this election to all, entrusting to each person and every people their own vocation dignity and responsibility.

The other stages of biblical history throw light on ours: the promises to Isaac, Jacob and his sons; the difficulties of the Exodus; the schism between the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah; the deportations and the exile. All of these stages in the history of a people are real and spiritual stages which enlighten the history of every people and of each individual within the whole people. They help us to interpret our history, to better understand it and to correspond it better with our vocation.

We are invited to read our own personal history and that of our people in the Bible. But we are also invited to read the history of others, and above all, that of God in our own history and in the history of others.

As readers of the Bible, and as readers who belong to our peoples, our cultures, and particular stages in our lives, it is our task to discern the ongoing action of God in human history. Biblical history and the reading of the signs of the times should help us to understand and interpret our present moment, in order to live our faith in the covenant with God, to choose good and to work for the blessing of all.

II. 4 Christ is the key for a christian reading of the Bible

Jesus applies Scripture to His person and His mission

25. When Jesus meets the two disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, He explains the Scriptures to them by-applying them to Himself "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted for them every passage of Scripture which referred to Him" (Lk 24:27).

In the synagogue at Nazareth, He directly applies the words of Isaiah to His own person and His mission. He clearly tells those listening to Him, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:21).

To the disciples of St. John the Baptist who had come to ask Him who He was, He gives the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled in Him as proof of His identity: "The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Mt 11:46; cf Is 26:19; 29 18; 35:5; 36: 1).

In His discourse after the curing of the paralytic at the Sheep Pool, He tells His Jewish listeners: "You search the Scriptures because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf" (in 5:39). And He adds: "For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me" (in 5:46).

Jesus is the fulfillment of the Scriptures

26. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). This fulfillment and non-abolition on the one hand indicates the confirmation of the Old Testament, since God's Word is one just as He is one. On the other hand it indicates the fullness of the New, in which God reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (cf Mt 28:19). In the New Testament Jesus presents Himself not merely as the Continuation or the end of the Old Testament, but as something, completely new, original and superior in the New Testament.

Jesus does not help us only to gain a better understanding of the Bible, but He Himself is the perfect and comprehensive Word of God, because He "is the very reflection of His glory, the very imprint of His being, the one who sustains all things by His mighty word" (Heb 1:3). He is the Word who "became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (in 1: 14). He is "the true light, which enlightens everyone" (in 1:9). He is the First and the last, the one who lives" (Rev 1: 17,18). Everything in the Bible and history cannot be definitively understood except in the light of Christ.

In relation to the Law

27. On the one hand, Jesus knows the Law perfectly and observes it with devotion. On the other hand, however, He shows Himself perfectly free with regard to the Law (cf Mt 17:24-27: the Temple tax). He wishes to give the authentic interpretation of the Law (the Sabbath, forbidden foods, legal purifications, fasting etc... cf. N4k 2:18-20; 2:28; 7:1-13), and to show its depth and interiority. He goes so far as to declare Himself the new lawgiver, with an authority equal to that of God. In fact, He says: "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors.. But I say to you... " (Mt 5:21-22). He Himself is the fulfillment of the Law (cf. Rm 10:4).

In relation to the Prophets

28. On the one hand, Jesus shows that He is the genuine continuation of the prophets in His message and His life. Like them, He proclaims faith in the "God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob" (cf. Mt 23). He defends the rights of God and of the poor (cf. Mt 11:20-24).

On the other hand, Jesus does not hesitate to declare Himself greater than all of them. He is superior to them, not only in the prophetic line, but He is the first, as the origin and source of all prophetic inspiration. He is greater than Jonah and Solomon (cf. Mt 12:41-43; Lk 11:31-32). He is greater than Moses (cf. Mt 17:3-9). He is the first of all the prophets, before John (cf. in 1:15), Moses (cf. in 6:46) and Abraham (cf. in 8:56-58). And it is important to note that His primacy is not only temporal, but existential. His "before" is infinite, because it is eternal: "Abraham, your father, rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad.. Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I Am" (in 8:56-58).

In relation to the Writers

29. Jesus also presents Himself as a fulfillment of the wisdom literature in the Old Testament. These books, under the form of psalms, proverbs and popular narratives, show an awareness that the people of God is governed on one side by the Law, which indicates the way, and on the other side, by the Prophets, who correct the people, the kings and even the priests when they go astray. Jesus fulfils the Law and the Prophets by embodying this awareness in Himself He embodies the way and reforms it by the witness He gives throughout His life, and even in His death.

The wisdom literature also tends to develop the universal character of the tradition given to Abraham and his descendants. At a certain moment, the path of Wisdom passes through a paradoxical situation (cf. Job and Ps 22) in which the wise person is taken for a fool, the true prophet for a false one, the priest becomes victim, and the victim becomes priest. There is a radical change in values, as if a new creation would emerge from a creation undergoing a major upheaval.

By His death, Jesus explains the apparent contradiction of these values in the wisdom literature, and opens the path which had seemed to become an impasse for humankind. "Since in God's wisdom the world did not come to know Him through "wisdom", it pleased God to save those who believe through the absurdity of the preaching of the Gospel, Yes Jews demand 'signs' and Greeks look for 'wisdom'. but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and an absurdity to Gentiles; but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks

alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's folly is wiser than men, and His weakness more powerful than men. " (I Cor 1:21-25).

A new creature and a new reading

30. The whole message and behavior of Jesus, His person, His word and His deeds, although referring to the ancient traditions with which He shows Himself to be in continuity, are something new, and therefore a fulfillment, a confirmation and surpassing of the Old Law (cf LG 22). From now on, all realities are made new in Him: the commandment of love is New (cf. in 13:14)⁷¹ is teaching is new (cf Mt 9:17; Mk 1:17; in 2:9); the Covenant is new (cf. Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25) .

Thanks to His Spirit, the one who believes in Jesus is a new creature (cf 1 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:24). In him, all peoples, Jews and Gentiles, become one new being (cf Eph 2:15). This newness of being will reach its complete and total fulfillment in heaven. There, those who are saved by God will have a new name (cf. Rev 2: 17); they shall dwell in the new Jerusalem (cf Rev 3:12; 21:2), because "the one who sits on the throne has declared, 'See, I make all things new " (Rev 21:5).

From now on, everything must be read, understood and lived in the light of this newness. The whole of Scripture, before Christ and after Him, can have but a single source: the risen Christ. After Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth (cf in 14:17), everything is seen in the light of Christ. In this manner, the Apostolic Tradition that has been handed on to us in an infallible way will be formed and developed, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

It is in this way that the Church throughout the centuries has read and understood the Scriptures. In the same way, we must read and understand the ,Scriptures with the Church.

Continuity, Fulfillment and Newness

31. The more faithfully one searches the Scripture and finds "the unfathomable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8), the more firmly one believes that Jesus embodies in Himself the continuity, fulfillment and newness of the history of salvation:

Continuity, because it consists of the same Revelation from the One and Only God who has revealed it and who desires that "all people be saved" (cf Jn 3:17).

Newness and fulfillment because there is a new covenant in the Redemption brought about by Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior.

Continuity, because "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rm 11:29). "That is why the apostle Paul maintains that the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take the gifts bestowed or the choice he made " (Nostra Aetate 4) .

Fulfillment and newness, because in and through the Church of the New Covenant, Christ reveals that He Himself is the goal of God's plan "to bring everything together under one single head the Christ" (Eph 1:10). In Him, the unity of the human race has already

begun to be realized, for the Church has begun to gather together in her womb the peoples of "every nation, race, tribe and tongue" (Rev 7:9) (cf. Catech.Cath.Ch. 772,775).

Accepting all of the Scripture in Jesus Christ

32. To be Christian means to believe in Jesus Christ and to accept everything that has been revealed about Him in the New Testament, and the way in which He understood and lived the Revelation of the Old Testament. He is also the key and supreme criteria for understanding the truth of the Bible, not only for everything that was said and done in Israel before His coming, but also for everything that will be done after Him (cf in 16:7-11).

To be Christian is to accept the whole of the Scriptures, with the consciousness of Jesus, fully aware that He will reveal to us the fullness of the truth.

III. ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS RAISED

The Word of God is the Word of truth

33. To be faithful to one's faith and to the Word of God, one must be set free from the conscious or unconscious influences stemming from one's cultural background, or from current political positions, whether favorable or contrary to one or the other of the two peoples involved, Palestinian or Jewish. Either of these two positions can deprive faith of its objectivity, and therefore of its faithfulness to God. Faithfulness to God can only mean faithfulness for the good of every person and every people, for the Word of God must always be a light and a guide, never an instrument with which to struggle for one side or the other, or against one side or the other.

The Word of God can be used only in the struggle for the truth. In such a case, this Word can only unite us. If, on the contrary, it fosters division or hatred among us, this would mean that we have deformed the divine Word, making of it a weapon of death, not of truth. And that would mean accepting the principle that we should only read the Bible from a political perspective, thus forgetting its religious essence.

In this spirit, and in light of what was said above, we can now try to answer the questions we raised at the beginning of this letter.

III. I The Old and New Testament

The first Christian community

34. The first Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles was faithful to God's Word revealed in the Psalms and in all the Books of the Old Testament. In view of the difficulties arising from contact with pagan philosophies, it was not long before some voices were heard which maintained that the Old Testament belonged to the past, or that it was in clear opposition to the New Testament.

The Church always condemned and tried to rectify those schools of thought or heresies that tried to separate the two Testaments, the Old and the New.

Today, under the pressure of events and the way that some manipulate the sacred text, there are still some people who claim that the Old Testament is simply the history of the Jewish people, and a book which does not belong to Christian Sacred Scripture.

The Teaching of the Church

35. The teaching of the Church has always been consistent and can be summed up as follows: The whole of the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, is the Word of God, revealed for the salvation of humankind. The two Testaments are Intimately connected with one another, and they cannot be separated under any pretext.

The Gospel is very clear on this subject: "Do not imagine", says Jesus, "that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke shall disappear from the Law" (Mt 5:17-18). "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (NU 13:3 1; cf Lk 16:17; 21:3 3).

The Church's teaching in this regard is summed up in the Second Vatican Council's document on Revelation: "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New. For, though Christ established the New Covenant in His blood, still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it" (DV 16).

The Old Testament, therefore, as defined by the Church, with all its canonical and deuterocanonical books containing the Law, the Prophets and the Writings, does not disappear. It does not lose any of its value. As revealed Word of God, it always continues to be God's Word and Sacred Scripture, while receiving a new light through its fulfillment by Christ, the incarnate Word of God. When it is received as such it will be a light to guide us towards truth and justice in our present situation.

God's Word is sacred

36. Furthermore, God's Word in the books of the Old Testament is addressed not only to Palestinian Christians and Jews, but also to every person and to every people, since God has spoken for all, for the salvation of all the peoples of the world, including Jews, Christians and Muslims, to gather them in fraternity and in the same economy of salvation.

In all circumstances God's Word remains sacred. No one can touch it. Hence, if it is rejected or misunderstood, it becomes one more weapon in our hostilities and an instrument of death for individuals, peoples and civilizations, instead of an instrument of salvation and fraternity for us.

We have already said that If some manipulate the Sacred Scriptures, this is not a reason to abandon our faith in our Scriptures. On the contrary, it is not the Word of God but the manipulation that we must denounce and correct.

III. 2 Violence in the Bible

Examples of violence in the Old Testament

37. On more than one occasion in the Old Testament, violence is attributed to God in order to affirm His holiness. This occurs above all in two areas: as a punishment for certain violations of the Law, and in the law of anathema (or total destruction) applied to defeated peoples.

In the first case, those guilty of idolatry are stoned (cf Dt 17:2-5). The person who profanes the Sabbath is put to death (cf Ex 31:14). Similarly, the foreigner who enters the sanctuary of the Temple is put to death (cf. Nm 3:38).

The Book of Numbers tells how the earth opened up and swallowed all those who had rebelled against Moses (cf Nm 16:30). In the first Book of Kings (cf. I K 18:40), the prophet Elijah orders the slaughter of the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, in God's name.

Regarding the second case, after the conquest of Jericho, Ai and other cities, the law of anathema is pronounced in God's name. All those who did not believe in God were to be killed. "They enforced the ban on everything in the town: men and women, young and old, even the oxen, sheep and donkeys, massacring them all" (Jos 6:2 1).

In the so-called "vengeance" Psalms, we see God 'fighting' with the people, and supporting them in their battles against other peoples. In them, prayer is sometimes also seen to be used to curse and to seek revenge "Let his life be cut short, let someone else take his office; may his children be orphaned and his wife widowed" (Ps 109:8-9). "May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward" (Ps 129 5). "Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers" (Ps 10 -. 15).

Condemnation and correction of violence in the Old Testament

38. Alongside these incidents in the Old Testament, we also find the condemnation and correction of violence.

God reprimands King David and rejects him because he has shed so much blood. He does not allow him to build the Temple (cf. I Ch 22:9). The Book of Proverbs orders the avoidance of the wicked for whom "wickedness is the bread they eat, and violence the wine they drink" (Prov 4:17). It condemns the use of violence: "The oppression of the wicked will sweep them away, because they refuse to do what is right" (Prov 21:7). In Psalm 62 'Put no reliance on extortion, no empty hopes in robbery" (Ps 62:11).

The Prophets fiercely condemned the acts of violence committed by Israel: "There is no fidelity, no tenderness, no knowledge of God in the country, only perjury and lies, slaughter, theft, adultery and violence, murder after murder" (Hos 4:1-2).

They also repeat Deuteronomy which demands that the rights of the stranger and the poor be respected. "A curse on him who displaces his neighbor's boundary mark .. A curse on him who tampers with the rights of the stranger, the orphan and the widow... 11 (Dt 27:19; cf. Dt 24:17; EA 22:7; Jr 22:3).

The Book of Exodus insists on one and the same law for the citizen and the stranger: "There shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you" (Ex 12:49). Concerning the rights of every person in general, Jeremiah says: "When all the prisoners in a

country are crushed and trampled underfoot, when a man's rights are overridden in defiance of the Most High, when a man is deprived of justice, does not the Lord see it?" (Lam 3:3 5).

Physical strength is useless, says I Samuel, and Isaiah speaks of another source of strength: "For it is not by strength that man triumphs" (I Sam 2:9), but "Your strength is in tranquility and in complete trust" (Is 30:15).

The "suffering servant" in Isaiah is an introduction to the New Testament and prefigures Christ, who suffered for the salvation of humankind. He is the "Just Man" who "has done no wrong", who is "crushed for our sins" and who "offers his life in atonement" (cf Is 53).

How is all this to be understood?

39. We must keep in mind that we are faced by deep and complex truths. Hasty, superficial judgments must therefore be avoided. We are before the Word of God, of which St. Paul says: "How impossible to penetrate His motives or understand His methods! no could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be His counselor?" (Rom 11:33-34).

Second, it is the progressive character of revelation and its fulfillment in the New Testament which can help us to understand these facts.

We have already stated that Revelation is progressive (par. 13). God takes into account the sacred writers' ability to understand, despite their deficiencies and failings. Revelation is measured out to them in a way suited to them, and in spite of their faults and failings they are appointed to proclaim the message of salvation to the whole of humankind in all times and all places. This is why we say that in Sacred Scripture and in Revelation God behaves as a good teacher of peoples. He speaks to them in a progressive manner through the ministry of the prophets and the sacred writers, in each stage according to the measure of their understanding.

To be able to explain these facts, one must know the language, the literature, the culture and the customs in which the sacred writers have transmitted Revelation to us. Then we have to distinguish between the revealed message and the customs of the time that are often in apparent opposition to the message, but which are at the same time the literary form in which the message is transmitted.

Then we must consider that Sacred Scripture is a single book. If we wish to understand any part of it whatsoever, or any incident related in it, this part or incident must be viewed in the context of Scripture as a whole, in all its stages, from the first book of the Old Testament to the last book of the New Testament.

Only within this deep unity of the Bible, in the progression of Revelation and in the discernment of the truth that is transmitted by and through cultural elements of the past, can we find the answer to our questions.

The violence as related to the holiness of God

40. In the mindset of the times of the sacred writers, the use of violence is related first of all to the concept of God's holiness, and secondly to the concept of justice and the way to preserve it among humankind.

Every transgression against God's holiness or against a commandment of His law was subject to a physical punishment, even death. This explains the examples given above. In the case of the conquered towns, the law of the ban expressed the obligation to uproot idolatry and affirm the holiness and oneness of God.

Violence as related to Justice

41. In this area we find the use of vengeance as a first stage in the establishment of justice between individuals and peoples. Vengeance consisted in responding to an evil with a greater evil. In the book of Genesis we read concerning Cain: "If anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken for him" (Gen 4:15), and in verse 24: "Sevenfold vengeance is taken for Cain, but seventy-sevenfold for Lamech".

In a second stage, in spite of its harshness, the "lex talionis" is a sign of progress in relation to the first stage. The excessive use of revenge is limited to an equal demand: one for one, and no longer seven-fold or seventy-sevenfold: "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (cf 19:2 1).

The book of Job reveals more progress in the way of dealing with one another: "Do to no one what you would not want done to you" (Job 4:15).

The perfection of Revelation in the New Testament will bring tangible, revolutionary progress. The golden rule in dealing with others commands not merely avoidance of wrong-doing, but doing to others the good you would wish to be done to you: "So always treat others as you would like them to treat you" (Mt 7:12).

The law of love replaces the "lex talionis" (eye for eye, tooth for tooth), and brings about a revolution which demands love even of our enemies: "You have heard how it was said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say this to you: offer the wicked ones no resistance... You have learned how it was said: You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:38, 43-44).

Violence in the New Testament

42. The New Testament brings the Revelation of the commandment of love directed towards every person, including one's enemy. There is no longer any room for violence: "Happy the gentle: they shall have the earth for their heritage" (Mt 5:4). But there is still room for the law and spiritual strength.

The "gentle" believer is the believer who is strong by reason of his love, a love which yields no rights nor abandons any brother or sister; a love which turns to the law to put right any wrong (cf. Mt 18:15-17). The Kingdom of God is the kingdom of the "strong": "The kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm" (Mt 11:12).

In the mystery of Redemption the power and effectiveness of gentleness and love is revealed. Death itself is overcome by the Resurrection of the glorified Christ after His death: "He abolished death, and He has proclaimed life and immortality" (1 Tim 1:10). Violence, too, is overcome by Jesus' forgiveness of his executioners. By the power of this forgiveness, He converts violence into redemption. Accepting it out of love for His adversaries, He shows that evil in itself is a lie, and thus invites His opponents to liberate themselves from their lie and to engage in truth. The cross which is a manifestation of violence, becomes the strongest and the most definitive means of reconciliation between human beings and with God.

The power of the truth

43. The one who is "gentle " is also made strong by the word of truth. Yet all the violent of the world endeavour to justify their doings by claiming to possess the truth. We see this clearly in the media and in the need of the violent to seek their support.

In the book of Revelation and the description of the battle between the powers of good and evil, the weapon used by Christ, King of kings, Lord of lords and Word of God, is the word of truth coming out of His mouth: "All the rest were killed by the sword of the rider, which came out of his mouth" (Rev 19:21).

In the New Testament therefore, there is a transition from a battle with material weapons of destruction to the spiritual combat. Our weapons are "the weapons of light" (cf Rom 13:12), i.e., good deeds and the word of truth. It is in this sense that St Paul says: "Grow strong in the Lord, with the strength of His power. Put on God's armour... For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle... That is why you must rely on God's armour, or you will not be able to put up any resistance when the worst happens, or have enough resources to hold your ground So stand your ground, with truth buck-led round your waist, and integrity for a breast-plate... receive the word of God from the Spirit to use as a sword" (Eph 6:10-14,17)".

The question of "religious wars"

44. By "religious war", the believer claims he is using force or violence to defend the rights of God. He maintains he is acting in God's name, and he allows himself to destroy or to kill in God's name. It is also true that religion is frequently used in support of other motives for war, both national and cultural. This phenomenon closely resembles certain manifestations of violence in the Old Testament, is a frequent occurrence in the history of all religions, and is still present in people's psychology in our day. It is not only in biblical times that violence is attributed to God; the same mentality continues in our times as well.

In itself, a "holy war" is a contradiction in terms. In his closing address to the meeting of the Eastern Patriarchs and Western Bishops following the Gulf War, Pope John Paul II declared, "there can be no such thing as a holy war". Religion must lead man to love God and God's children, the whole of man-kind. "Anyone who says, I love God, and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who does not love the brother that he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen " (I in 4:20).

To declare a holy war is therefore to go against the very essence of religion, and shows a lack of understanding of one's own religion. It is reducing God to our human level of jealousy, quarrels and criminal hatred.

Violence today

45. The harshness of the measures commanded by God in the Old Testament narratives to safeguard God's holiness and justice among humankind seems strange to us today. We maintain that today we have more appropriate ways of showing these same truths through writing, explanation, preaching, the use of the best means available. There is no need for us to pronounce anathema, or declare a war of extermination against those who do not believe in God in order to convince ourselves or others of God's holiness, God's uniqueness, and of the need for God's law to be observed.

And yet if we are sincere, we must confess that in the 20th century, many of us still have the mentality which we condemn in the Old Testament. Even today, examples can be found of

this mentality which demands the imposition of corporal punishment for the religious, spiritual transgression of God's law. Some still believe in wars of religion. Some still turn to violence or more insidious means to triumph or convince others in religious or other fields.

Our suffering in the conflict

46. In the conflict which is now coming to an end, it would appear for some people in the Holy Land to-day that the same violence is being repeated in the name of the Bible. There are indeed some who wish to continue using the Bible to justify their struggle.

To all we say that forgiveness and conversion of hearts are two elements needed in our land at this time. Forgiveness is the way of salvation for all. Be-cause God forgives those who forgive: "Pardon your neighbor any wrongs done to you, and when you pray, your sins will be forgiven" (Ecd 28:2). Forgiveness does not mean concession or loss of fights. On the contrary, it helps to reacquire rights, and at the same time, it purifies the soul, converts sufferings into a source of redemption, and gives birth to peace in hu-man hearts.

God cannot and does not want to oppress anyone, individuals or peoples, nor can God command that. His love for one people cannot become oppres-sion for another people. Therefore, no one today has the right to invoke the name of this God who is just, kind and who loves humankind, to justify one's own human violence, whatever may be the supposed inte-rest or good of religion or of the nation.

III. 3 Election, Covenant, Promises and the gift of the land

Faith and Concrete Realities

47. As we have said, the Bible is the Word of God which gives life. It is a history of salvation for the whole of humanity, presented by Sacred Scripture within the framework of human history. Therefore it is first of all a question of our salvation history, that of all of us, individuals, communities, and peoples. This religious perspective must be kept in mind, if we are to understand the realities of faith mentioned in Sacred Scripture, and their application to our daily life. This is the only way to find an adequate response to the questions concerning the concrete realities lived today by the two peoples, the Palestinian and the Jewish.

Election

48. Scripture tells us that God chose a people to prepare the way for the coming of the Saviour "Therefore, say to the Israelites I am the LORD... I will take you as my own people and you shall have me as your God" (Ex 6:6-7). In the Acts of the Apos-tles, St Peter addresses his Jewish audience: "You are the children of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your ancestors when He said to Abraham: In your offspring all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Acts 3:25).

We find the same idea in the Koran: "We chose them (the children of Israel) deliberately out of all the peoples of the earth" (44:32); "O Children of Israel Remember the benefits I have showered upon you. I preferred you above all the worlds" (2: 47).

Every person is the object of God's choice and Love: "He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before Him, in love" (Eph 1:4). Election is a free, gratuitous initiative on the part of God, by which He calls a person or a people to walk according to His law, and to make this same law known to others, individuals and peoples, as the way of salvation. In Scripture, God chose the Jewish peo-ple through whom He would call all the peoples of the earth to faith in God and in the Messiah whom He

would send as the Saviour of the world. For us Christians, this Messiah is the Eternal Word of God, sent to Mary, who conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and gave birth to Jesus, the promised Messiah and Saviour.

Election is therefore a gratuitous act of love on God's part, and on the part of the chosen people, a responsibility before God and humankind. Responsibility to God means the obedience of the people to God's commandments and fidelity to its very identity based on this choice, since its salvation depends on obedience and fidelity. To be responsible to human-kind means bearing witness to others, and transmitting to them the message received. Everyone who is chosen and called to salvation, whether an individual or a people, bears this same responsibility before God and others. To be faithful to oneself, and to be included among those who will be saved, one must obey God's commandments, and one must hand on to others what God has made known to him, and the grace granted to him by God.

Why the election of a people?

49. Why did God choose a people? It is not because of their excellence over others, nor because of their merits. Deuteronomy declares as words of God: "It is not because of your merits or the integrity of your heart that you are going in to occupy the land" (cf. Dt 9:5). The choice depends on the infinite wisdom of God and His love. "How inscrutable are His judgments and how unsearchable are His ways" (Rom 11:33).

It could be said that God chooses a people, or persons, and grants each of them particular graces, in order to destroy the dynamic of jealousy and envy, and to liberate peoples and persons from such a dynamic. Sacred Scripture describes the beginning of this dynamic, in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain kills his brother Abel, because God accepted the sacrifice of Abel, thus putting Cain's love for Him to the test. This destructive tendency continues to be seen in conflicts and wars at different periods of Sacred History, and in the history of peoples in general, down to our own times.

In the New Testament, Jesus recalls this same truth i.e., the need to overcome jealousy and envy. This is brought out in the parable of the laborers who come to work at different times of the day, and receive the same salary at the end. Those who came at the first hour grumbled against the landowner. "He said to one of them in reply, 'My friend, I am not cheating you... Are you envious because I am generous?' " (Mt 20:13-15).

This means that we must see God and accept Him, in our brother and sister just as God has wished them to be. For God to choose a person, granting him/her a particular grace, does not mean that He rejects the other person nor deprives him/her of His grace. God's graces are many, and each person receives his or her grace. Jesus declares: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" (in 14:2).

God's choice of a person or people should not be a cause of pride in those chosen, nor rejection of those not chosen. It is in the humility lived by both, and in their common vision of God's action, that they will come together in love, justice and finally to reconciliation.

The Covenant, the Promises and the Promise of the land

50. The Covenant is a treaty between God and humankind. Nowadays we speak of two Testaments, the Old and the New. The Old Testament preceded the coming of Jesus Christ. It contains the first part of Sacred Scripture and includes the different covenants between God and the Jewish people and other peoples or individuals, The New Testament is the Covenant established by the blood of Jesus Christ which brings the Old Covenant to its fulfillment, and opens it to all the peoples of the earth.

In the Old Covenant, God gave His law to the Jewish people and demanded observance of it. The Covenant is based on God's free choice, but its realization is dependant upon human free cooperation. The Old Covenant is the necessary foundation of the New Covenant, and therefore it remains as such. From its beginning, the Covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David is lasting in all its aspects, until its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ, son of David and son of Abraham. "For Christ is the end of the Law, that everyone who has faith may be justifi-fied" (Rom 10:4).

The promises are part of the Covenant and the first promises dealt with temporal realities (land, kingdom etc ...). The concept of the land as a promise has evolved according to the different life experiences of the chosen people.

From the time of Abraham, the land was closely bound to the laws of nomadic tribes who di-vided up the lands that they occupied during their wanderings (cf. Gen 12:4-6). During this period, the land was understood to be a gift of God and a sign of blessing. "God spoke to Abram... all the land that you see I will give to you and to your descendants for-ever... I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 13:14; 12 2).

After the Exodus from Egypt, from the time of Joshua and the Kings, the promise of the land was un-derstood by the Jewish people and presented by the sacred writers in terms of an armed conquest. The land became then a tangible sign of God's fidelity as well as a task to be accomplished by Israel.

The careful administration of the land in ac-cordance with the Law of the Covenant (cf. Dt 12-16) in a sincere love and devotion to God would sustain the claim of Israel to the possession of the land and the blessings to come through it (cf Dt 6:4-5; 8:11-20; 11:26-32;28).

The prophets declared that violation of the Covenant by idolatry (Ez 6:1-7,13; 14: 1-11; 16:15-22) and the unjust distribution of the land and its fruits (cf. Amos 2:9; 9:7; Mt 6:4-5) would bring about devastation and the loss of the land. The people would then be exiled to a foreign land. The Babylonian exile, like the exile in Egypt, is directly attributed to the people's disobedience of the Covenant. "They will no longer live in the land of Yahweh" (Hos 9:3), "the whole land shall be laid waste " (Jer 4:27).

During the Babylonian exile, the prophets did not leave the people without hope. "God consoles His people and takes pity on those who are afflicted" (Is 49:13). He would liberate His people from Babylon and make them return to their land. But now God would intervene directly in history, creating a new people in the land, giving them a new heart to con-form to His teachings and to His commandments. God would forgive and forget their sins (cf. Jer 31:31-34). "A redeemer shall come to Zion for those of Jacob who turn away tom their sin" (Is 59:20). He will restore the divine presence in the rebuilt Temple and throughout the whole earth (cf. Zech 8:3-9). Through the Messiah-king "the Lord, on that day will save His people, like a flock" (Zech 9:16).

Status of the land in the Bible

51. Land has a particular status in the Bible. It belongs to God. "The land shall not be sold in perpe-tuity; for the land is mine, and you are but aliens who have become my tenants" (Lev 25:23; cf Joshua 9:3; 1 Chr 29:15; Ps 39:12). Israel, therefore could not become the absolute owner of the land: it was only God's guest. The worst possible thing that could befall Israel would be to forget this truth, to settle this land, and to sub-stitute it for God in its worship and values system.

The land belongs to those whom God has allowed to enter it as His guests, as long as they are not unworthy of dwelling in it. "Because of the wickedness of these nations, the Lord, your God, is driving them out before you..." (Dt 9:5). So, too, the chosen people were required to remain worthy of the land, by observing God's law. They had to remain faithful to the grace they had received. Once they had occupied the land, they had to continue to merit it in order to preserve it, or else the land would "vomit out its inhabitants" (Lev 18:25). Furthermore, we find in the Bible a particular arrangement that limits the right of absolute ownership. Every fifty years, a Jubilee year is proclaimed, which, when fully understood, means the redistribution of the land and the setting free of slaves as an acknowledgement that God is both master of all people and the true owner of the land. The Jubilee year is a reminder that people are guests and foreigners in the land, and that their homeland is elsewhere. "You will declare this fiftieth year sacred, and you will proclaim the liberation of all the inhabitants of this land .. In this jubilee year, every one of you will return to your own property" (Lev 25:10,13).

The New Covenant and the new understanding of the land

52. With each covenant and each new stage of the history of the Jewish people, the spiritual, universal meaning of the Covenant and promises became more apparent. The New Covenant fulfills the Old one by bringing it to the peak of perfection.

A single Covenant exists between God and the Jewish people, and between God and humankind, expressed at different moments of salvation history in different ways: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our ancestors by the prophets; but in these last days, He has spoken to us by a Son" (Heb 1: 1-2). We cannot view these various moments, or Covenants, Old and New, as separate entities, as though they were two entirely separate, parallel or autonomous Covenants. As Christians, we believe that "The Law was given by Moses", and that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ "(in 1: 17) in order to fulfill the Law (cf Mt 5:17).

Jesus inaugurates the New Covenant announced by Jeremiah, a definitive, eternal Covenant (cf Is 55:3; 61:8; Jer 32:40; Ez 36:26, Bar 3:38). Ezekiel describes this Covenant: "I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them " (Ez 36:26-27, and cf. 36:26).

Jesus is the Chosen one 'gar excellence'. In Him and through Him, the ancient choice is henceforth applied to all peoples, Jews or non-Jews, who accept Jesus as the Saviour Risen from the dead. In Him, all barriers are destroyed between the chosen people and other peoples. The grace of Redemption is offered to all people: "For He is our peace; in His flesh He had made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us... that He might create in Himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body" (Eph 2: 14-16).

During Jesus' time, the Jews still awaited a political Messiah who would restore the kingdom to Israel: "Lord are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel now? " (Acts 1:6; Lk 23:41) . Jesus Christ, however, preached the kingdom of God that was present in each person, a spiritual kingdom of truth and holiness. Jesus said to Pilate: "My kingdom is not of this world.. I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth" (in 18:36-37).

Regarding the land, since it belongs to God, the just ones shall possess it: "The just shall possess the land and dwell in it forever " (Ps 37:29). Jesus takes up this verse in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). That the meek will inherit the earth without the use of violence is brought to completion by the image of the

heavenly Jerusalem (cf Rev 3:12; 21:2). The earthly Jerusalem becomes the image and symbol of the Promised Land which is our heavenly home with God. "But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (Gal 4:26). She is the "new heaven and new earth" (cf. Is 65:17 and 66:22; 11 Pt 3:12; Rev 21:1). Jerusalem is no longer only a land and earthly heritage: it is in a special way the spiritual heritage of humankind in need of a salvation. In the Old Covenant, land is God's sanctuary, and possession of it is the condition that makes it possible to worship God in His temple. Jesus brings the Covenant to its fulfillment by declaring: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth... God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and truth" (in 4:21,23-24) be it in Jerusalem, on Mt. Gerizim or in any other place in the world.

The concept of the land had then evolved throughout different stages of Revelation, beginning with the physical, geographical and political concept and ending up with the spiritual and symbolic meaning. The worship of God is no longer linked to a specific land. A specific land is not the prime and absolute value for worship. The sole and absolute value is God and the worship of God in any place in the world.

Facing a dilemma

53. The essential question asked by the Palestinian Christian and by every believer in the Bible, is this: does the Bible, as the Word of God, give the right to the Jewish people today to appropriate the land for themselves and, in doing so, disposses the Palestinian people?

The Jewish believer, the Jewish people and the State of Israel are faced with a dilemma. On one hand, this land is the holy land for them. God promised it to Abraham and to his descendants. In this land, they have found security from the nations that have persecuted them in the diaspora. For them, God, people and land, form the triangle of their security and peace.

But on the other hand, for centuries this land has belonged to another people, the Palestinian people. Even in the biblical times, this land was also the land of another people who always coexisted with the Jewish people.

Furthermore, this land is the cradle and the place of most important events of Christianity. It is Christianity's holy land 'par excellence'. It is also the holy land for Islam. It is then the holy land for all believers: Jews, Christians and Muslims. For each religion, the land is holy for many reasons. One reason, though interpreted differently according to the respective traditions of each religion is common to all of them: reference to the same ancestor, Abraham, and to the faith in the same God, who is one and unique.

Two peoples, therefore, have political rights in the same land, and three religions also have religious rights there. The three religions are the "descendants", physical or spiritual, of Abraham to whom God had promised the land. To whom then does it belong in the name of religion?

Today, if one of the three religions were to claim, in the name of religion, a political right to the land, then the two other parties would have the right to lay the same claim, for the same reason.

Religious fact and political fact

54. In the name of religion, each of the three religions has an equal right to be present in the land and to have access to it in order to be able to practice its faith. But the political rights of one or other of the three religions, or of any of the faithful, depends on the political action taken by the political authorities. And this is governed by international law. If the religious

factor intervenes in political action - and it must intervene since political action has an ethical dimension which concerns religion, faith in God and human rights - it is in order to recall the need to conform political action of whatever party to the religious values proclaimed by this holy land. It says also to all of them that they are the sons of the same father Abraham, who calls them to reconciliation and justice as required by the faith in this same and one father.

In certain periods of the history of salvation, political or military action was directly attributed to God. God was the God of armies. He fought with His faithful to defeat the pagans. God was immanent in history from an anthropomorphical and national perspective. Today humankind is better able to perceive God's transcendence. The word of faith is able to raise God above human conflicts in order to see Him as He is: a God who has chosen a people, but who is at the same time, Father of all His human creatures, and no longer a God of war, a friend of one people, and fighting against another people.

If the political authority wishes to relate to God and His revealed Word as a reference point regarding the gift of the land, this means that it must also be guided in the present conflict by the moral principles contained in this revealed Word. Such principles refer to God's justice and His goodness towards all peoples. God cannot permit His love for one people to become an injustice for another people. In fact, it is no easy thing for any believer to reconcile the acts of violence to which political and military powers are forced to turn, with God's commandments given on Sinai and with His love and justice as proclaimed by the Prophets of Israel.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between the religious fact represented by the Jewish people, with its duties, obligations and religious responsibilities, and the political fact of a modern sovereign state which this people can establish.

For all religions in the Holy Land, the prime value is adoration and love of God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your might" (Dt 6:5), and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). On those two inseparable commandments "the whole law is based and the prophets as well" (Mt 22: 40).

The political fact concerning its necessary moral dimension is to be considered according to the rights revealed by God in Sacred Scripture. But the different political rules among peoples, and especially the right to the land, is to be submitted to international law. The role of every religion is that of a moderator and guide regarding the moral and human value of all political action.

Biblical history and present history

55. Religious Jewish people today identify themselves with the Bible revealed by God. For us too, this same Bible is the Word of God. We respect this relationship by which the Jewish people identify with the religion revealed to them by God. But we do not believe that this religious identification implies in itself a political right.

Contemporary history is for the religious Jew a religious history related to his biblical past history. For the secular Jew, it does not implicate necessarily this religious dimension.

For us, Christians, God is present in every moment in the history of peoples. In the contemporary history of the Jewish people, as well as of the Palestinian people, God is present by His mystery and His Providence which is common to all peoples of the earth. But His presence in biblical history has something specific, which differentiates it from our contemporary history and from any other history. God wanted to make the instrument of Revelation and the salvation history of humankind emerge from the biblical history. That is the difference between the history of Biblical Israel and the history of contemporary Israel.

IV. CONCLUSION

Freeing the Bible from political manipulation

56. The Bible is the Word of God. If politicians or fundamentalist believers abuse it as a weapon in battle, it does not mean that the Word of God has ceased to be God's Word. The value and truth of Sacred Scripture depend on the authority of God Himself, and not on those who use it or abuse it, be they friends or enemies.

We say this because some people, exasperated by the abuse of the Bible in the present conflict, have begun to declare that the Bible or the Old Testament is nothing more than a simple history put together by the ancestors of the Jewish people, and that this book has nothing to do with the revealed Books.

First of all, this is a refusal to accept a part of the revealed Books and a denial of God's Word. Second, this position merely confirms that one has fallen into the same error which one is accusing of the other party, i.e. taking the Bible as a book of history or culture in favor of one people against another. Abandoning all the direct testimonies given by Jesus and the apostles in the Books of the New Testament, and those of the teaching of Tradition and the Church, we would accept the deformed idea imposed on us precisely by those who abuse the Bible.

By rejecting God's Word, dear brothers and sisters, you would simply become accomplices and victims of the Opposing party whom you accuse. Already deprived of the land, you would allow yourselves to be deprived of your Sacred Scriptures, and from the light shed by the Bible that helps you to come out of the darkness and to surpass all difficulties.

The witness of the three religions

57. Furthermore, regarding the revealed Bible, the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are in agreement, even if each one has its own interpretation of the Revelation. For each of them, the Bible or the Torah is the book of God.

Faced with abuses, the sound position is therefore to defend the Word of God, not to abandon it. The Word of God should be above every human conflict. It cannot foster a conflict between peoples or individuals. On the contrary, the message of salvation is to be found in it, even in our present situation of conflict. In it must be seen the one and only God, who commands all believers despite their different religions to practice justice, love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

To accept the Bible and believe in it does not mean that God is one's adversary, supporting the opposing side. On the contrary, to believe it is an invitation to both sides who believe it to see God inviting both of them to grant each other justice and reconciliation. In the present circumstances, the Bible is a word of God, a word of justice and forgiveness directed to the two peoples, the Palestinians and the Jews.

The aim of the Bible was always the domination of oneself, it was never the domination of others. To seek to dominate others in the name of God leads to one's own condemnation. All empires that attempted to dominate others came to understand this at their own expense.

The courage to accept one's faith

58. Believers must have the courage to understand the Word of God and be faithful to it, in whatever political or human contingencies they find themselves. It is time to return to the depths of religious truth, and free the religion from the social confines that are stifling it.

When religion is set free in this way, it will be a force for liberation; but subject to social or political constraints, it loses all its liberating power, and becomes an instrument of struggle and hostility. Religion should help us to correct ourselves, to free us in order to be able to dialogue with others, and to share with others in a common action of reconciliation and construction.

The Christian must accept himself and accept his faith in its entirety. No part can be excluded. Attachment to God's Word as transmitted in Sacred Scripture, is a part of our deepest, most solid Christian tradition.

It is our strength and a sure reference point in the trying circumstances which concern us. Where are we to find light and strength, if not in God, who makes Himself present in His living and life-giving Word?

In the most dramatic moments of its history, every civil or religious community looks within itself, to its deepest identity, to its origin and goal. This is what is happening to our community. We turn to the Bible to understand ourselves better, and to understand better our situation and our path.

Read and meditate the Bible

59. The Bible is an inseparable part of our faith, as it is of our cultural and religious heritage. The Fathers of the Church, the Greek, Latin and Arab Eastern writers, such as St. Jerome, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Sophronius, St. John Damascene, Abraham of Tiberius, Suleiman of Gaza, and many others give a central place to the Bible. As St. Athanasius admirably put it, we need "to breathe the Bible".

Our love for the Bible is expressed in an attentive, assiduous and regular reading and meditation of the Word of God. Such "lectio divina" has nourished the holiness of the saints, illuminated the investigations of theologians, and strengthened the Church throughout its history. Many of our Christian communities, frequently isolated from or even deprived of the hierarchy for long periods, have been able to maintain their faith because of the Bible.

Personal or community reading of the Scriptures

60. Our Bible reading can be done individually or in community, in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the liturgy of the Sacraments, in the different paraliturgies or celebrations of the Word, in Catechetical centers or classes, in prayer groups or within the different apostolic movements. It is also necessary for each family to have their Bible, to read it, meditate on it, and find in it a reference point for all moments of family life.

This ecclesial reading must retain all of its importance for the animation of our assemblies. It is one of the bases which make up every local Church. Born within the community, received in community, transmitted in community, the Bible gives us its true meaning in community. It is the Bible which makes God present in His Church.

Studying and understanding the Bible

61. The Bible is a special book, and its specific message is understood only by careful and appropriate study.

The Bible is a divine and human word, revealed to a community. Its message is divine, spiritual, and eternal. But it comes to us clothed in linguistic, literary, cultural, historical and geographical terms which are human. We cannot ask of the Bible what it is unable to give. We must seek from it what is truly particular to it: a divine message of life and salvation for humankind.

The study and correct understanding of the Bible is done in the closest bond of union with the Church, in light of Tradition and scientific research, in order to reach an understanding of the revealed truths, in an overall and unified consideration of Revelation in its entirety regarding the whole of Scripture from a Christological point of view.

At this point, we would like to stress once again the unity of the Bible, of the Old and New Testaments. The whole of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is revealed and inspired. Notwithstanding the great diversity of literary genres and the number of inspired human authors, the entire Bible is one Revelation and forms a single book with God as its author and Christ as its final goal. To bring the unity of Scripture into question is to compromise the personality and message of Christ.

The Biblical Institutes in our diocese

62. It is a cause of great joy for us to see the number of institutes dedicated to the study of the Bible in this land, in the bosom of our Church of Jerusalem and our diocese. They are performing a most worthy task and their responsibility to the local Church and the Universal Church is very great. We are grateful to them for all the help they provide, with patience and competence, for a better understanding of the Word of God. We ask them to persevere in this task in a spirit of collaboration between the different Institutes themselves, and with the local Church. We invite our faithful to be aware and to profit from this science which is so near to them. All of these institutes are able to contribute to a deeper study of the urgent questions that concern us and affect the universal Church.

God has spoken in our land

63. God has spoken in our land, and His Word has spread throughout the world from our land. "From Zion shall go forth instruction, and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Is 2:3).

Jerusalem was and remains the Mother Church, the birthplace of the first Christian community. Jerusalem, as a symbol of the Land itself, is called holy (cf. Mt 4:5; 27:53), not only because specific sites confirm the Bible stories and inspire faith, but also because the city and the land have experienced the divine touching the human in the midst of sinfulness. They call us to a revealed dialogue or conversation between God and us. Jerusalem indeed is the out-come of the free choice of God and an act of grace (cf. Ps 78:68; 87:1f). The city is a symbol of the assurance of the saving power of God: "Just as the mountains are around Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people" (Ps 125:2).

This holy city and this holy land are also ours. This place is our home. We live upon it and bury our dead beneath it. And today we are suffering for the simple fact of being here. Here in the land of the Bible we are the subjects of our own history. God calls us to take our destiny into our minds, hearts, and hands. We drink from the local wells of our unique experience, and are fed by the Word of God who calls us to be in Jerusalem, and throughout the world, authentic witnesses of the One and Only, who is "the faithful and true witness" (Rev 3:14).

A grace and a challenge

64. To read and to live the Bible today in the land of the Bible is a grace and a challenge. A grace, because we journey daily with the same Jesus along the same roads, where He walked with His disciples, as companion and friend.

A challenge, because what we experience to-day in this same land of conflict and sufferings enters our own conversation with the same Lord, in order to make our own "hearts bum within us" as He talks to us on our own pilgrim journey, "opens up the scriptures to us" (Lk 24:32), and helps us to discern the will of the Father in the unfolding of our history.

* * *

We are aware that this reflection on "Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible" with all the ques-tions it raises, needs to be continued. Therefore, as we have said it in the introduction of this letter, we hope that some of our brothers and sisters will share with us their reflections on this subject. The Word of God should indeed be a factor of rapprochement among believers, and a source of grace which enables them to share in the building and the sanctification of the world .

We ask God to bestow upon us His grace in order that we may understand His word, so it will be "light on our path and guidance to our steps" (Ps 118:105). We ask Him, by the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Peace, to enable us, by the strength of the Bible, to contribute to the new journey towards peace, justice and reconciliation which has started in our land. May Almighty God fill us all with His divine blessings. Amen.

Jerusalem 1. 11. 1993

Michel Sabbah, Patriarch