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COMMENTS ON THE HERVORMDE KERK STATEMENT

William H. Harter

The statement adopted in 1970 by the Hervormde Kerk of Holland, entitled "Israel: People, Land and State," breaks important new ground. It holds a more positive view of the Jewish people and of their relationship to God and to the land than any document issued by a corporate church body to date. At the same time, some of its angles of approach and some of its assertions are so unsatisfactory as to preclude its use by our Faith and Order Study in any other way than as a document for research and study.

Among the important positive emphases in the document the following seem most significant, and should be incorporated in any final theological statement or treatise which we might draw up:

- that the Jewish people of today are a direct continuation of the Israel of Old and New Testament times (#2);
- that the Jewish people continue to be an "elected" people, through whom God reveals himself to faith (#7), and that they have never "lost" this vocation (#23);
- that that same destiny is demonstrated by the inordinately high proportion of Jews to be found in the struggle for justice and humaneness around the world (#38);
- that an essential element in that elected status is the gift of the land (#10 & #11);
- that the New Testament does not abrogate the validity of the gift of the land (#24 & #25);
- that somehow the gift of the land is linked to Israel's destiny to help turn the nations toward God (#12; summarized in #15);
- that the only way in which the gift of the land can be ensured for the Jewish people at this time is through the vehicle of a free state (#43 & #46);
- that the state of Israel is one of the valid forms in which the Jewish

people exist, and thus in order to have an adequate relationship with that people Christians must have an adequate relationship with the state of Israel (#3);

- that the city of Jerusalem has become a symbolic "concentrated expression" of the union of land and people to such a degree that one may have to see it as integral to the state of Israel (#13, #51, and, more clearly, #26);
- that the state's right to exist may not be questioned by Gentile nations on the basis that a higher degree of political morality should be required for Israel than for other nations (#44);
- that the existence of the state in terms outlined heretofore should be for Christians a question of commitment; a challenge to commitment (#46).

As these positive emphases are incorporated in a new approach, certain of them need to be wrestled with more strenuously and expanded further:

- #24: Texts and interpretation should be cited to support the assertion that, according to the OT, the chosen people and the land belong together;
- #25 & #26: Many people would not agree that Jesus' prophecies regarding the destruction of Jerusalem and the expulsion from the land do not have "lasting" dimensions or authority. The sections on the NT witnesses need to be expanded and defended with texts and interpretive materials;
- #29 & #40: When we speak of signs of alienation in the life and experience of the church, we must include hostility and enmity toward Jews as primary among such signs;
- #13, #26, & #51: There is ambivalence in the appraisal of the place and importance of Jerusalem in the gift of the land and as part of the free state. Certainly in post-exilic OT and Intertestamental documents and traditions Jerusalem is vitally related to election, both temporally and eschatologically. The document shies away from the full implications of these facts, and eschews exploration of the eschatological dimensions (#26). If these are matters for debate (#51), more time and attention should nevertheless be given to them.

But at the same time that one sees many positive elements, and many hopeful strands to be followed further, it is also clear that the statement has major flaws. An intimation of those flaws is contained in section #4, where we read:

"...reflection on the Jewish people and the state of Israel is a task laid upon us by our faith."

One would have hoped to read "healing and loving relationship with" rather than "reflection on" in that sentence. Its orientation indicates that the Jewish people and Israel are to be treated primarily as somewhat abstract entities which must of necessity be satisfactorily incorporated into, "fitted in" an over-arching Christian theological system or perspective. Part of this tendency, of course, is due to the continental theological "custom" in such matters, but that makes it no more appropriate for our use.

Following the implications of that tendency, the statement proves itself tragically unable to escape or transcend certain pre-ordained theological judgments (however outdated) which have a baneful impact on true understanding of or creative relationship with Jews. Among the refractions of such perspectives in the document are the following:

--the joy and the appropriation of grace which Jews have had and have in fulfilling the law go unrecognized. "Law" is obviously narrowly defined in the document, not as Torah, with all its manifold implications, but as "sets of rules." Jewish adherence to the law is denigrated in the by now all too familiar fashion as excessively "pious," as "legalism," as a denial of the Jews' true vocation (#18, #35, #22). The reactionary Christian attitude that everything which took place between the prophets and Jesus was a "downhill slide" for Judaism rears its head. The overdrawing of the "law/grace" dichotomy, so influenced by continental (especially German) theological viewpoints, even leads the document to the outrageous statement that "because of their zeal for the law the Jews are stated to have "confirmed the judgement which (the) prophets had pronounced against them" (#22). Groups to whom Jesus addressed himself in criticism are described as "outside the pale of the true people of God" (#22).

These kinds of statements are a repetition of old canards. They further, rather than counter-act traditional Christian animus against Jews. They are bound to be extremely offensive, not only to Jews, but also to Christians who are trying to formulate new approaches in relationships with Jews.

--Jesus' rejection of the Zealots is also overdrawn (#22). Recent research (by S.G.F. Brandon, inter alia) points in the direction that Jesus' attitude toward the Zealots was at times at least ambiguous. Once again an animus is reinforced (cf. #39), this time against those who would dedicate themselves to national independence (although the animus is countered elsewhere in the document, e.g. in #44 & #46).

--the statement tends to require Jews to accept Jesus in order to become truly the people of God (#28). The implication is definitely that the "new Israel" is superior to the "Old," and that Jews who remain Jews are not fully, or really God's people in the most complete sense. The Christocentric norm for defining true and valid relationship with God is stressed again and again (#20, #27, #28, #30, #54). The possibility

that there may be other ways in which God calls and recalls his people to himself (e.g., through Torah as a "way of life," interpreted by the Rabbinic tradition; through mystical speculation and ecstasy; by raising up new prophets; through "wisdom," i.e., theological reflection and discourse; inter alia) is ignored.

At the same time, there is in the document the seeds of a broader approach. The document states:

"...in the history of Israel we are somehow indirectly dealing with God. It is in it that He reveals himself to faith." (#7)

The Jewish people today are seen as a continuation of that Israel of the OT and NT (#1), in the process of realizing their age-old universal vocation (#9, #32, #37, #38). If it is true that we learn of God and are brought closer to God by and through them, must they not possess valid avenues of communion and relationship with God? Here an internal self-inconsistency in the document exposes itself. It could and should be resolved by a categorical statement that Jews, whether or not they have "accepted" Christ, are just as fully and truly the people of God as Christians who have accepted Him, and that Christians should carry no brief for declaring the "New" Israel superior to the "Old."

--there is a veiled air of superiority, of presumption, of sitting as judge on the Jew which emerges at a number of points in the document:

- a) Jews are defined as being on a "course of alienation" from God (#30, #40, #41). In the light of all that has taken place in this century alone in the area of Christian hatred and persecution of Jews, not to mention previous eras, such a description lacks judgment and taste.
- b) Jews are claimed to be violating their true identity as God's people (definition of true identity-#15; one-sided description of "violations"-#33).
- c) contemporary signs of Jewish "chosenness" are classed as "extremely ambivalent" (#34). Even the return to the land partakes of this "ambivalence" (#36).
- d) if Jews do fulfill their universal vocation, it is connected with their function as "offence" and "annoyance." They fulfill that vocation "in spite of themselves" (#37)!!
- e) despite the assertion that Jews should not be expected to be better than other peoples (#44), the people and the state are required to be "exemplary" (#47 & #49). Demands are made that Israel not become "a people like all other peoples" (#48), that she improve her treatment of refugees (#49) and non-Jews (#50). It may be appropriate for God to say the following:

"...we expect from this people more than we expect from any other people. He who is placed in a special position has to act in a special manner...." (#52),

but it is hardly appropriate for a group of men.

- f) the rather grudging admission that under the present dispensation the Jewish people "can continue to exist in their particularity" smacks once again of arrogating to ourselves decisions which might better be left to God.
- g) the ability to find a sign of God in the suffering of the Jews (#32) skirts perilously close to the danger of finding meaning for ourselves in the misery of others--using them as steps on our road to illumination. The view that the discontinuity within the Jewish people in NT times took place in order that a larger good might be realized (#19) shares in the same syndrome.
- h) perhaps the most subtle way of "putting down" the Jews is to find in them archetypes of the psychic or physical realities people don't like about themselves. Thus, because we feel Western man to be alienated, we must define the Jews as alienated from God (#30, #33, #40, #41). Since we err in counting on being special in God's eyes "as if it were a right," we must find that Israel behaved this way during the OT period (#8). Since the church has not made good her destiny, we discover that the Jewish people have not (#39, #55). Since Christian countries have fallen victim to nationalistic self-assertion, we find that the Jews are doing so (#39--how could there even be a comparison in this area!?). Since Christianity has frequently degenerated into legalism and moralism, we find such behavior very typical of Jews (#39)! Naturally no concrete evidence is given to support these carping and gratuitous criticisms of Jews!

The operation of this psychological mechanism is actually betrayed openly by one phrase which is used:

"...the criticism which we make against the Jewish people comes back upon our own head." (#55).

Would it not be more accurate to say that the criticisms we wish to make of ourselves we somehow find to be very prevalent among Jews?

- i) finally, it is distasteful to read the phrase "the Jewish ghetto with its attendant mentality and dangers" (#43) when we consider the fact that it was the ghetto which preserved Judaism through many of its most threatened periods, and that it was, after all, Christians who forced Jews to live in ghettos!

The strengths of the Dutch statement indicate that progress is being made; the

flaws indicate how far even well-intentioned and charitable Christians have to go to develop a satisfactory perspective on Israel and on our relations with Jews. As we decry the flaws, we can nevertheless make use of the strong points as we continue to build.