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A RESPONSE TO A STATEMENT ADOPTED BY THE SYNOD OF DE HERVORMDE KERK, THE NETHERLANDS

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This response combines an evaluation of the statement by the Dutch with the request for a statement by each of the members of our Study Group about our Christian understanding of the nature of the relationship between the land and State of Israel and the community of faith called Judaism.

This is a remarkable statement. Not the least remarkable thing about it is the fact that it is an official ecclesiastical document, not a study paper. It sets forth the official theological interpretation of an articulate national church on an issue that causes great confusion and much controversy. And it does this with remarkable clarity, precision, and definitiveness. The range of diversity that exists in the Dutch church on all manner of theological issues is well known; and so is the fact that all points of view in its common life jealously guard their prerogative of "vrijheid van leer" (freedom of teaching, not bound by official confessions, etc. etc.). Thus, when one remembers, for example, the inability of the Committee of the Study Department of the WCC in this area to reach any sort of consensus the statement is an achievement on a high level.

There is something else that strikes me even more. That is the spirit and form of the document. There is about it a freshness and spontaneity, a simplicity and directness of style, a personal, human quality, and a theological lucidity that is reminiscent of the so-called "Dutch Catechism," officially sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church in The Netherlands, through its bishops. To be sure, this statement is much more limited in its scope and size. But the language of both, even in English translation, carries a quality of authenticity. The production of both undoubtedly went through many stages; and many minds and hands made contributions. But what is so refreshing is the absence of "gobbledygook," of "officialese," or even of a committee meeting atmosphere. The concrete and the personal win out over the impersonal and the abstract. And while these qualities do not touch upon the content as such, they do endow it with an importance and a persuasiveness not available in any other way. In the case of the statement, one is left with the conviction that this church not only has certain theological views and opinions about Israel and its land; it believes something about them, whether officially or in its actual life as a communion. I think that is important.

As to the contents of the statement:

- A. The document makes the very important point, not universally held by Christians, that the Jews of today are "the same historical reality" as the Israel of the Bible. The Jews are Israel; they are still Israel, and they always will be. This contradicts all sorts of ancient and current Christian teaching, including the statement of such a sober and respected scholar of the Old Testament as Martin Noth that the history of Israel came to an end with the death of Jesus.

The statement makes clear that for the Dutch church Israel is the chosen people. The church has not simply swallowed up the "old" Israel. Israel possesses the "promises" and the "oracles," not only in the past but now. It is beloved of God not simply "for the sake of the fathers," but for its own sake. That is a fresh Christian affirmation: God's covenant with Israel is alive and functioning; it has neither been brought to completion nor abrogated. The statement makes clear in other places--the "offence" given by Jews as a "summons to conscience" of mankind (including Christians) and the role of the Jewish spirit in the common life on the side of humanity and justice--that it believes Israel is doing special tasks for God in the world today. And by what it does it contributes to God's saving purpose.

About all of this I am enthusiastic.

- B. If Christians say that Israel is still Israel, and neither just another people nor a cast-off, says the statement, it follows that Christians must acknowledge Israel's tie with the land, for on that connection the definition of Israel has rested from the first. Whereas for the Christian the land has a function mainly of a "relic"--the scenes and sites made holy by God's use of them in the career on earth of Christ and his apostles--the land for Israel is an integral aspect of its mission today, as in all times. Here I think the statement makes important distinctions between the land and political sovereignty, without rejecting the rightness of the latter in the present time.

Out of this whole circle of ideas I find that the statement comes up with a very important affirmation for our controversies in the Christian scene today: it insists that, since for Christians Israel is Israel, the role of Israel in its land or of the situation of Israel as a political entity in the present scene in the Middle East "can not be a matter of uncommitted discussion in the christian community." This is most important, I feel, for it is my experience that "uncommitted discussion" is not only theologically erroneous but existentially impossible for Christians. Christians who oppose Israel's reassertion of its ties with the land, or the political state of Israel, often insist that, for them, the land is "just one more small piece of geography" and the state of Israel one more new little political entity. But they do not behave at all as though that were true; their opposition takes on a quasi-religious caste; it is turned into a crusade which, in the end, appeals to another version of Christian faith than the one delineated in this Statement! Unlike the complete "secularist" or "humanist," the Christian is never "neutral" or "objective" with respect to Israel, as he

as he may be in the case of other nationalisms. He can not be, no matter how much he would like to. This, of course, is not unrelated to the whole problem of Christian anti-Semitism, from the New Testament on.

- C. I like what the statement says about Jesus calling Israel back to its origins (#27), something that is unique in the case of Israel. This is really only a corollary of the position cited in (A), and it is not directly related to our purposes. But I want to mention it since it draws attention to the uniqueness of Israel from the Christian perspective in a way that has many possibilities for development.

There are also a few things in this statement that give me pause. I'll mention only two:

- A. For me the statement that the coming of God in Jesus Christ "can not be surpassed" is a lyrical statement of faith that can not be turned into a sober theological principle in any automatic or simple fashion. In a statement relating to Israel I find its use less than helpful precisely because it has a polemical history in Jewish-Christian relations. By the Christian it has been used so often in the past to assert his superiority over the Jew and to announce the end of the latter's vocation that the phrase seems out of place in a statement which is eager to affirm that Israel is still Israel. Psychologically, it's unfortunate. And theologically it's confusing, for, as I see it, the Christ who can never be surpassed is not available in any extant christological definitions, or in all of them put together!
- B. I am also troubled by the preoccupation with the required "exemplary character" of the state of Israel (#47, especially). Whether the authors of the statement so intended it or not, this re-enforces a pedantic, legalistic and moralistic spirit I find very prevalent already in many Christian circles. What is asked for, so often, is a sort Sunday School version of love and kindness that is totally unmindful of the realities of political or economic power. With one voice Christians insist that Israel is not a "messianic" state and demand that it must conduct itself as one. If it only could!

This statement was not written for the American scene, and I suspect its implications are less serious almost anywhere outside of it. I am ready to suppose that it may not have been intended in a moralistic way; nevertheless, it will feed an already flourishing moralism. That will not only embarrass the State of Israel; what is much more serious, theologically speaking, is that it will obscure and confuse Christian understanding of its real meaning.

It is of the heart of Jewish faith that whether as people in its land or outside of it, Israel participate in the whole of mankind's experience, on all levels and of all sorts. It does this as a "sign": that the world is not yet redeemed, and that the promise of its redemption is still true.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not separate Creation (old) from Redemption or power from love in the ongoing mystery of the divine action. It does not leave the world for some sort of "heaven" that relieves the tension; and, until Messiah comes, it can not provide such a heaven on earth. To ask it to do so, is to ask for the impossible; and it also confuses profound issues. I do not think the statement wants to be understood in such manner; but I fear will be. Pace Pastor Gruber!