

COMMENTARY UPON THE STATEMENT OF THE HERVORMDE KERK, HOLLAND

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From a recollection of our previous discussions I assume that other members will emphasize points where the Commission is rightfully sympathetic to the Dutch statement. I concentrate, accordingly, upon negative criticism. On the positive side I mention only the commendable way in which the Synod is committed to a uniquely Christian responsibility for Jews and the people of Israel (in contrast to marcionite-gnostic detractors who cannot admit such accountability) and is thereby fully prepared to accept responsibility for the political consequences of faith.

1. Biblical confusions. The Synod endeavors to build upon biblical, and particularly New Testament, authority. Inevitably, this gets the authors into difficulties. Neither Testament is singleminded upon our subject. The New Testament documents themselves are conditioned by apologetic and polemical influences. Fact and confession are not clearly distinguished or distinguishable. Post-biblical and extra-biblical notions have distorted successive renderings of the biblical record. The Synod seems unaware of these complications. It is itself influenced by Christian polemics. For example, there is no objective warrant for maintaining as the Synod does that Jesus "came into diametrical opposition to the 'pious' ones who tried to ensure and maintain the continued existence of the chosen people by faithful observance of the law," or that he "repudiated those who wanted to restore national independence and who in this way strove for the self-preservation of their people" (par. 22). On the contrary, Jesus has himself been identified as belonging to one or more of these very groups. (With respect to the goal of national independence, cf. S. G. F. Brandon, Jesus and the Zealots.) Again, how can the generalization possibly be made that "the Jewish people as a whole" rejected Christ (par. 28)? True, some Jews -- with very good reason -- could not be persuaded that Jesus was the Christ. But most Jews of the time probably never even heard of Jesus. Further, the "rejection" or "acceptance" of one or another messianic claimant has never been the fateful thing for Judaism that it was early to become for Christianity.

It is simply incorrect to attest, without qualification, that in the New Testament picture of Jesus as the Christ is found "the continuation and fulfillment of the history" of the Jewish people (par. 21) and that the Jews who accepted Jesus "attained in him the true nature of God's people" (par. 28). The dominant messianic expectation of the Jewish people of the first century -- an expectation made possible and nurtured by Israel's faith -- involved the redemption of Israel through the overthrow of her oppressors, an expectation that was totally contradicted in the actual fate of Jesus. (The apostle Paul indirectly testifies

to this state of affairs in his assertion that Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews; I Cor. 1:23.¹) To say of the Jewish people that Jesus is "their Messiah" (pars. 20, 30, etc.) is as ludicrous as it is offensive. The protestation that Jesus Christ is "not yet recognized by Israel as a whole as the fulfillment of its destiny" (par. 55) is worse than condescending. The time is long overdue for Christian churchmen to repudiate the falsehood that the (alleged) Jewish "rejection" of Jesus as Messiah (par. 22, etc.) constitutes unfaithfulness rather than faithfulness.

The Synod is inaccurate in certain of its own renderings of biblical materials. Where does Jesus ever speak of "expulsion from the land" as a judgment upon the Jewish people (par. 25)? More fatefully, the Synod's conviction that the divine faithfulness preserves the elect status of the Jewish people (cf. par. 31) is arbitrary, from the viewpoint of the statements's general theological orientation. The authors' (regrettably) biblicist preconceptions ought to have kept them from ignoring such a passage as this: "the Jews . . . killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets . . . and displease God and oppose all men. . . . But God's wrath has come upon them at last!" (I Thess. 2: 15-16). The Synod also typifies the familiar Continental idealization and misrepresentation of Romans 9-11 in its claim that Paul denied the view that "after the rejection" of Jesus the Jewish people "would no longer be defined by their vocation to be God's special people" (par. 23). This reading of Paul is onesided. For Paul, Israel's place in the present dispensation has been taken by the church. Israel's (sacred) history is ended. Israel has effectively betrayed and lost its vocation. We would do better to concede that the apostle was in error here than to try to make him say the opposite of what he in fact says. It is no good to cite the assurances that "all Israel will be saved" and that "God's choice stands" (Rom. 11: 26, 28). To Paul, for the present epoch original Israel lacks any positive theological identification or dignity. "Israel's 'election' is now a non-functioning election." Any attempt to utilize Paul as authority for a declaration of positive historical blessings for Israel (e.g., the retention of Eretz Yisrael in realization of the Landesverheissungen) is indefensible. Paul's expressed position is that in "rejecting" the Christ, Israel enters upon a period of spiritual occultation from which it will reappear only at the end time.²

¹Cf. also Paul's tantalizing caveat, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12: 3).

²A. Roy Eckardt, Elder and Younger Brothers, pp. 55-8.

The authors would have been infinitely more consistent with their (insufferable) triumphalism had they come right out with the obsolescence of Jewish faith to which their version of Christian messianism actually forces them to subscribe. To protest that God must still somehow cling to the Jewish people even though they have "rejected" him in Christ is to stoop to a deus ex machina. The idea that the elect status of the Jewish people is not annulled even for the present dispensation may be entirely valid, but it is poor scholarship and worse biblical theology to try to sustain that idea while trying to preserve the New Testament as one's theological authority.

2. The evils of biblicist-moralist politics. Spokesmen within Jewry may succeed in propagating or opposing the doctrine of the election of Israel. This is their privilege. But whenever Christian representatives intervene in that doctrine (other than perhaps in non-successionist application of the doctrine to the church), they seem unable to overcome the historical and ideological corruptions of Christendom. More specifically, whenever there appears a Christian declaration that the Jews are "unlike" all other peoples, we have to be on special guard against conclusions that are not only theologically suspect but morally harmful. Granted that the weight of history and ideology makes such conclusions unavoidable, we must still oppose them.

The Dutch Synod's intruding of the doctrine of election into the historical life of Israel is a case in point. In the Synod's statement the snares of biblicist-moralist politics are revealed. Expressed differently, the authors appear incapable of comprehending the difference and the tension between the sacred and profane domains. The document is most defective at the point of connections between Israel as the elect people of God and Israel as a historical entity. These Dutch churchmen are doubtless reacting against the terrible separation of theology from politics in the 1930's and 1940's. Therefore, we must be charitable. Yet the fact is that the statement under review fails to relate and to distinguish responsibly biblical-covenantal obligations and today's politico-moral situation. At least, the authors' simplistic, repeated summons to Old Testament covenantal norms makes that failure unavoidable.

The churchmen are trying to have things both ways. They offer us a completely "historical reality," and then they take it away by ruling that alone among the nations Israel must walk according to a peculiar righteousness. We have to object that if Israel is indeed a historical reality its rights, achievements, and shortcomings must be apprehended in strict comparison with other historical entities (ancient Rome, ancient Babylon, modern Egypt, modern Syria, etc.). We note the Synod's refusal in one place to extend the integrity of the elected people's land to their right to an independent state and even to the City of

Jerusalem (par. 13) -- a refusal that reappears later on in the effort to apply God's promise to "the lasting tie of people and land, but not in the same way to the tie of people and state" (par. 43). This curious disjunction between residency and sovereignty can only play into the hands of those who would have the Jews remain a (tolerated) minority devoid of independent political protection.

It is true that the Dutch authors concede "the relative necessity" of a Jewish state. But what is the possible ethical justification for being so restrictive here, when the restrictiveness is nowhere applied to other nations? And despite their relative sanctioning of the Israeli state, the authors continue to "wonder" whether "the special place of the Jewish people" does not make questionable "the right of existence of the state of Israel" (par. 44).

Consider the anti-Jewish, anti-Israel implications of such an emphasis as this: "The land was the place allotted to this people in order that they might realize their vocation as God's people to form a holy society" (par. 11). The implication that decisive Jewish impugning of such a society will justify punitive or other expulsion from the land is all too evident. The church had better stop lecturing Israel as though church spokesmen were biblical prophets. The immorality of such behavior is demonstrated in the fact that we never act this way toward Egypt, Syria, or Jordan. There is powerful ammunition here for the anti-Israel side in the current international dispute.

That some of the foregoing emphases of the Synod appear under the heading "The Jewish People in the Old Testament" does not exempt the Synod from our criticisms. One may ask: What is the real function or justification of the Synod's concentration upon the biblical record? Whatever the intentions of the writers, their statement cannot be saved from easy utilization by propagandists hostile to Israel. (Incidentally, we must wonder about the sources of the Synod's "information" that non-Jews in Israel are treated as second-class citizens; par. 50.) No propaganda strategem is more widespread today, especially among pro-Arab Christians, than the seemingly convincing use of the Bible to argue against Israel's right to exist and to make unbelievable demands of her. In this context, no point in the document under discussion is more fateful or lamentable than the Synod's implicitly affirmative response to the question of whether things said of Israel in the Old Testament are "still valid for the Jewish people today" (par. 19).

All through Christian history theological documents on the subject of the Jews have infected the political domain and prevented application to the Jewish people of the same moral standards that are applied to all men simply because they are human beings. The present document is no exception. For Christians

to expect from Jews "more than we expect from any other people" (par. 52) is not only horrendous, in light of the evil history of Christian treatment of Jews; the Synod's demand that the State of Israel be "exemplary" (par. 47) constitutes a wholly illicit linking of faith to the moral-political realm. The responsible politico-moral comparison is not Israel and "Christian states" (cf. par. 48) but Israel and the states that now surround her. In the presence of foes committed to the obliteration of Israel, the Synod's concern that the Jews may make their dwelling place "into a nationalistic state in which the only thing that counts is military power" is nothing short of a moral outrage (cf. also par. 51). If these Dutch churchmen are really so worried about Israeli militarism, they had better address themselves to the parties who are the culprits for this: the Arab states.

The only available cure for the resort to a double standard as between Israel and other states is to stop employing the Jewish tie with Eretz Yisrael that is based upon the divine promise (cf. par. 52) as a vehicle for moving over into the political domain. We must concentrate instead upon the overwhelming historical and moral rights that Jews have to the land (not, to be sure, in replacement of Palestinian Arab rights). For the Synod's theological imperialism against the political domain is as unfortunate when it is supporting Israel as when it is criticizing her. In the world of today we simply cannot try to justify the Jewish people's right to Eretz Yisrael through theological argumentation (cf. par. 24). To do so means unwarranted special pleading for the Israeli cause, another form of the double standard and an equally regrettable one.

In places this document merely restates the classical anti-Judaist (anti-Semitic?) pronouncements of Christendom. Thus, we are advised that it is "but a small step from loyalty towards God's commandments to legalism. Because of their zeal for the law the Jews have rejected Jesus" (par. 35). We are apprised of "the moralism and legalism into which the observance of the law has often degenerated among the Jews" (par. 39). Much more reprehensibly, we are told that the very Jewish act of taking refuge from death through a return to Eretz Yisrael is to be linked to alienation (par. 36; see below, part 4 of this commentary). Praiseworthy motivations among Christians today are often powerless to deliver them from traditional Christian immorality respecting the Jewish people and Judaism. Why is this? The Dutch Synod's captivity to biblicism provides at least part of the answer. A lesson of the document under discussion is that a biblicist theologization of politics means immorality. Unconscious biblicism is still regnant in much of the Christian world. Moral outrages against Jews will continue to be expressed until the church extricates itself from the politics of biblicist moralism.

3. Illicit theological utilizations of history. In attempting to find meaning in the return of Jews to Eretz Yisrael, the Synod says: "Precisely in its concrete visibility, this return points us to the special significance of this people in the midst of the nations, and to the saving faithfulness of God; it is a sign for us that it is God's will to be on earth together with man." Such a peril as future expulsion "cannot prevent us from understanding the return positively as a confirmation of God's lasting purpose with his people" (pars. 41, 42). In truth, the reestablishment of Israel provides no such sign or confirmation. The identities and eventualities of history simply do not vindicate faith, any more than they finally refute faith. The necessity for our denial here is seen through reference to the obverse of the Synod's proposition: Israel's annihilation tomorrow would have to signify the unfaithfulness of God -- unless we were to fall prey to the logic, forbidden to monotheistic faith, that "good" happenings are -- what? The machinations of a competing god?

We are further advised that the sign of God's faithfulness "is primarily seen in the fact that they [the Jews] still exist; the Jewish people cannot be done away with" (par. 34). Here the Synod becomes Polyanna in a way that must impress Jews as almost obscene. With six million European Jews dead, three million Russian Jews under oppression, and the threat of a new Holocaust in the Middle East, we are confronted by (false) prophets who promise that the Jewish people cannot be destroyed. God will take care of them. (As he did in Auschwitz?) Then almost as though it cannot stand a total abrogation of the traditional Christian assurance that, after all, the Jews must "have it coming" to them, the Synod does not totally dissociate itself from the finding, so cherished among anti-Zionists and anti-Israelists, that "the Jewish people now, as in the time of Jesus, are in danger of falling victim" to "nationalistic self-assertion" (par. 39).

4. Christian immorality. We are children of a tradition that has denigrated and persecuted Jews for centuries. I think that one of the special delights of the devil is to mete out theological-moral chastisements as the appropriate historical sequel to human agony. That in this day after Auschwitz a Christian body should dare to stress again and again the alienation of the Jewish people from God (pars. 30, 31, etc.) is not merely an instance of human callousness but also a proof that the voice of the church is sometimes the voice of the devil. Have we totally forgotten that suffering, especially the suffering of innocent ones, is the very opposite of alienation from God? Hypocritically, we have readily granted this truth for almost any Christian martyr. But with respect to Jews, even the Jews of Auschwitz, we cast about for other "explanations" that will harmonize with our pre-conceived notion of Jewish "alienation."

In attributing to the Jews alienation from God, alienation that reputedly arises from a denial of special peoplehood in behalf of other peoples (par. 33), while at the same time accusing Jews of retaining an alienated peoplehood that rejects Christ, the Synod damns the Jewish people whichever way they turn. Just what are the Jews supposed to do? The Synod's possible effort to extricate itself from this entrapment of the Jews by adding that they "are still the chosen people" and as such are "a sign of God's faithfulness" (par. 34) is empty consolation.

Most horrible of all is the fact that the very Christian world that has brought incalculable harm to Jews should continue to spawn well-meaning representatives that make the same old accusations against Jews and the same old demands upon them. The Christian kerygma has itself helped to ensure Jewish suffering. Anti-Semitism is "deeply rooted in the gospel itself" (Rosemary Ruether). To summon Jews to accept Christian ideas of redemption when in truth the world remains unredeemed, and especially when in her treatment of Jews the church has served to aggravate the world's unredeemedness, is to mock Jewish dignity and Jewish self-understanding.

An ironic lesson in the Dutch document is that the very same stereotypes and falsehoods that have perpetuated anti-Semitism for centuries should be disseminated by an official Christian body wholesomely committed to high humanitarian motives. I believe it would be most unfortunate for the Israel Study Group to associate itself with the statement, other than by repudiating it for its evident, if unintended, contribution to immorality as well as for its innumerable theological-intellectual defects.