

Israel Study Report

Summary of the progress of the Study

Initiated in 1969, the study on "Israel: People, Land, State" has convened five meetings, with a sixth planned for mid-April, 1972. The first meeting was devoted largely to drawing up a list of the most important issues to be investigated. The next two meetings centered on the Holocaust and its meaning as an event in Church history. The fourth and fifth meetings studied the land-promises in the OT, covenant relationship, and the Statement on Israel, People, Land and State adopted by the Hervormde Kerk of The Netherlands. Serious efforts were made to engage a Muslim scholar as participant in the two sessions which have involved the Land but without success. However, Dr. Hassan Hanafi of Temple University has promised to give a paper on "A Muslim Understanding of the Land" at the April meeting.

Throughout the study the participating scholars have been aware of their responsibility to the churches to communicate their findings as well as their concern for what they consider to be a much neglected, if not downright unjust, handling within Christian theology of the content of Judaism. Hence a sub-committee has drafted a paper on "Recommendations to the Churches" which we present as part of this report even though it has not yet been submitted to the full body for critique and approval.

Sponsorship of the Study

The study was initiated under the joint sponsorship of Faith and Order and the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. This relationship was later changed to one of collaboration, with the Catholic Secretariat paying the expenses of the Roman Catholic participants and sharing the costs of the meeting. Faith and Order, in addition to paying for the expenses of Protestant and Orthodox participants and one half of the meeting costs, provided the staffing and bore the secretarial, printing and mailing costs.

When the extent of the financial crisis of F&O became clear last Spring and it was no longer possible to continue financing the study, the NCCJ offered to pick up F&O's share of the costs for the October meeting. Next the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations withdrew its financial support, also because of reduced budget. NCCJ will finance the forthcoming April meeting, and two meetings thereafter will be funded by one of the Roman Catholic orders.

Meanwhile the participants believe that these three further substantive meetings, already financially backed, will enable them to bring the first phase of their work to a close. Most of them are committed to stay together thereafter to establish themselves as an independent group in order to continue study of several issues not at present being pursued by any ecumenical group of Christian scholars. In the meantime, while seeking financial support for meetings for the Fall of 1973 on, they wish to remain under the aegis of F&O in collaboration with the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, and they rely on the members of the Commission on Faith and Order to be their information link with the churches.

STATEMENT TO THE CHURCHES

Precis:

The Church of Christ is rooted in ancient Israel. Christians look upon "our father Abraham" as the spiritual ancestor and father of our faith. The relationship is not one of descent according to the flesh but the inheritance of a faith like that of Abraham whose perspective and prospects were based on his trust in the promises made to him by God. The Christian Church is still sustained by the living experience of this faith as well as by the life and light coming from the patriarchs and prophets, the kings and priests and people whom God had chosen to be his own. Christ is the link (Galatians 3,v.26-29) enabling the Gentiles to be numbered among Abraham's "offspring" and therefore fellow-heirs with the Jews according to God's promise. It is a horrible tragedy of history that Jesus, our bond of unity with the Jews, has at times become a symbol and source of division and bitterness due to human weakness and pride.

The singular grace of Jesus has in no way abrogated the covenantal relationship of God with Israel. The Church shares in Israel's election rather than supersedes it, or as the Roman liturgy says, by baptism and faith the Christian "passes over to the sonship of Abraham and shares in the dignity of Israel." The survival of the Jewish people, despite the most terrible persecutions and the extremely cruel circumstances under which they were forced to live, is a sign of God's continuing fidelity to this long-suffering people who remain dear to him. For our spiritual legacy and for all that the Jews have done for the whole human race we Christians are grateful to God and to the people whom God chose as the instrument of his gracious kindness.

The Middle East conflict, occurring at a time of new and expanding vistas in Scriptural research, prompts us to reconsider the relationship of Christians to Jews. We Christians have readily acknowledged that God made a covenant with the Jews in the past, promising his paternal care for them, his chosen people, in return for their fidelity. Many Christians, however, have assumed that the validity of Judaism ended with the beginning of Christianity, the rejection of Jesus as Messiah marking the dissolution of the covenant.

This assumption conflicts sharply with St. Paul's declaration that God did not annul his promise to the chosen people since God never takes back his gifts or revokes his call (Romans 11, v. 28-29). The Apostle dismissed as altogether untenable the notion that God had rejected his people. There is thus strong Scriptural support for the position that God's covenant love for the Jewish people remains unchanged. This direct continuity of contemporary Judaism with ancient Israel insures the abiding validity of Jewish worship as an authentic form of service of the true God. Likewise the fact that Christians live by the Hebrew Scriptures as well as by the New Testament is a sign of the mysterious continuity that runs from Abraham to Christian faith and worship today.

For this reason, the fierce persecution of Jews by Christians down the centuries has been a fratricidal strife as well as a vast human tragedy. In many instances, Christian preachers and writers disseminated cruel fables about Jews. Whole generations of

Christians looked with callous contempt upon this people who were alleged to have been condemned to remain wanderers over the earth for having killed Christ. Anti-Jewish polemics became a time-honored feature of Christendom although it had no basis whatever in orthodox Christian teaching but simply reflected a gross ignorance of Jewish history and religion. Even today, ignorance of Judaism seems to spawn in the Christian subconscious hidden fears and stereotypes of the Jew as a sinister person.

One of the main sources of friction in contemporary Christian Jewish relations is a latent mistrust of the state of Israel. In promoting dialogue among Christians on the Middle East question, the World Council of Churches has discovered a startling variety of opinions among Christians, some of which exacerbate already existing Christian-Jewish misunderstandings. We urge the Churches therefore to give their prayerful attention to a study of central questions such as the need for a Jewish homeland, the undeniable legality of the Jewish state, the Palestinians' claim to the right of self-determination, the agonizing problem of the refugees-both Arab and Jewish. Only a conscience well-informed and free of prejudice can help to bring about peace with justice in the Middle East.

Involved in the potentially explosive political conflict is a theological question that demands careful scrutiny. What is the relation between "the people" and "the land?" What is the relation between the chosen people and the territory comprising the present state of Israel? The land given by God to his beloved people (Gen. 15,v.18) is obviously not coterminous with Israel's present borders but it would be a flagrant garbling of Scripture to "spiritualize" God's gift into a mere symbol. If God

has not released the Jewish people from the covenant, what part does the land play in contemporary Jewish history and international affairs?

There is no Christian consensus on this question but many responsible Christian exegetes do see a present connection between the people and the land as inescapable as the connection cited in Genesis. True, certain Jews deny such an enduring connection just as some resent the theme of a persisting election of the Jewish people but we endorse the stand of those Jews who view the enforced dispersion of the Jews as out of line with God's plan for his chosen people. We rejoice in "the return."

Christian scholars who see Israel as something more than a political state are not thereby theologizing politics by justifying the existence of the Jewish state in theological terms. Every nation has a life and spirit deeper than its politics. Modern Israel is the homeland of a people whose political identity is not invalidated by the fact that God has blessed them with a covenant. The legality of the state is based on juridical, not theological grounds. It was established in response to a resolution of the U.N. General Assembly, after termination of the British mandate.

We have come to think of the Jews traditionally as a people having a universal dimension. God wanted them to set up a special society dedicated to the fulfillment of the messianic aspirations for peace, justice and freedom in order to mediate salvation to all men. Even when dispersed they became a summons to the human conscience to safeguard and protect the rights of all men. Here in the United States, the Jewish contribution to the advancement of human rights has been outstanding. Now the question arises: is the Jewish people so universalistic as to

exclude the possibility of their having a state of their own? It does seem to many political observers that the localizing of Jewish activities gives the Jews a greater opportunity to fulfill their global vocation than would an unfocused global presence.

No one can deny that Israel is a political state and thus open to all the temptations of power. The charge is sometimes made that Israel is belligerently expansionistic as a result of its military triumphs in the Six-Day War. Visitors to Israel, however, can easily discover that Israel's overriding concern is peace, not more territory. Its anxiety about national defense simply reflects the age-old Jewish yearning for security, the anxiety of a people whose history has been a saga of frightful persecution, climaxed by the holocaust of six million men, women and children. Against such a tormented background, is it surprising that the Jewish people should want to defend themselves even by force of arms? It would be quite unrealistic to expect Israel to become a sort of heavenly society, an angelic entity of which more is expected than of other nations. This would be an unfair double standard. Israel is not a monastic cloister but a modern state possessed of the military, political and economic power its leaders deem necessary for the survival of their people.

At present, anti-semitism is unpopular and seems to have gone underground in the United States. This has happened before but even an underground anti-semitism surfaces from time to time in various forms and disguises. New Left literature today excoriates the Jews not as Jews but as Zionists. Some Christian publications in the United States have even resorted to more

overt anti-semitism, claiming that Israel is "judaizing" Jerusalem and its environs and driving Arabs from their homes in the Holy City. Anti-semitism, however, is a difficult virus to counteract. It has a subtle pervasiveness that infects our whole civilization. Fortunately many Christian Churches are working hard to excise from their liturgy and Christian education any anti-semitic references.

Those who refuse to learn from history must relive the errors and evils of the past. In times of civil disorders, agitators have arisen and will continue to appear in our society attempting to make Jews the scapegoats for the evils of an era. At the height of the civil rights' riots a few years ago, agitators tried to saddle Jews with blame for injustices done to blacks. If problems like inflation and unemployment continue to escalate, if a depression should set in, we can be fairly sure that the radical Right and/or the radical Left will make Jews out to be the culprits. If the plan to coexist with ^{should go awry,} Red China/ we will probably hear more rumors about "the Kissinger plot to betray America."

The pressure of our violent times urges us as Christians to live up to our calling as ministers of reconciliation, ready and willing to stifle rumors about the Jews and to build up an atmosphere of brotherly understanding in Christian-Jewish relations. There are reports that Christian-Jewish dialogue has come to a standstill and that a pan-Christian ecumenism, hostile to Jews, is already forming. This would be a tragedy of monumental proportions not only for Jews but for Christians as well for our Christian religion is deeply and permanently rooted in Judaism.

The pain of the past has taught us that anti-semitism is a Pandora's box from which spring out not only atrocities against Jews but also contempt for Christ. Whatever the anti-semite inflicts

on the Jews he inflicts on Christ who is "bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh." In the words of St. Paul, "They are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh is the Christ." (Romans 9, v. 4-5)

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