

The Attitude of the Netherlands Reformed Church to *Israel: People, Land and State*

by Geert H. Cohen Stuart

On June 16, 1970, the General Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC) adopted the statement *Israel: People, Land and State*.¹ Its prologue states:

The Synod has accepted the document in its final draft by a vote of 38 against 10. This was not meant to conclude the discussion. On the contrary, by its clear theological stand on a very controversial issue, the Synod wanted to initiate the broad discussion that has been lacking too much among ourselves, in our foreign sister churches and in the World Council of Churches (WCC).... The General Synod named this declaration an "Aid" in order to clarify that it neither wants the document to be non-committal nor considers it to be final, but only a starting point for reflection.²

For practical reasons, this article will confine itself to the discussion inside the NRC. Comments from outside may be referred to, however, if similar points have been raised within the NRC itself. This particular church statement has been chosen because it made an important contribution to the broader ecumenical discussion, as is clear from its evaluation by Paul van Buren:

The first official church document on the State of Israel that tried to go beyond this "Yes, No, Maybe" was that of the NRC in 1970, which began by reasoning that the Jewish people today is the continuation of Israel, just as the church to-

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1. The text is found in *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations*, Helga Croner ed. (London and New York, 1977), pp. 91-107.
 2. *Israël volk, land en staat: Handreiking voor een theologische bezinning* (The Hague, 1970), pp. 5f. Note the subtitle of the official Dutch edition: "Aid for theological reflection." All direct translations from Dutch originals are by this article's author.

day is the continuation of the apostolic church, and then pointed out that the State of Israel is “one of the forms in which the Jewish people appear.”³

Van Buren adds that, having “traced the ineradicable place of the Land in Israel’s covenant with God,” the Synod came to the “far-reaching theological conclusion” that, “If the election of the people and the promises connected with it remain valid, it follows that the tie between the people and the land also remains by the grace of God.” He then notes that while the Synod “granted that there is no biblical promise concerning the State of Israel,” its statement included a section entitled “The Relative Necessity of the State,” where it said:

But as matters are at the moment, we see a free state as the only possibility which safeguards the existence of the people.... Therefore we are convinced that anyone who accepts the reunion of the Jewish people and the Land for reasons of faith, has also to accept that in the given circumstances the people should have a state of their own.⁴

Origins of the Discussion

The NRC decided to take a public stand on this vexed question during an ongoing process of theological reflection on the relationship between the Church and the Jewish People. On January 1, 1951, a new Church Order went into effect in the NRC.⁵ Some of its formulations have had a fundamental impact on the NRC’s subsequent attitude toward the Jewish People, as have the present discussions on a revised Church Order. In the revised Church Order, it has been proposed to mention the relationship between the Church and Israel in Article I, i.e., to formulate the identity of the Church in its relation to Israel.

In 1950, after long and intense discussions, the NRC formulated “Mission of the Church” (Article VIII) and “Confession” (Article X). This sequence expressed the conviction that the mission of the Church precedes its confession.

“On the Mission of the Church,” spoke about “Dialogue with Israel,” “Mission” and “Evangelism and Christianization of Society.” Its first subsection included the assertion that “the Church fulfills her apostolic task in the expectation of the Kingdom of God.” The second went on to give the following formulation of the NRC’s approach to the Jewish People:

The Church — in her dialogue with Israel — addresses herself to the Synagogue and to all who belong to the elect people, proclaiming to them from the Holy Scripture that Jesus is the Christ.

“Proclamation” to the Jews was stressed in this formulation, but not in the sense of “bringing to faith.” If “faith” is understood as “faith in the God of Israel,” the Christian community is not called to bring Jews to faith in the God of Israel. A.A. van Ruler (1908–1970), a prominent supporter of the adopted text, defined the Christian–Jewish dialogue as “Socratic,” by which he meant

3. *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People: Statements by the World Council of Churches and Its Member Churches* (Geneva, 1970), pp. 170f. This WCC publication is edited with a commentary by Alan Brockway, Paul van Buren, Rolf Rendtorff and Simon Schoon.

4. *Stepping Stones*, p. 103.

5. It had been adopted, after considerable discussions, in the previous year.

that Jews have the truth about Jesus in the Old Testament and only need help to rediscover it. Like Socrates in Plato's dialogues, the Church has to engage Jews in a conversation that reawakens a knowledge latent in them from birth. Van Ruler used to say, "The New Testament is a glossary to the Old Testament." However, his proposal to add the words "especially from the Old Testament" to "Holy Scripture" in the above formulation was not accepted.

That formulation did not refer to the Church's "dialogue with Israel" as a euphemism for "mission." Rather, "mission" was reserved as the proper term for the Church's relation with "pagans," that part of humankind which has no knowledge of Israel's God and the salvation in Christ Jesus.

In November 1988, the General Synod of the NRC accepted the first draft of a modified text of Article VIII. An intense discussion has been going on ever since at all levels of the NRC about the proposed text, and there is a variety of opinions on almost every issue. A vast majority seems to agree that the first subsection should include the statement that "the Church fulfills her apostolic task, sharing the expectation of the Kingdom of God given to Israel." The final decision is expected in 1991. If this text should be accepted, all NRC missionary work will have to be based upon this premise that the Church's expectation of the Kingdom of God is "shared with Israel." In the view of a majority of the NRC, the Jewish People can in no way be the object of mission by the Church. Instead, it is seen as the primary agent of *Missio Dei*, God's mission.

Among those who paved the way for this development was the late K.H. Miskotte (1894–1976). He stated that the parting of the ways of the Church and Israel was the first and most important schism in the history of the People of God. Overcoming a schism is not a missionary but an ecumenical task.⁶

A significant point in the formulation of the Church Order of 1951 was its adherence to the word "Israel." In 1942, the German occupation authorities decided to dissolve societies in the Netherlands that were involved in Jewish mission and Jewish evangelism. For the sake of the persons employed in these societies, the NRC established the Council for the Relationship between the Church and Israel. The word "Israel" was chosen because in the New Testament it is the most inclusive term for the Jewish reality. The General Synod decided to remain faithful to this biblical expression and not replace it, despite the change in political reality produced in 1948 by the establishment of the State of Israel.

"Israel" now had two meanings: its theological use to denote the Jewish People, and its new use as the name of that people's recently founded state. The NRC accepted the ambiguity and used "Israel" in both senses.

On May 20, 1949, the General Synod decided to ask the whole NRC to consider dedicating the first Sunday in October to "the relationship between the Church and Israel." The Council for the Relationship between the Church and Israel had stated in its request to the Synod: "The establishment of the State of Israel brought new possibilities. The living of Jews in a free and independent Israel might give the chance of a new meeting between the Synagogue and the

6. This terminology, of course, is not meant to be binding on the Jewish partner in a dialogue. It indicates the preferable Christian attitude.

Christian Church on equal terms.”⁷ The next day, May 21, the General Synod accepted a new confession: *Fundamentals and Perspectives of Confession*.⁸ Article XVII speaks about the “Present and Future of Israel,” and according to the accompanying explanation, “one will look in vain in earlier confessions for something similar.”⁹

The discussions in the NRC during the late 1940s laid the groundwork for a renewed theological reflection on Israel. Despite the ambiguity of the terminology — especially regarding mission, witness and/or dialogue and the term “Israel” itself — some basic questions were astonishingly clear from the outset.

The remainder of this article will concentrate on two sets of three points. First, there are three issues clearly present in the early documents: 1) the rejection of replacement theology, 2) the need to reevaluate mission to the Jews, 3) a reluctance in the application of biblical prophecy. Second, there are three issues lacking in the early documents: 1) the history of Christian anti-Judaism and the Holocaust, 2) the voice of the Palestinian People or specifically of Palestinian Christians, 3) the voice of the Jews themselves.

Issues Present in the Early NRC Documents

1. Rejection of Replacement Theology

Article VIII, Section 2 of the 1951 Church Order mentions “the Synagogue and all who belong to the Elect People” in speaking about Israel. The present reality of the Jewish People, including Jews not professing the Jewish religion, is seen as the “Elect People.” The early publications are ambivalent. The letter of May 20, 1949 states:

In Christ the whole of the “Old Testament” has been fulfilled, but apparently this does not mean that in Christ the whole people of Israel has been dissolved into a spiritual Israel and that all the “Old Testament” promises have been figuratively executed in the Church. The Church will have to reflect on the New Testament concept of “fulfillment.”¹⁰

The views of K.H. Miskotte about the permanence of God’s Covenant with Israel are still important in the discussion within the NRC. Miskotte stressed the “credit of the Old Testament,” elaborating on the many areas of biblical thought that are characteristic of the Old Testament but not dealt with in the New Testament. Thus a significant part of the biblical heritage shared by Jews and Christians lacks an explicit New Testament interpretation. For example, the importance of the physical, material reality belongs to the “credit of the Old Testament.”

In order to use the word “Israel” in the new situation, it became important to undertake a profound reinterpretation of the theological notions found in Romans 9–11. Attitudes in the NRC toward the Jewish People were still quite missionary in the early 1950s. They were called into question by a renewed

7. *Documenten Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk 1945-1955* (The Hague), p.76.

8. *Ibid.*, pp 78–111.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

recognition of the continuity and irrevocability of Israel's election by God, as emphasized in those chapters of Romans (especially 9:4–5 and 11:29).

For Christian theologians to accept the eternity of God's election of and covenant with Israel, they had to make a definite departure from the classical "supersession" or "replacement" theology, widely accepted in churches everywhere, according to which Israel had lost its election to the Church when it failed to recognize Jesus as its Messiah. The NRC now understood Israel to have remained God's Elect People, even though the Jews had not accepted Jesus. They might be looked upon as disobedient to their divine calling, but their disobedience never leads to their definitive rejection by God, just as it never did in the Old Testament.

If we say that God took away His election from Israel, it was now asked, how can we be sure that He will not abandon His covenant with Christians? If God is not faithful to His covenant with Israel, there is no guarantee that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church.

2. Need to Reevaluate Mission to the Jews

A.A. van Ruler's conception of a "Socratic dialogue" still presupposed the triumphalistic conviction that the Church, rather than the Jewish People, possesses the Truth. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates proclaims that his first task is to convince his dialogue partners that their supposed knowledge is merely ignorance. Only then are their minds open enough to discover the latent truth they have from birth. This, van Ruler implies, is how the Church should approach the Jewish People.

The NRC, however, does not treat the Jews as possessing only imaginary knowledge. Accordingly, it distances itself from those missionary societies which still believe that the creation of the State of Israel merely provides new and unexpected possibilities for mission to the Jews. The letter of May 20, 1949 already makes it clear that Jews may have something valuable to contribute in the meeting between Jews and Christians. In particular, it was stated that in the State of Israel there might arise "a new meeting between the Synagogue and the Christian Church on equal terms."

This initial position has been developed in the course of time. The conviction grew that the Jewish return to the Land of Israel and contemporary Jewish life in Jerusalem offer significant possibilities for a new relationship between Jews and Christians. In 1966, therefore, the General Synod of the NRC decided to create the post of "Theological Advisor in Jerusalem to the NRC," whose designated function was to study, develop, promote and support meetings on equal terms between Jews and Christians.

3. Reluctance in Application of Prophecy

The NRC's General Synod was aware of the problems caused by using the word "Israel" to denote the present Jewish reality. Theologians of the NRC have indeed questioned the wisdom of maintaining the word. The Synod could thus have sidestepped some theological and political problems by talking instead about "the Synagogue" or "the Jewish People," as is common practice in

many Church documents. Instead, its very use of the word “Israel” obliged the NRC to consider the theological meaning of the State of Israel.

The letter of May 20, 1949 begins: “The Church has a conclusive reason to deal with Israel, for this people will — according to Romans 11 — still fulfill a role in history at the End of Days.” It then warns, however, against a fundamentalist understanding of prophecy, for:

...the fulfillment thereof in its universalist sense has already been seen in the spiritual development of the Church.... But the spiritualization of the promise of the Old Testament, on the other hand, does not take into account that the People of Israel as tangible reality still exists.... It is impossible to summarize this whole complex of promises and expectations logically in one observation.... The mystery ... becomes tangible in the present world situation, for which there is no solution of the international tensions without a solution of the problem of Israel. Jerusalem is literally a stumbling stone for all peoples (Zach. 12).¹¹

The Synod took into account the influence of prophetically inspired movements in the Netherlands. The adherents of *Zoeklicht* (Searchlight), for example, believe that the restoration of the People of Israel in the Land of Israel is a prelude to the Second Coming of Christ, and this view is still influential in traditional circles within the Church. Although most theologians of the NRC reject millenarianism, the issue cannot be escaped. The applicability of prophecy remains on the agenda, not only between the NRC and free churches in the Netherlands, but also inside the NRC itself.

Issues Lacking in the Early NRC Documents

Since the appearance of *Israel: People, Land and State* in 1970, the NRC has realized that some very important issues were insufficiently dealt with or lacking from the document, such as the theological and ecclesiastical background of the Holocaust and the meaning of “people” and “land” for the Palestinian Arabs. The statement is to be seen as the culmination of theological ideas developed in the NRC since the late 1940s and early 1950s. It was issued too early to take full account of the impact of the Six Day War of 1967, and thus seems to represent the end of an era — the era of extensive Western, and in particular Western Christian, support for the still young Jewish State.

In retrospect, the 1960s was a decade of change in several relevant respects. It was in 1961, for instance, that the Orthodox Churches joined the World Council of Churches (WCC). Thus these churches, to which many Christians in the Middle East belong, joined a body that had earlier been predominantly Protestant.

This was also a decade in which theological and exegetical research into the Christian roots of antisemitism deepened. The Second Vatican Council adopted *Nostra Aetate*, its basic document on the need for a changed attitude toward the Jewish People, in October 1965. The discussions at the Council reflected the changing climate in the Church worldwide, as the representatives of

11. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

the Catholic Churches in Arab countries voiced strong opposition to *Nostra Aetate*, rejecting any rapprochement with the Jewish People.

After the Second Vatican Council, liberation theology emerged in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. New types of Christian theology gained prominence also through the influx of the Churches of Africa and Asia into the WCC.

The establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1964 changed the political situation. The Palestinian issue became a separate question in the Arab–Israeli conflict. Future historians may be able to judge whether this or the Six Day War was the greater turning point. The Arab world inflicted a defeat on Israel in the struggle for public opinion when the General Assembly of the United Nations passed its notorious resolution of 1975, equating the Jewish liberation ideal, Zionism, with racism.

As this article is not primarily concerned with the ideological or political controversies, the second part concentrates on three theological issues which were absent from the earlier documents of the NRC. Their omission was understandable in the 1950s. In the 1990s, they cannot be ignored.

1. History of Christian Anti-Judaism and the Holocaust

Reviewing Church documents dealing with Jewish–Christian dialogue, their renewed thinking about the relationship between Christians and Jews often seems to have been stimulated by Western Christians’ shock at the Holocaust, even when this is not mentioned explicitly. For example, in 1965 *Nostra Aetate* did not mention the Holocaust, but merely said in general:

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of antisemitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.¹²

More explicit is the major document of the WCC on Jewish–Christian relations, issued in 1983:

Teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism in certain Christian traditions proved a spawning ground for the evil of the Nazi Holocaust. The Church must learn so to preach and teach the Gospel as to make sure that it cannot be used towards contempt for Judaism and against the Jewish people. A further response to the Holocaust by Christians, and one which is shared by their Jewish partners, is a resolve that it will never happen again to the Jews or to any other people.¹³

At its Conference in Seelisberg in 1947, the International Council of Christians and Jews addressed itself “to the Churches to draw their attention to this alarming situation,” stressing that there was an urgent need “to avoid any presentation and conception of the Christian message which would support an-

12. *Stepping Stones*, p. 2.

13. Section 3:2 of *Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish–Christian Dialogue* (Geneva, 1983), reproduced in *More Stepping Stones to Jewish–Christian Relations*, Helga Croner ed. (New York, 1985), p. 173.

tisemitism under whatever form.”¹⁴ With the exception of pioneers like the late James Parkes, it was not before the middle of the sixties that Christian theologians took up the challenge.

Many faithful Christians were shocked to learn of the use and abuse of Christian theology by Nazi ideologists. Some felt cheated, asking why ecclesiastical and theological authorities had disregarded these facts for over 20 years after the end of World War II. Older and younger Christians began to realize how their thinking was still poisoned by anti-Judaic theology. Churches and theologians were still unable or unwilling to answer tough questions by concerned believers — and in some cases try to avoid the issue until this very day.

Many of the statements subsequently issued by churches and church groupings, as exemplified by the documents compiled by Helga Croner,¹⁵ seem to be prompted by a reevaluation of Jewish–Christian relations in light of the Holocaust and the rediscovered history of theological anti-Judaism and antisemitism. This motivation is commendable in itself, but it has a serious drawback. It has given opponents of such a reevaluation an excuse to claim that the reevaluation, at least in part, did not have a sound theological basis, but was rather an attempt by Western Christians to soothe their guilty consciences.

This excuse has been seized upon especially by those who reject any favorable remarks those church statements contain about the creation of the Jewish State or the return of the Jews to the biblical land.¹⁶ The so-called Western Christian guilt complex has been cited by some Palestinian Christians in their attempts to argue that anti-Judaic Western Christian behavior was the sole reason for the establishment of the State of Israel. This argument is given acceptance in a recent *Policy Document on the Middle East* issued by the Commission for InterChurch Aid of the NRC. The *Policy Document* makes this at least one reason for the creation of the State of Israel:

The antisemitism in Europe, culminating in the extermination of six million Jews in this century, makes Europe and the European Churches co-responsible for the establishment of the State of Israel and the injustice thereby caused to the Palestinian people.¹⁷

The inference that Europeans were “co-responsible for the injustice caused to the Palestinian people” only makes sense on the presupposition that the State of Israel should not have been created. Therefore it was absolutely astonishing for many participants in the Jewish–Christian dialogue to find the same argument used by Rosemary Radford Ruether.¹⁸

14. William W. Simpson and Ruth Weyl, *The International Council of Christians and Jews: A Brief History* (Heppenheim, c. 1988).

15. In *Stepping Stones and More Stepping Stones*.

16. For a survey and evaluation of what churches have said in these regards, see Petra Heldt and Malcolm Lowe, “Theological Significance of the Rebirth of the State of Israel: Different Christian Attitudes,” in this volume.

17. Generale Diaconale Raad van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, Commissie Werelddiaconaat, *Beleidsnota Midden-Oosten* (Driebergen, 1987), pp. 6f.

18. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether, *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict* (San Francisco, 1989), Chapter 7.

As the author of a widely read study of the Christian roots of antisemitism,¹⁹ Rosemary Ruether should be aware that the recently emerging "Palestinian theology," of which she has become a fervent advocate, shares the heritage of the anti-Judaic stereotypes of early Christian theology. Being a historian of religion, she should know that the first foundations of the State of Israel were laid by the Jewish religious dream of return to Zion, starting from the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. and the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–135 C.E. The Holocaust may have helped to give the final push for the establishment of the State of Israel, but a much more significant role was played by the nineteenth century pogroms in the Russian Empire, where Christian anti-Judaism owed less to the Western theological tradition than to traditions that are also strongly represented in the Middle East.

In view of arguments of the above kind, it is not necessarily to be deprecated that reflection on anti-Judaism and the Holocaust was virtually absent from the early documents of the NRC. The basis for their theological evaluation of the Jewish People and the recently emerged Jewish State was the Bible, and in the first place the New Testament. The NRC's theological approach was not rooted in a Christian guilt complex.

The fact that *Israel: People, Land and State*, to date the only full evaluation of the Jewish State by any church, does not reflect on antisemitism and Holocaust, is therefore not to be seen as a negation of reality. On the contrary, a reevaluation of the Jewish-Christian reality based on the vicissitudes of history, even such horrific ones as the Holocaust, can more easily be washed away by the ever-changing socio-political climate. Only documents firmly based on biblical theology can provide a lasting prophylactic against Christian anti-Judaism. Only such theological statements can help deal with a paralyzing guilt complex by converting it into a creative attitude of overcoming antisemitism wherever and whenever it recurs.

2. Voice of the Palestinian People or Palestinian Christians

In the early 1990s it would be a serious omission not to take into account the voice of Palestinian theologians. In the 1940s this could not have been expected, if only because the first full-scale Palestinian theology written by a Palestinian Christian appeared only very recently.²⁰

Israel and the Church,²¹ which appeared in 1959, described itself as "a study commissioned by the General Synod of the NRC and put together by the Council for the Relationship between the Church and Israel." Section 3 of Chapter 4 is devoted to the State of Israel. Although there is no official "Palestinian voice," the authors were very much aware of the relevant theological, political and humanitarian issues. One of the five subsections deals with "the reaction in the Middle East." As the term "Palestinians" was not yet in use, the word "Arabs" in the following quote also means the Palestinians:

19. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1974).

20. Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, 1989).

21. *Israël en de Kerk* (The Hague, 1959).

The Christians in the Middle East take the same attitude as Islam, although their confession teaches other things. Their national solidarity brings them to practically the same rejectionist position. They have, by the way, never heard or understood from the preaching or teaching of the missions of the Western Churches, that serving Jesus Christ should require a special bond with Israel. Here lies also a guilt of Christianity to the peoples of the Middle East.

In the midst of all the tensions in the world, the Church is asked for her judgment regarding the problems with which the Arab nations are wrestling, as much as regarding the rights and the meaning of the State of Israel. Her judgment will have to exclude prejudice toward either of both sides.

It has to be enjoined on the Church, that she carries *as heavy a responsibility* toward the inhabitants of the Arab States as toward the Jews. For the "love for the sake of Christ," there should remain no discrimination between Jew and Arab.

Thus the Church has to ask the Western nations to pay full attention to the overly difficult question of peaceful coexistence of all peoples in the Middle East, and not to have themselves guided by any prejudice, either toward Israel or toward the Arab nations. Our love for Israel may not mislead us to overlook Israel's calling and obligation to the Arabs and their problems.²²

Here the NRC held Western theology responsible for the lack of understanding of Arab Christians for the special bond of the Church with Israel. This charge could only apply to those churches in the Middle East which were established by Western missions. The role of the Eastern churches long established in the Middle East is clearly overlooked. This was not the only sense in which the study had ideas about Israel that were clearly at odds with the Palestinian perception of reality. Consider the Anglican Canon Naim Ateek, who himself belongs to a church that emerged from a Western mission. His complaint is not that this mission failed to teach the above-mentioned new understanding of Israel, but that Palestinian Christians are victims of Western antisemitism in the second degree:

Furthermore, Western antisemitism, culminating in the atrocities of the Holocaust in the early 1940s, helped speed up the process of Jewish immigration to Palestine and heightened the urgency of creating a Jewish homeland.²³

Ateek is exceptional among Palestinians in accepting the creation of the State of Israel as a haven for the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, although he is not exceptional in seeing no other justification for its creation:

It was the Holocaust and only the Holocaust that necessitated the creation of a home for the Jews.²⁴

Despite the humane flavor of this statement, by saying "and only" Ateek also underestimates the permanency of antisemitism, whether before or after the Holocaust. By this logic, the State of Israel should not become the haven of future victims of other outbursts of antisemitism, or at least not unless they reach the severity of the Holocaust. This would exclude, for instance, the post-perestroika influx of Jews from the Soviet Union, although fear of resurgent antisemitism is certainly the strongest force behind it. Not coincidentally, Palestinian moderates have had difficulty in explaining whether they are opposed

22. Ibid, pp. 39f.

23. *Justice and Only Justice*, p. 104.

24. Ibid, p. 169.

to this immigration as such or merely to the possibility that some of the immigrants might end up in the West Bank or Gaza.

Ateek tries to develop a way of interpreting the Bible that would enable him to deny any theological basis for seeing a connection between today's Jewish People, as the continuation of biblical Israel, and the Land of Israel.²⁵ He seeks to discern in the course of biblical history a development from a particularistic to a universalistic image of God. Parallel is the change of the meaning of the "chosen land" from the particular, the biblical Land of Israel, to the universal, the whole world. The concept of a "chosen people" is similarly dealt with.

As another reason to deny any necessary link between the Jewish People and the Land of Israel, Ateek refers to the Old Testament notion that the Land belongs to God, whereas the Israelites are its stewards who risk being vomited out if they are disobedient to God's commandments. This argument, of course, was long used by Christian theologians, starting from the early Church Fathers, to claim that the Jews had been sent into permanent exile because they failed to accept their Messiah. It is, however, precisely one of the achievements of recent Western church statements that they reflect the fact that the very same biblical passages that threaten Israel with exile, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–30, also contain the promise of eventual return from exile.

The Church Fathers at least acknowledged and even emphasized that Jesus and the first Christians were Jews, since otherwise the Church could not have seen itself as having inherited the Old Testament and the role of being God's People. Ateek prefers to call them Palestinians:

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, was baptized in the Jordan River.... Therefore, the first witnesses to the Resurrection were Palestinians; the Church was born in Palestine as the early disciples and followers of Jesus were Palestinians.... The Palestinian Christians of today are the descendants of those early Christians, yet this is no cause for hubris.²⁶

This is an attempt to impose a non-biblical terminology upon the biblical account. In the New Testament as in the Old, the proper name of the country is "the Land of Israel" (Matthew 2:20). The official name "Palestine" was introduced by Hadrian at the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–135 C.E., in order to obliterate the connection with the Jewish People suggested by "Judea," the previous official name for the whole Roman province. The Gospels leave no doubt that the early Church was Jewish, and in the rest of the New Testament one of the major issues is how non-Jews can fit into a community whose leadership is acknowledged to be Jewish (e.g., Acts 15) and does not see itself as having separated from the faith of other Jews. For example, this leadership still participated in the temple worship, as related in Acts 21.

The lineage claimed by Ateek for Palestinian Christians is open to at least as many doubts as those which he casts upon the lineage of today's Jewish People. Of course, there is no reason to dispute the deep affection of Palestinian Christians for the Holy Land, just as everyone should respect the Jewish

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–114.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

love for the Promised Land. In his writings, however, Ateek displays a similar “obsession with real estate” to the one he dislikes in the Jewish State.²⁷ Despite his principle of evolution from the particular to the universal, he seems to have replaced the Promised Land of the Jews with the Holy Land of Palestinian Christianity. Likewise, the Jewish People have been replaced as the legal inheritors of the Land by the Palestinians and — through their claimed lineage — by Palestinian Christians in particular.

As Ateek insists, Palestinian Christians played no role in the pogroms in the last decades of the Russian Empire that provoked waves of Jewish emigration. It should not be overlooked, however, that Russian and Palestinian Christianity both stem from Byzantine Christianity. St. John Chrysostom, one of the most revered saints in Palestinian Christianity, is also known for his severely anti-Judaic sayings. Thus there is no reason for Palestinian Christians to be immune to anti-Jewish or antisemitic biases.

On November 14, 1988, the General Synod of the NRC, in discussing proposals for a new formulation of the relation of Church and Israel in the Church Order, decided to install a “Commission for Reconsideration” of *Israel: People, Land and State*. The Commission is expected to reflect upon the faithfulness of God to His People, while taking into account the voice of the Christians in the Middle East. Time will tell how thoroughly it will go into the issues, including those raised above.

Although much argument preceded the initial adoption of *Israel: People, Land and State*, it may prove even more difficult to reach a broad consensus today. As an example of the present divergence of views, Dutch theologians involved in Jewish–Christian dialogue openly deplored the fact that the two delegations from the Netherlands Council of Churches sent to visit Israel/Palestine in 1984 and 1989 eschewed any discussion with Palestinian Christians on replacement theology, God’s everlasting promises and the meaning of the Land. Moreover, it was objected, delegates who were members of the NRC gave the impression of a factual denial of the clear position taken by their church in the past.

3. Voice of the Jews

The statement *Israel: People, Land and State* in 1970 was not received without criticism from either the Christian or the Jewish side. One of the authors, Dr. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, responded:

The statement should surely **not** serve as material for discussion between Christians and Jews, but as a starting point for reflection among Christians. Here it is spoken about the Jewish People proceeding from Christ; the way in which this people understands itself plays no role in that, or only indirectly. Formulated more bluntly, one could say: A Jew could never as a Jew accept this Reformed statement. If he fundamentally agreed with it, he should become a Christian.²⁸

27. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

28. Her response originally appeared in Dutch in *Christus en Israël*, a periodical of the Catholic Council for Israel of the St. Willibrord Association in Driebergen. It was

This manner of responding to critics is questionable, as the statement drew heavily on passages of the Torah and the Prophets in expressing criticism of the People of Israel. Since the christological reading of the Old Testament was involved only indirectly, there was surely a considerable employment of what the statement's authors supposed to be a Jewish self-understanding, especially when the criticisms were directed at today's Jews in the State of Israel. Jews also dispute the authority of any Church to apply special standards to the Jewish State, as in the following "bluntly formulated" passage:

Because of the special place in which by divine decree the Jews stand, the State of Israel has a dimension of its own. The election of the people implies the vocation to realize their peoplehood in an exemplary way. Therefore, the State also has to be exemplary. Israel is called to live in its State in such a manner that a new understanding of what a state is, is enacted before the eyes of other peoples. But those who among Israel plead for this exemplary existence find little response at the present time. In the State also there is manifest the brokenness and ambiguity to which the entire history of the Jewish people witnesses.²⁹

Many Jews do share a utopian view of the Jewish State. The worldwide Jewish press is constantly criticizing all Israeli governments according to such norms. Most of these Jewish critics, however, do not accept that Churches or Christians should act as "judge or divider" over the State, let alone apply stricter standards to Jews than to non-Jews. Evidently, the authors of the statement failed to recognize sufficiently that after many centuries in which Christians were guilty of anti-Jewish biases, Christians have to speak modestly when they raise theological accusations against Jews. Christians may be correct in discerning an occasion for criticism, but they have lost the right to "formulate it bluntly."

Israel: People, Land and State measured Israel by the ideal of the Jewish State, and thus already trod on dangerous ground. The Commission for Inter-Church Aid of the NRC made itself the "judge or divider" in its *Policy Document*.³⁰ Unlike the authors of *Israel: People, Land and State*, InterChurch Aid listened carefully to the voices of Palestinian Christians. Just like those authors, however, they overlooked the variety of Jewish voices in Israel and elsewhere.

The "Commission for Reconsideration" has not been asked to listen to Jewish self-understanding in reconsidering the meaning of the State of Israel. But since it is expected to listen more to Palestinian theology, which continually denies Jewish perspectives, its findings could well question even the relative need for the Jewish State admitted in *Israel: People, Land and State*.

One member of the "Commission for Reconsideration" might seem to be open to Jewish voices, having recommended one Jewish author, Marc H. Ellis. However, Ellis and his book,³¹ which Naim Ateek cites in support of his own

translated into German in *Freiburger Rundbrief* 23 (1971), 17–19, quotation from p. 18.

29. *Stepping Stones*, pp. 104f.

30. Op. cit., note 18 above.

31. *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, 1987).

views,³² is not representative of any major or even minor stream of actual Jewish thought on the question of the Land or the State of Israel.

The fact that Jewish self-understanding has to be taken into account, as was proposed to the General Synod of the NRC in June 1986, ought to be evident in the 1990s. Moreover, the basic outlines of the self-understanding of the great majority of Jews, as opposed to idiosyncratic views of unrepresentative individuals and tiny sects like the Natorei Karta, are well known to Christians who have engaged seriously in Christian-Jewish dialogue. The topic was discussed in the report of the Council for the Relationship between the Church and Israel to the General Synod in June 1986. An appendix presented the following considerations of its Theological Advisor in Jerusalem:

The starting point of every reflection on the State of Israel has to be the Jewish self-understanding. Inseparably, the three following points belong together: *Am Yisrael* — the People of Israel; *Torat Yisrael* — the Torah of Israel; *Eretz Yisrael* — the Land of Israel. In this regard, there is no difference between the religious and the non-religious Jew. Their interpretation of one or more of the three may differ, but that does not diminish the essence of their relatedness. In God's promise, the three are linked together. Only if mutually connected, can each of the three be fulfilled. The lack of one of the three means a hiatus in the realization of the Covenant.³³

The discussion at the Synod revealed that many of its members were unaware of the internal debate within the Jewish — and even the religious Jewish — community about the details of the relationship among People, Land and Torah. A majority knew only of extreme nationalistic viewpoints. To fill this gap in information, the present author subsequently wrote a book providing "insight into the meaning of the Land,"³⁴ describing a broad spectrum of religious views — Christian as well as Jewish — on the Land and State of Israel. Three main groups of views can be distinguished.

Palestinian Christians, generally speaking, still adhere to the replacement theology that many Western church statements have officially rejected. They believe that the Jews, by rejecting Jesus as their Messiah, have lost the identity as Israel, and that that prerogative now belongs to the Church. The return of Jews to establish the State of Israel, no matter how successfully, is dismissed as merely new evidence of Jewish disobedience to God. This is superficially similar to the views of the Natorei Karta and the Satmar hasidim, who denounce Zionism as a sinful anticipation of the task reserved by God exclusively for the Messiah. Even these Jews, however, maintain that God will restore Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel at His own appointed time.

At the other extreme, Christian Zionists view the State of Israel as one of the last stages of history before the second coming of Christ. They share the messianic zeal of those religious Jewish groups which see in the establishment of

32. In *Justice and Only Justice*. Marc Ellis was also the only Jew invited to contribute to a recent seminar on liberation theology, organized in Jerusalem by Palestinian theologians.

33. See Geert H. Cohen Stuart, *Land Inzicht: Inzichten in het theologisch denken over het land en de staat Israël* (Kampen, 1989), p. 129.

34. Op. cit., previous note.

the State of Israel an undoubted sign of the imminent coming of the Messiah, long expected by all religious Jews.

In between is a third group: those Jews³⁵ and Christians who regard the establishment of the State of Israel as a possibility for the Jewish People to realize its full identity by creating the right balance among *Am Yisrael*, *Torat Yisrael* and *Eretz Yisrael*.³⁶ They realize that the experiment of creating the State of Israel has staved off the threats to the very existence of the Jewish People that were posed by genocidal antisemitism and the attractions of assimilation. Thus, failure of the experiment could even lead to the end of the Jewish People. Religious Jews in this group try to pursue the experiment according to the critical standards of the Torah and the Prophets.

The Jewish People, forced by the increasingly unbearable burden of antisemitism, took a tremendous risk by establishing the Jewish State before being healed of the trauma and scars left by the Holocaust. While Western Christians are not asked to condone injustices done by any party in the Middle East, neither are they authorized to act as “judge or divider.” They should refrain from pedantry in addressing any of the parties in the conflict, being aware that feelings of superiority over Palestinian Christians may not yet be overcome, and that deep-rooted anti-Jewishness still persists in their churches and countries. By keeping to these guidelines, they might eventually be seen by both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Christians as reconciling mediators rather than merely partisans of one side or the other.

Although *Israel: People, Land and State* may have shortcomings by today’s perspectives, it takes its place with *Nostra Aetate* and the 1980 declaration of the Synod of the Protestant Church of the Rheinland³⁷ as a document that has commanded respect and exerted influence far outside the church that issued it. “Reconsideration” of it may bring some improvements, but it could also undermine the status of a historic document.

Time will tell how the “Commission of Reconsideration” will fulfill its task. For the sake of the future of all peoples in the Middle East, let us hope that it will be inspired by the modesty, as well as the concern, that characterized the telegram sent in 1988 by the NRC to the President of the State of Israel on the fortieth anniversary of Israel’s independence:

As the Netherlands Reformed Church, we thankfully remember that forty years ago your people, “as a brand plucked from the fire,” could declare its own state, which in one of the synagogical prayers is called “the beginning of the sprouting of our redemption.”

Convinced that in the existence of the State of Israel, the Eternal has given a sign of His faithfulness in this world, we see with concern and awareness of co-responsibility what impedes your state and your people in the cultivation of this still very vulnerable “sprout”:

35. See, for example, the view of David Hartman in this volume.

36. Palestinian Christians commonly call also Christians in this third group “Christian Zionists.” However, most Christians in this group would reject this designation. Indeed, they and the self-styled Christian Zionists of the second group have relatively few mutual contacts.

37. English translation as “Toward Renovation of the Relationship of Christians and Jews,” *More Stepping Stones*, pp. 207–209.

- the deep-rooted hatred of Jews
- outspoken enmity within the international community
- the unsolved struggle for a legitimate place for the Palestinian people
- the mutual oppositions that go together with the internal struggle about the character and the future of your state.

In virtue of our faith in the God of Israel, who through Jesus Christ is our God as well, we hope and pray that together with your people we may continue to seek for justice and a just peace for the world and for the Middle East in particular.

Immanuel 22/23