

# Jews and Christians\*

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## Abstract

*This review article of the collection of essays edited by M Van Campen and G C den Hertog deals with the question of the relationship between Jews and Christians. The publication, *Israël, volk, land en staat*, by the Centre for Israel Studies in the Netherlands is discussed. This article also summarises and comments on the views in the publication regarding the need for a dialogue between Christians and Jews, the election of Israel, its identity and alienation, the role of history and the meaning of the land and the State of Israel.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The events in Israel over the last decade of the twentieth century were the reason that Christians gradually felt diminishing loyalty to the Jews and the State of Israel. Sympathy for the Palestinians made orthodox Protestants reflect once again on their relationship with the Jews. Against this background, the *Centrum voor Israëlstudies* (Centre for Israel Studies = CIS) based at Ede in the Netherlands, published a collection of essays in 2005 on the Jewish-Christian encounter. Brought together by the editors M van Campen and GC den Hertog under the title *Israël, volk, land en staat. Terugblik en perspectief* (Israel, people, country and state. Retrospective and perspective) these essays deal with various aspects of the dialogue between Jews and Christians. CIS has in its service different action groups to advance its aims to maintain a discourse with Jews. The group *Theologische Bezinning* (Theological Reflection) was responsible for this particular book. This article summarises the arguments in this publication and comments on these by referring to other studies on the same subject.

The book is in essence a discussion of the *Handreiking (Advice) Israël, volk, land en staat* (Israel, people, country and state) issued by the synod of the Nederlands Hervormde Kerk (The Reformed Church in the Netherlands) back in 1970. The full text of the advice is printed in the third chapter (pages

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\* Review article: Van Campen, M & Den Hertog, G C (red) 2005. *Israël, volk, land en staat: Terugblik en perspectief*. Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum.

53-78). Seven people, most from academic institutions in the Netherlands, contributed to the book. In the first two chapters the historical background, design, eventual publication and contents of the Advice is expounded by Van Campen and Van der Meulen. In the fourth chapter Van der Meulen discusses the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the document, indicating how and why this document became outdated after 35 years. In the next two chapters Paul and Hoek analyse the biblical and theological hermeneutics found in the Advice. In the penultimate chapter Den Hertog investigates the ethical implications of the document. Van Campen summarises the contributions to this publication in the last chapter and provides some doctrinal guidelines to elucidate the present position of the CIS.

## **2. A CONTINUING DIALOGUE**

Christianity is deeply rooted in Judaism in its history and its theology. From the outset, however, the relationship between Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity was severely strained. This tension was manifested time and again in many forms through the centuries.

A new era dawned in this relationship on 14 May 1948 when Israel was established as an independent State in the Middle East. For many centuries the spiritual view had prevailed that notions of the “Promised Land”, “Chosen People”, “Jerusalem” and “Zion” were detached from all contemporary political associations. This view suddenly confronted the reality of the return of Israelis to *Eretz Jisrael* and the new state of “Israel” governed from the Knesset. The Israelis living in the same land as the biblical Israel, keeping the same scriptures and seeing themselves as the direct continuation of Biblical Israel, posed a challenge to the Christian church. The new state of Israel demanded theological reflection on the meaning of what was happening in the land previously called Canaan or Palestine. If this state of Israel was indeed the continuation of the Biblical Israel, the concept of God’s dealing with the world could no longer be viewed as a mere ideological exercise. God’s acts seemed to be closely related to the factual history of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. In particular, world opinion reacted against the Six Days War of 1967 in the Golan Heights and the resulting occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. At the fourth meeting of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in July 1968, the resolution on the “Statement on the Middle East” was taken.

As a direct result of the World Council’s resolution of 1968 and in continuation of the local debate, the General Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church appointed an *ad hoc* committee in 1969 to draw up an advice on the theological meaning of the State of Israel. The committee

members had to reflect on the question of whether the State of Israel presented any dimension of faith to the Christian church. The Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 provoked extensive discussions in the Netherlands. During the 1960s the subjects “people”, “land” and “State” were widely debated.

The *ad hoc* committee submitted its first draft report at the next meeting of the Synod in February 1970. This draft was mainly based on Romans 9-11. The committee saw “alienation” and “identity” as the keywords in this passage. Although the people of Israel had alienated themselves from God, the Lord was faithful and enabled Israel to continue its identity. Those who rejected the present State of Israel resisted God’s plans.

This report was criticised in many respects by another committee appointed to advise the Synod on the viability of the *ad hoc* committee’s report. The idea of continuity was categorically rejected because the committee’s study did not account for the Second Coming (parousia) of Jesus Christ. In the ensuing discussion at the meeting of the Synod, the members agreed with the comments of the second committee that the aspect of discontinuity had been neglected. The Synod members at the meeting also objected to the idea that those who rejected the modern State of Israel opposed the will of God. The two committees were requested to rewrite the draft report jointly and give their attention to the various comments made about the report during the Synod meeting.

The revised report was accepted at the next Synod meeting held from 15-17 June 1970. Refinements were added to the concepts of continuity-discontinuity. The unconditional acceptance of Jesus Christ was stated more clearly, attention was given to the role of Jerusalem and to the country in evaluating the present State of Israel. The judgement against those who did not accept the State of Israel as God’s will was also rescinded. Amid widespread public reaction to the report, the final draft was sent to the congregations of the church as a *Handreiking voor een theologische bezinning* (Advice for a theological reflection).

The socio-historic context of the 1970s strongly influenced the content of the Advice. The reaction to the Shoah tended to favour the Jews. Christians were hesitant about criticising the events in Israel. The viewpoints of individual members of the appointed committees also had a marked effect on the Advice. In particular, H Berkhoff’s views on history and theology had an undeniable influence on the design and formulation of the Advice.

At the time of the present publication, the world’s attitude to the Jews seems to be changing. The original deep compassion for the Jews, including guilt for their suffering during World War II, is apparently turning into

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compassion for the oppressed Palestinians as the underdogs. Anti-Semitism, still active in the world, and the escalating violence in the Middle East, have shifted the focus on the role of the Palestinians and the fate of Christian Arabians in the Middle East. Two Intifadas, militant movements among Palestinians, the removal of so-called "settlers" from occupied areas and the endless bomb explosions have combined to change the scene in Israel completely. The theological scenario in Europe has also changed. In a time when theology no longer has room for a God who acts in history (cf Den Hertog 2005:217), it is necessary to reflect anew on the relations between Christians and Jews. In view of these developments, the Centre for Israel Studies undertook a study of the Advice of 1970 and its *Nachwirkungs-geschichte*. The results of their study are presented in this publication.

The issue addressed here is not only as old as the Christian church itself, but is also an ongoing problem worldwide. There is no Christian church in the world that can avoid reflecting on its relationship with the Jews. The Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel too. Christianity shares a large part of its scriptures with the Jews. Not only the State of Israel but also the mere existence of Jews as neighbours living next door to Christians everywhere in the world, makes it inevitable that the church has to reflect on its relationship with this group which calls itself the Chosen People of God. As will be shown below, this reflection considers the practical arrangement between two related religious factions, and ultimately also contemplates the true identity of the Christian church itself.

### **3. ELECTION**

#### **3.1 Reflection on election**

The central thesis in both the original Advice and the contributions in this publication is that God always remains faithful to Israel. According to the Advice, God's fidelity is linked to God's election of Israel, giving it a unique identity. This identity was expressed in three integrated moments: receiving God's revelation, living in the land God promised them and the universal meaning of this land promised to them.

The notion of election forms one of the central pillars in the theological reflections represented in this publication. In each and every contribution the conviction is stated and reiterated that God chose Israel. This choice or election plays a central role in the Jew's self-evaluation. The Torah is the symbol and the proof of Israel's election. The theme of election occurs in all of Israel's confessions.

This election endures forever. Because the election is squarely based on God's fidelity, nothing will ever bring it to an end. Although the Jews

rejected God's prophets and his Messiah who died on the cross, they will always be God's Chosen People (cf Ac 3:19-20 and Rm 9-11). The continuation of the election does not depend in any way on Israel's acts. The election is still valid today. Modern Jews are still part of God's Chosen People. According to the Advice and the view point of the members of the CIS, God's election of Israel is demonstrated in the homecoming of the Jews to their land. The signs of God's election can still be seen in the law-abiding attitude of orthodox Jews, their interest in their land and even in the phenomenon of anti-Semitism. God's election is real and tangible and can be observed in modern history.

The idea of substitution is consistently rejected. The church never replaced Israel as God's Chosen People. Even alternative forms of the replacement idea, such as if Israel came to an end, individual Jews would have to be converted, or that only a remainder of the Jews would take part in the final eschatological events, are completely unacceptable to the propagandists of the election approach. These propagandists completely repudiate any minimalising or individualising which does not take account of the Jews as a collective unit.

In the reflection on the Advice, it became clear that the notion of election was no longer sufficient to describe this unique relation between God and Israel (cf Paul 2005:127-132). The relation between the Old and New Testaments has not been sufficiently accounted for in the Advice. Alternative notions such as a covenant were probably avoided because a covenant has a reciprocal nature and might indicate a condition of obedience and denigrate the idea of free will. Old Testament research during the time when the Advice was written in the late 1960s related the Pentateuch to the sources of the Yahwist, Elohist and Priestly Codex, and at that time the idea of covenant was regarded as a post-exilic development.

The focus therefore shifted in the later reflection on the Advice to the use of the complementary notion of covenant. The later feeling was that God's covenant with Abraham and his covenant with Moses at Sinai had not received enough attention in the Advice. It can be deduced from 2 Corinthians 3 and Hebrews 8 that the Sinaitic covenant is regarded as a thing of the past. The covenant with Abraham, however, is not over yet. The new covenant indicated in Jeremiah 31 and 33 intends that this covenant with Abraham should continue, and confirms God's eternal relationship with Israel. According to Paul (2005:127-132) more can be made of the Abraham covenant to describe Israel's position before God.

### **3.2 The American Interfaith Institute**

In 1987 the American Interfaith Institute in Philadelphia convened a congress on the dialogues between Christians and Jews. Murphy's (1993:172-180) contribution to the congress presented the notion "fear of the Lord" to facilitate the dialogue. Broadening his investigation to all of the Tanakh, including the wisdom literature, he expounded on Israel's experience of the numinous God. The expression "fear of God" is used in the Old Testament as a keyword for this experience of the *mysterium* of God as *fascinosum* as well as *tremendum*, joy and fear (cf Murphy 1993:176). In the light of this expression, Murphy (1993:180) views "the entire Tanakh/Old Testament as a bond of union between Jews and Christians, provided that it is interpreted on its own terms".

What is important here is that Murphy not only broadens the theological basis for the dialogue between Jews and Christians to all of the Old Testament, providing "fear of God" as one further term next to election and covenant for the relation between God and his people, but that he also shifts the focus to the mutual ground between God and Israel. In orthodox protestant thinking about the Advice and its continuing reflections in the Netherlands, "revelation" plays an overwhelming role. God's attributes are the revealed characteristics of God which unfortunately become eternal dogmas. God's attributes are divine entities sharing his eternity. They are not the notions people use when they endeavour to say something about the way in which God is experienced, but are entities existing even if God is not revealed to men. Election is something eternal that not even God can change. God's election of Israel can never be revoked, not even by God. This is corrected by Murphy. His theology shifts the focus to the human experience of God's revelation. Terms such as "fear of God", "election", "covenant", are all human notions used in an attempt to formulate some idea of this inexplicable relation between God and men. These terms are never substitutes for God, nor do they have the same eternal, divine attributes that God has. These and all other terms used in the Bible are mere notions to put into words the relationship between God and people. However, conveying unalterable eternal divine meaning from God in the form of notions describing the way people experience God is tantamount to deifying relational concepts. Using a term with its inherent semantic field of discrimination, choice and preference to link it to a specific group called "Israel" means making God a servant of his own choice. In other words, using this term to sanction the idea that present-day Jews still remain the same Israelites to whom God is bound for all time and eternity, is to diminish if not totally deny God's sovereignty.

The theological scheme used in the Advice is only one theological design among the many others used for describing the theology of the Old

Testament or Bible. Murphy's contribution indicates that it is virtually impossible for a theology, which tries to pronounce who God is and what his relationship with his people means, to describe these elements solely in terms of the notion of election. Even a broadening of this theology to other notions such as a covenant still does not suffice. This theology should be extended to include all of the Old Testament, as Murphy does. The members of the CIS do not seem to be keeping track of the research done on Old Testament Theology elsewhere. Moreover, if Christians want to converse with Jews about the scriptures, they ought to know what is going on in their own research, as well as what Jewish theological interpreters such as Michael Fishbane and Jon D Levenson are doing (cf Brueggemann 1997:93-95). A critical shortcoming in this publication of the CIS is its obvious lack of knowledge about recent Biblical research.

## **4. IDENTITY AND ALIENATION**

### **4.1 Election and the history of the Middle East**

The unique relationship between God and Israel gave Israel its identity. This identity totally depends on God's election of and his covenant with Israel. To live as God's Chosen People demands that Israel should receive God's revelation, live in the Promised Land in a holy community and have universal meaning for all the peoples of the world (cf Paul 2005:131-133). Israel was, however, unfaithful to its identity. This is explained in the Advice and shown in the resulting reflections as a process in which Israel became alienated from its election and its identity. It is stressed time and again in this publication of the CIS that God did not cancel his election of Israel because of the Israelites' alienation. Their election and resulting identity depend solely on God's decision. Because God's election is as eternal as He is, they remained God's Chosen People despite their alienation. Although they rejected the Christ of God, the Jews are still God's Chosen People.

The Advice's firm conviction that Israel's election was never cancelled is based on Romans 9-11. In this passage "alienation" and "identity" are the keywords. The continuation of Israel's identity depends upon God's grace, not the Israeli people's decisions. Although they are alienating themselves from this election, there are still signs of the true identity of the Jewish people. This can be seen *inter alia* in their return to the land promised to Israel and their fidelity to the Torah. Their unique existence has always been a sign of God's care for his people.

In his reflection on the Advice, Van Campen (2005:230-231) comments that balanced attention was not given in the Advice to the bipolarity between

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Israel's fidelity to her identity and her people's alienation from their identity. The identity was stressed too much and too little was said about their rejection of Jesus and the deep schism it caused. Van der Meulen's (2005:79-123) analysis of the *Nachwirkung* of the Advice indicates that between 1970 and the present there has been a shift away from Jewish sympathy (i.e. identity) towards Palestinian sympathy. What Van der Meulen (2005:91-105) calls a *dubbel spoor* (double track) developed in the 1980s. Political developments in the Middle East, such as the first Intifada in 1987 and the constitution of the Palestinian State on 15 November 1987, drew attention to the fate of the Palestinians, especially the fate of the Christian Palestinians. In its "Confessional Note on the Middle East" the Commission World Deaconate of the Netherlands Reformed Church proposed a dual solidarity, in which dialogue would be initiated with the Jews as well as the Christian Middle East Council of Churches. In 1995 the same commission presented a document studying the fate of the Palestinians and Christians in the Middle East. This document includes biblical studies on Deuteronomy 7:1-11, the book of Joshua, Romans 15:7-13 and Ephesians 2:11-22, as well as an overview of history of the Jews and the Palestinians.

The document of 1995 reveals an obvious prejudice against the Jews and a favouring of the Palestinians. In reaction to this, a far more nuanced debate was presented on the Israelite-Palestinian-Arabic conflict in a note by the Service Organisation of the *Samen op Wegkerken* (Together on the Way Churches) in September 2003. Neither a pro-Israeli nor a pro-Palestinian position was advocated. Any hint of "dual loyalty" to both the Jewish and the Palestinian people was avoided. Instead, the debate was intended to encourage a critical dialogue in solidarity with both the Jews and the different churches in the Middle East. The relationship to the two groups is, however, of a totally different order. The church has indissoluble links to Israel, based on God's election of the people of Israel. By contrast, the church can defend the Palestinians' right to an independent existence as a nation. Van der Meulen (2005:117-121) states that this balanced approach will avoid two pitfalls. On the one hand, it rejects all efforts to detach Israel from its concrete, historical basis, which would through substitution transform it into a mere symbol. On the other hand, it prevents the Palestinians from becoming the favoured folk of the church, simply because they are regarded as being oppressed.

Van der Meulen (2005:121-122) remarks that the original theological vision of Israel, people, land and State, as formulated in the Advice, gradually fell into disfavour. Ever-diminishing numbers of theologians keep to the original Israel theology of the Advice. This shift is due not only to the changing political circumstances in the Middle East, but also to a change in theology in



the rest of the world. In addition to several other reasons mentioned by Den Hertog (2005:198-224), the trend of abusing religion as a basis for laying claims to the justice of political demands can also be identified as one of the reasons for this change in theological attitudes. Van der Meulen (2005:117-120) points out how opposite groups in the Middle East sanction the position they take by means of biblical authorisation for their claims. This makes it virtually impossible to justify taking sides in the Middle East conflict.

The Advice states that another issue also plays a role in the dialogue between Christians and Jews. It is not only Israel which is alienating itself from its identity, the Christian church is also doing so. Jews and Christians alike are characterised by the phenomenon of alienation. Albeit in different ways, both groups are guilty of not really fulfilling their calling. Both groups depend upon God's election and loyalty (cf Van Campen & Den Hertog 2005:77-78).

Paul (2005:124-144) refers to the viewpoint in the Advice that Jesus' meaning was different for the Jews than for the other nations. Paul mentions that Jesus called the Jews to return to their God, whereas He called the nations to a faith totally new in history. As long as the final fulfilment is still outstanding, the difference between the Jews and the rest of the world will continue. The emphasis in the Advice on the meaning of Israel for the peoples of the world is contradicted by Paul (Paul 2005:143-144), nor does it represent the major trend of the Old Testament (Gn 12:3). Israel's isolation, the turning of other nations towards Israel and prayers against other nations indicate other emphases. On the one hand, this has practical implications for the Jews' relationship to Christianity. On the other hand, if the church accepts the enduring position of Israel as God's people, it has serious consequences for Biblical interpretation, for preaching and for recognising God's hand in the present.

#### **4.2 The American Interfaith Institute and some other opinions**

Jews and Christians share common religious elements but each group expresses them in profoundly different ways. Among these are faith in the God who chose Israel with irrevocable love, a vocation to holiness, the veneration of sacred Scripture, the prayer of tradition, obedience to moral law, responsibility for creation and the good of all humanity (cf Martini 1990:24). Dialogue between Christians and Jews has been stimulated and changed in several ways since Auschwitz (cf Venter 1999:533-562). The moral credibility of Christianity was severally challenged by the abhorrent events of the Shoah. The results of the idea of *Mitschuld* or common guilt for the horrors of the Holocaust, were that a new theological discussion with the Jews was called for, and also that Christianity was challenged "... not simply to demythologize

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the Christian tradition but to deideologize it – to overcome its super-sessionist elitism” (Eckardt 1990:155).

The American Interfaith Institute identified three areas which need urgent attention: Anti-Semitism, a hegemonic attitude and alienation from reality.

Anti-Semitism can be blamed for the Holocaust and for all the other pogroms of Jews through the centuries, yet it is also a self-destructive tendency in Christianity. Brueggemann (1997:8) asserts that the differences between Jews and Christians at a cultural, historical and political level are “... propelled by Christian hegemony and domination, which has produced not only anti-Semitism and super-sessionist interpretation, but also a serious misconstrual of our own tradition”. As a result of this hegemonic attitude, Christianity has become alienated not only from its basic roots, but also from reality. The assumption is that Christ’s triumphant resurrection has moved the church beyond the realm of human history and that Christianity is superior to all other religious faiths. In its eschatological fixation, the church has lost contact with present reality. It seems to have longed to be saved from history. There is an accusation that this religion arising from the resurrection of Christ is not itself able to rise above the immorality it shares with all other religions. As Eckardt (1990:165) bluntly states: “The authentication ... that the resurrection of Jesus cannot in fact embody eschatological fulfilment, even a fragmentary realization, lies in that event’s contribution to the deaths of millions of human beings, including great numbers of small children.”

In his contribution to the conferences of the Interfaith Institute Pawlikowsky (1993:159) proposes the “re-Judaisation” of the New Testament. A return to concrete historical methodology in theology would have a strong effect on the contemporary Christian-Jewish dialogue, as well as on the church’s self-awareness and its basic self-identity (cf Pawlikowsky 1993:165). Christian theology will have to study the Old Testament in its own right and not merely as a backdrop to the New Testament. As can be seen in the constructive use of the Old Testament by certain liberation theologians, the “New Testament remains inadequate in outlook in some areas when taken by itself as the basis of Christian faith” (Pawlikowsky 1993:157). Jesus cannot be detached from his authentic Jewish context or his concrete ties to biblical and Second Temple Judaism. The Jewish covenant was not a mere preparatory stage nor summarily displaced in the words and works of Jesus, but was the context in which his salvation occurred. Moreover, it is erroneous to assume a certain basic homogeneity in first-century Judaism. The studies of Smith (1990:76-96) and Culpepper (1993:21-43) of the Gospel of John indicate that the Jews referred to in this gospel are in fact only a sector of the first-century community. Smith (1990:82) defines “the Jews” in Johannine literature as “...

a term used of a group of *Jewish leaders* who exercise great authority among their compatriots and are especially hostile to Jesus and his disciples". For Culpepper (1993:37) the term "the Jews" is a "... term by which the Gospel of John characterizes both Jesus' opponents and the community's opponents".

A result of this "concrete historical methodology in theology" (Pawlikowsky 1993:165) is a greater awareness of reality in Christian theology. "After the Holocaust", states Pawlikowsky (1993:165), "neither a purely metaphysical approach to theology nor a mere emphasis on historical consciousness as abstract concept will suffice." Events such as the Holocaust and the emergence of the State of Israel assume central importance for both Jewish and Christian theology. Christians and Jews require greater sensitivity to historical reality and the intricate fabric of society in their dialogue with one another.

## **5. HISTORY**

### **5.1 The notion of history in CIS thinking**

The opinion is held throughout this publication of the CIS that God deals with real people on a real earth. The people of Israel and everything they have experienced and are experiencing are concrete proof of God's continued election. Although reality has many forms it can best be known and understood through the events that take place. The sequence of these events is known as history. History plays a central role in the theological deliberations in this book. A whole chapter (Hoek 2005:145-197) is dedicated to this subject.

God reveals himself in historical events. Reality experienced as a continuous line of events discloses who God really is and what He intends. In the events involving them, the Israelites experienced a God who elects, makes covenants and saves. Therefore they confessed in their theological narratives that God elected them among all nations, that He made covenants with them, that He saved them from all their tribulations. Israel's narrated history is the key theological notion in understanding and believing in God.

From this persuasion Hoek (2005:148-152) draws the conclusion that we still deal with the same God in the history of modern Israel. The physical Israel in its concrete, visible and tangible form is a relevant theological category in Christian thinking. The founding of the State of Israel has theological meaning. The land occupied by the State of Israel since 1948 is exactly the same real space as that indicated in the Bible. The Jewish people are an existing visible reality in whose lives still deal with the same God.

The supporters of the Advice blame those who focused on the discontinuity of Israel of Marcionitic or docetic spiritualising and ideologising of the relationship between God and his people. Van der Meulen (2005:89-92)

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points out that in the later debate on the Advice a substitution ideology was repeatedly used to claim that Israel became an indication for the utopian, messianic dimension of history. In recent years Israel has become the symbol for all those who are oppressed and suffering. Yet in the end this concept has become more of an indication of the Palestinians than the Jews in the State of Israel.

In Hoek's (2005:145-197) contribution, the role of history in the theologies of Barth, Miskotte, Marquardt, Van Ruler and especially Berkhoff is discussed. He indicates that Berkoff with his interest in history as a theological concept, as set out in his publication, *Christus der Zin der Geschiedenis* (Christ the sense of history) in 1958, was one of the driving forces behind the Advice and also the continuing debate. Berkoff sees all of history as a process in which God's plan of salvation is gradually unfolded. God directs history according to his will. God is on his way with his elected people towards the final consummation of his kingdom. At present two parallel trajectories can be found in God's history. The one is God's dealings with Israel and the other his history with the church. The Israel of the far past is continued in the church and in the elected Israel next to the church. Present Jews and biblical Israel are one continuing line and stand in a mutual covenantal relationship with the Lord. Within the present geographical and political dimensions, God is still loyal to his people, giving them the opportunity to form a modern State.

According to Hoek (2005:161-172) Berkhoff kept to his basic idea of a theology of history, but changed his view into a more "*von unten*" approach during the 1960s. Later on he was not as clear as previously about the issue of the land promised to Israel. He also fell silent about the issue of the State of Israel. The idea that God is going on a separate way with Israel implies that God has a concrete and realistic relation with Israel's history and people. As his evolutionist theology developed, Berkhoff had less to say about God's direct acts in history.

These tendencies are reflected in considerations about this issue in orthodox protestant circles. On the one hand the view is still held that God acts in history. God's election has an aspect of salvation as well as a dimension of salvation history. The continuing existence of the Jews proves the reality of God's actions in real history. The optimistic tone of the Advice regarding God's presence in historical events, however, was moderated by events such as Auschwitz. The Palestinian problem contributed in no small measure to the growing hesitation about the meaning of the events in the Middle East. Although caution should be exercised, "*lichtflitsen*" (glimpses – Van Campen 2005:237) of God's presence in history cannot be ignored. In Israel we are dealing with the "*raadsel der geschiedenis*" (mystery of history –

Van Campen 2005:237). The return of the Jews to the Promised Land cannot be understood in any other way than as a sign of God's fidelity. He fulfils the promises He made and is carrying out his plan of salvation for Israel. His hand is tangible and visible in the history of Israel. The founding of the State of Israel could therefore be interpreted as a sign of God's salvation in history. There are indeed clear human motivations to be seen in history. Nevertheless, faith must maintain that God's fidelity and the unchangeable election of Israel is present in and under all these confusions and doubtful motivations. God provided a new possibility for the Jewish people to live in the land He had promised to them. This should be understood as the fulfilment of God's promises.

The opposition to this viewpoint does not necessarily exclude reality. Since Buskes's critique in the 1970s (cf Van der Meulen 2005:82-83) a substitution tendency and also a universalising trend has been noted. A continuation of God's relationship with Israel is recognised, but this does not include the land or the State of Israel in any way. Jerusalem and Zion are temporal categories indicating God's final purpose for a world in which peace and righteousness will be found. In addition, Gerssen's (cf Van der Meulen 2005:84-85) reaction indicating that the term "Zion" is not understood as an indication of particularistic nationalism but in terms of our confession of Israel's God as Lord of history, indicates a spiritual and a political aspect which includes all of the world.

## 5.2 Other notions

Another alternative to the idea of revelation in history is that God is revealed primarily in his Name and not in history (cf Hoek 2005:179-182). The post-Auschwitz thinking departed from history and evolutionary thinking on world history. The thesis is: "We cannot read the Bible as history, but only as narratives on the history of a *dabar* coming from God." In human history the word-event, the word-act of God, pronounces what God says and activates what He intended. The truth of the Bible is totally different from the truth of history. Its truth is not to be conceptualised in terms of history, but in words and in the power of words.

A third alternative approach rejects the present and shifts all expectations to the future and a sphere outside the world. This approach leaves no room for any physical form of Israel in this world.

The real issue at stake here is the conceptualisations used in theology. The members of the CIS openly choose "history" as their mode of theologising. In the history of research, many studies have wrestled with the notion of history. The question has been asked time and again what the

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relationship is between reality or an event and the report or verbalising of those events. Since Hempel's investigations in the 1960s history has been understood as the combination of *facta* and *dicta*, real event and verbal report on that event. Pannenberg also worked with the unity of fact and meaning. Millard (1994) studied the way history is told in the Old Testament within its socio-historical context. He concluded that, in the Old Testament context, we are dealing with kerygmatic history that takes a theological perspective on events as a way of confessing the God of Israel.

Martens in his 1994 article, *The Oscillating Fortunes of "History" within Old Testament Theology*, investigates the different ways in which theology can be conceptualised, *inter alia* in terms of the notion of history. He concludes that history can be used as the primary but not as the exclusive category of theology. Other notions are also important when presenting the theology of the Old Testament.

The members of the CIS do not seem to have taken any notice of these investigations. Apparently history and reality are one and the same issue in their thinking. They could have benefited by studying other notions as well.

## **6. THE LAND AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL**

The Advice saw Israel's election as irrevocable. The possession of the land was an integral part of that election. God deals with concrete reality and the Chosen People could not fulfil their calling and election without a land of their own. As the election of the people remains forever in force, the relationship between people and land will also continue. Israel's possession of the Holy Land since 1948 was therefore the fulfilment of God's election. The existence of the State of Israel is a sign of God's loyalty. It indicates God's willingness to continue his election of Israel. But the boundaries of the State cannot be deduced from Biblical material. Israel should also be cautious of the difference between a viable living area on the one hand and the abuse of land as a power basis for military brutality on the other. Israel should practise righteousness and humanity towards the landless and deprived Arabs living among them.

The authors of the Advice written in 1970 did not seem to believe that Jerusalem has any particular theological function. The cultic service and the kingship were both related in the Old Testament to Jerusalem. As both of these were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, Jerusalem no longer has any theological meaning. The city now offers an invitation to a new form of political thinking, in terms of which many different people could live together in harmony.

Van der Meulen (2005:87-91) uses an *excursus* on Ms Flesseman-van Leer, one of the compilers of the original Advice, to illustrate the changes that

were made in the later reflections on these issues. Initially she defended the existence of the State of Israel. Although founding the State of Israel was the best practical option in 1948, the link between people and land had not changed with the coming of Christ. It is still valid. In 1982 she spoke again on the themes of people and land. Although the fact of the return of so many Jews to Israel may be abused for ideological purposes, it is also an undeniable fact that their return has theological relevance for Christians. Twenty years after the Advice, Flesseman-van Leer retracted her original opinion that the State of Israel has any theological significance. Although the return of the Jews can still be seen as sign of God's faithfulness, the justification for the State of Israel was abused for ideological reasons and for rigid Israeli politics.

Amid the spiralling violence in the Middle East and a growing empathy for the suffering of the displaced Palestinians, a decision was taken in 2001 that the church was inseparably linked to the people of Israel, but not necessarily to the State of Israel. To avoid the trap of sanctioning any group's position by giving them biblical authorisation in favour of their political ideology, a second decision was taken that the CIS should have relations with Jews as well as Palestinians, and that both groups should be urged to live in righteousness.

A shift in theological thinking took place in this decision-making process. Originally the election or the covenants were used to justify the Jews' occupation of the land of Israel. As time went by, humanitarian reasons gained greater importance. The Advice had already stated that Jews and Palestinians had a right to a safe national home. In the different essays in the publication, the contributors still confirm their belief that the land of Israel is linked to Israel's election as God's Chosen People. In contrast to the Advice, the contributors now differentiate between the relationship the people have with the land and the relationship they have with the State. Paul (2005:133-136) still sees the State of Israel as the most viable form to guarantee the existence of the people. This State is, however, not better in any regard than that of any other nation on earth. Israel should act responsibly towards the several thousand Palestinians in their midst. For purely political reasons, they should find a form of statehood that would guarantee their existence as well as the freedom of the non-Jewish residents in Israel. Jerusalem should become a laboratory where experiments could be done on different people of different faiths could live together in peace.

In the Advice the view is already stated that no theological grounds are necessary to accept the State of Israel. On humanitarian grounds, Israel is the elder brother who has the right to have land of his own. Having stated that we

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live in a time when theology no longer has any room for a God who acts in history, Den Hertog (2005:219-221) follows O'Donovan's political theology and proposes that a better starting point would be to reflect on the meaning that land has for every human being. According to Den Hertog (2005:222-224) the promise of a land in Eph 6:2-3 is valid for Jews as well as non-Jews. There is no room for absolute religious claims to the land. What is needed, therefore, are people who understand that the fifth commandment links the promise of land to the demand for peaceful co-existence. In Bonhoeffer's terms, man has the right to living space where he can live in peace. Only when this right is granted to all can a way be found to escape from the spiral of violence in the Middle East.

Den Hertog (2005:203-206) believes that God's promises can be directly linked to political realities. Israel should therefore be encouraged to keep the occupied areas. Den Hertog (2005:206-209) endorses Gersen's idea that the land is a sacramental gift, signifying the greater truth of what God wants for all the peoples of the earth. There is a natural relation between a nation and its land. Den Hertog (2005:217-221) follows O'Donovan's political theology to understand Israel's settlement of the land in terms of the political implications of the Christian message. It is the space God provided to enact his demand for righteousness in realistic everyday terms. Van Campen (2005:240-242) states that the Jews have a right to live in Eretz Israel, and so do the Palestinians. In some Jewish circles the idea is accepted that all of the area will only belong to God's people after the messiah has come. Meanwhile the Torah has to be followed, commanding Jews to live in compassion with and be righteous toward all other human beings.

Paul Dekar (1984) has an alternative opinion on the theological significance of the State of Israel. He studied three broad Christian approaches which try to understand the theological significance of the State of Israel. Neither dispensational prophetic approaches that interpret the State of Israel as a sign of the nearing end, nor interpretations that understand Israel in terms of the mysterious providence of God or in terms of the realisation of the responsibilities of the Jews to God, can provide any theological meaning. The legitimacy of the State of Israel "rests in historic and human rights recognized by the international community" (Dekar 1984:41). Although the Arab-Israeli conflict has ideological and religious dimensions, "any move which introduces theological categories or rationale to the peace process only make matters worse" (Dekar 1984:41). The solution will be political, not theological.

For Dekar (1984:44) the State of Israel compels Christians "to apply certain universal values to specific, concrete situations". One of these is the



question of Israel's occupation of the land. This question urges Christians "... to recover a healthy theology of geography within a land many consider holy" (Dekar 1984:44). Two other areas in which the State of Israel enables Christians "... to seek among Jews something essential to what it means to be Christian" (Dekar 1984:45) are the observance of the Sabbath and reflecting on the phenomenon of statehood in relation to the kingdom of God. So for Dekar the theological meaning of the dialogue with Jews is found in critical reflection on Christian identity, especially in terms of grappling with reality.

It seems as if members of the CIS has not taken notice of similar studies elsewhere in the world. Brueggemann has already offered a phenomenological perspective on what land meant to the people of Israel in 1977. Even at that stage Brueggemann (1977:190) pointed out that "... unless we address the land question with the Jews, we shall not likely understand the locus of meaning or the issue of identity." The dialogue with the Jews would benefit from including the notion of the land as one the biblical categories, and so would correcting our spiritualised interpretation of the Bible. Brueggemann (1977:193) mentions: "We have so interpreted the Bible away from its agenda and so focused on spiritual matters that we have not caught the power of its claim or the richness of its dialectic." The Bible presents a "storied place" (Brueggemann 1977:185), a faith not as a mere historical movement indifferent to place, but as a relationship to God embedded in the reality of terrestrial space and time. This theology of the land which Brueggemann offered ought to become an integral part of the Jewish-Christian conversation. Furthermore, Pawlikowsky (1993:170) remarks: "Though Christians and Jews may continue to disagree on some implications of the land tradition, its recovery by the churches will help the Christian community develop a new rootage in the earth and in the earth's history."

One final issue related to the reflection on the land is the development in CIS thinking about Jerusalem. Paul (2005:139-142) remarks that the question of the theological meaning of Jerusalem is not addressed in the Advice. It does not account for the role of Jerusalem in eschatological texts such as Zech 12-14, the role of the city in Acts, the letters of Paul, the collection made for the congregation in Jerusalem and the new Jerusalem descending from heaven in Revelations 21. Jerusalem has a far more eternal meaning than the Advice proposes. Van Campen (2005:234-236) suggests that Jerusalem should be made central to the reflection. Jerusalem is the symbol for the people as well as the land. It is not a mere sign of the future Jerusalem, but a sign of the future itself, in which it will play a central role. The Messiah will come to Jerusalem first and from there go to the heavenly Jerusalem.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The publication, *Israël, volk, land en staat*, represents a view from orthodox protestant circles in the Netherlands on the dialogue between Jews and Christians. It is clear from this publication that this is a multi-faceted issue which calls for reflection on several issues, such as biblical hermeneutics, Old Testament theology, Christian identity, history and realism. The publication reveals an unswerving conviction that Israel is elected by God. It also registers a shift in theological thinking, brought about by the political realities in the Middle East. A shortcoming found in the thinking of the contributors to the publication is a gross negligence in taking note of the research done elsewhere in the world. The members of the CIS can only benefit by enlarging their scope of investigation into the different areas of this expansive issue of dialogue between Jews and Christians.

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