Church of Scotland Shreds Bible

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The Kirk has committed theological suicide in order to promote political inanities. The former Church of Scotland is defunct; the Church of Latter Day Scots has taken over the premises.

At its recent General Assembly (May 18-24, 2013), the Church of Scotland adopted a pro-Palestinian tract entitled *The Inheritance of Abraham?* Its Preface admits that a previous version "caused worry and concern in parts of the Jewish Community in Israel and beyond" and offers "clarification." The clarification is mere window-dressing, but that is beside the point. It is rather "parts of the Christian Community in Scotland and beyond" that should be worried and concerned. To judge from the amateurish theological absurdities in this document, which passed through all the relevant levels of the bureaucracy up to the General Assembly, the whole Kirk is adrift. It has abandoned a glorious past for a dubious future.

We shall look at those absurdities in a moment, but first consider the dire situation of the Kirk. Its decline in recent decades parallels that of Christianity elsewhere in the UK. Nearly half the Scottish population still professes allegiance to the Kirk, but actual membership is below 10%. It was noted already in 2008 that "The number of new members joining each year has dropped by nearly 80% since 1981" and that the average age of congregations is "maybe even over 60."

Thanks in part to immigration, for the first time since John Knox there are more worshipers on a Sunday in Roman Catholic churches than in the Kirk. The Church of Rome, despite its recent travails, retains the advantage that it would never publish a document that had not been vetted by serious theologians.

The State of Israel, on the other hand, is doing very well, thank you, and need not care two hoots what the Church of Scotland thinks about it. Israel's GDP is higher than Scotland's. The GDP is still lower per capita, but that is because Scotland has benefited for decades from North Sea oil and gas, whereas Israel's immense natural gas reserves are a recent discovery only now coming on tap. As it is, Israel's growth rate is far higher than Scotland's (2.8% versus 0.5%).

The Jewish Community in Scotland and the UK is another matter. As elsewhere in Europe today, its synagogues and institutions are under intense security surveillance. Any kind of anti-Israel agitation, whose major sources include churches and trades unions in the UK, is likely to encourage anti-Jewish violence.

Theological Absurdities

The sham theology of *The Inheritance of Abraham?* begins with its misunderstanding of the relationship between the Christian Old and New Testaments. The tract speaks as though the New Testament existed from the moment that Jesus and St. Paul uttered their words, and it immediately replaced any previous understanding of the Old Testament. This is the hermeneutic tool, to give it a name more dignified than it deserves, that the Scottish authors of the Kirk's tract employ in their hatchet job on the Bible.

Anyone with a grain of theological education, however, knows that the original Scripture of the

Early Church was exclusively the Scripture of the Jews, whether in Hebrew or in its Greek version as the Septuagint. It was only toward the end of the second Christian century that authoritative Church Fathers began to treat as Scripture the books of what we call the New Testament. In the mid-second century, for instance, Justin Martyr ignored St. Paul completely; Justin's writings refer occasionally to the gospels as sources of information, but do not treat them as divinely inspired Scripture.

The books of the New Testament themselves show no consciousness or intention of presenting themselves as Scripture. They do repeatedly refer to Scripture, but in almost every case they are clearly referring to what later Christians would call the Old Testament.

Only in the fourth century did the Church Fathers establish a definite canon of the New Testament, out of the mass of other gospels, acts, epistles and apocalypses that existed at the time. On their way, they vehemently rejected the approach of Marcion, a second-century figure who suggested that Christians should discard the Jewish Bible. In its place, he proposed a new Scripture consisting of Luke's Gospel and some epistles of Paul. Even from these books he selected only the verses that suited him, since they contain many quotations from or allusions to books of the Old Testament.

Marcionism was perhaps the oldest Christian heresy. Marcion's approach is also that of the Scottish authors of *The Inheritance of Abraham?* They have put the Bible through the shredder, picking out for their purposes only a few verses from the New Testament that suit them, but giving them perverse interpretations that ignore the context as well as other statements in the New Testament itself.

We shall not bore readers with a comprehensive list of examples but confine ourselves to one paragraph that consists of three assertions. At any self-respecting university, a student would flunk the exams by writing such stuff.

Assertion One: "John's gospel speaks of Jesus being lifted up and drawing all people to himself (John 12:32). Jesus' cleansing of the Temple means not just that the Temple needs to be reformed, but that the Temple which by its order, kept some people separate from others is finished." The Scottish authors are referring to John 2:13-22, which tells how Jesus drove out of the Temple money-changers and vendors of animals for sacrifice. Here Jesus says exactly why he did it (John 2:16): "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade." Obviously, this verse does describe a reform of the Temple wanted by Jesus, and, since Jesus did it because the Temple is "my Father's house," the Temple was not finished for Jesus. The Scottish authors have done a Marcion on this verse.

Assertion Two (punctuation error as in the original): "Stephen's speech in Acts 7 makes it clear that God is no longer confined to the place of the Temple., God is in all places and for all people." Here the words "no longer" are a manifestation of gross ignorance. The Old Testament makes it clear in many places that God is not confined to the Temple and that God is in all places and for all people. The relevant part of Stephen's speech (Acts 7: 46-48) indeed quotes the Old Testament to that effect (Isaiah 66:1): "Heaven is my throne and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?"

Also, when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he already said (1 Kings 8:27): "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!" The Scottish authors have committed the folly of seeing a New Testament innovation in something that had been familiar to Jews for centuries.

Moreover, Acts portrays the Apostles as constantly frequenting the Temple; it is the geographical center of their faith just as with other Jews. In particular, Paul recounts (Acts 22:17-21) that it was

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when he was praying in the Temple that Jesus appeared to him and sent him to the Gentiles.

Assertion Three: "Temple and land give way to a new understanding so Paul can say that all the barriers that separated people one from another are down – 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus.'" The Scottish authors quote this verse (Galations 3:28) as if unaware that Paul contradicts each of its three clauses elsewhere.

Paul says explicitly that Jews have been given privileges by God that Gentiles do not have (Romans 9:4-5) and that these gifts of God to the Jews are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). He sends a runaway slave back to the latter's master, albeit with a plea to treat him as a free person (Philemon). And he tells women to be silent in the church, to be subordinate to their husbands, and to consult those husbands at home if they wish to know anything (e.g. 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35). Are the Scottish authors ignorant of those other statements of Paul or do they just want others to be ignorant of them? They are doing a Marcion again, but a big one.

What Paul meant by his "neither-nor" in Galatians need not be pursued further here, because Paul's own meaning is of no interest to the Scottish authors. Rather, let us ask them to be consistent in their misuse of Paul for their own political purposes. What they want to claim is that, according to Paul, Jews no more have any claim to the Land of Israel than Palestinians, if they have any claim at all.

So let us apply this principle to the upcoming referendum on independence for Scotland. According to their understanding of Paul, the Scottish authors should be telling their countrymen that "there is neither Scot nor Sassenach, but all are one in Christ Jesus," so forget about Scottish independence. Currently, as it happens, Scots are about two to one in favor of maintaining the union with England. But we suspect that they would be very angry if the Kirk told them that to do so is a Christian duty.

The pretense of the Scottish authors that the New Testament says anything new about the Land of Israel is a vain one. The Old Testament is replete with passages that emphasize the permanent connection of the Jewish People with the Land of Israel, not just the handful of quotations from Genesis mentioned by the Scottish authors. In the New Testament, nothing is added to the Old Testament and nothing is changed; it is simply taken for granted that this is the land of Jews and Samaritans, where they worship at their respective sites.

There is no peculiarly Christian element even in the indications that Jesus feared that the Temple would be destroyed (while wishing that it could be otherwise). The Talmud recounts that Rabbi Zadok, too, had such fears at the same time; it is said that he fasted for forty years in the hope of averting the destruction of Jerusalem (Gittin 56a-b). A story is also told by Josephus (Wars 6.5.3) about another Jew, Jesus son of Ananus, who made such forecasts. So, no difference here either between Jesus of Nazareth and other Jews.

Having dismissed the Old and mangled the New Testament, the Scottish authors let the real cat out of the bag with the following statement: "To Christians in the 21st century, promises about the land of Israel shouldn't be intended to be taken literally, or as applying to a defined geographical territory; they are a way of speaking about how to live under God so that justice and peace reign, the weak and poor are protected, the stranger is included, and all have a share in the community and a contribution to make to it. The 'promised land' in the Bible is not a place, so much as a metaphor of how things ought to be among the people of God. This 'promised land' can be found – or built – anywhere."

What the Scottish authors are saying here is simply: "In the 21st century, we don't actually care what the Bible says in either Testament. We just decide what we want to think and turn any inconvenient verses in the Bible into metaphors for expressing our made-up minds."

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Here we have the source of the Kirk's decline and Roman Catholic survival. The Bible is no longer a source of inspiration for the Kirk; it is merely a storeroom of rhetorical flourishes, taken wildly out of contest, for political agendas. Now, Catholics have many sources besides the Bible: Church Fathers, medieval scholastics, canon law, the rules of monastic orders. A Protestant church that has scrapped the Bible has nothing.

Yet the Scottish authors have not given up the idea of Scripture. Rather, they have invented their own new Scripture made up of two kinds of books. One is books by marginal Jewish figures, such as Mark Braverman and Mark Ellis; the criterion for their selection is conformity to the anti-Israel attitudes of the Scottish authors themselves. The other is books by self-styled Palestinian Christians, above all the so-called Kairos Palestine Document (KPD). I wrote about the pretensions and deceptions of the KPD when it came out and also more recently, so there is no need to repeat that here. What is remarkable is that extracts from the KPD are scattered about *The Inheritance of Abraham?* in exactly the same way as verses from the Bible used to be set forth in old-time Protestant tracts: they head or conclude sections and they are treated as unchallenged statements of authority.

Thus, besides Marcionism, the Kirk has succumbed to Mormonism, the creation of a new Scripture. Only whereas the Church of Latter Day Saints does no harm to anyone but the vendors of tea, coffee and alcohol, in the Church of Latter Day Scots the KPD functions as their Scripture and *The Inheritance of Abraham?* is its exegesis.

In Gemany, by contrast, the KPD has come under intense scrutiny; both leading theologians and official church statements have taken issue with it. But then, the Germans have learned where agitation against Jews can lead. Not that the Scottish authors have forgotten the Holocaust. They just want Jews to forget about it. Rather than say that themselves, however, they prefer to let it be said by quoting from the Jewish authors of their new "gospels of Mark." In the original version of *The Inheritance of Abraham?* this was done via a long passage quoted from Mark Braverman. This was so disgusting that the superiors of the Scottish authors decided to cut it out of the final version. Here, instead, they invoke Mark Ellis to the same effect. Both passages will be found in the Appendix to this article.

Political Delusions

The Inheritance of Abraham? only makes a pretence of being a theological document; its real purpose is to mobilize Scots for a series of political aims. Apart from some window-dressing, such as rejection of anti-Semitism and terrorism and admitting "that Israel is a country which is recognised within the international community of States," all of the Kirk's demands could have been written in Ramallah by the Palestinian Authority. Many of them consist of urging "the UK Government and the European Union" to do something. Here the Kirk is deluding itself. Whether in the UK or in Europe, today governments pay no attention whatsoever to the opinion of churches.

The Kirk's aims also include demands that ignore reality. It claims, for instance, that "the current situation is characterised by an inequality in power and therefore reconciliation can only be possible if the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the blockade of Gaza, are ended." Then it urges "the UK Government and the European Union to use pressure to stop further expansion of in Israeli settlements and remove existing illegal settlements in the Occupied West Bank" ("of in" as in the original).

There might seem to be an oddity here: "East Jerusalem" is missing in the second sentence. But actually it makes no difference. The large new Israeli housing estates that have been built in Jerusalem since 1967 are not in East Jerusalem but in the north and south of Jerusalem in what was previously the West Bank of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This is because Jerusalem

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lies on a mountain ridge that runs from north to south, so there is room for expansion only in those directions. Like most people outside Israel, the Kirk has no idea of the geographic reality because of the misleading chatter in the media about "Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem."

Anyway, the upshot is that the Kirk demands the removal of 40% of the Jewish population of Jerusalem, namely, the Jews who now live north and south of the ceasefire lines of 1949-1967. In other words, the Jewish majority in Jerusalem, which has existed for about 150 years, should be changed instantaneously into an Arab majority.

Obviously, not just Israel, but also no European or US government, could take that demand seriously. For some two decades now, the tacit understanding of those governments has been that Israel and the Palestinians should agree on land swaps that give the Palestinians the same amount of territory, but place all but scattered smaller Jewish settlements within the final borders of Israel. In April 2013, the Arab League itself indicated its openness to the idea of land swaps. So the Kirk has aligned itself with those Palestinian hardliners who are furious with the Arab League's demonstration of flexibility.

The Inheritance of Abraham? also recalls that the Kirk has repeatedly called for "the right of return and / or compensation for Palestinian refugees." The original version helpfully notes that it did so in 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2012. In the meantime, the Kirk had time to learn that it was calling for the creation of an Arab majority inside the State of Israel, another impossible demand. In short: the Kirk has committed theological suicide in order to promote political inanities.

Historic Disconnect

The funniest part of the Kirk's tract is its fulminations against "Christian Zionism." Funny, because they are denouncing what was for long the default viewpoint of the Kirk's ministers.

As the Kirk's tract puts it: "In the early 19th century, some influential Christians, encouraged by the mores of the colonial and imperial age which pervaded all aspects of life, including the Church of Scotland led to the development of a political idea to create a new homeland for Jewish people in Palestine. It may well have been a Kirk minister, the Rev Alexander Keith, who coined the phrase 'a land without people, for a people without land.' This view of the land of Palestine was linked from the 1840s to a literalistic view of Hebrew Biblical prophecy being fulfilled and the widely held attitude that European colonialism meant that a land was 'empty' if western power and culture was not present."

Here is a basic fact: that in the 19th and early 20th centuries the Church of Scotland was permeated with Christian Zionism. Only the Scottish authors have obscured that fact with ideological nonsense. European colonialism was a movement of territorial expansion inspired the example of ancient Rome, that is, by the Latin classics that formed the curriculum of grammar schools. The idea of resettling the Jewish People in its ancient homeland was precisely an exception to that: Christian Zionists held that there was one corner of the world, the Land of Israel, that Europeans must not take for themselves, and their inspiration was not Rome but the Bible.

Moreoever, when Keith spoke of an "empty" land, he was just stating an obvious fact. Demographers of Palestine in the 19th century differ, but their estimates of the population put it at 300,000 plus or minus 50,000. That was the population of Glasgow alone (c. 280,000) when Keith published his famous remark in1844, after traversing the land from Gaza to Syria. The Land of Israel was as empty as Scotland would have been if nobody lived anywhere in Scotland outside Glasgow.

In the meantime, the population of Scotland has increased threefold, but that of the Land of Israel

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close to 33 times. The case of Jerusalem is even more acute. Two hundred years ago, Jerusalem had some 9,000 inhabitants; it now has 90 times that number. But the authors of *The Inheritance of Abraham?* are no more interested in historical facts than in the Bible.

Rather, the Scottish authors have disconnected themselves from the history of their own church. A recent Scottish visitor to Jerusalem made a notable remark to us: "Forty years ago, the Kirk loved Israel and its churches were full; today it loves the Palestinians and the churches are empty." That emptying is a fact, as was noted above at the beginning. His remark is also confirmed by the history of the Kirk's presence in Israel.

Here the Kirk calls itself "The Church of Scotland in Israel / Palestine," but it has only ever been present in what became Israel in 1948: in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nazareth and Tiberias. Down to the late 1980s, St. Andrews Church in Jerusalem was staffed by Scottish Protestants of the old school, innately friendly to Israel. The change came with the appointment of Rev. Colin Morton. He was an amiable chap, but followed the policy dictated by his American wife, Carol.

Mrs. Morton immediately set up a gift shop on the premises of the church's guest house for handicrafts from Gaza. She rejected the suggestion that she should include handicrafts from disadvantaged groups in Israel, so as to maintain a balance. On the contrary, she insisted that the shop's purpose was not just commercial but "educational." By that she meant the PLO propaganda leaflets that were now spread out for visitors. Since the State of Israel grants tax exemptions to places of Christian worship, she utilized them to avoid taxes on the sale of those handicrafts.

Curiously, Colin Morton's obituary ascribes the creation of the gift shop to him alone, although we who witnessed it saw that his role was to acquiesce. The obituary also describes him as "the Church of Scotland's leading apologist for the Palestinian people" and recalls his constant question: "How can we blame the Palestinians for being mildly aggressive if the Israelis constantly flout international law?" Mildly?

Previously, the congregation had included just four Arab Christian members, the rest being foreign residents who were engaged either in Israel or with the Palestinians. All had happily worshiped and cooperated, giving each other help whenever needed. Now everyone connected with Israel drifted away. Also many Israeli Jews, who had previously felt welcome, were driven off by the PLO propaganda. It was now Jews working for the Palestinian cause who were warmly embraced. A later minister (not the current one) kept an online pro-Palestinian blog. It was the same change that has overcome the Kirk in general.

What has happened is similar to what the world of business calls a "hostile takeover." A business has been successfully making certain products for its clientele for a long period. Then some group manages to buy up the business despite opposition from the management and many shareholders. The new management changes the products, or at least their quality, and the old clientele vanishes. Either a new clientele is found or the takeover leads to the demise of the business.

This is what has happened to the Kirk within living memory. Since the 1980s, a new management with new products has established itself. Much of the old clientele has disappeared, while the rate of acquisition of new clientele has dropped by four-fifths, but the new management persists in its little-loved course. Yet the assets, in property that can be sold off, are still considerable, so the new management can waste resources on unwanted products for some time to come. The former Church of Scotland is defunct; the Church of Latter Day Scots has taken over the premises.

Appendix

Below is the passage from Braverman that was included in the original version of *The Inheritance*

of Abraham? but dropped in the final version. Nevertheless, the final version commends the book of Braverman from which it comes. Thus, indirectly, the Kirk continues to encourage its members to embrace the lies that Israel is engaged in ethnic cleansing, etc., as well as Braverman's call to revoke the repentance expressed by various churches for their role in facilitating the Holocaust.

"Braverman is adamant that Christians must not sacrifice the universalist, inclusive dimension of Christianity and revert to the particular exclusivism of the Jewish faith because we feel guilty about the Holocaust. He is equally clear that the Jewish people have to repent of the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians between 1947 and 1949. They must be challenged, too, to stop thinking of themselves as victims and special, and recognise that the present immoral, unjust treatment of Palestinian people is unsustainable. Braverman challenges, too, what he calls 'revisionist Christian theology', more widely known as Western post-Holocaust theology, i.e. theology which takes away Jesus' radical critique of Jewish theology and practice in order to provide no excuse for Christian anti-Semitism. In this approach, he claims, the Jewish people are and remain God's chosen. This gives them the right to land, to triumph over enemies and a sense of specialness. Other people's part in this is limited to being pushed aside to make way for occupation, being agents of God's punishment of the Jews for their disobedience and witnessing to God's glory through Jewish survival and prosperity."

The final version of *The Inheritance of Abraham?* replaced that passage with one from Mark Ellis, which uses less obviously revolting language but achieves the same aim.

"It seems late in the Israel / Palestine political game – and it is late indeed – but the mainstream Churches are breaking what I have called the interfaith ecumenical deal. That deal is usually referred to as the interfaith ecumenical dialogue, the post-Holocaust place where Jews and Christians have mended their relationship. Israel was huge in this dialogue. Christians supported Israel as repentance for anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. Then as Israel became more controversial with their abuse of Palestinians, Christians remained silent. Non-support and, worse, criticism of Israeli policies, was seen by the Jewish dialoguers as backtracking to anti-Semitism. That's where the dialogue became a deal: Silence on the Christian side brings no criticism of anti-Semitism from the Jewish side."

The aim of the exercise has been paraphrased by Ben Cohen, writing on "The Church of Scotland's War on Judaism." He says: "Let's translate the above lines minus the academic, ostensibly reasonable tone in which they are couched: 'Jews! Stop whining about the Holocaust. Stop making us feel guilty about the Holocaust. Repent, every single one of you, for the evil you have committed against the Palestinians. And, oh yeah, enough of the "Chosen People" thing—you people are so arrogant, no wonder nobody likes you. Even Jesus himself ran out of patience with you…'"

The original version of *The Inheritance of Abraham?* contained other outrageous passages that were removed in the revision . They led one commentator to remark facetiously that "in the view of the Church of Scotland, Israel has a right to exist, just not in Israel."

To date, the original version is still available on another anti-Israel church website and also here. It shows what was truly going on in the minds of the Scottish authors. The Kirk should have realized that the whole document was a disgrace to its reputation, one that could not be redeemed by cosmetic surgery. By merely removing selected passages, the Kirk allows the remainder of the document to achieve the same ends in a better disguised manner.

The Kirk's revised employment of Braverman is paralleled by its endorsement of the KPD. The increasingly aggressive successor documents to the KPD are not mentioned, but Scots are encouraged to find them and become radicalized by them on their own.

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On this, one can do no better than quote theexcellent document issued in May 2013 by the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) and entitled *Reflections on the Role of Religious and Interreligious Groups in Promoting Reconciliation about and in the Troubled Middle East*. After trying to conduct a discussion with the KPD's authors, the ICCJ was disappointed to discover the following: "Whereas the original 'Kairos Palestine' had offered 'a word of faith, hope and love', a December 2011 statement, 'The Bethlehem Call – Here We Stand, Stand with Us', began in a strikingly different tone by instructing readers to 'Read and interpret this text with a Kairos consciousness and gaze of prophetic anger'. More recently, a December 2012 text called 'Kairos Palestine: A Strategy for Life in a Steadfast Way towards Liberation' called 'for the rejection of the idea of a Jewish State of Israel ...' This phrasing can be interpreted in several different ways, including urging the dissolution of the State of Israel as it has been defined since 1948."

The ICCJ adds: "ICCJ believes that one-sided or unclear declarations – whether composed by Israelis or Palestinians; by Jews, Christians, or Muslims; by people in the Middle East or elsewhere – provoke only insecurity and fear, and so do not increase the likelihood of peace, either for the Middle East or for interreligious relations elsewhere in the world." *The Inheritance of Abraham?* is a case in point.

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