



Israel: State – Land – People

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Israel: State – Land – People

A Series of Theses by the Working Group on Church and Israel of the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate (Germany)

During a press conference in December 2006, the church's Working Group on Church and Judaism introduced a series of theses under the title "Israel: State – Land – People" which was published after a two-year process of discussion. The theses (see below) are to be understood as a contribution to an internal opinion-forming process of the church in the face of the tragic Middle East conflict that continues to this hour.

Preface by Christian Schad, member of the High Consistory

Like all other member churches of the Evangelical (Protestant) Church in Germany, our regional church, too, took a long time after 1945 – faced with the Shoah – to take steps of repentance and renewal in its relationship to Judaism. Only the Working Group on Church and Judaism, constituted in 1982, was able, after intense preparatory work, to submit in 1988 to the regional synod the working paper, "Church and Israel," which is an expression of repentance and, above all, was intensely discussed in congregations, presbyteries and district synods. The result of the engagement with this paper led, in May 1990, to a vote of the regional synod which included the task of preparing a supplement to the church's constitution concerning the relationship of our church to Judaism. On May 10, 1995, the regional synod decided unanimously to add the following supplement to §1 Section 3 of the Constitution of the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate (Protestant Regional Church):

"Through her Lord Jesus Christ she [that is, the regional church] knows herself to be taken into God's history of promise with his first-chosen people Israel – for the salvation of all people. Being called to repentance, she searches for reconciliation with the Jewish people and opposes every form of enmity against Jews."

In a 2002 resource of the Working Group on Church and Judaism, the long-time promoter of the Christian-Jewish dialogue in our regional church, Dr. Hans L. Reichrath, emphasized, "The change in the constitution must have consequences. It has to be integrated into the practice of our church's life. It has to lead to a rethinking, away from centuries-old theological aberrations and their consequences for the Jews and for the church itself."

With the present series of theses, "Israel: State - Land - People," the Working Group on Church and Judaism fulfills an urgent desideratum. The internal discussion process lasted almost two years, in which it was the concern to ask varying positions about their ability to reach a consensus. The series of theses at hand limits itself, on the one hand, consciously to the theme "Israel," and therefore does not claim to have addressed or considered all aspects of importance in this context. On the other hand, the wording chosen dares to reach beyond a simple description of the state of

affairs and attempts to offer orientation by listening to the witness of the Holy Scriptures and accepting joint responsibility for a peaceful coexistence of the citizens of the State of Israel and its Arab neighbors:

The series of theses is divided into two parts: the first argues in rather political-historical terms and the second part in more strongly theological terms. The first part (Theses 1 to 8) stresses the importance of the State of Israel as a "protective shelter" (Martin Stöhr) for Jews against persecution. The State's legitimacy after the decision of the UN plenary session of 1948 is as indisputable by international law (cf. Thesis 2), as is the right of the Palestinians to their own state (cf. Thesis 3). Theses 6 and 7 illuminate the special responsibility we have as Germans and Christians on account of our entanglement in the history of enmity against Jews. A theologically responsible dealing with history presents itself already in this first part as *cantus firmus* of this series of theses.

The benchmark of their theological statements in the second part is for the authors the interpretation of the Bible, especially the Old Testament's settlement traditions (cf. Thesis 9), which have not at all simply been surpassed or even negated by the New Testament (cf. Thesis 10). The central statement in Thesis 11 has its basis in this biblical-theological foundation, which – following a formulation by Schalom Ben-Chorin – speaks of the founding of the State of Israel as a "sign of God". The authors of the present text consciously chose a middle way between totally secularizing the history of Israel, on the one hand (cf. Thesis 12) and a biblically literalistic exaggeration on the other hand (cf. Thesis 13). The political entity Israel is therefore, on the one hand, theologically of decisive importance; on the other, however, it is neither sacrosanct nor immune to criticism.

In this sense the theses at hand are meant as a contribution to the process of opinion-forming within the church, which is faced with the anguished Middle East conflict that continues into this hour. In doing so, members of our regional church are also facing each other. For example, there are those who are engaged in peace work and ecumenical attachment to the churches in Palestine, along with those Christians to whom the permanent root of the church in Judaism is important. We can only hope that the paper at hand can assist, not to exclude positions but to relate them constructively to each other.

I explicitly thank the members of the Working Group on Church and Judaism for their continuous and intense cooperation. My special thanks to the chairperson, Rev. Dr. Stefan Meissner, who worked with great persistence and integrative power for the creation of the series of theses.

May helpful impulses flow from this text for the conversation between Christians and Jews as well as for a sensitive and differentiated perception of the situation in the Middle East, which can be the only basis for peaceful coexistence.

ISRAEL: STATE - LAND - PEOPLE

A series of theses of the Working Group on Church and Judaism of the Evangelical Church of the Palatinate

Part I: Historical and Political Aspects

Thesis 1: The decision to partition and the founding of the State

The resolution by the UN plenary session of November 29, 1947 to partition the territory of Palestine under the British mandate into two states represents, according to international law, an indisputable basis for the founding of the State of Israel which occurred on May 14, 1948.

Today there can be no turning back behind both these facts. They should also in the future represent the immutable basis of all political discourse.

Thesis 2: Israel's right to exist

After the history of persecution of the late 19th and the 20th century, the State of Israel has an important relevance as a "protective shelter" (Martin Stöhr) that stands open at any time to all Jews in the Diaspora.

Its existence in secure boundaries, recognized by international law, must not be questioned – neither politically nor by force of arms.

Thesis 3: The option of a Palestinian state

The United Nations' resolution to partition the land also contained the option for a Palestinian state which, for varying reasons, has not yet been implemented.

However, its establishment is today the indispensable precondition for a peaceful solution in the Middle East. It involves the amicable negotiation between both sides about their respective state territories.

Thesis 4: The international balance of power

The concern about the Middle East conflict must not be narrowed down to the two parties, Israel and the Palestinians. On the contrary, a constructive participation of the neighboring Arab states and the political powers that influence the region from the outside (USA, EU, Russia) is required as well.

An agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is realistic only within the framework of the establishment of peace in the entire region. At the same time, neither the legitimate claims of the Israelis to an existence recognized by the neighbors and not threatened by terrorist violence, nor that of the Palestinians to their own viable state, should be ignored.

Thesis 5: Israel as the centre of worldwide Judaism

Israel is the only country in the world in which the majority of the population is Jewish. It has special significance as intellectual centre of Jewish religion, history, culture, language and science.

This aspect is stressed not only by religious but also by secular Jews, who see themselves as a part of a great community of common destiny. It is important to be aware of this broad intra-Jewish consensus.

Thesis 6: Our responsibility for Israel as Germans

A Germany that knows itself committed to free democratic traditions carries a special responsibility for the existence of the State of Israel and the right to life of its people because of the genocide of European Jewry.

It concretely obliges Germany in its foreign policy action to stand at Israel's side especially in times of external or internal threats. However, also in our own society we must strive, in cultural and educational work, to hold alive a truthful memory of the Shoah, to strengthen a broad commitment against anti-Semitism and racism, and to resist any one-sided or ideologically distorted representation of the Middle East conflict.

Thesis 7: Our responsibility for Israel as a church

Also our church carries a special responsibility for Israel through its complicity in enmity against and persecution of Jews, above all in the time of National Socialism. Church solidarity with Israel can be expressed in diverse ways: be it by study tours, partnerships and Christian-Jewish meetings or also through long-term projects such as for Nes Ammim or in the work of "Aktion Sühnezeichen" (Action Reconciliation Service for Peace).

Solidarity with Israel also means to examine, in a non-prejudiced and critical manner and within the diverse contexts of church work, the political situation in the Middle East. In doing so, the State of Israel has a right to be measured by the same ethical-political standard as other states.

Thesis 8: Our bond with the Christians in Israel and Palestine

Our church supports all forces in the region that stand for a peaceful and just coexistence and are engaged for non-violence, the rule of law, and human rights as well as against the concept of an "enemy." In particular, it knows its bonds with our sibling churches in the Holy Land which represent the Christian minorities in Israel and Palestine.

Precisely this double bond with Jews and Christians in Israel and Palestine must be held strong across the current political conflict lines and lived responsibly, each in the face of the other side.

Part II: Theological Aspects

Thesis 9: The biblical promise of the land

The return of Jews to Israel can with good reason be seen in the light of the biblical promises of its land to the people of Israel (Genesis 12:7; Jos 1:1-6 and others) and its hope for an end of the exile. This Old Testament tradition remains also in Christian perceptions a valid biblical promise of God.

We consider the topic "Land and People of Israel" as a chance to concretize in space and time our contemplation of God – his election and calling, his covenants and promises.

Thesis 10: The land as a permanent covenantal gift

The land is also according to the testimony of the New Testament the permanent covenantal gift to Israel. Through our commitment to the Jew Jesus of Nazareth, who promised the meek "to inherit the land" (Mt 5:5), we also, as Christians, are referred to the land of Israel as geographical reference point of our faith.

Even if Jews employed the "land" as a spiritual symbol for their permanent communion with God, they held in awareness, in just this way, their longing for the real land. When Christians, following similar tendencies, speak symbolically about "land" (so already in the New Testament, e.g. Gal 4:26; Heb 11:14-16), they too should never lose sight of the connection to the real land of Israel.

Thesis 11: The State of Israel as a "sign of God"

In common with many religious Jews we see in the gathering of the people Israel in the "land of their fathers" and in the establishment of the State of Israel a "sign of God". We believe that God, in spite of all dangers and disasters in history, in particular the Shoah, has stood and still stands loyally by his people (Zach 2:12; Rom 9:1-5; 11:1).

Like the land, so also must the State of Israel be taken seriously as a historical entity to be set positively into a relationship with Christian faith.

Thesis 12: Against the profanation of Israel's history

We reject the thinking of many Christians who see in the increased return of Jews to Israel only an event of profane world history without any theological meaning and reduce the subject of land only to the level of *Realpolitik*.

Whoever in this way splits Israel's political from its theological reality removes God from history, and then it remains uncertain what it means that the God of Israel and Father of Jesus Christ is the Lord of history and acts within history. This position has trouble with the historical thinking of the Old Testament and can only take it as a failed model to be overcome.

Thesis 13: Against a fundamentalist/literalistic Israel-friendship

We also reject a fundamentalist or biblically literalistic view that is captive to an end-time apocalyptic scheme and sees in the newly formed State of Israel a sign of the imminent return of Christ.

Here indeed the land promises of the Old Testament are taken seriously, but the political consequences derived from them are often as estranged from reality and disaster-provoking as the accompanying expectation that "a remnant" of Israel will turn to Christ, while the other Jews will head straight for disaster.

Thesis 14: History and God's action have to be distinguished but not separated

Between both extremes (Theses 12 & 13) runs a path that – often against appearances – sees God at work in Israel, even today, without identifying the will of God simply with the State of Israel, its government, or specific political actions.

This position takes seriously the biblical promise of land; however, it recognizes at the same time a "surplus" of this promise compared to the historical events of immigration and foundation of the State. It takes seriously the permanent election of Israel to be a blessing to all nations and its destiny. At the same time it makes space for pragmatic solutions, oriented to real political factors with regard to the question of the partition of the land between Israelis and Palestinians.

Thesis 15: Perspectives for the land that are life-serving

The Bible contains an abundance of instructions that open perspectives, rich in blessings, for the land and all those who live in it. (Deut 27:1-3; Jer 7:5-7).

Justice and righteousness, the two great guiding perspectives of the Old Testament's ethos, have to be implemented also in concrete political action. This includes giving all inhabitants of the land the possibilities for life and participation to which they are entitled and respecting and protecting their human dignity, which is founded in their being created in God's image.

Thesis 16: Against the use of the Bible as an instrument for political purposes

Besides these life-serving perspectives exist problematic biblical traditions, that, for example, speak of wars in God's name and of the blotting out of other peoples (Jos 1:13-15; Ex 17:14). Against this we affirm: "According to God's will there must be no war."

Every use of the Bible for political purposes is to be rejected. In general we reject every use of religion as a weapon for the exaggeration or justification of the concept of an enemy as well as for the aggravation instead of alleviation of conflicts.

Thesis 17: The common task of the church and Israel

The church and Israel are called to be joint witnesses of the one God – the God of Abraham, the Father of Jesus Christ – "that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations." (Ps 67:2).

Our regional church confesses in its constitution, "Through her Lord Jesus Christ she knows herself to be taken into God's history of promise with his first-chosen people Israel – for the salvation of all people." This has to concretely be proven in its solidarity with Israel, also in its existence as a State. This includes our engagement for a just and salutary peace for the nations and the people in the Holy Land.

(Passed at the September 6, 2006 meeting of the Working Group)

Source: Materialdienst, Working Group on Church and Israel in Hesse and Nassau.

Translation Fritz Voll

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