

EDITORIAL

## THE CHURCH AND ISRAEL

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The Jews and Israel have had a most important place in the story of the twentieth century. When the century opened, Zionism, forged through the pogroms and the Dreyfus case, was still new. 1917 brought the Balfour Declaration. The thirties and forties witnessed the Nazi persecution and the horrors of the gas chambers. In 1948 the British mandate ended and the State of Israel was born, not without much travail. Since then we have seen a constant state of war between Israel and her neighbours (modified only in part by the Sadat-Begin accord), with a series of short, sharp conflicts, and such events as the Munich Olympic killings, Entebbe and the Ethiopia airlift.

What does all this mean for the Christian Church? Not surprisingly these events have stirred much interest in Church circles. Christians have pondered and discussed the significance of Zionism, the return to the Holy Land, the recapture of the Old City of Jerusalem, and the establishment of the 'Christian Embassy' in the city. More and more Christians have visited Israel and some now make an annual pilgrimage at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles.

In 1982 the Handsel Press published *The Witness of the Jews to God* which was edited by David Torrance. This volume brought together a varied group of thirteen writers. As David Lyon says in his foreword, 'there is disagreement among the writers at many points, not least where questions relating to the Land arise', but 'the writers all share the conviction that the Jewish people have a decisive place in God's creative and redemptive purpose for his world, that the fact that Jesus was a Jew is a central matter for faith, and that it is decisive for effective witness to the Kingdom that the Christian Church draw near to the Jews in humble and thoughtful dialogue'.

The following year Colin Chapman's volume, *Whose Promised Land?*, gave a conspectus of attitudes towards Israel through quotations from a wide variety of sources, dealt with the theological issue of the relationship between Israel and the Church, and set out some hermeneutical principles. In this book he expressed unease about the philosophy of Zionism and argued that largely uncritical Christian support for Israel is usually buttressed by a handling of the Old Testament Scriptures which does less than justice to the hermeneutical principles

the New Testament teaches us. He encouraged the reader to consider not only the sufferings of the Jews but also those of the Palestinian refugees.

Now the Handsel Press has published a series of four booklets under the general title *Church and Israel*. Clearly these are intended for the general Christian reader. The editor, Jock Stein, says of the series that it is 'sustained by the double conviction that (a) God has a great and continuing purpose for the Jewish people, and (b) that the Christian Church is (in New Testament language) grafted into Israel'.

The first of these is *The Mission of Christians and Jews* by David Torrance. He argues that God's covenant with Israel has been fulfilled in Christ but not in such a way as to be superseded. God still speaks to the Church today through Israel about his sovereign purposes in history and about his judgement and mercy. Christians should share Paul's deep longing for the Jews to come to Christ, but, because 'we belong to the same family', because of 'the long and sad history of Christian anti-semitism', and because of the impact the holocaust has had on the Jews, we must approach them sensitively in a spirit of deep repentance and humility.

*Anti-Semitism and Christian Responsibility* is by David Torrance and Alastair Lamont, and the contribution of each writer is clearly identified. David Torrance maintains that anti-semitism is not just antagonism to people who are different but has a distinctive quality because the Jews 'represent all the other peoples and nations before God' and, because of his peculiar identification with them, they represent God to the world. 'Anti-semitism is a rejection of God and his electing grace.' His appendix explores the causes of anti-semitism from this general perspective. Alastair Lamont emphasises the roots of the Christian faith and of the Church. He traces the deepening division between the Synagogue and the Church in the early Christian centuries and the various types of anti-semitism, from the 'dismissive form' in which the Jews are relegated to 'the dustbin of history', to ways in which the church itself prepared the way for the holocaust. He attacks the idea that the Church is the New Israel, replacing the Jews as God's people, and deals with alleged anti-semitism in the New Testament.

James Walker has written *Israel - Covenant and Land*. He relates God's covenant with Israel to his covenant with mankind and all creation. 'Israel is ... the focal, pivotal point wherein the covenant of God with all creation can most clearly be seen.' He sees the promise of the land to them as very important. 'Circumcision and the ceremonial law are both signs of the covenant, whereas the land is subsumed into and embraced within the covenant.' The Jews will come to faith within the land. They need to take seriously the Old Testament teaching about car-

ing for the stranger within the gates. Keeping faith with Israel does not necessarily mean approval of all she does.

Howard Taylor's *World Hope in the Middle East* is much the longest of the four booklets. Readers of this journal will recall his stimulating article 'The Continuity of the People of God in Old and New Testaments' in the Autumn 1985 number. God's redeeming purpose 'is to restore man and nature to their original position of reflected glory'. All are equally precious to God, but he chose Israel for a destiny of 'suffering that bears witness to the cross of Jesus.' God even used their disobedience to reveal himself more fully to them in his justice and mercy, in a revelation culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus which fulfils Israel's destiny as set out in the Old Testament. This does not mean that there is no longer a unique place for Israel in God's plan. The death of Jesus is the sign of Israel's scattering but his resurrection means that one day she will be revived and restored. The Church should not therefore claim to have replaced Israel as God's chosen people. He says, 'We must prayerfully look forward to the time when a truly renewed Christian Church is united in Christ with the descendants of Abraham - a blessing to all the earth.'

What about the Land? The return of Israel to the Land is 'a foretaste of the New Creation when again the whole of nature will be released from its bondage to decay.' What about the Palestinian Arabs? 'We should not regard Arabs as merely Gentiles. Their destiny is unique too.' Islam, however, 'is a rejection of the electing grace of God' in its rejection of Isaac and Israel. 'Although Israel like other nations has not always acted fairly - or justly - so that many Palestinian Arabs do have genuine grievances, still their record is a good one by any standards, especially compared with other middle eastern nations.'

Howard Taylor identifies the sin of the Church as refusal to see its root in Israel, that of the Jews as misinterpreting God's election of grace as favouritism, and that of the Arabs as the Islamic refusal to accept God's election of Isaac and Israel and the expression of this in a determination to destroy Israel.

These booklets and the other literature referred to, raise a host of important issues for evangelicals. Even at the *historical* level there is some disagreement. When *Whose Promised Land?* was published, Halver Ronning (in *Mishkan* 1, p.58) accused the author of 'omitting and misrepresenting historical facts', but as Colin Chapman pointed out in the next issue of the same journal, Ronning gave no examples. Clearly all who write on the subject must seek to give a fair and balanced presentation of the historical facts.

Then there are *ethico-political* questions. Do the Jews or the Arabs have the primary moral right to the Land? Now that the State of Israel is an established fact, what should be the attitude of Jews to Arabs within

it? In his booklet James Walker says 'great suffering has occurred in many a Palestinian and Arab home through Jewish violence, in many a Jewish home through acts of Arab violence, all of which are an affront to the living God who is God of the whole world'. Whatever the facts, this attitude is surely right.

Important *exegetical* questions have to be faced. Romans 11 is clearly crucial for the whole debate. It concludes the most massive piece of sustained theological reasoning the Bible contains. All the booklets make reference to it. Does 'all Israel' in Romans 11:25 mean 'all the elect both Jew and Gentile' (Calvin) or 'the nation of Israel as a whole', an interpretation held among others, by Barth whose discussions of Romans 9-11 (especially in the *Church Dogmatics*) have influenced several of the booklet authors, and Cranfield, who is also one of the contributors to *The Witness of the Jews to God*? At some points there is insufficient biblical material in the booklets, although this is not the case in Howard Taylor's work. For example, David Torrance says, 'nowhere does scripture say or imply that in Christ and in the giving of the New Covenant, the Old Covenant is set aside and of no further use in the economy of God'. It would have been good to see at this point some comment on passages like II Corinthians 3 and Hebrews 8 which might be thought to teach the opposite. There are quite a number of points in the booklets that really need biblical documentation for the sake of the reader. Moreover Alastair Lamont's comment on John 8:39-44 is quite unacceptable: 'this is one Jew arguing with other Jews and, in the heat of argument, using the language of the hyperbole'. This exegesis pays much too high a price in terms of theology and reverence.

So we move on to *theological* questions. The relationship between Israel and the Church is perhaps the most important and far-reaching issue for eschatology. All other eschatological questions are deeply affected by the answer given to it. Does the Church replace Israel as the people of God? Are there two peoples? If so, then what are their different functions in the one purpose of God? What is the 'people of God' status of Hebrew Christians, who would appear to belong to both? The whole issue of the theology of the land, on which contributors to the *Witness of the Jews to God* took a variety of positions, is also tied in to the question of Israel and the Church.

The debt of some of the writers to Barth on more than the interpretation of Romans 9-11 is evident. For instance, the influence of the Swiss theologian's approach to double predestination is in James Walker's booklet (p.5), when he writes of Israel's election both for rejection and salvation, with both finally fulfilled in Jesus.

The subject has, of course, very considerable *practical* implications. How should Christians view the State of Israel? If they are to support it, should this be unqualified and without criticism of Israel? Some

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writers are suggesting today that a re-discovery of the Jewish roots of the Christian faith raises questions as to whether the festivals of the Christian year should have replaced the Old Testament system of feasts or even if Christians should have moved their day of worship from the seventh to the first day of the week. What about the Christian approach to the Jews? Should this be in terms of dialogue or of evangelism? Must we wait until the Church as a whole has come to humble repentance for attitudes and acts of the past, or should Christians in a spirit of penitence and humility seek sensitively to preach the gospel to the Jewish people today?

These booklets and the other literature mentioned in this article present these challenging questions to us all. They all take us back to the most basic fact about the Bible, that is, that it consists of two Testaments. Indeed, almost all the major questions that divide evangelical Christians are related to the great *hermeneutical* issue of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New. Notable studies of this have come from evangelical sources, but we should be giving the subject a place of the highest priority in research. Meantime we should seek to learn from God through the insights of each other, and keep the situation in the Middle East in our prayers as well as our studies.