

BOOK REVIEWS

PROBING THE CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN THE JEWISH STATE

by WESLEY H. BROWN

Simon Schoon, *Christelijke Presentie in de Joodse Staat. Theologische overwegingen betreffende der verhouding kerk en Israel naar aanleiding van enkele vormen van Christelijke presentie in de Staat Israel*. Kampen, Holland: Kok, 1982, 279 p. (Doctoral dissertation at Theologische Academie Kampen, 1982).

Dr. Simon Schoon, who for six years was pastor at Nes Amim, the Christian moshav near Nahariya in Israel, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Christian presence in the State of Israel. It was published originally in Dutch and will soon appear in German and English.

Schoon's study proposes eight forms of Christian presence in the State of Israel. While churches and groups are not exhaustively examined, there are selective examples or models from each category:

1. Arab Christians — by far the largest group; Greek Catholics who live principally in Galilee being the most numerous;
2. Christians of Jewish parentage, who may either relate to existing churches, such as Hebrew-speaking Catholics and Protestants, or who meet in rather independent assemblies;
3. Christians committed to the preservation and care of the holy places;
4. Christians in contemplative and other orders in monasteries and convents;
5. Christians whose presence is a sign of their solidarity with the Jewish people, such as those in Nes Ammim;
6. Christians engaged in study and dialogue in Israel, often within an institution;
7. Christians of certain Protestant churches which are generally supported from abroad;

Dr. Wesley H. Brown is Director of Special Studies and Summer Programs at the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research, Tantur, Jerusalem.

8. “Dispensationalist” groups which emphasize the belief that biblical prophecies are being fulfilled in the modern State of Israel and that the “end of days” approaches.

Jewish self-understanding in the State of Israel is described in Chapter Two. This is discussed prior to the investigation of the motivation of Christian forms of presence, because it is believed unacceptable to speak about the Jews unless one is first aware of the expressions of their own self-understanding. Schoon describes various forms of Zionism, indicating the political and ideological tensions which have emerged within the State of Israel today. Several questions which surface include the concept of election, the ethical content of Zionism, and the importance of Zion over Zionism. For Jewish self-understanding, the aspects of particularity and universality cannot be played out against each other.

The inseparable links between land, people, and Torah are discussed as they relate to Jewish identity. The various perceptions of the bond between the people and the land are indicated with an explanation as to how these have influenced politics in Israel. Secularization forms a great challenge to the Jewish character of the State, with ambivalence resulting in a secularized democracy which bears the impact of a strong religious message. The tensions that are aroused are sometimes so strong that one can speak of “kulturkampf,” according to Schoon. Some orthodox Jewish thinkers, however, respect this secularity as a blessing, because it is a feature of Jewish reality.

The relationship of Jews in Israel to Christianity and Christians is further investigated. The attitude of Israeli Jews cannot be adequately understood without recognizing the perception of Christianity as a source of anti-Semitism in the course of history. When this is understood, the strong anti-missionary feelings in Israel, frequently reflected in government policies, become comprehensible. Despite the past, however, there is a growing interest in Jesus, a movement which is sometimes called the “Heinholung Jesu” (bring Jesus home). The efforts from the Jewish side to enter into dialogue with Christianity are still very cautious and reticent.

The motivations of various churches and groups for their presence in Israel is analyzed by Schoon in Chapter Three. For Arab Christians, this has been their home for centuries:

Arab Christians in Israel seem to have a torn identity due to the events of the last half-century. Against their will, they have become Israeli citizens. They form a minority within a minority. They feel themselves a part of the ‘Arab nation’ in which, as Christians, they are not fully accepted. The reality of the PLO confronts them with inescapable dilemmas. A progressive radicalization may be detected among them.

I believe that the founding of the Jewish state and the confrontation with the Jewish people

have, in fact, influenced their theological thinking. In their reflection, they continue to make a distinction between Zionism and the Jewish religion, a position that, for many Jews, is unacceptable.

Jews who believe in Jesus face a very different set of problems. I discovered they want very much to be one with the Jewish people in the Land of their Fathers, but they often find that their fellow Jews do not accept their self-understanding as both Jewish and Christian. This situation is a source of internal tension and external conflict.

In their theological reflection, they are seeking to integrate what they believe to be biblical attitudes towards Zionism, the Church and their continued observance of Jewish tradition. Their very lives seem to represent the tragedy of the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity in the first centuries.

Some, who belong to churches with a long historical presence here, adapt pragmatically to whatever government is in charge. As guardians of the holy places, they maintain the ideal of preserving the status quo. Schoon reflects on the significance that this tenacious clinging to the places of divine revelation may have for Christians today.

The Protestant Churches in Israel are inheritors of the missions of the 19th century, especially from Britain and Germany. Today's active missionary organizations are primarily from Scandinavia and the United States. As there are dispensationalists who are drawn to Israel by their anticipation of the events of the "end time," including the return of Christ and the coming of the Messianic Age, or the millenium, Schoon focuses on apocalyptic and prophetic texts and their interpretation.

What theological issues need to be faced in reflecting upon the Jewish-Christian relationship today? Too often, Christians act as if Jewish history ceased with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, only to be reborn with the State of Israel in 1948. Schoon surveys Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism through Christian history and notes the impact that they have had on Christian theology. Specific reference is made to Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin, Kuyper, Berkouwer, Miskotte, Barth and Marquardt.

Historically, Israel was generally spiritualized by Christian theologians; now there is a modern state that confronts them. Schoon deals with the accusation that the poison of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism is already found within the New Testament, and concludes that an apologetic treatment of these texts cannot remove suspicion of anti-Judaism.

Schoon believes that the return to the Land by the Jews has theological significance. "The events of this return are seen as a sign of the continuity of God's faithfulness towards the Jewish people." Does this imply a "separate path of salvation" for Israel and for history? On the one hand, the "two-paths"

teaching that results in a tension-less coexistence of Judaism and Christianity is rejected by Schoon. On the other hand, a Christian and ecclesiastical absolutism which cannot find a special place for the Jewish reality is also rejected as triumphalism. Can an answer be found in Paul's thinking in Romans 9–11? For Schoon, these chapters are an insufficient basis for a "Christian theology of Judaism" in the twentieth century because they cannot take account of almost two thousand years of subsequent history.

If one accepts the Jewish reality today as a sign of the continuity of God's faithfulness, what are the implications for other areas of Christian theology? Specific areas which will inevitably be influenced are the understanding of election, covenant, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and ultimately, eschatology. Since Schoon comes from the Reformed tradition, it is no surprise that he gives particular consideration to the doctrine of covenant as reflected in Calvin and post-reformation theologians. For Schoon, it is important to emphasize that the Church has not replaced Israel in the covenant with God, but has come to share with Israel in God's covenantal history through Easter and Pentecost. "The Messianic covenant is actually not only future, as Rosemary Ruether asserts, but is already provisionally realized in the Cross and resurrection of Christ. Here lies also the moment of discontinuity."

The discontinuity with Judaism which came with Jesus is an area of potential misunderstanding. "Some people are convinced that Jesus is a totally exceptional and new appearance in Judaism; others are of the opinion that with him there has been nothing new introduced into Judaism. Jesus can indeed only be understood in the framework of the Judaism of his day; but in his appearance, God's kingdom was already made visible, and this 'newness' was confirmed in the event of the resurrection."

Despite the fact that there is discontinuity with ancient Israel in the "no" of a majority of Jews to the Messiahship of Jesus, "Israel remains God's witness in history," asserts Schoon. "The motives of the Jewish 'no' must be taken very seriously. In the end, this 'no' serves in a miraculous way to bring the extension of salvation history." This alludes to the inclusion of believing and obedient Gentiles, as in Romans 11.

When faced with the effort to perceive some meaning out of the horror of the Holocaust, Schoon quotes a number of Jewish responses. "Every theodicy leads here to blasphemy. Christian theology cannot propose any easy solutions by means of discovering analogies with the cross and resurrection of Jesus... Christian theology can no longer escape from that monstrous event in history, which means the end of all Christian triumphalism and absolutism."

The place of Israel in eschatology is always controversial among Christians, as Schoon indicates in Chapter Four. He rejects "attempts to place Israel in all kinds of 'end-time' schemes," calling these "biblically and theologically illegitimate." However, Schoon views the intention of millennialism positively because "it has always sounded a protest against the spiritualization of history and the replacement of the Jewish people by the Church."

Both Israel and the Church are meant to be spearheads of the kingdom of God in the world, but this does not imply uncritical support of all the policies of the State of Israel, any more than it would uncritically support all that the Church is doing today.

"The eschatological expectation of the Jews is more directed to the Kingdom of the Messiah, while that of the Christians is more directed toward the Messiah of the Kingdom; but Jews and Christians are together on the way to the future, in which God will be all in all," says Schoon.

What factors ought to characterize the Christian presence in Israel? One is a readiness to listen and learn, especially in relation to the experiences of survivors of the Holocaust. The Christian must identify with those who suffer and have suffered, and there are many Christians in Israel whose presence is an expression of that identification.

Another characteristic should be solidarity. "Whenever the return to the land and establishment of the State of Israel are seen as signs of God's enduring faithfulness to the Jewish people, then Christian solidarity is required, in which full place must nevertheless remain for criticism of the political acts of the changing Israeli governments."

Schoon rejects any "mission" to the Jews, both methodologically and in principle, and emphasizes the conscious choice of a dialogical relationship between Jews and Christians.

The agenda for their dialogue with one another, says Schoon, is above all to be dictated by the situation in the Land of Israel. Christians should remember that some Jews fear in that encounter their "annexation and a loss of their own identity." Both Jews and Christians remain God's witnesses for each other and for the world.

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