



Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

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Report on

“Breaking Down the Walls: Report of the Middle East Study Committee to the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)”

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Dear Commissioner:

The Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, a network of academic and educational organizations that promotes mutual understanding between Jews and Christians, recently assembled a scholarly subcommittee of members to examine the new report, “Breaking Down the Walls,” by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Middle East Study Committee. The MESC report’s authors state that their purpose for writing is to offer “priestly, prophetic, and pastoral” perspectives on conflicts in the Middle East, above all the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (p. 1). It will be voted on at the Church’s General Assembly in July in Minneapolis.

Because of the report’s extensive discussions of religious texts and topics relevant to relations between Jews and Christians, the CCJR has decided to offer a response. This report has already prompted statements from numerous Jewish and Presbyterian groups. While most have dealt primarily with historical and political issues, we focus largely on the theological and exegetical issues that are raised in the report, especially as they relate to trends in Jewish-Christian relations. We also recognize the diversity of views among CCJR members regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and do not evaluate the policy recommendations and historical sections in the report.

Like the authors, we urgently hope to see a speedy and peaceful resolution of this conflict. We express our deep concern for the many on all sides who are suffering. It is appropriate for our religious communities to encourage peacemaking efforts, including constructive engagement by the American government. Neither the Israeli government nor the Palestinian leadership is immune from criticism. Likewise, we expect that foreign organizations and governments, including our own, as well as religious groups will play a responsible role. In particular, we view with dismay interventions by outsiders to ratchet up hostility and violence for their own religious or political ends.

However, we offer a critical evaluation of the MESC report, and identify serious theological and exegetical problems. These include imbalanced or unreliable analyses of religious themes, highly questionable interpretations of biblical passages, and statements reminiscent of traditional Christian anti-Judaism. We believe that this report will harm interfaith relations in the United States and the Middle East, and undermine the prospects for effective negotiations and positive outcomes for all parties.

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Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut

Center for Interreligious Understanding
Secaucus, New Jersey

Center for Jewish-Christian Studies and Relations
General Theological Seminary, New York City, New York

Center for Multifaith Education
Auburn Theological Seminary, New York

Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations
Merrimack College, North Andover, Massachusetts

Center for the Study of Values and Violence after Auschwitz
Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida

Centre for Catholic-Jewish Learning
Kings University College, London, Ontario, Canada

Christian Jewish Relation and Encounter
Sisters of Zion, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Driscoll Professorship in Jewish-Catholic Studies
Iona College, New Rochelle, New York

Graymoor Ecumenical & Interreligious Institute
New York City, New York

Hayyim Kieval Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies
Siena College, Loudonville, New York

Holocaust Education Resource Center
College of Saint Elizabeth, Morristown, New Jersey

Institute for Christian & Jewish Studies
Baltimore, Maryland

Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations
Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding
Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania

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Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey

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National Catholic Center for Holocaust Education
Seton Hill University, Greensburg, Pennsylvania

Notre Dame Holocaust Project
University of Notre Dame, South Bend, Indiana

Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding
New York City, New York

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum - Church Relations Comm.
Washington, D.C.

Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action
Aurora University, Illinois

We have chosen to highlight selected issues that we found especially troubling:

1. The report's biblically-based critique of the political decisions of the State of Israel reflects problematic hermeneutical assumptions.
 - a. First, without explanation, the report assumes that biblical passages addressed to ancient Israel can be applied to the modern State of Israel. This is evident in the extensive focus on passages under headings such as "Zion" and "Covenant and Land," chosen for their perceived usefulness in supporting criticism of the political policies of modern Israel (pp. 11, 14-23). However, this is a simplistic and selective analogy between the ancient Israelites and modern Israelis. It ignores the complex issues involved in reapplying millennia-old statements, whether denunciations or affirmations, to later generations of Jews in very different circumstances. We caution against any attempt, by the Presbyterian Church or by other religious groups, to offer a theological evaluation—*positive or negative*—of the policies of the modern State of Israel through analogy with biblical Israel. The report's approach is reminiscent of a traditional Christian anti-Jewish perspective, now widely rejected by Western churches, of viewing contemporary Jews as modern versions of biblical Jews, against whom one can reapply biblical critiques of injustice and unfaithfulness. It differs only in its politics from the problematic approach of Christian Zionists and others who reapply biblical promises and affirmations to the modern State of Israel.
 - b. Second, also without explanation, the report presents a biblical concept of justice as the dominant theological principle by which to analyze the policies of the State of Israel (pp. 11-27; cf. pp. 38; 59ff.). It is true that justice, though interpreted in diverse ways, is an important biblical and religious value. Nonetheless, the report overlooks or subordinates other, equally relevant theological concepts to justice, which it then uses in a strictly circumscribed fashion. It almost entirely appeals to justice in order to derive a few standards of behavior that can then be applied to modern Jews (but not Palestinians), subsumed under the heading of "[treatment of] others different from ourselves" (p. 13). Again, this approach, emphasizing not only this one principle but just a few specific standards, is highly selective and even biased. What is clear is that it reflects the report's intention to demonstrate Jews' failures to fulfill their "covenant responsibilities" because of the actions of the Israeli government (p. 23).
2. The report is theologically inconsistent. As noted, it often links ancient Israel with the State of Israel in order to reapply biblical critiques to modern Jews. However, without any discussion or exegesis, the report refuses to explore theologically the modern Jewish experience of a (partial) end of exile and the creation of the State. These, the report asserts, should be seen entirely in secular terms and not "validated theologically" as reflections of God's will (p. 22). Yet this results in a serious tension, and perhaps contradiction in the report. It is logically inconsistent to then criticize the State of Israel for not fulfilling its covenantal (i.e., theological) responsibilities. While denying that the creation of the State reflects divine intentions or is the fulfillment of God's biblical promises to the Jews, the report insists that actions of the modern State will lead God to punish the Jews (pp. 15, 18). That is, the report implies that God's involvement in Jewish history is strictly punitive. This furnishes another example of the unacceptability of any theology that simplistically links biblical and contemporary contexts.
3. A similar inconsistency is found in the report's almost exclusive emphasis on biblical passages containing divine threats against the Jews, to the exclusion of passages that contain divine promises. For example, the report omits or dramatically de-emphasizes texts that refer to God's promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants. It says Presbyterians believe "that the 'land-grant' to Abraham's offspring described in Genesis is not so much a matter of 'rights' as it is a matter of 'responsibilities'" (p. 18). Without explanation or interpretation, the report simply endorses this one-sided perspective on a complex biblical tradition, elevating threat above promise. It also misreads key passages to derive sharply critical meanings for modern Jews. For example, the citations of passages supposedly illustrating God's warnings to Jews "about the potential loss of the promises [of the land] through deeds of injustice" misrepresent what the texts actually declare (p. 18, referring to Genesis 18:19; Leviticus 25:23-24, 38).

4. The report expresses disappointment that the creation of the State of Israel did not fulfill biblical hopes for the “dawn of an age of peace.” It sets the Bible’s eschatological dreams over and against Israel and the Jewish people. The creation of Israel, the report says, did not lead “other peoples and nations to worship and study the teachings of the one true God.” Likewise, though Jews benefited from the creation, “the longed-for age of peace and reconciliation has yet to come” to all humanity. This unrealistic comparison implies a unique clash between the State of Israel and God’s will for all humanity that would actually be true of any nation. It also recalls past accusations of Jewish false messianism and ethnocentrism (pp. 16-17).
5. The report implies a linkage between the ancient Israelites’ brutal “holy war” in Canaan and contemporary Israeli policies. Its denunciation of Joshua’s fulfillment of the “land promise” through “land violence” serves as a parallel to Israel’s actions, which it sees, like Joshua’s, as leading to “the displacement of the others who have long lived there.” However, this reference to Joshua’s genocidal slaughter (itself of questionable historicity) is a strikingly disproportionate comparison. Furthermore, this linkage suggests that modern Jews, while more often criticized for their disobedience to God (e.g., p. 37), are yet faithful to the most deadly and immoral aspects of the biblical tradition (p. 19).
6. While the authors reinterpret and sometimes reject biblical texts that might offer support to Israeli policies or the existence of the State, they consistently omit any discussion of whether Israeli or American Jews themselves rely on such texts or traditions. The report’s perspective on the political use of the Bible is largely unrelated to Jewish views on any of these complex topics. One would not know from the report that few Jews adopt such an exclusively theological view of the policies and existence of the State of Israel.
7. The report reveals a bias against Jews and Judaism, and is reinforced by supersessionist themes.
 - a. The report implies that the current plight of the Palestinians is fundamentally the result of Israel’s misdeeds, and specifically of Israelis’ unfaithfulness to the requirements of the Jewish religious tradition (p. 37-38). It does not subject any of the other parties in the region to a similar theological critique out of their own religious sources.
 - b. While it is appropriate for Presbyterians to rely upon Christian scripture in developing their own views, the report also cites New Testament passages when making demands upon Jews and Muslims. For example, the report suggests that the best model for reconciliation in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is “Christ’s death [which has] broken down the dividing wall of hostility between any two peoples” (p. 24, referring to Colossians 1:20; Ephesians 2:14). The report superimposes a Christological model that is either alien or irrelevant to Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians.
 - c. Similarly insensitive is the choice of the title of the report, taken from this same verse in Ephesians. It hints at the report’s critique of Israel’s Separation Wall / Fence. However, it also recalls the New Testament author’s advocacy of the abrogation of the Torah because it divided Jews and Gentiles. For a report largely focusing on the policies of the State of Israel and partly addressed to Jews, the choice of this title and verse suggests a broader critique of Judaism generally.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) deserves credit for past efforts to improve Jewish-Christians relations. However, the MESC report, if approved in its present form, will not make a positive contribution. It fails to meet the Church’s own high aspirations to “establish a new basis of trust and communication with Jews” and never to countenance the “denigration of Jews or the belittling of Judaism” (see “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews” at <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/christians-jews.pdf>). We believe this report threatens to unravel a vital web of relationships, even as we respect and affirm its concern for the Church’s relationship with Palestinian Christians in their context and its urgent concern for peace. We are disappointed that it fails to offer a theologically responsible and coherent approach to an enormously complex issue and distorts the biblical witness in profound ways.

We offer these comments in a spirit of collegiality and a shared commitment to peacemaking and interfaith harmony. We want to repeat our genuine concern over the plight of the most vulnerable persons, caught up in protracted turmoil over which they have little control. We believe that Christians, Jews, and Muslims together should call upon all those with political responsibility and influence to work urgently to remedy the present intolerable situation.

We respectfully ask the General Assembly to consider our response in light of the serious concerns raised above before voting on the report.

The Ad Hoc CCJR Committee on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Middle East Study Committee Report

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