

# The Idolization of Israel is Harmful to Jews and Christians

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## 1. Introduction

Bitter memories of complicity in crimes against the Jews have strained the consciences of many Christians in the Western world. Feelings of collective guilt and shame have paved the way for strong reactions, culminating in recent statements by churches confessing guilt towards the Jewish people. These feelings and reactions are perfectly understandable, having in mind the stain of antisemitism that sticks to the history of the ('Christian') West.<sup>1</sup>

There is also another side. Those feelings of shame and guilt have coupled with a Judaizing undercurrent in Christianity. This tendency was already considered unacceptable by the apostles at the New Testament beginning of the Church (e.g. Gal. 3:1-15).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it must be said that from the early church fathers onwards, resistance to that undercurrent has been dominant and, unfortunately, has often shown extremely anti-Jewish attitudes. These attitudes have resulted in egregious sin against God, flouting His commandment of love and righteousness. This does not deny, however, the right to criticize Judaizing influences in the Church, particularly with regard to propagating the idea that even after the period of Biblical revelation, Israel or the Jewish people would have a lasting special religious position in God's plan of salvation and would therefore be entitled to an exceptional relationship with the Church.

Mainly due to the influence of English Puritans, this idea of an extraordinary status and future for natural Israel gained more sympathy and support in pietistic circles, also in e.g. the Netherlands and Germany, from the last days of the sixteenth-century Reformation.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this emerging view among Western Pietists goes beyond the conviction of the relationship between the Church and God's history of revelation through ancient Biblical Israel, which has been undisputed in the Christian tradition. According to the newer view, today's post-Biblical Israel, defined as the 'people of God', has retained a unique place and a special future in God's plan of salvation and therefore exists in an extraordinary, 'inseparable' relationship with the Church. Many have embraced that idea as if it were a Biblical dogma, often being unaware of its far-reaching theological and political consequences. The Jewish author Abraham van Kempen, with a certain irony, compares this concept with the idolization of a 'golden calf', as the Israelites did during their journey through the desert, at Mount Sinai (Ex. 32).<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, the political impact is not dealt with, except in passing. As to the theological impact, we question whether such an alleged exceptional position for one ethnic group can be reconciled with the consequences of what the apostle Paul says about the very *removal* of ethnic walls of separation (Eph. 2:14), about the *equality* in Christ between Jew and

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was published in: Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal, 2023, vol. 7.2, p53-66, [2023-72a-SEI-Journal-Summer.pdf \(secureserver.net\)](#). An earlier edition was published in Dutch, by *Cvandaag*, 10-11-22: [Idoliseren van Israël schaadt joden en christenen - cvandaag.nl](#)

<sup>2</sup> Alexander E. Stewart, 'The Future of Israel, Early Christian Hermeneutics, and the Apocalypse of John', in: *JETS* 61.3 (2018), p. 563-575, [https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/61/61-3/JETS\\_61.3\\_563-575\\_Stewart.pdf](https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/61/61-3/JETS_61.3_563-575_Stewart.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the development of these ideas in the Anglosaxon world and Germany, see my *Christian Zionism Examined: A Review of Ideas on Israel, the Church, and the Kingdom* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock) chapters 4-8, and for the Netherlands, see chapters 9, 10, 11 en 13 of my: *Israëlviesjes in beweging: Gevolgen voor Kerk, geloof en theologie* (Kampen: Brevier 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Abraham A. van Kempen, *Christian Zionism, Enraptured Around a Golden Calf: Stuck between Morality and Idolatry - Evangelicals Rediscovering New Testament Revelations*, FastPencil Publishing, 2018 [ISBN 978-1499904826].

Greek (Gal. 3:28), and about the non-ethnic and *universal meaning* of the qualification of being a Jew (Mt. 3:9; Lk. 3:8; Rom. 2:25-29).

Moreover, Paul says about us, people in general, ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Rom. 3:23). We have missed the purpose of our lives. Therefore, we have no peace with God and we have been surrendered to fatal vulnerability and death. This unpopular truth concerns Jews and non-Jews of all times and places. However, the Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished the work of reconciliation, which is perfect and fully sufficient for the salvation of all people, even for ‘the whole world’ (1 John 2:2). Consequently, all who surrender to Him in faith are saved (Rom. 3:24-31). With the perspective of peace with God and eternal life, Christians look forward to the new heaven and the new earth, which He will fully realize at His Second Coming. Jesus Christ and this Good News are at the heart of the Bible. The climax of this is fully revealed in the New Testament, but the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ are also the ultimate perspective of Old Testament prose and poetry, especially the prophecies in it, of which the descriptions also function as foreshadowing metaphors.<sup>5</sup> Only through the person and work of Christ, who works in us through His Spirit, can we access and understand the Bible. In Him, the universal meaning of the whole of Scripture has been contracted.

In this essay, I use the terms *Christian Zionism* and *Israelism* to indicate the wide movement within Christianity that – in whatever way – claims a position of religious extraordinariness for ethnic Israel. The term *Christian Zionism* refers to organizations, especially in the Western world, of extreme advocates of this opinion and its far-reaching theological and political consequences.<sup>6</sup> The term *Israelism* refers to the much more general and less sharply defined view that the Church or the Christians have a specific and lasting connection with post-Biblical Israel or the Jewish people and the Jewish religion, more than with other peoples and religions.<sup>7</sup> This view assumes that being a Jew and living in the context of a Hebrew culture relatively guarantees being closer to the understanding of God’s intention in the Old Testament. Therefore, listening to the scriptures of the rabbis of Judaism should be normative for the

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of the metaphoric character of the Old Testament have been beautifully described by: Nicholas Thomas (Tom) Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*, HarperOne 2016. Cf. Bert van Veluw, *Jezus' kruisdood in beeld: hedendaagse en bijbelse metaforen van verzoening en verlossing*, Van Warven 2022. For the christocentric structure and the universal scope of the Scriptures, see my essays: ‘The Message of the Bible: Wasp or Funnel?’ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/message-bible-wasp-funnel-steven-paas/?published=t&trackingId=YWBP410okXicpfrKmKo6YA%3D%3D> and ‘Chosen in Christ to Salvation and to Participation in His work’, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/chosen-christ-salvation-participation-his-work-steven-paas/>

<sup>6</sup> Some of these organisations, mainly in the Anglosaxon world: Christians United For Israel (CUFI), International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ – branches in various countries), Church’s Ministry Among Jewish People (CMJ). Also: Israel Trust of the Anglican Church within Israel - ITAC), Christian Friends of Israel (CFI), Intercessors For Britain (IFB), Prayer Friends of Israel (PFI), Bridges for Peace (BFP), The American Messianic Fellowship (AMF), The Messianic Jewish Alliance of America (MJAA), Jews for Jesus (JFJ), the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, the Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ), Christians for Israel (CFI – branches in e.g. Germany and the Netherlands), Institute for Black Solidarity with Israel. Some persons, representing the movement: Willem Glashouwer, John Hagee, Jerry Jenkins, Lance Lambert, Tim Lahaye, David Pawson, Derek Prince, Pat Robertson, Walter Riggans, Dumisani Washington.

<sup>7</sup> Apart from its extreme consequence in Christian Zionism, forms of the wider phenomenon of Israelism have been adopted by many Evangelical Christians in America and Europe. For example, in the Netherlands the majority of Protestant churches/congregations adhere to ideas of some extraordinary position of Israel or the Jewish people, and have established specific ‘Church & Israel’ agencies. See <https://www.kerkenisrael.nl/vrede-over-israel/voi56-1c.php> for an overview of positions Israel takes in Dutch Church Orders. Also note the Church Order of the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (PKN), which says in article I, section 7 that the Church is called to propagate its unconditional connection (‘onopgeefbare verbondenheid’) with the people of Israel, and the Centre of Israel Studies (*Centrum voor Israël Studies* - CIS - <https://hetcis.nl/>), in which churches and agencies cooperate. The authors of this publication defend the wider idea of *Israelism*: J.H. Bonhof, M.C. van Campen, J. Hoek, R. van de Kamp, C.J. Overeem, M.J. Paul, C. Sonneveld, *Met het oog op Israël: Bezinning en Bijbelstudies*, Apeldoorn: Labarum Academic 2022. Likewise: P.J. Vergunst (red.) *Eigendom van God: Onze relatie tot Israël, toegelicht voor een jonge generatie*, Groen, 2023.

Church.<sup>8</sup> Such an arrant order to listen to the Rabbis first is fundamentally different from recognizing the interpretive value of knowing the Hebrew language and culture or recognizing that Jewish interpreters may also provide for useful insight into Old Testament texts, possibly leading to a better understanding of the New Testament issues.

A practice connected to this assumption is that in prayer during worship pastors tend to distinguish between prayer for mission to ‘the ends of the earth’, and prayer focused on Israel or the Jewish people, which they then refer to as ‘God’s people’.<sup>9</sup>

I defend the following statements: The movement of *Christian Zionism*, or – more widely – of *Israelism*, has wrongly assigned a special religious status to the Jewish people and post-Biblical Israel, and they have placed that status at the center of personal faith, theology, and Church. This is harmful because it challenges the unique central position of Christ as the ‘Saviour of the world’ (1 John 2:2; 4:14) and puts it under pressure.

## 2. Christ is the heart of the Bible

This is the overarching message of the book *Israelism and the Place of Christ*, a collection of Bible studies by 14 theological experts, including Gregory K. Beale, Colin Chapman and Owen Palmer Robertson, edited by me, and published in English and in Dutch.<sup>10</sup> That message is also prevalent in my other publications on this subject, both in English<sup>11</sup> and in Dutch.<sup>12</sup> The incompatibility of our defence of a Christocentric interpretation of Scripture and of the claim of an extraordinary status for post-Biblical Israel is also demonstrated in the works of renowned

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<sup>8</sup> Sitting at the feet of the Rabbis! (‘Zitten aan de voeten van de rabbijnen’). That is what the Dutch ‘Parasja-project’ wants Christians to do. The project has been organised by CIS <https://hetcis.nl/joodsebijbeluitleg> (cf. RD 2-10-20). J. Blom critically commented on it by emphasizing that the interpretation of the Bible by Rabbi’s is confusing (‘Bijbeluitleg rabbijnen verwarrend voor christen’ (RD 19-10-20), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/bijbeluitlegrabbijnen-verwarrend-voor-christen-ds-jblom-paas/?trackingId=EMZre8anF3m3yl2mH9%2FYGA%3D%3D>

<sup>9</sup> Cf. my: ‘Bidden voor Israël en bidden voor de zending’, in CIP 22-10-22 (<https://cip.nl/81964-bidden-voor-israel-en-bidden-voor-de-zending>).

<sup>10</sup> Steven Paas (ed.), *Israelism and the Place of Christ: Christocentric Interpretation of Biblical Prophecy*, LIT Verlag, Berlin, Munster, Vienna, Zurich, London, January 2018 (contributing authors: Erik van Alten; Gregory K. Beale; Colin Chapman; Bram Maljaars; Joost van Meggelen; Duane Alexander Miller; Steven Paas; Wido van Peursen; Theo Pleizier; Raymond Potgieter; Owen Palmer Robertson; Stephen Sizer; Jos M. Strengholt; Martin van Veelen), <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/israelism-place-christ-steven-paas-1e/>; <https://www.lit-verlag.de/isbn/978-3-643-90981-7>. Summary and review by Alexander Stewart, in: *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, volume 50 - 2020, p.101, 102, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dr-stewart-reviews-israelism-place-christ-steven-paas/?trackingId=>. For the Dutch edition of this collection, see: <https://www.boekscout.nl/shop2/boek.php?bid=8349>.

<sup>11</sup> See my study of Israel theories, including the ideologies of antisemitism and philosemitism: *Christian Zionism Examined: A Review of Ideas on Israel, the Church, and the Kingdom*, Second Edition, Eugene Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2020, <https://wipfandstock.com/9781725254541/christian-zionism-examined-second-edition/>. In this article I introduced the book, and added a list of other relevant literature: ‘Character and consequences of Israelism/ Christian Zionism’, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/christian-zionism-examined-steven-paas/>. For a review, see: Bob Wielenga of *Christian Zionism Examined*, in: *In die Skriflig/ In Luce Verbi*, 56(1) 2022, ‘Is Christian Zionism a Heresy?’ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/christian-zionism-heresy-review-dr-bob-wielenga-steven-paas-1f/?trackingId=G44WflL6A22BZln8lQpr6g%3D%3D>

<sup>12</sup> For example, in my: *Israëlviesies in beweging: Gevolgen voor Kerk, geloof en theologie*, Kampen: Brevier 2014 (<https://www.bol.com/nl/nl/p/israëlviesies-in-beweging/9200000023055239/>); Idem, *Liefde voor Israël nader bekeken: Voor het Evangelie zijn alle volken gelijk*, Kampen: Brevier 2015 (<https://www.bol.com/nl/nl/s/?searchtext=liefde+voor+israel+nader+bekeken>).

scholars such as Graeme Goldsworthy,<sup>13</sup> John Stott,<sup>14</sup> Steve Wohlberg,<sup>15</sup> and Tom Wright.<sup>16</sup> In view of the importance of interpreting the core text *Romans* 11:26a ('And so all Israel will be saved'), it is also useful to point to the thorough studies in Dutch of Bram Maljaars<sup>17</sup> and the essay on *Romans* by Piet Guijt.<sup>18</sup>

In short, the Bible is God's love letter to all mankind (Dt. 33:3; Ps. 33:13), which gets to its climax in Christ (John 3:16-18). The Bible can only be interpreted from Christ as its center, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the opinion of virtually all Christian Bible scholars, the Old Testament is heading towards its fulfillment in the New Testament, especially towards its culmination in Christ. From that vantage point of fulfillment the Old Testament becomes essentially explicable for us. Perhaps the most powerful example is the Ten Commandments at the center of the Torah (Ex. 20; Dt. 5), the enormous depth and scope of which only gets into focus when Jesus gives His double commandment of love (Mt. 22:37-40; Mk. 12:28-31), not as just a summary of Old Testament commandments, but as the essence and foundation of the whole Word of God.<sup>19</sup> It is not difficult to complement this striking example with many others.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The Jewishness of Jesus and the New Testament

I am convinced that this Christocentric perspective also applies to the prophetic statements about the restoration of Israel in the Old Testament. God's plan for the salvation of the world

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<sup>13</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching*, especially p. 97-114 ('What is the Structure of Biblical Revelation'), Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009 (first 2000); Cf. his *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles*, Intervarsity Press 2012.

<sup>14</sup> John Stott, 'The Place of Israel', published at the internet, also as an appendix in: Stephen Sizer, *Zion's Christian Soldiers: The Bible, Israel and the Church*, Leicester: Intervarsity, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Wohlberg, *End Time Delusions: The Rapture, the Antichrist, Israel, and the End of the World*, White Horse Media, March 27, 2013. <https://www.amazon.com/End-Time-Delusions-Steve-Wohlberg/dp/0768429609>; Idem, a series of Bible lectures on Israel in Prophecy: 'Two kinds of Israel', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjQQy7uKNho>; 'Israel and Jesus Christ', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vy6yyz4guXc>; 'Seven years of tribulation', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLnnVpaxDrg&list=PLxqtf778JIPsKLonwp5TxqLsabBe64Hdu&index=7>; 'Great truths on the temple', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gO9dMfE5LM&list=PLxqtf778JIPsKLonwp5TxqLsabBe64Hdu&index=6>; 'Israel, Babylon, and Armageddon', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqEYgL3P4AY&list=PLxqtf778JIPsKLonwp5TxqLsabBe64Hdu&index=6>

<sup>16</sup> The most comprehensive work by Nicholas Thomas (Tom) Wright is: *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 4 volumes, Fortress, 1992-2013.

<sup>17</sup> Bram Maljaars, 'And so all Israel will be saved', in: Paas, *Christian Zionism Examined*, p.148-160. The article is a summary of his in-depth study in Dutch on the key verse *Romans* 11:26: *Heel Israël zal behouden worden: Een kritisch onderzoek van de gangbare exegeze van Romeinen 11, speciaal vs. 26*. Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2015, [https://uitgeverijaspekt.nl/boek/heel-israel-zal-behouden-woorden/?utm\\_campaign=search&utm\\_source=boeken&utm\\_info=page-0](https://uitgeverijaspekt.nl/boek/heel-israel-zal-behouden-woorden/?utm_campaign=search&utm_source=boeken&utm_info=page-0).

<sup>18</sup> Piet Guijt 'Israël en de Gemeente: De bedoeling van Paulus met Israël in Romeinen 9-11, in het licht van de hele Schrift', CIP, 6-1-21, [WatPaulusduidelijkwilmakenviaRomeinen9-11 - CIP.nl](http://WatPaulusduidelijkwilmakenviaRomeinen9-11-CIP.nl). Also, see: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/romeinen-9-11-het-licht-van-de-schrift-door-piet-guijt-steven-paas/?trackingId=L60jmdA9Ykz4YLxEvmWXpQ%3D%3D>.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. my: 'Dubbelgebod van de liefde is fundament, geen samenvatting', in: CIP 16-12-20 ([https://www.linkedin.com/posts/steven-paas-9122ba14\\_dubbelgebod-van-de-liefde-is-fundament-geen-activity-6744980230642913280-0r3v](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/steven-paas-9122ba14_dubbelgebod-van-de-liefde-is-fundament-geen-activity-6744980230642913280-0r3v) / <https://cip.nl/82775-dubbelgebod-van-de-liefde-is-fundament-geen-samenvatting>).

<sup>20</sup> Just a few extra examples. How could you know who, in Daniel's prophecy (Dan.7:13,14), is meant by the enigmatic Son of Man who will reign eternally as King over all nations, if Jesus had not said that He is that 'Son of man'? (Mt.17:22; Lk.9:22). The eternal character of Davidic kingship (2 Sam.7:13-16; 1 Chron. 17:12-14) would have no meaning for today if it had not been fulfilled in the kingship of Jesus (Lk.1:32,33). It is revealing to observe in the prophecy of the 'Servant of the LORD' in *Isaiah* 53 a foreshadowing of the suffering Christ in the New Testament (*passim*). The prophecy about the elder who will serve the younger, as with Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:22, 23; Mal.1:2,3), would have no meaning for today if it had not been made clear in, for example, *Romans* 9:6-18, 24-26; 10:9-13. How would we know about the many nations for whom God's Name is great and about the people who desecrate Him, of which the prophet Malachi (Mal.1:11-14) speaks, if not the double vision of the 12 tribes and the innumerable multitude in Revelation 7 was in the Bible?

in Christ has increasingly been unfolded in the Old Testament. For all nations and in a special sense for the Church, the Old Testament promises have come to their highest fulfillment and deepest meaning in the Christ or the Messiah, as the New Testament has revealed to us. This fulfilling connection to God's Old Testament promises is precisely why the Son of God was born of a Jewish mother in His humanity, and was adopted as 'Son of David'.<sup>21</sup> Jesus fulfilled all Old Testament promises (2 Cor. 1:20). He did so, not because He wanted to realize Jewish particularism and nationalism, but these promises of salvation relate to His own Kingdom, which is announced among all nations, 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8; Ps.67:8). It is not the rabbinical-Talmudic interpretation of the Torah and the rest of Tanakh that is normative. Instead, Jesus, the evangelists and the apostles have revealed to us the deep mysteries of the Old Testament as they unlock the divine eloquence originally shared through the Scriptures within the Hebrew culture. This refutes the theory that over the centuries the Church would have (deliberately) ignored or disregarded the true meaning of the Jewish identity of Jesus and the 'Jewishness' of the New Testament, and that we still have to look for it now. God's revelation in the Hebrew language, His history with the 12 tribes of Israel, the Jewish people, and the Jewishness of Jesus do not serve a limited purpose but they are focused on the salvation of the universe.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. The universal impact and destination

Christ leads the history of salvation to its universal impact and final destination. Neither He nor His apostles ever claimed an extraordinary future or a special religious significance for ethnic Israel as a special people or state like Christian Zionists and Israelists do. Such an ethnic and nationalistic notion would have contradicted the spiritual and universal character of Christ's Kingdom, already announced by John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2) and which in principle has already been realized in the hearts of believers of all ethnicities, although we are still looking forward to its completeness or comprehensiveness.

The Lord Jesus Christ was sent by God the Father, as His eternal divine Son *and* as a human being, to save the world. As a human being, He originated from the people of Israel, and both in His humanity and in His divinity He came to fulfill the Hebrew Scriptures for all nations. From the beginning of history, according to *Genesis*, God has focused on the redemption of the world. In a concrete way, He related Himself to the world by showing His identity through His actions in a unique relationship with Biblical Israel. That unique relationship He did not uphold 'for the sake' of Israel. But by means of that instrumental relationship He wanted all the nations to know that He is the LORD (Ez. 36:22-32). Looking back, we can say that already in the Old Testament, although still in shadows and images, God refers to who He is in Christ for the whole world.

Above, we pointed out the metaphorical nature of the Old Testament. With examples and images God painted His intention. That is why we say that basically the Old Testament metaphorically points to the core of the New Testament, namely the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So the Old Testament, like the New Testament, is 'Book of Christ'.<sup>23</sup> Jesus Christ has completed, fulfilled, and widened the Old Testament covenant relationship with

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<sup>21</sup> Steven Paas, *Challenging Western Christians and Their Neighbours: Be Participants in the Mission of Jesus, At Home and Abroad*, Eugene, Oregon (USA): Wipf & Stock, May 2020, <https://wipfandstock.com/9781725275843/challenging-western-christians-and-their-neighbours/>, p. 16-26 'The Sent Lord has become Sender (Cf. the Dutch edition: <https://www.boekscout.nl/shop2/boek.php?bid=11011>).

<sup>22</sup> Idem, p.35-49, 'The Universal Goal'.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Steven Paas, *Luther on Jews and Judaism: A Review of his 'Judenschriften'*, Berlin, Munster,Vienna, Zurich, London: LIT Verlag, 2017, p.15-25 about how Luther interpreted the Old Testament, not only as 'Book of Israel', but also as 'Book of Christ'; Raymond F. Surburg, 'Luther and the Christology of the Old Testament', Reformation Lectures, Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, 1982, internet.

Israel in a new form (Hebr. 8:13), demonstrating its universal scope and Christocentric meaning.<sup>24</sup> He is the light of the world (John 1:9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46), for all peoples, of course also for the Jewish people. Out of all the nations of the earth He gathers His one and only people, the community of all believers, the body of Christ. This saving work has been fulfilled and will be completed at His Second Coming. Then He will reward ‘all who have longed for His appearing’ with the ‘crown of righteousness’ (2 Tim. 4:8).

## 5. Theories about Israel and the Church

Many Christians hold specific kinds of *Israelism*-theories, sometimes going so far as to even embrace *Christian Zionism*. This implies their belief in certain religious thought-systems regarding the future, the past and the present. They expect an extraordinary involvement of post-Biblical Israel in the future of the world. More specifically, they connect today’s Jewish people, including the post-Biblical culture and the talmudic Jewish religion, with the roots of the Church and with their ideal vision for the Church. These ideas are adhered to in both mildly moderate and extreme ways, but often in a mixture of both.

There is a mild, largely undefined sentiment among many serious Christians, who – before the second coming of Christ – expect a national restoration of Israel and a mass conversion of Jews to Jesus Christ, which is supposed to be a great blessing to the Church worldwide. This branch of *Israelism* is often referred to as *postchiliasm* or *postmillennialism*. Other Christians expect – only after the second coming of Christ – a special age of 1000 years (Greek χίλια, chilia = thousand) of Christ’s rule on earth from Jerusalem as the capital of the world. Many adherents of this theory, referred to as *prechiliasm* or *premillennialism* (and especially its particular form of *dispensationalism*), believe that the Church will experience a ‘rapture’, i.e. it will be taken up to heaven before the Second Coming, which would then be followed by a resumption of God’s history with Israel.

Both visions of the future depend on disputed interpretations of the Old Testament. For example, Israelistic chiliasts mistakenly use the term ‘the credit of the Old Testament’ – first used by the Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte – for their view that the Old Testament promises a ‘credit’ for Israel that has not yet been fulfilled in the New Testament.<sup>25</sup> Both visions of the future also depend on the interpretation of New Testament pericopes, for example *Romans 11* and *Revelation 20* respectively. Strikingly, Jesus and the apostles do not speak of a special future for Israel. Not surprisingly, therefore, many theologians have shown that these ‘credit’-theories cannot be reconciled with a consistent Christocentric hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

Following the post-war resurgence of chiliastic expectations of a glorious future for Israel (and the Church) before or after the second coming of Christ, a desire has arisen to reinterpret the past, that is, the origin of our Christian faith in Israel, and to propagate the consequences of this reinterpretation for today. As such, there is nothing wrong with rethinking the relationship between our faith and the faith of ancient Israel. In addition, it is necessary for

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<sup>24</sup> I gratefully used these studies in order to emphasize the Christocentric meaning and universal scope of the Bible: Rob Dalrymple, *These Brothers of Mine: A Biblical Theology of Land and Family and a Response to Christian Zionism*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015, <https://wipfandstock.com/9781498208345/these-brothers-of-mine/> (See my introduction: <https://buildingthebridge.eu/common-ground/general/looking-for-the-brothers-and-sisters-of-jesus-challenging-the-ideas-of-israelism-including-christian-zionism-and-replacement-theology/630>; A. Blake White, *God’s Chosen People: Promised to Israel, Fulfilled in the Church*, Colorado Springs: Cross to Crown Ministries, 2017, [https://books.google.nl/books/about/God\\_s\\_Chosen\\_People.html?id=ftw0MQAACAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](https://books.google.nl/books/about/God_s_Chosen_People.html?id=ftw0MQAACAAJ&redir_esc=y)

<sup>25</sup> Kornelis Heiko Miskotte (1894-1976), *When the Gods are Silent*, Harper & Row 1967 [translated from: *Als de goden zwijgen: Over de zin van het Oude Testament*, Amsterdam, 1956. See also my: *Israëlvisies in beweging*, p. 65, 183, 185, 207.

<sup>26</sup> For example, the authors mentioned in some other footnotes.

the Church to have means and people who know the languages of the Bible and the culture of ancient Israel, so that their work enables others to understand and interpret the Bible. Besides, it is important to develop a sensitive and respectful missionary awareness with regard to today's Jewish people in and outside the State of Israel. Discovering 'points of contact' is important in any missionary situation.<sup>27</sup> In this case this can give us more insight into the problem why, regretfully, most religious Jews are still hostile to Jesus.

However, unfortunately, the new desire to (re)discover 'Jewish roots' is more often inspired by the 'romantic' but not Biblical idea that the religion of Judaism is in some way theologically related to Christianity. Or by the even more radical beliefs that Messianic Jews have their own way *to* Jesus, or by the even the further-reaching opinions that Messianic Jews have their own way *with* Jesus, or that Jews have their own separate way of salvation *without* Christ. Then, the question arises which faith is meant, the faith of Abraham and Moses, who *knew Christ* (Hebr. 11) and the faith of Simeon and Anna who *welcomed* Jesus (Lk. 2:22-40), or the faith of the rabbis of Judaism, who – copying the Jewish leaders in the time of the New Testament – reject Christ. If sharing the recognition of Jesus Christ has been refused, the call for love of neighbour continues, but then every basic relationship of faith ceases.<sup>28</sup> Children of God do not need to rediscover the faith of Abraham and the other true Israelite and Jewish believers of old Israel, for they already have it in Christ. This means that this new search for Jewish roots within the movement of Israelism runs the serious risk of facilitating a shift in faith and theology which puts under pressure the central position and the universal scope of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the theoretical assumptions of *Israelism* have political consequences. Many Christians think that the modern state of Israel, located on the geographical territory of the Bible, has the right to forcibly occupy and own the entire 'Holy Land', including the regions where non-Jewish Palestinians have lived for centuries. In his book *The Land of Christ*, the evangelical Palestinian theologian Yohanna Katanacho shows that such claims are not sustained by Scripture. Therefore, Katanacho rejects the absolute Israeli land claims, but at the same time as a Christian he distances himself from hostile attitudes towards modern Israel and Jews in general.<sup>29</sup>

## 6. Seemingly opposed extremes

The *Good News* of salvation for a lost humanity has been revealed by our triune God. In it, Jesus Christ holds the central and all-encompassing position. What does this mean for the relationship between Jews and Christians? First, it must be emphasized that the current State of Israel and the Jewish people have the right to be respected. We reject and abhor all forms of antisemitism and of a 'replacement theology' that tends toward antisemitism. *Antisemites* clash with the Gospel. But doesn't that also apply to *philosemites*, that is the admirers of post-Biblical Israel, and its feasts, settings and talmudic Bible interpretations? After all, in personal faith, theology, and the Church, confessing the love of God through the grace of Jesus Christ cannot

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<sup>27</sup> In *Challenging Western Christians and Their Neighbours*, I discussed the 'denial', the overvaluing', and the 'two-sidedness of points of contact', in chapter 4 'The Universal Goal', p.36-53.

<sup>28</sup> Jewish rabbis such as Lody B. van de Kamp agree. In response to Jesus' statement that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6, cf. 20, 21), he says honestly and confrontingly: But for me there is another truth, of which the Christian Messiah was not a part long before the church came into being and has not been a part of it for two thousand years now. My truth tells me that it will remain that way. In: 'De Jood heeft niets bij Jezus, maar mag er wel bij horen', in: *Volzin*, 17-6-22 (<https://volzin.nu/de-jood-heeft-niets-met-jezus/>)

<sup>29</sup> Yohanna Katanacho, *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry*, Pickwick Publications, October 1, 2013. See my review article: 'Katanacho and the Protestant Struggle against Israelism', in: *Building the Bridge*, 10-10-19, [Katanacho and the Protestant struggle against 'Israelism' | Building the Bridge](#) (Also in Dutch, in: *Theologie*, 23-7-19, <https://www.theologie.nl/blogs/recensie-het-land-van-christus-yohanna-katanacho/>); Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope*, IVP, 2020, <https://www.ivpress.com/the-other-side-of-the-wall>

go hand in hand with a positive appreciation of a religious nationalism that excludes others and a Jewish religion that rejects Jesus as Messiah. Do not the authors of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, appealing to the Word of God, regard such a mixture as ‘idolatry’?<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the Christian view of salvation history cannot include exceptional religious expectations, which would apply only to the people and land of post-Biblical Israel.

In my opinion, such a perspective is necessarily at the expense of the expectations that in Christ apply to all peoples. In essence, the Biblical meaning of our Lord Jesus Christ revealing His central position is incompatible with a salvation theology that allows for special salvific expectations for specific ethnic groups, geographical areas, and religions. Jesus is not glorified by Israel as such, but by all – Jews and gentiles in all countries of all times – who in faith belong to Him and have become new creatures.

*Christian Zionism* or – in a wider sense – *Israelism* at least obscures the view of the Christocentric meaning and universal scope of Scripture. The construction of a ‘nationalist-ethnic’ meaning of Biblical prophecy can evoke the very feelings of antisemitism that one wants to oppose. The interpretation which construes in God’s plan for post-Biblical Israel and the Jewish people a higher or more exceptional status than for all other nations leads to undervaluing, misunderstanding or even abusing the unique and all-encompassing meaning of Christ for all peoples. Such an interpretation of Scripture may be the cause of two seemingly opposing views: the one exalting Israel and the other degrading or humiliating Israel. However, in principle these two consequences are not really opposed to each other, for they stem from the same literal reading and interpretation of unilaterally selected parts of Scripture. History has shown that the one position can shift to the other.<sup>31</sup> The ideologies of *antisemitism* and *philosemitism* have often been related to the still lagging imperial pride of the ‘corpus christianum’, the colonialist abuse of power, white pride and racism, which have often characterized Western culture from Antiquity onwards. But whoever, as a Christian, wants to face his or her multicultural world with the redemptive message of Jesus Christ must be healed by Him of every form of racial pride and preference.<sup>32</sup> *Antisemitism* and *philosemitism* both go against the essence of personal faith, theology and the Church.

## 7. Consequences for faith, theology and the Church

Do racial or ethnic preferences count in the way God in His love has condescended to fallen humanity? In my opinion, the sincere and unequivocal Biblical answer to this question is: No! This persistent idea, which keeps popping up again and again, has proven to be definitely unfounded. The dividing wall has been destroyed (Eph. 2:11-22). The Gospel does not confer any special status on races, peoples, or nations. The spiritual status of Israel is not different from the spiritual significance of the other nations.

Therefore, the insistence by *Christian Zionists* or – more generally – by *Israelists* on an exceptional and privileged position of Israel in the doctrine of salvation is misleading both Jews and non-Jews. The ideology of *Christian Zionism* wrongly suggests a kinship of the Christian faith with the image of God and of man upheld in Judaism, and it also wrongly suggests that faith in Jesus Christ is somehow part of a set of exceptional religious and political expectations for the Jewish nation. This feeds the error that Christ can only be truly our Saviour if we accept Him in the context of special expectations for or from earthly Israel.

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<sup>30</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, question/ answer 95.

<sup>31</sup> About the basic relationship between antisemitism and philosemitism, see my: *Israëlvisies in beweging*, p. 10, 132v, 247vv.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. my: ‘Racisme penetreerde het Westers Christendom’, CIP 13-8-20 <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/racisme-penetreerde-westers-christendom-steven-paas-steven-paas/?trackingId=HITaQCAIShsxZjrogliDGA%3D%3D>



## 8. Conclusion

The ideas of *Christian Zionism*, or – more widely – of *Israelism*, are disputable, because they put pressure on the central place of Christ as the Saviour of the world. Consequently, they undermine the Christocentric and catholic (universal) nature of the Church, theology and personal faith. Therefore, this ideology can only be harmful to the unequivocal participation in Christ's universal mission to all peoples,<sup>33</sup> both to rebellious 'Babel' (*Rev.* 16:17) and to unbelieving 'Jerusalem' (*Gal.* 4:25). However, in this mission of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, despite the multitude of human errors and misunderstandings, God continues to extend His hands to sinful mankind in compassionate love and grace (cf. *Rom.* 10:20, 21).

That blissful situation exists because in Christ the demonstrative love and grace of God for Biblical Israel has been fulfilled. Therefore, it has become full reality in His love for the whole world (*John* 3:16-18). In God's revealed plan of salvation, the status of post-Biblical Israel – as co-recipient of that atoning love – is not different from the status of any other people. Every human being of all peoples may surrender in faith to God, embrace that love and be saved. Every Christian, as a participant in the mission of Jesus, is called to pass on that *Good Message* of salvation to Jews and non-Jews. If Israel-theories shift the Christ-centered scope of this universal mission to idolizing Israel, this is harmful to both Jews and Christians.

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<sup>33</sup> Paas, *Challenging Western Christians and Their Neighbours*, p.36-60 about the universal scope of mission, 'beginning at Jerusalem'.