



## Israel as the ‘hermeneutical Jew’ in Protestant statements on the land and State of Israel: four Presbyterian examples

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### ABSTRACT

This article studies four major Protestant Christian statements on the State of Israel, from the Presbyterian Church (USA) (1987, 2012) and the Church of Scotland (2003, 2013). While they initially advocate a secular, non-theologized view of Israel, they then paradoxically assess – and often critique – it using Scriptural texts and Christian theological concepts. These assessments are analysed using Jeremy Cohen’s model of the ‘hermeneutical Jew’, which describes a pre-modern Christian construction of the Jew as possessing Scripture but reading it incorrectly (e.g. too literally, particularistically). It is argued that the model applies to these modern Christian statements which view Israel as a hermeneutical Jew. They cast Israel as a corporate religious entity by which the Jewish people might fulfil their religious obligations, but criticize it for failing to properly interpret and apply Scripture in its policies. The article then critiques the appropriateness and accuracy of their viewing Israel as a hermeneutical Jew.

**KEYWORDS** Israel; Jewish–Christian relations; Judaism; Christianity; Bible; Presbyterian; Protestant; hermeneutics

Contemporary statements from Western Protestant churches about Judaism, the State of Israel, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict typically offer not just political but also theological assessments of the state’s creation and policies. Because Israel has both a democratic and a Jewish character and brings to an end centuries of Jewish wandering and powerlessness, the statements offer insights into the authors’ theological views on Jews and Judaism as well. Their perspectives on Israel, and especially their application of biblical texts and Christian theological concepts to it, emerge within the context of modern Christian efforts to break with centuries of anti-Judaism and to affirm the ongoing legitimacy of the Jewish covenant with God. These young, fluid, and sometimes halting efforts by both Protestants and Catholics in the wake of the Shoah have produced major and ongoing changes in important aspects

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of Christian theology. While some of these reforms were more easily made (e.g. the deicide charge is now universally rejected), other topics continue to provoke intense disagreement, both internally within Christian communities and interreligiously between Christians and Jews. Discussions of the land and State of Israel are among the most contentious topics because they touch not only on political issues but on profound and disputed religious questions such as the proper interpretation of Scripture and God's covenant with the Jews.

'Nothing in the [Christian] tradition has prepared it for dealing with the State of Israel.'<sup>1</sup> Its creation in 1948 threatened traditional Christian beliefs that Jews were condemned by God to wander the earth powerless and oppressed. These Christian statements offer a valuable window into the extent and influence of the formidable efforts to transform deep-seated and hostile patterns of thought about Judaism. They illustrate approaches to a highly challenging and politically fraught topic, one that potentially conflicts with other theological or ethical commitments.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate some approaches to this topic, I will present a comparative analysis of selected Protestant Christian statements on Israel.<sup>3</sup> This analysis will be situated within the context of contemporary Christian efforts to break with traditional anti-Jewish patterns. In this article, I will limit my study to mainline/mainstream statements, focusing on prominent themes and especially on the hermeneutical and theological assumptions their authors make regarding the relevance of biblical texts to the State of Israel and to the Jewish people.

## Sources

Four statements were selected, two each from two Presbyterian churches: the Presbyterian Church (USA) (abbreviated PCUSA) and the Church of Scotland (abbreviated CoS). Though they have shared roots in the Reformed branch of Protestantism, the churches are independent of each other. Each has issued two major statements on the land and State of Israel, the PCUSA in 1987 and 2012, the CoS in 2003 and 2013. These four statements should be viewed as comprehensive, stand-alone statements. The later statements refer only rarely to the earlier statements, and, rather than building on them, begin their analysis anew. Their major claims are largely similar, though there are some smaller differences as well; no authors declare themselves bound by earlier statements. Further, these Presbyterian statements are among the longest and most sophisticated of any contemporary Protestant church statements. Only a few other churches' statements reflect a similar commitment of resources and time and a similar scholarly engagement with theological and biblical issues.

Because of space limitations, the study will be restricted to these four Presbyterian statements. Their views, while more extensively developed than those of most other churches, are strongly representative of those also found in non-Presbyterian church statements on the land and State of Israel.<sup>4</sup> Both

Presbyterian and non-Presbyterians authors, in line with much mainstream Western Christian thought, oppose a supersessionist view of Judaism and instead affirm the ongoing validity of Jewish covenantal life. On the land and State of Israel they discuss a small range of common subjects related to the biblical promise of the land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants, including the terms of the promise and its relevance to the modern State of Israel. Additionally, both Presbyterian and non-Presbyterian statements engage similar biblical texts and perspectives.<sup>5</sup> They are also alike in being shaped by traditional theological views about Christian universalism versus Jewish particularism and in emphasizing Jews' responsibilities under the biblical covenant rather than Jews' rights. Most importantly, Presbyterian and non-Presbyterian statements employ parallel approaches to Scripture. All seek to preclude supposedly inappropriate applications of the Bible to the modern State of Israel while simultaneously drawing on the Bible to analyse Israel and modern Jews. Therefore, there is little in these four statements that is substantively and distinctly Presbyterian.<sup>6</sup> (Perhaps the Presbyterian influence is most apparent in the commitment in both churches to serious theological study and discussion.) Rather, they offer valuable insights into broader trends in mainstream Protestant reflections on the land and State of Israel, and on Judaism as well.<sup>7</sup>

## Structure and methodology

The article begins with a close reading of the theological and biblical issues raised in discussions of the land and State of Israel in the four statements, moving chronologically with attention to recurring patterns. These patterns will then be related to a model of the 'hermeneutical Jew' developed by historian Jeremy Cohen.<sup>8</sup> It will be argued that the perspectives of the authors of these modern statements adhere to an earlier and often critical Christian perspective based not on actual engagement with Jews but on an imposed theological model that contrasts 'correct' Christian interpretations of Scripture with supposedly 'incorrect' (or deficient) Jewish interpretations.

## Studies of the four statements

### **1. 'A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews', Presbyterian Church (USA) (1987)<sup>9</sup>**

This sophisticated and well-known statement contains seven sections (called affirmations) that present religious views on aspects of Judaism. In the sixth affirmation on the land and State of Israel, they establish their opposition to the application of Scripture to the state. They disavow the use of biblical texts to support the state and insist that the 'State of Israel is a geopolitical entity and is not to be validated theologically'.<sup>10</sup> Israel is an 'entity' like other states, to be viewed in secular rather than religious categories. By ruling out religious

arguments, the authors seem to circumscribe the use to which biblical texts might be applied to this or to any state.<sup>11</sup>

However, their introduction breaks with this secular approach when it states that their goal is 'to investigate the *continuing* significance [of biblical texts on the land of Israel] ... and to explore the [Bible's] implications for Christian theology'. The authors go on to add that 'God's [biblical] promise of land bears with it obligation' on biblical and modern Jews. They indicate here the religious lens through which they will view the modern state, now linked with the biblical land. Despite their declared opposition to treating the state in religious terms, they signal their intention to offer a detailed critique of it based on 'God's promise' as disclosed in Scripture. The authors are guided by a hermeneutical assumption that ancient biblical demands can be transferred to the contemporary State of Israel: 'The Hebrew prophets made clear to the people of their own day as well, indeed, *as any day*', that divine responsibilities fall on those who possess land.<sup>12</sup>

Unexpectedly dispensing with their resistance to theologizing about the State of Israel, they instead 'affirm the continuity of God's promise of land'. Such a seemingly generous view of the ongoing promise nonetheless yields to a more demanding and even threatening view. Their comments rely almost exclusively on those biblical texts that make demands of or pose threats to the ancient Israelites and, in the authors' application, also to the modern state. They consistently emphasize not the promise itself but the 'obligations of that promise to the people of Israel' then and now. For example, they focus on Jewish covenantal obligations: 'This promise [of land], however, included the demand that "You shall keep my covenant"'<sup>13</sup> The unconditional aspects of God's promise found throughout Genesis and elsewhere are minimized, with much more weight given to divine demands. The authors highlight God's strict requirements for conduct that are, they say, necessary for continued residency in the land, including by modern Jews: 'the blessings of the promise were dependent upon fulfillment of covenant relationships. Disobedience could bring the loss of land'.

The authors apply two biblical standards directly to the state and its (presumably Jewish only) citizens. First, they are construed as religious actors with an obligation to serve the weak and powerless. For example, the authors argue that 'those in possession of "land" have a responsibility and obligation to the disadvantaged, the oppressed, and the "strangers in their gates." God's justice ... is consistently in favor of the powerless.'<sup>14</sup> The authors highlight this biblical expectation for behaviour as a standard that remains binding today. The fate of modern Israel, like that of the biblical Jew, is dependent on the piety of its policies. If it follows 'God's justice' – if its residents 'cry out against the strong ... do justice and peace on earth' – it will experience 'God's peace'. Referring to the modern state's military and political acts, the authors warn against believing that 'peace can be secured without justice [and] through the exercise of violence

and retribution.' That is contrary to God's will as revealed in Scripture. Just as the biblical kingdoms were punished on account of their immorality, today Israel faces similar risks if its faithfulness to the biblical covenant is insufficient.

Second, they broaden and ultimately universalize the range of responsibility for the recipients of the land promise: 'Land is to be used as the focus of mission, the place where a people can live and be a light to the nations.'<sup>15</sup> The promise is fulfilled when the state, under this prophetic obligation, acts not exclusively or particularistically but on behalf of all humanity. This universalization is, they assert, the *raison d'être* of the land promise:

God chose a particular people, Israel, as a sign and foretaste of God's grace toward all people. It is for the sake of God's redemption of the world that Israel was elected. The promises of God, made to Abraham and Sarah and to their offspring after them, were given so that blessing might come upon 'all families of the earth'. (Affirmation 3)

This last sentence, despite its oblique reference to Genesis 12:1–3 in which God first unconditionally promised land to Abraham (not noted here), instead buttresses an instrumentalist and universalist interpretation: the biblical expectation of service to humanity fell on Abraham then and on Israel now.

Elsewhere, they turn to Scripture for an even starker universalization of the land promise, one that effectively vitiates the physical, geographical referent. They redefine the promise: 'to understand that [land] promise solely in terms of a specific geographical entity on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean is, in our view, inadequate'. Such an understanding, linked with one people and one place, they argue, is too restrictive. They propose a change in the plain sense of the biblical text so as to make the promise relevant to everyone everywhere: "'land" is a biblical metaphor for sustainable life, prosperity, peace, and security.' Based on their interpretation, the authors challenge the presumably competing Jewish interpretation as unacceptably particularist. They aim to neutralize potential biblical support for the state because it clashes with a wider goal of 'affirm[ing] those same rights in the name of justice to all peoples'. The Christian interpretation is a broader one, suited to the universalism supposedly inherent in the original promise. Thus, despite having affirmed the covenant with Abraham, this new interpretation undermines it by stripping it of any distinctive Israelite or Jewish dimensions.<sup>16</sup>

## **2. 'Theology of Land and Covenant', Church of Scotland (2003)<sup>17</sup>**

The statement's authors address multiple historical and political topics. However, their main focus is clearly defined:

Our remit is theological: to study what the Bible has to say about the Land [of Israel] and Covenant, and to reflect on how the biblical material has been interpreted and used in the context of the present conflict [in] Israel/Palestine. (Section 1:3; see also 1:5; 3:3:8; 6:2:1)

They state at the outset that they intend to challenge claims that ‘the contemporary state of Israel can be assumed to be coterminous with the Ancient Israel found in the Bible’ and to undermine ‘the way in which Old Testament material’ gets applied today (1:1).

Their critique rests on their fundamental claim about the State of Israel. It is, they write, a secular state, legitimated and bound by secular law (6:2:3). They have generic moral expectations of the state, which is ‘subject to those ethical norms’ found in modern society (5:5:2). They disapprove of religious claims for the state. Because of the hermeneutical challenges of moving between biblical and post-biblical periods, they argue that it is perilous to apply biblical texts to modern contexts: ‘biblical scholarship must point to the different historical settings of the Old Testament passages,’ thus ruling out their application to the contemporary state (5:5:1). They claim that their approach avoids an idiosyncratic privileging of some passages over others. Because interpretive choices always reflect the ‘context within which we speak,’ the authors are critical of those who today select and apply biblical texts to Israel (6:1:5).

The Christian Bible, they argue, supports only the most minimal claims for the State of Israel: ‘for the Christian Scriptures the return of Jews to the land of Israel at this time and in this form is neither necessary nor forbidden’ (5:5:1). This negative formulation signals the authors’ break with traditional replacement theology, which viewed Jewish exile from the land as divine punishment (5:4:2). However, it also bars positive statements about the religious significance of the land and state: ‘The complexity of Biblical resources and the contested nature of claims authorized by Scripture make any simple equation of ancient and modern Israel questionable’ (5:1).

This note of caution is then completely neglected when they shift to a critique of the state on explicitly religious and biblical grounds. Perhaps sensing the contradiction here, they claim as their rationale that because some Jews view the state as having religious significance, it is appropriate for Christians too to judge the state by religious standards. They cite unnamed Jews who, they say, hold a view of the state as theologically significant. First, they mention an unnamed ‘Israeli civil servant’ who in 1948 expressed satisfaction over the choice of the name ‘Israel’ for the new state because this connected it with ‘a people whose roots went back to the earliest ages of man,’ presumably referring to the biblical Israelites (6:2:1).<sup>18</sup> Second, they say Israeli Jews disdain international laws requiring the removal of settlements because these threaten their hold on ‘the Land promised by God to his [Jewish] people’ (6:2:3). This limited evidence then buttresses a surprisingly sweeping generalization of Jewish views of the religious significance of the state: ‘In other words the very name “Israel” is making a theological claim, that the State of Israel is the modern counterpart of Ancient Israel in the Biblical tradition’ (6:2:1).

This is an intermediate step in a larger argument to justify the authors’ shift to a theological approach to the state. Relying on only the two above examples,

they dispense with their earlier restraint about this approach and introduce a new, contrasting principle: 'If this state is to be regarded [by Jews] as the modern counterpart of ancient Israel then it must be judged [by Jews and Christians] in the light of the response expected from God's covenant people' (6:3:3). Rather than view the state as a secular political entity, the authors view it as a sort of corporate religious entity that should be used by the Jewish people to fulfil their religious obligations. Judgements about Israel's success at doing so can be made not just by Jews but, they say, by Christians too, who can appropriately evaluate the state's religious faithfulness: 'Not only Christians, but an increasing number of Jews' rightly question whether the state satisfies God's requirements (6:3:3).

The authors then critique the state based explicitly on biblical commandments given by God to the ancient Israelites. For example, referring to Israeli actions toward Palestinians, they argue that these 'fly in the face of important elements in the biblical tradition' (6:2:4). Scripture now contains the standards for judging the state. Casting contemporary (Jewish) Israelis as present-day counterparts to biblical Israelites, the authors argue that the actions of the state should adhere to God's requirements found in Scripture (6:3:3). Rather than offer moral judgements based on secular standards, they base their judgements on the 'irreplaceable ethical demand' *in Scripture*. They rely on the hermeneutical assumption that one can re-apply biblical commandments to much later and very different circumstances, in this case, to the state's policies.

In particular, the teachings of the prophet Amos are used to criticize the policies of the modern state (6:2:4). The authors restate in twenty-first century categories and concepts the sins that Amos assailed in his day in order to set up a parallel between ancient and contemporary misdeeds. Amos opposed, they say, any 'violation of accepted international customary law and human rights' and 'regarding treaties as scraps of paper'. This restatement links Amos' denunciation with the contemporary state's rejection of 'U.N. resolutions and international law', about which they had just written. Also, they said, Amos criticized 'atrocities against civilian populations in time of war [and] ethnic cleansing'. This restatement is meant to link Amos' denunciation with the contemporary state's 'actions that Palestinians believed to be tantamount to ethnic cleansing', again, about which they had just written. State actions parallel the ancient injustices condemned by the prophet, whose words now furnish the standards for assessing its behaviour.

On the one hand, the authors emphasize biblical demands and threats. The state and its residents, just like the biblical kingdoms, are 'subject to those ethical norms acknowledged by Jews and Christians alike, and embodied in their scriptural traditions' (5:5:2). The authors note threats against ancient Israel and minimize divine promises or assurances of an unbreakable biblical covenant. Applying Amos' words to the state, they criticize it for repeating those acts that brought down God's punishment in biblical days. In both ancient and modern

periods, the authors write, ‘God’s people have a greater responsibility, and will be the more inevitably called to account for what they do’ (6:2:4).

On the other hand, the authors, again reapplying biblical concepts to the modern state, minimize the hardship exile imposes on those outside the land. Rather, they celebrate landlessness (and by implication statelessness) for bringing ‘new life and new opportunities,’ which they contrast with the perils of life in the land: ‘living on the land seems to be at times fraught with difficulties’ and ‘The Land is also a threat’ (3:2:6). Their positive assessment of ancient Israelites’ experiences outside the land contains a religious critique of the modern state, whose value is questioned and which can be counterbalanced by the spiritual benefits of exile. While such themes are present in Scripture (along with contrasting themes that deplore landlessness and exile), the authors not only highlight them but apply them to modern Jews and to the modern state.

### **3. ‘Christians and Jews, People of God: A Contribution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to the Interfaith Conversation; Presbyterian Church (USA) (2012)’<sup>19</sup>**

This lengthy statement focuses on two subjects, the land and State of Israel and Christian proselytism of Jews; only the first will be discussed here. While the authors rarely mention the 1987 PCUSA statement, they affirm one of its principles: ‘The State of Israel is a geopolitical entity and is not to be validated theologically’ (page 6). They affirm the right of Israel as a ‘modern political state’ to exist on secular grounds. Repeatedly insisting on a strict separation between the modern state and the biblical tradition, they argue that ‘biblical realities should not be read into present-day political situations, nor should modern political situations be read into biblical narratives or accounts of the gospel’ (5). One should not blur things that should be kept apart: ‘the land of biblical Israel and the modern State of Israel are two distinct realities: the state is a contemporary secular and political entity’ (7).

Jews (and Christians) who apply biblical texts to the state are accused of misreading Scripture by removing it from its proper context and ‘misappropriat[ing] the biblical promise, employing it as a political instrument’ (6). Such texts, they say, cannot be applied to Israel. The authors repeatedly express their befuddlement over claims they attribute to Jews generally: ‘it is difficult for us to accord a contemporary state spiritual or religious significance’ (7). In a jarring parallel, they cite the German Confessing Christians’ 1934 Barmen Declaration against Nazism to underscore their opposition to attributing ‘too much theological significance to a state,’ whether to Hitler’s Germany or modern Israel (8).

However, this seemingly firm principle collapses elsewhere in the statement. The authors paradoxically analyse (and almost exclusively criticize) the State of Israel using biblical texts and theological concepts. They are clear that their interpretation of Scripture is intended as an exploration of the biblical land



promise 'at this [present] time in history' (6). Despite having questioned the appropriateness of applying biblical texts at all, much of their statement is engaged in this very endeavour, going so far as to offer an argument for the correct interpretation of biblical texts that they apply to the contemporary state.

For example, they repeatedly cite the demands of the Torah as relevant to modern Israel. This land, they say, is 'the place in which the people Israel can live out the covenant and carry out God's commandments' (6). God imposes on its residents a specific purpose: 'to fulfill the divine will'. The current state now bears these heavy obligations and risks punishment if it fails in this God-given task. They adopt a minimalist (and unexplained) view of the land promise, which they assert 'comes less with rights than with responsibilities'. Rather than highlight divine graciousness in the giving of the land, they highlight threats of divine justice and even wrath against its misuse: 'The gift of the land is conditional upon the following of God's way' (6). They cite God's chastisement and exile of biblical Israelites as a precedent and a warning to the modern state: the 'Scriptures warn repeatedly that failure to [follow God] will result in God casting the people out of the land'. They then assemble texts describing the terrible fate that befalls the disobedient, now applied to Israel.<sup>20</sup> (Strangely, these texts prohibit sexual transgressions, pride, or idolatry and are irrelevant to state policies.)

The authors consistently select biblical passages that seem to minimize Jews' and even God's attachment to the land. Modern Jews, cast in biblical roles, are assigned relatively mundane responsibilities as 'stewards' and 'caretakers' (7).<sup>21</sup> The land is not really their own but held 'as a trust' by Jews from God, suggesting a provisional connection dependent on their 'acting on God's behalf'. The authors suggest that passages from the Hebrew Bible closely linking God with the specific land of Israel are temporary. They look forward to the future ('in the end'), when God's concern with this one land will be replaced by a broader commitment to the entire earth. Citing passages that seem to transcend the particularism of the land of Israel, they expect that 'God will create a "new heaven" and a "new earth," in order to accomplish God's own intentions.'<sup>22</sup>

This preference for the (Christian) universal over the (Jewish) particular is seen in their insistence on a universal goal for the state: 'God gives this particular land to [the Jews], in which they are to fulfill the divine will, in order to establish the Sovereignty of God on earth' (6). This obligation rests not just on those who returned to the land in the sixth century BCE; rather, it rests on all Jews living 'before, during, and after the [Babylonian] exile', up through those resident in the modern state (6). Now, Israel is called to serve as the vehicle by which modern Jews might comply with this biblical requirement.

Strikingly, this concern eventually leads to an abrogation of Jewish particularism entirely. The authors empty the biblical land promise of any distinctly Jewish content by extending it to Palestinians alongside Jews: 'both people, in different ways, are recipients of God's gift [of land] and responsibility' (8).

Although they earlier wrote that it ‘is not possible to deny the particularity of God’s gift of a specific land to the people of God’s covenant’ (6), at this point they subsume the promise into a broader offer now available equally to non-Jews. It ‘pertains both to the Jews and to the Palestinian people who live along side each other in what was the ancient, biblical land of promise’ (8). This claim, negating the particularism of the biblical promise, is not supersessionist in the traditional sense. The authors do not transfer the covenant from (unbelieving) Jews to (believing) Christians. Rather, they vitiate its original biblical referent (one particular land given to one particular people) in favour of multiple recipients. This dramatic reinterpretation stands not just in direct contrast to a presumed particularist Jewish interpretation but to the authors’ own affirmation of the land promise.

#### **4. ‘The Inheritance of Abraham? A Report on the “Promised Land”’, Church of Scotland (2013)<sup>23</sup>**

This recent statement offers a ‘theological approach ... [to] the issues of land’ (page 11). It contains few references to the 2003 CoS statement, though its authors likewise begin by affirming the legitimacy of the State of Israel in secular terms. It ‘is a [legally] recognised State and has the right to exist in peace and security’ (3). Therefore, only political and moral, rather than Scriptural, arguments are appropriately applied to it: ‘the Church of Scotland does not agree with a premise that scripture offers any peoples a divine right to territory’ (3). Against those Jews (and Christians) who cite Scripture to support the state, they deny it offers Israel ‘a privileged claim for possession of a particular territory’ (12). Rather, they seek to rule out appeals to biblical texts: it is ‘a misuse of the Hebrew Bible ... to use it as a topographic guide to settle contemporary conflicts over land’ (11). Citations of Scripture are an unwelcome intrusion and neither relevant nor helpful.

Like the other authors, they are soon enmeshed in a contradiction. Despite their opposition to the use of biblical texts to justify the creation and policies of the state, they extensively deploy Scriptural arguments regarding the same subjects. But in contrast to the authors of the 2003 statement, who evinced some initial reluctance to do this (especially across religious boundaries, i.e. to Jews), these authors energetically draw on Scripture. Israel is treated not as a secular state. Rather, they merge two topics together: ‘[1] Scripture and [2] contemporary social and political [policies] in Israel’ (6).

The authors analyse Israel’s policies as if they were assessing Jews’ faithfulness to God. The Bible indicates the demands on the state: ‘occupation of the land must go hand in hand with obedience to God’s law and God’s concern for justice’ (5). Israel cannot dodge these requirements. Rather, like the biblical Israelites, modern Jews are bound by a ‘covenantal tradition of Moses and the prophets [that] knows that no community can hope to occupy land peaceably

and justly unless the claim of the neighbour is honoured' (6).<sup>24</sup> These demands are not cast as moral or political but as biblical commands. They are grounded in the authors' interpretation of shared Scripture, viewed as binding on the state. This allows the authors to treat a range of misdeeds – 'the displacement of some 750,000 [Palestinians in 1948], and the present injustices and humanitarian issues we see today' (6) – as religious transgressions of the Jews' (and the Christians') sacred text.

More explicitly than the authors of the 2003 statement, these authors denounce biblical interpretations applied to Israel and found in the Jewish 'community' generally (7) or held by those on the 'Jewish side' (8). They contrast these with their Christian interpretations. For example, they accuse Jews of misreading the book of Genesis when they 'try to use the Hebrew scripture to determine an area of land meant exclusively for the Jewish people' (8). Similarly, they accuse the state of ignoring the prophets' demands. Rather than obeying God, it commits deeds that 'seem to ignore those [biblical] texts' that mandate just behaviour (6). Wrongly, it acts 'in the name of alleged divinely conferred exclusive rights to a specific area of land' (6). Jews, they say, misunderstand the biblical land promise, wrongly believing that Israel has God's permission to act as it does. Throughout, the authors assume that Israel's acts are grounded in, and even motivated by, religious beliefs and sacred texts. Hence they offer their judgement that Jews are wrong to commit politically unacceptable acts and 'doubly wrong to seek biblical sanction for this' (10).

Like others, they cite threatening biblical punishments. Applying these to the state, they ask, 'Did the prophets not warn that pursuit of power and wealth would lead to inequality, injustice and the loss of land, as it did in the [Babylonian] Exile?' (5). Jewish indifference to the message of Scripture – especially when buoyed by belief in an unconditional covenantal promise of land – exposes the state to disasters similar to those suffered by the ancient Israelites. Jews should not cling to the land promise as a 'territorial guarantee' and not selectively depend on passages that 'show that God promises the land to the Israelites unconditionally' (4). Incorrect interpretation, they argue, is widespread, afflicting 'key aspects of contemporary Zionist positions' (4) and promoting misunderstanding of the covenant with God. The authors challenge this misunderstanding, repeatedly insisting on the 'conditional nature of promises in the Hebrew Bible' (8; see also 6, 7).

Echoing a traditional Christian accusation against Jewish biblical interpretation, the authors disapprove of what they call Jewish 'particularism' and 'exclusivism'. They present this not as a political but as a religious mistake, based on Jews' faulty readings of biblical texts. It is manifest in Israel's violence and hostility to others because of a Jewish belief, in antiquity and now, of a 'special, privileged position in relation to God' (8; see also 11). Jews supposedly use this to justify their special claim to the land of Israel. The authors reject these 'nationalist' elements in Scripture. These, they say, encourage the Jewish

people's 'turning inwards,' wrongly claiming God solely for themselves and for the land or state (9).

The authors do not entirely deny that some supposedly Jewish claims have support in Scripture. However, the authors defend a universalist and inclusivist position as the most accurate interpretation of the Bible: 'God was not confined to one land, or was not concerned only for one people' (8). Their 'different understanding' demonstrates that 'God's universal, inclusive love is for all' (9). As above, they offer competing biblical visions for the land and the state. Against an 'ethno-nationalist understanding' (7) of modern Jews based on a 'literal' (4, 5, 6) application of Scripture to the state, they propose an understanding of a 'land with a universal mission' (8). Their view includes and serves all the world's peoples, a higher value than the more limited view they impute to Jews.

## Discussion

This study of the four statements emphasized topics that appear repeatedly, receive significant attention, and clearly reflect the authors' views. As noted earlier, a limited range both of topics and of views is present in more such statements. It is contended that this can largely be explained by the continuing influence of a long-lived Christian practice of constructing an image of the Jew using Christian biblical and theological categories rather than through engagement with and knowledge of living Jews. Jeremy Cohen has called this construction the 'hermeneutical Jew'. While he focuses on its application to medieval Jews as a religious community, in these modern statements it is transferred to the State of Israel and by implication (and usually without explanation) to Jews resident in or supportive of it. The deeply rooted influence of this centuries-old model is apparent and helps us to understand the authors' perspectives. On this topic of the land, the authors remain bound by some traditional ways of thinking about Jews and Judaism, which reflects an older, more critical, and polemical stance unfavourably contrasting Christian with presumed Jewish views.

Cohen's model rests on the fundamental claim that the hermeneutical Jew was a Christian creation: 'Christian theology and exegesis created a Jew of their own.'<sup>25</sup> Rather than engaging with or even considering actual Jews, the hermeneutical Jew was 'constructed in the discourse of Christian theology, and above all in Christian theologians' interpretations of Scripture'. Such a Jew served to represent an inferior and incorrect approach to interpreting the sacred text shared by both communities. Jews composed a 'textually defined community' in Christians' eyes and were seen not as they really were or as they saw themselves.<sup>26</sup>

While developing and extolling their own interpretations of Scripture, Christian theologians polemically cast Jews as bad interpreters, misunderstanding the sacred text or refusing to follow its commands. They used their own religious categories and then fit Jews into them. For example, Jews were faulted

for what Christians saw as biblical literalism and said to be bound to a slavish observance of the details of the commandments. Without Christian insights, they missed the true, non-literal, meaning.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Jews were said to be too particularist in their approach to and possession of Scripture and indifferent, even hostile, to Gentiles. They supposedly cared only for their own needs, reading biblical texts without concern for others. Christian interpreters, by contrast, were solicitous to find ways to extend divine benefits to all of humanity.<sup>28</sup>

The accuracy of the portrait of the hermeneutical Jew was irrelevant to those employing it, especially when brought into internal Christian disputes. The hermeneutical Jew could symbolize competing values or 'deficient' Scriptural interpretations in internal Christian struggles.<sup>29</sup> While Christians sometimes polemicized directly against Jews and Judaism, they also applied its negative characteristics to other Christians, such as heretics, so-called Judaizers, and those with divergent views of Scripture. They castigated them as Jewish even if such views were not in fact held by real Jews. Whether referring directly to Jews or tarring other Christian as Jews, theologians assigned Jews a 'particular role to play in a divinely ordained [Christian] historical drama.'<sup>30</sup>

Cohen's model is relevant here as a heuristic device for understanding some contemporary Christian thinking about Israel and Jews. There are continuities between the medieval and modern periods, with many of the characteristics of the hermeneutical Jew now reapplied to the State of Israel and to modern Jews.<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, while all the authors studied in this essay initially advocate a non-theologized view of the state, they nonetheless analyse it using biblical texts and theological concepts. They view its political actions in fundamentally, sometimes exclusively, religious terms. The State of Israel (and modern Jews) is cast not (only) as a secular political entity but as a theological entity, to be analysed according to their Christian expectations of what constitutes fidelity to Scripture. In Cohen's terms, the state is 'textually defined' in the statements, its policies critiqued not (only) as politico-ethical transgressions but as religious transgressions of divine commandments.<sup>32</sup>

However, the authors fail to consider the major hermeneutical challenges of such a reapplication of biblical laws. Though citing divine commands given in very different contexts, the authors all shift abruptly and almost without explanation to the period after 1948. They assimilate (and sometimes conflate) biblical Israel and the State of Israel, viewing it as a sort of hermeneutical Jew bound by the requirements of Scripture. This shift encapsulates unresolved contradictions regarding contemporary interpretations of biblical texts, which are alternately judged irrelevant to a secular state and directly relevant to Israel because of its Jewish character. Beneath this are profound tensions regarding how they view Jews, who are alternately seen as both 'normal' residents of a state like any other and a unique religious community now incarnated in the State of Israel and therefore bound by Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

Conforming to Cohen's model, these authors, treating Israel and its Jewish residents as objects of theological inquiry, are indifferent to questions about the accuracy of the portrait they develop. Even though some note that Zionism was a largely secular movement and that most Israeli Jews are not religious,<sup>34</sup> they engage the state as a hermeneutical Jew and its residents in terms of a Christian-constructed discourse about interpreting Scripture in the present.<sup>35</sup> While a study of Jewish views of the theological significance of the creation and policies of the State of Israel cannot be included here, it can reasonably be asserted that many Jews would find the authors' approach incomprehensible.

While some Jews may trace the connection to the *land* of Israel to a divine promise, few if any justify the existence of the *state* of Israel, not to mention its government or policies, as a result of a divine promise.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than reckoning with the accuracy and appropriateness of viewing Israel's policies as implicitly or explicitly justified by appeals to Scripture, the authors simply presume such a connection because *they* seek to analyse the state this way. These authors miss an important opportunity to contribute to a salutary trend in the contemporary Jewish-Christian relationship: discussing fairly and accurately genuine disagreements over the meaning of Scripture, not those constructed by only one group and then imputed to the other.

The authors' specific claims similarly fit Cohen's model. As is common in earlier Christian constructions of the hermeneutical Jew, here the supposed Jewish interpretations are repeatedly used as foils against which the authors present superior interpretations. For example, authors, charging Jews with manifesting an overly particularist understanding of the biblical promise of land, insist the promise should not be so geographically limited (given an overly literal application to a small piece of earth) or demographically limited (applied to just one people). Nor should the promise buttress claims of a privileged and exclusive connection to God. They unfavourably contrast the Jews' alleged misunderstanding of the nature of the biblical land promise (which some supposedly use to justify hostility to non-Jews) to their own universal understanding.

The authors' emphases on covenantal responsibilities over rights (or privileges, a more polemical term) further illustrate the hermeneutical Jew dynamic at work. They formulate a clash in covenantal theologies between their Christian interpretations and those attributed to Israel and to Jews. While not negating the legitimacy of the biblical promise entirely, they seek to correct a supposed imbalance in Jewish views. They employ a largely one-sided hermeneutic to passages on the land and the covenant generally, preferring those that place demands on and present threats against Jews and now Israel. This clash is constructed around Christian assumptions about the correct way to read biblical passages. These buttress a theological critique of the state as if it were a hermeneutical Jew dependent on a divergent reading of Scripture, one overly confident about God's promise and in its policies indifferent to the biblical commandments. The authors' insistence on the weakness and conditionality

of the Jewish covenant recalls a traditional Christian polemic against the hermeneutical Jew's overly strong affirmation of the covenant between God and Israel. Formerly, this polemic was integrated into a supersessionist model that criticized Jews for mistakenly insisting on its validity after Christ. In these statements, while the authors do not argue for the abrogation of the Jews' covenant, they nonetheless argue for a different, and weakened, form of it.

The adaptability of the model of the hermeneutical Jew for inner-Christian disputes as noted by Cohen is present in these statements as well. Sometimes it is used to critique Jewish interpretations of Scripture as applied to Israel, but sometimes to critique other (typically more politically and theologically conservative) Christian interpretations.<sup>37</sup> These authors accuse not only Jews but also Christians of misunderstanding the biblical land promise, using nearly identical terms. For example, charges that some Jews misapply biblical passages to the State of Israel are brought against Christian Zionists as well.<sup>38</sup> Christians' unbiblical claims regarding the theological significance of the state parallel those of Jews, which are 'difficult for some Christians [i.e. the authors] to understand' (PCUSA 2012, 7–8). Authors charge Christians with making the same theological mistakes as Jews. Accusations of 'ignor[ing] those [biblical] texts' which demand that the state obey God's law are levelled against Jews and other Christians without distinction (CoS 2013, 6). Further, some Christians wrongly view 'the Land promised by God to his people' in geographically maximalist terms (CoS 2003, 6:2:3). Regardless of the accuracy of the model, the hermeneutical Jew is easily incorporated into a Christian dispute over Scripture.

The authors are engaged in a multi-pronged polemic, employing similar accusations against two groups, Jews and other Christians. While I do not want to claim one is the dominant or 'real' polemic, there is an ongoing and much larger dispute among Western Christians (especially Protestants) over enormously contentious issues about how to read and apply Scripture. This includes but transcends the dispute about the biblical land promise.<sup>39</sup> Most important for our purposes is to note the way that accusations that some Christians are like Jews in misreading Scripture reflect this long tradition charted by Cohen. By constructing and then critiquing a portrait of the Jew (or the Jewish state) that symbolizes a problematic reading of Scripture, one group of Christians can present their 'correct' interpretation as a challenge to another Christian group's 'incorrect', and too Jewish, interpretation.

There is another serious difficulty raised by the statements that demonstrates the authors' reliance on the model of the hermeneutical Jew. The authors apply biblical standards to the State of Israel but neglect to consider whether Christians and Jews could agree on how to interpret Scripture, let alone how or if to apply it in a modern political context. Jews and Christians do both claim the Hebrew Bible as a sacred text. However, they have different interpretive assumptions and histories of interpretation. This undermines authors' attempts to present themselves as interpreters speaking to Jews and Christians alike out of

a shared biblical heritage and with judgements that are relevant and potentially persuasive not just to Christians but to Jews as well.

Some authors briefly note these differences,<sup>40</sup> but none places limits on their interpretations of writings claimed by both communities. On the contrary, the authors imagine both communities as bound by Christian interpretations. For example, the 1987 PCUSA statement reads, 'Therefore we, *whether Christian or Jew*, who affirm the divine promise of land ... dare not fail to uphold the divine right of the dispossessed' (#6).<sup>41</sup> The authors insist that they, as Christians, are co-heirs to the biblical heritage. Jews and Christians constitute 'one religious family' (CoS 2003, 6:3:2), have 'a unique relationship' (PCUSA 1987, #5), and 'share these biblical books' (PCUSA 2012, 4). Their Christian interpretations are therefore presumed to be normative for Jews. This is especially surprising when the authors advance claims that are quite critical, as when privileging covenantal responsibilities and threats against disobedient Jews and also prophetic passages about sin, which they apply directly to Israel. These are of course interpretive decisions, chosen from among numerous options, and they reflect a long Christian tradition about how to read the Hebrew Bible. Yet the authors apply them to Jews without making any effort to demonstrate that they are held by Jews.

Claims that the Bible is a sacred text to both Jews and Christians and that the two have a special religious relationship to each other, while evidence of positive changes in Christian views of Jews generally, are not necessarily shared by Jews. The same holds true for the authors' assumption that it is possible to transcend the boundaries and assumptions of one's own religious community in order to instruct and even rebuke another religious community. Though the claims are meant to give the authors the authority to discuss the Bible's requirements on Jews, it is not shown that Jews would agree, or even share any of the underlying assumptions. More pointedly, it seems unlikely that the authors' efforts to find Scriptural warrants for critiquing the State of Israel and Jews on religious grounds would meet Jewish approval. These efforts then to place Jews and Israel in a relationship with Christians, and especially in order to deploy a harsh critique, clearly fit the model of the hermeneutical Jew. It is deployed for a contemporary polemical purpose, in this case, to charge the State of Israel with policies that are unfaithful to the Hebrew Bible.

## Conclusion

These statements offer a valuable opportunity to assess some contemporary Christian theological views of the land and State of Israel. This is helpful in light of the deep Christian interest in the region, apparent most recently in Christian religious and political activism regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The statements also allow us to assess contemporary Christian views of Jews and Judaism. While the article has noted far-reaching and welcome changes on



other topics, on this topic there is reason for disappointment. The authors' continuing (perhaps unconscious) reliance on a traditional, often anti-Jewish model reveals the powerful legacy of more negative patterns of thought. Not only is this inherently surprising, in light of the dramatic changes made on other issues, but those other issues include topics such as the ongoing legitimacy of the covenant between God and the Jews and the validity of Jewish readings of Scripture that should influence thinking about this specific issue. The land promise is but one component of the covenant, and yet in discussions of Israel it continues to be treated as separate and subject to different expectations for affirmation.<sup>42</sup>

This is not to oversimplify the challenges; their theological views on this issue are not only about ways of reading Scripture and interreligious relations but are enmeshed in a contentious political conflict. However, the tensions highlighted in this article are deep, and reveal that important aspects of Christian thinking about Israel and about the dialogue between Christians and Jews remain murky, problematic, and sometimes contradictory.

## Notes

1. Brockway et al., *The Theology of the Churches*, 170.
2. Boys, *Has God?*, 263–5.
3. While the Vatican and national Catholic churches have issued statements on the land of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, these seldom substantively engage theological topics; see Cunningham, “A Catholic Theology.” Statements by Middle East Christians differ greatly from Western statements and should be treated separately; see Khader, “Christian–Jewish Dialogue.”
4. E.g. “Christian Zionism: A Faithful Response” from the United Church of Christ (2006) at <http://globalministries.org/mee/resources/Christian-Zionism-Faithful-Response-September-2006-ed.pdf>; “Justice for Palestine and Israel” from the Methodist Church in Britain (2010) at <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf10a-14-pal-israel-160211.pdf>; and “Land of Promise? An Anglican Exploration of Christian Attitudes to the Holy Land, with Special Reference to ‘Christian Zionism’” from the Anglican Church (2012) at [http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/media/18907/land\\_of\\_promise.pdf](http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/media/18907/land_of_promise.pdf). Note also a recent and contentious statement, “Zionism Unsettled: A Congregational Study Guide,” from a group affiliated with the PCUSA, at <http://www.israelpalestinemissionnetwork.org/main/component/content/article/70/256-zionism-unsettled>. See also Ariel, “The One and the Many,” 35–6; Kaplan and Cantz, “Israel: ‘Occupier’ or ‘Occupied’?”; Kessler, *Introduction*, 154–64; Levine, “Old Habits.”
5. For example, the views of Palestinian Christian theologian Naim Ateek and American Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann are often cited by Presbyterian and non-Presbyterian authors.
6. The authors very occasionally refer to the Reformed tradition. Presbyterians were present in the Middle East beginning in the nineteenth century; see Haynes, “Jews and Presbyterians,” 66; Merkley, *Christian Attitudes*, 56. Of course, Presbyterians are not alone in having historical and contemporary connections to the Middle East.

7. They also illustrate a sharp divide among Christians about attitudes toward the conflict, usually splitting Christian Zionists from those in mainline/mainstream churches; see below.
8. Cohen, *Living Letters*. Others have made similar arguments; see Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*.
9. <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/4343>. It was ‘commended to the church for study and reflection.’ See further Roth, “Duped by Morality”; Banki, *A Jewish Perspective*; Edwards, “A Response”; Leighton, “The Presbyterian–Jewish Impasse”; Haynes, “Assessing,” 22–4; Smith and Levine, “Habits of Anti-Judaism.”
10. Quotations are from Affirmation 6, unless otherwise noted.
11. Kogan, *Opening the Covenant*, 217–23; Heldt and Lowe, “Theological Significance,” 4–5.
12. Emphasis added here and above.
13. Citing Gen 17:7–8.
14. Citing Ps 103:6.
15. Citing Isa 42:6.
16. March, “Land as Divine Gift.”
17. [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/13230/Theology\\_of\\_Land\\_and\\_Covenant.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/13230/Theology_of_Land_and_Covenant.pdf). The church agreed to ‘[r]eceive the report and commend it ... for study.’
18. The speaker was the first director general of the Foreign Ministry, Walter Eytan (1910–2001). His quote actually reflects his concern for how the new country would be perceived by other countries and most likely lacked the theological implications that the authors attribute to him; see Gilbert, *Israel: A History*, 187.
19. <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/4343>. It was offered as ‘a resource to encourage the furthering of conversation and building of healthy relationships between Christians and Jews’; see [http://www.pc-biz.org/PC-BizWebApp\\_deploy/\(S\(y3noqj0vg1zq5fbzszwt3bu\)\)/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&tid=4987](http://www.pc-biz.org/PC-BizWebApp_deploy/(S(y3noqj0vg1zq5fbzszwt3bu))/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&tid=4987). An earlier version was first proposed at the General Assembly of 2010 but not passed, partially because of disputes over related issues; see Small, “In Our Time,” 92–5.
20. Lev 20:22; Deut 8:11–20; 30:15–18.
21. Citing Ps 24:1.
22. Citing Isa 65:17; 66:22.
23. [http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/14050/the\\_inheritance\\_of\\_abraham.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/14050/the_inheritance_of_abraham.pdf). It was adopted by the General Assembly following revisions of an earlier version. See further Morrow, “This Church Report”; Hoare, “Church of Scotland”; Carrell, “Church of Scotland Agrees.”
24. They are here quoting Walter Brueggemann.
25. Cohen, *Living Letters*, 2–3.
26. *Ibid.*, 394. See also Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 7.
27. Cohen, *Living Letters*, 11–13.
28. *Ibid.*, 227.
29. *Ibid.*, 9–13.
30. *Ibid.*, 13. See also Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 48–134.
31. Cohen himself moves beyond the medieval period, noting that ‘Christian churches today still view the Jews’ as hermeneutical Jews; see Cohen, *Living Letters*, 17. Of course, not every characteristic of Cohen’s model matches up between periods.
32. *Ibid.*, 394. See also Levine, “Speaking of the Middle East,” 102.
33. Levine, “Old Habits.”
34. E.g. CoS 2003, 2:1:2; PCUSA 2012, 7.

35. That approximately 25% of the population, including some who set and implement political policies, are not Jewish has no impact on their theologized view of the state.
36. Sandmel, "Jews and Presbyterians," 68.
37. This is true of other Protestant church statements, which likewise present strong critiques of other Christians' divergent interpretations of Scripture. In addition to the statements mentioned above, see also "Christian Zionism: A Historical Analysis and Critique" endorsed by the Reformed Church in America (2004) at <http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/ChristianZionism.pdf>; "Resolution on Confronting Christian Zionism" from the Presbyterian Church (USA) (2004) at [http://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll/const\\_PCUSA/AnnoBoO/level000193.htm/level101172/level201273/level301274.htm#JD\\_2004minutes,item06-06](http://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll/const_PCUSA/AnnoBoO/level000193.htm/level101172/level201273/level301274.htm#JD_2004minutes,item06-06); "Why We Should Be Concerned About Christian Zionism" from the National Council of Churches (2008) at <http://www.nccusa.org/news/081202christianzionismbrochure.html>; "Bern Perspective," World Council of Churches (2008) at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/middle-east-peace/bern-perspective>; "Christian Zionism—Implications for Peace and Justice Between the Jewish and Palestinian Peoples" from the United Church of Canada (2011) at <http://presbyterian.ca/justice/middle-east/#christian-zionism>.
38. E.g. PCUSA 2012, 6.
39. Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel*, 111–40.
40. E.g. CoS 2003, 5:5:2; CoS 2013, 9.
41. Emphasis added.
42. Eckardt, "The Place of the Jewish State Part I"; Kessler, *Introduction*, 147–8.

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