The Jewish People, the Gospel, and the Promises

A Declaration on the Relationship between the Church and the Jewish People and the Place of this People within God’s Salvation History

By the Theological Commission of the Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel

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Editor’s Preface to the English Edition

As Christians we have a special relationship to the Jewish people: Jesus was a Jew, the first Christian church comprised Jews, and those who first preached the gospel to Gentiles were Jews. They did so because they knew that the message concerning Jesus as Messiah was relevant not only for Jews, but for Gentiles as well. Many Gentiles came to faith and soon they became the majority among the believers. At a relatively early stage the Jews thus became more or less “invisible” as a part of the church, and the church’s relationship to the Jewish people soon became characterized by discrimination and persecution. Large parts of the history of the church’s relationship to the Jewish people are thus dark and painful.

In the 17th century a new interest in the Jews arose among Protestant Christians in Europe. This interest was often linked with strong expectations concerning the last days and the return of the Jews to the land of their fathers. In the wake of this interest a commitment to mission among Jews shot up at the beginning of the 19th century. There was a desire to bring the gospel back to the people from whom it came.

In the last century several events took place that both strengthened and changed Christians’ attitudes towards the Jewish people. First, the Holocaust. In many countries, particularly Germany, this terrible tragedy led to a thorough rethinking of the church’s relationship to the Jewish people. People from many quarters questioned whether it was legitimate to conduct missionary work among Jews. New models for understanding the relationship between the Church and Judaism were developed, among others the idea that there were separate roads to salvation for Jews and Gentiles.

In addition, at the time that many European churches were saying No to missionary work among Jews, a Messianic movement sprang forth in Israel and in the Diaspora: A movement of Jews who confessed Jesus as the Messiah but who also maintained their Jewish identity. In this way the Jewish element within the framework of the universal Church once more became visible. This resulted in new challenges with regard to theological reflection concerning the meaning of Jewish identity.

Finally, the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 was followed with great interest by many Christians, who wondered how these events were related to the biblical promises given to Abraham and his descendants concerning the land. The short and turbulent history of the state of Israel has also created debate among Christians
concerning political solutions. In the background there is another question: Does the state of Israel hold a unique position because the Jews are God’s chosen people? Do different norms apply to this state than to other people and nations?

Many Christians are concerned about the issues mentioned above. Some years ago the Norwegian (Lutheran) Church Ministry to Israel (NCMI) asked its Theological Commission to work out a declaration dealing with the principal questions related to missionary work among Jews and in Israel. This is the background of this document, which the Board of NCMI accepted in March 2004 as an adequate expression of its theological foundation with regard to the relationship between the church and the Jewish people and the place of this people within God’s salvation history.

Several issues are dealt with in this declaration. Not all of them are equally important, and Christians may disagree on some of them, e.g. the question of the fulfillment of prophesies in our time. This should not, however, be the main focus of Christians’ concern for the Jewish people. Such a commitment should rather be guided by the words of the apostle Paul: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16).

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Introduction

From the very beginning the Christian church has based its confession on two fundamental convictions. First, the God in whom we believe is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God of Israel. Second, the Jesus whom we proclaim is the Messiah foretold by the prophets.

At an early stage, however, it became clear that the majority of the Jewish people did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. The Gentiles soon became the majority among the believers in Jesus, and the church gradually lost awareness of its Jewish roots. These are historical realities which have made it difficult for both Jews and Gentiles to think rightly about the place of the Jewish people within God’s salvation history.

This declaration is formulated by a group of Christian exegetes and theologians who wish to take seriously the fundamental issues concerning the relationship of the Jewish people to the gospel and to the church, and the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises in Jesus the Messiah, in the church, and in the history of the Jewish people. We will try to deal with these issues in light of the word of God in the Holy Scriptures, as God has revealed it through his prophets and apostles and through his own Son.

1. The Jewish People and the Gospel

1.1. Israel is God’s chosen people

The Law and the Prophets make it clear that Israel is God’s chosen people, his own possession (Deut 7:6; Joel 3:7). This is confirmed by the apostle of the Lord: “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). Consequently God’s promises to Israel remain in force.

1.2. The promises to Israel have been confirmed in Jesus Christ

According to the New Testament the prophecies point forward to Jesus. Referring to the Holy Scriptures of the Jews, Jesus said: They “bear witness to me” (John 5:39 RSV).

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2 The word Israel in this text refers to the Jewish people; it does not refer to the state or the land unless explicitly stated.
3 Unless otherwise indicated, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in USA.
With regard to the promises of the old covenant, the apostle Paul says: “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor 1:20 RSV). When Jesus of Nazareth is first and foremost known by the name Jesus Christ, this expresses a fundamental conviction that he was the Messiah that would come. This conviction is based on the teaching of Jesus himself (cf. Luke 24:25–27; 44–49).

1.3. Jesus is Israel’s Messiah

The mission of Jesus Christ was primarily to the Jewish people. His ministry was focused on this people (cf. Matt 15:24), and he sent his disciples to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6). For that reason his disciples – after Easter and Pentecost – preached the gospel only to Jews. This was evidently based on the prerogative of Israel: “You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3:25).

1.4. There is no way to salvation other than through Jesus Christ

Because the promises of salvation have their fulfillment in Christ, he is the only way to salvation. When Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” (John 14:6), this is a statement without exceptions. It has absolute validity, both for Jews and for Gentiles. That the Jews are not excepted is confirmed by the apostle’s word to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The idea of two covenants and two different ways to be saved, one for Gentiles and another for Jews, is not in agreement with the testimony of the New Testament.

1.5. There is a “mystery” connected with the salvation of Israel and the nations

In Romans 11 Paul says that there is a “mystery” in connection with the salvation of Israel and the nations. Being the apostle of Christ, Paul reveals something that until then had not been known. Some interpreters of the Bible claim that what earlier had been hidden is that the Gentiles would have a share in salvation. This is obviously wrong. The fact that the Gentiles would partake in the blessings of Israel had been promised already in the Old Testament (Gen 12:3; Isa 42:6; 49:6). Admittedly, Paul in Ephesians speaks about a mystery in relation to the salvation of the Gentiles. This statement is, however, related to their full and complete participation in the promises to Israel: Jews
and Gentiles shall no longer be separated, but make up one and the same body (Eph 3:2–6; cf. 2:11–22). It is this that was earlier hidden.

In Rom 11:25f, however, the mystery is linked to the salvation of Israel; more precisely the point of time and extent of this salvation. The common opinion was that Israel would gain salvation before the Gentiles. Paul reveals that this is not the case. He says that “a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” This means that some of Israel not will be saved before the last days. Then “all Israel” will be saved.

The phrase “all Israel” refers to the people as an entity. This does not, however, mean that the phrase refers to every single individual. This can be seen from the usage in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Kings 12:1; 2 Chron 12:1; Dan 9:11). Similarly the rabbis say that “all Israel” will have a share in the world to come – and then they list the exceptions, e.g. those who claim that there is no resurrection from the dead (Mishna, Sanhedrin 10.1).

1.6. The salvation of Israel comes about through faith in Jesus

It is a widespread notion that the Jews will be saved in a special way – without faith in Jesus as the Messiah, e.g. in connection with his second coming. However, the context in Romans 9–11 makes it clear that the Jews – in the same way as the Gentiles – will be saved through faith in Jesus. The Jews who do not believe in Jesus shall – to use Paul’s image – be grafted into the olive tree “if they do not persist in unbelief” (Rom 11:23). Even if God has given a special promise of salvation to the Jews, this does not abolish the commission that the gospel should be proclaimed also to the Jews. In Romans 10 – where Paul writes about the salvation of Israel – he emphasizes precisely the necessity to preach the gospel so that people can come to faith. The hardening, which according to Paul has stricken the Jews, is not total, but related only to a part of the people: “I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel” (Rom 11:25). Thus it is not in vain to preach the gospel to the Jews.

1.7. The gospel is to the Jew first

Since the promises first and foremost belong to the people of Israel, the Jews also have priority with regard to the gospel: “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16). In line with this statement Paul – the apostle to the Gentiles – first visited the synagogue when he came to each
new city. His fellow countrymen should be the first to hear the gospel. The statement in Rom 1:16 suggests, however, that something more is involved. Due to their prerogative the Jews have a special right to hear the gospel. For that reason it has to be made known to them. In this fact there is an important justification for continuing to proclaim the gospel to the Jews.

1.8. The apparent lack of results cannot nullify the Great Commission
One of the objections against preaching the gospel among Jews is that it is futile: they have in most cases rejected the gospel. This was already an issue in the first century. Paul expresses great sorrow about the fact that the majority of his fellow countrymen did not accept the gospel, but is convinced that they are loved by God and that all Israel will one day be saved. Neither the relatively poor results of the missionary work nor the promise of Israel’s salvation hindered him from preaching the gospel to the Jews. Everywhere he went, he proclaimed the gospel to them. Even his ministry among the Gentiles was driven by the hope of salvation for at least some Jews: “Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them” (Rom 11:13f).

In any case, the preaching of the gospel to Jews was not without results. The first congregation was made up of Jews who had come to faith in Jesus, and the greater part of the New Testament was written by Jews. The Book of Acts records that many Jews outside the land of Israel (in the Diaspora) came to faith. The same continues to happen in our time.

1.9. The gospel has to be preached to Jews and Gentiles – by Jews and Gentiles
The commission to preach the gospel was first given to Jews. They preached to their own kinsmen and later to Gentiles. There is no indication in the New Testament that Jewish believers in Jesus alone should fulfill this task. The commission is given to the whole church – to all believers – independent of their ethnic background. Thus there is nothing that hinders non-Jews from witnessing about the gospel to Jews.

1.10. The sins and errors of the church cannot set the Great Commission aside
One objection to Gentile Christians preaching the gospel to the Jews is related to the church’s participation in, and shared responsibility for, the cruelties against the Jews throughout history. There are, no doubt, many stains in the history of the church.
concerning her relationship with the Jews, also in connection with missionary activity among them. Since 1945 reflection on the church’s shared responsibility for the persecution of Jews has led many churches to abandon preaching the gospel to the Jews. It is obvious that the past may complicate missionary work and witness among Jews. The sins of the church in the past must not, however, result in a new, serious sin: hindering the Jews’ access to the gospel.

2. The Jewish People and the Law

2.1. The Law is not the way to salvation – for either Jews or Gentiles

The Law (the Torah) – understood as God’s commandments and instruction – plays an important role for the Jewish people. This is true also for the first Jewish believers in Jesus. Paul, the Lord’s apostle, emphasizes that his preaching was not in contradiction to the Law. His use of this term shows, however, that “the Law” may have different meanings. The word may refer to the Pentateuch (e.g., Rom 3:21b) or – in a more restricted sense – it can refer to the commandments given on Mount Sinai (Gal 3:17).

The New Testament makes it absolutely clear that nobody will be saved by keeping the Law of Moses. Salvation is exclusively related to God’s grace and his promises, as the Law – in the broader sense – confirms (cf. Rom 4). The question concerning the validity of the Law became important when the gospel was first preached to the Gentiles: Did they have to be circumcised and observe the Law in order to be saved? The answer given not only by Paul, but also by the other apostles and the church in Jerusalem was a clear No. Peter’s contribution to the debate made it evident that the basis for salvation is solely the grace of God – and this holds true for Jews as well as for Gentiles: “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11).

2.2. The gospel does not abolish the Law as an expression of the will of God

The apostle Paul makes it clear that nobody will be saved by observing the Law (cf. Gal 2:21). This does not, however, mean that the Law is abolished. It is still an expression of the will of God, and the believers in Jesus are called to live according to God’s commandments (cf. Rom 6:1f; 7:12; 8:4). Paul stresses the commandment to love one’s
neighbor, and shows how this may be exemplified in the ethical commandments of the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments; Rom 13:8–10). These commandments were repeated and confirmed by Jesus (cf. Matt 5:21ff; Mark 10:19). They set the ethical standard which underlies Paul’s exhortations to a holy life (cf. e.g., 1 Cor 6:9–11; Eph 4:17ff) – exhortations which are valid for Gentiles as well as for Jews.

The Christian church has to preach this message with clarity and power – the same way it preaches the gospel of God’s grace in Christ. A life following Christ is lived precisely in the tension between God’s commandments and his grace.

2.3. Not all parts of the Law have universal validity

Some of the precepts of the Law of Moses have, in a special way, served the purpose of marking the Jews as the chosen people. First and foremost this applies to the circumcision, which Scripture depicts as a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:9ff), but it also applies to the celebration of the Sabbath (Ex 31:13). In addition the laws concerning food have served to separate the Jews from the Gentiles (cf. Dan 1:8).

In the New Testament there is no explicit distinction between the ritual and the moral commandments. But in practice a distinction is made. Several times Jesus himself is in conflict with the Pharisees and the scribes concerning the Sabbath, and then he makes it clear that the Sabbath commandment is subordinate to the commandments which focus on the well-being of humankind (cf. Luke 13:10–17; Matt 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28). Likewise he subordinates the precepts concerning purity to the moral commandments (Mark 7:1–23; cf. also Acts 10).

The relative validity of the ritual precepts is expressed also with regard to circumcision. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the apostles say that it does not have universal validity (cf. Acts 15); even more, it is in direct conflict with the truth of the gospel to require that Gentiles be circumcised (Gal 5:6). Thus the ritual commandments do not have the universal validity that other commandments have. This comes to expression in Paul’s words: “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything” (1 Cor 7:19).

2.4. Jesus-believing Jews have full freedom to live according to the Law of Moses

Even if the ritual precepts do not have universal validity, they are still important for Jewish identity. Paul, who strongly fought against those who demanded that the
Gentiles be circumcised (Gal 2:2-6), circumcised Timothy. This he could do because Timothy had a Jewish mother – and thus could be regarded as a Jew (Acts 16:1–3).

Thus it is quite possible for Jews to practice circumcision and observe the ritual precepts in the Law of Moses within the framework of the Christian church. Paul says as follows: “Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision” (1 Cor 7:18). According to this principle it is legitimate for Jewish believers in Jesus to continue to practice circumcision and observe other Old Testament regulations. The same holds true with regard to other Jewish customs as long as they do not contradict the gospel. It is, however, not legitimate to require that anyone observe the ritual commandments of the Law of Moses – neither Jews nor Gentiles. Christ has called us to freedom (Gal 5:1ff).

With regard to circumcision as a sign of God’s covenant with the Jewish people, it is natural for Jewish believers in Jesus to continue to circumcise their sons. If not, they are in danger of being totally assimilated into their non-Jewish surroundings. If this happens, it will soon become imperceptible that the church of Christ consists of Jews and Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised (Col 3:11; see also below 3.4).

2.5. It is possible to be a Jew and believe in Jesus as Messiah

The first people who believed in Jesus as the Messiah were Jews. And nobody questioned their Jewish identity. In New Testament times there were several parties and movements within Judaism: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes – and the sect of the Nazarenes (cf. Acts 24:5). Since the Jesus believers, the Nazarenes, could also be depicted as a Jewish party, it is evident that it was possible to confess faith in Jesus as Messiah within the framework of first century Judaism. One did not cease to be a Jew even if one believed in Jesus.

2.6. Judaism is not exclusively rabbinic Judaism

After the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 several of the Jewish parties disappeared, and gradually the plurality of ancient Judaism vanished. Two main movements developed in quite different ways: rabbinic Judaism and the Christian church. Historically, these two movements are not related to each other as mother (Judaism) and daughter (Christianity), but rather as two sisters. In spite of their different development, they have a common basis in the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism. As a consequence of this historical development, “normative” Judaism was to
a great extent defined according to the rabbinic precepts in the Talmud. These precepts may be seen as a continuation of the traditions, which the New Testament refers to as the “tradition of the elders” or the “traditions of the fathers” (Mark 7:3; Gal 1:14). According to Jesus himself, these precepts were only human traditions (Mark 7:8f). He and his disciples lived as Jews without being committed to these precepts. This fact has to be taken into consideration when Jewish believers in Jesus today shape their Jewish identity.

3. The Jewish People and the Church

3.1. The Gentiles are incorporated into God’s people
The Christian faith confirms the salvation history of the Old Testament: As an element in his plan of salvation for the world God chose Abraham and his descendants so that they would be a blessing for “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3). In spite of disobedience and apostasy a remnant of Abraham’s descendants was always kept within the covenant.

Into this people God let the promised Messiah be born “when the fullness of time had come” (Gal 4:4). Not all of his people accepted him (John 1:11). But those who received him, he chose as his congregation, his church. This church is built on the confession of Jesus as Messiah, the Son of God, and Lord (Matt 16:16–18; Acts 2:36).

In his own ministry, Jesus mainly restricted his calling to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24), but he commissioned his church to go and “make disciples of all nations” through baptism and teaching (Matt 28:19f). By the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles were convinced that the Gentiles should be incorporated into God’s people without first becoming Jews (cf. Acts 10 and 15).

3.2. The church comprises both Jews and non-Jews
The preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles was based on the idea that the nations should be incorporated into the people of God which already existed. Paul says that the Gentiles are citizens with the saints, taking part in the covenants of promise (Eph 2:12, 19). This means that there is only one people of God, one body (Eph 2:16; 3:6). It is not true that God, through the coming of Christ, established a new people of God in
addition to Israel. When Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples, they were told to start in Jerusalem (among Jews) and continue to the ends of the earth (among Jews and Gentiles) (Acts 1:8). The Jewish believers in Jesus comprise the core of God’s people, and the Gentiles are incorporated into this people. This is foretold by the prophets (Isa 49:6; Zech 8:20-23; Zeph 3:9ff).

3.3. The church has not replaced the Jewish people

The church has, in parts of its history, developed a replacement theology which represents a false understanding of the relationship between the church and the Jewish people. According to this theology the church has replaced the Jews as God’s own people. Because the majority of the Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, God chose a new people independent of the old one. According to such thinking the Jews today are theologically on the same level as all other nations. Such a way of thinking is false because it is not in agreement with the New Testament witness, which on the contrary confirms God’s continuing election of and will to save the Jewish people. The apostle says: “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! …God has not rejected his people …” (Rom 11:1f).

3.4. It is not true that Jews have to renounce their Jewish identity when they come to faith in Jesus

As Gentile Christians gradually dominated the church, it became difficult for Jewish believers to maintain their Jewish identity. In the Middle Ages it happened frequently that Jews who were baptized had to swear that they would not observe the Law of Moses or live as Jews.

It is wrong to demand that Jews renounce their Jewish identity when they come to faith in Jesus the Messiah. Such thinking and practice is in contradiction to the New Testament, where coming to faith in Jesus does not imply an abandonment of Jewish identity and lifestyle.

This does not imply criticism of Jews who – for various reasons – have chosen to tone down their Jewish identity. That some – due to anti-Semitism and persecution – have been silent about their Jewish background is more than understandable. Others have freely chosen to live in a non-Jewish way among Gentiles. In light of the apostle’s word in 1 Cor 9:20-21 this is a legitimate choice: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I
myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law.”

3.5. *Jewish and non-Jewish believers have to be considerate of each other in order to keep the unity of the body of Christ*

From the earliest days of the church it has been necessary to take into consideration that the church comprises both Jews and non-Jews. When the incorporation of the Gentiles was discussed, it was decided that they should observe a minimum of Old Testament commandments, evidently those that were required of non-Jews living in the land of Israel (Acts 15:23–29; cf. Lev 17). The purpose was to make fellowship between the believers possible.

The New Testament also makes it clear that the Jewish believers in Jesus should not practice their Jewish lifestyle in a way that destroys the unity of the church (cf. Gal 2:11ff). The unity of the body of Christ is the major concern.

3.6. *Messianic congregations are an important reminder of the place Jewish believers in Jesus have in the church*

Even if they have often been neglected and made invisible, there have at all times in the history of the church been Jews who have come to faith in Jesus as Messiah, and thus become part of the church. It must be seen as a positive development that the Jewish-Christian element in the church in our time has become more visible by the establishment of Jewish-Christian organizations and Messianic congregations. In many situations the establishment of congregations with a marked Jewish character is a necessary corrective to the Gentile Christian dominance in the church. It will also make it easier for Jewish believers in Jesus to keep their Jewish identity.

3.7. *Messianic congregations must not isolate themselves from other parts of the church*

It goes against the unity of the body of Christ if the Messianic congregations isolate themselves from other parts of the church. This happens if they exclude Gentiles believers from their fellowship or deny that it is legitimate for Jewish believers to find their place within other congregations. This also happens if one abandons biblical and ecumenical confessions of the triune God or of Jesus as true God (e.g. the Nicene
Creed) because one regards the history of the church as a solely Gentile Christian history which does not concern the Jewish believers.

3.8. Gentile Christian dominance has led to the renunciation of the Jewish roots of the church
As the mission among the Gentiles gained ground, the Gentile Christians became the dominant group within the church. In large parts of the history of the church this dominance led to the Jewish roots and identity of the church being forgotten or denied. Among other things this has resulted in antinomianism, i.e. a conception of Christian freedom from the Law which became identical to independence from or disregard of fundamental ethical commandments and the calling to holiness. This Gentile Christian dominance has very likely also resulted in the tendency to set men in the place of God, e.g. in the worship of saints.

3.9. The neglect of the Jewish roots of the church has contributed to anti-Semitism
A false understanding of the relationship between the church and the Jewish people has sometimes resulted in Gentile Christians not treating the Jewish people with love and respect. Instead Jews have been discriminated against and persecuted, based on the false accusation that they – to a greater degree than other people – were responsible for the death of Jesus. In this way the churches share responsibility for the anti-Semitism which has characterized great parts of European culture. For that reason the churches today must dare to confront earlier practices and theology with regard to the Jewish people.

4. The Jewish People and the Last Days

4.1. The promises of salvation still await their final fulfillment
In the Old Testament, God’s fulfillment of his promises is often linked to “the last days.” According to the New Testament, the coming of Christ means that the last days have become a reality (cf. Heb 1:2). The forces of the Kingdom of God have started to manifest themselves in this world, but they have not yet come in power (Matt 12:28; Luke 22:18). For that reason all believers in Jesus look forward to the second coming of
Christ. Then all God’s promises of salvation shall have their final fulfillment – both for Jews and for Gentiles.

4.2. The Old Testament promises of salvation apply to both Jews and Gentiles

According to a widespread teaching about the last days (dispensationalism), the Old Testament promises of salvation relate only to the people of Israel. During the time between the ascension of Christ and his first return, God has taken a pause in the fulfillment of these promises. In this pause, which was unknown to the prophets, God builds his church which mainly comprises believing non-Jews.

This teaching runs counter to central texts in the New Testament. Jesus teaches that the believers from the Gentile nations shall sit at the table with the patriarchs and the believers of Israel (Matt 8:11). Paul says that God grafts wild shoots (the Gentiles) into the olive tree of Israel, where they share in the rich root; i.e. they share in the blessings of Israel (cf. Rom 11:17). The second chapter of Ephesians deals with the wall separating Israel and the nations, which has been torn down, and the Gentile believers who have now become fellow citizens in Israel. Paul does not say that God has planted two olive trees. He speaks of only one tree.

4.3. Biblical references to the “rapture” apply to both Jews and Gentiles

According to dispensationalist teaching Christ shall – at his first return – catch up the Gentile Christian church to heaven. Then he will come again and continue the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises to Israel. He will strike the enemies of Israel and give Israel the millennial kingdom, which is a kingdom on earth. Here the Jewish people will believe in him and conduct missionary work for him among the other nations.

Notwithstanding how the various words about “rapture” or the gathering of those who believe in Jesus are to be understood, none of them indicate that they are restricted to the Gentile believers, nor that this is something that will take place before God starts to fulfill his promises to Israel. The biblical texts use different words and metaphors to describe what will happen when he returns to save those who believe in him. To distribute the various images and concepts among different stages in the end time drama is without basis in the texts, and creates new problems of interpretation which this teaching has not solved.
4.4. The Bible speaks about one people of God – not two – in the last days
This same teaching about the last days claims that God’s dispensation for Israel and his dispensation for the nations do not have to be mixed. Only when the Millennium has come to an end and eternal life begins will the two peoples of God become one and have a share in the same salvation. Until then the two peoples of God are separate. The church of the Gentiles has a share in spiritual blessings and a spiritual salvation in heaven, while Israel is God’s people on earth and will take part in earthly blessings when they convert and believe.

The whole of Scripture teaches that God in the last days will create for himself one people of Jews and Gentiles, and that this people will partake together in the blessings of the Messianic age. The New Testament teaches consistently that this age began with the work of Christ in his first coming, and that it is precisely during the time before Christ’s second coming that the church of Jews and Gentiles shall be built. It is this church the drama of the last days in Revelation speaks about. This book is written to comfort persecuted Christians, whether Gentiles or Jews. It is obviously unreasonable to claim that the major part of this book does not apply at all to Gentile Christians since they are “caught up” at the time the final drama of this book is taking place.

4.5. The main issue is salvation for Israel and the nations
The statements of the New Testament concerning the end times pose many difficult questions of interpretation. In what way and at what time Israel will be drawn into the end time drama is debatable. The main issue is, however, quite clear: When “the full number of the Gentiles has come in,” all Israel shall be saved (Rom 11:25f). This – the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles – is the principal thing the Christian church should be concerned with, proclaiming the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ both to Jews and to Gentiles.

5. The Jewish People and the Land

5.1. God fulfilled his promise about the land
God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, and that he would have the land which God showed him (Gen 12:1–3, 7). Thus God brought the
descendants of Abraham out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Under the leadership of Joshua the Israelites conquered the land of promise, and there they experienced fellowship with God in a special way.

When entering the Promised Land God made it clear to the people that as long as they were obedient to the covenant, the land would be theirs. But if they wandered from God and his commandments, their existence in the land would be threatened (Deut 27–28; Josh 8:30ff). God also made it clear that He was the owner of the land; the Israelites were only his tenants (Lev 25:23).

The history of Israel records that the people were frequently in conflict with God’s will. Through the prophets God called the people to repentance, but when they ignored the call of the prophets they came under God’s judgment: Great parts of the people were led out of the land and had to live in exile (2 Kings 17:2; 2 Kings 25). But God stood by his promises to Israel and saw to it that the people could return to their land – even if this time they did not have political sovereignty.

5.2. The Jews have always had expectations linked to the land
The land has a central place in God’s history with his people in the old covenant, and as far as we know today Israelites/Jews have lived in the land continuously from the time of Joshua. The presence of the people in the land has not, however, been dependent on political sovereignty and a separate state, and during much of history the majority of the Jewish people have lived in the Diaspora.

The ideal has, however, been otherwise. This is expressed by the fact that from New Testament times Jews have prayed daily that God would “gather together our dispersed, and assemble us from the four corners of the earth.” Likewise they have prayed about living freely in the land under God’s reign: “Restore our judges as in former times and our counselors as in the beginning; and take from us sorrow and sighing; and reign over us, thou Lord alone, in grace and mercy” (The Shemoneh Esreh; the main prayer of Judaism).

5.3. The promises concerning the land in the Messianic age exceed the limits of this age
The Old Testament contains several promises for Israel linked to the age to come. In some of these the age of salvation is connected with the coming of the Messiah. These promises also include the land, and depict the glory that shall prevail when the time of
fulfillment comes. Among the promises we read that “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid” (Isa 11:6), and that a life-giving source shall spring forth from the Temple and make the Dead Sea fresh (Ezek 47:1ff). Many of these promises clearly exceed the limits of this age.

5.4. In the New Testament the promise of the land gains an expanded meaning
The New Testament widens the perspective of the promises of the land in the direction of the final deliverance, linked with the coming of the Kingdom of God. In Rom 4:13 Paul says concerning Abraham that he received the promise that he should inherit “the world” (Greek: kosmos) (cf. Matt 5:5). This corresponds to the promises that the delivered people of God shall experience fellowship with God on a new earth (Rev 21). Consequently the Promised Land is expanded to encompass the total redeemed work of creation.

In Luke 21:24 Jesus says that the people shall be taken away as captives among the nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. The text does not say what will happen thereafter. Some interpreters think that the rule of the Gentiles shall be replaced by a new, earthly Jewish rule. The text may, however, be understood otherwise, namely that it refers to the Kingdom of God which will replace the rule of the Gentiles (cf. Dan 7). No matter how one understands this specific text, we will stick to two main thoughts. First, the principal line in the New Testament is to perceive the promise of the land as a universal promise, which will be realized for the whole people of God on a new earth. Second, there is no New Testament text which directly cancels the promise of the land to Israel. In other words, the New Testament does not exclude the possibility that there is a link between the people of Israel and the land of Israel with regard to salvation.

5.5. The prophesies speak about something greater than the establishment of the state of Israel
The universal perspective on the promise of the land makes it problematic to see the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948 as a direct and final fulfillment of the biblical promises concerning the land. Besides, it is important to emphasize that the promises and prophesies which speak about the homecoming and settling in the land also say that the people shall live under the reign of God and follow his will (cf. Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 11:17–20). In other words, the texts speak about a spiritual renewal of the people as a
whole, that God gives the people a new heart and a new spirit so that they will live in accordance with his commandments. This is not the reality in today’s Israel. The establishment of the state of Israel thus cannot be seen as the realization of God’s plan of salvation in Christ Jesus.

It is nevertheless possible to see the political events of 1947–1948 as an expression of God’s will to preserve Israel as a people. In Old Testament times God also showed how he could use political superpowers in his plans (cf. e.g. Isa 45:1ff).

5.6. The Jews have a historical right to live in the land of Israel
Regardless of how one evaluates the secular formation of the state of Israel, there are strong ethical reasons and reasons pertaining to international law for the right of the Jews to live in the land of Israel. The people’s historical connection to this land cannot be disputed, and justifies their right to live in this area. The treatment of the Jews throughout history, including pogroms, persecution, and the inconceivable crime of the Holocaust, shows the need to secure a separate state for the Jews, where they can live in freedom and peace within secure borders. This was the background for the United Nations decision in 1947 to establish a Jewish state within the British mandate in Palestine. In this way international law confirmed the right of the Jews to live in this area. The United Nations decision which gave the Jews the right to a separate state did, however, also give the international legal basis for a Palestinian state.

5.7. The state of Israel is a democracy – not a theocracy
In Old Testament times Israel was – at least in principle – a theocracy, i.e. governed by God himself. The modern state of Israel, on the other hand, has a secular and democratic constitution. The politics of the modern state of Israel can thus not be justified on the basis of the idea that the Jews are God’s chosen people. According to international law the state of Israel has the same rights and is subject to the same ethical obligations as any other state. On the one hand Israel has, e.g., the right to defend its land and people. On the other hand the state of Israel is, e.g., obliged to treat all citizens equally. This has particular relevance in relation to all the non-Jews who live – and have lived – in the land through generations, and who have a legitimate right to live there on equal terms.

Pertaining to international law this obligation is expressed e.g. in the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, a declaration to which Israel has given its approval. The obligation may also be argued on the basis of Jewish ethics, referring to the Law of
Moses, which stresses the responsibility of the Jews for the resident aliens who live among them in the land (Ex 22:21). The people are exhorted to love them as they love themselves, treat them as citizens, and not oppress them (Lev 19:33–34).

5.8. The gospel creates reconciliation and peace among Jews and Palestinians

The gospel speaks first and foremost of reconciliation between God and humankind, but it also speaks about reconciliation among men. For that reason we, as Christians, must support efforts to bring peace and reconciliation in the Middle East. To create peace is in accordance with God's will (cf. Matt 5:9; Ps 122).

As Christians we have a particular responsibility to our fellow believers – among both Jews and Palestinians. We are pleased with the efforts towards reconciliation which take place among Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians, and we regard this as a witness of the power of the gospel to create peace among men.

5.9. The salvation of Israel is much more important than the land of Israel

In spite of the importance of the land for Jewish identity, it is advisable to remember that in great parts of Old Testament history the Jews lived in the land without having political sovereignty. It must also be emphasized that the New Testament is not concerned with the right of the Jews to their land. Instead the emphasis is on the Jews’ relationship with God. Notwithstanding how positively one may evaluate the Jewish return to their land in modern times, the obligation of the Christian church is to proclaim the gospel to the Jews so that they can return to the God of their fathers through faith in his Son, Jesus the Messiah. This is what lies near the apostle’s heart when he speaks about his own people: “Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” (Rom 10:1).