

Israel – a topic for our churches?

Presented at the Israel-Seminar-Day CH, Baar, 17.06.2022 (Pfarrer Martin Rösch) (Translated by DeepL, paid version)

When I talk about Israel today, I think it is essential that I first clarify what exactly I mean by "Israel". If we were to ask contemporaries what they mean by "Israel", I suspect they would immediately mention the Middle Eastern state by that name. In contrast, I have with me here a booklet entitled "Witnesses from Israel". They are short biographies of Jewish people from the 19th and 20th centuries. With one exception, none of them ever set foot on the soil of today's State of Israel. But they all belonged to the people called "Israel", and they all came to the conclusion, sooner or later in life: Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel, the "King of the Jews".

Where does the name "Israel" come from? It first appears in the Bible in Genesis, in the account of Jacob's struggle with God before his encounter with his twin brother Esau. God speaks to Jacob in these words:

“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have fought with God and with men, and you have won.” (Genesis 32:29)

The 12th chapter of Genesis records the calling of Jacob's grandfather Abraham, back when he had made his home in Haran in the south of what is now Turkey.

“And the LORD said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy father's country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land which I will shew thee.

And I will make thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thee a great name, and thou shalt be a blessing.

I will bless them that bless thee, and curse them that curse thee: and in thee shall all kindreds of the earth be blessed.”

“Then Abram went out, as the LORD had said to him, and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he went out of Haran.

So Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, with all their substance which they had gained, and the people which they had bought in Haran, and went forth to journey into the land of Canaan. And they came into the land,”

“And Abram passed through the land unto the place near Shechem, unto the oak More: and the Canaanites dwelt in the land at that time.

Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I will give this land to your descendants..." (Genesis 12:1-7).

At this point in the Book of Genesis we encounter for the first time what is often called the promise of land. The land near the present-day city of Nablus - Shechem in biblical terms - is centrally located



between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan Valley. The view goes far to the north and south, to the east and west. Here we see an inhabitant of this region in biblical Samaria, the co-founder of the Jewish settlement "Elon More".

This land is promised and assigned by God to the descendants of Abraham as a place to live. Fittingly, the first book of Moses tells us about Jacob after he had reconciled with his twin brother Esau:

“After this Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, after he had come from Mesopotamia, and encamped before the city, and bought the land where he had pitched his tent from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of gold.” (Genesis 33:18f.)

Yes, the land that is visible from the area of Shechem, that is the dwelling area of Israel intended and guaranteed by God. However, Israel has had to experience that it as a people has not only once been driven out of this land to a lesser and greater extent. Already in the 5th book of Moses Israel is threatened for the case that it should turn away from God:

“...the LORD will scatter you among all nations from one end of the earth to the other.” (Deut. 28:64)

To drive Israel out of its allotted living space, however, is not the last will of God. Many of his promises about the return of Israel from all over the world to the land of the fathers speak against this. I will quote an example:

“I will bring them out of the nations, and gather them out of the countries, and will bring them into their own land, and will feed them upon the mountains of Israel, and in the valleys, and whithersoever they dwell in the land.” (Ezekiel 34:13)

In September last year, the "Jewish Agency for Israel" issued a statistic, according to which 15.2 million of the estimated eight billion people on earth are currently Jews, i.e. belong to Israel in the broadest sense. 6.9 million Jews lived in Israel in 2021. This corresponds to a good 45 per cent of the world's Jewish population. Persons who describe themselves as Jews and do not belong to any other religious community have been recorded as Jews. According to the citizenship law in force in Israel, a further ten million people worldwide would be entitled to an Israeli passport because they have at least one Jewish grandparent.

In 2020, there were about 16,400 Jewish people living in Switzerland, almost exactly the same number as 50 years earlier in 1970, and about 3,000 more than in 2010. The Jews in the Wiedikon district of Zurich also



belong to Israel in the broadest sense, even if they presumably mostly have a red Swiss passport and not a blue Israeli passport.

I will use a few **examples to show how diverse the people and the state of Israel are.**



This picture shows Ruth Dreifuss, prominent Jewish SP politician of Switzerland, when she took office as President of the Swiss

Confederation in 1999. Where Ms Dreifuss stands in religious terms? I don't know.



Who does not know this face: that of the Ukrainian President Selenski, who also belongs to the people of Israel. I read the following about him in a Christian news service: "On 24 April 2022, Orthodox Easter Sunday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Selensky addressed his people in the thousand-year-old St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev. In a moving prayer to God, he spoke hope to his beleaguered country." A Jewish president prays in a Christian cathedral.

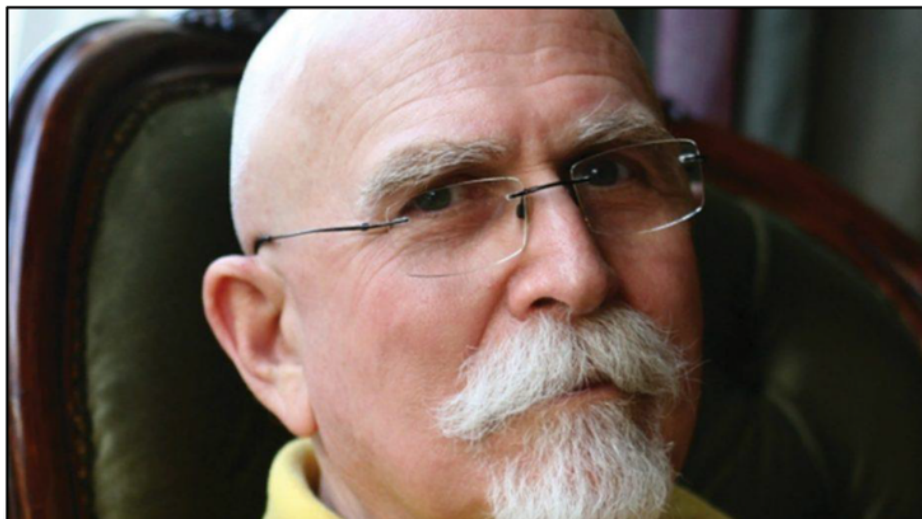


The older among us may know this face: that of Henry Kissinger, a former US Secretary of State, born Heinz Alfred Kissinger in Fürth in Germany in 1923. He addressed Selenski critically a few days ago, calling on him to think about ceding territory to Russia. Jews like to argue among themselves.

Let's take a leap from Europe and the US to Israel:



This picture shows an Israeli professional soldier. He is not Jewish, but the son of an Armenian mother and a pastor of an Arab Christian congregation. Tino took up the officer's career as a conscious Christian, commanding Jewish comrades and earning much respect in the process.



Baruch Maoz, as a Jewish follower of Jesus, has been pastor of the Christian congregation "Grace and Truth" south of Tel Aviv for many years. He sees himself as a "Hebrew Christian" and in 2003 published a book entitled "Judaism is not Jewish", an examination of rabbinic

Judaism. He told me in a personal conversation, "I wave the Israeli flag, but my first identity is in Jesus Christ."

Now I still haven't given an answer to the question, "Israel - an issue for our churches?" Here comes my answer: **a resounding "yes"**. I want to give **reasons for this yes**. During my work at the AMZI, I was invited to preach in a Chrischona congregation in Germany. On the website of that congregation I found that they wanted "sermons close to everyday life". This startled me a little at the time. I thought to myself: the relationship to the Jewish people and to the land of Israel does not have anything to do directly with the everyday life of many fellow Christians. There are topics closer to everyday life such as "dealing with illness" or "tips for dealing with each other in marriage and family", for example - topics that were not part of my sermon repertoire. Nevertheless, I experienced a friendly and attentive congregation during the service - despite the Israel topic that I brought in.

However, according to my observations, topics around Israel are very much part of the everyday life of people in Switzerland and Germany. Even though in the last two years the pandemic and more recently the Ukraine war have repeatedly been in the foreground of media coverage - there have nevertheless often been Israel-related reports. One example: A week ago today, the airport in the Syrian capital Damascus was allegedly attacked by the Israeli Air Force. The runways have been "ploughed through" in such a way that they are both unusable for some time. I cite this aerial photo as evidence....



Why this new Israeli strike against Damascus airport? It is considered a transfer point for heavy weapons from Iran to the terrorist militia Hezbollah ("Party of God") in Lebanon.



Iran and Hezbollah are both powers working towards the destruction of Israel.

Those who strive for the destruction of the state of Israel are more or less consciously striving to ensure that God's plan with the people of Israel and the world cannot be fulfilled. After his resurrection, immediately before he returned from the visible world to God his Father, Jesus gathered his disciples on the Mount of Olives. The Acts of the Apostles records this in chapter 1:

“They therefore being gathered together asked him, saying: Lord, wilt thou at this time set up again the kingdom for Israel?

And he said unto them: It is not for you to know the time or the hour which the Father has appointed in his power;

But ye shall receive power from the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you,

and shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth.

And when he had said this, he was visibly lifted up, and a cloud took him away from before their eyes.”

“And as they looked after him as he went up to heaven, behold, there stood by them two men in white robes.

And they said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come again just as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:6-11)

Looking over these announcements - are they not an indirect indication that Jewish people will receive the returning Jesus in Jerusalem?

Jesus himself addressed the people of Jerusalem in this way before going to the cross:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you, how often have I wanted to gather your children together like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings and you have not wanted to!... I say to you: You will see me no more until the time comes when you will say: Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” (Matthew 23:39)

In the prophet Zechariah we read about the coming of the Messiah:

“... His feet will stand at that time on the Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem towards the east...” (Zechariah 14:4)

For decades, there have been forces at work in the Middle East which have taken up the cause of mortal enmity not only against the State of Israel, but against the Jewish people as a whole. At the very least, they do not want Jewish dominance over the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan.



It is to be made impossible that the Jewish people will welcome their King, the Messiah Jesus, at his Second Coming in Jerusalem. That this will happen, however, is - according to the Bible - in God's plan. As Christian congregations, we recognise the Bible as an authority. I take this for granted. The Bible does not only show how individual people can live, die and rise with God. There is not only a history of individual people with God. The Bible also gives information about God's future plan with

the whole of humanity: Jesus will step onto the Mount of Olives to take up his unrestricted rule over Jerusalem and the whole world. We are heading towards this event as Jesus' followers. **There will be no way to the reign of God bypassing Jerusalem and thus apart from Israel, exercised by the King of the Jews.** **This is a first reason why the theme of "Israel" is one for our Christian congregations.**

What does this mean practically? As congregations of the King of the Jews, we will show interest in what is happening around the Jewish people and thus also in the state of Israel. Showing interest - this also means that we promote encounters with people from and in Israel, i.e. also trips there. I remember a pastor as a role model in this regard. He managed several times to bring small travel groups to the country at a very reasonable price, among the travellers also a Turkish woman, who had come to faith in Jesus in Germany, who would never have been able to afford an expensive group trip. In one tour group I led, a first-time traveller, rather reproachful of Israel before the trip, remarked after a few days about the political and religious realities in the Middle East: "I didn't imagine that this would be so complex."

With this remark, **we are turning towards areas of commitment for our congregations:**

- 1) that we stand up for fair reporting on all issues concerning the State of Israel;
- 2) that we stand up for the recognition of the State of Israel's right to exist and for its fair treatment, for example in the United Nations, vis-à-vis the political leaders in our countries;
- 3) that we oppose any form of hatred of Jews, which is currently often hidden in constant accusations directed at Israel - as if the solution to the Middle East conflict lay in Israel showing more accommodation to its enemies.

Another task for us Christians: to seek dialogue with Muslims who are often caught up in their hatred of Jews. Carmen née Matussek is an Islamic scholar, a Christian and married to a Christian from Iran.



She received a prize years ago at the Institute for Israelology at the Free Theological Academy in Giessen (Germany) for her research on an alleged Jewish world conspiracy. In her book "Israel, My Friend. Voices of Reconciliation from the Islamic World" she writes: "I would like to tell you briefly about an Iranian who now wears a Star-of-David-necklace around his neck. During our first conversation... he said: 'Carmen, I don't like Israel either.' Because I took him seriously and didn't judge him, didn't rebuke him or lecture him, I was able to start an avalanche with a simple question: 'Why?' A few days later he came up to me and said: 'Carmen, I thought about what you said. Who taught me that Israel and the Jews are bad? It was the mullahs, and only them.' That was the beginning of a long process that, after three years of intense conversations, is still ongoing. Decades of indoctrination cannot be undone overnight." (Holzgerlingen: SCM, 2016, 256)

Even though "Israel" only occurs 54 times in the New Testament, it still plays an important role there - not only in the Old Testament with 1294 references. In two passages in the Apostle Paul it becomes clear that **the worldwide church of the King of the Jews** does not exist without a close connection with the people of Israel. **This brings us to the second reason why the theme of "Israel" is one for our local congregations:**

People from the world of nations – Nonjews– who are connected to Israel through Jesus are described by Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome within chapters 9-11 as grafted wild branches of a noble olive tree:



Paul cautions his readers against feelings of superiority towards the "olive tree":

“If... you, who were a wild olive branch, have been grafted into the olive tree and have partaken of the root and the sap of the olive tree, do not boast about the branches. But if you boast, know that you do not bear the root, but the root bears you.” (Romans 11:17f.)

According to my understanding of the Apostle Paul's argumentation, by that noble olive tree he means Israel trusting and obeying its God with people like Abraham and Moses, David and Solomon, Ezra and Nehemiah, Simeon and Hannah, Peter, James and John... An example is mentioned by the Evangelist Luke:



“And, behold, there was a man named Simeon in Jerusalem; and this man was righteous and godly, and waited for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And he had received a promise from the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Anointed.” (Luke 2:25f.)

Paul refers to Jewish people who do not say yes to Jesus as King of the Jews as “broken branches” of the noble olive tree. The following image of broken or cut olive tree branches shows that the meaning of images and comparisons has its limits.



These branches are good for nothing more than burning or composting. Paul, however, writes hopefully of the branches that have been broken off in a figurative sense:

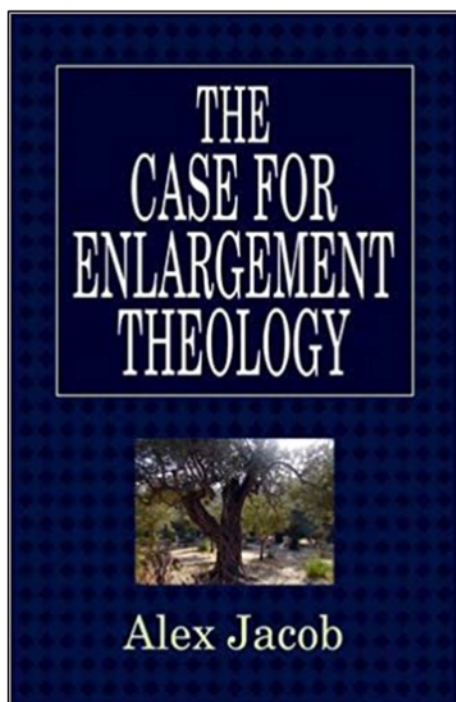
“But those, unless they remain in unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou hast been cut off from the olive tree, which was wild by nature, and hast been grafted contrary to nature into the noble olive tree, how much more shall the natural branches be grafted in again into their own olive tree?” (Romans 11:23f.)

As mentioned: The church of the King of the Jews does not exist without a close connection to the people of the Jews. This is shown in the letter of the apostle Paul to the Christians in Ephesus, chapter 2. There Paul shows: The church of the King of the Jews consists of two divisions: one Jewish and one non-Jewish. The difference between the two is not wiped-out, and yet it is true for both: Jesus, by dying on the cross, reconciled both to God. For his sake, both may also call his Father their Father. Paul in the original:

“...remember that you, who were once **Gentiles by birth** and were called uncircumcised by those who are circumcised outwardly, were at that time without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel and strangers outside the covenant of promise; therefore you had no hope and were without God in the world.”

“But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have become near through the blood of Christ. So then you are no longer sojourners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the cornerstone.”
(Ephesians 2:11-13, 19f.)

Alex Jacob, a Protestant theologian from England, published his book years ago entitled “The Case for Enlargement Theology”.



I have not yet found a good-sounding German translation for this book title, but I have understood what the author's message is: Israel, which trusts and obeys its God, has not been replaced by the Church, but is continually receiving additions from the other nations, experiencing "enlargement". Through what? Through the fact that people from all nations join the body of Jesus, thus also becoming linked to the Jewish

followers of Jesus. By this enlargement is meant the increase of people who profess Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. A Messianic Jewish commentator from the USA calls this enlargement "connection to the commonwealth of Israel". By belonging to the Jewish Messiah Jesus, non-Jews receive the privilege that they too may call out to the Creator and Father of Israel: "Our Father!" "My Father!"