

Declaration of the Synod of the ECCB about the relationship of Christians to Jews May 2002

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
And for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest...*
(Isaiah 62:1a)

Many Christian churches in the last ten years have come to realize, that they must give an account of their relationship to Judaism – they sense it as a debt to Jews as well as to the people, who live among them, and as an urgent task for themselves. The following document is the declaration of the ECCB as a provisional summary of the recent discussions, which have occurred in the past years on many levels in the churches as well as in the ecumenical community.

1. Israel – God's people – Churches²

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets...³ According to the polyphonic witnesses of the Bible are these “ancestors” of men and women, who belonged to the people of God, the chosen people-Israel. The first and most extensive part of the Christian Bible, the Old Testament, is the Jewish description of God as the Lord, as the creator of the world, how he called the forefathers of these people, and how he freed these people from slavery in Egypt, how he made a covenant with them through the mediation of Moses, gave them the Tora and brought them to the promised land, how they arrived in this land, how he led and reprovved them through the prophets, and how he was with them even at the time when his people lost their homeland, and when they returned to it and started anew. Exactly in this situation of inner temptations as well as exterior challenges the multiform expectation was born in Israel, that God will send a Messiah into the world, the “anointed” saviour. The New Testament, the second part of the Bible, is a witness that this Messiah (in Greek *christos*, in Czech *Kristus*), given to Israel, through whom came God's purpose for man through his determining fulfillment, is Jesus from Nazareth. Several of those, who met with him, understood the extent of his crucifixion and resurrection as a breach in the Messiah's last era, whose invitation to participate in God's purpose in the world now affects people from all nations. They opened then the community of Christ's faith to all, without a requirement that they would have to first become Jews. The Church is how we call this community of Christ-like faith, which quickly spread through a big part of the known world of that time. Soon it was, and still is, formed mostly of people of gentile origin. To this community of Christ's faith we belong as well. We believe, that from us Lord, the God of Israel, in Christ made “citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God”⁴, so we can turn to him with trust as to our heavenly father.

2. Who belongs to God's people?

The origin of the church however is from the beginning stigmatized by the dispute about whether this “broad invitation” to a participation in the calling of God is legitimate or not. After the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 AD and throughout the

following centuries there prevailed among the Jews a direction characteristic of their efforts about concrete forms of obedience to the God of the Tora in their written and verbal forms.”⁵ This tradition does not see a Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth. The cause for the separation of Churches and Synagogues wasn’t in the first centuries only a question of christology (“Was Jesus the Messiah or no?”), but rather many other telling questions of ecclesiology (“Who then now creates God’s people”). The polemic circumstances at the beginning of the Church then brought it to the fact, that in several places in the New Testament become unfriendly pronouncements against Jews.”⁶ Rabbinical literature similarly contained critical statements against Christians.

3. The undeniable affirmation of the Chosen Israel

If it is about us, we believe, that we also belong to God’s people due to the credit of Jesus Christ, the promised messiah of Israel. Our invitation to God and his purpose in the world we understand in relation to the prophetic promise of God’s salvation, given to Israel and to all nations in the world.⁷ Jesus as the anticipated messiah of Israel opened up a new era. Now when we come to the Lord, we don’t become Jews, but we look to the fulfillment of God’s salvation in freedom and the obedience of Christ’s double commandment of love. Of course on the basis of the polyphonic testimonies of the prophets of the Old⁸ as well as the New Testament⁹ Israel above all remains God’s people . God’s affirmation of the chosen Israel is a reality which is valid even “after Christ.”¹⁰ God’s election of Israel is the act of God’s love¹¹ and as such it concretely and positively also refers to the message and services of the churches: Israel has been presented in the world through the Jews as a sign of God’s faithfulness. Just the same as God’s love called in Christ and us, we are also concentrated on this same faithfulness God.

The way of the Lord with Israel is referred to as a mystery by the Apostle Paul, thanks to which “the full amount of Gentiles”¹² is allowed to enter. Even when the Jews in their relationship to the Lord refuse to accept the Christian conception of Christ, we perceive in this the manifestation of this mystery, which is for us, as Christians difficult and disquieting. At the same time we perceive the manifestation of their faithfulness to the covenant which they made with God. The call to mission¹³ certainly belongs to the substance of the Christian church. The church originated “ due to the extended invitation to the kingdom of God”(see line 1) and this invitation has to be brought to “all nations.” This is a clear challenge in our secularized society, but only partially addressed from our side. But as Christians we are always those, who were alone grafted on the noble olive branch of Israel.¹⁴ For these reasons we don’t consider the relation of Church to Synagogue as a field for mission, but for brotherhood, sharing the hope of the coming of God’s kingdom.

4. Blind alleys

A very unpleasant role in the history of the church was played by the schematic separation of the biblical testimonies of the Old and New Testament on the antithesis of “testament” and “gospels” as if the primary function of the “testament: was only a witness to people’s inability to live justly before God. Such an understanding of the scriptures doesn’t correspond to the basic emphasis of the biblical messages, that meeting with the living God is always undeserved mercy, as well as a call to follow. The stress on the inseparable unity of mercy and demands, “the gospels” and the “testament” we find on the pages of the Old and New Testament. The tradition of the Czech reformation, to which we belong, expresses this unity through the words about the *testament of Christ*.¹⁵

We must also reject the position, which the dispute about the election solved through the help of the so-called substitution model, according to which in the time “after Christ” the heirs of the Lord’s calling and even the Old Testament promise are only Christians, and not Jews, who did not accept Christ. Such an approach dismisses the unambiguous promise given to Israel, as well as the word, about God’s forgiveness, which is made heard even in the context of the words of critic and judgement.¹⁶

5. Tragic ends

The histories of Church followed as a shadow violence against Jews often committed with the explanation that it is a punishment for refusing of Christ. This cultivation for centuries of an animosity against Jews, strongly helped to create the environment in which in the 20th century the plan for the systematic extinction of Jews was planned. The horrible fulfillment of this plan, the events of *shoa* (holocaust) which had its wider political and social preconditions was a tragic failure of European civilization. Through their silence even many Christians and denominations were engaged in this failure. A theology is no longer possible which does not consider the events of the shoa with expectancy.

6. Physical existence

For many Jews a quality new element in relation to their own traditions is the creation of the state of Israel in the year 1948. At that time it was the result of the particular balance of powers in the international community. It was also a reaction to the events of the shoa. On the other hand the establishment of a Jewish state was the fulfillment of the efforts of the Zionist movement. And, it did not follow only Biblical motives. Still, we see the creation of the Jewish state in connection to the struggles, losses, sufferings, aspirations and hopes of the people of God, which is described in the Old and New Testament, early Christianity and rabbinical literature. We refuse the hatred towards Jews and the state of Israel from the Arab states. A number of them right away declared a war against Israel at the moment of this state’s creation, which some of them continue to support through anti-Israeli terror. On the other hand, we are alarmed by the painful lot of the Palestinians. As a result of the war in 1948 many lost their homes, and after 1967 they became an occupied nation. They were deprived of many civil rights, above all the possibility to choose their own political order. This situation leads repeatedly to the outbreak of attacks, which only strengthen the mutual irreconcilability and it ends in an endless circle of attacks and retaliation. We pray, that both of these nations would find a way towards a just peace, which is pronounced and sounds similar in Hebrew as well as in Arabic.¹⁷

7. Practical steps

The Synod invites the congregations of the ECCB, to continue in the dialogue about the relationship to Judaism from the view of the Biblical witness, and to think about questions and standpoints expressed in this statement as well as in similar documents of Churches and world church alliances from recent time.¹⁸ We are thankful for opportunities where frequent meetings with Jews occur on the congregational level and where respect and solidarity with Jewish communities is shown, or where attention and reverence is paid to Jewish memorials and historical sights. We suggest to follow in the steps of our sister churches from abroad which introduced to their church calendar a celebration of a Sunday devoted to Israel (for example in September in proximity to significant Jewish holidays).