

Habits of anti-Judaism: Critiquing a PCUSA report on Israel/Palestine

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Old habits die hard. Despite numerous attempts by mainline Protestant denominations to promote historically informed studies of Judaism, repudiate supersessionist theologies and engage in conversations with Jews, the old habit of bearing false witness against Jewish neighbors lives on. In recent years this practice has thrived especially in mainline Protestant statements on the Middle East.

Congregations, denominations and councils have rightly advocated for Palestinians suffering because of Israeli policies. The injustice is real; the situation is urgent. But church statements too often slip from a laudable call for a just peace—a call with which a large and growing number of American Jews would agree—into false and negative depictions of Jews. This slippage contradicts the churches' own theological convictions. It distorts Jewish teaching and history. And it can discourage both Palestinian Christians and their U.S. supporters from building alliances with Jews who share their commitments to peace and human rights.

Members of the churches that issue these statements frequently express sincere desires to avoid anti-Semitism. Supporters of problematic statements are rarely bigots; they are more likely people committed to justice who have also absorbed centuries-old patterns of Christian anti-Judaism. This false witness is more a matter of habit than of hate. It lives on through good intentions.

Good intentions are crucial resources for the work of breaking bad habits. But good intentions can become obstacles to change when they short-circuit serious conversation about the nature, history and impact of actions. Breaking habits requires bringing them to consciousness. And that requires attending to the gap between action and intention.

A report just issued by the Middle East Study Committee (MESC) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) provides an important example of this gap between action and intention—and it presents a real opportunity to begin to learn better habits. The

report will be considered this July at the denomination's General Assembly in Minneapolis. The MESC was created at the 2008 General Assembly, which asked the moderator, Bruce Reyes-Chow, to work with his two immediate predecessors in appointing the committee's nine members. The assembly charged the committee with preparing "a comprehensive study, with recommendations, that is focused on Israel/Palestine within the complex context of the Middle East."

The study committee made several moves that demonstrate its desire to avoid some of the most common forms of false witness against Jews. For example, it notes that most Presbyterians reject supersessionist narratives in which "Christians have supplanted Jews" to become "the only legitimate heirs of God's covenant with Abraham." Signaling this rejection of supersessionism, the report speaks of "Older Testament" and "Newer Testament" in its biblical references. Such language is neither necessary nor sufficient for avoiding supersessionism, but it at least suggests a desire to proclaim a gospel that does not begin with God's rejection of Jews.

Yet Christian false witness persists in the report despite its authors' intentions. Habits have that kind of power. Below we name some of these habits and trace the dynamics by which they survive. We write as a Presbyterian and a Jew, as colleagues on a divinity school faculty and as teachers who continue to see the habits of false witness in the work of even our most talented and committed students. We know firsthand how deep-seated the habits can be and how quickly they can outrun our best intentions. We seek not to single out the Presbyterian report, but to illumine patterns that recur in many forms of Christian witness.

Echoes of past interpretations: The report's opening biblical reflections make conspicuous efforts to avoid anti-Jewish exegesis. But the report pays scant critical attention to Christianity's long history of anti-Jewish interpretations, and so echoes of these interpretations linger. Those echoes then become amplified by other sections of the report.

The report's title, "Breaking Down the Walls," echoes the celebration in Ephesians 2:11-22 of God's overcoming of divisions between gentiles and Jews in Jesus Christ. The passage, which speaks of abolishing Torah and the formation of "one new humanity in the place of two," has a long history of supersessionist deployment. There are other ways to read this passage, but the committee does not offer them. The report affirms that Jesus breaks down "the dividing wall of hostility between any

two peoples or groups within God’s creation.” Read in the context of the full report, however, that vague affirmation takes on supersessionist content. The church is asked to consider a historical narrative that points indirectly to a single state—a new social body—in which a Palestinian majority displaces Jews. The report’s consistent lament that the time for a two-state solution is rapidly ending solidifies that impression. “Breaking down the walls” in order to form “one new humanity in the place of two” evokes old echoes of theological supersessionism and transposes them into a political key.

Such echoes also linger in the report’s treatment of the story of Jacob and Esau. Framing the story as an illustration of general “processes of human reconciliation,” the report explicitly refuses to identify Palestinians and Jews with one brother or the other. But it describes Jacob in ways that resonate with anti-Jewish stereotypes. He is “characteristically untrusting and wily.” He cannot accept forgiveness. And “in spite of his having seen ‘the face of God’ and received a new name, he had no experience of ‘new being,’ of ‘new creation.’”

The ambiguity of these associations takes on a more pernicious clarity when this retelling of the story of Jacob and Esau is compared to the report’s main historical narrative. The narrative describes the birthright of a peaceful, multicultural Palestine being appropriated by an influx of European Jews. It says that these Jews refused to assimilate, but preferred—like Jacob—to move ahead on their own. It says that Israel—like Jacob—has refused the offer of full reconciliation. While the biblical reflection suggests that Jacob might also be like Palestine, no part of the document suggests how this might be. Jacob/Israel becomes the guilty brother.

Such associations defy the report’s stated intentions. The failure to root them out allows them to resound and replay in later arguments.

Ambiguities about covenant: The report’s biblical section draws upon at least three different understandings of covenant and land. First, its analysis of the term *Zion* concludes that the church “fully transferred the locus of God’s concrete presence in the world of space and time from the place of Zion—that is, Jerusalem—to the person of Jesus, who had been crucified and raised from the dead just outside Jerusalem.” The covenant has been fulfilled, and its fulfillment involves a transcendence of place in the person of Jesus. Covenant no longer concerns land.

Consonant with this view, the report reaffirms a prior PCUSA statement that “the State of Israel is a geopolitical entity and is not to be validated theologically.” Thus Israel, having neither special sanction nor special obligations, should be judged by the same standards applied to any other nation.

But a second understanding of the land checks this approach. Appealing to a survey of Presbyterians and a collection of biblical texts that limit Israel’s claim to the land, the report states, “Most Presbyterians . . . hold that this promise [of offspring and land] is conditioned by concepts found elsewhere in the first five books of the Bible,” such as the idea that the gift of land is conditional upon Israel’s “adherence to justice.” Here God’s covenant with Israel did and does include provision of land. But that covenant also includes special obligations. And so the report insists that “Israeli Jews” must “fulfill their ‘land responsibilities’” and their “covenant obligation.” Israel is here not just another nation, but a nation held to a special standard. Its claim on the land is not unconditional, like the claims of other peoples upon the places where they live.

A third view of the land further complicates the report’s thinking. When it seeks to expand the Abrahamic covenant to include Palestinian Christians, it appeals to Paul’s view that in Jesus Christ God’s covenant with Abraham expands to include the church. But when the report expands the covenant to Palestinian Muslims, it argues that the covenant extends to all Abraham’s descendants. Thus the report offers different views on who is included in the Abrahamic covenant and how people come to be included. But in neither case does it mention special covenantal obligations. Again the report promotes a vision in which conditional Jewish claims to the land are surpassed by and then reformulated within the seemingly unconditional claims of other communities.

All three views draw upon old tropes of Christian anti-Judaism. The first describes the incarnation as a rejection of God’s covenant with Israel. The second singles Jews out as a people condemned to wander, a people without “natural” ties to land like other people. The third follows a narrative in which Jews are replaced by others.

The use of any of these tropes would be problematic. The problems increase when the report entangles these different strands of thought, with the only significant consistency supplied by political conclusions that stress unconditional Palestinian (Christian and Muslim) covenantal roles while minimizing and holding to special standards Israeli (Jewish) covenantal roles.

Comparative trauma and false stereotypes: The MESC report rightly refuses to engage in comparisons of suffering. It rejects attempts to compare the systematic murder of 6 million Jews (*ha-Shoah*) and the forcible displacement of 750,000 Palestinians (*al-Nakba*). Instead it argues that these two catastrophes should be regarded as parallel but incomparable “psycho-traumas.” But the report compromises this sound principle when it compares present-day suffering, calculating that the “ratio of all Israeli to Palestinian deaths [between 2000 and 2008] is 1 to 8.5 and for children it is 1 to 7.4.” Thus suffering is incomparable when comparison might speak on behalf of Israel, but quantifiable to a tenth of a life when it benefits Palestinian claims.

The report makes a further unhelpful comparison in tracing the effects of these traumas. It states, “This sense of historical victimization creates for some Israelis a compensatory reflex to choose power and armament; to reject the claims and critique of others; and the adoption of a philosophy that the ‘end justifies the means,’ even if that means the loss of human rights, life, and the dignity of others.” The summary of effects for Palestinians invites comparison: “The inexplicable pain of the Nakba creates for some Palestinians a sense of historical victimization, which creates a compensatory reflex to choose violence; to reject the claims and critique of others; and the adoption of a philosophy that the ‘end justifies the means.’”

Israelis have a “sense of victimization”; Palestinians have “inexplicable pain.” The Israeli psyche is so damaged that it leads to the “loss of human rights, life, and the dignity of others.” The Palestinian psyche appears better preserved. This comparison is neither social psychology nor pastoral counseling. It is at best unfortunate rhetoric—all the more unfortunate because it draws upon stereotypes of Jews as neurotic, legalistic, bellicose and xenophobic. Again the report’s rhetorical habits betray its best insights: traumas are wounds to be tended, not arguments to be deployed.

Narratives of replacement: The report’s longest section is a sprawling 68-page “Plea for Justice: A Historical Analysis,” written by a professor of bioethics and a professor of Old Testament. This study appears alongside a nine-page piece by a Reform rabbi titled “Notes from a Humanistic, Liberal Zionist: A Personal Perspective.” The two documents seem intended, despite the disparity in size, to balance one another.

They do not. “Plea,” which stresses a Palestinian perspective, was written by members of the MESC, and its arguments appear elsewhere in the report. “Notes”

exerts no discernible influence on other parts of the report. Even the titles of the pieces suggest asymmetry: “Plea” makes a much stronger rhetorical claim on readers than some comparatively skimpy “Notes.”

The problem here is not simply imbalance. The problem is that neither document is rigorously historical. “Notes” is a collection of personal anecdotes. “Plea,” despite its length and footnotes, ignores violence against Jews in the region both before and after 1948 and so can be easily dismissed as partisan.

The lack of critical historiography in “Plea” also allows old narrative habits to structure the material. For example, “Plea” notes that between “the fourth and the seventh centuries C.E., the majority of those who lived in the Roman province of Palestine were Christians . . .” But it ignores the reasons for this shift, including Christian persecution of Jews, an influx of Christian immigrants and an imperially supported program of Christianization. Worse, it argues that “when Jerusalem was captured by the Persians in the seventh century of the Common Era, it was the Christians, not the Jews, who sang a lamentation over the Holy City.” Here, Christians replace Jews in lamenting Jerusalem, and this replacement then legitimates Christian claims to the land. The form of supersessionist narrative endures, even as the topic shifts from soteriology to politics.

Presentations of history always involve decisions about what data to present and how to present them. The canons of academic history—canons that “Plea” largely ignores—do not eliminate the necessity of such judgments. But they can check political interests, force reflection on inconvenient truths, create conditions for meaningful disagreement and disrupt too-familiar narrative forms. They can expose bad habits and serve as a tool for their reform.

Mischaracterizing Jews: The report begins with a series of letters to groups the committee believes have a stake in the report. One letter, addressed to “Our American Jewish Friends,” laments the difficulty of working with “organizations within the mainstream Jewish community.” This difficulty should be the occasion for dialogue, not an excuse for avoiding it. Moreover, the report does not name these “mainstream” groups. The open-ended designation has the effect of suggesting that most Jews do not care about Palestinian suffering.

Nor is it clear that the committee seriously attempted to engage with this Jewish “mainstream.” Its schedule of interviews included an associate director of the

Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, but no other representatives of U.S. rabbinic assemblies, let alone the Jewish Council for Public Affairs. The committee did meet with the American Jewish Committee's representative in Israel, but he told the *Jewish Week*, "They listened to nothing." Also missing is a conversation with Americans for Peace Now (APN), a "mainstream" Jewish organization and a member of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. APN was established to mobilize support for the Israeli peace movement, Shalom Achshav (Peace Now), and is the most prominent American Jewish Zionist organization working to achieve a comprehensive, just political settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The report silences some Jews by naming them as difficult. It silences other Jews by presuming to speak for them without having spoken to them. The report states that it is "hopeful as organizations like J Street, B'Tselem, Jewish Voice for Peace and others continue to raise the banner that being pro-Israel and being truly Jewish is not tantamount to complicity in the excesses of Israeli policy." However, a J Street spokes person indicated that the committee did not consult her organization. She added that J Street had "serious disagreements" with the recommendations and deep concern that the report "consistently downplays Israel's very real security concerns, appears to shrug off any Palestinian responsibility for resolving the ongoing conflict, and downplays the Israeli narrative throughout."

The thinness of the committee's consultation with Jews is especially striking when the report is compared to another Presbyterian document, "Christians and Jews: People of God." This document followed eight meetings between PCUSA theologians and representatives of the National Council of Synagogues and four additional meetings of Presbyterian ministers and Conservative, Orthodox, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis.

Erasing Israel: Breaking old habits is hard work. Guidelines can help. But guidelines become fault lines when they slip from being guides for transforming action into standards for justifying action.

A crucial guideline for Christians seeking to break habits of anti-Judaism is to criticize Israeli policies in the same ways they criticize the policies of other states—without calling the very existence of Israel into question. The report follows this guideline in its letter to American Jews: "We want to say to you in no uncertain terms," it insists, "we support the existence of Israel within secure and recognized borders. No 'but,'

no ‘let’s get this out of the way so we can say what we really want to say.’”

Having sworn off qualifications of its support for Israel’s existence, the report then offers them: “The phrase ‘the right of Israel to exist’ is a source of pain for some members of the 2009–2010 Middle East Study Committee, who are in solidarity with Palestinians who feel that the state of Israel has denied them their inalienable human rights.”

This frank acknowledgment helps interpret a series of notable silences. While the letter to American Jews affirms Israel as a “home for the Jewish people,” language about a “Jewish state” appears in no policy recommendation. Affirmation of Israel as any sort of state is absent from the letters to American Muslims, Palestinians and Christians in the Middle East. The recommendations do not call the General Assembly to reaffirm its commitment to Israel’s existence. And the recommendations—despite a promise in the summary of past GA positions—do not call “Palestinians and other Arabs to recognize Israel’s existence within secure borders.”

At two points the report insinuates the illegitimacy of Israel through connections to Nazi Germany. A committee member quotes an unnamed Israeli activist as saying that Israel “acts as a Nazi state.” By quoting an Israeli, the report draws the unfortunate connection even while exculpating itself of having made it.

The report also quotes Martin Niemöller’s famous litany: “First, they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a socialist. . . . They came for the Jews, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Jew.” Then it calls for human rights “not just for the Jew, but for every suffering victim in the world today, including the Palestinians.” When Palestinians become Jews in the quote, Israel becomes Nazi Germany. It is hard to see how such rhetoric attends to the “psycho-trauma” noted in the social analysis. And it is hard to see how it squares with the strong affirmation of Israel’s existence contained in the letter to American Jews.

Critics of Christian statements on Israel/Palestine have too often relied on premillennialist theologies or blanket charges of anti-Semitism that stop conversation before it can begin. The former exempt Israel from criticism because of divine favor; the latter exempt Israel from criticism because of human guilt. We have tried to avoid both gambits. We do not wish to muzzle Christian critics of Israeli policy. We have criticisms of our own. We rather seek to foster conversations that

can consider Middle East politics without being overwhelmed by old habits of anti-Judaism.

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