ISRAEL AS A PROBLEM
THE PROMISE OF THE LAND BY BRAM VAN DE BEEK
IN CONFRONTATION WITH THE PALESTINIAN KAIROS DOCUMENT
AND AUGUSTINE

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Introduction

In 1996, when I applied to Bram van de Beek as my promotor of a dissertation on the subject of ‘Israel and eschatology,’ he referred me to his article ‘Son of God’ that had just been published. In it he wrote: ‘in the gas chambers of Auschwitz lies the deepest essence of the church.’ If the church is, like Jesus, like Israel, son of God, then the church must also unconditionally die unto God. Therefore, his article ends with the sentence: ‘Auschwitz is the foreshore of the church.’ This sentence indicates how I have always understood Van de Beek: not as a form of new orthodoxy, but rather as a postmodern theology which precisely in its completely anti-utopian form offers solidarity with the ‘victims of this century.’ I am very grateful for my promoter’s way of thinking. Yet our ways never became the same. In this article, by focusing on the problematic of the ‘promised land,’ I will attempt to somewhat clarify this by comparing his thoughts on Israel with the published ‘Kairos-document’ by Palestinian Christians as well as with the Church Father Augustine.

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A moment of truth. A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering, was published in Arabic in December of 2009. This document, calling itself ‘Palestinian Kairos’ as well, was formulated by some fifteen ‘Palestinian Christians,’ among whom Naim Ateek is probably best known in the Netherlands. It is prefaced by an accompanying piece by thirteen leading clergy of several churches. It has been noted that its translation

1 A. van de Beek, ‘Zoon van God. Over de zijnswijze van Israël, Jezus en de christenen’ ['Son of God. About the manner of being of Israel, Jesus and the Christians], Kerk en Theologie 47/1 (1996), 2–21.
in many languages shows marked differences. For our purposes we will quote from the English translation.

We will have to consider this Kairos document at face value: a confession of faith, hope, and love, in the midst of great suffering—‘in the absence of all hope, we cry out our cry of hope.’ (10) This paradox captures the smarting pain of the document. At the same time, it confronts the reader either to settle for hopeless dismissal or to enter the fray. Here we encounter the very scope of the problematic situation that marks the ‘Palestinian Question.’ It serves to make us aware that this document does not offer a theological contribution to ‘a very complex problem,’ but as the birth of a theology of hope and struggle within ‘the heart of the Palestinian suffering,’ as stated in the subtitle. ‘Hope is the capacity to see God in the midst of trouble, and to be co-workers with the Holy Spirit who is dwelling in us.’ (3.2)

The document begins with great passion: all speak of peace, but there is no peace; ‘the reality is one of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, the privation of our freedom and all that results from this situation.’ (1.1) This reality of the occupied land colors the entire document, and it means that ‘the land’ is also the most significant theological category. On the one hand the document is oriented towards the territories that were conquered by Israel in 1967. The reality articulated here is that of suffering caused by the increasing occupation, which leads to calls upon Israel to end this occupation. On the other hand, the document has much more of the land in view, as becomes immediately clear when it speaks theologically. The confession of God as Creator implies that people are not born to fight one another, but ‘together build up the land in mutual love and mutual respect.’ (2.1) ‘We believe that our land has a universal mission.’ ‘...the promise of the land has never been a political program, but rather the prelude to complete universal salvation. It was the initiation of the fulfillment of the kingdom of God on earth.’ (2.3.1). This creates obligation for land: ‘It is the duty of those of us who live here, to respect the will of God for this land. It is the duty of those of us who live here, to respect the will of God for this land. It is our duty to liberate it from the evil of injustice and war...It is God’s land, and therefore must be a land of reconciliation, peace, and love.’ (2.3.1). Such concord is possible if the will is present:

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2 http://www.kairos-palestine.ps/?q=content/document
3 Also 1.5; ‘Again, we repeat and proclaim that our Christian word in the midst of all this, in the midst of our catastrophe, is a word of faith, hope and love.’