

# **Levensschets van Ds. J. I. Fles**

Not Without a Struggle:  
Lifesketchn of Rev. J. I. Fles

by Kenneth Fles

As nineteenth century Dutch immigrants to America progressed from pioneering in fields and woods to becoming settlers, their Midwestern cities grew around them. The post-Civil War era saw more industrialization and easier travel. And new ideas flourished. Tightly knit Dutch communities were conflicted; could they stay close to God while modernizing and becoming more American, or should they resist change and keep their traditional ways? Their devout religious beliefs led to many doctrinal disputes between themselves.

Jan Isak (anglicized to John Isaac) Fles was a converted Rabbi's son and a minister who once had a key role in an early Christian Reformed Church (CRC) evangelical mission that spread the Christian gospel of salvation among Jews. Fles's support for the Chicago Hebrew Mission and its influential leaders was significant, but his role is barely remembered now. This paper is not only a biography; it also attempts to show how beliefs about the end times were once part of the dramatic, complex relationships between the Reverend Fles, the CRC, and the Chicago Hebrew Mission.

Fles and other ministers, usually from Protestant denominations other than the CRC, understood the Bible literally by taking the Scriptures "in a realistic manner." They studied Bible verses describing how the Jewish people would someday return from exile to live in the land God once gave them. Those ministers advanced a theology which said the Jews will recognize and accept Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Messiah and Savior, on the day when they see Him coming again. Then Israel will be restored and Christ will reign in His glorious Kingdom for a millennial thousand years. Rev. Fles's faith was shown through his words and in his life.

These premillennial ideas reached even more people in the twentieth century, and then another religious belief system, Fundamentalism, sprang from many of those same roots. Controversial doctrines once divided individual churches and the denominations to which they belonged. Today, similar Christian Zionist beliefs about the Jewish homeland are still debated. Modern Christians and Jews still wonder if historical and current events show Biblical prophecies about Israel are coming true. Views on premillennialism continue to split churches and influence political policies.

Fles was my grandfather's grandfather; born in 1842 in Aalten, Gelderland, the Netherlands. Of Jewish descent, his recorded ancestors go back to his forefather David Markus (1683-1763). Markus was from Wesel, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany; then he moved to the Netherlands and settled in that village by 1715. The Jews in Aalten established a synagogue there in 1767 and again in 1857 as their

numbers grew to about 85. Markus's grandson, Jacob Fles (1753-1829), was a leader of the Aalten Synagogue. Jacob's son, Isaac Fles (1799-1876) became a Rabbi at age 30. According to a family story, Rabbi Fles passed by a Protestant church one winter Sunday and went in when he heard singing. The sermon was on Isaiah 53 which he knew well, and then he was immediately converted. However another account from 1894 said Isaac heard a sermon at a Reformed church "explaining that Jesus was the promised Messiah" when he was eighteen during a visit home from his rabbinic studies in Elberfeld, Germany.<sup>1</sup> Afterwards he returned to his studies, and to "ponder over this weighty matter." He was given a copy of the New Testament and "became impressed." Then later, perhaps four years after becoming a Rabbi, "He had no peace, his heart was heavy and conscience awoke to the fact that he was a poor sinner. He had no ground upon which hope could be built. The Jewish religion, ritual and laws did not give it to him. In this painful struggle, he read his New Testament and prayed that if Jesus was the true Messiah he should hear his prayer and save him. Such was the result. He felt himself reconciled to God alone through the atoning blood of the Redeemer." When Isaac renounced his "Israelite faith from the pulpit of his synagogue, ... his enraged congregation drove him out" and the police had to be called. And "great enmity" led to a Jewish "plot with the intention to take his life," which doesn't appear to describe the same fracas. Isaac's brother(s) and sisters tried to hold him back at his Christian baptism. Historian Peter Lurvink said (in Dutch), "It was the first and only time that such a thing happened in Aalten." Yet another account has said Rabbi Fles may have converted "through the ministry of Rev. De Cock, the leader of ... the [CRC] secession," which also happened in 1834. Did Isaac seem to have premillennial beliefs? Apparently so, since he often told his family that "the promises of God are unchangeable," and he "desired so heartily the conversion of Israel." This line of thinking had been present in parts of the Dutch Christian society for a long time, and it was held by some of the CRC Seceders. De Cock was a conservative religious reformer who did not share those beliefs.

In 1837, two years after converting, Isaac Fles married Everdina Geurink, a young Christian girl. At that time he worked as a merchant; her family called him an "eggs seller." They had several children including John (Jan) Fles, who was baptized and then made profession of faith at a "special revival" when he was fifteen years old in 1857. He was home schooled at night, along with his siblings and others. His father taught John the Hebrew language and both testaments of the Bible. He participated in the rapidly developing Dutch Christian Reformed Church's studies and activities. On the proposal of many, he took charge of Bible exercises. They were so popular that the youth group had to rent a meeting house. The minister and church elders

came to see and hear and gave their approval to this work. At the age of nineteen John was selected by lottery to become a soldier. He served in the army of His Majesty William III for 18 months at the garrison in Maastricht where he came into contact with an evangelist who roused John's enthusiasm for Christian service. Initially he wanted to become an evangelist. Once back home he consulted with his pastor, Rev. Derk Breukelaar of Aalten, and continued to study under him.

The 23 year old Mr. Fles went with Rev. Breukelaar to the Classical Assembly (or the Synod) at Varsseveld and was called upon to speak before the gathering. He chose Romans 8:1 for his text. Rev. Jan van Anandel, who was already controversial after a premillennial 1863 sermon, and who would later become a noted theologian and writer, was one of the ministers there. The occasion was "something he will never forget," Fles would later recall, "I hardly knew where I was and what I said, and later Ds. van Anandel came with me and gave me his hand and assured me that it had gone well." He was embarrassed and didn't know what to say to the minister. Next Fles was assigned to serve at the church in nearby Winterswijk on Sundays, beginning on Ascension Day in 1865. He even preached from the pulpit although he had not been trained or ordained yet. He walked for hours on alternating weeks to also receive instruction from Rev. J. Bulens, who was already a curator for the Kampen seminary. Fles often walked through the beautiful area to scatter the seed of God's Word. "Many a grain fell into earth prepared by God's Spirit and brought forth fruit." Was this bucolic scene amidst farms and fields truly tranquil? No, it was not.

Chiliasm was up for a vote by the separated new denomination in 1863. A decision of "Netherlands Christian Seceder Church" Synod said, "no one is permitted to teach it or spread it," namely, "the doctrine of the return of the Saviour to reign visibly and bodily on earth for 1000 years." Revs. Bulens and Breukelaar objected to their denomination's ruling. Ministers chose differing (often opposing) "directions" and argued with each other to uphold their churches as rationalism and new "scientific" studies of the Bible affected their beliefs. In 1864-65 there was a "pamphlet war ... about election and modern theology," soon resulting in modernist ministers being voted out of office - locally. If Fles was attending Bulens' 1865 preaching sessions from inside a barn in Varsseveld, then he would have been right in the middle of it, perhaps even assisting Rev. Bulens when the minister denounced modernism within the Church. Different Varsseveld area [evangelical meetings on Sunday](#) became much more popular than sparse attendance at the town's modern Reformed church. The 1866 Synod voted on the same matter again (the Seminary's President wanted it to change). However their vote ended with a tie, so the earlier ruling stayed in place.

*Note to the reader;* above is the first link in this paper. I'll leave it up to you to understand that these links and the endnotes (not included) won't work in a printout! This one is actually just an image of a summary of my research that is currently stored on my website. Other ones can be regular links to other websites. But Stickysystems.com won't be the final online repository of my paper; instead it will go to the Internet Archive. Just skip past anything that looks too confusing! So the rest of these pages are from those images, then the main text will continue on the following pages.

Note that the Confessional Association was from the older Dutch Reformed Church.

Varsseveld . . . . .	P. Jellesma, <i>Evangelist</i> .
Voorschoten . . . . .	J. Baart.
Wageningen. . . . .	Ds. J. Kooy.
Warmond . . . . .	Ds. N. Ostl.
Winterswijk . . . . .	J. M. Stroes.

#### 6. Br. P. JELLESMA te Varsseveld.

Des Zondags morgens ,wordt de Evangelisatie door ongeveer 600 hoorders bezocht, terwijl meestens 15 personen de Kerk bezoeken, waar tot dusverre twee moderne predikanten het woord voerden. Een hunner, de voornaamste woordvoerder, gaat Varsseveld verlaten. „Een ding staat „bij mij vast: God breekt de modernen af door hen zelve.”

**On Sunday mornings, about 600 listeners visit the Evangelization, while at most 15 people visit the Church, where two modern pastors have spoken so far. One of them, the main spokesperson, will leave/ is leaving Varsseveld. "This thing is certain to me: God breaks down the modern ones through them."**

However Brummelkamp, a prof. from the CRC seminary in the Netherlands, approved of the meetings; "... he was inclined, especially initially, to appreciate the revivals positively." (Per te Velde's biography.)

I'll also throw in my original source for that 1866 vote (in the likelihood that it wasn't taught at Calvin Seminary):

Original document from H. De Cock of the CRC in the Netherlands 1868 Synod

*D. OVER DE LICHAAMELIJKE WEDERKOMST DES HEEREN.*

De Synode verklaart dat de leer van Christus licha-  
melijke wederkomst, om 1000 jaren op aarde te regee-

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ren, niet is, de leer der Gereformeerde Kerk in Neder-  
land, maar met de belijdenisschriften dier Kerk in strijd is.  
Synode 1863, pag. 10, 11.

In de Synode van 1866 kwam het volgende in  
behandeling:

De Synode kome terug op Art. 16 der Synode van  
1863, en doe dat Art. deze verandering ondergaan, dat  
de leer van Jezus lichamelijke wederkomst op aarde aan  
ieders persoonlijk gevoelen worde overgelaten, maar dat  
niemand het der Gemeenten als leer der Kerk mag voor-  
stellen; of verklare, in hoeverre die leer in strijd is met  
de leer der Gereformeerde Kerk.

Dewijl de stemmen staakten, zoo oordeelt de Verga-  
dering voor de behandeling van dat punt niet rijp te zijn.  
Synode 1866, pag. 21 en 23.

*D. ON THE PHYSICAL RETURN OF THE LORD.*

The Synod declares that the teaching of Christ bodily return, to reign on earth for 1000 years,  
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it is not the teaching of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands that is contrary to the confessions of the Church.  
to govern, is not the teaching of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands country,  
but is contrary to the creeds of the Church.

Synod 1863, pg. 10, 11 .

The following was discussed in the Synod of 1866:

The Synod returns to Art. 16 of the Synod of 1863 , and do so Art. undergo this change, that  
the teachings of Jesus physical return to earth  
everyone's personal opinion is left, but that no one may present it to the churches  
as the teaching of the Church; or declare, to what extent that doctrine is contrary to  
the teachings of the Reformed Church.

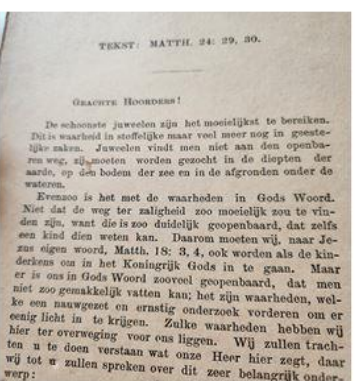
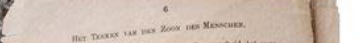
Since the votes were tied , the Assembly does not consider it ripe for discussion of that point .

Synod 1866, pg. 21 and 23 .

After that 1866 denominational (CRC) decision, my ancestor wrote this: see an image below of a page from 1879, or go to another [supplementary document](#) with the whole thing.



The original 'THREE BIBLE LESSONS' was 52 pages long, and its newsprint type of paper is getting quite crumbly! If you've read my whole Rev. Fles bio, then you may know that the first 1882 North Street CRC consistory called Rev Fles to come to Michigan and to join the Christian Reformed denomination. Their hearings continued for years!

	<p>TEKST: MATTH. 24: 29,30 GEACHTE HOORDERS!</p> <p>De schoonste juweelen zijn het moeielijkst te bereiken. Dit is waarheid in stoffelijke maar veel meer not in giestelijke zaken. Juweelen vind: men niet nan diepten der aarde, op den bodem der zee in de afgronden oner de wateren.</p> <p>Evenzoo is het met de waarheden in Gods Woord. Niet dat de weg ter zaligheid zoo moeielijk zou tp vinden zijn, want die is zoo duidelijk geopenbaard, dat zelfs een kind dien weten kan. Daarom moeten wij, naar Jezus eigen woord, Matth. 18: 3, 4, ook worden als de kinderens on in het Koninkrijk Gods in te gaan. Maar er is ons in Gods Woord zooveel geopenbaard, dat men niet zoo gemakkelijk vatten kan; het zijn waarheden, welke een nauwgezet en ernstig onderzoek vorderen om er eenig licht in te krijgen. Zulke waarheden hebben wij hier ter overweging voor ons liggen. Wij zullen trachten u te doen verstaan wat onze Heer hier zegt, welke een daar wij tot u zullen spreken over dit zeer belangrijk onderwerp:</p>	<p>TEXT: MATTHEW 24: 29, 30 DEAR READERS!</p> <p>The most beautiful jewels are the most difficult to reach. This is true in physical but much more so in spiritual matters. Jewels [which] are not found in the depths of the earth, [or] on the bottom of the sea in the abysses deepest beneath the waters.</p> <p>Evenso it is the same with the truths in God's Word. Not that the way to salvation would be so difficult to find, for it is so clearly revealed that even a child can know it. Therefore, according to Jesus' own words in Matthew 18:3, 4; we must also become like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of God. <b>But there is so much revealed to us in God's Word that one cannot grasp so easily: they are truths, which require a careful and serious investigation in order to gain some light from them.</b> We have such truths here before us for consideration. We will try to make you understand what our Lord says here, who will speak to you about this very important subject:</p>
	<p>6. HET TEEKEN VAN DEN ZON DES MENSCHEN. De Heilige Geest liede ons in zijn waarheid</p>	<p>p. 6. THE SIGN OF THE SON OF MAN. The Holy Spirit leads us in his truth to our salvation.</p>

And one more image below is from a [2021 source by GK Kok](#) in the Netherlands:



Rev. D. Breukelaar (1814-1891) from Aalten assisted the church council of Winterswijk during the vacancy period.

Sometimes there were some difficulties about the preaching of Rev. Sipkes. The preacher was a convinced supporter of *chiliasm*, the conviction that before or after the return of Christ a thousand-year kingdom of peace, a paradise, will be established on earth. He even wrote a booklet about it. He also spoke about it openly at the classis and without opposition from the classis members. But the *synod* of the *Christian Separated Church* thought differently about it, when it declared in 1863 that chiliasm is 'not a doctrine of the Reformed Church'.  
(Author's italics)

Winterswijk experienced similar strife; a "Confessional Association" was established (in 1863-64) for those who were against "deviations both in the pulpit and in the church," and they (along with the Friends of Truth) had a department there. Ds. Kuenen, a Modernist professor teaching the historical-critical study of the Old Testament, helped to establish the "Assembly of Modern Theologians" in 1866. The Separated Church's minister from 1867 - 1895, after Ds. Breukelaar had gone there to teach catechism for seven years and Fles had guest preached there, was a Chiliast. Ds. Sipkes fought against a modernist attempt "to strip Biblical prophecy of its supernatural character." He wrote an 1891 book about Chiliasm that is still in Calvin's library. Ds. Stroes ([see a picture](#)) was an orthodox teacher who lived in Winterswijk, evangelized in 1872, met in groups in 1887 to read from [Jeremiah 23](#) on the "decay of the sunken church," and left the older denomination to join a new one.

Fles began his studies in 1867 at the Dutch CRC Church's seminary in Kampen, the Netherlands. A professor from Gelderland who had once been involved in their denomination's secession went too far at an evangelical conference that August, but



the local church council decided not to punish him. A premillennial minister spoke at it, and published a textbook in 1872 which was later removed from their curriculum. The CRC ended their affiliation with another chiliastic Gelderland minister in 1869. A Committee advised against letting that minister and his followers attend the 1872 Synod, one of its members also joined with van Andel and Bulens in Synod's next vote that year on whether to tolerate premillennialism. No changes were passed.

I'll add another (translated) summary to perhaps give the "zeitgeist" From Kampen's "Years 1868-1870," by J. van Gelderen in his [1987 source article](#):  
"It is our young men in particular who can no more be withdrawn from the influence of the spirit of the times than they can protect themselves from it. ... Therefore we considered it necessary that we should also be allowed an organ in which the truths of the Gospel ... are explained and defended, and the ... Scripture maintained against the attacks of the unbelief and the half-faith ... " "Also in view of the many religious directions which may attract our young students (... the Evangelical, the ethical, the Irvingian, the Darbitic)" ... We seceders should "dare to" "get involved in the struggle(s) of our days." These statements were quotes from a contemporaneous publication, DE GETUIGENIS, editors H. De Cock (the son at Kampen) and J. Bavinck. A 1904 source says in Dutch, "There is one direction ['sociale en moderne theologie'] whose increasing power I make no secret of ..."

The author of a recent biography of Herman Bavinck, J. Eglinton, said Bavinck's father was also a CRC minister – one who was "anti-modernist" and "orthodox." Additionally, he has used the [same quote](#) (I'd found it myself before I realized that). Bavinck went to Kampen in 1873, the school year after Fles graduated. Eglinton joked that it was "A national controversy: teenager leaves conservative seminary for liberal university!" when Herman left a year later to go to the seminary at Leiden. He was conflicted when he met Prof. Kuenen, but soon learned the "critical" approach. David Engelsma's article <https://www.prca.org/prtj/Nov2012Issue.pdf> tells why Rev. Bulens' examination of Bavinck included having him preach a sermon on Matt. 15:4. Kuenen published his "polemical" book "against those who rest theological dogmas on the fulfilment of prophecy" (descriptions from [Wikipedia](#)) the next year (1875).

John married Johanna Harmina Bokhorst in January 1873. He kept evangelizing after he graduated that year until they emigrated in the fall, sailing for six stormy weeks on the *SS Rotterdam* of the newly formed Netherlands-America Steamship Company with their baby Anna, and Johanna's mother, Anna Heebink Bokhorst.

Fles had accepted a call from the Cedar Grove, Wisconsin Holland Presbyterian congregation where they knew him. Choosing to serve at a Presbyterian church was unusual or even unprecedented for a Kampen graduate. It was more evangelical, conservative, and premillennial than other ones in the main Dutch denominations. The church “was at first a small, struggling congregation” whose members held “divergent ideas.” The dissension caused some to leave and begin a Dutch Reformed church in 1856. Later under the leadership of Fles, the congregation “enjoyed a remarkable development. Mr. Fles was a young man from the Netherlands with the qualifications and tact requisite for the accomplishment of such a work.” A local minister from the period noted the church was prominent since it had the largest membership among many in the area and because of its “historic associations.”

The hard-working Dutch cleared and fenced the land, raised cattle and sheep, and developed a fishing industry. “After the building of the [steam] railroad ... in 1872, the growth of Cedar Grove increased ... A grist mill with three run of stones was built in 1876 and a [grain] elevator in 1878. ... A cheese factory was in operation in 1880.”

Rev. Fles preached and wrote in their native language. He published a catechism, *The Doctrine of Salvation* in 1878, and a booklet “Three Bible Lessons” in 1879. Two of the texts in his lessons were from Matthew 24: 29-36, so its topic was about Christ’s second coming. The first was titled “The Sign of the Son of Man,” and the second told of “Israel’s Restoration.” And from Isaiah 21 was “Night and Tomorrow.” Fles’s catechism book referred to the resurrection of believers and asked, “Will the Lord Jesus during the blessed time of these thousand years reign physically on Earth on David’s throne in Jerusalem?” His answer (approximately - Google translated) said thoughts on that were very different but one not decided could still speak about it. Fles’s catechism also explained, “Spiritual and material blessing will flow as mighty rivers,” likely showing he meant God’s blessings will happen on Earth.

Fles must have read other premillennial writers, and perhaps he knew of William Blackstone by then. Blackstone also wrote his book, *Jesus is Coming*, in 1878. It was “one of the most widely-read books of his time” and has sold over a million copies.

Dutch folk were certainly interested in discussing the subject. Dr. E. William Kennedy’s *“Prairie Premillennialism: ...”* depicts Iowans in Pella meeting during the winter of 1865 – 1866 to study biblical prophecy and a book about the Apocalypse. Conversely, there was a “public declaration made by the Pella Christian Reformed Church in 1872, stating as its first reason for separate existence that it opposed ‘the

teaching and introduction of Chiliasm, an opinion so commonly permeating the ministry and membership of the Dutch Reformed Church in America.'” Rev. Ede Meinders was the minister at First C.R.C. of Wellsburg, IA, and wrote an amillennial book that year about the Kingdom of Jesus Christ based upon Genesis 49:10.

Iowans from a Pella church asked Fles to send them some of his sermons. Then, after six and a half years in Wisconsin, Fles accepted a call from Pella, Iowa to preach in the church once begun by Rev. Hendrik Scholte (1805-1868), the well-known community founder who led their original group of about 850 people to America. The history of this church is hard to follow; a schism had once led to another offshoot, some branches may have reunited, one branch became a Dutch Reformed church, and then the congregation was independent when Fles arrived. An article from that time said, “This church organization was formed but very recently, the date of organization being June 10, 1880. ... Rev. John Isaac Fles is the present pastor; the membership numbers eighty. The Sunday-school numbers about one hundred and twenty five pupils. The church was originally known as the Fourth Reformed Church.”<sup>2</sup> Another article said Rev. Fles was “The Hollander who located his imported parishioners and ... built the Holland Pres. Ch. of Pella, in ‘81.” Fles came there under the “condition that they would join” a Presbyterian denomination. Many questions about those times remain unanswered. Fles left their church in 1882 after he received an “earnest and pressing call from Zeeland.”

The Fles family had added a boy and two more girls by the time they moved to Michigan. Johanna had already had a child who did not live long, and was pregnant when they moved. That baby girl died of TB a month after her birth. Johanna (she was called Minnie) “shows herself to be a true mother and with her husband does all to bring up their children ‘in the fear of the Lord,’” as the Church required.

The American CRC had begun in 1857, later than the one in Holland, when many people left the Dutch Reformed Church (in both countries). A history of the CRC written by Rev. Henry Beets (1869–1947) explains they once believed, “fellowship in Secret Orders is incompatible with membership in our churches ... even at the cost of losing the cooperation of brethren accepting the same fundamentals.” And he said, “These things led to much unpleasantness, and finally to open rupture.”

What did Rev. Beets mean by "Secret Orders," and why were they so controversial? The Freemasons and other fraternal organizations required their members to take oaths of secrecy before joining. The CRC denomination’s representative ruling body,

the Synod of 1900 said making the oath “obligates ... the concealment of all possible evil” leading to an “irreconcilable conflict” between lodge and Church.

Rev. Henry Dosker, one time Professor of Historical Theology in the seminary at Hope College, described how North Street Christian Reformed Church began: “[In] the dreadful storm of the anti-Masonic agitation ... another church was born. It was wrenched from the mother church, in those days when the Reformed Church in these parts appeared to be rocking to its very foundations; when things were in a continuous state of eruption; when all was unsettled, and the very existence of our Reformed, ecclesiastical life appeared a complicated question, by no means easily settled. On March 17, 1882, forty-four members of the Zeeland Church, offended at the treatment which Masonry received at the hands of the old consistory, organized themselves into an independent church. Later on they joined the old seceders. They now number 200 communicants, and have property valued at \$3,200. They [were] ministered unto ... by Rev. J. I. Fles, formerly of the Presbyterian Church, and since his departure two years ago by the Rev. J. Riemersma, the present incumbent.”

North Street C.R.C.’s records indicate its original members left their community founder, the Rev. Vander Meulen’s (1800-1876) First Reformed Church and began meeting in 1881, and then they organized and applied to join the small but growing CRC in 1882. Then there was another doctrinal controversy when Fles arrived.

The Henry Beets CRC history said, “In 1883, when the Rev. J. I. Fles was admitted to the denomination, he had to retract certain views connected with Chiliasm, expressed in his aforementioned catechism. Drs. A. Kuyper and H. Bavinck had condemned Chiliasm repeatedly as Judaistic.” Chiliasm was an early form of dispensational premillennialism, a doctrine that examines what Biblical prophecy foretells will happen when Christ returns. (Masselink’s 1930 book calls it Jewish.)

The CRC does **not** think Christ will reign on Earth for a thousand years. One of North Street’s first Elders, Hessel Yntema said (see a [saved image](#) published in 1958) that he read sermons from Spurgeon when their pastor was absent. The famous evangelist had believed Jews would return/be restored to their land in a “political restoration” (per an [1864 sermon](#)), and experience a national conversion to Christ. Fles was probably as close as the Zeeland congregation could get to those teachings.

The denomination’s official Acts of Synod from each year were all translated into English and are available online. Those original CRC documents from The Acts Of

Synod in 1883 said, “A letter from the Church at Pella, containing a protest against the pastorate of the Rev. J. I. Fles, as the minister of the Zeeland Congregation, because of his expressed opinions not in accord with Holy Writ, in connection with some points of Eschatology, in his Question Book, which after being printed was made public, and these opinions have not been retracted. The decision: The Rev. Fles has satisfied the Classis Holland in this respect.” His Zeeland church was part of Classis Holland at that time. Fles was admitted into the CRC ordained ministry.

“Chiliasm even threatened to bring on a pen-battle in the summer of 1884 between Rev. L. J. Hulst and Rev. J. I. Fles,” according to another Beets history. Fles brought the matter up in a Christian publication early in June. Rev. Hulst, an important CRC minister from Grand Rapids and the President of the 1884 Synod, followed with an article in *De Wachter* (a denominational periodical) on June 25 saying, “I have not in the least labelled the men who are committed to Chiliasm as unreformed, but I have considered Chiliasm to be contrary to the Reformed theological position.” He also acknowledged Chiliasm had “famous theologians as supporters.” Beets said Hulst “condemned Chiliasm because it taught that Jesus would sit on a literal throne in Jerusalem (not denied by Rev. Fles).”

At the 1884 Synod session, which was held during that same time period, Rev. Fles responded to another objection made against him. He affirmed “that he is in hearty accord” with all the Confessions and Articles of the Church, “and rejected that which was in conflict with this.” The Synod said his explanation was acceptable, so “it lets the matter rest, as in accord with Classis Holland. The South Holland Consistory, however, continues its protest.”

Then in August that year, “a debate was threatened in *De Wachter* but within a short time so many articles about ‘the future’ were received by the editor that he deemed it wise to close its columns to this subject.” Some of the writers must have supported Fles’s position. And for some reason the denomination decided its Synod sessions would become biennial, therefore they didn’t need to hold one in 1885!

Even as the voting about him continued for a while, Fles wasn’t exactly lying low during the following year. In August of 1885 he visited and preached at his old Presbyterian church in Pella, Iowa. Soon after, the church inquired to see if he would consider becoming their minister again. In the fall, Fles wrote about an issue that had appeared in the CRC’s *De Wachter* periodical which said it was “unholy” to be “participating with other church societies in praying with each other, preaching for



each other, etc.” The CRC Church was the most insular of all the Dutch denominations, but Fles was definitely an ecumenist. “I want to be able to pray with all the believers, whoever they are, [even] to Baptists and Darbyites [followers of John Darby, the Plymouth Brethren].” It was “marvelous” to talk about salvation with people who might disagree over “small partitions.” (Brummelkamp, the Gelderland professor had once said something similar, and van Dijk, the chiliastic minister from Gelderland who’d been deposed in 1869, considered “substantive affinity” more important than “formal ecclesiastical boundaries.”) Fles may very well have done just that in Pella, since there were not any Brethren in Zeeland. He then said, “We pray with our Congregation for blessing not only for us but for all three of the Church denominations in Zeeland ... that there may be peace and love among the people.” Then several letters to the paper commented about Fles’s article and cited Bible verses either for or against it.

In June, 1886 the same consistory from South Holland, Illinois appealed the decision again, this time saying, “One of his three lectures uses an expression which might lead to the conclusion on non-recognition of the divinity of Christ ... all such expressions [are] out of order, and dangerous besides, and though they were not meant to be taken amiss, they were nevertheless stated so they might be.” This Synod replied, “Since the Rev. Fles has even stated very clearly at this session, that he believed in the divinity of Christ with all his heart, and as his preaching has always shown; the Consistory of South Holland should now rest in this explanation.” The minister who objected, Rev. Ede Meinders, and his church decided to leave the CRC denomination soon afterwards, though he continued to dialog with his opponents.

Fles published an article about the restoration of Israel in the popular *The Volksvriend* Iowan newspaper on July 8, 1886, right after that Synod session. “*Israel's Present and Future*” was on Jeremiah 30:17 and said, “Israel will be so despised by the nations that it will not be looked after to help them out: no one cares for her. ... From there she will come to light in prayer, confess, believe and walk. You see, the Lord will do to Israel, as He does to every human being ... It will be saved from unbelief and all sin. It will come to the faithful embrace of Jesus Christ, the only Savior from sins. It will be restored in national freedom and as a people.” Another one in September was on 1 Thess. 5:20. “*Do not treat the prophecies with contempt.*” Prophetic Scripture gives strength to faithfully endure this world and it points to a blissful future; “Christ’s Church will rule with Christ on a renewed earth.” In December was “*This world is going to perish*” from 2 Peter 3: 5-9. Fles warned

against “those who believe the Bible, but took away the promises of His future. They also do not seriously conduct Scripture studies about these revealed truths.”

The next 1888 Synod considered collaborating with the United Presbyterian Church and sending a missionary to Egyptian Muslims. Rev. J. Kruidenier (a Dutchman) “went thither in 1889,” supported financially by the "Gereformeerde Zending" committee (perhaps involving the Reformed Church too) of which Fles was President, along with church elders as the secretary and treasurer. The CRC’s support and Fles’s group were soon ended, although the mission continued. The CRC also formed another Missions committee in 1888 (regarded as the origin of their World Missions), but wouldn’t send its own missionaries overseas until much later. The Reformed Church denomination already had missions in a number of countries.

The seven years at North Street “flew by” and were “most blessed and enjoyable.” Their youngest child Benjamin was born in 1884. The congregation installed a clock tower and engraved bell in 1885. It still rings every Sunday (with a pull rope). Fles wrote a nice sermon for Zeeland’s 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial celebration in 1887. Anna Bokhorst died and was buried there in 1887. A family story thought Rev. Fles also preached on street corners to Zeeland’s general public. He didn’t want to leave; “Not without a struggle [it probably means in his heart], he took this call” to serve as a pastor in Muskegon next. Other denominations, including a breakaway evangelical church, had also sent calls. All three of Rev. Fles’s postings later asked if he might return to their churches, which Beets considered “quite remarkable,” likely because they were so different from one another. The three churches that Beets listed must have recognized and largely agreed with their minister’s premillennial beliefs.

Dominie (as clergymen were called) Fles preached the “Gospel of the Cross” at First Muskegon C.R.C. from 1890 to 1908, and very many came during these years to the confession of faith. The most memorable event that occurred was the great fire throughout the city on May 16, 1891. The church, the parsonage, and the school were reduced to ashes in the inferno, but by God's good hand were soon rebuilt. In 1892 after the fire, “The congregation consists of 350 families, a total of about 1,300 persons.” Their new church building was “beautiful and large.” Although three other CRC churches were added nearby afterwards, the First C.R.C. membership continued to grow. The congregation was later called the largest in the city and one of the largest within the entire CRC denomination as well.

Church records show Rev. Fles used to preach three different sermons on Sundays. During the first month at their new church building, one Sunday included “Jacob’s Peril” in the morning, “The Christian Prayer” in the afternoon, and “Transfiguration of our Lord, Jesus Christ” in the evening. Another one from that October, “Jehovah the Light, Salvation, and Strength of His People against the Enemies” could have been from Psalm 27. A couple of those sermons appear to have had Old Testament prophetic themes telling what will happen to the Jewish people.

Fles believed Jewish salvation to be so significant, and so necessary for God’s plan that he helped persuade the Christian Reformed Church to begin a mission to the Jews. His CRC obituary said, “Himself belonging to the chosen people of God, he believed firmly in their future, and aroused much interest in the cause in the hearts of many of our people.” Henry Beets said Fles “pleaded touchingly for the cause.”

Historian Robert Swierenga says, “The Christian Reformed Home Mission Board, through the agency of the Rev. John Fles, head of the Jewish Mission Board, contributed \$500 – 2,500 annually to the Chicago Hebrew Mission.” (This end note also goes back to Holland.) Actually Fles was the treasurer of the CRC Jewish Mission Committee from 1892 – 1920, and its support for the Chicago Hebrew Mission began then as well. Henry Beets said of his CRC, “The Chicago Hebrew Mission is largely supported by this denomination.” And the CRC says of him, “Rev. Beets was highly committed to mission work and was an ecumenist.”

A Methodist layman, William Blackstone (1841 – 1935) had founded the ecumenical (of different church denominations) Chicago Hebrew Mission in 1887. He helped Dwight Moody establish a Bible Institute nearby around that same time. Then Blackstone visited Palestine in 1889, held a conference for Christians and Jews in 1890, and petitioned President Harrison in 1891 (McKinley signed it) and later also President T. Roosevelt when a wave of pogroms broke out in 1903 and President Woodrow Wilson in 1916 for “sympathy with the oppressed Jews of Russia” ... “and to consider ... the possibility of opening a way for their restoration to Palestine.”

Rev. Scott Hoezee and Chris Meehan’s book, Flourishing in the Land: A Hundred-Year History of Christian Reformed Missions in North America, says, “It seems odd that the Jews, hardly the most obvious among potential targets of evangelism, captured the imagination of the denomination” especially since it was “one of the earliest mission interests” when “the denomination was itself quite young [with] precious little missionary activity,” acknowledging Fles’s “significant early voice.”

The Synod of 1892 document said (Fles's) Classis Muskegon initiated a request "to support the above mentioned Mission" and "to stir up the Congregations to collect for Jewish Mission Work," and "to name a Committee" which would receive and distribute the donations coming in for this purpose. Then the Committee was formed; its members all came from that Classis (group of local churches). Fles was named the Treasurer, "... and any monies for this fund should be sent to him."

Fles spoke for CRC Jewish Mission Committee (it "reports thru the Rev. Fles"), and his report back to the next 1894 Synod had this account written in the third person; "The Treasurer has given addresses here and there, in connection with the work among the Jews, about the darkness in which they find themselves, about the Mission work among them, so difficult, but also so full of blessing concerning God's promises, which leads us to expect great things from Israel." "We are giving attention to the needs and the miseries of the people of Israel." First Muskegon C.R.C. organized a five cent "Society for Israel." Fles wrote an "earnest petition" in the CRC's periodical, "informing all the Congregations of this project." But how did they react to it? "Because of the neglect of larger Congregations," the Mission Committee also accepted donations from various societies such as the Young Men's society, and from individuals – some of whom belonged to the Reformed Church denomination. The Committee supported Jewish missions in NY, Chicago, and two in the Netherlands. A Jewish former Rabbi who had converted in 1891 and led another mission in Boston was among those requesting information from the Committee.

The Chicago Hebrew Mission described Fles's contribution this way; "His activities were a boon to the little struggling mission in its early days when friends were few and funds were scanty." And he secured both for the Mission with "his pleasing personality." He gave them "comfort and cheer in the pioneer days of our Mission." They said his letters and prayers "greatly encouraged us ... to press on and do greater things [than] we have yet done to bring the light to blinded Israel."

Fles did more than offer encouragement and financial support. The Chicago Hebrew Mission's quarterly journal, *The Jewish Era* mentions the Revs. Fles and Riemersma each gave a testimony about Jesus there for the mission on or around Sept. 12, 1893. Fles probably took the train from Muskegon; railroads reduced rates for ministers. Riemersma had transferred to the nearby First Chicago C.R.C. church. That issue described an "opening session of Jewish congress"<sup>3</sup> with Rabbi Kohler. Kohler spoke at the Parliament of Religions held then in conjunction with the famous

Chicago (Columbian) World's Fair. The big conference was held "center stage," as part of "the most elaborate display of religious cosmopolitanism yet seen on the continent." Kohler sought to "prove how close Judaism and Christianity stand to each other." Assorted conferences at the Fair discussed many serious new issues. D. L. Moody held huge revival meetings under a circus tent. The Fair also showcased fantastic exhibitions and futuristic inventions. I bet Fles went to the World's Fair, but have seen no evidence to suggest they rode on the first Ferris wheel while there!

Professor Yaakov Ariel calls the Chicago Hebrew Mission, "The largest mission to the Jews in America during the 1880s to 1910s." He says, "The impetus for the establishment of the mission and its explicit theology was the dispensationalist messianic belief and its understanding of the Jewish people and their role in history. This was unmistakably revealed in ... its journal, the *Jewish Era*. The magazine regularly published articles on the emerging Zionist movement and the development of the Jewish settlement in Palestine, which it interpreted as 'signs of the time' indicating the present era was ending and the messianic age was at hand."

The CRC had been distributing their offerings among several Jewish missions since 1892. The CRC Acts of Synod in 1896 relates that the Rev. Marcusson, a Jewish convert to Christ and the Superintendent of the Chicago Hebrew Mission, spoke to them in person quoting John 4:22, "Salvation is from the Jews" and adding, "They have rejected the Lord, but at some time they shall again worship Him. Therefore help us to bring Christ to the Jews."

Synod's reply said their President "thanks him" ... "and assures him of our support [hearts] and our prayers. This is according to the prophecy ... that God will fulfill his prophecy." The Dutch version of this section makes its meaning plainer, "according to the Prophecy, God will even fulfill His promises to Israel." But then later the Synod said why their support was qualified, "Our Church would be more in sympathy with his [Marcusson's] work if it were conducted along more ecclesiastical lines."

Rev. Riemersma said the CRC Jewish Mission Committee was "appointed to labor in Israel's behalf." But the Henry Beets history gave several somewhat different Biblical and historical reasons why the CRC thought it was their duty to perform the mission work; one was, "God's decree also embraces a number of Jews, Romans 11:25-28." Premillennialists interpret this profound passage more prophetically and reach a broader conclusion than Beets since verse 26 says, "And so all Israel shall be saved."



Beets' summary of the CRC's amillennial view reflected their reaction to the events told later in this story, and it is still their Church's position; "Pre-millennial premises almost inevitably lead to developments out of line with sound Calvinistic principles." He elaborates on the following page, "the Pre-millennial view, a literal interpretation of prophecy, is subversive to the Christian Creed ... dividing what God united ... His one people, of the Old as well as of the New Testament dispensation, His one Vineyard although in charge of different keepers; His one Olive Tree."

Fles replied for the Committee to the Synod, "Permit us to recommend the [Chicago] Mission among the Jewish people very strongly." And, "Your Committee hopes and prays that the good will in this among our people shall in no way diminish, and the advice to the Synod is that it continues the course it has been following." Then he repeated the verse from John 4 and referred to Romans 11, "Although ... [the Jews] now are broken off because of unbelief, nevertheless God's promises and his calling remains unchanged, and they will again be grafted into one olive branch." And, "The time will come when the Lord will direct his aid to his Zion, and at that time the cities of Jerusalem shall be rebuilt, and He will then return His people to His land and they will settle there, and then He will be a God to them, and they, His people. Tell the Brothers, Ammi, [from Hosea 2:23 and is in Romans 9:25, Hebrew for 'My people'] and the sisters, Ruchama, ['Who hath –or shall- received loving mercy'] that they will surely be fulfilled. But therefore must the Gospel be preached, so they may learn to know him, who was the hope of the fathers, the wish of the Heathen, who is the Saviour of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ."

In an article he wrote that year (1896) for the Chicago Hebrew Mission's journal, *The Jewish Era*, Rev. Fles said, "Jesus ... wishes that the church, the believers of the Gentiles, shall know and never forget that the Lord shall yet do great things for his chosen people." And a main point, "We preach and pray and labor to save some of them, but they are only the first-fruits of the great coming harvest. To convert the people, the nation, is the work of Christ, the Anointed One of the Father. He shall convert Israel to Himself." Fles ends by saying that The Lord will ever bless these missions "until all His promises are fulfilled. The powers of darkness will be destroyed, the church glorified, Israel brought to Christ, and the whole earth be filled with His glory, and the conclusion of David's Psalms will reach its fulfillment: 'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord.' Hallelujah!"

The next CRC Synod continued to voice their concerns in 1898 by repeating what they had said previously about churchly "ecclesiastical lines," and adding "the

[Mission's] Committee was informed of this." At that time "The Committee consisted of W. E. Blackstone, the Rev. J. J. Riemersma, and the Rev. E. P. Goodwin, D.D." Rev. Riemersma had been North Street Church's minister after Rev. Fles left. The Synod added Fles and another CRC elder from Chicago, Mr. Simon Dekker as Board members or trustees of the Chicago Mission in order to "use their influence for a gradual change into our type of ecclesiastical life." The Synod drafted a doctrinal statement for the Mission Board to use as a declaration of faith. Then they noted the Mission "has consented."

Hoezee and Meehan's missions book said Rev. Fles pled to do something for the 100,000 Jews in nearby Chicago in 1897, before "it was finally decided ... to focus [all] the support on the Chicago Hebrew Mission" in 1898. The Mission apparently had to agree with the CRC's requests in order for that to happen. Their book also said, "some voices recommended ... [the Church] withdraw its cooperative efforts from Christians with such dubious theological credentials."

Fles and the Jewish Mission Committee told the Synod in 1898, "It is our firm conviction that the Church was in harmony with God's will, and acted according to God's Word, when she assumed the work of this branch of God's Vineyard. Hence we whole-heartedly continue to recommend and call Synod with all the earnestness that is in us: Brothers, don't forget Jacob's dispersed, don't forget the Jews! He who blesses Israel, shall be blessed."

Fles quoted from Ezekiel 34:6, Isaiah 54:7, and Romans 11; the passages all fit together to assert that "Jacob's straying children" have been scattered like sheep, but Jehovah with great mercy and compassion will gather her in again. "Jerusalem shall not always be as a forsaken one. ... The fullness of the Gentiles shall come in, and so all Israel shall be saved. This is believed by our people, and therefore they with their prayers add their free-will offerings," he said while attempting to persuade the CRC church leaders to consider the legitimacy of what some in the laity believed. Rev. Fles's church had heard the same prophetic Bible passages when collections were raised specifically to support Jewish missions, but who knows how many other churches received similar teachings from their own minister.

Other Dutch denominations' congregations donated to the CRC Jewish mission again that year; Rev. Hulst's old church (that was before their 1882 split – it didn't take long for him to become a President of CRC Synod), the Fourth Reformed of

Grand Rapids congregation contributed, so did a Holland Presbyterian church in Baldwin, Wisconsin and the First Reformed Church of Orange City, Iowa.

Dr. E. William Kennedy has written several Orange City histories that show some members at First Reformed Church had premillennial beliefs. One leader, “Dominie Antonie J. Betten, [was] a premillennialist, biblicist Scholte disciple, who had come from Pella to retire in Orange City.” Betten had come to America with Scholte, later he went to and occasionally preached at the First Reformed Church there, and “[he] had frequently published pieces in *De Volksvriend* and elsewhere promoting dispensational premillennialism.” In one of his articles from 1888, Betten objected to the “spiritualizing of biblical prophecy.” He was responding to a local minister’s long amillennial series. Betten’s son was the editor of the newspaper from 1885 – 1891. An 1895 retrospective from the same popular Orange City newspaper said Fles’s contributions were “gladly read,” and that he had been “a help.” Kennedy said his articles “presented world, national, and church related events from a prophetic perspective.” They undoubtedly prompted donations from sympathetic supporters.

The arrangement between the CRC denomination and its Jewish Mission Committee required renewing at every Synod session, at least at first and maybe throughout the mission’s existence. Therefore Rev. Fles regularly prodded the CRC in his distinctive way, asking them to continue supporting the Chicago Hebrew Mission throughout the years as the Jewish Mission Committee made their report each time the Synod met, with Fles sometimes solely signing it as Treasurer.

Meanwhile back in Pella, Iowa, one of the churches where Rev. Fles once served previously had re-claimed their old name and denomination by 1897. Rev. Zeilstra’s church history says that was when “the withdrawal of 109 members from the Fourth Reformed to the Second Christian Reformed amounted to between one-half and two-thirds of the membership of Fourth Church.” It repeatedly says how “the influence of Scholte” had shaped this church, and that Scholte’s beliefs once included dispensational premillennialism. A history of the Fourth Reformed church said, “The doctrinal validity of this theory appears to have been the single most potent issue leading to the 1897 schism in the 4th RC.” The Sunday school teachers were the faction that taught premillennialism. The group led by the church elders felt harassed when the teachers began to press their “unsound views.” Discord grew, “enmity broke loose,” and then conflict included a court injunction and an incident where “Scholte’s followers” locked the church to keep out the elders’ “dissident group” one Sunday morning! That group voted to secede and they joined the CRC

upon agreeing to reject the “fellowship of the lodge.” The rest found another pastor, Rev. J. Poot, who had served with some Reformed Church congregations and also ministered the same breakaway evangelical church which Fles once turned down.

“Rev. Poot seems to have made efforts to influence the religious divide in Pella [concerning Darby and Scofield’s premillennial theory and “timeline of events that will occur”]. A year later, on August 14, 1899, Rev. Poot was the main speaker at a local conference. He requested all preachers to attend ... His subject was ‘The Millennium.’” This source speculated about what Rev. Poot believed and may have said at the conference, and then it says, “The RCA preferred not to take a stand on this conflict, claiming there were no clear guidelines in Reformed Church doctrine about this theory.” Poot soon left the Pella Fourth Reformed Church in 1900, perhaps because of the discord or due to his “evangelic leanings.” “[He] thought highly of Mr. Moody.” I wonder if he attended another Chicago Hebrew Mission (C. H. M.) [Prophecy Conference](#) at Moody’s church in October of 1899?

Miss Minnie Fles, age 20, played the First Muskegon church’s new pipe organ to open a young people’s program in 1901. Rev. Fles prayed, and then the choir sang “Zion Awake, Thy Strength Renew.” Two student preachers who had roomed at the Christian Reformed Calvin Seminary together both married into the Fles family in Muskegon in 1905. Cornelius De Leeuw married Hermina (Minnie). John Hiemenga married Everdena (Dena). Oldest son Isaac moved back to Muskegon to help his brother run a clothing store near the church. He married Lutena Boonstra in 1906, and my Grandpa John Fles was born in 1908. Benjamin married Della Haan in 1909; his father officiated (per FamilySearch).

In 1901, the Dutch Reformed Church (in America – the RCA) denomination decided they would begin a mission to the Jews. “Our people are disposed to contribute for this work.”<sup>4</sup> Soon after graduating from their seminary, Rev. Cornelius Kuyper was the main one of two ministers who would receive, disburse, and account for donations toward those missionary efforts “according to their best judgment.” The RCA mission became official in 1906 when receipts were \$740 and \$579 was sent to Jewish missions in New York, Brooklyn, Pittsburgh, and Chicago.

The 1902 CRC Synod had representatives who saw a need “to have [a] better confessional [or doctrinal] basis in ... [the Chicago Jewish mission] work.” Synod still intended “to guide [them]” and “to have one of our men placed on the [C. H. M.] Administrative Committee.” However if the CRC’s Jewish Mission Committee found

that to be impossible, they said, then “it is instructed to devise a plan for a mission of our own church, with our own workers, or to cooperate with another Church of acknowledged Reformed Confession.” Fles thanked the other two Dutch denominations that had donated - the “Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, who have so unequivocally shown their cooperation.” His response included this admonition; “Brethren, do not forget Israel, and Israel's God will not forget you.” The CRC Jewish Committee was not focused only on Chicago; they also sent two New York Jewish missions three hundred dollars, the Cleveland Hebrew Mission fifty, and thirty to a converted Jew who had gone to Kampen Seminary when Fles was there. The Rev. Eliezer Kropveld’s Jewish Mission began in the “Separated” CRC in 1875, and was eventually supported by both denominations in the Netherlands. I don’t think the Committee ever devised a plan like the one that Synod requested.

Fles spoke in Dutch on “Our Mission to the Jews” at the 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee Anniversary of the CRC in April of 1907. He reminded the audience how respected Dutch Protestant theologians like the pietist Wilhelmus á Brakel and many others had long advocated that “Israel's future is always great.” He said, “It is almost incomprehensible why other churches don’t show more interest.” Then he gave details of how the work at the Chicago Hebrew Mission was going “exceedingly well.”

He showed real empathy and a desire for the Church to improve social conditions as he explained at the Jubilee Anniversary how the converted “Jews who believe” faced “difficulties” with their neighbors and relatives, and were “fired from their jobs,” leaving them in “misery and poverty.” “Out of the ten cases, there are nine where this happens.” So to “not ...continue to help [them] ...would indeed be merciless ..., yes cruel.” Fles pleaded to the large audience of CRC leaders and church goers, “However, this is where our influence is felt and appreciated by all who have ... come. Please do it ...” (Quotes translated via Google.) The publication<sup>5</sup> said Fles was “in many respects the soul of this work in our Church.” Rev. Groen, who was the minister of the large Eastern Ave. C.R.C. in Grand Rapids, Henry Beets, theologian Louis Berkhof, and other familiar names from the CRC past also spoke.

The 1908 Synod session was held in Muskegon, Michigan at Rev. Fles’s church, possibly to offer support or even to show concern. Louis Meyer, a Jewish convert and the field secretary of the Chicago Hebrew Mission, attended it and spent two weeks there that summer. Perhaps that was when Meyer said to Fles, “The Chicago Hebrew Mission ... has grown and grown even though she stands under adversity and contempt.” Rev. Hiemenga was on the 1908 Synod’s pre-advice Committee



which counseled exerting as much influence as possible to lead Jewish Missions in “the Reformed ecclesiastical stream.” Fles’s three page report to Synod included financial figures of receipts and disbursements, declared “a mission of our own is not feasible,” warned the Church that withdrawing their support would be a “calamity” for the Mission, and expressed the surety that “All Israel shall be saved,” and from Isaiah, “For the Lord will have mercy upon Zion, and He shall yet choose Jerusalem.”

“Ds. Fles was climbing in years [He was 66], so after consulting with church council and receiving their approval he went to take a well-deserved rest, saying farewell to the congregation in Nov. 1908,” said the Muskegon CRC history (in Dutch). His farewell sermon included a verse from Acts 20: 27, “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.” In September ’08 his church said, “Several years ago Mr. Fles nearly suffered a breakdown and many of his congregation advised his retirement as they feared his health might give way.” In other words he didn’t retire when he experienced the earlier warning. In 1908 the CRC periodical printed a description of First Muskegon, “This church has always been very loyal to the denomination. May it stand and flourish till the Master comes.”

Rev. Fles “filled local pulpits a number of times” in Grand Rapids during his emeritus retirement period, and then in October of 1911 he preached at Coldbrook C.R.C.’s new building to say “farewell to his Grand Rapids friends” before moving to Pella, Iowa. Rev. Hiemenga was Coldbrook’s minister, so Fles and Johanna (?) probably stayed at the parsonage with Dena and their granddaughter. Fles had accepted a call for them to return to Pella and the same strife torn (in 1897) church they left in 1882. Their daughter Minnie had just moved to Pella. Her third child, also named Hermine, was born Oct. 1910. The church members must have known what Fles had been advocating; thus it appears they didn’t have a problem with him.

The history of Pella’s Second Christian Reformed Church said of their minister, “His ministry was richly blessed of the Lord. He labored with devotion and in an able manner. The membership once more increased. It was also during his ministry that interest was awakened in the cause of Christian education.” Fles was one of the author/editors of the joint CRC and RCA missionary magazine from 1912-1915, which was based in Orange City, Iowa at that time. Fles wrote a column and other articles in it about Jewish missions and “the conversion of the Jews,” presenting powerful arguments (one from Dr. Bavinck recognized the Jewish mission in Amsterdam was fulfilling prophecy) and asking both denominations for financial and moral support.

In the 1912 session held in [Roseland Chicago](#), the CRC Synod first expressed (through Rev. Groen) a desire for “the welfare of Zion” and Jerusalem, then they considered beginning the CRC’s own Mission to the Jews because “a mission that proceeds from a society never gains the full support of our people. And, if this work is done by our own Church, then it proceeds along purer lines, and then there will be more sympathy gained among our people for this cause.” And so they advised, “In Chicago attempt to take over the Northwest Branch of the Chicago Hebrew Mission.”

A separate “Committee With Reference To Jewish Missions” had influenced that decision. Was Rev. De Leeuw on it? He didn’t sign their six page statement (p. 97), which described the CRC’s motivations. Reason number three was this: “The big question is whether the work is carried on in a Reformed spirit or in a more unreformed, and this depends to a great extent upon the question what personnel is working in this field of missions. As long as we do not have our own mission, it will be impossible to **control** the mission personnel, and we shall have to be satisfied to offer our support to the efforts that are more Methodist and Baptist than Reformed.” That statement may require analysis, but were they comparing those denominations’ premillennialism to the Mission’s message about “the promises”?

Then Fles responded to the other advising Committee by noting the Chicago Hebrew Mission’s success and asking, “Why should anyone want to disturb this work? What gain would there be to move this work elsewhere? ... Your Committee earnestly requests the support of the Church for the Chicago Hebrew Mission.” He was the sole signer of his committee’s objection.

Rev. Louis Meyer of the Chicago Hebrew Mission was an influential premillennial evangelist for Jewish “acceptance of Christ and restoration to Divine favor.” Meyer spoke in Grand Rapids at an ecumenical local conference of more than one hundred ministers and at Rev. Beets’ English-speaking LaGrave Avenue C.R.C. either before or in 1907. A local Rabbi attended both events. Fles probably went to that conference. Meyer spoke at a landmark 1910 missionary conference in Scotland where Lord Balfour was its President. “It would be a strange reading of the New Testament that would exclude the Jews from the sphere of missionary work,” their magazine (likely it was he) said. Meyer also went to the dramatic 1912 Synod session, speaking on the Mission’s behalf and heartily thanking the CRC for supporting them. (So he apparently didn’t object when the denomination attempted to change the Mission!)

Meyer edited both the *Jewish Era* and most of the essays in The Fundamentals, which was called “the important literary project defending orthodox biblical faith” (from an increasingly popular “Liberal Protestantism”) at his Centennial Memorial. The essays were published in Chicago from 1910 through 1915. Meyer died in ’13 from meningitis,<sup>6</sup> although some blamed “overwork, constant travel, and his desire to overcome attacks and criticisms from so many quarters.” Revs. Beets and Fles eulogized him in the *Jewish Era*.

Former Calvin College professor, Dr. George Marsden’s history of Fundamentalism said the essay books kept premillennial teachings in the background “in order to establish a respectable and self-consciously conservative coalition against modernism.” The books came to “represent the movement at a moderate and transitional state before it was reshaped and pushed to extremes by the intense heat of controversy.” They later became an important symbol for the “emerging movement.” The CRC was affected by those on both sides of the theological spectrum, but often sought to follow a way between them, which included moving back and forth on some issues.

The CRC began to solely support another Jewish mission in New Jersey in 1913. Then in 1914 the Synod (again meeting at the church in Roseland, Chicago) said, “It is not possible to obtain part of the Hebrew Mission in Chicago, since the Board rejected the request.” Rev. Hiemenga was on the CRC’s Jewish Mission Committee in 1914. Rev. Fles’s son, Isaac Fles, examined the “Heathen Mission” (a separate CRC mission to Indians) financial books. Disbursements for that mission were over \$31,000. The CRC gave \$3,000 to the Chicago Hebrew Mission, and \$1,025 to the New Jersey Hebrew Mission. The Synod said they should appoint someone who could “devote all his time” to all of their missions.

Fles said to the 1914 Synod, “For twenty years ... the love of Christ pressed me not only to pray for this people ... but also that I might do something towards their salvation. It was a work of love. The gratification was the faith in the promises of Jehovah, that he has chosen this people and not cast them off, and that once again he shall make himself glorious in Israel. ... Herewith your Treasurer in a happy frame of mind, places his work in the hands of Synod, trusting that the Gospel proclamation to that ancient people prayerfully shall be prosecuted with joy and zeal.” He recited a verse from a hymn on Psalm 130, “He shall redeem His people, His chosen Israel.”

Fles met Rev. Harry Bultema (1884 - 1952) in Pella around 1913 or so. Bultema said in his autobiography<sup>7</sup> it was then that he first began to question the standard views of the (Christian) Reformed Church with respect to the future of the nation of Israel.

“When I was in Peoria, the Rev. Fles was in Pella for at least the first two years. We once had a pastoral conference at the home of his son-in-law, the Rev. De Leeuw. [De Leeuw was then the minister at First Pella C.R.C.] ... They had asked the old patriarch to give conclusive proof that Israel would be restored. His father, having been a Rabbi in Holland, knew Israel’s past, present, and future as few others did, and he believed and preached and taught Israel’s future, though always in a general and never in a specific way. I was convinced at the time that God was not all through with Israel, as many believed, but I did not know how, why, when, and wherefore. I was greatly interested to hear what our revered Father Fles would say on this important theme, so close to his own heart. He quietly read the brief chapter of Hosea 3 ...” then he explained Israel had broken their covenant by once worshipping other gods and after that by rejecting “Calvary’s perfect Lamb,” and Fles’s lesson continued until he said, “Now listen then, brethren, to the Word of God in verse 5. ... Afterward, i.e., after this long period of Israel’s desolation, which is still going on, the children of Israel shall return, and seek Jehovah their God ... When? In the latter days, the day of Christ’s coming and Kingdom.’

After the venerable old man was through, his son-in-law tried to tear his presentation all apart. Taking the figure from [Abraham] Kuyper, he exclaimed, ‘Israel is the fire-hose, and when God has quenched the burning world, then He burns the hose.’ All the other preachers agreed with Rev. De Leeuw and all agreed that Israel had sinned so terribly that God, in wrath, had put Israel forever aside. Christ was the end of Israel and His Church had now fully and finally taken Israel’s place in God’s plan.” Then Bultema responded, “It is not at all to the point what Kuyper, Bavinck, and Warfield may have said, but the point is what God has said in this Word right here, eloquently brought before us.’ ... They said the exegesis was wrong, but not one made an attempt to prove it wrong.

Rev. Fles was grieved, and said ... ‘You preachers gladly believe in Israel’s past and present sins and miseries, but you will not believe in God’s future mercy for them. I take both as equally true and righteous altogether.’ Soon after that he laid down his ministry in Pella and became an honored member of his former charge in Muskegon where he had labored for eighteen and a half years.”

The CRC ministers were applying an interpretation that Dr. R. Kendall Soulen calls “the ‘punitive’ version of supersessionism,” one which said the Jews “had forfeited their covenant because they had rejected the Messiah, Jesus.” Soulen explains the general version taught, “After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel.”

I am not sure of the exact timing that year, but Fles was condemning the CRC’s (and other denominations’) viewpoint in his 1913 study of Romans 11: 5 -10 from this [missionary magazine article](#). His words had turned sharper, “... those so-called Christian churches and congregations, leaving and losing the truth ... concealed confused ... the form kept, but the content changed ... there are so many who hate such words of David and Paul ... Woe, woe to those chaff, and happy will be those who are His grain.” (A Biblical metaphor; the saved and unsaved will be separated.) His column the following month opposed supersessionism’s replacement theology, “Canaan supposedly means Heaven. ... Israel supposedly means the church, etc.” The missionary magazine also covered political Zionism in 1913; one ancillary section by Fles was titled “Palestina voor [for] de Joden [Jews].” It cited London’s Jewish Chronicle’s quotes from early Zionist Nahum Sokolow’s speech in New York that fall. Another article told of Jerusalem at the beginning of the war and asked if prophecies in Deuteronomy are being fulfilled; you can read the article’s answer in the end note.

An important “Prophetic Conference” was held in Chicago at the Moody Bible Institute in February 1914, “on the eve of World War I.” “William B. Riley [elsewhere called ‘the chief executive of the fundamentalist movement’] specifically referred to the Zionist movement ... [it] was ‘the beginnings of fulfillment for ... prophecies.’” Rev. Cyrus Scofield was there as well, saying, “In every prophetic description of the Kingdom, the re-gathering of dispersed Israel is prominent.” Dr. James Gray and Rev. A. Gaebelein were other noteworthy leaders there. One historian said, “At no previous conference had the details of dispensationalism been laid out so explicitly and dogmatically,”<sup>8</sup> likely referring to their ten point statement of belief. The addresses preached were also published. Beets said Fundamentalism began there.

Rev. Henry Beets took over as the author/editor of the Jewish mission section of the missionary magazine after Fles left in June, 1915. Written in Dutch, his first column’s rhetorical style used hyperbole – contrarian, exaggerated statements from a fictional character in a popular Christian book. “‘I want to share some of my objections,’ said Uncle Bartel,” who then presented pointed arguments about ineffective missions to Jews (with an example from a CRC booklet), described



punitive replacement theology, said Jews could find Christ in the Old Testament if they read those “dear places,” and suggested Reformed people didn’t care about those missions. (Topics the original character did not address.) Beets answered in a more restrained manner, explaining why there was “relatively little sympathy among the leaders of the Reformed people, a fact which is not in their favor as the Bible speaks of the loved ones for the fathers’ sake,” giving Bavinck’s numbers of converted Jews, mentioning the “great blessing” converted Jews had been in Dutch history – an additional page was glued in holding names and details, the large number of Christians who had Jewish blood in them, and recognizing Isaiah 66:9 and Zechariah 8: 20-23 verses indicating there “will be a more widespread meaning [for Jews] in the last days” than the CRC usually thought.

That fall *The Jewish Era* states there was another interesting “Conference on behalf of Israel held in Chicago November 16-19, 1915, under the auspices of the Chicago Hebrew Mission. The meetings were held in the great New Moody Tabernacle.” Several thousand people attended each day. The focus was “looking to the restoration of the land to Israel in the final adjustments at the close of the war; and the desperate spiritual needs of this people not only now, but in the future, when this country should become the home of multitudes of the ‘tribes of the wandering foot.’” Blackstone and Scofield were both on the program but were too ill to attend. I do not see Fles being present; however Henry Beets did speak there. His topic was “Our indebtedness to Israel.” Another speaker was described in the journal similarly, as one “who for many years has emphasized the Christian’s obligation to the Jews.” Rev. Cornelius Kuyper, the Reformed Church pastor in Cedar Grove, WI, treasurer of their Jewish fund, and member of the Chicago Hebrew Mission’s Board of Trustees spoke on “The Development of the Spirit of Antichrist.”

Both Rev. Beets and Rev. Kuyper were then put on the board of The International Committee for Christian Work Among the Jews, with William Blackstone as its honorary president. “It [that Committee] was born ... without the ... premeditated plans of men ... by the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

Rev. Fles served again in Pella for four years of “greatest harmony” (doubtful if it really was). “Due to his advancing age and the failing health of his wife,” he retired from the ministry in 1915. Daughter Dena Hiemenga died from a sudden illness in New Jersey in 1915. They had a little girl, Hermine. Rev. Hiemenga remarried the following year, and he became Calvin College’s first President in 1919. John and

Johanna returned to Muskegon where their two boys' families still lived, and stayed in Isaac's home. Then Rev. Fles "received a keen blow" when Johanna died in 1916.

Rev. Fles was a pastor emeritus at his old church, First C.R.C., and when they needed a new minister in 1916, "he made a speech on behalf of young Bultema of Peoria. He evidently had not forgotten the interesting debate at the home of his son-in-law." Many asked Fles to preach one more time at Bultema's installation. Bultema said, "He preached with fire a stirring and unforgettably beautiful sermon on Daniel 12. I still hear him paint the firmament and the shining starry worlds."

The CRC Synod of 1916 "decided not to consider the request to sign a memorial presented by Mr. Blackstone, requesting the government of the United States to work out a plan that Palestine be placed at the disposal of the Jews." Blackstone's Memorial inspired the Jewish Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis to ask President Wilson in 1917 if he would support the Zionist Movement. Soon Wilson did.

World War I brought an apocalyptic interpretation of how current events were fulfilling the prophecies in Matthew 24. Premillennialism became popular and tore through the CRC yet again. Rev. G. Spykman later said it spread like a "prairie fire." The Balfour Declaration was published in 1917, expressing British support for a Jewish home in Palestine. After the document was signed, Brandeis thought that it should be "a good time to get the Blackstone crowd to cheer." Fles must have been overjoyed to see his expectations were coming into being. But the CRC's next response wasn't to celebrate; the Church felt threatened and was mainly concerned whether its members were following its doctrines.

Both Scofield's revised Reference Bible, an influential dispensational commentary, and Rev. Bultema's book Maranatha were published in 1917. Maranatha said (in Dutch) that Christ's return was imminent. Many in the CRC agreed, in 1918 the President of that Synod, Rev. Idzerd Van Dellen said, "Brothers, the Lord is coming! Everything points to this event. The signs of the times tell us ... [and] the bloody field of war speaks of it." But the CRC's official [position on eschatology](#) (a study of the end times) declares Bultema's "views to be contrary to the confessions of the church." Elsewhere the 1918 Synod said, "The difference with the brother does not concern the point of the Thousand Year Reign, Twofold Resurrection, the Return of the Jews to Palestine. It does, however, concern the Unity of the Church of all Ages," and the belief that "Christ is King, but of Israel, not of the Church." The CRC website explains what they believe regarding those two points. So it was "In response to a

theological challenge to its underlying eschatology” that the Synod demanded the First C.R.C. church’s consistory discipline their pastor. In 1918 when the church refused, a legal story said the CRC Classis “appointed a committee to persuade the consistory to do so.” That committee had “four [other] ministers and five elders.” The consistory would not suspend their minister and Bultema would not retract his statements about those “two points,” contending that his reasoning was Biblically based and stating he “wholeheartedly accepted all Creeds.” So later, “the existing committee ... [was] instructed to execute the decision of classis and to perform the duties of consistory.” In 1920 Isaac Fles was voted to be an elder on the “new consistory.” Bultema’s autobiography included Isaac in a list of seventeen “Classical brethren.” They “were the plaintiffs, and my consistory and myself were the defendants.” Would the son have acted against his father’s wishes? It appears quite possible. Dr. Kennedy suggests Rev. Fles may have become more conciliatory, “[He] tried to exercise a moderating influence in this controversy.”

The 1918 Acts of Synod listed a committee of three: Rev. H. Hoeksema, Rev. J. Dolfen of Bethany C.R.C., Muskegon, and Rev. Volbeda from the Calvin Theological Seminary. One Sunday the CRC sent Rev. Volbeda to the church in Rev. Bultema’s place. Newspaper boys patrolled the streets screaming, “Will Bultema preach?” He took the pulpit early and preached quoting John 9, “And they cast him out,” said his autobiography. Rev. Bultema and most of the church’s consistory were deposed (removed from office) at the end of 1919. Most of the congregation followed them, but “forty families (including two consistory men) ... had decided to remain faithful to their denomination.” There was an unpleasant lawsuit adjudicated in Michigan’s Supreme Court for possession of the church property. Bultema defended his beliefs while on the witness stand before a packed courtroom. One of the judges compared “the classical men” to lizards, but ruled the CRC owned the building.

Soon afterwards Eisse Woldering, a CRC ministry student from the Netherlands, wrote, “I preached in Muskegon, where Rev. H. Bultema was deposed by the classis. Two hundred families left with him, and only one hundred remained in our denomination. I preached to these one hundred. It was the largest church I have ever preached in, but the pews were not filled. On that occasion a Jewish minister, the elderly Rev. John Fles, was also in attendance.”

Why did Rev. Fles decide to remain within the CRC denomination? Family obligations had to be part of the reason. Both of his sons also stayed with their denomination; Benjamin was at the English speaking Bethany C.R.C. in Muskegon in

1920. And Isaac soon taught at Hartford Christian School, which was closely associated with the First C.R.C. church. Both of Fles's minister sons-in-law were granted new responsibilities in the CRC in 1919. I'm sure Fles followed God's will and design for him – to preach among churches with different thoughts on the Bible. My impression is that even though Fles's beliefs were closer to Bultema's eschatology than to the one the CRC espoused, he didn't leave his denomination because he was so invested in CRC history, and was still too involved in their present, and since he remained hopeful about the future course of the Christian Reformed Church – it might yet change or at least look for a way towards common ground.

Rev. Bultema and most of his congregation went on in 1920 to found the Berean Reformed churches. "In 1920, Muskegon's newspapers declared that every Dutch church in western Michigan was affected by the stir which Bultema caused," said Thomas Boslooper, a Reformed Church minister likely influenced by the movement. Several CRC and other churches were also divided, and some joined the Bereans.

Rev. Herman Hoeksema was Bultema's "chief antagonist." Later Hoeksema became involved in other doctrinal controversies, was also deposed from the CRC denomination, and then formed the Protestant Reformed Church. Both Bereans and the PRC still exist today. The First Christian Reformed Church of Muskegon closed their doors in 2013 for the final time after 146 years of ministry (see [picture](#)).

In 1918 the CRC Synod also decided to end their support for the "interdenominational" Chicago Hebrew Mission and to begin a different "ecclesiastical and confessional" Chicago Jewish Mission "of our own Church." They probably meant its eschatology did not conform to their creeds. The Beets history explained, "Most of the Jewish mission activities had been carried on by independent societies, without specifically Reformed tenets." Berkhof said that Blackstone was "guilty of twisting Scriptures," in a 1918 book on premillennialism.

Rev. Elias Newman was there to speak on behalf of the Chicago Hebrew Mission. Fles and the committee once again made several arguments to defend the Mission. Their report pointed out that other CRC supported missions were "not ecclesiastical" and were "much less under our influence than the Chicago Hebrew Mission" and asked, "Why should we then refuse to support the Chicago Hebrew Mission because it is not church related?" And they asked the Synod, "whether we want to assume the responsibility that a noble work in God's kingdom, for the salvation of that aged

people of promise, would without necessity ... suffer damage by us" if the Church terminated its financial support.

The Synod decided Jewish missions would no longer be represented by having a delegate to the Synod. Fles said, "The Committee for Jewish Missions has entered a new phase." He noted the number of its members had been reduced, and its disbursements as well, then he asked what its mandate would be. In 1920 Dr. Henry Beets, who was installed as the first Secretary of Missions connected with the Board of Heathen Missions would also speak for Jewish Mission interests.

And lastly in 1918 the Jewish Mission Committee said, "As in the past 24 years, the lion's share of the work fell on our President-Treasurer, Rev. J. I. Fles, who, despite his age and physical weakness has always continued to perform his work cheerfully." They closed with Psalm 53:6, "Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! When God bringeth back the captivity of his people, then shall Jacob rejoice, and Israel shall be glad."

Fles had still been writing a little summary or comment in the section of that missionary magazine after where it reported the Jewish mission contributions each month, separate from Beets' regular column. The last reported CRC receipts were in May 1919; then the magazine stopped reporting those numbers. The CRC Classes that contributed the most; Orange City IA - \$334, Sioux Center IA - \$280, Zeeland MI - \$146, and the total was \$1,038. Nothing came in from Muskegon Classis, which had usually been among the top contributors before their break up. That month (during the break up) Fles wrote, "Thank you, gentle donors. May the God of Israel bless you."

J. I. Fles Muskegon, Michigan

and to finish was a poem (it likely rhymes in Dutch, maybe I should get it translated):

"Israel! The lid is still in place  
On your unbelieving heart,  
It will be taken away from you one day;  
Oh, you obey your sorrow,  
Yes, your eye will see Him.  
Killed by your leaders;  
That's how [or why] you're bitter,  
Call to Him in your distress,  
Then you will have your King again,  
He's your Savior, God and Lord."

However in spite of Fles's warnings about the lack of CRC support causing financial damage, Blackstone's "evangelistic organization" had possessed a "tremendous cash endowment" in 1917. That was when Blackstone asked the Jewish Supreme Court Justice L. Brandeis, "If the Rapture does come, and you are not among those who participate in it" (i.e. perhaps he will someday find himself left behind) would he then disburse that money "for the benefit of those [Jews] who may be by the Rapture, convinced, and who will thereby be led to ... believe the Word." Justice Brandeis agreed to do so. Blackstone's "Rapture Will" would have disbursed "millions of dollars" during the Tribulation - a time of doom.

The Chicago Hebrew Mission became more involved with the other Dutch denominations after the CRC relinquished its support. In 1919 their Superintendent Norman Camp went to Cedar Grove, WI to speak in Rev. Cornelius Kuyper's church, another nearby Reformed church, and in the Presbyterian church there (Fles's former church). Two years later, Kuyper wrote a letter in the Jewish Era looking to the time when Christ will return in glory and the brightness of His coming will consume the Antichrist, and "inaugurate a reign of glory such as this world has never seen before, when the fullness of the heathen shall enter into the Kingdom of God and all Israel shall be saved."

In 1920 Rev. Fles "requested Synod not to re-appoint him" to the Jewish Mission Committee. They granted his request "with gratitude for the many, long, and faithful years he has served." And the CRC made plans to give \$20,000 for a new building to their new mission, the Chicago Jewish Mission,<sup>9</sup> later called the Nathaniel Institute. Rev. John Rottenberg, a converted Dutch Jewish CRC minister (see my other [story about him](#)), and Rev. Elias Newman, another converted Jew, were two of its early leaders. There was also a protest that year from some "brothers" regarding the "Maranatha Question," saying they had acted "too quickly." Rev. Gordon Spykman later agreed with that assessment, and CRC historian James Bratt has said the Synod acted "tactlessly."

Fles visited his daughter Minnie and Rev. De Leeuw's family in Iowa that winter. He died suddenly in 1921 at age 78 while spending Easter at his daughter Anna and Peter Zuidema's house in Kalamazoo, Michigan. They are all buried in Zeeland Cemetery. Inscribed upon the family monument is the Old Testament verse, Isaiah 26:19 which says in Dutch, "Thy dead shall live, they will rise." The next verses in the Bible show this passage is part of another premillennial prophecy.

B. K. Kuiper, the editor of the CRC De Wachter publication wrote in a 1921 article about Fles, “He had done more than anyone else to awaken interest in mission work among the Jews. Whatever our church does in that regard today is due in large measures to him.” It is hard to gauge what the impact of Fles’s ministries was during his lifetime. Their effect since then may well reach further than we’d guess.

A family story said when Rev. Fles was permitted to join the CRC he told the Church that he would never preach about his own opinions and premillennial beliefs, but would follow the CRC teachings in his sermons and catechism teaching. Does the story actually tell more about the family than about Fles? Rev. Riemersma’s 1894 biographical article said when company’s conversation turned to theology, then Fles could talk “for hours” about God’s promises to Israel that are yet to be fulfilled. Next Riemersma described his friend’s preaching; “he is very biblical and proves his statements from the Word.” This rather circumspect portrayal reminds me of Bultema’s description; Fles’s preaching was always general and never specific. Did any of the thousands of sermons my ancestor preached ever broach premillennial topics that would have made some in the CRC uneasy? It seems clear he followed his heart and his catechism book which advised, “Still speak about it.” Once the CRC’s 1883-1886 inquiries finished, I don’t think the Church ever asked Rev. Fles to withhold from preaching how the Bible prophesizes that Israel will be restored.

Premillennial beliefs remained a key part of the thinking in some Christian Reformed Fundamentalist circles for years, according to James Bratt and Gordon Spykman, who said, “It was even tolerated officially as long as its advocates avoided agitation.” Premillennialism and fundamentalism became more closely associated with each other and spread across denominations because they were in “opposition to liberalism” and modernism within the Church – which were often considered to be a greater threat to their faith. Amillennial eschatology had also spread in other denominations. Bratt’s Dutch Calvinism in Modern America says there was a “harsh liberal attack [not from CRC] on dispensational premillennialism” that began before 1920. Swierenga’s Dutch Chicago<sup>10</sup> says “friction arose” in some CRC churches over “the rising premillennial movement,” probably after 1920.

Blackstone donated at least \$38,500 to the RCA from 1920 - 1927. An RCA minister, Rev. Hospers, argued for premillennialism and was part of their “battle for the Bible” then and later. Here in Grand Rapids, Michigan (the CRC’s headquarters), Rev. M. R. De Haan was deposed from the RCA (it has a nearby college and HQ) in 1929 over his

premillennial (and other) teachings and founded the Calvary Undenominational Church. Another Chicago Hebrew Mission trustee, Rev. J. C. O'Hair, and Rev. Bultema both spoke at completely full inaugural services in that church. Also in the 1920s and 1930s, O'Hair and others advanced Fundamentalist and dispensational doctrines and began the Grace Movement, which is still active with a college here.

Yaakov Ariel says that in the 1930s and 40s the Chicago Hebrew Mission was reluctant to join the International Missionary Council and its Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews. Some Fundamentalists were suspicious of ecumenical organizations like it that represented mainline and liberal Protestantism, even when "such organizations advocated the cause of missions to the Jews." Those mainline advocates did not share the more conservative ones' "prophetic worldview, in which the evangelization of the Jews had a very special meaning as part of God's plan for human salvation." I'd put the CRC among them. The conservative concern was that mainline churches might soon "be convinced by the liberals to abandon the mission work among the Jews altogether, a scheme that eventually happened."

I have not found enough CRC history to confirm whether that scenario is really what happened to finally end the evangelical mission which Rev. Fles helped begin. However, Rev. Hoezee and Chris Meehan's missions book suggests "this current age of relativism" was a factor. One great analysis from 1973 by J. Rozeboom said the Church's "motivation was gone." The CRC's missions to Jews lasted until 1965.

Rev. A. J. Hoolsema, a premillennial Baptist minister and missionary with the AMF spoke at a prophetic Bible Conference in Zeeland, MI Oct. 30 - Nov. 6, 1960 (and again in the spring too) at First Baptist Church. (Per the [HOLLAND CITY NEWS](#)). So his preaching then was from the original Chicago Mission to Zeeland Christians! The Chicago Hebrew Mission continues and has never stopped their evangelizing. Now called [Life in Messiah International](#) or AMFI, they are "America's oldest independent outreach to the Jewish people." The Lord has truly blessed them!

And what has become of the belief system that Rev. Fles once supported? Its teachings remain similar to what they were over a hundred years ago. Yaakov Ariel says, "Although the international political situation has changed radically since 1916-1917, the current fundamentalist-premillennialist attitude toward Zionism is very much in keeping with Blackstone's understanding of the role and place of that movement in God's plan for humanity."



The CRCNA's Office Of Social Justice has said, "Dispensationalist Christians centered in North America actively hinder prospects for a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians by promoting a radical form of Zionism that alarms us." The RCA denomination says, "The ideology of Christian Zionism and the theology of dispensationalism that undergirds it ... [is] a distortion of the biblical message and an impediment to achieving a just peace in Israel/Palestine."

Hermeneutical and ideological debates about Romans 11 have been going on for many hundreds of years and continue today. Those thoughts on premillennialism and prophecies concerning Israel will always affect religious beliefs and political opinions. To support my assertion, read this description from Chapman's [2021 book, Christian Zionism and the Restoration of Israel](#); "We are dealing here with the most **bitter and protracted conflict** of the last 150 years; and the way we interpret the Bible has profound political consequences." (See Dr. Burge's endorsement [on back](#).) In 2017 he transferred from Wheaton to the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary.) Its pages 97-98 say, "Historians believe they can explain Zionism and the process leading to the Creation of Israel without resorting to supernatural explanations ... in a thoroughly **rational** and convincing way." (My bold.)

A 2023 book edited by Porter and Kurschner, [The Future Restoration of Israel: A Response to Supersessionism](#) (see [an image](#) from it), defines supersessionism as claiming that "God has no future redemptive plan for national Israel." I agree with Porter's view, which argues for such a plan. Another of its articles by Jewish missions expert and the President of Chosen People, Mitch Glaser, says that supersessionism has been and always will be the "chief enemy of Jewish evangelism" because the historical missions "believed the second coming of Christ was inextricably linked to the salvation of the Jewish people" by Romans 11. (p. 643-653. This aligns with what Rev. Fles said.) He focuses on three theologians; Sizer, Chapman (but does not mention his 2021 book), and Burge (from "Calvin University") for examples of "Christian non-Zionists." A 2012 source from the [ICEJ](#) calls those same three men "strident critics of Israel and of Christian Zionism."

An additional image below is from the beginning of a [2021 article](#) by Dexter Van Zile:

<https://www.algemeiner.com/2021/12/20/evangelical-contempt-for-jewish-life-in-israel-must-be-confronted/>

by Dexter Van Zile 

Evangelical Protestants in the United States have a well-deserved reputation for supporting Israel, but there are signs that younger people in that community are abandoning their support for the Jewish state.

One of the factors contributing to this trend is the publication of books by Evangelical scholars who portray Israel as an affront to all that is good in the world, especially the Christian faith.

These writers combine a dishonest portrayal of Israeli and Jewish history with a hostile theological interpretation of Christian scripture. They depict Christian support for Jewish efforts to achieve survival and sovereignty in the modern world as a betrayal of the Christian faith. In this narrative, the Jewish quest for survival and well-being is more worthy of contempt than efforts to kill and terrorize Jews in their homeland. They promote contempt for Jewish life in Israel.

One egregious example of this phenomenon is the writings of Gary Burge, who currently serves as the Dean of Faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In the first edition of his notoriously hostile text, “Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians,” Burge maligned Israelis with falsehood after falsehood, declaring, for example, that Israeli Arabs are denied membership in Israel’s labor movement, when in fact they have had access to full membership in Israel’s largest union — Histadrut — since 1959. He reported that all Israeli Arabs were barred from service in Israel’s military and that they were prohibited from joining Israel’s major political parties — another falsehood.

In this same text, Burge made his objection to Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel explicit when he argued that in light of the Gospel of John, Jews who do not believe in Jesus

The end notes tell more about Calvin University’s current situation, but for now this [2024 JPost article](#) explains why young American Evangelicals don’t support Israel as much as their predecessors once did; “Israel is portrayed as the aggressor while the Palestinians are victims.” And another reason is their “amillennial theological views, which see the Jewish people and the state of Israel as no longer necessary in the fulfillment of God’s plan for the second coming ...”

Here is Dr. Burge’s “[Why I am not a Christian Zionist](#)” from 2019 in The Banner. Contrast that with what former CRC Seminary Professor of systematic theology, John Bolt said in 2022 as he attempted to discern what the Bible and Romans 11 means in this article; “[Why I Am No Longer A Christian Anti-Zionist](#).” He finishes it with, “... all I

ask of those who read this is that they consider the possibility that our covenant God may have had a redemptive as well as providential purpose in Israel acquiring nation status in 1948.” Yes, I do wish that he would have said more on the topic.

All of these events have been part of the same struggle; from Prof. Kuenen’s spiritualized, amillennial “Modernism” as shown by his “The New Testament is antiChiliastic” in the [1875 book](#), through times when churches divided into two parts as they reacted against the encroaching modernism, until now.

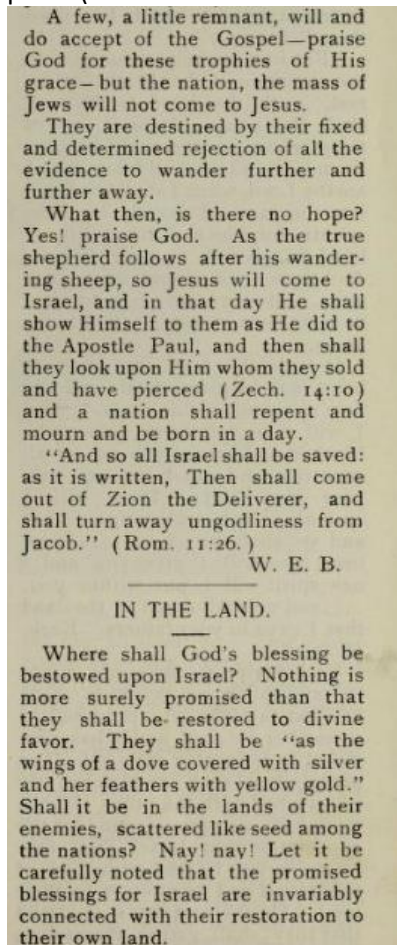
My dad’s parents belonged to LaGrave C.R.C. (their [self-description](#) now). My parents and I left the CRC in the seventies. Rev. Fles’s old church in Wisconsin and my parents’ church in Grand Rapids, Oakhill,<sup>11</sup> have both split away from the Presbyterian (USA) denomination and joined the Evangelical Presbyterian Church after their old denomination voted to divest their investments away from some companies in Israel, although those two churches may have also had other reasons to leave. Oakhill’s Rev. Jeff Carlson is a strong supporter of Israel, and he has led nine tour groups to the Holy Land. Next 2023 will include a chance to go there again! If money is an object, then you will just have to wait for the “free trip” opportunity during the Millennium. Rev. Carlson preaches that the Nation of Israel will turn to Christ one day and often says he eagerly anticipates Jesus Christ will return soon.

**A summary which gives a perspective of Rev. Fles before Zeeland's CRC church first hired him**

Are the origins of a main Zeeland church still known today? Why did they secede and start up in 1882? Perhaps no one really wants to remember? Their church building had a picture of him the last time I visited. [Zeeland's Historical museum](#) is by it. Did Fles also preach from streets, or in [its Baptist church](#)? Source: The Jewish Era, a publication of William E. Blackstone's **Chicago Hebrew Mission** in July, 1894. Revs. Fles & Riemersma had already witnessed at that Mission during the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, which is from same source (on their p. 247.)



p. 69 (article is from Blackstone – he was sometimes called the [Father of \(Christian\) Zionism](#)).



... This bottom part is probably also by Blackstone.

The following material is just one example of that material; it is part of the body of work not included in this printout version. I think it verifies most of my suspicions on the important role premillennialism has played within the history of the CRC church. This information was found from a Dutch archival source – it is dated as a 1933 retrospective which also looked back to their chiliastic beginnings.

[https://stickysystems-com.translate.goog/pics/Rapport-over-de-leer-Ds-AM-Berkhoff.htm? x tr sch=http& x tr sl=nl& x tr tl=en& x tr hl=en& x tr\\_pto=wapp](https://stickysystems-com.translate.goog/pics/Rapport-over-de-leer-Ds-AM-Berkhoff.htm? x tr sch=http& x tr sl=nl& x tr tl=en& x tr hl=en& x tr_pto=wapp)

Link is a translated version.

### **Rapport over de leer van Ds. A.M. Berkhoff betreffende het duizendjarig rijk en de tweeërlei opstanding**

**"Concerning the desire expressed in Art. 43 of the agenda, the Synod judges that our Forms of Unity clearly state that the sentiment of the doctrine of the return of the Savior to reign visibly and bodily on earth for a thousand years is not a doctrine of the Reformed Church, but is opposed to it as well as to God's Word, which is why no one is permitted to teach or spread that sentiment."**

**When this proposal was adopted, a protest was lodged during the Synod by Rev. JF Bulens, Rev. D. Breukelaar and Elder G.J. Hendriks.**

**When we read this protest, it is clear that these Brothers did not want this teaching to be spread, but that they wanted to tolerate this teaching and that they feared that the decision taken would result in disciplinary actions - something they did not dare to take responsibility for [if that occurred].**

**With this in mind, it is not surprising that at the next Synod in 1866 in Amsterdam there was a protest against the [1863] decision taken in Franeker.**

**At that Synod it was about whether the Synod would reconsider the decision taken in Franeker. The discussions were extensive and the end was that, due to the tied votes, the decision taken in Franeker remained in force.**

**Once again a protest came from NH Dosker, JR Kreulen, WH Gispen, JW te Bokkel, JH Donner, AG de Waal, F. Nugteren and HC Smit.**

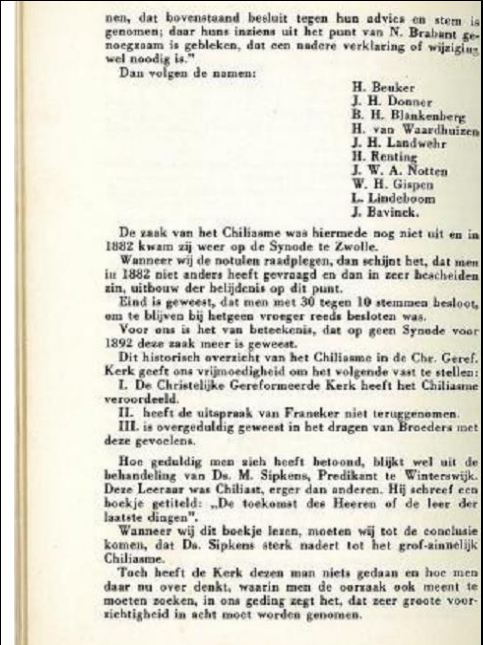
**Rev. Bulens lodged a separate protest and Prof. Brummelkamp joined the objectors.**

**The first protest reads:**



"The undersigned feel compelled, now that no further explanation has been given to Article 16 of the Synod of Franeker according to their wishes, to join the protest already submitted in the Synod of 1863 by Rev. Bulens et al., because also in their opinion, by the feeling of the physical return of Christ none of the main truths of the Reformed Doctrine are overthrown; as such no infringement is made on the regularity of faith; and that nevertheless the interpretation of the article could give rise to an incorrect application of church discipline..."

## Rapport over de leer van Ds. A.M. Berkhoff betreffende het duizendjarig rijk en de tweeërlei opstanding - pagina 79 (below)

 <p>nen, dat bovenstaand besluit tegen hun advies en stem is genomen; daar hun insiens uit het punt van N. Brabant genoegzaam is gebleken, dat een nadere verklaring of wijziging wel noodig is."</p> <p>Dan volgen de namen:</p> <p>H. Beuker J. H. Donner B. H. Blankenberg H. van Waardhuizen J. H. Landwehr H. Renting J. W. A. Notten W. H. Gispen L. Lindeboom J. Bavink.</p> <p>De zaak van het Chiliasm was hiermede nog niet uit en in 1882 kwam zij weer op de Synode te Zwolle.</p> <p>Wanneer wij de notulen raadplegen, dan schijnt het, dat men in 1882 niet anders heeft gevraagd en dan in zeer heescheiden zin, uitbouw der belijdenis op dit punt.</p> <p>Eind is geweest, dat men met 30 tegen 10 stemmen besloot, om te blijven bij hetgeen vroeger reeds besloten was.</p> <p>Voor ons is het van beteekenis, dat op geen Synode voor 1892 deze zaak meer is geweest.</p> <p>Dit historisch overzicht van het Chiliasm in de Chr. Geref. Kerk geeft ons vrijmoedigheid om het volgende vast te stellen:</p> <p>I. De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk heeft het Chiliasm veroordeeld.</p> <p>II. heeft de uitspraak van Franeker niet teruggenomen.</p> <p>III. is overgeduldig geweest in het dragen van Broeders met deze gevoelens.</p> <p>Hoe geduldig men zich heeft betoond, blijkt wel uit de behandeling van Ds. M. Sipkens, Predikant te Winterswijk. Deze Leeraar was Chiliasm, erger dan anderen. Hij schreef een boekje getiteld: „De toekomst des Heeren of de leer der laatste dingen”.</p> <p>Wanneer wij dit boekje lezen, moeten wij tot de conclusie komen, dat Ds. Sipkens sterk nadert tot het grof-zinnelijk Chiliasm.</p> <p>Tuch heeft de Kerk dezen man niets gedaan en hoe men daar nu over denkt, waarin men de oorzaak ook meent te moeten zoeken, in ons geding zegt het, dat zeer groote voorzichtigheid in acht moet worden genomen.</p>	<p>(prior page) The undersigned feel the need to indicate ... that the above decision was since, in their opinion, it has sufficiently appeared from the point of N. Brabant [classis?] <b>amendment [to the 1863 decision]</b> is necessary."</p> <p>Then the names follow:</p> <p>H. Beuker J. H. Donner</p> <p>B. H. Blankenberg H. van Waardhuizen J. H. Landwehr</p> <p>H. Renting J. W. A. Notten</p> <p>W. H. Gispen L. Lindeboom J. Bavink.</p> <p>The matter of <b>Chiliasm was not yet over</b> and in 1882 it was again at the Synod in Zwolle. seems that in 1882 no other request was made, and then in a very different sense, an ex point.</p> <p>At the end of the day, it decided with 30 against <b>10 votes to stick to what had</b> already be to us that this matter was no longer discussed at any Synod before 1892. This historical o Church gives us boldness to establish the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>The Christian Reformed Church has condemned Chiliasm.</b></li> <li>[It] did not retract statement of the Franeker [1863 Synod].</li> <li>[It] has been over-patient in carrying Brothers with these feelings.</li> </ol> <p>How patiently they have been rewarded is apparent from the treatment of <b>Rev. M. Sipkens</b>, Pastor in Winterswijk. This Teacher was Chiliasm, <b>worse</b> than below. He wrote a booklet entitled: "The Future of the Lord or the Doctrine of the Last Things" When we read this booklet, we must come to the conclusion that Rev. Sipkens is approaching grossly sensual [carnal] Chiliasm.</p> <p>Yet the Church has done nothing to this man, and whatever one thinks about it now, [or whether] whatever one thinks one should look for the cause, in our case it says that very great caution must be observed.</p> <p>[So they "wanted to tolerate Chiliasm in the Church"]</p> <p><a href="https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/offset/8/id/tag:Brochures-(TUA),193a54b-712a8fca775c">https://www.digibron.nl/viewer/collectie/Digibron/offset/8/id/tag:Brochures-(TUA),193a54b-712a8fca775c</a> This link may have a possible issue. Yes, it does. Perhaps go there first, then search for it from within that archive?</p>
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That after 1882 in the Chr. Ref. Kerk, **the extinction of the chiliastic ideas, will have to be traced in part to the fact that Dr. Bavinck and Dr. Kuyper made clear sounds in this area, sounds uttered by Augustine and the Reformers.** c. The Ethical and Apologetic Direction. We would not be complete if we did not establish for a moment that the **Ethical direction** in our Fatherland, which is closely associated with Vermittlungstheologie in Germany, **is generally chiliastic.** Names such as Chantepie de la Saussaye, J. H. Gunning and others confirm our position. Of the Apologetic direction, especially Prof. J. J. van Oosterzee whose Chiliasm we can say is full of contradictions. Wouldn't it be noted here that **before** the appearance of Dr. Bavinck and Dr. Kuyper, the dogmatics **of Van Oosterzee** in the Chr. Ref. Church **was widely used** and that this can also be called a cause, that **many in the Chr. Ref. Church are Chiliast minded.** It is remarkable that such a rapid decrease is noticeable after 1882. d. In our days. Also in the days in which we live there are various Chiliasts, but we generally find them among the Sectarists. We call: Adventists, Sabbathists, Darbyists, Russellians, not to mention the Maranatha movement of Joh. de Heer, a movement that vigorously promotes the doctrine of universal reconciliation. It is therefore **no honor** for a Chiliast who lays claim to the name Reformed to be with such a company.

(A question this **1933 retrospective** – and many histories – don't consider: what effect did this decrease have on the US CRC? Was the Netherlands decrease a cause or a result of increasing emigration? In fact, I don't really see much acknowledgement of any Dutch premillennialism – I told a local CRC Seminary professor (who taught eschatology, I later learned!) about the tied vote in the 1866 CRC Synod in the Netherlands. He didn't reply with any "Interesting!" statements.



Mount Zion by William Bartlett, 1847.

Micah 4:1-4; In the last days ...

<sup>2</sup> Many nations will come and say,  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,  
so that we may walk in his paths.”

The law will go out from Zion,  
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> He will judge between many peoples  
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.

They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,  
nor will they train for war anymore.

<sup>4</sup> Everyone will sit under their own vine



and under their own fig tree,  
and no one will make them afraid,  
for the LORD Almighty has spoken.

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