

THE BIBLE AND THE PALESTINE- ISRAEL CONFLICT

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The Bible and the Palestine-Israel Conflict

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and Tina Whitehead



Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center — Jerusalem

2014

DEDICATION

We dedicate this book to the founders of Sabeel:
Abuna [later Archbishop] Elias Chacour, Assis [later Bishop]
Riah Abu El-Assal, Samia Khoury, Jean Zaru, Cedar Duaybis,
Jonathan Kuttab, and Assis Naim Ateek,
who through their tireless work over the past 25 years
have strived for justice and liberation
and sought freedom and peace
based on the liberating power of the Gospel.

CONTENTS

Editors' Note	9
Acknowledgments	11
Contributor Biographies	13
Foreword, <i>Naim Ateek</i>	19
Introduction, <i>Naim Ateek</i>	23
PART I: The Occupation of the Bible	29
Opening Sermon, "Today the Scripture Is Fulfilled," <i>Naim Ateek</i>	31
Biblical Authority <i>Gary Burge</i>	39
<i>Nancy Cardoso Pereira</i>	45
<i>David Mark Neuhaus</i>	49
The Occupation of the Bible <i>Gregory Jenks</i>	53
<i>Yohanna Katanacho</i>	59
<i>Nancy Cardoso Pereira</i>	65
The Bible and the Occupation of Palestine <i>Joakim Wohlfeil</i>	69
<i>Deborah Weissman</i>	75
<i>Jean Zaru</i>	79
The Land of Promise <i>Yohanna Katanacho</i>	85
<i>Nancy Cardoso Pereira</i>	91
<i>Pietro Kaswalder</i>	97

Does the Bible Have a Future?	
<i>Peter Du Brul</i>	105
<i>Gary Burge</i>	113
<i>Gregory Jenks</i>	119
Bible Study: Land of Promise, <i>Naim Ateek</i>	123
PART II: Realities on the Ground	137
The Status Quo in Israel and Palestine,	
<i>Mustafa Barghouti</i>	139
Perspectives from Gaza,	
<i>Mads Fredrik Gilbert</i>	151
Perspectives from Israel,	
<i>Hala Khoury-Bisharat</i>	165
Breaking a Generation,	
<i>Gerard Horton</i>	173
Negev report,	
<i>Gordon Matthews</i>	181
PART III: International Law	185
International Law and Religion	
<i>Jonathan Kuttab</i>	187
<i>Diana Buttu</i>	195
International Law and the Palestine-Israel Conflict,	
<i>John Quigley</i>	201
PART IV: Contemporary Issues	213
Women, Colonialism, and Human Rights,	
<i>Maha Abu-Dayyeh</i>	215
The Holy Books as Guiding Lights,	
<i>Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi</i>	221

Resistance through Culture,	
<i>Rania Elias Khoury</i>	233
“Jewish and Democratic?”,	
<i>Jeff Halper</i>	239
The Future of Jerusalem,	
<i>Raffoul Rofa</i>	245
The Militarization of Israeli Society,	
<i>Moriel Rothman</i>	253
Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land,	
<i>Sami El- Yousef</i>	261
PART V: Remembering and Looking Forward	271
Final Sermon,	
<i>Don Wagner</i>	273
Twenty-Five Years of Palestinian Liberation Theology	
<i>Naim Ateek</i>	279
<i>Rosemary Radford Ruether</i>	285
<i>Mary Grey</i>	289
When I Look Forward, <i>Bo Forsberg</i>	295
APPENDICES	299
Appendix I: Conference Prayer, <i>Bo Forsberg</i>	301
Appendix II: Litany for Peace and Justice	302
Appendix III: Baptismal Covenant Renewal	303

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DOES THE BIBLE HAVE A FUTURE?

Gregory Jenks

This panel discussion arises out of the following critical awareness:

Since the Bible has been used to support highly destructive moments of human history such as theft, slavery, murder, assassination, war, genocide, population transfers, forced conversions, and environmental degradation, perhaps the Bible is too dangerous for the masses. Maybe we should take it away from the laity and only allow it to be read and interpreted by professionals. Yet neither political leaders nor the Church's anointed have been free of biblically justified atrocities. Perhaps the Bible should be counterbalanced by other authorities such as scientific findings and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Can the Bible be redeemed and used as a source for human advancement, and if so, how?

This panel has the theme, "Does the Bible have a future?" This is a very different kind of topic, and it plays into my own research and writing about the "once and future Bible." It could be a theological diversion from the challenges of justice and peace, but perhaps it is also about asking what ways we might imagine the Bible contributing to justice and peace, rather than promoting and endorsing violence and oppression.

Let me begin by noting a simple but significant error in the title of our panel and of our conference. The title refers to *the* Bible, but there is not *one* Bible. Rather there are *many* Bibles, as Yohanna Katanacho reminded us. There is more than one form of the Bible and one expects there always will be, just as there is more than one expression of Church. This diversity of Bibles extends beyond the formal differences of content among Anglican, Armenian, Catholic, Ethiopian, Jewish, Orthodox, Protestant, and Syrian

Bibles, since—even when we have the same set of books in our Bible—we may choose to read some parts while ignoring others.

So much of the power talk around the Christian Scriptures speaks as if the Bible was a single thing that exists in one agreed form and through which God speaks with one voice. I suggest this is simply not so. The Bible is diverse and God speaks through the Bible in many different voices.

Yet, so often our language about the Bible reflects an assumption that the Protestant Bible, as it emerged in Northwest Europe at the time of the Reformation, is “the Bible.” That particular form of the Bible is the Bible most of us know, but it is not the Bible of the Catholic Church nor of the Eastern rite churches. It is the Bible of the North Atlantic theological organisation, but it is not the only Bible. It is not the ancient Bible. And it is not the best Bible.

I suggest, with as much humility and grace as I can muster, that the first thing about the future of the Bible we need to embrace is that the Bible has always existed in multiple forms and will continue to do so. Our desire for certainty seduces us into thinking of the Bible as a single thing that speaks with one voice, and that plays into theological power games which—as we see in this and other lands—can have unjust outcomes for the people of the land, the *am-haaretz*, the little ones of God.

So I have no doubt that the Bible has a future, even if I find it hard to predict just what the future of the Bible may be like.

A further response to this topic would be to ask why we are discussing this theological topic rather than a real topic? My own response to this comment is that—in my view—an authentic Christian response to occupation, dispossession and violence must be derived from our understanding of Jesus, and for that I need the Bible. Not because I will ever take the Bible literally, but because I must always take it seriously.

So let me be clear at the outset that I have no doubt that the Bible has a future. Indeed, I am sure that the Bible *does* have a future, but I do wonder whether it will be a future that serves the powers that be or a future in which the Bible functions as a prophetic text, calling us all to repentance, renewal and action.

Let me also say that how this future takes shape rests with the communities of faith for which the Bible serves as sacred text. Academics will not determine the future of the Bible. The future of the Bible will be determined by the people of God, in all their diversity.

While I am sure that the Bible has a future, I am not sure whether the future of the Bible will be toxic for humanity or a good thing for us all. For sure, I suggest the toxicity of the Bible rises in direct correlation to its integration with the powers that be, whether those powers be inside the Church or outside the Church.

Not every reading of the Bible is healthy and good for us. I wish I could promise that the future of the Bible is one characterised by life-affirming readings, but I fear this will not be the case. People of power will always find it expedient to co-opt and exploit the Bible for their own ends, while evading its prophetic claim upon our lives. In this respect, I have found the contributions of Nancy Cardoso Pereira to be challenging and transformative for me.

As we reflect on this further, I would affirm that the Bible, in its diverse forms and with its diverse voices, is a key text for both victims and perpetrators, and will continue to be so unless we can change the ways in which people read the Bible. This suggests at least two different futures for the Bible: one that assists victims to use it more effectively, and another that disarms the Bible so that it cannot be used as a weapon of fear and hate. The trick is not to change or domesticate the Bible, but to change and empower the readers.

So I invite you to think about the two sides of the coin for the future of the Bible: how to make it work better for the little people, and how to make it work not so well for (and even against) the powerful people. Some of the strategies will contribute to both outcomes, so they are high value options. These would include:

- Improving biblical literacy within the churches and in the wider community
- Accessing contemporary critical biblical scholarship
- Recognizing diversity within the Bible and attending to the minority voices

THE BIBLE AND THE PALESTINE-ISRAEL CONFLICT

- Acknowledging the dark side of the Bible
- Celebrating the positive side of the Bible

One key element will be reading the Bible contextually:

- In its ancient historical contexts
- Through its history of interpretation across the centuries
- In our own contexts now
- In the context of scientific insights and human rights values
- In our multi-faith context (as one religion among many, not as the *only true religion*)

If we can make progress across these issues, then the Bible will not only have a future but it will be a future that brings healing and hope to all people.

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