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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
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Ms. Jean Zaru is Presiding Clerk of Ramallah Friends Meeting in Palestine and a founding member of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center. She is the author of the influential book, *Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks*, and was actively involved with the World Council of Churches.

THE OCCUPATION OF THE BIBLE

Gregory Jenks

One of the things I have learned to do when speaking in Australia is to always bring greetings from the Church and the Christian communities in Palestine. But when I am somewhere else, I find myself discovering a deeper sense of my own country, or unique place in the world. As someone who has been out of my own “country” (an indigenous Australian term for the specific place where a person is born) for most of my adult life, I am learning to appreciate how the Christian Scriptures are used and misused in terms of Palestine, Israel, and the conflict.

I begin from the assumption, of course, that the Bible has immense authority for this conversation. We have already begun to explore this with the earlier panel. Because of the authority that the Scriptures have, and however we understand that authority, the Bible will inform and shape the ways that we address issues of justice, peace, and reconciliation for all the communities that live in this land.

So far as process is concerned, my working assumption is that this will require an active and open-ended engagement with the sacred texts. It will also require us to be involved with the historical processes that have led to the present situation in this land. As we have already heard, we need to be paying attention to our own perspectives, our own locations, and our own points of view.

I actually think we had a fine example of that in the opening sermon that Assis Naim Ateek gave in the Melkite Church. However, I want to go out on a limb and indicate one of the places where I would probably differ significantly from some of the other members of the panel, and particularly the previous panel.

I am one of those liberal or progressive scholars who look at the way Scripture functions in terms of the Palestine-Israel conflict. This is one way of working around the issue of how the Scripture impacts the claims made for land by both Jewish and Palestinian communities.

So as the sermon began I said to myself, "This could be hard." While I love Assis Naim very much, I could see that he was going to take the story very literally. And that is not what I would do. As the sermon unfolded, I was delighted, then more delighted, and more pleased. I found myself drawn along. I loved it and entirely agreed with the way he unfolded the text. I mention this because saying that I do not begin with the assumption that the Bible is simply a record of something that happened can frighten the camels; it can scare the horses. Choose whichever metaphor works for you.

But even if we start from different positions as we engage with Scripture, my experience has been—and this perhaps goes to the question of the role of the Spirit in this whole process—that no matter from what position we start, if we engage the Scriptures with open hearts and minds then God is able to speak to us.

So what I saw yesterday was someone who took the Gospel story at face value in a way I would have difficulty doing, and yet deftly avoided some of the traps that I might imagine when people say they are taking the Bible literally, at face value. What I saw yesterday, and what I am committed to myself, is engaging with Scripture in a way that offers the Bible the best of our critical engagement. We are called to love God not only with heart and soul and strength, but also with our minds. I believe we are called to engage with Scripture in that same diverse way: with the best of our mind, the best of our soul, the best of our heart, and the best of our strength.

The Bible, I suggest, deserves and requires the best of our critical engagement, rather than naive readings which perhaps are predicated on the assumption that we should defer to Scripture. I think Scripture—like God in the Book of Job—is strong enough, powerful enough, and robust enough to take our questions,

to take our confrontation, and then to take us further into the journey that God has for us.

With all that in mind, I take this panel to be an invitation to explore some of the ways the Bible has been exploited to justify the occupation of Palestine to the benefit of some people and the simultaneous detriment of others, rather than serving—as I think it *could* and *should*—as a prophetic text that might challenge both the occupiers and the dispossessed.

This gets me thinking about the significance of the location and agenda of the reader when using Scripture in the context of occupation. Clearly a Jewish settler would read the Bible differently than a displaced Palestinian, and neither would read the Bible from the same perspective as me. I am a white, male, Anglican, academic, priest. And a colonialist, or at least a descendant of colonialists. And someone who benefits from the dislocation and displacement of the indigenous peoples of my own country.

There are other variables as well, including those between someone like myself, who reads the Bible from a consciously critical and humanistic perspective, and others who may read the same Bible from different perspectives, some of which we heard in the panel on Biblical Authority. My experience has been that beginning with different perspectives does not prevent us from discovering common ground and hearing common wisdom.

I invite us to think about how the Bible's three different "worlds" are captured in this occupation of the Bible, these worlds being the *world behind the text* (the historical realities that we presume to be behind the text, how we imagine the ancient past), the *world within the text* (the stories, the context of the Bible as it is), and the *world in front of the text* (those places in which we exist as we engage with Scripture).

The World behind the Text

I think of the historical dynamics of ancient Palestine that witnessed the emergence of ancient Israel and Judah and, at some point in that process, the suppression of non-Yahwistic Canaanite



communities with their rich cultural fabric. As an academic and as a follower of Jesus, I find myself wondering how many of those ghastly stories of ethnic cleansing and religious violence reflect events that actually happened. To what extent do they represent the imagination of later religious scribes—the Taliban of ancient Jerusalem—who were expressing how they felt about their experience of marginalization and their threatened fragile existence, and found comfort in fantasies about total conquest, excluding the other, ethnic cleansing, and the belief that God gave this land to no one but me and my own kind?

So there is a whole set of issues regarding claims made and assumptions embraced in terms of the historical veracity of the biblical narrative. You might have already picked up, in case I have not made it clear enough, that I am actually a minimalist and I think there is very little historical value to the biblical narratives. (So get the tar and feathers ready!)

The World within the Text

The second world is the world within the text. This is the story world that Naim and I both find in Luke 4. Whether or not there was a synagogue in Nazareth for Jesus to attend during the first three decades of the first century, and whether or not Jesus was literate are beside the point. These are narratives by first and second century Christians, and the sermon created for Jesus by Luke now serves as a sacred text that calls us to faithfulness.

Whether we think of the Old Testament or the apocalyptic fantasies of the New Testament, the ethnic violence of the Bible, real or imagined, inscribes and reinforces patterns of fear, suspicion, and violence that are presumed to have divine legitimacy. The Bible drips with blood, whether that be the blood of Jesus (whose death is often understood in Christian tradition as expiating an angry, potentially violent, and dangerous God), the blood of the little ones who are crushed by empire, or the blood of those whose religion is different from ours and are thus doomed to destruction by our God. The Book of Revelation is certainly a classic text in that respect.

The World in front of the Text

Then, of course, there is the world in front of the text. This is the world in which we live, the world in which we attempt to shape lives that are holy and true.

Looking at the text from where I stand and from among the communities to which I belong, I discover that I am in an ambiguous space. I belong to a religion that has incarcerated, tortured, and killed its opponents, whether they be internal dissidents or external infidels. My religious community has drunk deeply from the well of violence. I am a citizen of a nation that has dispossessed and literally hunted down the indigenous community. I benefit from an economic system that continues to use violence to sustain itself.

So neither the text nor this reader of the text is innocent. Yet all the same, both are open to be used by God and to serve God's purposes of justice and peace. The occupation of the Bible can come to an end, just as the Bible can encourage us to resist the occupation of Palestine until it also comes to an end.

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