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.

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FOREWORD

Naim Ateek

Twenty-five years ago (1988), a movement was born—Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT). It was nourished by a small group of Palestinian Christians who struggled to find a relevant faith in the midst of occupation, dispossession, and oppression. Over the years, PLT has reached Palestinian Christians throughout the Holy Land as well as people around the world who together share a vision of justice, peace, and reconciliation under the sovereignty of a loving, inclusive God. During this conference, we celebrate 25 years of this vision and movement.

In the years following World War II, Zionist ideology clothed itself in two garments. The first was a secular garment that succeeded in creating the State of Israel in 1948; the second was a religious garment that was slowly stitched together after the 1967 war. But the clearly identifiable threads of Zionist ideology were sewn into both garments: to establish a Jewish state in Palestine with a dominant if not exclusively Jewish population, despite the thriving presence of the Palestinian people.

After World War II, secular Zionism made use of the Christian West’s guilt for the holocaust to cloak the aggressive Zionist acquisition of the land of Palestine. Zionists callously exploited the horrible suffering of the holocaust in such a way as to ostracize and condemn anti-Semitic anyone who disagreed that the Jewish holocaust should be used to justify the dispossession of another people. On the one hand, Western powers sacrificed Palestine as a burnt offering to falsely absolve their consciences of the guilt of hundreds of years of Christian anti-Semitism, including biblical anti-Jewish misinterpretations. On the other hand, Western states accepted the Zionist arguments
My fifth and final point is what I call the problem of perspective. The deepest problem we have with the Bible, and what puts its future in jeopardy for some communities, is how we view where we stand when we read it. We see ourselves as privileged, as entitled, as the elect, the chosen. We see ourselves as exceptional. Simply look at the history of the interpretation of the parable of the great banquet. Remember how the banquet host sends out invitations and excuses come back to him. The history of the interpretation of that parable has always been used for evangelism. In other words, we are at the banquet and we are listening to all those people who have rejected the invitation. They should respond. In fact, however, the cutting edge of that parable is that we hear that we are the recipients of the invitation, and therefore we should be chastened for rejecting it.

We, therefore, have to rediscover the central themes of the Bible and live them: repentance, redemption, renewal, the kingdom of God. Not simply do individuals have to rediscover these themes, but whole societies must as well. The message of the Bible is the reconstituting of creation, of setting it right. We can read the Bible with our friends in the majority world, and I think this is essential. But when I read the Bible with Latin Americans, Africans, and Asian Christians, my peculiar personal interpretations are chastened and I am humbled. We should read the Bible not asking how we can cull from it what we want, but instead how it can change the way we look at the world.

Does the Bible have a future? I would say absolutely. It not only delivers to us the Word of God, but it is a word of truth. In the estimate of the Church for twenty centuries, it is the Word of God written. In our frailty and with repentance on our lips, we need to learn how to use it rightly. When we do use it rightly, not as a guarantee of privilege, not as something reinforcing my entitlement, but honoring it, studying it, and listening carefully to it, it will always be a constant supply of hope and promise.

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 Katanachio 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.

BIBLE STUDY

"Land of Promise"
How do we understand the promise of the land?

Naim Ateek

One of the major problems facing Christians in the twenty-first century has to do with the way people understand, interpret, and use the Bible. This is a cause of great concern for us, Palestinian Christians, due to the abuse of the Bible which we observe especially as it relates to the Israel-Palestine conflict. We believe that the Bible is meant to be an instrument for liberation and redemption, but our experience today is that it is being used as an instrument of enslavement and oppression. There were times when the Bible was used to justify slavery, war, the silencing of women, and many other evils. One of the latest abuses of the Bible, especially after the creation of the State of Israel, is the way it has been used to justify the oppression and the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians.

In my theological writings, I have often emphasized two words: exclusive and inclusive. I believe that the movement in the Bible story is from exclusive thinking and beliefs about God, people, and land to more inclusive concepts. In other words, the story moves from a tribal way of thinking about God and people to a more inclusive theology. In this Bible study, I would like to present the land promise as recorded in the books of the Torah, then show how religious thinking developed after the Exile, continuing into the New Testament writers' interpretation in light of the coming of Christ. I will conclude with a discussion of how contemporary Christian thinkers continue to interpret the promise.
And for the second conference in a row, we wish to express special thanks to Mr. Robert Maynard for generously underwriting the cost of the production of this book.

We would like also to express our thanks to the many organizations, churches, and individuals around the world which gave and continue to give financial support to the ministries of Sabeel, without which this conference could not have occurred. We also wish to thank the many local organizations which contributed to the participants' understanding of the cultural and political issues in Palestine and Israel, and to the local guides and representatives from these organizations. And, of course, our work will always depend on the support and steadfastness of the Palestinian Christian community.

Above all, we give thanks to God for the ministry of Sabeel and we pray that we can remain steadfast and faithful in the work of justice and peace.

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