THE BIBLE AND THE PALESTINE-ISRAEL CONFLICT

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The Bible and the Palestine-Israel Conflict

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Edited by
Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis
and Tina Whitehead

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center — Jerusalem
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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 as 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
that the Christian West must compensate Jews for their near total destruction and protect them within a state of their own from the threat of future catastrophes, even if that state was built on the ashes of another people.

While we agree that Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish biblical misinterpretations are wrong, totally untenable, and are to be rejected wherever they happen, we do not believe that the Palestinian people have to pay the price for the guilt of the West. Yet, on the ashes of Palestine and of millions of Holocaust victims, secular Zionism triumphed.

While the 2013 international conference presupposes the secular Zionism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as Holocaust Zionism, the foci of this conference are, first, the religious and more specifically the biblical garment that hides the brutality of Zionism and, second, the question of human rights and international law that are buried beneath today’s Zionism.

Israel’s 1967 victory over Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, which resulted in its possession of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was proof for most religious Jews that Zionism and the State of Israel were God’s redemption of God’s chosen people. Whereas most Western Jews up to this point had been equivocal about the State of Israel, now Western Jewry offered unmitigated support to Israel and its Zionist project.

Once God was invoked in the conflict, it became the responsibility of religious Jews to wash secularism out of Zionism so that all that remained was the “God of Israel” acting in history to return “God’s chosen people” to the Promised Land. It was their religious duty to reclaim God’s promise of the land; anything less would be infidelity. But just as Zionist ideology/theology is rooted in biblical “holy war,” tribalism, exclusion, inequality, and domination, Zionist ethics have justified war, assassination, terrorism, land theft, ethnic cleansing, home demolitions, eradication of villages, and the uprooting of thousands of olive trees. The Holocaust was no longer necessary to justify the possession of Palestine and the dispossession of Palestinians. The Bible replaced the Holocaust as a far more potent tool to dominate and expel Palestinians and to control and appropriate their land.

The new Zionist ideology set in: “We are not here because of the Holocaust; we are here because God gave us this land and the Bible is our title deed. Don’t talk to us about international law or the human rights of the Palestinians; we have divine rights to this land. The Palestinians must go.”

This is today’s theology of the religious Zionist extremists, both Jewish and Christian, and even the so-called secular Zionists. The Hebrew Bible—the Christian Old Testament—has become a weapon by which Palestinian Arabs, including Palestinian Arab Christians, are denied their internationally guaranteed rights to their lands, livelihoods, culture, and self-determination. Hence the theme of the 9th International Conference: “The Bible and the Palestine-Israel Conflict.” Moreover, although the Bible has been part of the problem and must be part of the solution, Sabeel’s vision is that the political solution to the conflict must be based on the universal principles of human rights and international law. The world must find a way to come together regardless of differing and even competing ideologies and religions.

In light of the above, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center has organized the 9th International Conference, 2013. We hope that you will find it intellectually stimulating and an invaluable experience that will energize your commitment to continue the pursuit of a just peace for all the people of Palestine and Israel.
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 naïve 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.
• 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.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Ms. Maha Abu-Dayyeh is founder and general director of Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC). She is engaged in responding to the political, legal, social, and cultural needs of Palestinian women. Born and raised in Jerusalem, Ms. Abu-Dayyeh is a recipient of the French Republic Human Rights Award (1998) and the 2002 Ms. Woman of the Year Award. Abu-Dayyeh serves on the boards of several local Palestinian and international human rights organizations that promote democracy and civil society.

Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek is cofounder and director of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. As early as 1989, he articulated a Palestinian theology of liberation in Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Liberation Theology and again in his more recent book, A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation.

Dr. Mustafa Barghouti, MD, is Secretary General of the Palestinian National Initiative and member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. He was a candidate for president of Palestine in 2005 and nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, and he writes extensively on civil society, democracy, and health policy for Palestinians living under occupation.

Dr. Hala Khoury-Bisharat has been a longtime member of the Board of Directors for Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, and is now also the Chairperson of the Board. She is a lecturer in criminal procedure, law of evidence, public international law, and international criminal law at Carmel Academic Center-Haifa.
Dr. Gary Burge is Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, with forty years of experience among Christian communities in Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. He has written extensively about West Asian Christians, land theology, and Zionism.

Ms. Diana Buttu, JD, is an attorney based in Ramallah. She is also Research Fellow in the Middle East Initiative of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government as well as an Eleanor Roosevelt Fellow in the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School. She specializes in negotiations, international law, and international human rights law and is a former spokesperson for the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Dr. Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi is the head of the American Studies Program at al-Quds University and founder of the Wasatia movement of moderate Islam. He serves as a visiting scholar at The Washington Institute and is Founding Director of the Jerusalem Studies and Research Institute.

Rev. Dr. Peter Du Brul, SJ, is a professor and the first chairperson of the Religious Studies Department at Bethlehem University as well as having been the former chair of the Humanities Department.

Ms. Rania Elias Khoury is Director of Yabous Cultural Centre, which supports revival of cultural life, and is also Director of the Jerusalem Festival. She is on the executive committee of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, as well as on the board of several local organizations.

Mr. Bo Forsberg is the General Secretary at the Swedish NGO Diakonia and the Chairman of the Foundation for Human Rights. He has written hundreds of articles about democracy and human rights as the basis for equitable distribution of resources to work for peace. He is also a longtime Friend of Sabeel.

Dr. Mads Fredrik Gilbert, MD, is a Norwegian physician and professor specializing in anaesthesiology and emergency medicine. He has volunteered as a medical solidarity worker for Palestine since 1981, most recently serving in Gaza at al-Shifa Hospital during the 2008-2009 and 2012 Israeli bombardments. He is the coauthor with Dr. Erik Fosse of the documentary book, Eyes in Gaza, which describes the situation on the ground during Israel’s “Operation Cast Lead.”

Professor Mary Grey is a Roman Catholic liberation theologian and former professor at St. Mary’s University College in London and the University of Wales. Her present theological focus is on reconciliation, including reconciliation with the earth. She is Trustee of Living Stones of the Holy Land, a core member of the Ballour project, a Patron of Friends of Sabeel UK, and a longtime Friend of Sabeel.

Dr. Jeff Halper is an anthropologist, author, lecturer, political activist, nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize, and cofounder and director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. His books include An Israeli in Palestine and Between Redemption and Revival: The Jewish Yishuv of Jerusalem of the Nineteenth Century.

Mr. Gerard Horton is a cofounder of Military Court Watch (MCW) and has worked on the issue of children prosecuted in the Israeli military court system for over six years. Gerard has authored a number of reports on the subject for nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies, as well as three UN shadow reports to CAT, HRC and the CRC. Prior to cofounding MCW, Gerard worked for Defence for Children International and practiced as a barrister in Australia at the Sydney bar, specializing in commercial and criminal law.

Rev. Dr. Gregory Jenks is an Anglican priest, biblical scholar, and the Academic Dean at St. Francis Theological College in Brisbane, Australia. He is also the co-director of the Bethsaida Excavations Project in Israel and coordinator of the Jesus Database project.
Rev. Dr. Pietro Kaswalder, OFM, is a professor of Old Testament Exegesis and Archeology at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem and the author of many highly influential works, such as *Biblical Archaeology and the Origins of Israel*.

Rev. Dr. Yohanna Katanacho is a Palestinian evangelical Christian who serves as Professor of Biblical Studies and Academic Dean for Bethlehem Bible College. He is one of the coauthors of the Palestinian Kairos document and has written several books, including *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry*.

Mr. Jonathan Kuttab, JD, is a leading Palestinian human rights attorney in Israel and Palestine. He is also a cofounder of Al Haq, Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, and the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence. He continues to serve as Chairman of the Board of Bethlehem Bible College.

Mr. Gordon Matthews is a lifelong Quaker who recently served for three months as Resident Friend at Claridge House, a Quaker centre for rest, renewal and retreat in Dormansland, Surrey. He works as a freelance translator and has recorded a CD of his own songs in the folk tradition. He is an associate tutor of Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre and recently did a short spell as Joint Representative at the Quaker Council for European Affairs.

Rev. Dr. David Mark Neuhau, SJ, is an Israeli Roman Catholic priest of the Jesuit Order and serves as Latin Patriarchal Vicar for Saint James Vicariate for Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel. He teaches at Bethlehem University and at the Seminary of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem. His most recent book is entitled *The Land, the Bible and History: Toward the Land That I Will Show You*.

Rev. Dr. Nancy Cardoso Pereira is a Brazilian Methodist pastor, community organizer, member of the Land Pastoral Commission, and Professor of Ancient History, Porto Alegre Institute of the Methodist Church, Brazil.

Professor John B. Quigley, LLB, is the President’s Club Professor of Law at Moritz College of Law at Ohio State University, where he teaches International Law and Comparative Law. Professor Quigley’s numerous publications include works on human rights, international law, the United Nations, war and peace, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the State of Palestine.

Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether is a leading feminist theologian and Visiting Professor at Claremont Graduate University in the United States. She also specializes in liberation theology and is a longtime Friend of Sabeel.

Mr. Raffoul Rafa is Executive Director of the Society of St. Yves of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which promotes human and civil rights by providing legal assistance, counsel, and advocacy to the politically oppressed Palestinian population in Jerusalem and the southern West Bank.

Mr. Moriel Rothman is an American-Israeli activist, writer and poet. He was born in Jerusalem, raised in Ohio, and now lives in Jerusalem. He was imprisoned for publicly refusing to serve in the Israeli military. He is a member of All That’s Left, a diaspora collective against the occupation, and writes a regular blog.

Rev. Dr. Donald E. Wagner is an ordained Presbyterian minister (PCUSA) and the National Program Director of Friends of Sabeel-North America. Formerly Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and Director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at North Park University and National Director of the Palestine Human Rights Campaign, he is the author of four books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including *Anxious for Armageddon* and *Dying in the Land of Promise: Palestine and Palestinian Christianity from Pentecost to 2000*. 
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