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The Bible, Zionism, and Palestinian Liberation Theology

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THE BIBLE IS THE LAST and lasting bastion of Zionism and we have a responsibility to confront and challenge the way it has been used both by religious Jewish Zionists and by Christian Zionists. When Zionism was established by secular Jews, it was considered by many religious Jews to be an aberration.¹ Likewise, from the perspective of many Christians, the use of the Bible by Christian Zionists to support the oppression of the Palestinians by the government of Israel is a Christian and biblical aberration. I believe that behind both of these aberrations is a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the Bible that is contrary to the authentic and deeper message of the Bible—the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, as well as the New Testament. What I intend to do is to consider some of the factors that have led to such an abuse as well as the connection and interplay between Zionism and the Bible and how the ramifications of this have negatively affected and continue to affect the pursuit of a just peace in Israel-Palestine.

I want to make it clear from the start that I do not believe that the solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict should be based on the Bible, but instead on the demands of international law. At the same time, I believe that when the Bible is interpreted in the right spirit, it can inspire us to work for justice and peace for all the people of the land.

¹ See Yakov M. Rabkin, *A Threat From Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism*, trans. Fred A. Reed (London: Zed Books, 2006).

Christian Zionism

The story of Zionism is the story of two movements that emerged in the nineteenth century. The first movement, Christian Zionism, began to crystallize during the first part of the nineteenth century; the second, Jewish Zionism, towards the end of the same century. The Christians involved were called “Restorationists” because they believed that Jews needed to be restored to Palestine before the Second Coming of Christ could take place. We know them today as Christian Zionists. They were Bible-loving Christians studying the Scriptures and looking for the signs of the times. As many had done before them, they concluded that they were living close to the end of history and that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. Whilst the roots of this movement lay in previous centuries, it was in the nineteenth century, for a number of political and religious reasons, that the time became ripe for its religious and political renewal and empowerment.

It is important to remember that Europe was expanding via its colonial and imperial ventures, and with this expansion the spread of the Gospel through Christian missions was taking place in Asia and Africa and in many countries across the world. For many Christians, this wide dissemination of the Gospel was an indication that the Great Commission of Christ to go and preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth was finally being achieved, and that this was a sign of the end times. These Christians, therefore, deduced from their study of the Bible that before Christ’s return, Jews must return to Palestine. The Jewish people were placed at the centre of God’s plan for history that would culminate in the Second Coming of Christ, the battle of Armageddon, the thousand years of the reign of Christ, and finally the end of the world with a new heaven and a new earth.

Christian Zionism was essentially a Protestant phenomenon. The first half of the nineteenth century was replete with the thinking, interpretation, writings, and teachings of European Christians on Zionism. Some of the prominent figures who played an important role in defining and promoting Christian Zionism warrant some discussion here.

John Nelson Darby (1800–82) was the father of dispensationalism. He charted the history of salvation from the time of the creation to the end of the world and went on eight trips to America promulgating his teachings which were well received by some Christian groups. Two prominent followers of Darby who proved very influential were Cyrus I. Scofield (1843–1921),² who authored the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909 with its dispensationalist footnotes and commentary that influenced millions of people, and William Blackstone (1841–1935), an evangelist from Chicago, who was the first to lobby President Benjamin Harrison (1889–93) to promote the immigration of Jews to Palestine.³

² See David Lutzweiler, *The Praise of Folly: The Enigmatic Life and Theology of C. I. Scofield* (Draper, VA: Apologetics Group Media, 2009).

³ Ibid., 1, 4–5, 32–33; Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll:

Lord Shaftesbury (1801–85) “was one of the first English politicians to translate religious or biblical convictions about the return of Jews to Palestine into political action.”⁴ He believed that the return of Jews to Palestine was important for the strategic interests of the British Empire. In the 1840s he lobbied Henry John Temple, Lord Palmerston (1784–1865), the British Foreign Secretary, to be God’s instrument in carrying out the return of Jews to Palestine. On November 4, 1840, he placed an advertisement in the *Times* of London in which he wrote, “A memorandum has been addressed to the Protestant monarchs of Europe on the subject of the restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Palestine... which secures that land to the descendants of Abraham.” It was Shaftesbury who was the first to coin the phrase “A country without a nation for a nation without a country,” which the Zionists later transposed into “A land of no people for a people with no land.”⁵

Shaftesbury was also instrumental in the establishment of the Anglican Bishopric in Jerusalem, which started as a partnership between the British and Prussian Crowns. The history and background of the Jerusalem Bishopric helps us to see how political and religious interests were intertwined. Lord Shaftesbury wrote that the purpose of the bishopric would be both political and religious: “a combination of Protestant thrones—England and Prussia—bound by temporal interests and eternal principles, to plant under the banner of the Cross, God’s people on the mountains of Jerusalem.”⁶ Shaftesbury was given the honor of choosing the first bishop and he chose Michael Solomon Alexander (1799–1845), an immigrant to England from Russian Poland. Alexander was a former Rabbi who had converted to Christianity in 1825. He became the first Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem.⁷

Pragmatically, the person who played one of the most essential roles in the emergence of the Zionist Movement was William Hechler (1845–1931), Anglican chaplain to the British Embassy in Vienna. Herzl called him “the First Christian Zionist.” He was the only non-Jew to attend the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland in 1897. He was a crusader against antisemitism and promoted and supported Zionism. According to Jerry Klinger, “Hechler was the man who made Herzl and Zionism legitimate in the eyes of the world and in the eyes of the Jewry. Were it not for Hechler, Herzl would have remained an eccentric, obscure Austrian writer, long forgotten.”⁸

Christian Zionist teachings and doctrines emerged from the Bible and preceded Jewish political Zionism. Christian Zionists were consumed and preoccupied by a particular reading of the Bible. This reading emphasized the Bible as the inerrant word

Orbis, 2008), 84.

⁴ Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 83.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Paul C. Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism: 1891–1948* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1998), 14.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jerry Klinger, “Reverend William H. Hechler—The Christian minister who legitimized Theodor Herzl,” *The Jewish Magazine* (July 2010), http://www.jewishmag.com/145mag/herzl_hechler/herzl_hechler.htm.

of God, that the return of Jews to Palestine and the building of their kingdom was an essential precursor to the end, that the Old Testament prophecies must be fulfilled, and that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent.

Jewish Zionism

Jewish Zionism, by contrast, emerged within the pragmatic secular outlook of Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) who was more concerned with the predicament of his fellow Jews in Europe than with biblical prophecy. He was aware of the malevolent nature of anti-semitism and was cognizant of the pogroms that were taking place in Eastern Europe. He was also convinced by the Dreyfus Affair that it was not easy to curb the evil of antisemitism. He surmised that if Alfred Dreyfus could be unjustly indicted in France, the most enlightened country in Europe at the time, where the cry for liberty, equality, and fraternity was first heard, then there was no hope for Jews in Europe. He could not imagine a democratic Europe where all people could live with equality under the rule of law. His solution was clear. Jews must have a place of their own like other nations. People without states are looked down upon and are not respected. He believed that Jews, though scattered, nonetheless constituted a nation and needed to live in a country away from antisemitic Christians. Such a project, given the colonial framework within which he was operating, seemed entirely feasible to Herzl. He wrote in his diary that once the Zionists had taken over Palestine, they would drive out its people across the border. He only needed a European sponsor to achieve his project.

The European origins of the Zionist Movement are well known. Herzl was a secular Jew, but from the start he was encouraged and supported by William Hechler and European Christians who believed that Jews must be restored to Palestine. Herzl was anxious to find people to help him, especially those who had political clout and could introduce him to people of power. Without their help, Herzl would be only a dreamer. Hence one of the first requests he made of Hechler was to introduce him to a minister of state or a prince so that he could share with them his vision. “Then the Jews will believe in me,” he told Hechler. In spite of his endeavours, Herzl failed to find a sponsor during his lifetime. (1860–1904) Thirteen years after the death of Herzl in 1904, the British Government committed itself to sponsor Zionism in the Balfour Declaration of 1917.⁹

The political tragedy of this Declaration was that although Britain did not own Palestine, it gave it away to somebody else. It fits, however, the spirit of the time—and the nature and arrogance of colonialism.

It is important to point out that one cannot understand the full force of Zionism by looking at it only from the point of view of its beginning and initial success in the establishment of the state of Israel, although that in itself was a huge feat. Nor was the ultimate potential of Zionism realized in the military victory of the 1967 war,

⁹ Ibid.

though, again, this was undoubtedly perceived by many to be miraculous. These military victories were undoubtedly impressive and made it possible for Israel to expand its territory tremendously. However, I believe that Zionism reached its full potential and force only when it managed to enlist the Bible as the primary source for justifying its injustice against the Palestinians. The Bible continues to be the core reference point for the legitimization of the occupation. One can even say that religious Zionists have hijacked Zionism from its secular origin and made it more potent. Indeed, as secular Zionism after the 1967 war started waning, religious Zionism waxed and expanded. The main rationale for the creation of the state of Israel was no longer predominantly antisemitism and the holocaust, but the Bible through the manipulation of certain texts. Moreover, for the religious Zionist settlers, their “Aliya” turned into a “right of return” to “Judea and Samaria” based on the Bible. When that happened, the Zionists guaranteed, directly and indirectly, the support of millions of conservative, evangelical, and non-denominational Christians across the globe, not only in the West but also in Africa and Asia. The mere reading of the Bible could potentially make readers naturally inclined to a pro-Israel position especially if such a choice was also between a pro-Jewish and a pro-Muslim stance.

In their own interpretation of the Bible, Christian and Jewish Zionists forced the Bible to legitimize their cause. This legitimization was a sin against the integrity of the Bible as the word of God and its central message about God’s love and care for all human beings. It was also a sin against the victims of Zionism and against international law.

As the Kairos Palestine document explains, the word of God in the Bible was turned into a word of death against the Palestinians.¹⁰ Such aberrations were not totally outlandish given the way the Bible has been abused during the last two thousand years by many Christians. The Bible has been used to justify war, colonialism, slavery, the silencing of women, and many other wrongs.

In order to support Israel’s claim to Palestine, some Christians and Jews have been using certain biblical texts to condone and justify the displacement and oppression of the Palestinians. Such abuse prompted many of us to ask a barrage of questions. Do such texts used constitute the heart of the biblical message? Do the biblical texts that promote ethnic cleansing and justify the expulsion of Palestinians reflect a message from the word of God for people today? Do these texts manifest the understanding of God that we have come to know in Jesus Christ? Do they reflect the theology of neighbour that Jesus gave us? Such questions and their answers are at the heart of Palestinian Liberation Theology.

These questions can be asked from other angles: Are these texts in line with international law today? Are they in line with the basic moral and ethical values that we cherish as humans? If what we call sacred texts do not rise to the level of the sacred and divine, do they retain their sanctity? Does the God we believe in have a lower standard

¹⁰ Kairos Palestine, “Kairos Document: A Moment of Truth,” *Kairos Palestine* (Dec 15, 2009), <http://www.kairopalestine.ps/content/kairos-document>.

of justice and morality than we humans? If we ordinary human beings have a higher morality and ethical standard than God, then can God be God?

Biblical Texts

It is crucial to recognize that within the Bible one hears different voices. Walter Brueggemann sees the Old Testament as polyphonic and open to various interpretations.¹¹ There are voices that reflect a tribal understanding of God. Sometimes, they are expressed in a narrow, nationalist language. At other times, they are expressed in a language that we consider today racist, chauvinist, and xenophobic. To describe these texts, I normally use the term “exclusivist.” They reflect an exclusivist picture of God and of our fellow human beings. I see them expressing a narrow theological perspective that has, I believe, been transcended not only within the New Testament, but in the Old Testament itself.

There are, however, other voices in the Old Testament. We see a development in theological thinking and understanding of God. God does not change, but human understanding of God changes. These voices reflect an understanding of God that is loving, caring, and merciful, a God of peace and justice, a God who is inclusive, a God who loves all. In the Bible one can discover a development in understanding of God. The movement is from exclusivity to inclusivity, from a narrow theological understanding of God to one that is more open and global, and from a chauvinist to an all-embracing, loving God. This theology is encapsulated in the story of Jonah in the book of Jonah, probably one of the latest books to be written in the Old Testament.¹²

Let me emphasize this point: I believe that in the Old Testament there is a development in theological thinking that moves from the tribal to the universal, from the exclusive to the inclusive, from the particular to the general. This is at the heart of Palestinian Liberation Theology, which entails a critique of narrow theologies of God, the people of God, and the theology of land that we find in those exclusive texts. Furthermore, in my own research and that of other scholars, this movement to inclusive theology is strengthened during and after the Exile, which I will now illustrate with two examples.

First, according to the Torah the solution to the problem of the indigenous people of the land of Canaan is to drive them out or exterminate them.

[God said to Moses,] “Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: ‘When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from *before you*, destroy all their figured stones, destroy all their cast images, and demolish all their high places. You shall

¹¹ See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

¹² Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 67–77.

take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess....” (Num 33.50–56)

[God said to Moses] “But as for the towns of these people that Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. *You shall annihilate them*—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as Yahweh your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods and you thus sin against Yahweh your God.” (Deut 20.16–18)

I believe that such an exclusive theology was critiqued by the prophet Ezekiel. Years later, after the Exile, Ezekiel claims the authority of Yahweh when, in the name of Yahweh, he commands that all the inhabitants of the land must share the land equally.

“So you shall divide the land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribes aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance,” says the Lord God. (Ezek 47.21–23)

This text goes beyond other texts in the Old Testament regarding the inheritance of the land. It is partly a reference to Lev 19.33–34, where we read, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Undoubtedly, in its historical context, this text reflects inclusive ideas about “human rights.” It certainly speaks about giving foreigners and aliens what in today’s language we would call their “human rights.” Nevertheless, it stops short of giving the people of the land their political rights. In other words, it does not mention that the alien has the right to inherit the land. The Ezekiel text, however, goes beyond Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy by insisting that the people of the land he calls “alien” have the right to full inheritance including their share of the land.

Here I would argue that the prophet has gone beyond “human rights” to political rights. The experience of the Exile has stretched his tribal theology of god and land. He now sees God not as exclusive or biased but as demanding the division and allotment of the land equally among all the people of the land. Ezekiel’s language was still racist by using the word alien but his theology of land was correct. This is an inclusive theology that can inspire us to work for one democratic state for all the people of the land, a proposal the government of Israel rejects.

The Ezekiel text is an important step in the right direction. It should silence those who use texts of ethnic cleansing and extermination as a solution to the Palestinian

problem. That kind of a theology has been transcended within the Old Testament itself and must be rejected. It is not characteristic of the creator and loving God.

Furthermore, from our Palestinian perspective, it is important to note that we Palestinians are not alien to the land; we are indigenous to the land. We belong to the land.

The second example to look at concerns Jerusalem. Nehemiah 2.19–20 states:

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem [Jasem] the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, “What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” Then I replied to them, “The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.”

This text comes from the end of Exile. The Persian Empire was in control and Nehemiah was the appointed governor of Judea. Nehemiah was intending to build the destroyed walls of Jerusalem but he encountered some resistance from other local officials. The text is part of Nehemiah’s response and reflects a very exclusive attitude towards Jerusalem: “You have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.”

Nehemiah’s words reflect the attitude of the present government of Israel that considers the city of Jerusalem as the exclusive possession of Jews. Such an exclusive claim, in our contemporary context, where Christians and Muslims possess equally valid and historic rights in the city, is absurd. Psalm 87.1–7 states:

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob.
Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.
Among those who know me I mention Rahab [Egypt] and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia—“This one was born there,” they say.
And of Zion it shall be said “This one and that one were born in it”; for the Most High himself will establish it. The Lord records, as he registers the peoples, “This one was born here.”
Singers and dancers alike say “All my springs are in you.”

Biblical scholars identify this psalm as post-exilic and its interpretation is much debated. Some scholars believe that it must refer to Jews living outside Palestine or converts to Judaism but I believe that it is one of those rare texts that comes from the pen of a poet that envisaged God as an inclusive God who embraces all people equally. From this inclusive perspective, Psalm 87 critiques the narrow theology of Ezra-Nehemiah. It sees the city of Jerusalem as an inclusive holy place belonging to all people, even the enemies of ancient Israel and Judah—Egyptians, Babylonians, and the Philistines. Such a psalm inspires our work for a shared Jerusalem, equally holy and equally significant to the three monotheistic faiths, and an open city for all people.

The above two examples are only samples of the growing development of the inclusive understanding of God and God's people that slowly became prevalent after the Exile. Although some people continued in their narrow and exclusive theologies, it is clear that the movement towards inclusive, open and all-embracing understanding was gaining momentum. Palestinian Liberation Theology highlights and emphasizes this inclusive theology and finds it very relevant in addressing the contemporary conflict over Palestine.

Conclusion

What are the political and theological implications and challenges today? I would like to suggest the following points:

1. Palestinian Liberation Theology points us to an inclusive theology of God, an inclusive theology of the people of God, and an inclusive theology of land. It encourages every person to take a stand for truth, to work for justice, and to pursue peace in Israel-Palestine.
2. Even before the New Testament was written, the exclusive tribal theology of God had already been challenged, confronted, critiqued, rejected, and transformed into an inclusive theology by the great Hebrew prophets.
3. We must reject and resist the use of the Bible to justify injustice and oppression against Palestinians.
4. We in the Middle East live in the midst of the Muslim world. They have their own faith and their own holy book. Islam cannot be taken lightly. It is a force to be reckoned with. Political Judaism (Jewish Zionism) and political Christianity (Christian Zionism), due to their misuse of the Bible, are driving moderate Muslims and political Islam towards extremism and further politicization. This is making the conflict a religious one that could drive us backward hundreds of years. The whole region could be enveloped in new wars of religion which we so desperately need to reject and avoid.
5. We continue to work with all people of faith including Christians, Jews, and Muslims and also people of no faith to use all nonviolent means to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. In a special way, I thank God for Jews of conscience who are active in the struggle against the Israeli injustice.
6. In the absence of a strong will by the international community to enforce international law and to stop the injustice which the government of Israel is committing against the Palestinians, we need to keep insisting that justice must be done in accordance with the demands of international law. We continue to work and wait for the time when world public opinion will become strong enough to persuade

Israel to change. I believe that the state of Israel can enjoy peace and security only when it does justice to the Palestinians and when the Palestinians also are allowed to live in peace and security.

7. The justice that the Palestinian people are seeking will not be satisfied by guaranteeing and achieving their human rights alone. Palestinians have the right to self-determination, and we look forward to a time when there will be one state, or two democratic states in Israel-Palestine and a confederation or federation of states in our region.
8. One of the best expressions of the development of the inclusive theology that I am referring to, that looks at all humans as equal and special, entitled to a life of peace, security, and human dignity is found in international law. So far, the United States and its allies have used double standards in this regard, one for Israel and one for the rest of the world. They have protected Israel from accountability for its violations of international law.
9. The Bible, used and interpreted in the right spirit, should inspire us to work for justice and peace. The solution of the conflict, however, must be based on international law, so as to guarantee that there is no oppressor or oppressed and that all can enjoy the fruits of a life of freedom and liberation.