

*Response to Michael Sandford*  
*Palestinian Liberation Theology, Anti-Judaism, and*  
*Jewish-Christian Relations*

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IT IS, AS I TOLD MICHAEL SANDFORD when he sent the draft of his chapter to me, always salutary to hear how one sounds in the ears of another. I begin this short response with my thanks to him, my acceptance of culpability in some cases and gentle demurrals in others, and a few suggestions on where the conversation might go.

### Corrections

Regarding my use of the past tense in describing house demolitions, Sandford is correct: this practice continues. Similarly, on textbooks, I could have been more precise (although “reading” either Palestinian or Israeli literature will falter less because of political pressure than the lack of skills most English speakers have with either Hebrew or Arabic).<sup>1</sup>

Sandford also surmises that I could be “interpreted as saying that the association of Jesus and his first followers with ‘the Palestinian population’ is theologically abhorrent.” I thought I was clear in listing three claims that *together* create the problem: the other two factors are separating Jesus from his Jewish identity and restricting “Jews” to Christ-killers and Christian-persecutors. The association of Jesus with any group—Jesus the Mexican, Jesus the Aleut, Jesus the Palestinian—can be a theologically profound move. But to claim a multicultural reading while stripping Jesus of his own culture and then making his own culture into a negative foil can be theologically toxic.

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<sup>1</sup> See now Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, “‘Victims of Our Own Narratives?’ Portrayal of the ‘Other’ in Israeli and Palestinian School Books,” *Study Report* (Feb 4, 2013), [http://d7hj1xx5r7f3h.cloudfront.net/Israeli-Palestinian\\_School\\_Book\\_Study\\_Report-English.pdf](http://d7hj1xx5r7f3h.cloudfront.net/Israeli-Palestinian_School_Book_Study_Report-English.pdf).

Third, Sandford finds me dismissive of “Palestinian perspectives” and suggests that my critiques “might be fairer if Ateek were a North American or British New Testament scholar....” In the few pages in which I address Ateek’s statements, I also speak of Palestinian victimization, the legitimate concerns of the Palestinian people, and the “ugly rhetoric on the part of those who would oppose the Palestinian state.” I explicitly noted abuses Palestinians face because I have too often heard their concerns dismissed; it is from my interest in a lasting peace in the Middle East that I do consulting work for both Americans for Peace Now and Churches for Middle East Peace. It is humbling, and instructive, to find myself accused of exactly what I was seeking to correct.

Those abuses do not, however, excuse the anti-Jewish tropes deployed by Ateek. To grant “concessions” strikes me as a pernicious form of Western imperialism that sets up a “separate but equal” system: those speaking from a position of colonialism or occupation are judged either ignorant or traumatized (pathologizing is a frequent and nasty move) and therefore given a pass in the promotion of hateful speech. The theologians I cited publish in Western presses, have degrees from Western Universities, and receive speaking invitations from Western universities and churches. Those who choose to appear on the international stage should be open to the same critique as anyone else.

## Conversations

Sandford refers to “the social world of first-century Palestine”; more politically loaded is the claim that “notions of continuity between ‘ancient Israel’ and the contemporary state of Israel are fundamental to the Zionist narrative and to Jewish claims on the land of Palestine.”<sup>2</sup> The Bible does not call the land Palestine, and the term is rare in Josephus and Philo. Romans used the term to erase Jewish presence, and scholars, by using “Palestine” rather than “Israel,” or “Judea/Samaria/Galilee” do the same. Sandford could have used “Syro-Palestina,” but that name compromises the immediate association between Palestine then and Palestine now. From Sandford’s rhetoric, one could get the impression that ancient “Palestine” is the equivalent of modern “Palestine,” and that no such place as Israel—those quotation marks Sandford places around “ancient Israel” renders even that name suspect—ever existed. I’d call this language “rash,” but I do not want to be snarky.

Second, Sandford, following James Crossley, proposes that the Six-Day War and its attendant increase in American support of the state of Israel prompted interest in the Jewish Jesus. Temporal proximity is not the same thing as cause. More than the 1967 war, I think the Jewish interest in Jesus was sparked by *Nostra Aetate* (1965),<sup>3</sup> Hugh J.

<sup>2</sup> This statement was from an earlier version of the chapter. Sandford has now removed the reference to “the Zionist narrative,” simplifying the statement to: “Notions of continuity between ‘ancient Israel’ and the contemporary state of Israel are fundamental to Jewish claims on the land of Palestine.”

<sup>3</sup> Pope Paul VI [Giovanni Battista Montini], “Declaration on The Relation of The Church to Non-Christian Religions—*Nostra aetate*,” *Holy See*. Oct 28, 1965.

Schonfield's *The Passover Plot* (1965)<sup>4</sup> and Samuel Sandmel's *We Jews and Jesus* (1965).<sup>5</sup> It was also about this time that departments of Religion, detached from Theology, appeared in American universities, and only then could Jews study the New Testament without having to bracket their own Judaism.

Third, Sandford suggests that NT scholars concerned about the minimizing of Jesus's Jewishness have "a fear no doubt rooted in the efforts of certain Nazi theologians...." My concern is based in more optimistic settings. I would like more Jews to recognize Jesus as a Jew. As mentioned in *The Misunderstood Jew*, if we Jews can celebrate our connections to Freud, Einstein, and Marx (Karl and Groucho), surely we can do the same for Jesus. I would like more Christians to recognize Jesus's Judaism: its practices, theologies, ethics, scriptural interpretation, willingness to argue over the Law (and most everything else)—that recognition creates richer biblical appreciation, and it plants seeds for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Finally, Sandford asks, "is it not reasonable to allow some association between Jesus and Palestinians today because of their connection to the land, or their culture?" This reasonable association should, I think, require acknowledgment of the Jewish roots of Jesus and his earliest followers, and so a connection between today's Palestinian Christians (and Muslims) and today's Israeli Jews. I like the idea of Jesus serving as a bridge between Jews and Christians, Israelis and Palestinians.

This bridge-building comports with my major concern in documenting negative depictions of Jews in Christian teaching. These depictions prevent me from being able to work with Rev. Ateek or with the signers of the Presbyterian 2010 report,<sup>6</sup> the British Methodist 2010 report,<sup>7</sup> and so on. Worse, they make it more difficult for me to convince Jews and Christians to my political right that there are potential partners for peace.

Sandford does "not believe that the statements... which have proven offensive to Levine (and others) result from a wilful desire to offend, but, more likely than not, from a heritagist mode of reading." While the prompts are not mutually exclusive, I would like to think that he is correct. If we can learn to hear through each other's ears and acknowledge our trespasses, we have a better chance of working together for peace.

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<sup>4</sup> Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot: A New Interpretation of The Life and Death of Jesus* (London: Hutchinson, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> Ted A. Smith and Amy-Jill Levine, "Habits of Anti-Judaism: Critiquing a PCUSA report on Israel/Palestine," *Christian Century* 127, no. 13 (June 29, 2010): 26–29; Response to letters, *Christian Century* 127, no. 18 (Sept 7, 2010): 6.

<sup>7</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, "Old Habits Die Hard: A Critique of Recent Christian Statements on Israel," International Council of Christians and Jews, Scholarly Contributions 507 (Feb 5, 2012), [http://www.jcrelations.net/Old\\_Habits\\_Die\\_Hard\\_A\\_Critique\\_of\\_Recent\\_Christian\\_Statements\\_on\\_Israel.3797.o.html](http://www.jcrelations.net/Old_Habits_Die_Hard_A_Critique_of_Recent_Christian_Statements_on_Israel.3797.o.html).