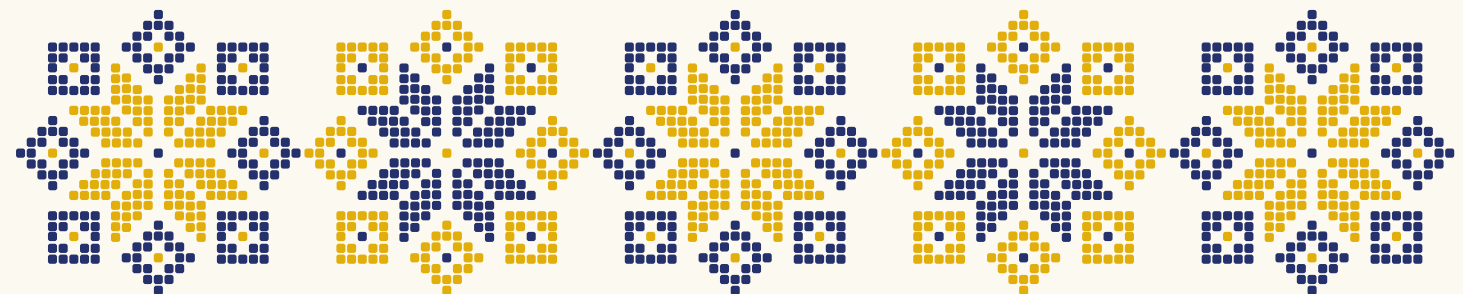




JOURNAL OF PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANITY

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Introduction of the Issue

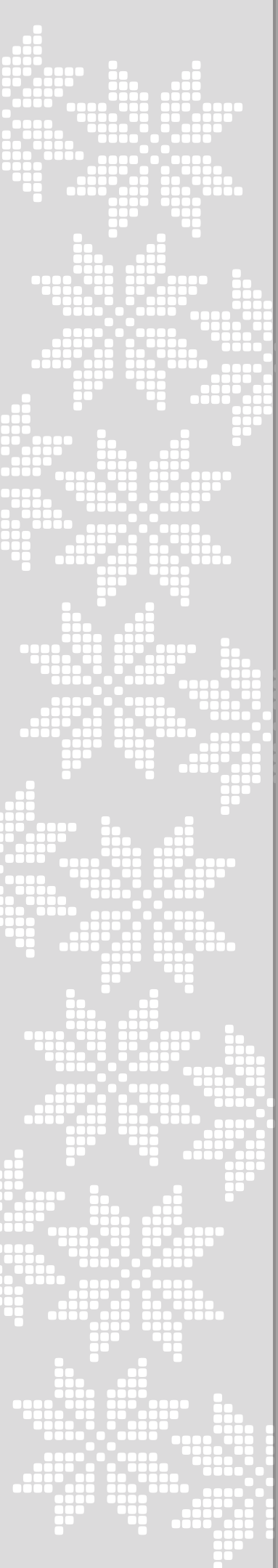
We are writing this introduction to the first issue of the Journal of Palestinian Christianity, hosted by the Bethlehem Bible College, at a very difficult time. We continue to see the genocide in Gaza unfold in front of our eyes. Right now, academia feels less important compared to the challenges we and our people are facing. At the same time, academia is a form of resistance. It is a place for us to challenge western colonial productions of knowledge and preserve Palestinian heritage, knowledge and thought.

Palestinian Christians have played an integral part in both Palestinian society and World Christianity. In some circles, Palestinian Christian thinkers have been extremely influential in their research, writing and activism. However, most academic publications by Palestinian Christians or on Palestinian Christians/Christianity have been in English and targeted Western readers. Until today, there is no peer-reviewed journal in the world which specialises in Palestinian Christianity and Christians in Arabic or English.

As a result, Palestinian scholars interested in academic research and writing concerning Palestinian Christianity have been forced to submit papers at Western academic journals and conferences. Due to their specific interests, the availability and space for such research has limited the number of writings. This of course has also limited the publications in Arabic for the local communities in Palestine and the Middle East at large. Likewise, the sensitivities concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, continued colonisation and the liberative nature of Palestinian writings have closed numerous academic opportunities for Palestinian academics, and indeed for non-Palestinians who write in a similar manner.

For this reason, the Journal of Palestinian Christianity aims to answer the needs listed above. Through the establishment of an academic and peer-reviewed journal, Palestinian, Arab and international scholars from all over the world will be able to research, write and engage with one another on issues relating to Palestinian Christianity. As such, the journal will host writings in both Arabic and English, and translate the articles from one language to the other, fostering a vibrant and diverse academic discussion between scholars in Palestine and abroad. Palestinians should be leading the work being done on Palestinian Christianity, and not have to wait on Western institutions for their initiatives or approval. Further, we expect this journal not only to advance discussions relating to Palestinian Christianity, but also contribute to global discussions in academia.

We are therefore honoured and pleased to introduce the first issue of the journal. This is a general issue and a collection of various articles. The first article by Yousef al-Kouri will be demonstrating a new perspective in Palestinian theology. He uses the olive tree as a metaphor to engage in contextual theology. The second article by Elizabeth Martijn provides an



overview of the development of Palestinian theology. It is a helpful overview and analyses of the social and political developments influencing the theological trajectories. The second

In the third article, Ulrich Duchrow's article will look at Bonhoeffer and Palestine. He examines the violent usage of scripture and its logic against Palestinians, and brings it into conversation with Bonhoeffer theology. The fourth article by Caterina Bandini, delves into the solidarity efforts of groups outside of Palestine. She examines the activism of French Catholics including their connections, activities and contexts. Michael McDougale's article brings Palestinian theology into dialogue with Black theology. More specifically, he looks at the liberative hermeneutics of both traditions, similarities and differences. Finally, Ty Melgren looks at identity formation in Palestine among Palestinian Christians. This article examines the role of crafting beer and its influence on identity.

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The Tree of Life and an Olive Tree: A Contextual Theological Reading in the Palestinian Context

Yousef Kamal AlKhouri, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College

Abstract: This paper argues that olive trees in Palestine are the Tree of Life for the Palestinian people. By applying both biblical theology and liberation interpretation, I showcase the spiritual, liturgical, and socio-economic significance of olive trees, offering a biblical theology of the olive tree and the Tree of Life in the Bible. Furthermore, I propose that it is safe to assume and suggest, historically and theologically, that the Tree of Life is an olive tree. Regardless, Palestinians are connected to their olive trees and are rooted like them in their homeland. For decades, the Israeli colonial regime has targeted olive trees to crush the Palestinian socio-economy and annex olive groves. By examining both the olive trees and the Tree of Life, I conclude that both trees symbolize and inspire nonviolent resistance, resilience, healing, and hope.

Keywords: Theology, Tree of Life, Olive, Palestine, Liberation, Contextual, Oil, Land, Kingdom of God, *Sumud*, Resistance, Biblical Theology, Anointing Oil, Colonialism




We live in the quest to return to the Tree of Life, to the garden of Eden, and the divine presence. It is this tree that we read about in the first chapters of the Bible and the book of Genesis, a tree planted in Eden, and through it and in it, life is given (Gen 2). God planted it so that humans could live, and that through it God may heal all nations in the new creation (Rev 22:2). In the present, we live in the in-between time: between the old creation and the coming creation. With the old creation, we still struggle with and against the evil of humans against God, and against their siblings in humanity, and against the environment. However, the new creation began with Jesus Christ's proclamation that the divine kingdom has arrived, yet we await its completion.¹ In between these two time periods, Christ gave his followers the mission of the Kingdom to steward, to be messengers of peace and reconciliation, and to be witnesses for the good news (Mat 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Acts 1:8). The body of Christ in Palestine carries a special mission in a painful context – a context where the sanctity of the land is emphasized, and the human being, who was made from its soil, is demonized; a context where divine truth is manipulated to violate God's commandments. While pilgrims search through the valleys of Jerusalem for a shortcut to the Tree of Life, the residents' trees of livelihood are uprooted daily. The Palestinian context requires bravery to read the Word of God as the Word of Life – and it truly is so – not a word of death, as the Kairos document affirms.² The Palestinian context also requires creativity in interpreting the Bible's message and its symbols in an existential, contextual manner that addresses reality, and to outline the features of a theology that embraces the trilogy of history, civilization, and faith. My visit to the oldest olive tree in the world in Walajeh – a Palestinian village threatened with annexation by the Israeli colonial regime – inspired me to write this research paper.

This paper offers a contextual Palestinian reading and argues that the Tree of Life in the Bible could be viewed as a representation of the olive tree which is the lifeblood of the Palestinian people. This research paper utilises a methodology that combines liberation contextual interpretation and Biblical theology. The paper presents the significance of the olive tree in the Bible – in both the Old and the New Testaments – its meanings, and

¹ There are various perspectives regarding the Kingdom of God. Some see it as an event in the future, such as Albert Schweitzer and Johanna Weiss; others view it as a past event, such as C.H. Dodd; and a third perspective, which is adopted here, is that the kingdom of God is both present and future, supported by George Eldon Ladd and N.T. Wright. Proponents of the latter perspective believe that the Kingdom was fulfilled in Christ, is still present in the world, and will be completed in the future.

² See Sections 2-4 in Patriarchs and Heads of Churches Jerusalem, 'A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering,' *Kairos Palestine*, 15 December 2009, <https://kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/English.pdf>, accessed 31 July 2024.



its historical, cultural, and spiritual symbols. The paper presents the historical, economic, and existential status of the olive tree in the eyes of the Palestinian people. The paper concludes by offering a theology of the Tree of Life inspired by the olive tree based on five pillars: (a) shared life, (b) peace and peaceful/nonviolent resistance, (c) healing, (d) *Sumud* (steadfastness), and (e) hope.

A Biblical, Theological, Contextual, Liberative Methodology

The topic of this research paper necessitates a dual methodology. This methodology argues that the Palestinian olive tree carries, amidst its roots and on its branches, and in its existential meaning, an image of the Biblical Tree of Life. The first approach in this methodology is biblical theology, through which we study the Bible, with its two testaments, as one whole indivisible unit. This approach is used to explore the olive branches that extend throughout the pages of the Bible. The second approach is based on Liberation Theology and the contextual interpretation of the Tree of Life as the olive tree in the Palestinian reality.


First, a biblical theology regarding the olive tree: the methodology adopts the foundations of Biblical theology. Biblical theology rests upon two main concepts: (a) the unity of the Bible, and (b) a broad vision of the history of salvation.³ Basing this paper on biblical theology stems from the conviction that the Bible is one unit in all its books, seeing a theological thread connecting all the books of the Bible, in a broad vision of God's dealings with humans. Biblical theology also specializes in describing a specific image and exploring its extension in the Bible, as well-known theologian Christopher Wright confirms.⁴ Biblical theology uses symbolic images to present God's work of salvation, and in doing so, helps us to discover the big picture.⁵ Accordingly, this paper explores the olive tree in the Bible, taking into consideration its linguistic, historical, and theological depth as a symbol of the Tree of Life.

Second, a contextual liberative reading: the second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of contextual liberative readings of the Bible. The most influential of these were by the Latin American priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez realised that church sermons were not addressing the concerns of the poor and the marginalised. Thus, the reality of the Latin American Church and Latin American people

³ Munther Isaac, *The Promised Land: A Theological Reading in the Palestinian Context* (Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2021). In Arabic.

⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*, trans. Hoda Bahji Youssef (Cairo: Dar Al-Thaqafa, 2014), 15.

⁵ T. D. Alexander, 'Biblical Theology,' The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/biblical-theology/> (accessed 20 August 2023).



became a driving force for a reading and an interpretation of Scripture that is faithful to the Word of God and speaks into people's realities.⁶ Liberation theologians stress how necessary it is for the Christian faith to be practical, and not confined to philosophical theological circles and individual salvation, and thus they call out societal and structural sin that causes injustice and poverty. Contextual liberation theologies emphasise orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy.⁷ In other words, liberation theologians derive their interpretation of the Bible from reality, in order to liberate humans from injustice and lead society to change in accordance with the Kingdom of God. Based on these foundations, and with careful consideration of the Palestinian context, this research paper adopts a contextual liberative approach which connects the Bible and Palestinian reality in order to liberate the people and the land from injustice through the Word of God. Palestinian theologian and founder of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, Naim Ateek, writes that theology is the only bridge able to convey the message of the Bible to people. Therefore, theology must be 'Biblically sound, liberative, adaptive and interpretive, while remaining true to the heart of the Biblical message.'⁸ The motive of Liberation Theology is faithfulness to the Word of God that seeks to liberate humans from their own evil and the evil of others towards them.

Without this, both the Tree of Life and the olive tree are doomed to extinction if they are confined to past and future imaginations which do not address the context of the reader here and now. Rev Dr Rafiq Khoury expresses the vitality of theological thought and the contextual reading of the Bible in these profound words:


Amidst historical experience, present challenges, and future aspirations, theological thought is situated and practiced, in service to the community of believers, helping to connect the three dimensions, breaking forth as a thought that keeps pace with life and creates life. If any Christian community lacks this theological thought, they are bound to fail.⁹

⁶ See William Sedhom, *Liberation Theology in Latin America: Its Beginning, Development, and Content* (Beirut: Dar Al-Mashriq, 1993). In Arabic.

⁷ Stephen Bevans, 'Models of Contextual Theology,' *Missiology* 13, no. 2 (1985): 185-202; and Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 70-87.

⁸ Naim Ateek, 'The Bible: A Problem or a Solution?' in *An Introduction to Palestinian Theology*, ed. Munther Isaac (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2017), 105. In Arabic.

⁹ Rafiq Khoury, *Local Palestinian Theology (1967-2019): A Comprehensive Vision* (Jerusalem: Al-Liqa' Centre, 2019), 33-34. In Arabic.



It should be noted that the late Palestinian theologian Dr Geris Khoury wrote a rich contextual theology based on the olive tree in the face of Israeli colonisation. Khoury explores this using eleven branches, combining contextualism, ecumenicism, and inter-religious dialogue.¹⁰ While Khoury emphasises theological and philosophical dimensions, this research paper adopts a different methodology and builds upon what Khoury and others have offered in the Palestinian context.

The Tree of Life and the Olive Tree in the Bible

The Tree of Life and the olive tree has stirred the imaginations of ancient peoples, including the ancient Hebrews. The roots and branches of the olive tree extend across the pages of the Bible, from the book of Genesis and through to the Book of Revelation. Moreover, its produce, leaves, and oil carry significant historical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions in the history of the people who lived in the land of Palestine across thousands of years, and for the Arab Palestinian people.¹¹ The Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, is a product of the experience of those who lived in Palestine of God's salvation. The land is the fifth gospel and the olive tree infuses its oil into this gospel.¹² A careful reader who searches for the presence of the olive tree in Scripture will notice that it is an integral part of the civilisation, heritage, and spirituality of the people who lived in Palestine. It is a symbol of life.


The Tree of Life and the Olive Tree

It is difficult to offer a definitive historical exploration regarding the quality of or a physical/material description of the Tree of Life mentioned in the Bible. Therefore, it is necessary to utilise its religious and theological symbols. This utilisation will confirm that the Tree of Life *is* the olive tree. The phrase 'Tree of Life' is mentioned six times in the Old Testament (Gen 2:9, 3:22–44, Prov 3:17–18) and in the Septuagint

¹⁰ Geris Khoury, *Arab Christians: Indigeneity... Presence... Openness* (Jerusalem: Al-Liqa' Centre, 2006). 246-254. In Arabic. See also, Geris Khoury, "Theology of the Olive Tree Rooted in the Land of Palestine" in *An Introduction to Palestinian Theology*, introduced and edited by Munther Isaac (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2017), 69-81. In Arabic.

The modern Arab Palestinian people are a historical extension of the many nations that lived and moved through Palestine, therefore historical readings need to be comprehensive. The history of the Bible is an integral component of the heritage of the Palestinian people. Palestinian historian and theologian Rev Dr Mitri Raheb succeeded in correcting historical approaches to the Palestinian narrative by emphasising this. See *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014).

The saying that the land is the 'fifth gospel' dates back to the fourth century AD and to Saints Jerome and Cyril of Jerusalem. See B&H Editorial Staff, *The Holman Illustrated Bible Study* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publisher, 2006), v.



translation of Isaiah 65:22.¹³ In the New Testament, it is mentioned three times in one book (Rev 2:7; 22:1–2, 14–15). According to Hebrew tradition, the *menorah* lighted in the temple was – and still is – a symbol of the Tree of Life in Eden.¹⁴ Wolf Wirgin says that the Tree of Life, which was expressed in Hebrew tradition through the *menorah* in the temple, is a representation of the olive tree, asserting that the *menorah* in the temple was

In compliance with divine law, lighted exclusively with olive oil, the source of which is the olive tree. The olive tree is in wide popular belief the tree that never dies... An olive leaf was the first thing mentioned in the Bible as having survived the flood outside Noah's ark. We should not doubt that for the ancients the olive tree was the symbol of enduring life, and thus it was befitting to blend it with the *menorah* into a Jewish symbol of eternal life after death.¹⁵

Ancient drawings adorning texts close to the Masoretic character, which may date back to the end of the thirteenth century, show an olive tree with seven branches, similar to the temple *menorah*, and three oil springs emerging from its roots. This image supports the apocalyptic and Talmudic understanding that the Tree of Life produces oil that gives eternal life.¹⁶ Researcher Zofja Ameisenowa explains that the writers of the sixth chapter in the apocalyptic book Second Enoch believe that the Tree of Life is an olive tree, and through this tree, oil is continuously produced to adorn a blessed eternal life.¹⁷ Together, these elements increase the historical credibility of the assertion that the Tree of Life is the same as the olive tree. It is interesting that the symbolism of the Tree of Life as an olive tree and its centrality in the worship of ancient peoples is not limited to the Hebrew people and the Temple of Jerusalem. There are many historical examples from the ancient Egyptian civilization and the Canaanite, Hittite and Akkadian peoples, where they used the olive tree and its oil in their worship and rituals.¹⁸ The presence of this evidence from other civilizations supports the credibility of the Biblical text, which

William R. Osborne, 'The Tree of Life in Ancient Egypt and the Book of Proverbs,' *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 14, no. 1 (2014): 114–36.

¹⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Rethinking Genesis 1-11* (Eugene: Cascade books, 2015), 28.

¹⁵ Wolf Wirgin, 'The Menorah as Symbol of Judaism,' *Israel Exploration Journal* 12, no. 2 (1962): 141–142.

¹⁶ Zofja Ameisenowa, 'The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography,' *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, no. 4 (1938): 339.

¹⁷ Smridnows, 'The Tree of Life,' 331.

¹⁸ Bryan R. Moselle, 'The Symbolic and Theological Significance of the Olive Tree in the Ancient Near East and the Hebrew Scripture,' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Pretoria, 2015), 68–88.

has always expressed the human journey to return to the divine presence, to the Tree of Life and to eternal life.

The Olive Tree and Oil in the Bible: The Linguistic Dimension

There are many biblical references to the olive tree in the Old Testament, as well as variations of Hebrew words that refer to the olive tree, its oil, and its grease. The name *zayt*, זַיִת appears 38 times and is used to refer to the olive tree. The other noun, *shemen*, שֶׁמֶן appears 210 times, 193 of them referring to the oil or grease extracted from olives.¹⁹ In the New Testament, the olive tree does not appear frequently, but the most important events in the Gospels took place on and near the Mount of Olives. In Paul's letter to the Romans, the olive tree is mentioned twice (11:17, 24), and Paul uses the name *agriaios* ἀγριέλαιος, which refers to the wild olive tree. It also appears in Revelation, where two olive trees stand in the divine throne (Rev 11:4). As for the biblical references to olive oil: in Greek ἐλαίω elaiō, Jesus uses it a few times in his parables, such as the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt 25), the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:34), and the writings of the epistles (Heb 1:9; Jas 5:14), and in Revelation 18:13.

The Tree of Life, the Olive Tree, and Oil: Biblical Theology

The principle of biblical theology lies in its exploration of a specific image in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Biblical theology emphasises the unity of Scripture. The first direct reference to the olive tree in the Bible indicates that it is a symbol of life (Gen 8:11). Using the assumption previously established – that the Tree of Life mentioned in Genesis 2 and 3 is the olive tree – it is possible to move towards building a biblical theology based on it.

Biblical theology affirms, from Genesis to Revelation, God's comprehensive mission of restoring humans to the original image in which they were created. That is, the return to the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life, the centre of divine presence. Human rebellion against God's commandments made them unfit to enter into a true and holy relationship with God. Humans were expelled from God's temple, Eden, and from enjoying the Tree of Life. With the fall, God prepared for a new phase: the journey of redemption and the establishment of peace with humans. God gave humanity and creation a new opportunity through Noah and his descendants. After the flood, Noah sent a dove to determine the retreat of the water, and it returned to him with an olive branch as a symbol of the

¹⁹ William Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 1030-1031.

beginning of the return of life to the land. The flood story represents re-creation. God does not want the world to be ruined or humans to perish. The book of Genesis depicts Noah as the new Adam, with whom new creation begins.²⁰ Earth is like a new Eden, and the first sign of this life and this new creation is the olive branch.


Old Testament writers saw Palestine as an image of the Garden of Eden.²¹ One of the features of Eden was that it was planted by God and was not the product of human labour. In Genesis 2:9, God made every tree that is pleasing to the sight grow, including the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thus, God asserted to the ancient Hebrews that the land planted with vineyards and olive groves is the work of His hand (Deut 6:11, Josh 24:13, Neh 9:25) so that humans may enjoy its plentifulness. If Earth is an example of Eden, then the Temple of Jerusalem, the centre of divine worship, constitutes a miniature image of the Garden of Eden in the theological imagination of the ancient Hebrew people²². In the Tabernacle and then in the Temple, where the divine presence was, the sanctuary and the pillars of the Temple were made of olive wood (1 Kings 6:23, 31-33), and olive oil was used for lighting the Tabernacle lamp (Exod 27:20, 35:8, 14, 28). Furthermore, the *menorah*, placed in the middle of the temple and in front of the Holy of Holies, symbolises the Tree of Life and the olive tree. Moreover, olive oil is considered an important part of the ordination/anointing ritual of priests, kings, and servants of God (Exod 28:41, 29:21, 30:31; Lev 7:35, 8:12; 1 Sam 10:1, 16:12-13; 2 Sam 5:3, etc.). Olive oil is also a key part of the ritual worship in the Tabernacle and the Temple, during animal sacrifices and offerings (Lev 2, 11:5, 6:15, 7, 14; Deut 18:4, etc.). Additionally, oil was considered part of the process of being cleansed from sin (Lev 14:29). Perhaps one of the most beautiful and striking Biblical references that emphasise the connection between the olive tree and the Temple, and an example of the Tree of Life, are the words of the prophet David: “But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God” (Ps 52:8).

Olives continued to be used in the Second Temple period in Jerusalem. Theologian Boulos Feghali writes that olives were ground in a special place during the Roman era and that there was an interest in preparing oil

²⁰ Ashraf Azmi, *In the Beginning: A Linguistic, Theological, and Historical Interpretation of Genesis 1-11* (Cairo: Ro'ya Printing, 2017), 6–335. In Arabic.

²¹ See Munther Isaac, *The Promised Land: A Theological Reading in the Palestinian Context* (Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2021), 42–68. In Arabic.

²² See Yousef Kamal Al-Khoury, ‘The Environment and End-Times Theology: Towards an Enlightened Christian Thought in Palestine’ in *Towards a Renewed Mind*, edited by Munther Isaac and Botrus Mansour (Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2021), 287–305. In Arabic.



to be used exclusively for worship in the Temple²³. Jesus, in his teachings, also spoke about olives, albeit implicitly by referencing their oil. In the New Testament, Jesus is the king, priest, and anointed prophet of God (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18). Jesus teaches about the wise virgins who saved their oil and the foolish virgins who did not save their oil to light their lamps to receive the bridegroom.²⁴ Jesus spends a long time on the Mount of Olives, and from there He goes to the Father's arms in the hope of returning to the same mountain to rule eternally and announce the completion of the new creation. Between the two creations, old and new, the olive tree remains a symbol of the work of reconciliation and the establishment of peace between God and humans. The Apostle Paul writes about the wild olive tree, which represents the reconciliation that brings together Gentiles and Jews (Rom 11:17).²⁵ Olive oil is also an anointing of healing for the sick (Mark 6:13; Luke 10:34; Jas 5:14). As the oil drips from the sick person's cheek, it reminds them of the complete healing that is to come. Moreover, the anointing of oil is an expression of the Holy Spirit's presence in believers' lives (2 Cor 1:21; 1 John 2:20, 27). The Bible concludes the written divine declaration with a heavenly image of divine presence, with two lampstands and two olive trees on either side (Rev 11:4). This proclamation of the two lampstands and the two olive trees contains a proclamation of the peace that has been completed, the healing that has been accomplished, and the eternal life that will never end.

The Olive Tree in the Palestinian Context

Its Historical, Economic, Social, and Spiritual Significance


Olive trees grow in the vicinity of the Mediterranean Sea, including in Palestine. The previous explanation about the centrality of the olive tree in the Old and New Testaments demonstrates the tree's historical, economic, and spiritual importance to the peoples who inhabited Palestine, both ancient and modern. Feghali explains that olive trees are thought to be one of the oldest trees planted in Palestine.²⁶ Olive trees have grown in coastal and mountainous regions since BC. For example, researchers found olive tree seeds in Megiddo and Beit-Shan dating back

²³ Boulos Feghali, *The Environment of the Bible and the Ancient East* (Beirut: Bible Society and the Pauline Library, 2003), 628-629. In Arabic.

²⁴ New Testament authors did not clarify that the oil referenced in this parable is olive oil. As the olive tree and oil were an integral part of their world and faith, this was to be understood implicitly in the minds of the original readers of the text. These references, despite being few in the New Testament, show the significance of the olive tree and oil for both the writers and readers of the text.

²⁵ See Isaac, *The Promised Land*, 94-95.

²⁶ Feghali, *The Environment of the Bible and the Ancient East*, 629.



4,000 years.²⁷ The tree's natural characteristics allow it to adapt to climate conditions and water scarcity. It needs minimal attention and is evergreen. Humans can benefit from its shade, its fruits, and oil for food and worship, its wood for heating in the harsh Palestinian winter, and in wooden handicrafts. Thus, the olive tree is considered a national and economic treasure for the inhabitants of Palestine from the dawn of history until the present day. According to the National Strategy for the Olive Sector in Palestine (2014-2019), olives constitute approximately half of the agricultural land area in Palestine and 85% of the area of horticultural trees. Around 100,000 Palestinian families depend directly or indirectly on growing olive trees and olive tree products.²⁸ All of this made the olive tree a pillar and lifeline of the Palestinian economy throughout history and became Palestine's green gold.

Olive trees' national, social, and spiritual impact on Palestinian identity cannot be overstated. These trees are considered a part of the heritage of Palestinian families, for it is inherited from one generation to the other, and it tells the stories of both grandparents and children. It is a symbol of the life of the Palestinian family whose members gather annually to harvest its fruits, to squeeze its oil, and to share it with others. Palestinian tradition speaks of many tales and practices related to olives and olive oil. Olive and its oil have a myriad of health benefits in food and for putting on the skin of babies and adults. The significance of the olive tree and its centrality in Palestinian history and heritage led some artists, at the beginning of the 20th century, to suggest that an olive branch be added to a future flag of the Palestinian state.²⁹

The olive tree and its oil constitute a crucial part of the spiritual heritage in both the Old and New Testaments, as previously explained, and of the church liturgy. Throughout history, Palestinian churches have relied on olive oil to light church lamps, for anointing at baptism (i.e., chrism), and for anointing the sick. Those who are familiar with the history of the liturgy realize the connection of the olive harvest season with the early rainy season in the Old Testament.³⁰ Those who are also familiar with church traditions and the ritual year, as well as the oral tradition passed down from generation to generation, will notice the connection of the

²⁷ Wafa, 'The Olive Tree Throughout History,' *Palestinian News and Info Agency*, 2024, https://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=8416, accessed 2 Aug 2024. In Arabic.

²⁸ The Ministry of Agriculture, 'National Strategy for the Olive Sector in Palestine (2014-2019),' *Wafa, Palestinian News and Info Agency*, 2024

https://info.wafa.ps/userfiles/server/pdf/olive_2014-2019.pdf, accessed 2 Aug 2024. In Arabic.

²⁹ During the British Mandate period, Palestinians planned to include an olive branch to the flag of the Palestinian state to be established, in addition to the colour orange which symbolises the famous Jaffa oranges.

³⁰ Issa Diab, *The Old Testament: Its World and Challenges* (Beirut: Dar Manhal Al-Haya, 2014), 90-91. In Arabic.

olive season with the Feast of the Cross. Based on all of the above, a Palestinian's connection to the olive tree has comprehensive, indivisible dimensions, as they embrace the olive and its oil spiritually, socially, economically, and ritually.

The Israeli Colonial War on the Olive Trees

Throughout history, time and time again, Palestinians have carried the olive branch as a symbol of peace. In the shadow of the colonial Israeli war on all that is Palestinian, olive trees have also not escaped killing and destruction. Israeli colonialists wanted to kill the tree of life and rob Palestinians of their lives. Despite this, Palestinians continue to carry what remains of the olive trees as an expression of their desire for just and true peace. In his speech in front of the general assembly of the United Nations, the late Palestinian president Yasser Arafat spoke to the nations of the world and called for peace using the olive branch as a symbol saying: 'do not let the olive branch fall from my hand,'³¹ expressing his dismay at the Israeli coloniser's disregard for the Palestinian calls for peace. Not a day passes by without the coloniser's military forces and the settlers setting fire and uprooting olive trees that Palestinian families care for and from which they make a living.

As reported by the Official Palestinian News Agency, in 1967, Israeli colonisers uprooted eight thousand olive trees, according to UN Development and Trade reports. Statistics from the Arij Institute report that 'the Occupation forces uprooted, between 1993-2020, 639,683 thousand trees, 80% of which are olive trees.'³² These reports present a humble picture of a systematic colonial war against Palestinian olive trees. Those who follow the news in the Palestinian territories will know that the attacks of the colonisers and the settlers are a daily occurrence.³³ These

³¹ Yasser Arafat's speech at the United Nations General Assembly on 13 November 1974. See English transcript at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Yasser_Arafat%27s_1974_UN_General_Assembly_speech, accessed 2 Aug 2024.

³² Zahran Ma'ali, 'The War on Trees: Numbers and Facts,' *Wafa, The Palestinian News and Info Agency*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/17272>, accessed 2 Aug 2024.

³³ See 'The Oppressed Tree ... The Occupation Intensifies Olive Uprooting Operations,' *Quds*, 10 January 2021. In Arabic. <https://qudsn.net/post/181570/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B8%D9%84%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%AB%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86>, accessed 2 August 2024. And see reports by B'Tselem, 'Damage to Property (Agricultural),' <https://www.btselem.org/taxonomy/term/160>, accessed 2 August 2024.

attacks become more severe during the harvest season in an attempt to rob Palestinians of the fruits of their trees. The Occupation forces also restrict the access of farmers to their lands during that season. These colonial policies and systematic intimidation against Palestinians and against olive trees aim to kill the Palestinian economy and life.

Theology of the Tree of Life and the Olive Tree

Olive trees are a symbol of the life that God has given and is giving to Palestinians and the inhabitants of historic Palestine. I previously explained Palestinians' attachment to the olive trees by exploring its historical, economic, and spiritual significance. In a sense, the olive tree has become the story of the Palestinians, their suffering, and their steadfastness in the face of colonialism. In the village of Al-Walaja, southwest of Jerusalem, the oldest olive tree in the world tells a story of




Figure 1: Woman embracing olive tree Photo Credit: Jaaafâr Ashtiyeh,

resilience and life.³⁴ During my visit to the tree site, Salah Abu Ali told me that this tree is like a member of his family, and that he names each one of its new branches a human name. The newest of these branches is 3 years old and its name is Ibrahim - named after Salah's last son. To Palestinians, the olive tree is a living, rational being, almost human. The colonizer does not understand this, while the Palestinian, the original owner of the land, who carries a legacy whose roots extend back to ancient times, believes in it with certainty. The Palestinian farmer addresses the

³⁴ 'It is Five Thousand Years Old ... Meet The Oldest Olive Tree in Palestine,' *AlJazeera*, 14 November 2019.

<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/miscellaneous/2019/11/14/%D8%B4%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%B1>, accessed 2 August 2024. In Arabic.



olive tree as he addresses his sons and daughters, realizing it can hear his words.

Looking at an occupier who uproots and kills, and a Palestinian who plants, holds on to, and speaks to the olive tree – we can see the difference between the aggressor and the landowner. The photograph of the woman (see Figure 1) embracing the olive tree immediately after its uprooting by the occupier is etched into Palestinian memory, and it tells the story of love and life that the Palestinian has with their olive tree. Based on this heritage carried by Palestinians, considering the olive tree as a tree of life, we can articulate a theology based on five pillars:

The Tree of Shared Life


The olive tree, out of its plentifulness, feeds whoever seeks its fruits. It does not discriminate, but rather expresses its ability to share its goodness with everyone. It gathers everyone under its shadow and around a table of its harvest – and in doing so it expresses the human capacity for dialogue and to seek shared living. Regarding this, Geris Khoury says that dialogue should not be about abstract ideas, but rather ‘the dialogue of daily life and shared living.’³⁵ Shared living includes everyone: the Palestinian Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Jews alike.

The Bible provides a unique image about shared living: the Apostle Paul writes about the wild olive tree and the branches grafted into it, all of whom share the same root and oil, as explained clearly in Romans 11. Despite exclusionary and supremacist interpretations of Paul’s words by some conservative theologians, the wild olive tree and the branches grafted into it provide a beautiful image of shared life between nations who share the same root and oil. The Bible continues the line of this vision for shared life in the new creation, where people of every tribe, nation, and tongue gather in harmony before the divine throne (Rev 5:9). If we are eagerly waiting for that moment, as children of God we are called to work in our world today and to enjoy shared living that glorifies God.

Tree of Peace and Peaceful/Nonviolent Resistance

The olive branch expressed peace between God and humans after the flood, and it continues to be used as a symbol of peace today: peace with the enemy and with the partner, both who are neighbours as Jesus Christ teaches. The olive branch must remain a motivation for pursuing peace based on justice. Any peace not rooted in justice is incomplete and does not lead to true reconciliation and eternal life. Jesus Christ calls us to be

³⁵ Khoury, “Theology of the Olive Tree”, 76. In Arabic.



peace-makers (Mat 5:9), not peace-keepers. Peacemaking is founded on justice, while peace-keeping accepts the state of non-war. Peacemaking requires courage and the responsibility of being God's children. Peacemakers are the children of God, 'praise Him, for He is peace.'³⁶ Peacemaking also requires a prophetic duty to confront injustice using peaceful and creative means, and not repaying evil with evil. The Kairos Palestine document asserts the legitimacy of nonviolent Palestinian resistance based on the 'logic of love' which is 'creative.'³⁷

Tree of Healing


As the olive branch expressed peace after the flood, it also expressed new creation and complete healing. The book of Revelation presents a beautiful picture of the Tree of Life through which healing is delivered to all nations (Rev 22:2). The olive tree and its oil have always been symbols of divine healing which God bestows upon humans and the earth. We should perceive healing not only as a physical matter, but also as it pertains to human and political relations. It heals nations bleeding from injustice, and oppressive nations from the consequences of their sin. Moreover, healing requires bravery to overcome the borders of race and religion to extend a helping hand to the other. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-36) is beautiful in its portrayal of pouring healing oil upon the wounded, abandoned man.

Tree of Sumud (Steadfastness)

Olive trees grow despite harsh natural conditions, and they can live for many centuries. They are an outstanding example of true *sumud*. In the autumn of hardship and injustice, the olive tree does not surrender, its flat, green leaves remain until the wind passes through and the winter rain washes them clean. In the context of the oppression of colonisation, this is a sign that the colonisers are only passersby, with no roots established in the land. They will leave and the olive trees will endure. Its roots in the land are deeper than those of the coloniser, and its experience over the decades confirms its faith that the coloniser will leave and it will stay. This is also true for the Tree of Life in the book of Revelation, for it also expresses *sumud* – all the empires of the oppressive world have passed, but it remains steadfast forever before the divine throne.

³⁶ Michael Sabbah, 'Nonviolent Resistance in Palestine: A Christian Palestinian View of Nonviolent Resistance,' in *Introduction to Palestinian Theology*, edited by Munther Isaac (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2017), 146. In Arabic.

³⁷ Patriarchs and Heads of Churches Jerusalem, 'A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering,' *Kairos Palestine*, 15 December 2009, <https://kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/English.pdf>, accessed 31 July 2024.



Tree of Hope

It is difficult to kill an olive tree, for it is able to be resurrected. Small buds grow from trees that are cut down, expressing the advent of life and hope out of the womb of pain and death. Thus, our need for the theology of the Tree of Life is driven by our firm hold on hope. Geris Khoury writes that local theology is ‘the only [theology] that gives life and hope and future for Palestinian Christians.’³⁸ This is given to all inhabitants of the land, of all ethnicities and religions. Palestinian land is full of trees of life which sustain hope for a just and peaceful future.

Final Remarks

The attachment of Palestinians to olive trees is not merely due to its economic significance, but to its historical and spiritual status. The olive tree has been an essential component of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the inhabitants of Palestine for thousands of years. Looking at the olive tree through a theological lens leads to the conclusion that it is the Tree of Life in the Bible, due to its ritual and liturgical uses. It constitutes a source of inspiration for the Christian Palestinian – to remain steadfast and to pursue peace and coexistence with the other. It carries a noble message based on the Biblical call for Palestinian Christians to be a healing presence for this land and its inhabitants. To remain steadfast (*samidun*) rooted in this land, a light burning with olive oil that does not cease.

³⁸ Khoury, ‘Theology of the Olive Tree,’ 80.



The Revival of Palestinian Christianity: Developments in Palestinian Theology

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Abstract: Palestinian Christians are a minority of approximately 1 or 2 % in a context marked by conflict, expulsions, and ongoing emigration. Despite all this, Palestinian Christians have made a significant contribution to society in the spheres of politics, the arts, science, and social welfare. Moreover, from the 1980s onwards, this Palestinian context of struggle has also been the source for the emergence of a socially and politically committed contextual theology. This article analyses the development of Palestinian contextual theology by examining theological publications by Palestinian theologians. It identifies liberation, reconciliation, witness, ecumenism, and interfaith-dialogue as some of the dominant theological themes. What unites these publications is a theological engagement with the Palestinian Christian identity in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Keywords: Contextual theology, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kairos theology, Palestinian Christianity, Palestinian theology, public theology.

An Arab Christian Awakening

Palestinian Christians feel deeply rooted in Palestinian society.³⁹ They understand themselves as part of the Palestinian community and actively contribute to its flourishing. This article aims to outline how Palestinian Christians have embraced their vocation, in the words of Emeritus Patriarch Michel Sabbah, to be “in the service of society.”⁴⁰ Michel Sabbah, born in Nazareth in 1933, was consecrated on 6th January, 1988, by Pope John Paul II as the first Palestinian-born Roman Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem. This was a significant event in the recent history of the Palestinian church, highlighting the indigenization of religious leadership in the 1970s and 1980s. These indigenous Palestinian (and other Arab) church leaders gradually made their voices heard on topics like injustice, peace, and occupation, encouraging their religious communities not to lose hope. This development of indigenization has paved the way for a specific Palestinian strand of theological thought, as well as a feeling of public responsibility visible among both the clergy and laypeople in Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant denominations.

Not long after Michel Sabbah assumed his post as Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, he published his first pastoral letter on 15th August, 1988, in which he encouraged the faithful to “proclaim the message of the faith according to God’s Will: to carry out our mission means to serve Him and our fellow-men.”⁴¹ With these words, Sabbah voiced a specific Palestinian theological theme that I call ‘the revival of Palestinian Christianity’: a spiritual, societal, and political awakening of the Palestinian church that started in the 1970s and which transformed the local churches into an important force for social and political change.

This revival is part of a longer, more gradual ‘Christian awakening’ in the Middle East, starting in the 19th century and continuing over the course of the 20th century, itself the result of the challenges of war,

³⁹ This article is an updated version of: Elizabeth S. Martejijn, “The Revival of Palestinian Christianity: Developments in Palestinian Theology,” *Exchange* 49/3-4 (2020): 257-77. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341569>. Permission to reuse and translate this article were granted by Brill.

⁴⁰ Michel Sabbah, *First Pastoral Letter “Our Faith in the Holy Land,”* Jerusalem 15th August 1988, § 45. <https://www.lpj.org/storage/2023/12/14/1st-pastoral-letter-of-michel-sabbah-1591181230-docx.pdf> (accessed May 2024). For a biographical documentary of Emeritus-Patriarch Michel Sabbah, see: *The People’s Patriarch: Reflections with the Patriarch*, produced and directed by Lily Habash and Mohammed Alatar, 2020. For a selection of his pastoral letters and sermons, see: Michel Sabbah, *Faithful Witness: On Reconciliation and Peace in the Holy Land*, edited by Drew Christiansen (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2009).

⁴¹ Sabbah, *First Pastoral Letter*, § 5.

displacement, migration, European intervention, and an overall religious radicalisation in the Middle East. In this context, Arab Christians have found opportunities to contribute to social and political change. Examples are the Christian pioneers in Arab nationalist thinking during the *Nahḍa* ('Arab Renaissance') in Ottoman Syria,⁴² such as Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1883), a Maronite convert to Protestantism, as well as the Melkite Greek Catholic father and son Nasif Al-Yaziji (1800-1871) and Ibrahim Al-Yaziji (1847-1906). The Coptic Orthodox politician and diplomat in Egypt, Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1922-2016), is a more recent example of an Arab Christian with social and political influence, having served as Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1992 to 1996.

In terms of public visibility and engagement, Arab Christians have also been influential in the arts and sciences. For example, the voice of Lebanese Greek Orthodox singer Fairuz (b. 1935) is regularly heard on radio broadcasts all over the Levant. Born in an Anglican Palestinian family, literary critic Edward Said (1935-2003) has been one of the most influential thinkers in recent scholarship, well-known for his theory of Orientalism.⁴³ Arab Christians have also been influential in social welfare, for instance in the flourishing of the press in 19th and 20th century Lebanon and Egypt, not to mention their influence in the areas of education and health care, mainly due to their contact with Western missionary work.⁴⁴

⁴² Throughout this article, the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) has been used. Diacritical marks for transliterated terms have been used and all Arabic terms are italicised in the text, except for names of persons, places and organisations. The English spelling of places that have a clearly established English name, like Jerusalem (instead of the Arabic name Al-Quds), has been used. For names of persons, their own preferred spelling has been honoured.

⁴³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1978]). Born to a Protestant family, Said identified as a secular humanist. However, Said was the keynote speaker during Sabeel's first international conference in Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem in 1990, a clearly Christian-oriented event (which will be referred to later in this article).

⁴⁴ See, for example: Deanna Ferree Womack, *Protestants, Gender and the Arab Renaissance in Late Ottoman Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); David D. Grafton, *The Contested Origins of the 1865 Arabic Bible: Contributions to the Nineteenth Century Nahḍa* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Heather J. Sharkey, "American Missionaries, the Arabic Bible, and Coptic Reform in Late Nineteenth-century Egypt," in *American Missionaries and the Middle East: Foundational Encounters*, (eds.). Mehmet Ali Doğan and Heather J. Sharkey (Salt Lake City, UT: The University of Utah Press, 2011), 237-59; Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Qustandi Shomali, "Palestinian Christians: Politics, Press and Religious Identity 1900-1948," in *The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land*, (eds.). Anthony O'Mahony, Göran Gunner & Kevork Hintlian (London: Scorpion Cavendish Ltd, 1995), 225-36.

This article contests the common and rather pessimist discourse on Christians in the Middle East. Themes of suffering and the impending disappearance of Middle Eastern Christianity seemed to dominate in the writings of historians such as Frenchman Jean-Pierre Valognes and American Philip Jenkins, but also appeared in the works of more popular writers such as Scottish William Dalrymple.⁴⁵ Christians in the Middle East, Palestinian Christians included, do indeed live in vulnerable circumstances with declining numbers. Statistics of the *World Christian Database* reveal that Christians make up 0.8% of the population in the Palestinian Territories and 2.1% of the population in Israel.⁴⁶ These Palestinian Christians live as a tiny minority in a context marked by armed and ideological conflict, expulsions, and ongoing emigration. Palestinian Christians are suffering from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and – as Middle Eastern Christians in general – from the rise of militant Islamic groups. On top of that, about half of the Palestinian population lives outside the borders of the historical Palestine of 1948,⁴⁷ with even higher percentages among Palestinian Christians, of whom between 70% till 90% live in diaspora.⁴⁸ Consequently, Palestinian Christians are often categorised as “a threatened form of Christianity”, “a Christian neighbour to the Muslims”, or “a minority in need of help (from the West)”.⁴⁹

While acknowledging the harsh situation in which Palestinian Christians are living, this study aims to demonstrate how Palestinian Christians have brought about a revival and played a significant role in


⁴⁵ Jean-Pierre Valognes, *Vie et mort des chrétiens d'Orient: Des origines à nos jours* (Life and Death of Middle Eastern Christians: From the Origins to the Present Day) (Paris: Fayard, 1994); Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (Oxford: Lion Hudson PLC, 2008); William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A journey in the shadow of Byzantium* (London: Harper Press, 1998).

⁴⁶ Todd M. Johnson & Gina A. Zurlo (eds.), *World Christian Database* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, accessed October 2023).

⁴⁷ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Palestine in Figures 2023* (Ramallah, 2024), 18. <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Downloads/book2693.pdf> (accessed May 2024).

⁴⁸ Palestinian sociologist Bernard Sabella estimated that 72% of Palestinian Christians live in diaspora, see: Bernard Sabella, “Palestinian and Arab Christian Migration: Church Initiatives, Positions of Europe and Reflection from the Palestinian Context,” in *Palestinian Christians: Emigration, Displacement and Diaspora*, (ed.) Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem: Diyar, 2017), 63. In my own research among Christians in the village of Taybeh in Central Weest Bank (2016-19), I have established that 90% of the village population lives in the diaspora. Elizabeth S. Martejn, *Between Ruins and Remnants: Religious Reinvention and Renewal among Christians in West Bank Palestine*, PhD thesis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

⁴⁹ See also: Amahl Bishara, “Covering the Christians of the Holy Land,” *Middle East Research and Information Project* 43/2 (2013), 7-14; Mitri Raheb, *The Politics of Persecution: Middle Eastern Christians in An Age of Empire* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2021).



creating a society based on the principles of justice, peace, and reconciliation. This study specifically focuses on the public role of Palestinian contextual theology as reflected in Palestinian theological works. Accordingly, the first part of the text presents the historical and theological developments since the 1980s, and the second part reviews the scope of Palestinian theology. This article therefore functions as an overview of Palestinian theology and distinguishes itself from earlier presentations by prioritising the contextual developments in various local churches that contributed to the revival mentioned above. In the author's opinion, it is more fruitful to study theological developments in their broader, holistic context instead of taking a more enumerative, systematic approach, which merely focuses on thematic perspectives such as liberation, the Bible, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or the influence of Protestant/Evangelical Palestinian theologians.⁵⁰ While the author has conducted interviews with all of the Palestinian theologians who are mentioned below, this article is a literature study and relies primarily on Palestinian theological publications, mainly, but not exclusively, those produced in English.

⁵⁰ For an overview with a more systematic approach, see for example: Rafiq Khoury, "Palestinian Contextual Theology: A general survey," in *Christian Theology in the Palestinian Context*, (eds.). Rafiq Khoury & Rainer Zimmer-Winkel (Berlin: Aphorisma Verlag, 2019), 9-46. Other scholars have emphasized only one aspect of Palestinian theology. On Palestinian liberation theology: Atalia Omer, "The Cry of the Forgotten Stones: The Promise and Limits of a Palestinian Liberation Theology as a Method for Peacebuilding," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 43:2 (2015): 369-407; Samuel J. Kuruvilla, *Radical Christianity in Palestine and Israel: Liberation and Theology in the Middle East* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013); Laura C. Robson, "Palestinian liberation theology, Muslim-Christian relations and the Arab-Israeli conflict," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 21/1 (2010), 39-50. On the Bible: Lance C. Laird, "Meeting Jesus Again in the First Place: Palestinian Christians and the Bible," *Interpretations* 55/4 (2001), 400-12; Janneke Stegeman, "Remembering the land: Jeremiah 32 and in Palestinian narrative and identity," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 26/1 (2013), 41-54. On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Alain Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land: Thinking Theologically about the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 46-68; On Protestant/Evangelical theologians: Yohanna Katanacho, "Palestinian Protestant theological responses to a world marked by violence," *Missiology: An International Review* 36/3 (2008), 289-305. Other studies on Palestinian theology come from German academia: Harald Suermann, *Zwischen Halbmond und Davidstern: Christliche Theologie in Palästina heute* (Between the Crescent and the Star of David: Christian Theology in Palestine today) (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2001); Uwe Gräbe, *Kontextuelle Palästinensische Theologie: Streitbare und Umstrittene Beiträge zum Ökumenischen und Interreligiösen Gespräch* (Contextual Palestinian Theology. Disputatious and controversial contribution to the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue) (Erlangen: Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene, 1998).

The Emergence of Palestinian Theology

Contextual theology can be defined as “the attempt to understand the Christian faith in terms of a particular context”.⁵¹ Roman Catholic authors such as Stephen Bevans and Robert Schreiter argue that context is at the very centre of theology. Beside the two classical *loci theologici* of Scripture and tradition, contextual theology adds a third theological source, namely the locus of the human experience or the context. In his reflection on the birth of Palestinian theology, Father Rafiq Khoury (b. 1943), Palestinian theologian and vicar of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, writes that Palestinian theology indeed developed from experience to reflection, and from general “Christian thought” to a well-formulated body of “contextual theology”.⁵² Recent events in the second part of the 20th century, such as war, displacement, and colonial intervention, made Palestinian Christians start asking questions about their identity. In the words of Khoury:

It started from the base, at the grassroots level, among those who were daily living through the tragedy. It started in the form of questions that these people began to ask themselves spontaneously: Who are we? What is the meaning of our presence in the Holy Land? What is our identity? What are our vocation, mission, and witness? What does it mean to be an Arab Palestinian Christian here and now? Where do we come from? What are our roots? Where are we going? What are the questions put before our Christian conscience by the tragedy of our Palestinian people? What is our position? Our attitude? What is the originality of our contribution to the struggle of the Palestinian people? ... and many other questions besides.⁵³

For some Palestinian theologians, the seed for theological reflection was sown during the *Nakba* (‘catastrophe’), referring to the war of 1948, when more than 700,000 Arab refugees fled or were expelled from their villages. This forced displacement had disruptive consequences on different levels of human existence, identity, and theology.⁵⁴ The Melkite Greek Catholic archbishop from Haifa, Joseph Raya (1916-2005), was the first church

⁵¹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*. Revised and Expanded Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002 [1992]), 3. Another seminal work in contextual theology: Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM Press, 1985).

⁵² Khoury, “Palestinian Contextual Theology,” 18.

⁵³ Rafiq Khoury, “Palestinian Contextual Theology,” 16f.

⁵⁴ E.g. Naim Ateek, interviewed by Elizabeth Martijn, Jerusalem, 22th February 2018; Elias Chacour, interviewed by Elizabeth Martijn, Ibilin, 19th July 2018. See also: Cedar Duaybis, “The Three-fold Nakba,” *Cornerstone* 66/summer (2013), 8f.

official who spoke out for the Christian victims of the *Nakba*.⁵⁵ He fought for the rights of the villagers of Iqrit and Kufr Baram, two Christian villages in Galilee in northern Israel, whose inhabitants were driven out in 1948, and which were finally bulldozed in 1951.

Other theologians point to the *Naksa* ('setback'), the Six-Day War of 1967, as the decisive event that shaped the emergence of Palestinian contextual theology.⁵⁶ Israel defeated a joint front of Arab nations and took over the Palestinian-populated West Bank (previously controlled by Jordan), the Golan Heights (previously controlled by Syria), and the Gaza-strip and Sinai Peninsula (previously controlled by Egypt). This defeat caused shock waves through the Arab world, but simultaneously gave rise to independent Palestinian thought, both politically and theologically. It also changed broader Arab patterns of thinking concerning religious concepts such as violence in the Old Testament, God's covenant with the Jewish people, and the identity of Jesus and his connection to Judaism. This was illustrated in the first major Arab theological document that dealt with the Arab-Israeli conflict after the Six-Day War: *A theological perspective on the Arab-Israeli conflict*, written by a group of Lebanese and Syrian theologians.⁵⁷ Another important step on the road to Palestinian contextual theology was taken on 20th April, 1971, with the creation of the *Justice and Peace Committee/Jerusalem* of the *Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land*, under the banner of the episcopate of the Catholic Church in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Cyprus.⁵⁸ This committee published its first document in 1980 on the political commitment of Palestinian Christians, and has continued to produce further publications concerning the Palestinian Christian community.

1 First phase (1984-2000): Giving a voice to Palestinian Christians

It was not until the 1980s that Palestinian contextual theology began to take its current shape. In 1984, Melkite Greek Catholic Emeritus Archbishop Elias Chacour (b. 1939) published *Blood Brothers: The Dramatic Story of a Palestinian Christian working for Peace in Israel*, a

⁵⁵ Cf. Naim S. Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 124f.

⁵⁶ E.g. Rafiq Khoury, interviewed by Elizabeth Marteiijn, Jerusalem, 28th December 2017; Michel Sabbah, interviewed by Elizabeth Marteiijn, Taybeh, 1st December 2017.

⁵⁷ Cf. George F. Sabra, "Theology," in *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity: Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, (eds.). Kenneth R. Ross, Mariz Tadros & Todd M. Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 325-34.

⁵⁸ For more information, see the website of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land: <https://aocts.org/> (accessed May 2024).

memoir that can be conceived as the first contextual theological book by a Palestinian theologian.⁵⁹ Chacour was a young priest in the time of Archbishop Raya and came from Kufr Baram, one of the Christian villages destroyed after the *Nakba*. Chacour produced a narrative theology; he wrote his own personal story of displacement and formulated a theology on the Palestinian connection to the land. Later, this genre was also used by other theologians like Naim Ateek, Alex Awad, Munther Isaac, and Mitri Raheb, whose works include anecdotes from their own lives.

A next milestone in the history of Palestinian contextual theology was the publication of *Theology and the Local Church in the Holy Land* in 1987, by the Al-Liqa' ('Encounter') Center in Bethlehem, which a Melkite Greek Catholic named Geries Khoury (1952-2016) founded in 1982 and presided over until 2016. Since then, a Roman Catholic named Yousef Zaknoun has directed the center.⁶⁰ The Al-Liqa' Center was established as a small initiative but quickly developed into one of the main institutes for local Palestinian theology. The foundational idea behind Al-Liqa' was that religion in the Middle East stands for more than just piety and needs to be seen as a force influencing social and political movements. In the opinion of the founders, the church needs to understand her own identity, using the hermeneutics of contextual theology and ecumenical cooperation to formulate an answer to the question of Palestinian Christian identity. The 1987 document was designed to serve as a starting point for a local theological movement and was used at one of the first conferences Al-Liqa' organised at Tantur, an international ecumenical institute in Jerusalem. The authors conclude: "...the task is to contribute, each within his specialization, to the building of the church and the serving of society."

⁶¹ Another publication, called *Al-Liqa' Journal* (in Arabic from 1985 onwards and in English since 1992), presents socially and politically

⁵⁹ Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers: The Dramatic Story of a Palestinian Christian working for Peace in Israel*. Updated Edition (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2003). His later books include: Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli who Lives for Peace and Reconciliation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001); Elias Chacour, *Faith beyond Despair: Building Hope in the Holy Land*. Trans. by A. Harvey (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008).

⁶⁰ Al-Liqa' Center, *Basis Document: Theology and the Local Church in the Holy Land*, 3rd ed. (Bethlehem: Al-Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land, 2015). Those involved in writing this basic document are: Father Rafiq Khoury, Joseph Zaknoun, Adnan Musallam, The Reverend Munib Younan, George Hantilian, Peter Qumri, Shukri Sambar and Geries Khoury. For an overview, see: Al-Liqa' Center, *Al-Liqa' Center, The Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land: 25 the Silver Jubilee, 1982-2007* (Al-Liqa' Center for Religious and Heritage Studies in the Holy Land, 2007).

⁶¹ Al-Liqa', *Basis Document*, 18.

motivated articles, written by Palestinian scholars from diverse backgrounds.

Hence, Palestinian contextual theology emerged in the 1980s as a politically and socially committed enterprise. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, this runs parallel with the outbreak of the First *Intifada* ('Uprising') on 8th December 1987. This was a time in which the Palestinians were feeling tired, frustrated, and helpless after twenty years of occupation and felt discouraged about the political climate within both the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership. This caused the Palestinian people to become more outspoken and seize the initiative by establishing new grassroots movements; the *Intifadas* can be understood as an answer of revolt, and Al-Liqa' as an answer from theology. This development of a Palestinian theology was advanced because of the indigenization of religious leadership in the Catholic and Protestant denominations in the 1970s and 1980s. And thus, with the eruption of the First *Intifada*, the indigenous Arab leaders made their voices heard. Less than two months after the First *Intifada*, on 22nd of January, 1988, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches of Jerusalem issued their first of many joint statements against the Israeli occupation. These statements continue to be issued right up to the present day.⁶²

A subsequent development in Palestinian contextual theology was the emergence of a Palestinian liberation theology. The Reverend Naim Ateek (b. 1937), an Anglican priest, has been seen as the father of Palestinian liberation theology. In 1989 he published his book *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, the first serious attempt of a Palestinian Christian to provide a counterargument to a (Christian) Zionist reading of the Bible.⁶³ After the publication of his book, Ateek founded *Sabeel* ('the Way') *Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center*, which is currently located in Shu'afat, a neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. Where Al-Liqa' was essentially an encounter between local Palestinians focussing on ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, *Sabeel* (although initially addressing the local church) was internationally

⁶² For an overview of the statements from 1988 until 2008, see: Melanie A. May, *Jerusalem Testament: Palestinian Christians Speak, 1988-2008* (Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010).

⁶³ Naim S. Ateek, *Justice, and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989). Ateek also published three other books concerning Palestinian liberation theology, the latter being an autobiography: Naim S. Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008); Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology*; Naim S. Ateek, *Call and Commitment: A Journey of Faith from Nakba to Palestinian Liberation Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023).

connected, and its leaders' writings were characterised by theological activism.

In 1990, Sabeel organized its first conference on Palestinian liberation theology at Tantur Ecumenical Institute. There were ten international participants from across the world, including the United States, Ireland, South Africa, The Philippines, Zimbabwe, and Sri Lanka, joined by around forty local participants.⁶⁴ This was the beginning of a global movement of groups called *Friends of Sabeel* in several countries in North America and Europe. Nearly all Sabeel's material is written in English, which has aided Palestinian liberation theology to gain attention and support throughout the world. Palestinian liberation theology began as a response to Western Christian theologies about Israel. The movement could therefore be critiqued for not sufficiently reaching Palestinian laypeople. Ateek was, however, of significant importance for his own Arab church community. He served as Canon of the Anglican St. George Cathedral in Jerusalem from 1985 until 1997 and preached every Sunday during the time of the First *Intifada*. After each of those services, Ateek listened to the reflections of his congregation on the sermons and on the Gospel in relation to the political situation they were living in. These moments provided inspiration for his books on liberation theology.⁶⁵

Another prominent theologian in this field is the Reverend Mitri Raheb (b. 1962), a Lutheran pastor who calls himself a contextual theologian rather than a liberation theologian – although his concerns are similar to Ateek's. In fact, some distinguish 'Palestinian liberation theology' (*lahūt al-tahrīr al-Filasṭīnī*) from 'Palestinian contextual theology' (*lahūt al-siyāqī al-Filasṭīnī*),⁶⁶ but this study considers liberation theology to be part of Palestinian contextual theology. Raheb became pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem in 1987,⁶⁷ and started publishing in 1990.⁶⁸ Raheb's first book in English, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (1995),⁶⁹ mainly addresses the

⁶⁴ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology*, 130.

⁶⁵ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology*, 37ff.

⁶⁶ E.g. Jamal Khader Daibes, interviewed by Elizabeth Marteiijn, Ramallah, 21st December 2017; Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, 53.

⁶⁷ For an overview of his sermons, see: Mitri Raheb, *Lakulli maqāmin maqālun: 'Iḏaat larubu' qarn: 1988-2013* (For every situation a comment: Sermons for a quarter century: 1988-2013) (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher, 2013).

⁶⁸ Mitri Raheb, *Das reformatorische Erbe unter den Palästinensern: Zur Entstehung der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche in Jordanien* (The Reformed Heritage among the Palestinians: The Emergence of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Jordan) (Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 1990).

⁶⁹ Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). A similar book was first published in German a year earlier: Mitri Raheb, *Ich bin Christ*

identity of Palestinian Christians and Biblical interpretations of topics such as election, the Promised Land, the Exodus, violence, suffering, and loving one's neighbour. His later book *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (2014) provides arguments against what he calls "imperial theology": a divine purpose of the empire in an ideological or theological framework.⁷⁰ Raheb explains what this imperial theology entails for Palestinians, saying:

It is noteworthy that, on the issue of Palestine, both supposedly liberal Western theology and conservative and fundamentalist theology are uncritical of the State of Israel and contain a pro-Israeli bias, choosing to ignore the presence and suffering of the native Palestinian people. We are still far away from the moment where Western and Jewish theologians will ask Palestinians for forgiveness for the harm done to them and their land in the name of the Divine.⁷¹

This led Raheb to write his most recent book *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible* (2023), in which he presents a decolonial theology of Palestine.⁷² Raheb sticks to the themes of his earlier work – including the history of Palestine, Christian Zionism, the theme of land, and the notions of biblical election and chosen people – but brings them now in dialogue with settler colonial theory, thereby interrogating how biblical language and motives are used in support of a settler colonial project. Raheb calls this a "new paradigm shift [that] will bring us closer to justice and closer to the spirit of God."⁷³

Raheb is a very productive theologian: to date, he has published eighteen solo-authored books in different languages,⁷⁴ dozens of co-

und Palästinenser: Israel, seine Nachbarn und die Bibel (I am Christian and Palestinian: Israel, its neighbours, and the Bible) (Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshaus, 1994).


⁷⁰ Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014).

⁷¹ Raheb, *Faith*, 65f.

⁷² Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2023). Another attempt to decolonise Palestinian theology has been made by John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer in their joint article "Decolonising Palestinian Liberation Theology: New Methods, Sources and Voices," *Studies in World Christianity* 28/3 (2022), 287-310.

⁷³ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, x.

⁷⁴ Besides those works already mentioned before, Raheb also published the following books in English: Mitri Raheb, *Sailing Through Troubled Waters: Christianity in the Middle East* (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher, 2013); Mitri Raheb, *Bethlehem Besieged* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).



authored or edited books, and numerous articles and book chapters. Furthermore, Raheb established the center *Dar al-Nadwa* in Bethlehem in 1995 as an international forum for the dialogue between faith and culture, *Dar al-Kalima* University in 2006, and *Diyar* publishing house in 2011. Hence, similar to Ateek's theological activism, Raheb's work merges theology and public engagement, contributing not only to the development of Palestinian theology, but also to Palestinian society in general.

2 Second phase (from 2000 onwards): localising the theological questions

While the 1980s brought the formal emergence of Palestinian theology, by the turn of the new millennium this theological revival had moved into a new phase of contextual reflection. When Pope John Paul II visited Israel and the Palestinian Territories during his Millennium Pilgrimage in March 2000, it raised the morale of Palestinian Christians. Like his predecessor Pope Paul VI in January 1964 – the first pope to visit the Holy Land in modern history – Pope John Paul II said that the suffering of the Palestinians must end, and that Palestinian people have a natural right to a homeland. In his Easter Message of 23th April, 2000, Patriarch Michel Sabbah reflected on the papal visit, emphasising the Pope's times of deep prayer at the Holy Places and summarising the Pope's message with the following words: "...be courageous, accept your vocation, and accomplish your mission in your different societies in the land of Jesus."⁷⁵ Hence, Roman Catholic leadership has shown awareness of Palestinian Christian suffering.

This contrasts with the situation of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, where the Greek hierarchy has frequently clashed with their Arab priests and laity since the end of the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁶ These conflicting relations came especially to light during the Second *Intifada* (2000-2005) when the Palestinian Archbishop Theodosios Hanna (also known as Atallah Hanna; b. 1965) acted as official spokesperson of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Archbishop Theodosios Hanna is known for his outspoken political activism, which has caused frequent

⁷⁵ Michel Sabbah, "Easter Message, 23 April 2000," § 3, in Sabbah, *Faithful*, 126ff.

⁷⁶ This clash has been documented by, for example: Anna Hager, "The Orthodox Issue in Jordan: The Struggle for an Arab and Orthodox Identity," *Studies in World Christianity* 24/3 (2018), 212-23; Samuel J. Kuruvilla, "Church-State Relations in Palestine: Empires, Arab-Nationalism and the indigenous Greek Orthodox, 1880-1940," *Holy Land Studies* 10/1 (2011), 55-71; Laura C. Robson, "Communalism and Nationalism in the Mandate: The Greek Orthodox Controversy and the National Movement," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41/1 (2011), 6-23; Sotiris Roussos, "The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and Community of Jerusalem," in *The Christian Heritage in the Holy Land*, (eds.) Anthony O'Mahony, Göran Gunner and Kevork Hintlian (London: Scorpion Cavendish, 1995), 211-24.

clashes with the majority-Greek clergy of his church – and even more so with the Israeli authorities, who arrested and interrogated Archbishop Theodosios Hanna several times during the Second *Intifada*. As one of just four high-ranking Arab clerics in the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Archbishop Theodosios Hanna is an exception to the rather distanced leadership of the Greek Orthodox hierarchy.

Local Palestinian leaders, such as Patriarch Michel Sabbah and Archbishop Theodosios Hanna, were beacons of hope for the Palestinian Christian community during times of crisis and uncertainty, expounding their contextual theology in sermons, pastoral letters, and media appearances. In 2003, three years into the *Intifada*, Bishop Jamal Khader Daibes (b. 1964) was appointed as the new Chairperson of the Department of Religious Studies of Bethlehem University, a Roman Catholic institution.⁷⁷ This was another important step forward for contextual theology, as this department started to organise local and international conferences on contextual theological topics. Further progress came in 2005, towards the end of the *Intifada*, when Lutheran human rights activist Rifat Kassis (b. 1958) gathered an ecumenical group of fifteen Palestinian Christians, both clergy and laypeople, to work on a Palestinian Kairos document, patterned on its South African counterpart of 1985.⁷⁸ On 11th December, 2009, this group presented the *Palestinian Kairos Document* in Bethlehem, urging Palestinians to be steadfast, patient, and resist the occupier in non-violent ways. The text challenges churches of all denominations to get involved in current debates within the tradition of love for the oppressed. The document boldly calls the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land “a sin against God and humanity”:

We also declare that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights, bestowed by God. It

⁷⁷ Some of his writings include: Jamal Khader, “Religions in the Service of Peace? The Case of Palestine/Israel,” in *The Role of Religion in Peacebuilding: Crossing the Boundaries of Prejudice and Distrust*, (eds.). Pauline Kollontai, Sue Yore & Sebastian Kim (London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2018), 226-42; Jamal Khader, “Countering Violence in the name of God in Present Day Palestine/Israel,” *The Ecumenical Review* 68/1 (2016), 81-94; Jamal Khader, “The Context of *Kairos Palestine*,” *The Ecumenical Review* 64/1 (2012), 3-6.

⁷⁸ The fifteen authors of the Kairos Palestine Document (2009): Patriarch Michel Sabbah, Archbishop Theodosios (Atallah Hanna), Bishop Jamal Khader Daibes, Father Rafiq Khoury, The Reverend Mitri Raheb, The Reverend Naim Ateek, The Reverend Yohanna Katanacho, The Reverend Fadi Diab, Geris Khoury, Cedar Duaybis, Nora Kort, Lucy Thaljieh, Nidal Abu Zuluf, Yusef Daher, and Rifat Kassis (coordinator). For background information on the Palestinian Kairos movement, see: Rifat Odeh Kassis, *Kairos for Palestine* (Ramallah: Badayl/Alternatives, 2011).

distorts the image of God in the Israeli who has become an occupier just as it distorts this image in the Palestinian living under occupation. We declare that any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty, subordinating God to temporary human interests, and distorting the divine image in the human beings living under both political and theological injustice.⁷⁹


Originally published in Arabic and English, the Palestinian Kairos Document has now been translated into 23 languages. After the so-called *Bethlehem-call*, a conference in Bethlehem in 2011, Kairos Palestine has evolved into a *Global Kairos Network*, which is currently present in eleven countries worldwide.

Some of the newest developments in the field of Palestinian contextual work have taken place in the young and quickly advancing strand of Evangelical Palestinian theology.⁸⁰ Centres for Evangelical Palestinian theology include Bethlehem Bible College (established in 1979) and Nazareth Evangelical College (established in 2014). The Evangelical voice especially gained attention through the first *Christ at the Checkpoint Conference* in Bethlehem 2010, which aimed to “reclaim the prophetic role in bringing peace, justice and reconciliation in Palestine and Israel.”⁸¹ Now, once every two years, these *Christ at the Checkpoint*

⁷⁹ Kairos Palestine, *A Moment of Truth: A word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering* (Bethlehem: Kairos Palestine, 2009), § 2.5.

⁸⁰ For more information on Palestinian Evangelicals, see: Azar Ajaj, Duane Alexander Miller & Philip Sumpter, *Arab Evangelicals in Israel* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016). A selection of theological publications from Palestinian Evangelicals includes: Alex Awad, *Palestinian Memories: A Story of a Palestinian Mother and her People* (Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2012); Munther Isaac, *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020); Munther Isaac, *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centered Biblical Theology of the Promised Land* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2015); Yohanna Katanacho, *Praying through the Psalms* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018); Yohanna Katanacho, *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2013); Salim J. Munayer & Lisa Loden, *Through my Enemies Eyes: Envisioning Reconciliation in Israel-Palestine* (Crownhill: Paternoster, 2014); Salim J. Munayer & Lisa Loden (eds.), *The Land Cries Out: Theology of Reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian Context* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

⁸¹ Christ at the Checkpoint Conference Committee, *The Christ at the Checkpoint Manifesto*, statement 1. <https://christatthecheckpoint.bethbc.edu/about-christ-at-the-checkpoint/> (accessed May 2024). For a selection papers presented during the conferences, see: Manfred W. Kohl & Munther Isaac, *Christ at the Checkpoint. Blessed are the Peacemakers* (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher, 2018). In June 2021, the Christ at the




Conferences are organised under the auspices of Bethlehem Bible College and led by local Palestinian Evangelicals. As Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College and Minister of the Lutheran Christmas Church, Bethlehem (succeeding the previously mentioned Mitri Raheb since 2016), Munther Isaac (b. 1979) quickly rose to national and international fame during the Israel-Hamas War that started in October 2023. His Christmas sermon “Christ in the Rubble: A Liturgy of Lament” of 23 December 2023 has been shared widely on social media and was quoted during South Africa’s genocide case against Israel, that was brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 29 December 2023.⁸²

The Israel-Hamas War, and, concomitantly the humanitarian crisis and new wave of forced displacement in Gaza, have sparked a recent upsurge of political theological reflection among Palestinian Christians. About two weeks after the outbreak of the war on 7 October, an open letter titled “A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians” was published on Change.org, an online petition platform, and received attention in local and international media.⁸³ As the letter was targeted to Western audiences, it was clear in its condemnation regarding the silence of many Western church leaders and theologians about the rising death toll in Gaza, or, in other cases, unwavering Christian support for Israel. Joint statements also came from the Patriarchs and Heads of Christian communities, continuing a tradition since 1988. They formed a united front after atrocities that happened to Christians in Gaza, most notably the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital explosion on 17 October 2023, a hospital managed by the Episcopal

Checkpoint Young Adults section published a statement entitled Statement of Repentance and Hope, in Arabic and English, representing the voice of the young, up-and-coming evangelical generation, who call for self-reflection, repentance, and unity in the battle for justice and peace. *Christ at the Checkpoint Young Adults, Statement of Repentance and Hope*, https://www.kairospalestine.ps/images/STATEMENT_CATCYA.pdf (accessed May 2024).

⁸² Munther Isaac, Sermon “Christ in the Rubble” in *Liturgy of Lament: A Liturgy of Lament*, Lutheran Christmas Church Bethlehem, 23 December 2023. Videorecording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEGiANa0-oI> (accessed May 2024). The sermon featured prominently during the opening statement at the ICJ hearing on 11 January 2024 by Irish lawyer Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh who is advising South Africa’s legal team.

⁸³ “Palestinian Christians”, “A Call for Repentance: An Open Letter from Palestinian Christians to Western Church Leaders and Theologians”, <https://www.change.org/p/an-open-letter-from-palestinian-christians-to-western-church-leaders-and-theologians> (accessed May 2024). The letter was signed by most organizations and institutions mentioned in this article, including Kairos Palestine, Christ at the Checkpoint, Bethlehem Bible College, Sabeel, Dar al-Kalima University and Al-Liqa’ Center, as well as a number of other Christian organisations active in Israel and Palestine.



Church in Jerusalem, resulting in hundreds of injured and killed, and the Israeli airstrike on 19 October 2023 that caused the death of at least 18 Christians who were seeking refuge in the compound of the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint Porphyrius.

The Israel-Hamas War is another turning point in the development of Palestinian theology, similar to earlier waves of forced displacement (1948) and outbursts of violence (1967, First *Intifada*). As a response to the widespread suffering of Gazans population during this war in general, and the Gazans small Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical Christian communities in particular, Palestinian Christian institutions such as Sabeel, Kairos Palestine and Bethlehem Bible College – as well as individual Palestinian Christian church leaders – have written statements, and initiated prayer meetings and advocacy efforts, to call for an immediate ceasefire and, in some cases, for a recognition of the genocidal impact of the war for Palestinians in Gaza. Just as the First *Intifada* functioned as a stimulus for Palestinian clergy and theologians to become more outspoken, and the developments in the early years of the 21st century made Palestinian theology more localised, the Israel-Hamas War made this group of Palestinian contextual theologians even more politically engaged than they were before.

Currently, one can speak of a systematised body of Palestinian contextual works. Fourteen Palestinian theologians have published contextual theology books in English, Arabic or German; and this number is significantly higher if one counts Palestinian theologians who have contributed to the *Al-Liqa' Journal*, those who have spoken at national or international conferences, those who teach at local universities and seminaries, or those whose dissertations are yet to be published as a book.⁸⁴ In the late 2010s, the first edited volumes began to appear that presented systematic overviews of Palestinian theology: *Madkhal ilā al-lahūt al-Filasṭīnī* (Introduction to Palestinian Theology) (2017) edited by Munther Isaac and published in Arabic;⁸⁵ and *Christian Theology in the Palestinian Context* (2019), edited by Rafiq Khoury and Rainer Zimmer-Winkel and published in English.⁸⁶ A similar development is the launch of the *Journal of Palestinian Christianity* in 2024, founded and edited by

⁸⁴ These fourteen theologians include The Reverend Naim S. Ateek, The Reverend Alex Awad, Emeritus Archbishop Elias Chacour, The Reverend Munther Isaac, The Reverend Yohanna Katanacho, Bishop Jamal Khader Daibes, Gerjes Khoury, Father Rafiq Khoury, Rula Khoury Mansour, Salim J. Munayer, The Reverend Mitri Raheb, Emeritus Patriarch Michel Sabbah, Emeritus Bishop Munib A. Younan, and Jean Zaru.

⁸⁵ Munther Isaac (ed.), *Madkhal ilā al-lahūt al-Filasṭīnī* (Introduction to Palestinian Theology) (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher, 2017).

⁸⁶ Khoury and Zimmer-Winkel (eds.), *Christian Theology*.

Munther Isaac, Yousef K. AlKhoury and John S. Munayer. The publication of these books and journal clearly indicates that the field of Palestinian contextual theology – since its emergence around 40 years ago – is burgeoning, with participants from across the Christian spectrum.

Nevertheless, many of these developments have been overlooked in Western theological circles and also in the field of World Christianity, despite its attention to theological developments outside of Europe and North America. This is partly because the development of Arab contextual theology came later and was slower to develop than in some other regions of the world. The other reason for this lack of academic attention is the very different status of Christianity in the Middle East: in contrast to Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, Christianity in the Middle East is dwindling. Hence, the trajectory of Christianity in the Middle East does not fit the general assumption underlying the field of World Christianity that the number of Christians in the Global South is growing rapidly.⁸⁷

The Scope of Palestinian Theology

Palestinian theologians have been pioneers, playing an exemplary role in the emergence of a broader spectrum of Arab theology, and hence have made a significant contribution to Arab thought in general.⁸⁸ Palestinian theology offers a deep reflection on the recent history of the Middle East – a history of political turmoil, conflict, human suffering, and an ongoing flow of refugees. Broadly speaking, there are currently four major themes in Palestinian theological works, most of which this article has already alluded to: 1) liberation, 2) reconciliation, 3) witness, and 4) ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. This final section provides an in-depth examination of these distinct, but interconnected themes. Many

⁸⁷ Deanna Ferree Womack, “Incorporating Middle Eastern Christianity into World Christianity,” in *World Christianity: History, Methodologies, Horizons*, (ed.). Jehu J. Hanciles (Maryknoll: Orbis: 2021), 171-84; Deanna Ferree Womack, “Middle Eastern Christianity in the Context of World Christianity,” in *The Rowman & Littlefield Handbook of Christianity in the Middle East*, (eds.). Mitri Raheb & Mark A. Lamport (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 548-58; Dyron B. Daugherty, “Ignoring the East: Correcting a Serious Flaw in World Christianity Scholarship,” in *Religion on the Move! New Dynamics of Christian Expansion in a Globalizing World*, (eds.). Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 41-59.

⁸⁸ Cf. Elizabeth S. Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 207-13. A similar development of contextualised Arab theology took place in other places in the Middle East, see Antoine Fleyfel, *La Théologie Contextuelle Arabe: Modèle Libanais* (Arab Contextual Theology: Lebanese Model) (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2011); Andrea Zaki Stephanous (ed.), *Arabic Christian Theology: A contemporary Global Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

Palestinian contextual theologians reflect on all four themes, but have a particular emphasis. In addition, these themes carry a varying weight of importance dependent on the given situation at different periods of time. What unites all these theologians, though, is their theological engagement with their identity as Palestinian Christians, and their reflection on the social and political context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

1 Liberation

One of the distinct strands in Palestinian contextual theology is liberation theology. Influenced by postcolonial theories, the liberation theme encompasses a broad spectrum of connected topics including biblical hermeneutics, modern Israel, the status of the Old Testament, the Exodus narrative, the covenant, election, the land, and Christian Zionism. This theme is found, for example, in the work of Munther Isaac, Yohanna Katanacho, and Mitri Raheb. Most prominently, Palestinian liberation theology is found in the writings of Naim Ateek, the author of *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (1989) and founder of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Center. Ateek aims to find a new biblical hermeneutic that emphasises a universal, inclusive view of God, over against the restrictive, exclusive views of some Jews and certain Western Christian theologians. Palestinian liberation theology, as developed by Ateek, differs profoundly from the Latin American variant as expounded, for example, by the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez,⁸⁹ since it addresses Zionist and colonial oppression instead of focussing on economic oppression as the direct result of colonialism.⁹⁰ In Western academia, Palestinian liberation ideas are among the most discussed theological concepts of Palestinian theology.⁹¹ Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, Palestinian liberation theology has not had a wide audience among Palestinian laypeople and could therefore be described as

⁸⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM, 1988).

⁹⁰ For a comparison between Palestinian liberation theology and Latin American liberation theology, see: Brian Stanley, *Christianity in the Twentieth Century: A World History* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 231-7; Samuel J. Kuruvilla, "Theologies of Liberation in Latin America and Palestine-Israel in Comparative Perspective: Contextual Differences and Practical Similarities," *Holy Land Studies* 9/1 (2010), 51-69.

⁹¹ This becomes apparent in, for example: Michel Elias Andraos, "Palestinian Theology of Reconciliation: A Cry of Hope in the Absence of All Hope," *VOICES Theological Journal of Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* 36/1 (2013), 47-59; Kuruvilla, *Radical Christianity*; Robson, "Palestinian liberation theology"; Andrea Zaki Stephanous and Jos M. Strengolt, "Middle Eastern and Arab Theology," in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, (eds.). William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove & Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 537-42.

a movement of the Palestinian Christian elite.

2 Reconciliation

A second major theme in Palestinian theology is reconciliation. The narrative of liberation was often heard in the 1980s, 1990s, and at the beginning of the 2000s, the time of political tension and *Intifadas*. More recently, Palestinian theologians have begun to portray themselves as active reconcilers instead of critical liberationists. Concepts of reconciliation are found, for example, in the writings of Elias Chacour and Salim Munayer and in the work of two prominent women theologians, Rula Khoury Mansour and Jean Zaru.⁹² Salim Munayer (b. 1955) made reconciliation the main theme of his work and founded the organisation *Musalaha* ('Reconciliation') in Jerusalem, which aims to build bridges between different segments of the Israeli and Palestinian society according to reconciliation principles derived from the Bible. Instead of focussing on different ethnic and nationalistic identities, *Musalaha's* theological emphasis points to the biblical concept of new identity in Christ, making it possible for opposing people to meet and reconcile in this new identity. One could question, however, whether such a focus on reconciliation can be viewed separately from the concept of liberation. Ateek, for example, has argued that liberation and reconciliation are interconnected, but that liberation and justice are necessary before any form of reconciliation can be achieved.⁹³


3 Witness

The theme of 'witness,' the most widespread and popular theological concept among current Palestinian clergy, can be found in different sources, especially in the statements of the Heads of churches in Jerusalem. It is also apparent in the work of Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah who has said that it is the vocation of Palestinian Christians to bear the witness of Jesus Christ "first of all, in the face of the holiness of this land, then in the face of the difficult birth of peace and justice in it, and in the face of the oppression and the violation of the dignity of the human person, which is being perpetrated here."⁹⁴ Therefore, a Palestinian

⁹² Chacour, *Blood Brothers*; Rula Khoury Mansour, *Theology of Reconciliation in the Context of Church Relations: A Palestinian Christian Perspective in Dialogue with Miroslav Volf* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2020); Munayer & Loden, *Through*; Jean Zaru, *Occupied with Non-Violence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

⁹³ Ateek, *Justice*, 180f.

⁹⁴ Michel Sabbah, "Homily at the Benedictine Abbey Hagia Maria Sion in Jerusalem, Pentecost Sunday 8th June 2003," § 3, in Sabbah, *Faithful*, 165ff.



Christian theology of witness strives first of all for justice and then, in second place, for a Christian contribution to society. Bishop Emeritus Munib Younan (b. 1950) calls this a theology of *martyria* (Greek for ‘witness’) and focuses on the social role of Christianity. He describes witness as a creative *diakonia*, where the Christian faith functions as an inspiration to establish schools, universities, Bible translations, and ecumenical movements.⁹⁵ The concept of witness is, therefore, most apparent in the public role played by Christians in society. However, a theology of witness does not speak radical truths to long-standing injustices in the same way liberation and reconciliation theologies do.

4 Ecumenical and interfaith dialogue

Fourthly, a recurring theme in Palestinian contextual works is ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. Organisations such as Al-Liqa’, Sabeel, and Kairos Palestine are all ecumenical initiatives. The organisation Al-Liqa’ has organised yearly conferences for Christian-Muslim dialogue since 1983. This has long been a group for the Arab intelligentsia, who promote Palestinian nationalism, unity, and dialogue. Father Rafiq Khoury, who is also part of Al-Liqa’, states that Christian-Muslim relations in Palestine are a special case.⁹⁶ Palestine is situated at the crossroads of three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe) and of three world religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Palestinian Christians have gone through an advanced stage of Arabisation, Khoury argues. In fact, he describes Palestine as “that part that Arabized the most”.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict made Palestinian Christians and Muslims not suffer *from* each other, but *with* each other. One could also reference such Palestinian solidarity to explain the ecumenical attempts for church unity and national unity made by the Patriarchs and Heads of Christian communities in their joint statements concerning the Israeli occupation.

⁹⁵ Munib A. Younan, “Anniversary Worship Service in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, Sunday 17th May 2009,” in *Our Shared Witness: A Voice for Justice and Reconciliation*, (eds.). Munib A. Younan (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2012), 41-5. See also: Munib A. Younan, *Witnessing for Peace: In Jerusalem and the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

⁹⁶ Rafiq Khoury, “Future of Muslim-Christian Relations in Palestine,” *Al-Liqa’ Journal* 11 & 12 (1998), 88-113. Also notice his five book series: Rafiq Khoury, *Naḥwa laḥūt mutjassid fī tarbiyyat bilādnā* (Towards an Incarnational Theology for the Progress of our Country) (Bethlehem: Al-Liqa’ Publications, 2012); Rafiq Khoury, *Al-ḥudūr al-Masīḥiyya fī-l mashriq al-‘Arabiyya bin al-māḍī wa al-hāḍara wa al-mustaqbal* (The Christian Presence in the Near East in the Past, Present, and Future) (Bethlehem: Al-Liqa’ Publications, 2014); Rafiq Khoury, *Al-ākhir... na‘ama ‘am naqima?* (The End... Blessing or Curse?) (Bethlehem: Al-Liqa’ Publications, 2016); Rafiq Khoury, *Filasṭīn fī-l qalb* (Palestine in the Heart) (Bethlehem: Al-Liqa’ Publications, 2017); Rafiq Khoury, *Kitāb al-a ‘yyām* (Book for every Day) (Bethlehem: Al-Liqa’ Publications, 2018).

⁹⁷ Khoury, “Muslim-Christian Relations,” 94.

The question remains, though: What will happen to this church unity and interreligious dialogue if group interests do not coincide any longer but oppose each other?

Some Remarks

Although this article has specifically focussed on texts written by Palestinian theologians and church leaders, there are parallel developments in popular religious expression, such as pilgrimage and the veneration of saints.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Palestinian Christians are locally active in the sphere of civil society, education, health care, and the arts.⁹⁹ On the political level, Christians have a set number of seats in the Parliament of the Palestinian Authority. Several of the national political liberation movements, like the *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP) and the *Al-Ard* ('the Land') movement, had Christian founders as well. There was also Christian participation in the Palestinian delegation in the 1990s peace process, with Anglican politician Dr Hanan Ashrawi (b. 1946).¹⁰⁰ Palestinian contextual theology is therefore an exponent of a wider Palestinian Christian societal and political engagement.

While the spectrum of Palestinian contextual theology is broad and diverse, not all voices are equally represented. In Palestinian theology there is, for example, an underrepresentation of female voices. This does not mean that women have not played any role in this Christian revival. The three women Cedar Duaybis, Nora Carmi, and Jean Zaru were part of the group that helped establish Sabeel. Similarly, the Kairos Palestine Document has three women among its fifteen authors: Cedar Duaybis, Nora Kort, and Lucy Thaljieh. This article also referred to Palestinian Evangelical theologian Rula Khoury Mansour, whose continuing work

⁹⁸ See, for example: Elizabeth Marteijn, "Martyrdom, Liberation, and Belonging: An Ethnography on the Popular Saint George Veneration among Palestinian Christians," *Journal of World Christianity* 10/1 (2020), 53-67; Elizabeth S. Marteijn, "The Politics of Interpretation: Understanding Biblical History in Palestinian Rural Culture," *Studies in World Christianity* 26/1 (2020), 4-20; Munayer & Munayer, "Decolonising Palestinian Liberation Theology," 298-306.

⁹⁹ Paul S. Rowe, "The Open Sanctuary: Palestinian Christian Civil Society Organizations and the Survival of the Christian Minority in Israel-Palestine," *Journal of Church and State* 58/4 (2016), 1-19; Shomali, "Palestinian Christians".

¹⁰⁰ For a review on Middle Eastern Christianity and politics, see: Kail C. Ellis (ed.), *Secular Nationalism and Citizenship in Muslim Countries. Arab Christians in the Levant*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Mohammed Girma & Cristian Romocea (eds.), *Christian Citizenship in the Middle East: Divided Allegiance or Dual Belonging?* (London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. 2017); Fiona McCallum, "Christian political participation in the Arab world," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23/1 (2012), 3-18.

may signify the beginning of a broader theological engagement of young female Palestinian theologians who are now graduate students. Concomitantly, on 22 January 2023, Sally Azar was ordained as the first Arab female church leader in Israel/Palestine in the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem.¹⁰¹ Neither should one underestimate the role of the *Rahbāt al-Wardiyye* ('Rosary Sisters'), founded by Palestinian nun Maria-Alphonsine Danil Ghattas (1843-1927) on 24th July, 1880. This Arab Roman-Catholic order runs churches, schools, and hospitals in the Palestinian Territories, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁰²


Another group that is generally underrepresented in the discussion of Palestinian theology are the Eastern Orthodox Christians, who in fact are the largest community among Palestinian Christians. Palestinian theologians from the Western school of theology – Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants, and Evangelicals – have played the major role in the formation of Palestinian contextual theology. The most plausible explanation for their dominant role is their direct engagement with European and American Christian Zionist concepts of eschatology, the land, and the covenant. It was their struggle with these questions which contributed to the emergence of a body of Palestinian contextual theology.

Conclusion

This study has described how Palestinian theology and Christianity have developed since the 1970s. It has reviewed the historical developments of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s that made Palestinian clergy and theologians more outspoken. Developments such as the First *Intifada* and the indigenization of religious leadership have encouraged Palestinian Christian leaders to speak out. Since the turn of the millennium,

¹⁰¹ To date, earlier appointments of female Arab church leaders have only taken place in Lebanon and Syria. Rola Sleiman was consecrated on 26 February 2017 in the Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Tripoli as the first female Arab church leader in the Middle East. Shortly after her consecration, on 24 March 2017, Naja Kassab was consecrated in the Presbyterian Evangelical Church in Beirut. A year later, on 11 November 2018, Rima Nasrallah was ordained in the National Evangelical Church in Beirut. The fourth consecration in Lebanon took place on 26 June 2022, when Linda Macktaby was ordained in the National Evangelical Church in Beirut. To date, Mathilde Sabbagh is the only Arab female church leader active in Syria. She was consecrated on 3 April 2022 in the National Evangelical Church in Al-Hassakeh. Arab female ministers active outside the Middle East and non-Arab (Western) female church leaders in the Middle East are not mentioned in this list.

¹⁰² Willy Jansen, "Arab Women with a Mission: The Sisters of the Rosary," in *Christian Witness between Continuity and New Beginnings: Modern Historical Missions in the Middle East*, (eds.). Martin Tamcke and Michael Marten (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2006), 41-6.




Palestinian theology has become more localised, by not prioritising international Christian connections but by emphasising the importance of local theological discussion. Earlier theological initiatives such as the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, the joint statements of Patriarchs and Heads of Christian communities of Jerusalem, the local theology of the Al-Liqa' Center in Bethlehem, and the liberation theology of Sabeel Center in Jerusalem, became enriched by newer theological streams such as Palestinian Kairos theology, Palestinian Evangelical theology, and Palestinian decolonial theology. It is now possible to speak of a systematised body of Palestinian theology containing theological reflection on the concepts of liberation, reconciliation, witness, interreligious dialogue, and ecumenism.

Throughout this article the importance of 'context' has been apparent. There are two different ways in which context has influenced Palestinian theology. A theology of liberation is based on a 'context of co-resistance', found in places such as Jerusalem, where Christians live together with Muslims *against* the Israeli occupier. In contrast, the theology focussing on reconciliation and witness leans more towards a 'context of co-existence': living peacefully together *with* the other, with Jews and with Muslims.

Beyond a select few like Naim Ateek, Mitri Raheb, and Munther Isaac, Palestinian theologians – and Middle Eastern theologians in general – have gained little influence in Western theological scholarship or in the field of World Christianity. Misunderstanding in the West, ongoing emigration, and growing sectarianism have minimized the voices and public engagement of Palestinian Christians. The Israel-Hamas War, on the other hand, has turned a spotlight to the fate of the small community of Christians in Gaza and provided a platform for Palestinian Christian theologians to raise their public profile amidst a context of humanitarian crisis and increased emigration.

The examples of Palestinian theologians mentioned in this article indicate that hope for the future is not lost. Palestinian theologians are currently decolonising and localising the theological discourse even further by publishing more work in Arabic and by working together with Arab theologians from other parts of the Middle East. It will be a task of other world theologians to engage with them, stimulate them, and include these Palestinian theologians in their international theological debates.



The Violent and ‘Biblically’ Justified Disenfranchisement of the Palestinian People in the Light of Bonhoeffer's Theology

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Abstract: The Palestinian ‘Cry for Hope: A Call to Decision and Action’ with the motto ‘We cannot serve God while remaining silent on the oppression of Palestinians!’ directed to the churches of the world, builds on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In 1933 he had written, that if the state disenfranchises a group of its citizens and or transgresses its mandate by intervening in matters of faith, this constitutes a case of confession (*status confessionis*). This means that a Christian church has to take a firm position and resist the state. What does this mean for the present violent oppression of the Palestinian people by the state of Israel? The response is that this systemic disenfranchisement by direct, systemic, and cultural (symbolic) violence, amounting to apartheid, settler-colonial ethnic cleansing, and now even genocide, corresponds exactly to what Bonhoeffer writes concerning the Jews in the beginning of the Nazi rule. In addition, violent (Christian) Zionism (not the non-violent form in the way of e.g. Martin Buber) misuses the Bible for the justification of this structural injustice, which makes it a heresy to be rejected by the Christian churches. The World Council of Churches (WCC) has initiated a study process on this issue aiming at a clear decision.

Keywords: Disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people, Violence, Zionism, Biblical understanding of the land issue, *Status Confessionis*

Introduction

Kairos Palestine (KP) and Global Kairos for Justice (GKJ) released the ‘Cry for Hope: A Call to Decision and Action’ on 1 July 2020. With the motto ‘We cannot serve God while remaining silent on the oppression of Palestinians!’ it states:

We call on all Christians and the churches at the congregational, denominational, national and global ecumenical levels to engage in a process of study, reflection and confession. At issue is the historical and systemic disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people and the misuse of the Bible by many to justify and support this oppression. We call on churches to reflect on how their own traditions can express the sacred duty to uphold the integrity of the church and the Christian faith in relation to this issue.¹⁰³

In doing so, they were referring back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stated in his 1933 essay ‘The Church and the Jewish Question’ that the then civil and political disenfranchisement of Jews by the Nazi regime and the intervention of the state in religious affairs meant status *confessionis* for the church.¹⁰⁴ I hope to show in this article that exactly the same argument applies to the violent disenfranchisement of Palestinians by the state of Israel and the justification of this injustice with the Bible by Zionism and particularly also Christian Zionism.

The Expulsion and Disenfranchisement of the Palestinians by Direct Violence

I will first talk about direct violence, then later structural and cultural.¹⁰⁵ The colonial powers, England and France, had promised the Arab states that helped them defeat the Ottoman Empire that they would grant independence after achieving victory. They broke this promise by dividing the territories among themselves in the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, the region first suffered colonial violence. This colonialism then enabled the Zionist movement and later the State of Israel to carry out what is called settler colonialism – that is, what took place in

¹⁰³ Michel Sabbah and Rifat Kassis, ‘Cry for Hope: A Call to Decisive Action,’ 1 July 2020, Kairos Palestine and Kairos Global for Justice, <https://www.cryforhope.org/>, accessed 12 July 2024.

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting 1933 is not yet about the Holocaust, but about the deprivation of civil and political rights so the comparison with other similar situations is legitimate. Bonhoeffer, ‘The Church and the Jewish Questions,’ 366.

¹⁰⁵ On structural and cultural violence see Johan Galtung, ‘Cultural Violence,’ *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (Aug 1990): 291-305.

¹⁰⁶ Lilian Goldman Law Library, ‘The Sykes-Picot Agreement: 1916,’ The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp, accessed 31 July 2024.

North America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand where the colonists directly and indirectly forcibly displace the native populations.¹⁰⁷ Colonialism aims at exploitation, settler colonialism at replacement of the indigenous people.

Differently from a German audience, there is no need to repeat for Palestinians the insights of the ‘new historians’ on the individual acts and sequences of violence during the *Nakba*. What is key is the Zionist violence of ethnic cleansing started right after the decision of the United Nations (UN) to divide Palestine on 29 November 1947 – that is, still under the British mandate – and not only after Arab states declared war following the foundation of the state of Israel on 14 May 1948.¹⁰⁸

The violence reached another peak in Israel's 1967 Six-Day War, declared as a preemptive war. It led to the occupation of the remaining Palestinian territories of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. Since then, the violence has continued day by day with various measures. The psychological effects of this policy of violence have been described in a flesh-creeping way by Nadira Šalhub-Kifurkiyan in her 2015 book *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear*.

Meanwhile, this tyranny of Israel over the Palestinian people has been identified as an *apartheid* system that sustainably enforces settler colonialism. This has been noted and documented by many human rights organizations such as B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Al-Haq, as well as the UN.¹⁰⁹ In the UN, the Economic

¹⁰⁷ See Petra Wild, *Apartheid and Ethnic Cleansing in Palestine: Zionist Settler Colonialism in Word and Deed* (Vienna: Promedia, 2013).

¹⁰⁸ See Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications Limited, 2006).; Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge Middle East Studies, 2004).

¹⁰⁹ See B'Tselem. “A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid,” B'Tselem, updated 12 January 2021, accessed 14 July, 2024, https://www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid. (accessed 14 July 2024); Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution* (April 2021), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/04/israel_palestine0421_web_0.pdf. (accessed 14 July 2024). Amnesty International, *Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime Against Humanity* (London: Amnesty International Limited, 2022), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/02/israels-apartheid-against-palestinians-a-cruel-system-of-domination-and-a-crime-against-humanity/>. (accessed 14 July 2024); Rania Muhareb et al., *Israeli Apartheid: Tool of Zionist Settler Colonialism*, Al-Haq (Ramallah, 2022), https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/11/29/israeli-apartheid-webversion-1-page-view-option-01-1669748323.pdf. (accessed 14 July 2024). Kairos Palestine and its international network Global Kairos for Justice have compiled and theologically assessed all documents on Apartheid in Israel: see Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice, *A Dossier on Israeli Apartheid*, Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice (2022), <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/images/kairos-palestine-apartheid-full.pdf>. (accessed 14 July 2024). Also see the resolution of the Presbyterian Church in the USA: ‘On Recognition that Israel’s Laws,

and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA)– not yet the General Assembly – has clearly demonstrated apartheid.¹¹⁰ However, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, goes even further. She notes that while the concept of apartheid clarifies the systemic nature of the oppression, there are other facts to be indicted that are contrary to international law: (1) the denial of the right of return or compensation to refugees; (2) the illegality of the occupation under international law, including land theft and disregard for the Palestinians' right to self-determination; (3) the root cause, settler colonialism, including war crimes under the Rome Statute.¹¹¹

Apartheid is not about a comparison with South Africa. Rather, apartheid has since been clearly and generally defined under international law, most recently in the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as a crime against humanity. The following are its premises:

1. One ethnic group dominates and oppresses another.
2. It practices inhuman and inhumane acts such as murder, arbitrary killings or imprisonment, displacement.
3. All this in a systematic and institutional form, as well as permanently
4. and with the intention to dominate.¹¹²

Amnesty International has most fully illustrated that the State of Israel, in terms of laws, policies and practices, meets all of these conditions – and does so for all fragmented segments of the Palestinian people. The International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague opened war crimes investigations in 2021 into Israel's military actions in the 2014 Gaza war, including the role of Hamas and, meanwhile, also concerning apartheid.¹¹³


Policies, and Practices Constitute Apartheid Against the Palestinian People: 225th General Assembly, 2002, <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000773>, accessed 26 July 2024.

¹¹⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), 'Israeli Practices towards the Palestinian People and the Question of Apartheid, Palestine and the Israeli Occupation,' Issue no. 1, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170316054753/https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/israeli-practices-palestinian-people-apartheid-occupation-english.pdf>, accessed July 26, 2024.

¹¹¹ Francesca Albanese, *Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967*, United Nations General Assembly (2022), https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/A.77.356_210922.pdf. (accessed 14 July 2024)

¹¹² See International Criminal Court, *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (Rome Conference, 17 July 1998), <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2024-05/Rome-Statute-eng.pdf>. (accessed 14 July 2024).

¹¹³ Nahed Samour, 'Völkerrechtliche Entwicklungen zu Palästina-Israel,' in *Religionen für Gerechtigkeit in Palästina-Israel Band 2: Ökumenische Antwort auf Völkerrechtsverletzungen und Apartheid*, ed. Ulrich Duchrow and Mark Braverman (Otterstadt: Stiftung Hirschler, 2023), 73-82.



Briefly on *Palestinian counterviolence*. There have been two attempts by Palestinians to change the situation of violence through counter-violence: the two intifadas (uprisings, rebellions 1987–90 and 2000). It should be noted that these are legitimate acts of resistance against illegal occupation under international law. According to the applicable criteria, however, a distinction must be made between combatants and civilians, which the Palestinian side has not always observed. It is true that normally the repeated rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip on Israeli territory are preceded by Israeli targeted killings or other provocations. Nevertheless, any counter-violence that endangers civilian lives should also be criticized. This is true particularly in relation to the Hamas massacre on October 7, 2023. We have to remember that the African National Congress (ANC) in apartheid South Africa with its armed struggle was so convincing and effective because it strictly observed international law by limiting itself to sabotage and military attacks on combatant (police and military). Since 2005, however, the majority of Palestinians have opted for nonviolent resistance, a point to be returned to.

Germany and the Entire West as Part of the System of Violence


Now there is not only the problem of the direct violence of the State of Israel, but also the structural (systemic) and cultural (symbolic) violence. As far as *systemic violence* is concerned, Israel's embeddedness in the West, hegemonically determined by the United States, is the condition for the State of Israel to be able to maintain its reign of violence with impunity. It can only enforce and finance its occupation, which is contrary to international law, its colonization of the occupied territories and progressive disenfranchisement of the Palestinians because the USA, Germany and the EU, in particular, let Israel have its way and support it militarily, politically and financially – despite all lip service in the form of occasional protests.

The former Speaker of the Knesset, Avraham Burg, sums it up after the shift to the right in the 2022 elections, the victory of fascist parties:

Only the absolute protection of Germany and the United States still stands between Israel and the denunciation of its political distortions.¹¹⁴

In the UN, the U.S. in particular blocks any action to implement UN decisions. Moreover, it gives US\$ 3.8 billion annually in military aid alone to the occupation army. Germany gives humanitarian and development aid, co-finances the autonomy authority and thus relieves Israel of the

¹¹⁴ Burg, 2022



costs of the occupation. It even supplies taxpayer-subsidized submarines that can be converted into nuclear bomb launchers, and lets German soldiers train in house-to-house combat from Israeli soldiers who have been tried and tested in the Gaza war, even though UN proceedings are underway against them for war crimes. In addition, there are currently joint projects in training for cyber warfare. In summary, Israeli economist Shir Hever states: 'It must be said quite clearly that Israeli apartheid would not have been possible and could not continue without international support.'¹¹⁵ While the basic condition of liberation is Palestinian resilience, the United States and Germany hold the key to make Israel implement international law and human rights.

Even more serious than its participation in systemic violence, however, is Germany's leading role in *cultural violence* against the Palestinian people. This has now been precisely elaborated in a dissertation by Sarah El Bulbeisi: *Taboo, Trauma and Identity – Subject Constructions of Palestinians in Germany and Switzerland, 1960-2015*.¹¹⁶ She conducted 39 biographical-narrative interviews with Palestinians in Germany and Switzerland from 2010 to 2015. The first generation already experienced violence in its cultural, symbolic form, but the second generation is experiencing it much more. This consists in the fact that, especially in Germany, the Palestinian narrative is suppressed in a comprehensive, multifaceted way. The Palestinian catastrophe (Nakba) would be inconceivable without the catastrophe of the Shoah. So the Germans have not only incurred one guilt but two: they should therefore not only stand up for the rights of the Jewish people, but also, and in particular, for the rights of the Palestinians, but they do not do so.

This repression of the second half of German guilt and co-responsibility as cultural violence has been observable in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) from the very beginning. There is also a new study on this by Daniel Marwecki, *Germany and Israel – Whitewashing and Statebuilding 2020*. He shows how the entire understanding between Adenauer and Ben Gurion was based on the fact that Germany wanted to clear itself of guilt with this emphasis on reparations to the Jews and thus become part of the Western imperial community again. 'Germany accorded to Israel the power of absolution, and the Israeli state used that power to acquire material support for its own consolidation.'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Shir Hever, *Was Bedeuten Die Ökonomischen Beziehungen Zwischen Europa und Israel?* in Ulrich Duchrow and Hans G. Ulrich, *Religionen für Gerechtigkeit in Palästina-Israel – Jenseits von Luthers Feindbildern*, 3rd ed. (Otterstadt: Stiftung Hirschler, 2020), 25.

¹¹⁶ Sarah El Bulbeisi extends Galtung's categories with the analogous ones of Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008).

¹¹⁷ Daniel Marwecki, *Germany and Israel – Whitewashing and Statebuilding* (London: Hurst & Co, 2020), 224.

Particularly important to German co-responsibility for the situation of the Palestinians is the fact that Germany – kept secret from the public at the time – made amends primarily by building up the Israeli military before the United States assumed that role in 1967. That is, ‘The military force displayed by Israel in the decisive Six-Day War could not have been developed to this level without the FRG's prior support.’¹¹⁸ So the occupation of Palestine since 1967 also came about with German help. And today Germany co-finances the occupation:

It is fair to say ... that economic aid has so far only propped up the process and not led to peace. As a result, the focus on humanitarian relief and upkeep of the PA [Palestinian Authority] effectively means subsidising the Israeli occupation.¹¹⁹

Summing up, Marwecki states:

For now, it looks as if Germany will continue to play its part in sustaining an untenable situation between the Israelis and Palestinians, one it has historically contributed to in so many ways ...¹²⁰

The same view is expressed by Charlotte Wiedemann in her book *Understanding the Pain of Others: Holocaust and World Memory*:

...because the agreement with Israel paved the way for the Federal Republic's international rehabilitation and integration into the West...Israel's existence helped the Germans to absolve themselves of responsibility for the Holocaust, which the majority of them did not even recognize.¹²¹

She believes this has serious implications for the culture of remembrance in Germany. ‘Jewish history is narrowed down to Zionism,’ and the historical and current diversity of Judaism is not perceived.¹²² ‘Apparently there is a German need to identify with Israel and Zionism in such an unconditional way that Jews who think otherwise may be told they are for a new “final solution.”’¹²³ ‘We redeem ourselves by identifying with the

¹¹⁸ Marwecki, *Germany and Israel*, 21.

¹¹⁹ Marwecki, *Germany and Israel*, 211.

¹²⁰ Marwecki, *Germany and Israel*, 229.

¹²¹ Wiedemann, Charlotte Wiedemann, *Den Schmerz der Anderen Begreifen: Holocaust und Weltgedächtnis* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2022), 241.

¹²² Wiedemann, *Den Schmerz der Anderen Begreifen*, 255.

¹²³ Wiedemann, *Den Schmerz der Anderen Begreifen*, 255.

victims...'¹²⁴ Against this she sets understanding the pain of others – in this case, today, that of the Palestinians.

The Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis diagnoses something similar in German politics and society for the development of *Christian-Jewish dialogue* in Germany. He acknowledges the effort of Christians in Germany after World War II to repent for the sin of anti-Judaism and the Shoah as 'necessary and revolutionary.'¹²⁵ However, this rapprochement practically demanded victims – the Palestinian people. The dialogue became a deal in many ways: 'Christians repent for your sins, hold fast to Israel and be silent on the Palestinian question. Silence on Palestinians is demanded, otherwise the accusation is that Christians have returned to their previously abandoned anti-Semitism.'¹²⁶

In politics, society and the church, Germany's historical and current co-responsibility for the situation in Palestine is permanently concealed. Germany is not only passively exercising cultural violence against the Palestinian people, but actively. The most blatant example is the criminalization of the Palestinians' non-violent resistance against the Israeli apartheid system in the Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign. The entire German parliament (*Bundestag*) except the *Die Linke* party condemned BDS as anti-Semitic. On 17 May 2019, it passed a resolution – against imploring voices of Israeli and Jewish scholars and lawyers¹²⁷ – that no public spaces or funds may be given to organizers and organizations that can be associated with BDS in any form. The only public institutions in Germany that still adhere to applicable law in this matter are the courts. This is because all the lawsuits brought by event organizers against city councils or institutions such as Caritas Munich, which wanted to block contractually agreed rooms, were successful. The clear reasoning of the courts: BDS is not anti-Semitic and falls under Article 5 of the Basic Law for the protection of freedom of speech. Most recently, the highest-level Federal Administrative Court sentenced the city of Munich to release rooms for a BDS event.¹²⁸ So the decision of the

¹²⁴ Wiedemann, *Den Schmerz der Anderen Begreifen*, 268.

¹²⁵ Marc Ellis, 'Repentant Enablers – German Christians, the Holocaust and the Resurgence of German Power: Reflections from a Jewish Theology of Liberation,' in *Interreligious Solidarity for Justice in Palestine-Israeli – Transcending Luther's Negation of the Other*, ed. Ulrich Duchrow (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 60. <https://www.radicalizing-reformation.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Radicalizing-Reformation-Vol.-7-EN.pdf>, accessed 24 July 2024.

¹²⁶ Ellis, 'Repentant Enablers,' 61.

¹²⁷ See Aufruf Von 240 Jüdischen Und Israelischen Wissenschaftlern An Die Bundesregierung Zu BDS Und Antisemitismus (Call from 240 Jewish and Israeli Scientists to the Federal Government on BDS and Anti-Semitism), 3 June 2019, <https://de.scribd.com/document/412474418/Aufruf-von-240-Judischen-und-Israelischen-Wissenschaftlern-an-die-Bundesregierung-zu-BDS-und-Antisemitismus> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹²⁸ See the ruling of the Federal Administrative Court 'Themenbezogene Widmungsbeschränkung verletzt Meinungsfreiheit (Topic-related Dedication Restrictions Violate Freedom of Expression),'

Bundestag to prevent non-violent resistance to the violence of the Israeli state is not only based on lies and insinuations but is unconstitutional. For this reason, a lawsuit against this *Bundestag* resolution is also underway.¹²⁹

There is now an infrastructure in Germany that seeks to prevent the issue of Palestine from being discussed publicly and openly. Particularly active with this objective are the German-Israeli societies led by the Green former member of parliament Volker Beck,¹³⁰ the anti-Semitism commissioners of the federal government, the states and the churches, and the group calling themselves the ‘anti-Germans.’¹³¹ They use the anti-Semitism definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which has been changed under the influence of Israel, to brand any criticism of the state of Israel as anti-Semitic.¹³² With the help of the fear of being called anti-Semitic, they persuade majorities in politics, churches and the media to suppress the Palestinian reality and criticism of Israel's breaches of international law. So far, it is not apparent that politicians are taking the multiple criticisms of the IHRA definition seriously and substituting the Jerusalem Declaration on Anti-Semitism (JDA), which has since undergone a scholarly rewording.¹³³

20 January 2022, Bundesverwaltungsgericht, Nr. 6/2022, <https://www.bverwg.de/de/pm/2022/6> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹²⁹ See Bundestag Für Palästina, <https://www.bt3p.org/de/home> (accessed 26 July 2024).

¹³⁰ For example, see his campaign against the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Kairos Palestine before the WCC Assembly (Badische Neueste Nachrichten/BNN v. 21.5.2022).

¹³¹ Besides Robert Kurz, *Die Antideutsche Ideologie: Vom Antifaschismus zum Krisenimperialismus: Kritik des Neuesten Linksdeutschen Sektenwesens in Seinen Theoretischen Propheten* (*The Anti-German Ideology: From Anti-Fascism to Crisis Imperialism: Critique of the Latest Left-German Sectarianism in its Theoretical Prophets*, (Münster: UNRAST, 2003). See also the documentary film ‘The Time of the Slanderers’ with historian Moshe Zuckermann premiered on YouTube, 22 May 2022, directed by Dror Dayanand Susann Witt-Stahl, Projekt Kritische Aufklärung, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mYNLAykdZM> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹³² To the original working definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), 11 examples of anti-Semitism were later added, seven of which relate to criticism of Israel. See Shir Hever, ‘Was Bedeuten Die Ökonomischen Beziehungen Zwischen Europa und Israel?’ Subsequently, the person originally responsible for the definition, Kenneth Stern, distanced himself from it (See Kenneth S. Stern, ‘Written Testimony of Kenneth S. Stern, Executive Director Justus and Karin Rosenberg Foundation Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary,’ 7 November 2017, Hearing on Anti-Semitism on College Campuses, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/JU/JU00/20171107/106610/HHRG-115-JU00-Wstate-SternK-20171107.pdf> (accessed 16 July 2024). See also Peter Ulrich, ‘Expert Opinion on the “Working Definition of Antisemitism” of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance,’ Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung und medico international e.V., March 2019, <https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/41168/gutachten-zur-arbeitsdefinition-antisemitismus-der-international-holocaust-remembrance-alliance/> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹³³ See ‘The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, 2020, <https://jerusalemdeclaration.org> (accessed 16 July 2024).

The Violent Oppression and Disenfranchisement of Palestinians and its Theological Justification in the Light of Bonhoeffer's Theology

People often ask, 'Why are you so critical of Israel? After all, there is much injustice in the world.' One of the answers is simple: because the State of Israel justifies its violent crimes of international law and human rights with the Bible. Moreover, there are Christian Zionists who do the same. Consequently, it is crucially important to clarify the Israel-Palestine question theologically and to decide it ecclesiastically. To this end, the 'Cry for Hope' refers to Bonhoeffer.

In his already quoted essay 'The Church Before the Jewish Question' he says about the church:

...it can and must, precisely because it does not moralize about individual cases, keep asking the government whether its actions can be justified as *legitimate state* actions, that is, actions that create law and order, not lack of rights and disorder. It will be called upon to put this question as strongly as possible wherever the state seems endangered precisely in its *character as the state* [*Staatlichkeit*], that is, in its function of creating law and order by force. The church will have to put this question with the utmost clarity today in the matter of the Jewish question.¹³⁴

Then follow the criteria for the church's decision:

In doing so the church will, of course, see the state as limited in two ways. Either *too little* law and order or *too much* law and order compels the church to speak. *There is too little law and order wherever a group of people is deprived of its rights ...*¹³⁵

Historically, it should first be noted that in 1933 the issue was not yet the extermination of Jews, but the deprivation of civil and political rights. That is why the comparison with other countries is legitimate. Therefore, this concrete comparison between the disenfranchisement of Jews at that time and Palestinians today does not at all compare Israel to Nazi Germany. In the case of Israel-Palestine, what does '*too little state*' mean, 'depriving of rights'? Israel ignores and breaks all the decisions of the UN under international law. Everything that was said above about apartheid comes into play here. If – according to Bonhoeffer – the church by warning the state to fulfill its mandate protects the state from self-

¹³⁴ Bonhoeffer, *The Church and the Jewish Question*, in Berlin: 1932-1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol 12 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 364. *Emphasis original.*

¹³⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Church and the Jewish Question*, 364. *Emphasis mine.*

destruction, this has clear implications for the present Israeli government's destructive actions.

With regard to the 'too much state,' the Israeli state does not directly interfere with the proclamation and order of the churches, but it justifies its unjust actions with the Bible.¹³⁶ Now you could object that the Christian church is not affected when a state that calls itself Jewish reads out of the Hebrew Bible something that does not correspond to Christian doctrine. Here it is interesting to see that Jewish author Mark Braverman echoes Bonhoeffer and therefore calls on churches to respond, as they did in the Nazi era and in apartheid South Africa, with confession and resistance to the misuse of the Bible for Zionist justification of settler colonialism and the associated violation of international law and human rights.¹³⁷

Christian Zionism cannot be justified biblically at all. It is often linked to anti-Semitism. Its fundamentalist adherents read the apocalyptic texts to mean that the return of the Jews to the Holy Land will hasten the coming of the Messiah.¹³⁸ He will snatch (in the rapture) his faithful to heaven – including a number of converted Jews. Most, however, will be killed with the unbelievers in the final battle and cast into hell. Politically, these fundamentalists are especially dangerous today because they see the destruction of *Al-Aqsa* Mosque and the building of the Third Temple in Jerusalem as a necessary step in the sequence of final events, thus supporting the radical Jewish Zionists and the Kach party founded by Rabbi Kahane; who are pursuing this plan.¹³⁹ The Netanyahu governments welcomed and still welcome these radicals. That is because their US representatives donate large sums of money to the Israeli military and colonies in the occupied territories, which are illegal under international

¹³⁶ However, the authorities do not sufficiently prevent radical groups from targeting churches and Christians. See the protest of local church leaders: The Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, 'Statement on the Current Threat to the Christian Presence in the Holy Land,' 13 December 2021, Jerusalem Patriarchate, <https://en.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/blog/2021/12/13/statement-on-the-current-threat-to-the-christian-presence-in-the-holy-land-by-the-patriarchs-and-heads-of-local-churches-of-jerusalem/> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹³⁷ See Mark Braverman, 'A Confessing Church for the Present Kairos,' in *Interreligious Solidarity for Justice in Palestine-Israel – Transcending Luther's Negation of the Other*, ed. Ulrich Duchrow (Münster: VIT Verlag, 2017), 35-58. <https://www.reformation-radical.com/files/RR-vol-7-Eng-rev1218.pdf>

(accessed 17 July 2024). Also see the decision of the Lutheran World Federation in 1977 to declare apartheid constituting a status *confessionis*, which occurred while I was director of the LWF Study Department and was inspired by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own confession.

¹³⁸ Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Israel-Palestine* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 124.

¹³⁹ Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism*, 177.

law; in this way they want Judea and Samaria, as they call the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, to become Israeli territory again.

But there is also *implicit Christian Zionism*. For example, Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, one of the pioneers of post-Holocaust theology, on a visit to Palestine told Mitri Raheb as a young pastor in Bethlehem, ‘Mr. Raheb, you stand in God’s way. If I were you, I would pack my bag and emigrate, leaving this country to its rightful owners, the Jews.’ Marquardt summarized his earlier publications on the subject in his *Eschatology* Volume 2.¹⁴⁰ His thesis: the land is an integral part of the promises. Therefore, the Canaanites had to be ‘disinherited,’ either by enslavement or expulsion. In his view, the same applies to the Palestinians – they were to leave the land or serve Israel.¹⁴¹ As exegetical justification, he cites God’s election of Isaac with the simultaneous rejection and disinheritance of Ishmael. He does not even shy away from quoting Jesus’ word in which he praises the meek who will inherit the land (Matt. 5:5).

Yes, in the Hebrew Bible the land is an essential element of the promises¹⁴² – but only as compensation after ‘loss of the national territory’ and tied to the fulfillment of the Torah.¹⁴³ Thus, it also has a universal perspective and purpose from the beginning, namely to realize God’s justice in the land in an exemplary way and thus to be a blessing for all peoples, as is already stated in the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1).¹⁴⁴ Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac puts it this way:

We must not lose sight of the purposefulness behind the promises of the land. Keeping Torah and being faithful to God take precedence over any claim of entitlement. This is why Israel was given a land as an inheritance. Furthermore, the obedience of Israel and her keeping of the covenant mark Israel as a distinct covenant community – God’s chosen people. God

¹⁴⁰ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Was Dürfen Wir Hoffen, Wenn Wir Hoffen Dürften?* (*What May We Hope, If We Were Allowed to Hope? An Eschatology*, Vol. 2 (Gütersloh: Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994).

¹⁴¹ Marquardt, *Was Dürfen Wir Hoffen*, 275.

¹⁴² Claus Westermann, *Forschung am Alten Testament [Research on the Old Testament]* (Munich: Kaiser, 1964), 11.

¹⁴³ Frank Crüsemann et al., *Sozialgeschichtliches Wörterbuch zur Bibel* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009), 326.

¹⁴⁴ Frank Crüsemann et al., *Sozialgeschichtliches Wörterbuch zur Bibel*, 275; This already Old Testament orientation of the particular election of Israel to the universal development of a just world of nations is clearly and concisely summarized by Norbert Lohfink, *Das Jüdische am Christentum: Die Verlorene Dimension* (Freiburg: Herder, 1989), 62.

brought Israel to the land so that they model a different and distinct community, set apart from the other nations.¹⁴⁵

This is also the reason why most biblical texts on the land are formulated in the context of exile and explore the question: Why did we lose the land? The answer then in each case is: because we broke the covenant.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, at the end of the exile and after the return, when the Torah was written in the context of the Persian Empire, there was a debate as to whether the Book of Joshua, with its violent occupations, should be included in the basic document of Israel.¹⁴⁷ The decision was not to create a hexateuch with the inclusion of the Book of Joshua, but a pentateuch. The Promised Land was then included in the Torah through the chapters Numbers 25-36, but as a future perspective.

Therefore, it is exegetically and theologically not permissible to use the Hebrew Bible to base the identity of Judaism on the State of Israel and the possession of the land instead of on the Torah, as is often done today – and on top of that, a state-based violence, not law. Rolf Verleger quotes a friend from his youth who told him: ‘In the past, you had to keep the commandments in order to define yourself as a Jew. Today we have the State of Israel. We no longer need the commandments. To be a Jew is to stand by Israel.’ And he adds, ‘This is the message of Zionism: nationalism as a substitute for religion.’¹⁴⁸

Socio-historically, as is well known, the settlement of the Promised Land was not an ethnic project, but a cooperative project of various socially oppressed groups called ‘Hebrews,’ including peasants liberating themselves from dependence on the city kingdoms and empires, cultivated land nomads, and the enslaved YHWH group fleeing Egypt under Moses.¹⁴⁹ The violent conquest as recounted in the Book of Joshua is

¹⁴⁵ This quote comes from an unpublished paper by the Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac, which he presented at a conference on the topic of the Promised Land at the Woltersburg Mill near Ülzen in 2015.

¹⁴⁶ See Ulrike Bechmann, ‘Genesis 12 and the Abraham Paradigm concerning the Promised Land,’ *The Ecumenical Review* 68.1 (2008), 62-80.

¹⁴⁷ See Rainer Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israels in Alttestamentlicher Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992).

¹⁴⁸ Rolf Verleger, *Hundert Jahre Heimatland? Judentum und Israel Zwischen Nächstenliebe und Nationalismus* (Frankfurt: Westend, 2017), 133.

¹⁴⁹ Frank Crüsemann et al., *Sozialgeschichtliches Wörterbuch zur Bibel*, 325; See also Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israels in Alttestamentlicher Zeit*; Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 BCE* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979); Ulrich Duchrow, *Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action* (Utrecht: International Books with Kairos Europa, 1995); and Edith Rasell, *The Way of Abundance: Economic Justice in Scripture and Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022).

known to be a later (Deuteronomistic) construction. And when Deuteronomy speaks of separation from other peoples and their gods, the basic sense is, first of all, a rejection of their basic socio-economic order of injustice, enslavement and exploitation as a question of which god rules, not an ethnic separation.¹⁵⁰ However, in the post-exilic parts of Deuteronomy, the ethnic component plays a role insofar as those who remained in the land had mixed with the rest of the population. The new beginning with the returnees from Babylon was very vulnerable, so that family solidarity had to be strengthened in order to enforce a more just order.¹⁵¹ In any case, these texts cannot be used to justify the violent dispossession, expulsion and oppression of a people by today's extremely powerful State of Israel. Manfred Oeming summarizes his treatment of the topic of God and violence in the Old Testament this way:

Where God's violent action in its abysses, which are not really understandable, is to be made into a direct and immediate model for violent action by human beings, there must be theological objection. When, for example, violence against foreigners is called for or when some texts speak of an "ethnic cleansing" (especially Deut. 5, Joshua and Judges 13), when political crimes are to be derived or legitimized directly from religious ideas, then theological factual criticism is and remains necessary. Violence in God has its own laws, it is reaction to violation of human rights. Where human rights themselves are touched, there resistance is also necessary against the biblical texts!¹⁵²

Moreover, Marquardt's claim that Ishmael was disinherited is untenable.¹⁵³ Ishmael is also heir to the promises like Isaac – the land need not be mentioned here because they both live in different areas (Gen. 16). Ishmael is included in the covenant of circumcision even before Isaac and receives the promise of a great posterity (Gen. 17 and 25). Ishmael and Isaac coexist in friendship and brotherly harmony. They bury their father Abraham together. Hence, the justification of Marquardt's thesis about the Palestinians to be expelled (by force) and subjugated proves to be exegetically baseless. For a peaceful future of the peoples in West Asia, it

¹⁵⁰ Ton Veerkamp, *Die Welt Anders: Politische Geschichte der Großen Erzählung [The World Differently: Political History of the Grand Narrative]* (Hamburg: Argument/InkriT, 2012).

¹⁵¹ See Ruth Ebach, *Das Fremde und das Eigene: Die Fremddarstellungen des Deuteronomiums im Kontext Israelitischer Identitätskonstruktionen* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

¹⁵² Manfred Oeming, 'Gott und Gewalt im Alten Testament [God and Violence in the Old Testament]: Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen eines Exegeten,' in *Frieden als Gabe und Aufgabe: Beiträge zur Theologischen Friedensforschung* ed. Norbert Ammermann, Beate Ego, Hehnut Merkel (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2005, 85).

¹⁵³ See Thomas Naumann, *Ismael: Israel's Self-Perception in the Circle of Nations from the Descendants of Abraham* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).

is of central importance to overcome such misinterpretations of the Bible. The trialogue of the Abrahamic religions is of great significance for this future.

A detailed discussion of the land question is offered in the dissertation of Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac 'From Land to Lands.'¹⁵⁴ He seeks to demonstrate that the overall biblical theology of the land ultimately aims to reorient the whole earth toward God. The theology of the land recognizes 1) that the land mediates the presence of God and demands holiness, 2) that the land is included in the covenant, so it is never an unconditional possession, but always also a mandate, a mission, and therefore involves accountability, and that it is therefore the place where God's reign takes place and therefore God's agenda is to be implemented by his governors.¹⁵⁵ It is plain for all to see that the present situation in the territory of historical Palestine is far from this biblical vision. For it is characterized by oppression and lawless violence. This poses the same problem for Judaism as it does for imperialized Christianity. This is the reason why the Jewish liberation theologian Marc Ellis speaks of Constantinian Judaism with regard to Jews who support the policies of the present State of Israel.¹⁵⁶

This raises the question of how the real existing *State of Israel* is to be judged *theologically*. In terms of international law, the question can be answered clearly. The International Court of Justice has expressly rejected the idea of an original or ancient territorial property right.¹⁵⁷ This idea, if it were valid, would lead to perpetual war. But even if this idea were valid law, the ancient Israelites would not have been the first to settle today's Palestine, but rather the Canaanites, Phoenicians, and so on. It therefore should be clear even to theologians that today's State of Israel is not simply the continuation of the ancient Israelite community. That means that the existence of the present State of Israel is to be justified exclusively by international law, by which its laws and policies must also be judged.

But then one must ask what it means that the Synod of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland in 1980 said '...that the continued existence of the Jewish people, its return to the land of promise and also the establishment of the state of Israel are signs of God's faithfulness to his

¹⁵⁴ See Isaac Munther, *From Land to Lands, From Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-centered Biblical Theology of the Promised Land* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2015).

¹⁵⁵ Munther, *From Land to Lands*, 24.

¹⁵⁶ See Ellis, 'Repentant Enablers.'

¹⁵⁷ John B. Quigley, *The Case for Palestine: An International Law Perspective*. Revised Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 69.

people’¹⁵⁸ Of course, one can say as a statement of faith that ‘the continued existence of the Jewish people’ is a sign of God’s faithfulness. However, this is not tied to a particular country or even a state, but to the Torah. Nor is there any problem with the idea of, say, Martin Buber, as Jews settling and living in the land in peace with the Palestinian inhabitants. But it is theologically impossible to legitimize a particular state theologically as a direct action of God – quite apart from the violent and rights-denying policies of that state in contemporary Israel. To link the state with God’s faithfulness mixes people and state. The Rhineland Church urgently needs to correct this if it does not want to put itself on a par with Christian Zionists. An interesting approach to this is offered by Berthold Klappert in his book *Der Name Gottes und die Zukunft Abrahams: Texte on the Dialogue between Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. He sees both the original Zionism and the Palestinians’ struggle for self-determination as expressions of legitimate liberation movements, adding, ‘In this, the state of Israel, if it does not promote the statehood of the Palestinians, has no perspective in the land of promise.’¹⁵⁹ He agrees with the statement of Palestinian theologian Shihadeh Jadallah, who concludes ‘that the blessing of the chosen people of Israel and its land promise, which is still valid today, must also become a blessing for the Palestinian people and their land, if the permanent election of Israel is not to degenerate into nationalistic chosenness.’¹⁶⁰ And in this regard he refers to Frank Crüsemann when he states, ‘At no point do the [biblical] land promises say that Israel alone should or will live in the land.’¹⁶¹

The Violent Oppression and Disenfranchisement of Palestinians and its Theological Justification in the Light of Bonhoeffer’s Theology


In view of the violent disenfranchisement of the Palestinians and the state’s and Christian Zionist misuse of the Bible to legitimize this injustice, the churches are called upon today, to begin a process of study and confession that can lead to the declaration of a status *confessionis*. What might such a status *confessionis* look like in the spirit of Bonhoeffer? According to his mentioned criteria, the issue is both the systemic disenfranchisement of the Palestinians as ‘too little law and order’ and the state and Christian Zionist misuse of the Bible to legitimize

¹⁵⁸ Cornelia Breuer-Iff, ‘Zur Erneuerung des Verhältnisses von Christen und Juden [To Renew the Relationship Between Christians and Jews],’ 12 October 2005, Evangelische Kirche Im Rheinland <https://www.ekir.de/www/service/2509.php> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹⁵⁹ Berthold Klappert, *Der Name Gottes und die Zukunft Abrahams: Texte zum Dialog zwischen Judentum, Christentum und Islam [God’s Name and the Future of Abraham: Texts on the Dialogue between Judaism, Christianity and Islam]* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019), 204.

¹⁶⁰ Klappert, *Der Name Gottes und die Zukunft Abrahams*, 206.

¹⁶¹ Klappert, *Der Name Gottes und die Zukunft Abrahams*, 206.



this injustice ('too much state'). Here, as said, 'the *third* possibility is not just to bind up the wounds of the victims beneath the wheel but to seize the wheel itself.'¹⁶² According to Bonhoeffer, the church supports the state precisely in this way in exercising its true power, namely to provide law and order.

This is also the stance taken by the churches in Palestine when they point out in their Kairos document that commitment to the struggle to end oppression includes liberating the oppressors. Similarly, in his 2015 letter to the German Protestant Kirchentag, Archbishop Tutu wrote, 'Please join the ecumenical Kairos movement and raise your voice in public solidarity to liberate Palestine so that Israel can be free, too.'¹⁶³ Central to all efforts is how Israelis and Palestinians can build a shared future – for they only have a future together.

As shown above, the oppression of Palestinians by the State of Israel can only be implemented because the US, Germany, and the European Union make it possible politically, militarily, and financially. Hence, churches in the US and Germany, in particular, have every reason to join a process of confession and participate in resistance in solidarity.

This is precisely what the Palestinian 'Cry for Hope' has been calling for since 2020. This call has been answered in significant ways by various churches, to which we will return in a moment. Another step was taken in preparation for the 2022 World Council of Churches (WCC) assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany: in addition to the 'Cry for Hope,' Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice (GKJ) issued a dossier summarizing human rights organizations' reports on apartheid in Israel and recommending the declaration of status *confessionis* as a theological response.¹⁶⁴ In addition, the Anglican Church in South Africa prepared a resolution for the assembly calling on it to repudiate apartheid in Israel and act accordingly.¹⁶⁵ This motion was supported by sixteen churches, including the Churches of Norway and Sweden. Nevertheless, the voices from and for Palestine were systematically suppressed in the assembly under pressure from the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the German

¹⁶² Bonhoeffer, *The Church and the Jewish Question*, 265.

¹⁶³ Desmond Tutu, 'Fordert Öffentlich und Solidarisch Freiheit für Palästina, Damit auch Israel Frei Sein Kann,' 30 April 2005, Kairos Palestine, German trans. Dorothea and Gerard Dilschneider, https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Tutu_Brief_Palaestina_30.04.2015_deutsch-21.pdf (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹⁶⁴ Kairos Palestine and Global Kairos for Justice, *A Dossier on Israeli Apartheid*.

¹⁶⁵ Thabo Cecil Makgoba, 'Resolution Proposed by the Anglican Church of Southern Africa on the Holy Land,' 5 August 2022, <https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/KPS-OeRK-Protest-Anlage-ACSA-final-resolution-25AUG2022.pdf> (accessed 16 July 2024).

Foreign Office.¹⁶⁶ At least the EKD did not succeed in getting the term *apartheid* deleted from the final document. Rather, the disagreement was used to call on the WCC and the churches to look intensively at the reports of human rights organizations and the UN on Israeli apartheid and to come to a decision.¹⁶⁷

After the WWC assembly, the focus is now on organizing the process of study and confession in all parts of the world. The Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network Germany (KPS) has been preparing a process for this in all churches (synods) at all levels. On January 23, a letter was sent to all church leaders in which KPS offers its cooperation:

1. Four booklets have already been published including
 - 1) The Palestinian Cry for Hope and the Churches' Response
 - 2) The Apartheid System in Israel – An Urgent Call to Churches Around the World to Do Justice
 - 3) How Churches in USA and Europe Can Help Enforce International Law and Human Rights in Palestine/Israel?¹⁶⁸
 - 4) And a fourth booklet explains the different forms of (Christian) Zionism.¹⁶⁹
2. A model for a four-part congregational seminar was developed using the themes of the booklets.¹⁷⁰


¹⁶⁶ Ernst-Ludwig Vatter, 'EKD Distanziert Sich Vom Völkerrecht und Setzt den ÖRK Unter Druck, Die Stimme der Palästinenser zu Unterdrücken (EKD Distances Itself from International Law and Puts Pressure on the WCC to Suppress the Voice of the Palestinians),' Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network, <https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/KPS-OeRK-Protest-mit-Link.pdf> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹⁶⁷ World Council of Churches, 'Seeking Justice and Peace for All in the Middle East,' 11th Assembly, 31 August–8 September 2022, Karlsruhe, Germany, <https://www.oikoumene.org/de/resources/documents/seeking-justice-and-peace-for-all-in-the-middle-east> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹⁶⁸ Kairos Palestine and Kairos for Global Justice, 'Wie Können Kirchen in USA und Europa Helfen, Völkerrecht und Menschenrechte in Palästina/Israel Durchzusetzen?: Texte im Zusammenhang der Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rats der Kirchen in Karlsruhe,' Issue 3, *Ecumenical Process*, Israel as an Apartheid System? https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/KPS-Flyer_EUUSA-Kirchen-fuer-Voelkerrecht-2022.pdf (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹⁶⁹ See also a book available in German and will come out soon in English; Ulrich Duchrow and Mark Braverman (eds.), *Religionen für Gerechtigkeit in Palästina-Israel Band 2: Ökumenische Antwort auf Völkerrechtsverletzungen und Apartheid* (Otterstadt: Stiftung Hirschler, 2023).

¹⁷⁰ Kairos Palestine, Einladung an Gemeinden Zum Vierteiligen Seminar im Ökumenischen Prozess 'Israel – Ein Apartheidsystem?' Nach der ÖRK-Vollversammlung (Invitation to Congregations to the Four-part Seminar in the Ecumenical Process "Israel – An apartheid system?" after the WCC General Assembly,' <https://kairoseuropa.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/KPS-Einladung-vierteiliges-Seminar-2-S..pdf> (accessed 16 July 2024).

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3. As part of the post-assembly process, the issue of the BDS campaign, which many churches support, also needs to be revisited. After the WCC assembly, are the German churches ready to learn from their sister churches in global ecumenism? In particular, the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the USA responded to the ‘Cry for Hope’ with an exemplary confession in the structure of the Barmen Theological Declaration (1934).¹⁷¹
 4. In July 2022, the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA), at its General Synod, also passed a resolution recognizing, in particular, the apartheid character of the State of Israel.¹⁷² Meanwhile, several churches in England and Scandinavia have also followed the example of the US churches in the same direction.¹⁷³

One could summarize the voices of the cited churches and the call to the German ones to oppose ecclesiastically and politically the apartheid system of the State of Israel, which is justified by the Bible, in community with ecumenism, with a modified word of Bonhoeffer: “Only he who cries out for the Jews can sing the Gregorian chant,” Bonhoeffer once remarked to his ordinands.¹⁷⁴ In today's context, this could be translated as follows: ‘Only those who cry out for the Palestinians may also sing psalms.’

¹⁷¹ Shalom United Church of Christ, ‘Declaration for a Just Peace Between Palestine and Israel,’ New Haven, <https://www.globalministries.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/General-Synod-2021-Resolution-I-P.pdf> (accessed 16 July 2024).

¹⁷² Presbyterian Church USA, ‘On Recognition that Israel’s Laws, Policies, and Practices Constitute Apartheid Against the Palestinian People: 225th General Assembly, 2002, <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000773>, accessed 26 July 2024.

¹⁷³ The Cry for Hope and all the above-mentioned church responses to it are printed in the Kairos Palestine Solidarity Network, ‘The Palestinian Cry for Hope and the Churches' Response - Towards the WCC Assembly,’ ed. by Ulrich Duchrow (Kairos: Krummhörn-Uttum, 2021).

¹⁷⁴ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, Revised and ed., Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 441.

Transnational Christian Solidarity with Palestine: The Case of French Catholic Activism¹⁷⁵

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Abstract: Drawing on transnational studies and relational sociology, this essay sheds new light on the solidarity between a segment of French Catholicism and Palestinian Christian communities. For this purpose, the article engages with the discourse and practices of French Catholics concerning the Palestine question, as well as with social and political transformations within the Palestinian Christian population. The call for solidarity comes from a sector of Palestinian Churches and laity that is involved, since the late 1980s, in a Liberation Theology movement, and in the creation of alternative pilgrimage tours. These tours, called ‘living stone pilgrimages,’ lead both groups of actors to question their religious and national identity and the meaning of their commitment as Christians for justice and peace in Palestine.

Keywords: Transnational solidarity, Relational approach, ‘Left-wing Catholics,’ Christian Palestinians, ‘Living Stone pilgrimages’

¹⁷⁵ This article is an updated version of an article originally published in French: Caterina Bandini, ‘Catholiques Français et Chrétiens Palestiniens : Pour Une Sociologie Relationnelle de la Solidarité,’ *Les Cahiers d’EMAM* 32 (2020), <https://journals.openedition.org/emam/2787> (accessed 5 July 2024). I am grateful to Cécile Leca for her help with the translation of the first draft in English.

The solidarity that links a part of the French Catholic world to Christian Palestinians has religious, political and historical arguments.¹⁷⁶ It is the product of a work of co-construction that members of the clergy and activists have undertaken both in France and in Palestine. In order to shed light on it, it is necessary to study the discourses and practices of French Catholics regarding the Palestine question, as well as the transformations that the Christian communities in Palestine have undergone. Indeed, the views on both sides of the Mediterranean are both informed by each other, with commitments ‘over there’ always reflecting concerns ‘here.’

In this context, solidarity movements constitute privileged objects of study for relational analysis, an approach that aims to account for the dynamic aspect of social processes and historical changes, thus avoiding the pitfalls of methodological nationalism and culturalism.¹⁷⁷ The relational approach has been put forward by historian Zachary Lockman in his seminal work on Palestinian-Jewish working-class solidarity in late Ottoman and Mandate Palestine.¹⁷⁸ It is also central to the study of transnational solidarity with Palestine,¹⁷⁹ that includes ‘Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity,’¹⁸⁰ ‘transcolonial identification’ between Maghreb and Palestine,¹⁸¹ the politics of solidarity connecting several anticolonial movements (Algeria, Vietnam, Libya, Palestine, Mexico),¹⁸² and French Arabs’ support for the Palestinian cause.¹⁸³ Scholars of settler colonial studies are particularly involved in drawing comparisons between Palestine and other settler colonial contexts.¹⁸⁴

This article focuses on the current relationship between the marginal sphere of left-wing Catholic laity and clergy in France, and a part of the Christian elites in Palestine, all of whom are involved in the establishment of transnational solidarity networks.¹⁸⁵ The

¹⁷⁶ Although I use the term ‘Christian Palestinians’ here, it is important to note that the debate around the order of use of the religious and national identities (e.g. ‘Christian Palestinians’ or ‘Palestinian Christians’) remains alive among the Christian population in Palestine.

¹⁷⁷ Mustafa Emirbayer, ‘Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,’ *The American Journal of Sociology* 103.2 (1997), 281–317 (282–91).

¹⁷⁸ Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arabs and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹⁷⁹ Sorcha Thomson and Pelle Valentin Olsen (eds.), *Palestine in the World: International Solidarity with the Palestinian Liberation Movement* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

¹⁸⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, ‘From the River to the Sea to Every Mountain Top: Solidarity as Worldmaking,’ *Journal of Palestine Studies* 48.4 (2019), 69–91.

¹⁸¹ Olivia C. Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in the Era of Decolonization* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹⁸² Alina Sajed and Timothy Seidel (eds.), ‘Anticolonial Connectivity and the Politics of Solidarity: Between Home and the World,’ *Postcolonial Studies* 26.1–2 (2023).

¹⁸³ Abdellali Hajjat, ‘Les Comités Palestine (1970-1972): Aux Origines du Soutien de la Cause Palestinienne en France,’ *Revue d’Études Palestiniennes* (2006), 74–92; Olivia C. Harrison, *Natives Against Nativism: Antiracism and Indigenous Critique in Postcolonial France* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

¹⁸⁴ See Caterina Bandini and Marion Lecoquierre (eds.), ‘Le Colonialisme de Peuplement: Applications Empiriques et Approches Critiques,’ *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée* (forthcoming).

¹⁸⁵ The expression ‘left-wing Catholics’ refers to the movement starting in the 1930s with the launch of the journal *Esprit* (‘Mind’), whose goal was to ‘disassociate’ the Catholic world from the right political spectrum, and to create a political alternative that would break free of the dichotomy between the Right and Catholicism, and the Left and atheism. In the wake of Vatican II (1962-1965), ‘left-wing Catholics’ were particularly active in 1968, before contributing to the victory of François Mitterrand in 1981 French presidential election. Although Protestants also took part in this movement, I have retained here only Catholics. As there are class differences between the intellectual bourgeoisie and the working-class in this social sphere, the expression ‘left-wing Catholics’ should therefore be understood not as a homogeneous group, but rather as a typical ideal ‘that has taken various forms over the course of history.’ Guy Coq, ‘Chrétiens de Gauche: Une Dénomination Problématique,’ *Transversalités* 140 (2017), 13. See also André

‘living stones’ pilgrimages, which are a mix of pilgrimage, activism and tourism, constitute a paradigmatic example of this. At a time when solidarity actions in favor of Christians in the Arab world are multiplying in France, one would be tempted to include this phenomenon in the same trend.

It was following the capture of the cities of Mosul and Karakoch by Daesh in particular, in the summer of 2014, that the French mobilized in favor of the Christians of Syria and Iraq on social networks, creating associations or coming to the aid of Christian refugees.¹⁸⁶ From a sociological point of view, most of these mobilizations are right-wing and accompanied by a nationalist, confessional, and identity-based discourse with Islamophobic overtones. The rapprochement with the ‘Christians of the East’¹⁸⁷ reflects the very French fears of a decline in religious practice, and the ‘Islamization’ of society, subjects largely favored by the right’ and the far-right.¹⁸⁸ The latter has recuperated this cause, as shown by the creation in 2013 of the association *SOS Chrétiens d'Orient* (SOS Christians of the East) by activists close to the far-right party, The National Rally (formerly known as The National Front).¹⁸⁹

In France, solidarity with the Palestinians is not in itself a prerogative of the left political spectrum. Historically, right-wing groups, such as the journal *Défense de l'Occident* (In Defense of the West), have engaged in support for the Palestinian cause based on theological anti-Judaism as well as racial and political anti-Semitism.¹⁹⁰ Holocaust denial has had adherents on the far-right, such as Robert Faurisson, and on the far-left, such as the bookshop and publishing house *La Vieille Taupe* (The Old Mole).¹⁹¹ At the same time, far-left anti-racist groups are accused of abandoning the fight against anti-Semitism,¹⁹² recently co-opted by the far-right as the 2024 European and legislative election campaigns have shown.¹⁹³ But the specificity of the Palestinian cause can be found in its inclusion, since the beginning of the 1970s, and in particular after the events of ‘Black September,’ in the anti-colonial movement carried by the French left.¹⁹⁴ Within the Christian world, it was

Rousseau, ‘Petite Bourgeoisie Intellectuelle et Classe Ouvrière dans la Configuration des Chrétiens de Gauche en France (1962-1978),’ *Histoire@Politique* 30.3 (2016), 98–113.

¹⁸⁶Jean-Christophe Peaucelle, ‘La France et les Chrétiens d’Orient,’ *Études* 12 (2017), 7–18.

¹⁸⁷The expression is commonly used in French to designate the Christians of the Arab world.

¹⁸⁸Camille Lons, ‘Une Compassion Très Politique Pour les Chrétiens d’Orient,’ *Orient XXI* (2016), <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/une-compassion-tres-politique-pour-les-chretiens-d-orient>, 1300 (accessed 5 July 2024).

¹⁸⁹Alexis Artaud de La Ferrière, ‘Ces Jeunes Chrétiens Partis en Syrie,’ *Esprit* 9 (2017), 28–31.

¹⁹⁰Theological anti-Judaism accompanied the spread of political and racial anti-Semitism in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Developed by the Church from the first century onward, the anti-Judaism thought known as ‘supersessionism,’ or replacement theology, is based on the idea that with the coming of Christ, God would have replaced the ancient election of the Jews with that of the Christians, seeing in the former’s diasporic exile the punishment willed by God for their sins, namely, the fact of not having accepted the Messiah. It was only with the Second Vatican Council that the Catholic Church laid the foundations for overcoming this theology. On this point, see Léon Poliakov, *Histoire de l’Antisémitisme. 1, L’âge de la Foi* (Paris: Seuil, 2018); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

¹⁹¹Gisèle Sapiro, ‘Le Négationnisme en France,’ *Revue de Synthèse* (2004), 217–228.

¹⁹²See Illana Weizman, *Des Blancs Comme les Autres? Les Juifs, Angle Mort de l’Antiracisme* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2022).

¹⁹³Joseph Confavreux, ‘L’antisémitisme, Fléau et Piège de Campagne,’ *Mediapart* (2024), <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/200624/1-antisemitisme-fleau-et-piege-de-campagne> (accessed 5 July 2024).

¹⁹⁴Denis Sieffert, ‘L’extrême-gauche Française et la Question Palestinienne,’ *Matériaux Pour l’Histoire de Notre Temps* 96.4 (2009), 59–62. A recent expression of this phenomenon is the foundation, in Summer 2023, of *Tsedek!* (‘justice’ in Hebrew), a ‘Jewish decolonial collective’ aiming at fighting institutional racism in France, apartheid and occupation in Israel-Palestine. The collective has been particularly vocal

above all the 'left-wing Catholics' who, recognizing themselves in the social Catholicism of liberation theology and in the declarations of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), translated the Palestinian cause into terms of anti-colonial struggle.

In addition to this political heritage, there is the specific condition of the Christian communities in Palestine. Christian Palestinians played a very active role in the national liberation movement: two of the largest Palestinian organizations, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), were founded by Christians. They were also very active during the First *Intifada*, through the theorization of non-violent resistance¹⁹⁵ and the revolt against the taxation system imposed by Israel, led by the Christian town of Beit Sahour.¹⁹⁶

Yet the number of Christians dropped dramatically following two waves of emigration in 1948 and 1967, corresponding to the first two Arab-Israeli Wars. It is estimated, for example, that the Jerusalem area lost 70% of its Latin-rite Christian inhabitants between 1949 and the early 1970s.¹⁹⁷ In 2019, the Christian presence was estimated at about 49,000 individuals living in East Jerusalem (10,000) and the West Bank (39,000), barely 2% of the total Palestinian population in these territories. The number of Christians within the State of Israel was 120,000, or 15% of the Palestinian population of Israel and 2% of the total Israeli population, and less than 1,000 Christians lived in the Gaza Strip before the outbreak of the war in October 2023.¹⁹⁸ In general, the significant decrease in the number of Christians in the Middle East should be seen primarily as the result of natural demographic changes,¹⁹⁹ plus, in the case of Palestinians, opportunities for emigration due to high levels of education, and Church, community, and family networks abroad.²⁰⁰

Islamic fundamentalism is far from being the primary threat to the Christian presence in Palestine. Tensions with the Muslim majority do exist, but they are largely due to the intra-Palestinian divisive efforts of the State of Israel. The relatively peaceful cohabitation of Christians and Muslims in Palestine, and the emergence of left-wing anti-Zionism in France have made it difficult for solidarity associations with ties to the far-right to recuperate this cause.²⁰¹ While most of them convey a religious and civilizational reading of the conflicts in the Middle East, my ethnography shows that left-wing Catholic activists tend to minimize inter-community tensions in order to peddle the image of a Palestinian people united in resisting Israeli occupation and colonialism, and to convey the message that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a religious one.

The objective of this article is therefore twofold. On the one hand, it aims to offer a relational perspective on the solidarity of this part of the French Catholic world with the Christian communities and Churches of Palestine. On the other hand, it tries to reflect on the significance of this solidarity, which is affirmed in the name of the Christian faith,²⁰²

since 7 October 2023 against the war on Gaza. See their manifesto Tsedek!, 'Manifesto,' <https://tsedek.fr/manifeste-en/> (accessed 11 July 2024).

¹⁹⁵Mubarak Awad, 'Non-Violent Resistance: A Strategy for the Occupied Territories,' *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13.4 (1984), 22–36.

¹⁹⁶Sossie Andézian, 'Palestiniens Chrétiens et Construction Nationale,' *Confluences Méditerranée* 66.3 (2008), 66–67.

¹⁹⁷Anthony O'Mahony (ed.), *The Christian Communities of Jerusalem and the Holy Land: Studies in History, Religion and Politics* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 102–104.

¹⁹⁸Justice and Peace Commission, *Is Peace Possible? Christian Palestinians Speak* (Jerusalem/Beit Jala: Latin Patriarchate Printing Press, 2019).

¹⁹⁹Bernard Heyberger, *Les Chrétiens d'Orient* (Paris: PUF, 2017), 103.

²⁰⁰Andézian, 'Palestiniens Chrétiens et Construction Nationale', 59–60.

²⁰¹The association *SOS Chrétiens d'Orient*, for example, is active in Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and Pakistan, but not in Palestine.

²⁰²As shown in the title chosen for the brochure '*Le Défi de la Paix: Au Nom de Leur Foi, des Chrétiens s'Engagent pour Plus de Justice en Palestine et en Israël*' (The Challenge of Peace: In the Name of their

but which is also distinguished from other forms of solidarity specific to the Catholic right-wing circles. Is it a form of solidarity that is properly political, and in which the religious dimension has only a marginal place? Or is it, on the contrary, a form of confessional solidarity, motivated by theological arguments and directed exclusively towards the Christian community?

The empirical data was collected during doctoral research focusing on religious ‘peace’ and human rights activism in Israel-Palestine,²⁰³ particularly within the Jewish and Christian communities.²⁰⁴ The fieldwork for this research was carried out primarily between November 2016 and October 2019; additional missions were carried out between May 2022 and June 2024. The theme of solidarity is central to this research, as local groups insist on the need to create and consolidate transnational solidarity networks. The ethnographic survey of Christian organizations combines biographical interviews,²⁰⁵ participant observations during ‘living stones’ pilgrimages, and the analysis of the magazine *Le Journal de la Paix* (The Peace Magazine), published by the French Catholic NGO *Pax Christi France*.

I will first trace the rise of a militant Catholic anti-Zionism in France to suggest a historical continuity between the Catholic left and the mobilizations in favor of the Palestinian cause. I will then look at the Palestinian Liberation Theology movement born within the Christian communities in the Occupied Territories, and its reception in France. The third and final section will be devoted to the so-called ‘living stones’ pilgrimages organized from France. They constitute a good case study in a relational analysis framework, as they lead the two groups of actors to question their religious and national identity and the meaning of their commitment, as Christians, for justice and peace in Palestine.

The Historical Roots of French Catholic Solidarity with Palestine

Since the creation of the State of Israel, the Palestine question has become a battleground where both internal political affairs and foreign policy issues are played out. In the specific case of France, the ‘eldest daughter’ of the Catholic Church and historical protector of the Holy Places, as well as a country hosting the largest Jewish and Muslim communities in

Faith, Christians Commit Themselves to More Justice in Palestine and Israel) published by *CCFD-Terre Solidaire, Justice et Paix, Pax Christi France* and *Secours Catholique-Caritas France* in January 2013.

²⁰³ In this article, I will use both the terms ‘Israel-Palestine’ and ‘Palestine-Israel’ without distinction, and without giving them any particular political meanings.

²⁰⁴ Caterina Bandini, ‘La Religion Pour Langage: Genèse et Sociologie de l’Espace des Organisations Religieuses pour la Paix (Israël-Palestine, 1987-2019)’ (PhD. thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2022).

²⁰⁵ Between November 2016 and October 2019, I conducted four interviews with activists from French Catholic organizations (*Secours Catholique, Pax Christi France*); two interviews with French people employed in Catholic institutes in Jerusalem (Custody of the Holy Land, *École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem*); and twenty-one interviews with Christian Palestinians engaged in solidarity networking (authors of the *Kairós Palestine* document, liberation theologians, members of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, activists from Christian organizations). To this corpus should be added two interviews with the Counselor for religious affairs at the French Consulate General in Jerusalem at the time, as well as informal interviews with French pilgrims. Additionally, I conducted five interviews with Italian pilgrims and those who accompanied them, and one with the Secretary General of the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, also Italian. Four more interviews with Palestinian theologians and activists were conducted in May-June 2022, and some interviewees were interviewed again in 2023 and 2024.

Europe, it goes without saying that when one speaks of Israel-Palestine ‘there is a mixture of internal French problems and foreign affairs.’²⁰⁶

The French are first and foremost the heirs of a long colonial history in the Middle East, of a ‘tradition that is unabashedly in favor of what can reinforce the place of Catholicism and of France in this region.’²⁰⁷ From the middle of the 19th century, French congregations settled in the Holy Land and fulfilled evangelizing and humanitarian roles through educational and health activities.²⁰⁸ As far as their attitude towards the Jewish people and then towards the State of Israel is concerned, ‘French Catholics have come a long way,’²⁰⁹ as shown in the ‘traditional Catholic judeophobia’ widespread particularly in Eastern France, and which led the deputy Maurice Barrès, among others, to take explicit anti-Dreyfusard positions.²¹⁰ The emergence of the Palestinian question, however, divided the Christian world between the concern to protect the Holy Places, French religious institutes, and the Christian presence in the Holy Land – by virtue of France’s ‘specific organic bond’ to the ‘Christians of the East’²¹¹ – and the need to engage in the fight against anti-Semitism in the aftermath of the Holocaust. From 1947 onward, there was a massive mobilization of the French Catholic press in favor of Jewish immigration to Palestine, going so far as to justify Zionist terrorism. The only exception was the weekly *Témoignage Chrétien* (Christian Account) which, on the contrary, stated already in August 1947, ‘The Arab cause is just.’²¹² With the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli War in 1948, the clandestine supply of arms to the Zionist forces was made official.²¹³ Throughout the ‘golden age’ of Franco-Israeli relations (1948-1967) and, in particular, from 1954 onward, France engaged in very close military collaboration with Israel.²¹⁴

Between 1948 and 1967, the humanitarianization of the Palestinian cause contributed to the representation of Palestinians as victims receiving international aid.²¹⁵ It was following the 1967 War that a more political sensitivity towards the Palestinians developed in the French Catholic world. Although it was not until the end of the 1980s that a theology of Palestinian liberation appeared and French Catholics adopted its arguments, in December 1967 the monthly magazine *Lettre* (Letter) associated the Palestinian with the image of the poor man loved by the God of the Psalms and the Gospel. At Christmas 1969, the editorial of *Témoignage Chrétien* was entitled ‘Jesus Christ: A Palestinian Refugee.’ These two

²⁰⁶Dominique Trimbur, ‘Les Relations Franco-Israéliennes, 1948-2004,’ *Outre-Terre* 9.4 (2004), 405.

²⁰⁷Dominique Trimbur, ‘La Conquête de Jérusalem et les Illusions Perdues des Catholiques Français,’ *Orient XXI* (2018), <https://orientxxi.info/l-orient-dans-la-guerre-1914-1918/la-conquete-de-jerusalem-et-les-illusions-perdues-des-catholiques-francais>, 2207 (accessed 5 July 2024).

²⁰⁸At the beginning of the British Mandate for Palestine, most of the Catholic educational institutions were French. See Karène Sanchez-Summerer, ‘La Réception et les Impacts de l’Action Éducative et Sanitaire des Sœurs de Saint-Joseph et des Sœurs de Sion par les Populations Musulmanes Rurales et Urbaines en Palestine Ottomane et Mandataire (1870-1940),’ *Histoire et Missions Chrétiennes* 22.2 (2012), 163–195.

²⁰⁹Martine Sevegrand, *Israël Vu par les Catholiques Français: 1945-1994* (Paris: Karthala, 2014), 5.

²¹⁰Michel Leymarie, ‘Sur l’Antisémitisme de Maurice Barrès (1): De l’Enfance à la Veille de l’Affaire Dreyfus,’ *Archives Juives* 52.1 (2019), 125.

²¹¹Interview, in French, with Luc Pareydt, Counselor for Religious Affairs at the French Consulate General, Jerusalem, 12 December 2018. The interviewee refers to the Capitulations, political and commercial treaties signed in 1535 by Francis I and Suleiman the Magnificent, which by the same entrusted France with the right over the French Latin Catholic communities, and over the pilgrims coming from France.

²¹²Sevegrand, *Israël Vu par les Catholiques Français*, 42.

²¹³Frédérique Schillo, ‘La France et le Règlement Onusien de la Première Guerre Israélo-arabe (Mai 1948-Juillet 1949),’ *Relations Internationales* 127.3 (2006), 32.

²¹⁴The Franco-Israeli friendship was also linked to geopolitical considerations, in particular to the desire to consolidate French imperial policy to counterbalance the British. See Trimbur, ‘Les Relations Franco-Israéliennes,’ 408–409.

²¹⁵Stéphanie Latte-Abdallah, ‘Regards, Visibilité Historique et Politique des Images sur les Réfugiés Palestiniens Depuis 1948,’ *Le Mouvement Social* 219.2–3 (2007), 66.

magazines led the anti-Zionist fight within the French Catholic world from 1968 onward.²¹⁶ With the Six-Day War, the Palestinians had become fighters who fought and resisted on their land, therefore getting their agency back. In France, against the backdrop of decolonization and the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with most Arab countries, now former colonies, the oppression and dispossession of the Palestinian people began to be read as the direct consequences of the Zionist colonial project. It was at this point that intellectuals such as Maxime Rodinson adopted a settler colonial reading of the situation, in line with the Palestinian account.²¹⁷ While the comparison with Algeria was still vivid in the minds of many French Catholics who lived through the era of decolonization, the Palestinian cause was indeed part of the emerging movement of Franco-Arab solidarity.²¹⁸

No one will thus be surprised to learn that a French militant and left-wing Catholic, Georges Montaron, played a leading role in the organization of the First World Conference of Christians for Palestine, which opened in Beirut on 7 May 1970. The French represented one third of the Christian participants (out of a total of 2,000), who came from 37 different countries.²¹⁹ Montaron's opening speech was clear: Christians should 'respond to a call' made by the Palestinians and by the Christians of the Arab world. He invited people to point out the hypocrisy of the Zionist project's biblical justification, as the Zionists, Montaron declared, 'for the most part, read the word of God with the eyes of faithless men.'²²⁰ Launched at the end of the conference on 10 May 1970, the Beirut Appeal called for the evacuation of the Occupied Territories and the dismantling of 'Zionist structures,' affirming the support of the 400 signatories 'as Christians' for the Palestinian resistance, "one of the most significant expressions [they wrote] of the struggle for humanity and for freedom."²²¹ At this time, the Franco-Palestinian Medical Association of Paris was created (1974), which was to merge in 2001 with the France-Palestine Association in the new France-Palestine Solidarity Association (AFPS), one of the most significant solidarity groups still active today.

These solidarity organizations are grouped together in the 'Platform of French NGOs for Palestine,' created in 1993 'in the context of the Oslo Agreements' and bringing together 39 associations, including 24 members and 15 observers.²²² Christian associations, both Catholic and Protestant, have joined the Platform, including *Cimade*, *Chrétiens de la Méditerranée* (Christians of the Mediterranean), the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development-*Terre Solidaire* (CCFD), *Secours Catholique-Caritas France*, the International Movement for Reconciliation, and *Pax Christi France*. Others, such as Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture-France (ACAT-France), are among the observer members. According to an activist representing *Pax Christi* on the Platform's board of administration at the time of our interview, four main movements coexist within the Platform: 'Catholic, humanitarian, trade union, and Third-Worldist.'²²³ The links between

²¹⁶ Sevegrand, *Israël Vu par les Catholiques Français*, 143–45.

²¹⁷ See Maxime Rodinson, 'Israël, Fait Colonial?' *Les Temps Modernes* 253bis (1967), 17–88; Maxime Rodinson, *Israel. A Colonial-Settler State?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973); Fayez Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* (Beyrouth: Research Center Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965).

²¹⁸ In 1967, Louis Terrenoire and Lucien Bitterlin launched the Franco-Arab Solidarity Association, of which Georges Montaron was named vice-president. Lucien Bitterlin is also the founder of the France-Algeria association (1963), and of the *France-Arab Countries* magazine (1975).

²¹⁹ Cécile Hamsy, *Georges Montaron: Le Roman d'Une Vie* (Paris: Ramsay, 1996). The book was accessed in digital version. All quotes come from Chapter XIV 'Palestine: A Aopic of Passion.'

²²⁰ Hamsy, *Georges Montaron*. Chapter XIV.

²²¹ Hamsy, *Georges Montaron*. Chapter XIV.

²²² Plateforme des ONG Françaises pour la Palestine, 'Who are we?' (2014), https://plateforme-palestine.org/Who-are-we?var_mode=calcul (accessed 5 July 2024).

²²³ Interview in French, Paris, 10 October 2017.

them are focused on the ideas of human rights, peace, and justice, as well as the contacts established with Palestinian left-wing and far-left organizations since the 1980s. The Platform came to support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign on the basis of the assimilation of the State of Israel to the apartheid regime in South Africa.²²⁴ The mobilization against apartheid is moreover a determining factor for an entire generation, as this *Pax Christi France* activist, born in 1958, testifies:

For me, yes [the memory of the South African boycott is vivid], because I was a high school student at the time and it was... I had the impression that the youth was almost more committed than the adults. We were experiencing such a militant fever [...], we were completely in it, and I remember that it was really a very strong youth movement... The seizures we could have at home if we had the misfortune to see *Outspan* oranges on the table!²²⁵ And I think our parents stopped buying *Outspan* oranges so that their teenagers wouldn't throw a fit. I mean, in my house it was like that.²²⁶

Pax Christi France was the first French Catholic organization to join the BDS campaign in 2017.²²⁷ Initially, the association was founded in 1945 with the aim of working for Franco-German reconciliation in the context of a European construction. At that time, Jewish-Christian rapprochement was a central theme, as shown in the first issues of the *Journal de la Paix* which was very attentive to the question of interreligious dialogue in the wake of the encyclical *Nostra Aetate* (1965).²²⁸ Here again, it was following the Six-Day War that the Jewish question was associated to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and that a pro-Palestinian discourse began to appear. The editors, while affirming that 'there can be no question of driving Israel out of the "Promised Land" once again,' were clearly on the side of the Palestinians, 'who have been forced for twenty years to live the enclosed life of refugee camps.'²²⁹ Their March 1970 dossier is thus devoted to the Middle East with Yasser Arafat on the front page of the magazine (see Figure 1). In November of the same year, Palestine was again on the front page with an eloquent title 'A People Without Land: The Palestinians' (see Figure 2). In an article compiled from readers' letters, 'often devoted to the Palestine question,' and from a survey of members of the editorial board, a specifically Christian argument is used: 'Christians [...] feel that it is Christ who is being crucified

²²⁴ Claude Léostic, 'Le Mot de la Présidente' (2019), <https://plateforme-palestine.org/Le-mot-de-la-Présidente-5557> (accessed 5 July 2024). Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) is a campaign launched in 2005 at the initiative of 172 Palestinian civil society organizations calling for a boycott of the State of Israel, modeled on the boycott of South Africa.

²²⁵ *Outspan* is a brand of oranges produced in South Africa that became one of the symbols of the anti-apartheid movement in Europe.

²²⁶ Interview in French, Paris, 2 February 2017.

²²⁷ The decision was made public in a press release on 10 January 2017, and the membership text was published in the booklet, 'What is BDS? A Nonviolent Action by Palestinian Civil Society,' *Thinking and Living Peace* 10, February 2017. It states 'this position only commits the *Pax Christi France* Near East Commission, and not the movement as a whole.'

²²⁸ *Journal de la Paix* (Peace Journal) was first a quarterly, then a monthly publication, founded in 1951. I have consulted the issues published between 1951 and 2010 which are kept at the organization's headquarters in Paris. The encyclical *Nostra Aetate* is considered one of the most important documents produced by the Second Vatican Council. It deals with the relationship between Christianity and all non-Christian religions, but the question of the ties to the Jewish people is dealt with in greater detail. If the accusation of deicide is not explicitly rejected, the declaration nevertheless marks an important step in the rapprochement between the Catholic Church and Judaism.

²²⁹ *Journal de la Paix* 180, May 1970, 2.

again.²³⁰ It is precisely for this reason that ‘Palestine [they conclude] challenges the Christian conscience.’²³¹ After 1967, the Palestinians would no longer be ‘refugees,’ ‘marginalized’ or ‘social cases,’ but ‘a people that has become aware of its existence, suffering injustice, and gradually organizing [...] its “resistance”’ (See Figure 3).²³²



Figure 1: *Journal de la Paix*, No. 178, March 1970, Private collection of Pax Christi France. Photo Credit Caterina Bandini.



Figure 2: *Journal de la Paix*, No. 184, November 1970, Private collection of Pax Christi France. Photo Credit Caterina Bandini.

In 1978, a first eleven-day trip was organized to Israel-Palestine, entitled ‘*Pax Christi* Encounter-Trip “In the Land of Abraham.”’²³³ It included ‘meetings with the inhabitants’ as well as a ‘study of their problems’ (See Figure 4).²³⁴ A few issues later, we find the account of one of the 17 participants, who insists on the non-touristy aspect of the trip, made instead of questions, concerns, and encounters that have allowed her to discover the ‘complexity of political and religious problems’ of the land.²³⁵ The practice of pilgrimage as a journey of encounter, an experience that is both spiritual and political, is however not specific to Palestine: *Pax Christi* has organized memorial trips to Lebanon to spend

²³⁰ *Journal de la Paix* 184, November 1970, 18

²³¹ *Journal de la Paix* 184, November 1970, 18

²³² *Journal de la Paix* 184, November 1970, 18.

²³³ *Journal de la Paix* 256, January 1978, back cover.

²³⁴ *Journal de la Paix* 257, February 1978, back cover.

²³⁵ *Journal de la Paix* 266, January 1979, 23.

Christmas in the Christian village of Saidā,²³⁶ as well as to the nuclear test sites in Nevada, USA.²³⁷

International solidarity is nourished by ‘encounters from over there’ that give birth to ‘the desire to get involved here,’ the pilgrims write, once back in France.²³⁸ If such networks were established, however, it was above all thanks to relations with the local population, which called for solidarity and then managed the influx of pilgrims. Like other left-wing Catholic publications, such as *Témoignage Chrétien*, the *Journal de la Paix* was the receptacle of messages from committed Palestinian clerics who were able to express their analyses and invite French Catholics to go to Palestine, as Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah did, to discover ‘the real situation’ and to bear ‘witness to the truth.’²³⁹



Figure 3: *Journal de la Paix*, No. 184, November 1970, p. 18, Private collection of Pax Christi France. Photo Credit Caterina Bandini.

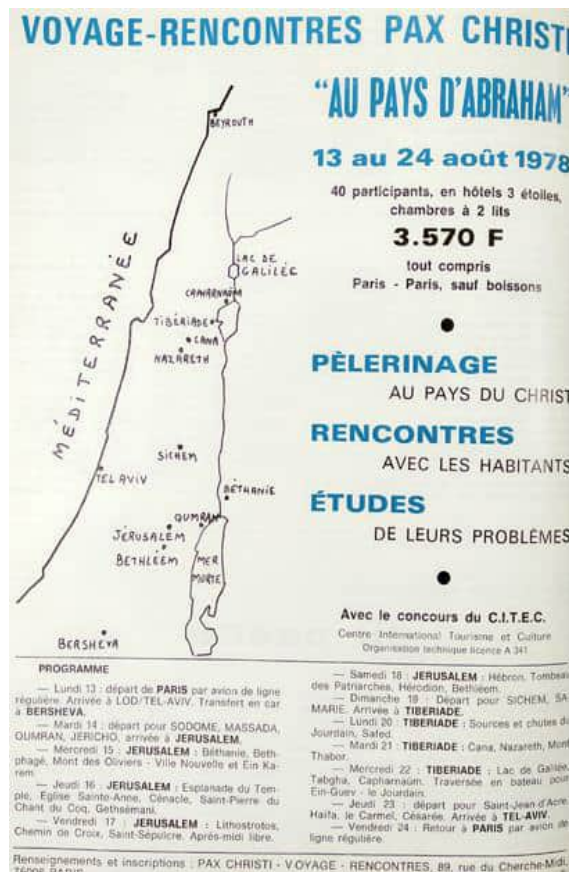


Figure 4: *Journal de la Paix*, No. 257, February 1978, back cover, Private collection of Pax Christi France. Photo Credit Caterina Bandini.

- 236 *Journal de la Paix* 339, February 1986, 13.
- 237 *Journal de la Paix* 394, January 1992, 6.
- 238 *Journal de la Paix* 496, June 2007, 36.
- 239 *Journal de la Paix* 395, February 1992, 2.

The Call of Christian Palestinians to Transnational Solidarity

The massive emigration of Christian Palestinians has contributed to the internationalization of the Palestinian cause. From the end of the 1980s, Palestinian clerics trained in Europe and the United States became theologically involved in the struggle for national liberation.²⁴⁰ For his part, Sabbah undertook a genuine process of Arabization and Palestinianization of the Latin Catholic Church – which only the Melkite Church had begun during the Mandate era.²⁴¹ Born in 1933 in Nazareth, Michel Sabbah was the first and so far only Palestinian Catholic patriarch in history from 1987 to 2008.

The development of a Palestinian contextual theology has to be seen in relational terms, while there are debates within the Palestinian community itself about the term to be used to designate the movement. Some authors speak of *lahût at-taharrur al-falastini* (Palestinian Liberation Theology), in reference to Latin American theology; others prefer to speak of *lahût siyâqî* (contextual theology), in order to distance themselves from the latter, which is associated with Marxism; others, in the same spirit, use the formula *lahût falastini* (Palestinian theology). Regarding the content, two theological movements have largely contributed to the development of Palestinian theology: Jewish messianic Zionism and Christian Zionism, born within the Protestant movement.²⁴² Representatives of messianic political theology, like Rabbis Kook, father and son, called for the expulsion of the ‘Arab invader’ from the land of Israel based on the incitement to ethnic cleansing of the land of Canaan (Deut 7:1–11).²⁴³ Since 1967 and, in particular, since the founding in 1974 of *Gush Emunim* (The Bloc of the Faithful), this mentality has served as the ideological basis for the colonization of the Palestinian territories. Furthermore, Christian Zionist theology has gained considerable weight within the North American evangelical churches as well as on US foreign policy, as evidenced by President Donald Trump's decision to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem in December 2017. In the millenarist current of Christian Zionist eschatology, the divine mission of every Christian is to bring the Jews of the Diaspora back to the Holy Land to rebuild the kingdom of Israel, for only the return of the ‘Land of Israel’ to the Jewish people will guarantee the return of Christ.²⁴⁴

The Anglican Reverend Naim Ateek's *Justice, and Only Justice*, published in English in the United States in 1989, is commonly regarded as the manifesto of Palestinian Liberation Theology. Born in 1937 in Bisan (now Beit She'an located within the State of Israel) in the northern Jordan Valley, Ateek, who in 1985 became the pastor of the Anglican Episcopal congregation at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, notes the triple trauma the *Nakba* brought on the faithful after 1948: a *Nakba* that was spiritual, human, and identity-

²⁴⁰See Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989); Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²⁴¹Karène Sanchez-Sommerer, ‘Linguistic Diversity and Ideologies among the Catholic Minority in Mandate Palestine: Fear of Confusion or a Powerful Tool?’ *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43.2 (2016), 202.

²⁴²See Samuel Jacob Kuruvilla, *Radical Christianity in Palestine and Israel: Liberation and Theology in the Middle East* (London/New York: IB Tauris, 2013); Nur Masalha and Lisa Isherwood (eds.), *Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel. Indigenous, Contextual, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

²⁴³Nur Masalha, ‘Reading the Bible with the Eyes of the Philistines, Canaanites and Amalekites: Messianic Zionism, Zealotocracy, the Militarist Traditions of the Tanakh and the Palestinians (1967 to Gaza 2013)’, in *Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel. Indigenous, Contextual, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Nur Masalha and Lisa Isherwood (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 57–114 (75–92).

²⁴⁴See Jan Nederveen-Pieterse, ‘The History of a Metaphor: Christian Zionism and the Politics of Apocalypse,’ *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 75 (1991), 75–103.

based.²⁴⁵ Ateek's work is part of the current of postcolonial criticism which, inspired by the thought of Edward Said, challenges the historical value of biblical texts.²⁴⁶ The so-called 'minimalism' current emerged in the field of biblical studies in the late 1980s to 'recognize and reconfigure the central role of the biblical text in the European colonial and imperial project.'²⁴⁷ In his book, Ateek explains that a Palestinian Liberation Theology is needed because few scholars have focused on the biblical and theological aspects of the situation.²⁴⁸ He believes that this theology should be biblically based and not associated with Marxism, thus distancing itself from the South American model. Palestinian Christians would need a new hermeneutic, centered around the figure and word of Christ that is theologically and biblically grounded: it is not a matter of expressing the change in the nature of God between the Old and New Testaments, but of having a universalist understanding of it. Ateek therefore invites his Christian readers to recognize that, while the whole Bible is valid, not all parts of it have the same value and authority for Christians.²⁴⁹

These same arguments were taken up, twenty years later, by a document made public by the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Holy Land, based on the model of the *Kairós* of South Africa. Entitled '*Kairós* Palestine: A Moment of Truth: A word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering,' it is inspired by the landmark document of contextual theology written in 1985 by a majority of black clergy to denounce apartheid.²⁵⁰ The document is based on the premise that the occupation concerns the Church and by extension the entire community of the faithful, namely, the 'living Church' (*al-kanîsa al-hayya*).²⁵¹ For one of the authors, a Palestinian Catholic priest, this 'document that has become a movement.'²⁵² Written and signed by clergy and lay people, the document is also a proof of ecumenism on the part of the different components of the Christian community: it is thanks to contextual theology that 'an ecumenical movement specific to the Churches of the Holy Land is gradually taking shape.'²⁵³ The central issue in *Kairós*, as in other Palestinian Liberation Theology texts, is that of the occupied land, to the extent that it is possible to distinguish between South American theology, focused on the issue of poverty and human dignity, and Palestinian theology, a 'theology of the land.'²⁵⁴ The document thus affirms that the land of Israel-Palestine is not the absolute and unique property of the Jewish people: *nu'min anna li-arddinâ risâla kûniyya shâmila* (we believe that our land has a universal vocation). Thus, God's promise to the Jewish people does not involve any form of exclusivity, neither theological nor, even less, territorial promise: *al-wa'd bil-ardd lam*

²⁴⁵Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation. The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), 25–29.

²⁴⁶See Valérie Nicolet-Anderson, 'Perspectives Postcoloniales en Exégèse Biblique: Introduction aux Théories Postcoloniales dans le Domaine Biblique,' *ThéoRèmes* 4 (2013).

²⁴⁷Nur Masalha, 'Reading the Bible with the Eyes of the Philistines,' 97.

²⁴⁸Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 1.

²⁴⁹Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 83.

²⁵⁰Gerald West, 'Tracing the 'Kairos' Trajectory from South Africa (1985) to Palestine (2009): Discerning Continuities and Differences,' *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 143 (2012), 4–22.

²⁵¹For the full document in Arabic, see Kairos Palestine, 'A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering, 11 December 2009, <https://kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/Arabic.pdf> (accessed 5 July 2024).

²⁵²Interview in Italian, Ramallah, on 27 February 2018.

²⁵³Sossie Andézian, 'Formation des Identités Palestiniennes Chrétiennes: Églises, Espace et Nation,' *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 149 (2010), 194.

²⁵⁴Jamal Khader, 'Émergence d'une Théologie de la Terre en Palestine,' Speech at *Les Amis de Sabeel – France colloquium*, 24 November 2018, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-4FhIW2J7gur2BMvjJp1wkytLmqCdDj3/view> (accessed 5 July 2024).

yakun yawman 'unwânan li-barnâmiy siyâsiyy (the promise of the land was never the basis of a political agenda).

Kairós Palestine has had a wide international circulation thanks to the work of its authors, and other Christian organizations. Every year, for example, a *Kairós International* conference is held in Bethlehem, bringing together representatives of several Churches, personalities from Palestinian political life – Christians and Muslims – Christian theologians from abroad (South Africa, India, Europe, and the US), and finally an audience composed mainly of pilgrims, volunteers, and activists from Christian organizations in solidarity with Palestine. In 2018, the conference was attended by around 200 people (See Figure 5).²⁵⁵



Figure 5: Opening of the conference, ecumenical prayer for Gaza and for justice in Palestine, Bethlehem Melkite Church, 6 December 2018. Photo credit Caterina Bandini.

Among the other Palestinian organizations, let us mention at least four. The non-governmental organisation *Alternative Tourism Group*, founded in 1995 in Beit Sahour by Rifat Kassis, author and coordinator of the *Kairós* initiative, has published a significant number of booklets and brochures inviting pilgrims to visit the Holy Land in the spirit of the document.²⁵⁶ Three other associations are dedicated to welcoming pilgrims in the same spirit: *Dar Annadwa Adduwaliyya/International Center of Bethlehem*, founded in 1995 by the Lutheran Reverend Mitri Raheb, who is also one of the authors of the *Kairós* document, and a prominent contextual theologian; *Al-Liqâ'*, an association for Islamic-Christian dialogue founded in 1982 in Jerusalem; and *Sabeel*, an ecumenical center for liberation theology, founded by Ateek in 1990 in Jerusalem, with headquarters in the Shu'afat neighborhood (East Jerusalem) and another in Nazareth. It is notably thanks to *Sabeel* that the *Kairós* movement has become known in France. The organization has a vast network of 'friendly' associations in a dozen countries around the world. Founded by a Protestant pastor in 2010 in Avignon, the association *Amis de Sabeel-France* (Friends of Sabeel-

²⁵⁵ Field journal, 6 December 2018.

²⁵⁶ See Come & See, 'A Call From Palestinian Christians: A Journey for Peace and Justice: Guidelines for Christians Contemplating a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land' (2010); 'Listening to the Living Stones: Towards a Theological Explorations of *Kairós* Pilgrimages for Justice' (2016); 'Theology of Pilgrimage' (2016), <http://atg.ps/study-center/publications> (accessed 5 July 2024).

France) aims to disseminate and publicize the theological reflection of Christians in Palestine-Israel, to support *Sabeel* and the Christian Palestinian community, and to fight Christian Zionism within the Protestant churches. *Les Amis de Sabeel* systematically translates and distributes the weekly 'prayer wave' proposed by *Sabeel Jerusalem* – also published by *Pax Christi France* – as well as other documents and works published by *Sabeel*, *Kairós* or by Palestinian theologians. The association also organizes trips to Israel-Palestine for French Christians and to France for Christian Palestinians so that they can share their stories.

These exchanges are made easier by the presence, within the *Kairós* and *Sabeel* networks, of people who were educated in French missionary institutions. Among our interviewees, an activist and former employee of *Sabeel Jerusalem*, although Armenian Orthodox, was educated by the Sisters of Zion in Jerusalem, and even taught at the *Collège des Frères* in Beit Hanina (East Jerusalem), a school of the *La Salle* educational network. Another activist from *Sabeel Nazareth* was sent to study in a missionary school in Jaffa that was placed under the supervision of the French Embassy after 1948 and where she obtained her baccalaureate. Others continued their studies in France: a Jesuit priest involved in the Justice and Peace Commission of the Latin Patriarchate studied for three years in France and Sabbah obtained a doctorate in Arabic philology at the Sorbonne in Paris. These few elements of the life paths of the respondents illustrate the impact of international mobility on the structuring of solidarity networks. French-speaking, these very same people regularly take part in meetings and conferences organized in France by *Chrétien de la Méditerranée*, *Les Amis de Sabeel* and *Pax Christi France*, and express themselves in the French Christian press.

Political Pilgrimage: A New Paradigm to Transnational Christian Solidarity

Today, the term 'living stones' (*al-hijâra al-hayya*) is increasingly used to refer to the Christian Palestinians who, by their permanent presence in extremely difficult living conditions, ensure the functioning of the Holy Places deserted by pilgrims.²⁵⁷ The term, taken from the New Testament,²⁵⁸ became popular thanks to a British charity, *The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust*, and is now used to refer to Christian solidarity tours with Palestinians that take place under various sponsorships.²⁵⁹ The promotion of the Christian presence in Palestine has accompanied the development of cultural and political tourism in the occupied territories, as shown, among other things, by the opening of a Bethlehem museum in 2015 dedicated to Palestinian Christian heritage, identity, and culture (it is now closed). Here again, one could find the expression of 'living stones,' and the idea of 'authenticity of the land and the people,' associated with an exhibition of photographs of the Christian inhabitants of Bethlehem in the 19th century.²⁶⁰

The 'living stones' have become the stages of a new pilgrimage called 'of justice,' 'incarnate,' 'of transformation,' or 'of hope.' The official creation of these itineraries by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem dates back to 1986 and increased considerably during the mandate of Sabbah. The identification of pilgrims as 'witnesses to the sufferings of

²⁵⁷Andézian, 'Formation des Identités Palestiniennes Chrétiennes,' 194–95.

²⁵⁸See 1 Peter 2:4-5, NIV: 'As you come to Him, the living stone, rejected by men but chosen and precious in God's sight, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'

²⁵⁹Jackie Feldman, 'Abraham the Settler, Jesus the Refugee: Contemporary Conflict and Christianity on the Road to Bethlehem,' *History & Memory* 23.1 (2011), 74.

²⁶⁰Field journal, 20 May 2017.

Christians' on their return to Europe has not failed to provoke a metamorphosis of the figure of the pilgrim, who is no longer in search of the sacred but calls himself a 'sacred being.'²⁶¹ Between 2017 and 2019, I have followed three groups of French Catholic pilgrims attached to the association *Secours Catholique* (Catholic Aid), as well as a Protestant group.²⁶² The 'living stones' itineraries are *ad hoc* tours intended to help pilgrims experience the everyday life of the occupation. They differ from traditional pilgrimages in two ways: the attention paid to meeting the local population, and the visit to key places of the occupation and of Palestinian resistance (refugee camps, checkpoints, communities threatened with demolition or surrounded by the Wall: see Figure 6 and 7). Pilgrims meet Christians as well as Muslims and, to a lesser extent, Israeli Jews committed to solidarity with the Palestinians. The Christian population, however, tends to be overrepresented, especially the French speakers.



Figure 6: A group of pilgrims in front of the Wall in Bethlehem March 2018. Photo Credit Caterina Bandini

The Church, in particular, seems to be a place of encounter and sharing: the itinerary includes at least one Mass celebrated in a Palestinian parish in the Occupied Territories in Beit Jala, Aboud, Rafidia, or Jifna, among others. The Latin liturgy provides a framework for interaction where pilgrims and worshipers come together in a shared ritual space. Usually, the parish priest delivers a speech in French to the pilgrims, which is

²⁶¹ *Journal de la Paix* 482, November 2003, 75.

²⁶² Respectively in April 2017, February-March 2018, April 2018, and March 2018 for the Protestant pilgrimage which I do not take into account in this article. To these groups must be added four Italian Catholic pilgrimages organized by the Italian section of *Pax Christi* in which I participated between summer 2015 and summer 2019.

intended to bear witness to the tragedy that Christians in Palestine are experiencing and to salute the efforts of the pilgrims who have chosen to attend Mass, and to ‘protect not only the dead stones but the “living stones” as well,’ as the parish priest of Jifna told one group.²⁶³



Figure 7: A group of pilgrims at the entrance to the Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem, March 2018. Photo Credit Caterina Bandini.

The process of integrating a political dimension into the spiritual experience is a form of politicization through faith. This can be seen not only as a metamorphosis of the figure of the pilgrim, but of the pilgrimage itself, which goes from being an individual experience of the sacred to a collective experience of solidarity. Historically, pilgrimages have always been feared by clerical authorities, because pilgrims expect salvation from their own individual practice instead of institutional rituals. Similarly, these groups do not entrust their support to political bodies, but rather advocate for a generalized awareness within transnational civil society that should lead to the multiplication of grassroots initiatives. These two dimensions of protest against the hegemonic religious discourse and of political criticism are thus intertwined during the pilgrimage. The group leaders, whether religious or lay, are supposed to ‘translate’ the reality observed by the pilgrims, and to transmit the emotional experience (See Figure 8). In the groups I observed, the spiritual guide always sought to provide a critical reading of the Bible in order to legitimize his or her political opinions and to sensitize the less politicized pilgrims. A French priest who accompanied *Secours Catholique* groups for three years reflected on his experience as a guide and the effects the trips produced on the participants:

The primary goal of these trips was to discover the local reality in a broader sense than just the places of worship. So, what it changed was that [...] the people who came on the trips with me [...] it allowed them to reflect not just on the question of Palestine, but on the question of a life of faith [...], of a commitment in society. [...] And there I really saw the

²⁶³

Field journal, 4 March 2018.

fruits because the people with whom I am still in contact later became involved in France and not only on Israeli-Palestinian issues. It opened them up to a commitment as Christians in society, to migrants, to poverty, to social issues. [...] This point of contact of attention to a situation in a spiritual dimension invited them to look more precisely at their lives. For some, it engaged them for the first time, for others it reassured them that they must commit themselves [...]. The public that came [...] were people who were already asking questions about international solidarity [...].²⁶⁴

Not all pilgrims are committed to the Palestinian cause before their departure. The guides especially address those who are not, by deconstructing certain biblical stories: they explain that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem but in Nazareth, that the Holy Sepulchre is not located in the original site of Christ's tomb, and that the Stations of the Cross and most of the Holy Places are of dubious historical authenticity. This work is the foundation on which the politicization of the Palestinian cause is built, for it is precisely the non-literal exegesis of the gospel narratives that makes it possible to link the episodes of Jesus' life to the history of the Palestinian people: this is how Jesus can become a Palestinian refugee.



Figure 8: A guide imitates the gesture of Pope Francis during his 2014 visit to the Holy Land, Bethlehem, March 2018. The Pope reportedly stopped at the Separation Wall and took 'the same position as at the Wailing Wall,' March 18. Photo Credit Caterina.

The priest quoted above always asked that at the end of each trip, the participants write a 're-updated' Way of the Cross, inspired by their encounters and experiences in Palestine. According to him, 're-updating' would mean taking the text and seeing 'what it wants to tell us.' 'We don't do politics for the sake of doing politics,' he explained to one group, 'We do it because it's written in the Gospel and it's a part of our faith!'²⁶⁵ The Stations of the Cross are thus a real catalyst in the process of politicization through faith. Formalized by *Sabeel* in a booklet published in 2008 and updated in the context of the 2023–2024 War on Gaza, this approach has led to the production of guidebooks in which each canonical station is associated with an episode in Palestinian history and accompanied by a testimony – 'Jesus is condemned to death' becomes 'the *Nakba* of 1948;' 'Jesus carries his cross' becomes 'the

²⁶⁴ Interview in French, Paris, 17 December 2018.

²⁶⁵ Field journal, 5 April 2017.

refugees' and so on.²⁶⁶ Ultimately, the whole journey becomes a political journey. The entire pilgrimage becomes a Way of the Cross, a journey through the heart of Palestinian suffering, staged specifically for the pilgrims.

During the trip, two practices in particular materialize the solidarity: listening to testimonies and buying Palestinian products. The testimonies are indeed moments of meeting with Palestinians engaged in non-violent resistance to the occupation, actors of the associative world, farmers who oppose the expropriation of their lands, priests and liberation theologians, journalists, and intellectuals. These moments of interaction are extremely codified – the Palestinian witness must convey to the audience both the harshness of their condition and the firmness of their resistance, what is commonly known in Palestine as *sumûd*.²⁶⁷ Through the sharing of personal experiences and sufferings, the witnesses invite the pilgrims to use their words as tangible proof to support their cause. This is how Sabbah sees the potential of testimonies:

Pilgrims walked by without seeing and we told them: don't walk by without seeing! See that there is someone who is suffering and perhaps you can do something about it. Each according to their possibility, of course. A simple pilgrim cannot do much, but there are pilgrims who have power in their society who can do something, who must be aware that not everything is normal here, that there is an evil that must be cured.²⁶⁸

It is sometimes difficult for pilgrims to imagine what they might do when they return to France: 'We don't have much power,' exclaimed one participant, 'and then she (an Israeli Jewish activist the group had met with) also says that the solution must be a more political one!'²⁶⁹ However, there is one area in which the contribution of these pilgrimages seems more direct and that is economy. Although marginal, these tours have contributed to the development of tourism in the Occupied Territories, after long years of crisis during which the Holy Places were deserted because of the clashes of the Second *Intifada*. Buying 'ethically' means buying Palestinian. While traditional religious objects, such as crowns of thorns, are not even considered, the purchase of Palestinian handicrafts (olive oils, spices, ceramics, etc.) gives pilgrims a sense of 'usefulness.' The religious tourism industry has also adapted – purely religious objects have been reinvented through the prism of the conflict and the occupation, as shown by the olive wood nativity scenes where the Magi cannot reach the Holy Family because of the Separation Wall on sale in several souvenir stores in Bethlehem. On the Wall itself, one can find references to the impact of the barrier on the Holy Family's ability to move, as in the Right to Movement's #MaryCantMove campaign launched in 2016, aiming to highlight that Mary and Joseph wouldn't have been able to make their famous journey today (See Figure 9). A tourism sector linked to the occupation has developed in the urban centers of the West Bank. The opening in Bethlehem in March 2017 of the hotel installed by British artist Banksy, the Walled Off Hotel, located opposite the Wall and advertised as the hotel 'with the worst view in the world,' is a good example of this. Inside, there is a small museum that describes the history and functioning

²⁶⁶For an updated version of the Stations of the Cross booklet see, Sabeel, 'Holy Week with Gaza,' March 2024, <https://sabeel.org/holy-week-gaza/> (accessed 5 July 2024).

²⁶⁷ This term, which does not have an exact translation in English, indicates attachment to the land and resilience. On the performativity of the interactions between Palestinians and pilgrims, see Caterina Bandini, 'Donner la Parole' aux Palestiniens.ne.s. Normativité et Tensions dans le Dispositif du Témoignage Direct en Israël-Palestine,' in *Donner la Parole aux 'Sans-voix'? Construction Sociale et Mise en Discours d'un Problème Public*, eds. Benjamin Ferron, Émilie Née, and Claire Oger (Rennes: PUR, 2022), 89–95.

²⁶⁸Interview in Italian, in Jerusalem, 01 May 2017.

²⁶⁹Field journal, 2 March 2018.

of the occupation regime. The site mirrors other sites of memorial tourism related to armed conflict, such as those found in former war zones in Central and Eastern Europe – the sites of extermination of Jews in Poland or the Levachovo Memorial Cemetery in Russia, dedicated to the victims of Stalinism, to name a few examples.²⁷⁰



Figure 9: The Right to Movement's hashtag #MaryCantMove on the Separation Wall, Bethlehem, June 2022. Photo Credit Caterina Bandini.

Conclusion

Unlike the missionaries, whose goal was first evangelization and then the protection of local Christians, the new actors of French solidarity seem less committed *to* Christians than they are *as* Christians. The participants in these 'living stones' pilgrimages indeed mobilize religious resources to present themselves as Christians: cross around their necks, Gospel in their hands, they pass themselves off as traditional pilgrims on their arrival at Tel Aviv airport. But their objective is to discover the reality of the Israeli occupation, and to become spokespersons upon their return to France for the struggle of all Palestinians, Christians, and Muslims who are not absent from the arguments of the Catholic solidarity associations. Indeed, if they meet many Christians, the pilgrims do not seek to establish a hierarchy of suffering among Palestinians. Nevertheless, these commitments have a strong left-wing Christian base, rooted in social Catholicism, and militant anti-Zionism. This differentiates them from most of the mobilizations that have taken place in France since 2014 in favor of the 'Christians of the East,' and that are linked to right-wing identity politics.

On the Palestinian side, the discourse on national unity is essentially performative. One of the authors of *Kairós* assured us that this is a 'Palestinian document, coincidentally

²⁷⁰ See Delphine Bechtel and Luba Jurgenson (eds.), *Le Tourisme Mémoriel en Europe Centrale et Orientale* (Paris: Éditions Pétra, 2013).

written by Christians,²⁷¹ but this claim needs to be qualified. Contextual theology is distinctively Christian-based, as evidenced by its lack of recognition among the Muslim population. This movement plays on the asset of Palestinian Christianity – its transnational network – to mainly oppose the advance of Christian Zionism in the world. Before being a point of reference for all Palestinians, as clerics and theologians insist, it seems to be first and foremost a way to ‘place the Palestinian cause in the international theological arena.’²⁷² The movement is nonetheless undergoing some changes, with the emergence of a new generation of theologians more interested in empowering local communities and engaging in dialogue with the Muslim population, than in international advocacy.²⁷³ A more explicitly decolonial connotation is also emerging in Palestinian liberation theology.²⁷⁴

The Christians of Palestine have become a matter more of symbol than of numbers, the latter having moreover begun to value this condition.²⁷⁵ The assumption of responsibility for the ‘living stones’ pilgrimages thus shows that the local Christian population is far from being a helpless victim of international tourism.²⁷⁶ This is not just a process of patrimonialization of Christian sites. Through the ‘living stones’ itineraries, the memory of the occupation and resistance is reactivated so that upon returning to their country, pilgrims become actively involved in the defense of Palestinian rights. The Christian Palestinians have thus succeeded in taking advantage of the solidarity movements, which they have actively contributed to structuring in areas that are neglected by the classic pilgrimage circuits because they are considered dangerous. By choosing multi-sited research and a relational analysis framework, by being attentive to the reciprocal influence of those who bring solidarity and those who manage it, it was finally possible to restore the agency of the Christian Palestinians as solidarity entrepreneurs.

Finally, in the current context of genocidal war in Gaza, despite the brutal halt to tourism and pilgrimage in the West Bank and the severe repression faced by Palestinians throughout Palestine-Israel, Palestinian Christians remain mobilised in the wake of their historical theological-political commitments.²⁷⁷ In France, however, advocacy is struggling to attract Christian support against a backdrop of rapprochement between the right and far-right, and Israel, all the more so since the attacks on 7 October 2023. Widespread Islamophobia and the perception of Israel as a Western state are leading many Christians on the right to distance themselves from their Palestinian co-religionists. Left-wing Christians thus appear to be increasingly marginalised, even though minority voices continue to mobilise, in the name of their faith, to call for a ceasefire.²⁷⁸

²⁷¹ Interview in Arabic and English, Jerusalem, 28 February 2018.

²⁷² Marc H. Ellis, ‘Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel and the Struggle for Peace and Justice,’ in *Theologies of Liberation in Palestine-Israel: Indigenous, Contextual, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Nur Masalha and Lisa Isherwood (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 47.

²⁷³ See John S. Munayer and Samuel S. Munayer, ‘Decolonising Palestinian Liberation Theology: New Methods, Sources and Voices,’ *Studies in World Christianity* 28.3 (2022), 287–310.

²⁷⁴ See Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2023).

²⁷⁵ Andézian, ‘Formation des Identités Palestiniennes Chrétiennes,’ 195.

²⁷⁶ Glenn Bowman, ‘The Politics of Tour Guiding: Israeli and Palestinian Guides in Israel and the Occupied Territories,’ in *Tourism and the Less-Developed Countries: Issues and Case Studies*, ed. by David Harrison (London: Belhaven Press, 1992), 131.

²⁷⁷ Caterina Bandini, ‘Le Keffieh et la Croix: Les Défis Politiques et Théologiques du Christianisme Palestinien,’ *Bulletin de l’Observatoire International du Religieux* 49, June 2024, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/bulletin/le-keffieh-et-la-croix-les-defis-politiques-et-theologiques-du-christianisme-palestinien/> (accessed 5 July 2024).

²⁷⁸ See for example the publications of the left-wing Christian collective *Anastasis*, founded in March 2022, <https://collectif-anastasis.org/> (accessed 5 July 2024).



Liberation Theology Hermeneutics: How James Cone and Naim Ateek Interpret the Scripture

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Abstract: This article compares the hermeneutics of James Cone and Naim Ateek, founders of Black Liberation Theology and Palestinian Liberation Theology. Due to their contexts of oppression, both men learned new methods for reading and interpreting Scripture that prioritizes the perspective of the marginalized. Cone's hermeneutic focuses on whether a text is life-giving for the oppressed, while Ateek's focuses on Jesus and love. While both men applied their hermeneutics to numerous texts, this article focuses on the Exodus, Jesus in Nazareth, and the cross. In addition, this article examines how each understands violence and nonviolence as methods of resistance to oppression and how their understanding of God's love influences their perspectives. The article concludes by stating that Christians need both Cone's and Ateek's theology as these two men's positions correct and complement each other.

Keywords: Black Liberation Theology, Palestinian Liberation Theology, James Cone, Naim Ateek, Violence, Nonviolence, Oppression, Hermeneutics



Background and Purpose

In 2022, I had the opportunity to visit Israel-Palestine for the first time: first in Israel as a pilgrim and then in Palestine as a student at Bethlehem Bible College's Institute of Peace and Justice. While there, I realized that Jesus is 'on the other side of the wall,' standing with the oppressed; if I wanted to understand and follow Jesus, I needed to listen to and learn from those on the other side. This revelation led me to James Cone and Naim Ateek. While this article can benefit liberation theologians, it is written for those like me who need to hear the voice of Jesus anew through the voices of the oppressed. As Cone has stated, 'the time has come for white Americans to be silent and listen to black people.'²⁷⁹ This article is my attempt to listen.

While some write about the connection between Black Liberation Theology and Palestinian Liberation Theology, I have not discovered anyone who put these two theologies in conversation through the writings of those who first articulated them. This article hopes to fill in this gap as many Christians worldwide are turning away from the toxic theologies they once held and looking for a theology that looks more like Jesus.

Introduction

James Cone was born in 1938 in Arkansas. His negative experiences growing up in the South as a minority and his positive upbringing in the Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church led him into ministry and academia where he eventually developed Black Liberation Theology.

Naim Ateek was born in 1937 in Beisan, Palestine, and in 1948 his family was forcibly relocated to Nazareth by the Israeli military. Ateek eventually became an Anglican priest, earned his doctorate, and founded Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, which seeks to help those who are suffering under occupation. Ateek is known as the founder of Palestinian Liberation Theology.

²⁷⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 24.

Hermeneutics

Before analyzing each man's hermeneutic, it is important to briefly explain Cone and Ateek's general view of Scripture. While both men highly value Scripture, neither accepts the belief that Scripture is inerrant and infallible. Cone believes that even if God inspired the authors of Scripture, those authors were fallible.²⁸⁰ He also stresses that whether or not one believes in the infallibility of Scripture, one's interpretation is not infallible.

Ateek agrees with Cone that fallible humans wrote the Scriptures but also highlights how Scripture often contradicts itself. These contradictions exist because some authors had a primitive view of God, viewing God as tribal and exclusive, while others had a more universal, inclusive understanding.²⁸¹ This leads Ateek to claim that not all Scripture is the Word of God, but only those texts that point to Jesus should hold this designation.²⁸²

James Cone's Hermeneutic

To understand Cone's hermeneutic, it is necessary to understand his perspective on Jesus. Jesus is the revelation of God and is, therefore, the starting point for any talk about God.²⁸³ Because Jesus was born at the bottom, Cone's liberation perspective when reading Scripture is from the perspective of the marginalized, the weak, and the helpless,²⁸⁴ which leads Cone to demand that Jesus is Black.²⁸⁵ By examining Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, Cone concludes that Jesus 'is black because he was Jewish.'²⁸⁶ In the incarnation, Jesus' Jewishness connected Jesus to God's liberating activity in the Exodus story, which shows that Jesus 'was not a "universal" human but a particular Jew who came to fulfill God's will to liberate the oppressed. His Jewishness establishes the concreteness of his existence in history.'²⁸⁷ Jesus' crucifixion represents 'the particularity of divine suffering in Israel's place,' while the resurrection represents 'the universality of divine freedom for all who "labor and are heavy laden."²⁸⁸ The resurrection means that God's identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his

²⁸⁰ Total Life Development Movement, "A Conversation with James Cone," 14:52-15:17.

²⁸¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 101.

²⁸² Ateek, *A Palestinian theology of Liberation*, 141-142.

²⁸³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 23.

²⁸⁴ Total Life Development Movement, "A Conversation with James Cone," 12:10-12:20.

²⁸⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40-41.

²⁸⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 123.

²⁸⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 109.

²⁸⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 124.

Jewishness but applies to all who fight for the liberation of humanity.²⁸⁹ To summarize, because Jesus was an oppressed Jew (tying Jesus to the Exodus), lynched by the powerful, and raised back to life, Jesus is now forever present with the oppressed, which in Cone's context, are African Americans, hence the claim that Jesus is Black.

Cone's understanding of Jesus is tied to Cone's understanding of Black Power. Not only is Jesus present with the oppressed, but he is also with those, Christian or not, who are fighting against injustice. For Cone, Black Power is the movement that embodies the gospel of the Black Jesus. In fact, Cone states that 'Christianity...is Black Power.'²⁹⁰ According to Cone, Black Power is Black people affirming their worth and power through any means necessary to say yes to what is worthwhile and no to whatever the oppressor says.²⁹¹ Cone believes that even in its most extreme forms, Black Power, because of its fight against injustice, is not the antithesis to Christianity, but rather 'Christ's central message to twentieth-century America.'²⁹²

Cone's belief that Jesus *is* Black and Christianity *is* Black Power has given him a hermeneutic: 'If the doctrine is compatible with or enhances the drive for black freedom, then it is the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the doctrine is against or indifferent to the essence of blackness as expressed in Black Power, then it is the work of the Anti-Christ.'²⁹³ Cone believes that the way to judge whether one's interpretation is correct is by whether or not it has 'life-giving power for the poor and the oppressed'²⁹⁴ According to this perspective, Black Power's fight against oppression is not just consistent with the gospel but is actually an expression of the gospel.²⁹⁵ Through this hermeneutic, Cone does not accept anything that 'contradicts the black demand for freedom now.'²⁹⁶ On the other hand, if the teaching exalts the Black drive for freedom, self-determination, and dignity, these are accepted as from Christ.

Naim Ateek's Hermeneutic

As Palestinian Christians sought to make sense of their context, many faced a faith crisis. Some believers found it difficult to read the Scriptures 'that once was their source of comfort but is now used by some as the

²⁸⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 124.

²⁹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, xxvi.

²⁹¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 6-7.

²⁹² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1.

²⁹³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 80.

²⁹⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, xxx.

²⁹⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 136.

²⁹⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 136.

book that justifies their misery.²⁹⁷ These Christians found themselves asking, ‘How can the Old Testament be the Word of God in light of the Palestinian Christians’ experience with its use to support Zionism?’²⁹⁸ This led some Palestinians to develop a hermeneutic that would address the texts used to justify their oppression, with the following criterion: 1) the hermeneutic must be based on a strong foundation in both the Bible and theology to prevent it from becoming a means to solely oppose Zionists and blindly support Palestinian beliefs and biases, and 2) it must accurately reflect God's unchanging nature.²⁹⁹

This resulted in two hermeneutical lenses – Jesus and love. Jesus’s life and teachings were chosen because of the belief that Jesus perfectly reveals the nature and heart of God.³⁰⁰ Thus, Jesus is the hermeneutic ‘through which Christians can examine, test, evaluate, and determine the authentic word of God for them and differentiate it from what is unauthentic and meaningless to their life of faith.’³⁰¹ This hermeneutic also applies to interpreting current events.

To apply this hermeneutic accurately, one must understand Jesus. First, Jesus was born under Roman occupation, lived under occupation, and was executed by the occupying powers.³⁰² Although Jesus’s contemporaries responded to the occupation in various ways, Jesus chose

‘(1) to stand for justice and truth [...] to resist without using evil methods; (2) to rise above the ways of the world without abandoning involvement and commitment to the poor and oppressed; (3) to seek the humanity of the oppressor without losing integrity by appeasement or collaboration; and (4) to love and worship God without adhering to a strict and closed religion.’³⁰³

Second, Jesus revealed that God is love. God is a parent who loves all equally. God is merciful and just, whose love has no boundaries. Because God’s nature is love, God is nonviolent, even in the face of suffering and death;³⁰⁴ therefore, Palestinian Christians reject any image of Jesus that reflects war, violence, or terrorism.³⁰⁵

²⁹⁷ Tienou and Yeh, *Majority World Theologies*, 283.

²⁹⁸ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 79.

²⁹⁹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 79.

³⁰⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 80.

³⁰¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 44.

³⁰² Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 92-93.

³⁰³ Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, 95-96.

³⁰⁴ Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, 96.

³⁰⁵ Ateek, “Suicide Bombers,” 23.

With this knowledge, one is then able to pose questions to the text:

- Is what I am reading in line with the spirit of Christ and does it agree with the knowledge, nature, and character of God that has been revealed to us in and through Jesus Christ?³⁰⁶
- Is the way I am hearing this the way I have come to know God in Christ? Does this fit the picture I have of God that Jesus has revealed to me?³⁰⁷

If the answer is *no*, then the text in question has no authority over the Christian. The text becomes authoritative only if the answer is *yes*. Ateek claims that ‘the Old Testament continues to be the word of God whenever and wherever it conforms and complies with the Christ hermeneutic and God’s love hermeneutic that embraces all people equally’³⁰⁸

Intrinsically connected to the Jesus hermeneutic is the love hermeneutic, which has two aspects: love of God and love of neighbor.³⁰⁹ The love of God hermeneutic asks, ‘Does this text reflect God’s love for all people as revealed in Jesus?’³¹⁰ In order to apply the love principle, and before thinking about loving one’s neighbor, the question ‘Who is God?’ must be explored because one’s view of God necessarily impacts one’s view of neighbor.³¹¹ For example, if God is exclusive, then the answer about the neighbor will also be exclusive, and vice-versa. Since Jesus revealed God’s nature, Palestinian Christians turn to Jesus for their answer, and ‘Jesus turns to us and gives us the parable of the Prodigal Son,’ which answers the question this way: God is a loving parent who loves all of his children equally; love is the essence of God’s being.³¹²

The love of neighbor hermeneutic applies ‘loving the neighbor as oneself’ to the text.³¹³ In this case, it is important to ask the question, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ which is answered in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). Ateek says,

Jesus opens up the concept of neighbor to mean not just our kin, that is, our fellow Jew, but to include all people, and in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:43-48) Jesus radically commands us to love even our enemies.

³⁰⁶ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 45.

³⁰⁷ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 82.

³⁰⁸ Ateek, “A Response to Dr. Yohanna Katanacho,” 1.

³⁰⁹ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 45.

³¹⁰ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 51.

³¹¹ Ateek, “Who Is My Neighbour,” 157.

³¹² Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 144, 146.

³¹³ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 61.

From then on, at least for Christians, whenever the question of who is our neighbor comes up, we have a definite and reliable answer from the source—Jesus himself.³¹⁴

Again, if a particular text fails the love hermeneutic, then, according to Ateek, the message is not God's word to Christians today.

Key Texts and Symbols

Through the application of their respective hermeneutics, Cone and Ateek have found within the Scriptures texts and symbols with which each identifies. This section will focus on three such texts and symbols; however, though Cone and Ateek share some texts and symbols, they sometimes have differing views on what makes each significant.

The Exodus

The Exodus event has historically been the key text for liberation theologians; Cone is no exception. He believes God 'chose to grant a self-disclosure' in this historical event, and 'it was granted to an oppressed people.'³¹⁵ It is in this self-disclosure Israel came to know and understand God as the liberator of the weak and oppressed.³¹⁶

The Exodus event also reveals that God is involved in history.³¹⁷ God is not unconcerned or ignorant of humanity's suffering; instead, God saw the plight of Israel and elected them *because* they were oppressed,³¹⁸ condemned the oppressor, and through Moses, declared the release of the captives.³¹⁹ In other words, the Exodus event reveals that God cares about human affairs and takes sides, and it is always on the side of the oppressed against the oppressors,³²⁰ which for Cone means that God is concerned for Black people, not white.³²¹

The Exodus event was also important to Cone's Black church tradition, where preachers preached Exodus' liberating message. 'Black preachers reasoned that if God delivered Israel from Pharaoh's army [...] then God will deliver black people from American slavery and oppression.'³²² The

³¹⁴ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 143.

³¹⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 49.

³¹⁶ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 85.

³¹⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 73.

³¹⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2.

³¹⁹ Reddie, *Introducing James H. Cone*, 41.

³²⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 6.

³²¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 73.

³²² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 57.

Black church also found hope through songs, such as “Go Down Moses,” which used the Exodus as the theme of survival and liberation:

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,

Let my people go;

Oppressed so hard they could not stand,

Let my people go;

Go down Moses, ’way down in Egypt’s land.

Tell ole Pharaoh

Let my people go.³²³

The Exodus event also informed Cone’s view of humanity. Cone says, ‘It is impossible to view the exodus as an act of God without at the same time seeing it as an act that changes Israel’s view of itself as a people [...] when persons encounter God’s self-disclosure, they not only know who God is but also who they are.’³²⁴ Just as God elected Israel *because* they were oppressed, God also elected Black people, not for them to suffer, but *because* they too are oppressed, ‘and God has decided to make our liberation God’s own undertaking.’³²⁵ Because God has elected them, the oppressed Black person is free to break the oppressors’ chains, ‘free to revolutionize society, assured that acts of liberation are the work of God.’³²⁶

The Exodus event is also important for Cone because it provided Israel and, by extension, all people an understanding of sin. For the Israelites, sin was a betrayal of God’s covenant with them, based on God’s liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This covenant was the foundation of the Israelites’ identity as God’s chosen people. Therefore, any behavior against this covenant was considered a violation of their identity and relationship with God. In other words, sin is ‘a condition of human existence in which we deny the essence of God’s liberating activity.’³²⁷

In contrast to Cone, Ateek rarely mentions the Exodus because of his context and hermeneutical lens. According to Ateek, the Exodus event

³²³ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 27.

³²⁴ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 56.

³²⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 59.

³²⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 80.

³²⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 112.

‘has been abused by both religious Zionists and Christian fundamentalists, who see in it a call for the physical return of the Jews to the land in this century.’³²⁸ The Zionists and the fundamentalists view the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 as an exodus from oppressive European countries and a return to their promised land.

The Zionist narrative of exodus and return to their promised land also necessitates ethnic cleansing of the indigenous people. To justify this, the Zionists have used the Hebrew Scriptures to equate the Palestinians with the Canaanites. Professor Nur Masalha says that the Hebrew Scriptures are:

responsible for the creation of the myth narrative that the culture of the Philistines – who gave their name to the land of Palestine and indigenous Palestinian Arabs – and Canaanites were culturally inferior to the Hebrew tradition and ‘Israelite civilisation’ – an inferiority which justified their subjugation or even elimination.³²⁹

Ateek agrees with Masalha and sees the dispossession of the Canaanites ‘at God’s command’ as unacceptable.³³⁰

The importance of the Exodus event lies in Ateek’s hope that Palestinian Christians will one day be able to reclaim the Exodus event as a meaningful story. He hopes Palestinians will enjoy their own exodus and be able to return to their homeland, not as conquerors and oppressors, but to *share* the land. Ateek says, ‘This is the kind of return that is willed by the God whom we have come to see in the overall biblical revelation – a God of justice, mercy, and peace.’³³¹

Jesus in the Synagogue in Nazareth

Applying their hermeneutic to the following text, Cone and Ateek argue that Jesus’ gospel is for the poor, the captive, and the oppressed:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me


to bring good news to the poor.

³²⁸ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 86.

³²⁹ Masalha, “Naji Al-Ali, Edward Said and Civil Liberation Theology,” 110.

³³⁰ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 86-87.

³³¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 87.



He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.³³²

Cone believes that just as the Exodus event was God's self-revelation to oppressed Israel, the incarnation of Jesus was God's self-revelation to oppressed Israel in first-century Palestine. While this text reveals Jesus' purpose and the content of his gospel, Cone does not interpret it in isolation from what comes before (Jesus' baptism and temptation) and what comes after (Jesus' response to John the Baptist's messengers).³³³

At the baptism of Jesus, God declared, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'³³⁴ These words echo texts from the Hebrew Scriptures:

I will tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, 'You are my son;
today I have begotten you.'³³⁵
Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.³³⁶

Cone claims that the former is a 'coronation hymn, emphasis[ing] his role as King, who is God's representative to bring justice to the nation,' while the latter refers to God's servant 'who brings justice to his own suffering.'³³⁷ According to Cone, these texts shed light on Jesus' self-understanding: Jesus is King and Servant simultaneously, who will establish justice through Jesus' own suffering. Cone also claims that

³³² Luke 4:18-19, New Revised Standard Version from here on.

³³³ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 68-70.

³³⁴ Luke 3:22

³³⁵ Ps 2:7

³³⁶ Is 42:1

³³⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 68.

Jesus' baptism 'reveals Jesus' identification with the poor [...] He is one of them.'³³⁸

This same theme is also found in Jesus' temptation in Luke 4. While Cone does not wholly reject a traditional interpretation of this event, namely Jesus' rejection of political power, he does believe that it misses the central point of the narrative: Jesus rejects *any role* 'that would separate him from the poor.'³³⁹

In this context, Cone presents Jesus' gospel proclamation in Luke 4 as evidence that Jesus entered human history to break the chains of oppression because the work of Jesus is the work of liberation. Expounding on this, Cone says that Jesus' gospel

is a message about the ghetto, and all other injustices done in the name of democracy and religion to further the social, political, and economic interests of the oppressor. In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair. Through Christ the poor man [sic] is offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes him other than human.³⁴⁰

For Cone, Jesus' gospel message ushered in the new age of liberation, an age with the poor and oppressed at the center, as seen in Luke 7 when John the Baptist sent messengers to Jesus to inquire whether Jesus truly was the Messiah. Jesus' response fulfilled Jesus' kingdom proclamation in Nazareth: he healed the blind, deaf, invalid, and unclean, raised the dead, and preached good news to the poor. Cone claims that 'any understanding of the Kingdom in Jesus' teachings that fails to make the poor and their liberation its point of departure is a contradiction of Jesus' presence.'³⁴¹

For Cone, Jesus' gospel message for the poor and oppressed was not confined to the first century, nor is it only meant for the eschatological hope of the afterlife, but because of the resurrection of Jesus, is for today. The gospel of Jesus is a call to free those who labor and are heavy-laden, which is the message of Black Power. As Cone puts it, 'Black Power is the message of Christ himself'; Christianity *is* Black Power.³⁴² And since Jesus is alive and active today, he is alive and active in all those who follow in Jesus' footsteps of liberating the oppressed, even in the most

³³⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 210.

³³⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 69; Cone, *A Black Theology of the Oppressed*, 121-122.

³⁴⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 41.

³⁴¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 70.

³⁴² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43-44.

radical elements of Black Power.³⁴³ Black acts of rebellion are the manifestation of the gospel: 'If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century.'³⁴⁴ According to Cone, anything that goes against Black Power's pursuit of liberation is heretical.³⁴⁵

This text is also important for Ateek. The discovery of its importance resulted from Palestinian Christians realizing that Jesus was also a Palestinian. They claim that:

He lived in the same land we lived in. He breathed the same air we breathed. His language and thought patterns were Semitic as ours were. The Palestine he lived in was always a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multiracial, and multi-religious society, whether during his lifetime or ever since. Moreover, the political situation of his day, with its multi political and religious parties, showed great similarities to the political parties we have today.³⁴⁶

This revelation led Palestinian Christians to embrace and emphasize Jesus's humanity, resulting in their return to the Gospels to study Jesus' life and teachings.

As they looked to Jesus, they did so to answer questions such as:

- How did Jesus live under occupation?
- How can he help us in our life under the Israeli occupation today?
- What does Jesus say about resistance?
- What lessons do we deduce from the Gospels that can help us in relating to the occupation forces?³⁴⁷

The first text Ateek mentions that provided answers is Luke 4 where Jesus confronted the racist attitudes and narrow image of God the people of Nazareth held.

This text is relevant in two ways for Palestinian Christians. First, 'it is a call for activism on behalf of the underdog and the oppressed people of the world.'³⁴⁸ In Jesus' choice of and appropriation of this specific text, Jesus accepted his prophetic ministry to talk against oppressors and work

³⁴³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 47.

³⁴⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43-44.

³⁴⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 10; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 35.

³⁴⁶ Ateek, "Palestinian Liberation Theology," 11-12.

³⁴⁷ Ateek, "Palestinian Liberation Theology," 11-12.

³⁴⁸ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 43.

on behalf of those who were oppressed.³⁴⁹ Second, it critiques policies and beliefs that favor one ethnicity over another. Jesus did this in two ways. First, Jesus critiqued racism in how he quoted the Isaiah text: Jesus stopped mid-sentence and refused to quote the ‘racist’ part of the text that proclaims God’s vengeance. Second, Jesus critiqued his crowd’s understanding of God by pointing out that God’s love was not limited to ancient Israel but also included the Phoenician widow and the Syrian general. Jesus’ point was to reveal that God has never been a racist.³⁵⁰

The Cross

In Cone’s earlier writings, the cross is used to help explain Black suffering. In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone claims that the cross shows Jesus fully identifying with human suffering; Jesus is not ‘merely sympathetic with the social pain of the poor but becomes totally identified with them in their agony and pain. The pain of the oppressed is God’s pain, for God takes their suffering as God’s own, thereby freeing them from its ultimate control on their lives.’³⁵¹ This full identification with the oppressed locates Jesus in the midst of those who are ‘hung, shot, burned, and tortured.’³⁵² In other words, on the cross, Jesus took upon himself the fullness of human oppression.³⁵³

The defeat of the powers of evil through Jesus’ cross and the resurrection does not mean that suffering no longer exists. It exists and will not be fully defeated until the Second Coming of Christ. Since this is the case, the oppressed are called to suffer with God as they fight against the powers of evil. ‘Suffering therefore is reinterpreted in the light of Jesus’ cross and resurrection and of our call to become liberated sufferers with God. There is joy in our suffering insofar as we have to suffer for freedom.’³⁵⁴ In other words, joy does not result from suffering because of oppression; oppression is evil. Joy comes when the oppressed suffer while fighting against injustice.

In Cone’s ‘last great masterpiece’ according to Anthony Reddie,³⁵⁵ *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* Cone connects the cross with the lynching of Black Americans. Surprisingly, Cone does not dwell on this connection in his earlier works, though its origins began at least 15 years before he published this work. Although Cone avoided directly dealing with

³⁴⁹ Ateek, *Cry Out, Do Not Hold Back!*, 7-8.

³⁵⁰ Ateek, *Cry Out, Do Not Hold Back!*, 9.


³⁵¹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 161.

³⁵² Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 26.

³⁵³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 125.

³⁵⁴ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 163.

³⁵⁵ Reddie, *Introducing James H. Cone*, 175.



lynchings in his earlier writings, it liberated him when he finally began to write about this subject: 'The cross helped me to deal with the brutal legacy of the lynching tree, and the lynching tree helped me to understand the tragic meaning of the cross'.³⁵⁶

The cross became an important symbol for Black Americans during the lynching era (1880-1940). On the cross, they saw the innocent suffer at the hands of the powerful. Cone says, 'crucifixion was recognized as the particular form of execution reserved by the Roman Empire for insurrectionists and rebels. It was a public spectacle accompanied by torture and shame – one of the most humiliating and painful deaths ever devised by human beings.'³⁵⁷ For many Black Christians, the connection to the lynching tree was obvious. The cross and the lynching tree represented the worst in humanity, while at the same time, the refusal to let the worst define ultimate meaning.

Ateek sees four paradigms within Scripture that portray the human condition. The first paradigm is based upon killing the holy innocents, representing genocide. The second paradigm is from the conquering of Jericho, where the innocent and the guilty were indiscriminately murdered. He likens this paradigm to Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the war in Iraq. The third paradigm is Sodom, where the guilty are killed, but the innocent are spared. Using 'smart' bombs in places like Lebanon and Israel represents this third paradigm. Ateek sees these paradigms at play in every conflict; all three are nothing less than devastation and destruction.³⁵⁸

The fourth paradigm is the cross, which comes with responsibilities. First, the paradigm of the cross refuses violence and, because of love, accepts suffering. It is the willingness to resolve conflict through sacrifice. Second, the paradigm of the cross 'requires that we choose to serve others rather than dominate them, to provide for their welfare rather than to participate in their exploitation.'³⁵⁹ The paradigm of the cross overcomes and destroys the paradigms of the past.

Similar to Cone, Ateek connects the suffering of Palestinians with the cross of Christ. In an Easter message, Ateek preached:


In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. It only takes

³⁵⁶ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xvii.

³⁵⁷ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 1-2.

³⁵⁸ See Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, 110-111.

³⁵⁹ Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, 111.



people of insight to see the hundreds of thousands of crosses throughout the land, Palestinian men, women, and children being crucified. Palestine has become one huge golgotha. The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily. Palestine has become the place of the skull.³⁶⁰

Responding to charges of antisemitism, Ateek claims that the cross' imagery of suffering and shame is one that predates the crucifixion of Jesus. Also, other liberation theologians use similar language in their theologies and have never been labeled antisemitic.³⁶¹ Ateek even points to Jewish artists who have identified with the cross in their own suffering. Ateek's point is that those who suffer unjustly can find meaning in the cross.

Love, Violence, and Nonviolence

In any context of oppression, the question of how to oppose oppression must be addressed. Using their hermeneutical principles, both James Cone and Naim Ateek engage the difficult topics of violence and nonviolence and how love is connected to both.

James Cone

The topic of violence and nonviolence plays an important role in Cone's life. According to Cone, 'no issue has been more hotly debated in the African-American community than violence and nonviolence. No two persons symbolize this debate more than Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X.'³⁶²

To better understand Cone's position on this debated topic, it is necessary first to understand King's and Malcolm X's positions. Among the many things King is known for, his nonviolent resistance is one of the most notable. The sources of his conviction lie in his parents' faith, Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, and Gandhi's words. King not only preached nonviolence, but also responded in nonviolent ways in the face of violence. 'For King, love was the most powerful force in the world, and nonviolence was love expressed politically.'³⁶³ Nonviolence was not for cowards and was not passive but required the willingness to suffer in the pursuit of justice rather than inflict harm on another individual.

In contrast, Malcolm X believed that self-defense was a basic element of being human. He rejected the nonviolent stance of King, as nonviolence

³⁶⁰ Ateek, "An Easter Message from Sabeel."

³⁶¹ Ateek, "Rev. Naim Response to Attacks."

³⁶² Cone, "Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence," 173.

³⁶³ Cone, "Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence," 176.

would not allow self-defense, therefore denying the humanity of Black people.³⁶⁴ Malcolm was known for telling his audience that whatever harm white people were willing to inflict upon Black people, he was ready to ‘do the same thing-only more of it.’³⁶⁵ His challenge for the Black community was to use any means necessary to gain their freedom.

Cone respected Martin and Malcolm, though he does not believe that people today must simply adopt one position over another. It is not a matter of whether King’s nonviolence or Malcolm’s ‘any means necessary’ approach is the correct one; instead, these two positions correct and complement each other, ‘showing us that an abstract, absolutist, and uncritical commitment to violence or nonviolence, to Malcolm or Martin is wrongheaded. We do not need to choose between Martin and Malcolm but rather to acknowledge the value in both.’³⁶⁶ Each has value insofar as they ‘strive for a liberated freedom.’³⁶⁷

Although Cone had a similar theology to King, he disagreed with King’s nonviolent stance. Cone believed that hatred and vengeance were opposed to the struggle for freedom, but he did not believe that this meant Black people must accept white definitions of violence and nonviolence. In fact, Cone claims that in an unjust society, it is impossible to be nonviolent; everyone is violent. So the question is not whether one should be violent or nonviolent, but ‘whose violence will we support – that of the oppressors or the oppressed?’³⁶⁸

Cone’s view on violence and nonviolence is linked to his understanding of God’s love. God’s love for the Black individual is a love that affirms their humanity and teaches them to love themselves. As Black people accept God’s love, only then are they ready to think about what love for their neighbor may look like. True love can only exist between equals, so Black people must demand that whites view them as a *Thou* rather than an *It*.³⁶⁹ Because of this position, Cone believes that love can sometimes be shown through violent rebellion.³⁷⁰ Speaking of the connection between love and violence, Cone says,

Thus, the love of self and the love of neighbor, which constitute the heart of one’s being in God, never escape the possibility of self-annihilation and destruction of the neighbor. The violence in the cities, which appears to

³⁶⁴ Cone, “Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence,” 181.

³⁶⁵ Cone, “Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence,” 180.

³⁶⁶ Cone, “Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence,” 182.

³⁶⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 206.

³⁶⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 201.

³⁶⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 60-61.

³⁷⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 128.

contradict Christian love, is nothing but the black man's attempt to say Yes to his being as defined by God in a world that would make his being into nonbeing. If the riots are the black man's courage to say Yes to himself as a creature of God, and if in affirming self he affirms Yes to the neighbor, then violence may be the black man's expression, sometimes the only possible expression, of Christian love to the white oppressor.³⁷¹

Despite this statement, Cone later claims that Black Theology and Black Power do not promote violence but instead promote Black people defending their humanity. In response to criticisms claiming that Cone promoted violence, Cone claimed that his 'straight talking by a black person' made white people nervous, which led them to interpret his words as promoting violence against white people.³⁷²

Cone also does not believe that Jesus' nonviolence in the Gospels is a model for Christians today to imitate. Instead of asking what Jesus *did* in the past, Christians should ask what Jesus *is doing*. Because Jesus is risen, 'we must use his past activity as a *pointer* to what he is doing now.'³⁷³ According to Cone's theology, Jesus is 'in the ghetto fighting the racism of churchly white people.'³⁷⁴ Jesus is currently present and working alongside those who are struggling for freedom for the oppressed, and sometimes those struggling do so violently. Although some used violent struggle, Cone was adamant that he refused to participate in any violence, responding to those who called on him to participate in a violent revolution by saying, 'I'm not for any revolution that does not include my mother, and she is a nonviolent Christian.'³⁷⁵

Naim Ateek

Ateek claims that the way of Jesus is the way of nonviolence. Ateek points out that Jesus lived under a violent system of oppression yet was not foolish enough to believe that violence would change the situation. Instead, Jesus taught his followers to go the extra mile: 'Rejecting the injustice of empire, [Jesus] believed it was possible to resist its unjust laws [...] Evil can be resisted without violence.'³⁷⁶

Ateek also believes that the Eastern tradition, to which he belongs, never adopted the just-war theory of Augustine nor the violence of Western nations. He does not deny that some have used violence, but he

³⁷¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 63.

³⁷² Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 31.

³⁷³ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 205.

³⁷⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 75.

³⁷⁵ Cone, Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, 53.

³⁷⁶ Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, 180.

does not believe it is a part of the Eastern Christian tradition. He claims that the ‘only way of life that really makes sense to Eastern Christians is the way of Jesus,’ which is the way of nonviolence.³⁷⁷

Ateek acknowledges that violence has a broad definition. This definition must be addressed because of the accusations that nonviolence is impossible in situations of oppression, being simplistic or naïve. Ateek appears to hold to the idea that violence includes more than only physical violence, such as structural violence. He also mentions that not all physical harm done to another individual is violence. For example, Ateek references South Africa’s *Kairos Document*, which asks, ‘Would it be legitimate to describe both the physical force used by a rapist and the physical force used by a woman trying to resist the rapist as violence?’³⁷⁸ The *Kairos Document* does not believe that all physical harm is violence.

Despite Ateek’s apparent acceptance, or at least understanding of the *Kairos Document*’s description of violence, he believes that not only is ‘all violence wrong, and violence can never contribute to peace,’³⁷⁹ but also that violence is impractical.³⁸⁰ Ateek understands that the Israeli military is trained to deal with violence, so responding violently only strengthens the Israeli government’s power to continue its oppression of Palestinians. In contrast, ‘nonviolence is dreaded by the Israelis because it reminds them of their situation before their empowerment, appealing to their memory of their own powerlessness and awakening their consciences to deal with those now in their power more justly.’³⁸¹ Perhaps because of this mindset, the Israeli army does not know how to handle acts of nonviolent resistance, which is why Ateek believes that the path to victory is through training Palestinians to respond nonviolently.³⁸²

Ateek is also critical of Christian Zionists and how their understanding of the end times promotes violence against Palestinians and, ultimately, against Jewish people. He is critical of this position for several practical and theological reasons, but the primary one is how violence opposes love. God’s love expressed in nonviolence is revealed in the cross of Jesus. Ateek calls Christians to accept the paradigm of the cross, which

is based on the willingness of love to suffer and to bear pain rather than to inflict it on others. This is love that categorically refuses to use war and violence in order to crush an enemy. It is a love of others that invests itself

³⁷⁷ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 135.


³⁷⁸ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 138.

³⁷⁹ Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, 48.

³⁸⁰ Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 117-118.

³⁸¹ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 138.

³⁸² Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, 117.



in inventing and creating ways and methods that can, to a large extent, be successful in vanquishing evil through nonviolence. It is a love that is willing to sacrifice much in order to resolve conflict without resorting to arms.³⁸³

The paradigm of the cross, which is love for one's enemies, is costly, at times full of agony and pain, yet Ateek holds to the conviction that it also has the promise of new life.³⁸⁴

Ateek, in contrast to Cone, holds to the belief that 'unearned suffering is redemptive.'³⁸⁵ Because of its redemptive nature, it is better to suffer than afflict suffering on another individual. One way that Ateek appears to understand the redemptive nature of suffering is through the belief that Jesus is present with them in their suffering. He says, 'Christ is not in the tanks and jet fighters, fighting on the side of the oppressors (although many Jewish and Christian Zionists believe that); God is in the city of Gaza, in the Jenin camp, and in the old city of Nablus, Ramallah, and Bethlehem, suffering with the oppressed. God has not abandoned us.'³⁸⁶

One challenging aspect of this research was in seeking to understand the topic of violence and nonviolence within Cone's and Ateek's theologies. While Ateek's nonviolent resistance position is clear and easy to understand, Cone's is much more complicated. At times it felt like Cone supported physical violence, while at other times, it seemed as if he simply understood the violence of the oppressed against the oppressor. Sometimes it sounded like Cone was willing to join in the violence himself, while at other times, he adamantly refused to engage in violence personally. Perhaps the difficulty in understanding is the fault of the researcher's own whiteness or limited understanding of violence.

Conclusion

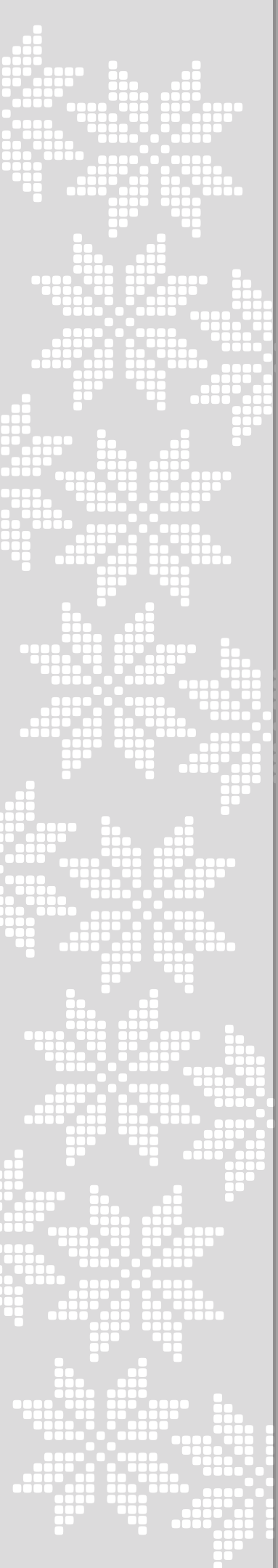
The work of Cone and Ateek is vital for Christians today as many continue to use a Western colonial hermeneutic to justify un-Christ-like behaviors, such as war, nationalism, apartheid, xenophobia, racism, and patriarchy—to name but a few—while at the same time attacking those who challenge this way of interpreting Scripture. By becoming acquainted with Cone and Ateek, Christians can develop a hermeneutic that leads to active Christlike engagement in society around issues such as racism, inequality, and the pursuit of justice in today's world. Cone and Ateek remind readers that

³⁸³ Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation*, 111.

³⁸⁴ Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 150.

³⁸⁵ Ateek, "Suicide Bombers," 21.

³⁸⁶ Ateek, "Suicide Bombers," 23.



when Jesus is the interpretive lens, that interpretation will always lead to participating in Jesus' liberating activities.

Those who seek to follow Jesus in today's world need Cone and Ateek and the theologies they represent. Perhaps Cone's view of Martin and Malcolm could be applied also between Cone and Ateek: people today must not simply adopt one man's position over the other as these two men's positions correct and complement each other. We do not need to choose between Cone and Ateek, but rather acknowledge the value in both; each has value insofar as they strive for liberation.



Brewing Beer and Crafting Identity in Palestine

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Abstract: Alcohol has a long history of being used to define, differentiate, and display a person's social, religious, and national identity. This paper considers the ways in which two Palestinian breweries in the West Bank – Taybeh Brewing and Shepherds Brewing – articulate a specifically Christian-Palestinian identity: as religious minorities in an occupied land, they are using beer to both claim a place for themselves within a contested society and to change the wider world's perception of their homeland.

Keywords: Alcohol, Beer, Wine, Palestine, West Bank, Taybeh, *Birzeit*, Muslim-Christian relations.

Introduction

Beer and wine are not only two of humankind's oldest creations and forms of pleasure, they are also some of our oldest means of defining and displaying identity. What we drink, when we drink, and who we drink with have long been used to describe and demonstrate a person's gender, religion, ethnicity, social status, and other aspects of identity. This paper considers the ways in which two Palestinian breweries articulate a specifically Christian-Palestinian identity: as religious minorities in an occupied land, they are using beer to both claim a place for themselves within a contested society and to change the wider world's perception of their homeland.

Anthropologists have long been intrigued by alcohol's ability to function as a social boundary marker. Dwight B. Heath has pointed out that as a social act, drinking alcohol can provide insight into social organization, especially in terms of gender, age, class, ethnicity, and religion.³⁸⁷ He writes, 'drinking itself can be an important boundary marker between social groups ... it is clear that the way people drink (or don't drink) marks them as belonging in different social categories.'³⁸⁸ David G. Mandelbaum agrees asserting, 'In a complex modern society, made up of many subgroups, the drinking patterns of each subgroup or class may reflect its special characteristics as well as the cultural frame of the whole society.'³⁸⁹


He goes on to say that 'where alcohol is known, patterns for its use and for abstention are prescribed, usually in fine detail ... alcohol may be tabooed; it is not ignored.'³⁹⁰ These patterns, prescriptions, and taboos are often articulated via religious rules and rituals. Sami Zubaida finds that such patterns of use and exclusion are particularly nuanced within the Abrahamic religions. Wine obviously plays a role in some of the central rituals and symbols of both Judaism and Christianity, the Jewish Kiddush and Christian Eucharist being two of the most obvious. This ritual significance has caused some Jews and Christians to see all wine as an inherently sacred substance to appreciate and be grateful for, and others to avoid outside of its ritualistic use. Beer, having less symbolic significance in either Judaism or Christianity, is relished by some members of both communities but shunned by others. And in Islam, while historically a majority of scholars have held that the Quran forbids consumption of any type of alcohol, there has never been universal

³⁸⁷ Heath, "An Anthropological View of Alcohol and Culture," 336.

³⁸⁸ Heath, "An Anthropological View of Alcohol and Culture," 341.

³⁸⁹ Mandelbaum, "Alcohol and Culture," 281.

³⁹⁰ Mandelbaum "Alcohol and Culture," 288.



agreement on the issue, and in any case religious prohibition does not necessarily translate into cultural practice.³⁹¹ Zubaida also points out that historically in Muslim societies, as well as in Muslim poetry, legend, and popular culture, religious minorities such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians were often associated with making or selling alcohol.³⁹² Depictions range from negative stereotypes to more affectionate or humorous portrayals, both of Muslims who covertly or flagrantly circumvent the prohibition of alcohol, and of the non-Muslims who supply them with it. Zubaida concludes that ‘drink, then, constituted a boundary of identities and affiliations not only between Muslims and other religious communities who drank but also within Muslim groups.’³⁹³

In addition to acting as a boundary marker between both different religions and different communities within the same religion, alcohol consumption can also carry connotations of other types of identity, including class and social status. In his work on the Egyptian beer industry from the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, Omar D. Foda has demonstrated that beer, due to its associations with Europe and technology, conveyed a sense of modernity that encompassed those who drank it. Foda shows that in Egypt beer was particularly popular with one segment of Egyptian society: the rising middle class. Termed the *effendiya* or ‘new men,’ these secularly educated new elites were eager to present themselves as the face of Egypt’s future by distancing themselves from what they saw as its regressive past. Beer was used as a clear mark of aspiration and differentiation as they claimed a distinct and modern identity for themselves. Foda writes that, ‘Alcohol served as an ideal commodity for the *effendi* to perform modernity because its consumption achieved a double effect: while linking its Egyptian drinker to the “modern” European, who drank on social occasions, it separated him from both the nonelite and the religious Egyptian, who viewed alcohol as socially suspect at best or as religious anathema at worst.’³⁹⁴

While the *effendiya* surely enjoyed their beer, their use of it was also aspirational. By drinking beer at bars or at home, along with other modes of performative modernity, members of the new middle class signaled that they were somehow different from both the religious elite and the lower working classes, essentially defining a position for themselves that had not previously existed in Egyptian society. These engineers, journalists, lawyers, and activists carved out a spot for themselves in the Egyptian social hierarchy by defining and displaying two interrelated aspects of

³⁹¹ Zubaida, “Drink, Meals and Social Boundaries,” 209.

³⁹² Zubaida, “Drink, Meals and Social Boundaries,” 213.

³⁹³ Zubaida, “Drink, Meals and Social Boundaries,” 212.

³⁹⁴ Foda, “The Pyramid and the Crown,” 143.

their identity: they were proudly middle class, and they were proudly modern.³⁹⁵

As described by Foda, the *effendiya* were self-conscious and intentional about the identity they sought to create, define, and project. Today, two breweries in Palestine seem to have a similar self-consciousness and intentionality about their own identity. If, for the *effendiya*, drinking beer was an aspirational identity marker for individuals, for these breweries in Palestine, producing and distributing beer seems to signal both identity and aspiration on a communal or national level. Through their beer, they are displaying to their neighbors and the larger world that they are both proudly Christian and proudly Palestinian.

Beer in Palestine

Evidence of production of both beer and wine in the region of Palestine dates back thousands of years, but today, with an 85% Muslim population, most people do not drink either of them.³⁹⁶ In Gaza, where Hamas has been in power since 2007, producing, importing, selling, or consuming any type of alcohol is strictly prohibited, though non-Muslims sometimes make wine at home or covertly drink at weddings.³⁹⁷ Alcohol is more readily available in the West Bank – especially in cities and villages with significant Christian populations – with alcohol served at hotels, bars, and restaurants in Ramallah and Bethlehem. The West Bank is now also home to several craft breweries, including Taybeh Brewing and Shepherds Beer.

Taybeh Brewing Company

Located in the small village of Taybeh northwest of Ramallah, Taybeh Brewing Company became Palestine's first microbrewery when it opened in 1994. It was founded by Nadim Khoury, who decided to return to his hometown after the signing of the Oslo Accords. After 15 years of living and working in the Boston area, he saw the Oslo Accords as a sign of hope for the future of his country and an opportunity to participate in shaping its future. While going to college in Boston, Khoury had worked at a liquor store, and eventually tried his hand at homebrewing, enjoying it enough to take homebrew kits back home to Palestine each summer, making beer to share with his family and friends. During the school year in the U.S., he began to immerse himself in craft beer culture, visiting local breweries,

³⁹⁵ Foda "The Pyramid and the Crown," 143.

³⁹⁶ US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, 2022.

³⁹⁷ Al Gherbawi, "Gaza Wine."

attending festivals, and ultimately completing a brewmaster's program at the University of California Davis.³⁹⁸

In the mid-1990s, the prospect of peace between Palestine and Israel lured him back home. 'When the Oslo peace agreement was signed, my father encouraged us to come back,' he explains, 'I figured this was a chance to start a factory for the first Palestinian beer.'³⁹⁹ Along with his brother, he brought home with him a love of the styles of beer he had enjoyed in Boston, hoping that brewing and distributing beer could have a positive impact on Palestine's culture and economy.

It was not an easy start. All of the equipment for brewing had to be imported, some of it being delayed for months at Israeli border checkpoints. Water, too, proved to be a problem. Israel controls the water supply, and ensures a constant supply for its settlements, but villages like Taybeh often only get water once every ten days, obligating them to store up a sufficient amount to last until the next time. Nadim also remembers financial frustrations in the early days: 'We couldn't get any bank loans to get started, because the banks were scared of the idea of making alcohol on Palestinian soil.'⁴⁰⁰ Such unpredictable factors obviously complicate both the process of starting a business and the process of making beer, but Madees Khoury – who in recent years has taken on the title of brewmaster once held by her father Nadim – takes it in stride. 'Making business in Palestine, especially beer business, is not like anywhere in the world,' she says. 'We have no borders, no airport, no ports. Religion, culture, education, advertisement, there are so many obstacles. But we are determined to produce good quality beer and show the whole world Palestinians are normal and love to enjoy life.'⁴⁰¹


Though a banner at the entrance to the brewery once announced, 'Taste the Revolution!' in terms of its actual products, whether the beers themselves or their packaging, Taybeh brewing does not seem to be particularly provocative. Beginning with its flagship beer, a golden lager, Taybeh now also offers dark, amber, and light styles, as well as a white Belgian-style wheat beer, an IPA, and a seasonal winter lager. The labels show an image of a giant wooden beer barrel and a frothy overflowing mug with the sun rising in the background, flanked on each side by a stack of wheat. Large white text announces the product as Taybeh Beer, and a smaller golden font proudly proclaims it 'The Finest in the Middle East.' This modest lineup might hardly seem revolutionary, but as the first

³⁹⁸ McCann, "He's Got some Bottle."

³⁹⁹ Struck, "Beer That's Making Taybeh Famous."

⁴⁰⁰ Struck, "Beer That's Making Taybeh Famous."

⁴⁰¹ Lieber and Tress, "Straight Outta Taybeh."



microbrewery in the Middle East, for years these were products that no one else was offering. And lately, the brand might be getting a little bolder, both in terms of their flavor, and in their brand messaging. A company description of one of their newer beers, the India Pale Ale, announced, ‘As the original IPA was brewed with a large portion of hops to preserve the beer on its journey from India to the UK, the Taybeh IPA with its strong aroma of freshly-picked hops, citrus and herbs can preserve the long journey to freedom,’⁴⁰² seeming to reference the Palestinian struggle for an independent state, and positioning its beer as a partner in the cause.

Barred from selling his product in Muslim towns or advertising it in Arabic newspapers, and with the Christian population making up only a tiny percentage of Palestine, many of Khoury’s earliest customers were Jews, both in nearby Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and even in the settlements encroaching onto the land directly surrounding Taybeh. To help gain access to this potential customer base, several of Taybeh’s beers are certified as *kosher*. Oren and Mira Weigensberg, who grow produce for *kosher* restaurants in a settlement near Bethlehem, wanted to help Khoury get his product into the hands of their clients, and suggested asking a rabbi to inspect his beers and brewery to see if they passed *kashrut*. ‘Whatever the politics, we believe that neighbors ought to cooperate. I have a lot of respect for Nadim for opening up something new, and for doing what he’s doing,’⁴⁰³ Mira said at the time. Khoury welcomed the idea of a kosher certification for his product: ‘They’re open-minded. I’m open-minded. I said, “Why not?”’⁴⁰⁴


Though kosher beer was created almost immediately, *halal* beer did not appear until 2008. The packaging for this non-alcoholic beer is noticeably different from the rest of the Taybeh line. While the label retains the same overall look as the rest of the beers, the color is a distinctive Islamic green, and the language on bottles of the non-alcoholic beer is Arabic, whereas the others are all in English. The design makes clear that the product contains 0% alcohol and that it is *halal*. According to an article on Reuters, Nadim introduced the non-alcoholic beer as a reaction to huge parliamentary political gains by Hamas in the 2006 elections.⁴⁰⁵ The article describes a speech that aired on television on the opening night of Taybeh’s Oktoberfest, in which Mushir al-Masri, a member of Hamas, describes the government of the Palestinian Authority as ‘alcoholic’ and insisted that producing beer or wine was illegal throughout Palestine, while another legislator defended the Khoury’s right to make beer and

⁴⁰² Khoury, “Annual Taybeh Fest.”

⁴⁰³ Struck, “Beer That’s Making Taybeh Famous.”

⁴⁰⁴ Struck, “Beer That’s Making Taybeh Famous.”

⁴⁰⁵ Sangwon, “Palestinian Non-Alcoholic Beer.”



touted the brewery's benefits to the local economy. Shops in Gaza that sold alcohol were permanently closed, and some were burned down by supporters of Hamas.⁴⁰⁶ The destruction directly affected Taybeh Brewing, as one of its distribution centers was torched.⁴⁰⁷ In response, Nadim told reporters, ' Hamas can say whatever they want. I make a living brewing beer, I am proud of it, and will continue doing it.'⁴⁰⁸ Perhaps understandably not particularly eager to make overtures towards a segment of the population whose more extreme members want to destroy his business or at least make it illegal, it remains interesting that in a country with an 85% Muslim population, the brewery's very first beer was certified *kosher*, while a *halal* product took 14 years to appear. In his defense, Nadim has pointed out that 'it's extremely hard to find a way to make *tasty* non-alcoholic beer.'⁴⁰⁹

Since 2005, Taybeh Brewery has also thrown an annual Oktoberfest celebration that the local community is invited to, and which attracts visitors from Israel, and from as far away as Germany, Japan, and the United States. Nadim Khoury has been clear in his hopes that his brewery will bring in tourists and change perceptions about Palestine and its people, and he hopes that the tourism will benefit not just his business, but the whole country's economy as well. Local farmers, food vendors, and craftsmen are encouraged to set up booths at the festival to sell kebabs, olive oil, handmade items, and other local products. Local musicians perform traditional Palestinian music as well as rock, jazz, and rap, and according to the festival's Facebook page, international performers have come from as far away as Brazil, Japan, and Sri Lanka.

Interestingly, among the food items that have been offered are pork sausages.⁴¹⁰ Ostensibly an event encouraging Christians, Muslims, and Jews to all celebrate together, the pork is clearly only an option for the Christians in attendance, and for the Khourys' Muslim neighbors, it is easy to see why a party celebrating beer and serving pork might not be seen as particularly inviting. Despite this, a few Muslims do seem to come each year, and Nadim insists he has never received any complaints about the festival on religious or moral grounds.

Farther from home, the company has accomplished one of Nadim's long-held dreams: selling his product in the United States.⁴¹¹ He started, of course, with the Boston area, where he and his family lived for nearly

⁴⁰⁶ Al Gherbawi, "Gaza Wine."

⁴⁰⁷ Sheridan, "Palestinian Brewery."

⁴⁰⁸ Sangwon, "Palestinian Non-Alcoholic Beer."

⁴⁰⁹ Sangwon, "Palestinian Non-Alcoholic Beer." Emphasis original.

⁴¹⁰ Lieber and Tress, "Straight Outta Taybeh."

⁴¹¹ Porter, "How a Palestinian Brewery is Taking on the US."

two decades during the eighties and nineties. Nadim's son, Canaan, who oversaw most of the effort to begin exporting to the US, told Al Jazeera that 'there is a lot of sentimental value in this accomplishment. His friends here have been ecstatic, waiting to try the beer since 1994.'⁴¹² A Boston man named Nicholas Croce who had previously tried Taybeh beer when he visited the West Bank seems to agree, and ascribes an even larger importance to the beer's availability in the US: 'I immediately told other friends, near and far, who have a connection to Israel and Palestine ... I do hope the beer grows in popularity. Perhaps it can start important conversations. I've always thought that peace is possible when we take the time to know each other, and if beer can facilitate that, I support Taybeh all the more.'⁴¹³

While the Khoury family and their supporters seem delighted with their expanded market, the process was not without its complications. In addition to the high shipping cost and the usual frustrations at Israeli borders and checkpoints, the company faced a demand from the US that it had not encountered in any of the other countries where its product is sold. 'We are able to export the beer to many countries all over the world with the words "Product of Palestine," such as Denmark, Italy, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan, Belgium, UK, and even Israel,' Canaan said.⁴¹⁴ But because the US does not officially recognize Palestine as a sovereign state, the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau claimed that Taybeh bottles proclaiming its beer to be a 'product of Palestine' violated its rule against products with 'false or misleading statements on labels.'⁴¹⁵ The Bureau was appeased when Taybeh agreed to change its packaging to read 'product of West Bank,' instead.⁴¹⁶

As of 2022, the brewery produces 1.8 million bottles of beer each year, and sells its products in countries throughout the world.⁴¹⁷ Daily operations are increasingly run by Nadim's daughter Madees and son Canaan. The only female brewer in the Middle East, Madees relishes her role, and is proud of what her family has accomplished. 'With Taybeh,' she says, 'you are getting the name Palestine, and a high-quality product, to Israelis and the world – and you are changing the way they see Palestinians. [Our global expansion] resembles hope, determination, and success; not just for us, but for Palestinians in general.'⁴¹⁸

⁴¹² Porter, "How a Palestinian Brewery is Taking on the US."

⁴¹³ Porter, "How a Palestinian Brewery is Taking on the US."

⁴¹⁴ Porter, "How a Palestinian Brewery is Taking on the US."

⁴¹⁵ Porter, "How a Palestinian Brewery is Taking on the US."

⁴¹⁶ Porter, "How a Palestinian Brewery is Taking on the US."

⁴¹⁷ Times of Israel Staff, "First Palestinian Beer-Maker."

⁴¹⁸ Porter, "How a Palestinian Brewery is Taking on the US."

Shepherds Brewery

In 2015, after twenty years of Taybeh Brewing Company being the only beer producer in the country, a second brewery opened in Palestine. Shepherds Brewery was started by Alaa Sayej and his brothers, and their story has some parallels to that of Taybeh's founder Nadim Khoury. While attending graduate school in England, Alaa began homebrewing with a friend from Ireland. 'It was my hobby when I was in England,' he says. 'I was really fascinated by all the ales, and all the pubs in the country. So I started brewing in the dorms. After that, I thought, why not make it a business?'⁴¹⁹ After earning his MBA, when it came time to return home, he worked at a bank before deciding to try opening a brewery. Like the Khoury family, his motives seem to have been not only personal, but national. 'I wanted to do something for my country, to boost our economy,' he has said.⁴²⁰

Originally intending to start production in summer 2014, the brewery's opening was delayed for months by fighting that broke out between Israel and Gaza. Even when all of the equipment arrived, there were still bureaucratic and logistical complications to deal with. 'Some workers refused to deal with my application because it is a brewery,' Alaa remembers. 'Or some drivers would not deliver my malt because it is for an alcoholic drink.'⁴²¹

In its marketing, Shepherds explicitly connects its brand to the land and history of Palestine. The front page of its website states 'inspired by the traditional profession of our Palestinian ancestors, Shepherds Beer earned its name. To glorify the great men who walked on this land, as well as to connect the past to the future through our fresh creation.' Elsewhere, the site encourages customers to 'Enjoy the taste of ancestor's beer.' Images of these shepherd ancestors are also used on the brand's beer labels, which at first caused concern for local authorities. When the Ministry of Commerce saw bottles of beer made by a Christian family, with labels depicting a shepherd with a star above his head, they took the image to be a representation of Jesus Christ, and therefore a religious icon not suitable to be used in product packaging. The marketing department fought back, arguing that all Palestinians had once been shepherds, so the depiction honored everyone's ancestors, no matter their religion. Though frustrated, Alaa was able to find some humor in the situation, saying, 'If they knew anything about religion, they would have known that Jesus would have been a baby in this image. Do you see a baby? He looks more like Moses

⁴¹⁹ Lieber and Tress, "Palestinians Flock to Bethlehem."

⁴²⁰ Swift, "Shepherds Beer Taps Palestinian Market."

⁴²¹ Swift, "Shepherds Beer Taps Palestinian Market."

with the staff.’⁴²² He eventually won approval to use the design, and the shepherd and star now appear on the labels of all the company’s beers,⁴²³ which are sold in multiple places in Israel, and in Christian Palestinian towns. Beyond Palestine and Israel, the beer is sold as far away as Italy and Chile, the latter having a significant Palestinian diaspora population.⁴²⁴

In addition to producing and distributing bottled beer, Shepherds has kegs and draught machines to make their beers available by the glass at weddings, baptisms, and other local events. Sayej is also hoping to revive a local homebrewing culture, which he sees as having a long history in Palestine. To encourage this resurgence, he sells kits with the equipment and ingredients that allow people to experiment with making small batches of their own beer at home. ‘If you love my beers and you want to brew your own, just learn the way I did. It is every man’s dream to have his own brewery and beer.’⁴²⁵ While not every Palestinian will have the opportunity to study beermaking in Europe, Sayej hopes to make accessible to his countrymen what he himself had to go abroad to find.

Like Taybeh, Shepherds now also hosts its own annual festival. This one, though, was in some ways born out of strife. While based in Ramallah, the brewery is named after Alaa’s hometown of Birzeit. When Alaa applied to set up a booth for his company at a Birzeit heritage festival, a local imam used his Friday *qutbah* to speak out against the brewery, calling it *haram* and telling people not to support it. Hoping to avoid having a bad relationship with his hometown, Alaa pulled out of participating in the Birzeit festival, and started his own in Ramallah.⁴²⁶ Photos from the event’s Facebook page show plenty of people drinking beer, rock bands playing, crowds dancing to dubstep and house music, and photo opportunities for people to hold signs declaring ‘Product of Palestine’ and ‘Technically beer is a solution’ to post and share on social media.

Shepherds also hosts comedy shows and concerts throughout the year, as well as Halloween and St. Patrick’s Day parties, and an annual Christmas Market, which is a collaboration with the Orthodox Ramallah Club. As with Taybeh’s annual festival, the events at Shepherds are obviously meant to be fun for local Palestinians, but there is also a clear intent to change global perceptions about Palestine: the Shepherds

⁴²² Lieber and Tress, “Palestinians Flock to Bethlehem.”

⁴²³ Swift, “Shepherds Beer Taps Palestinian Market.”

⁴²⁴ Lieber and Tress, “Palestinians Flock to Bethlehem.”

⁴²⁵ Swift, “Shepherds Beer Taps Palestinian Market.”

⁴²⁶ Laub, “Reviving Old Traditions.”

Facebook page says that they hope the events will ‘promote better taste of Palestine from Birzeit to the world.’

Taybeh Winery

Beer is no longer the only type of alcohol being produced and sold in Palestine. In November 2014, the Khoury family significantly expanded its decades-long involvement in the local alcohol industry by beginning commercial production of wine. The village of Taybeh has a long tradition of winemaking, and some people, including the Khoury family, have been making small amounts of wine at home for generations.⁴²⁷ But in recent decades even this small-scale production has faced both environmental and human threats. In the 1980s, phylloxera – an insect that plagues grape growers around the world – destroyed over half of the region’s vines. The area also faces the threat of settlement and annexation by Israel, a problem that directly affects the wine industry. Before the 1967 war, there were two Christian monasteries that made wine, but during the war Israel seized the Trappist Latrun Monastery, and has maintained control of it ever since. The Salesian Cremisan Monastery, the only remaining monastery in the West Bank that produces wine, is also being eyed for confiscation, with Israel citing security concerns.

If the Taybeh Brewing Company was started with the intention of providing a boost to Palestine’s economy and tourism industry, the winery project seems to have an additional intention of preserving or reclaiming Palestinian land and history – Christian Palestinian land and history, in particular. When asked about his reason for entering the wine trade, Nadim Khoury is quick to mention the seizure of the monasteries and the success of Israeli wines – ‘When I came (back) to this country in 1994, there were nine wineries in Israel, now there are 300.’⁴²⁸ He is also blunt in pointing out the encroachment of territories onto Palestinian farmland. ‘We did a winery because we didn’t want Palestinian grapes to be sold in the world as Israeli wines. The settlements are taking advantage of the fact that we have good grapes and good land and good weather.’⁴²⁹ Nadim intends his own winery to be an answer to the dominance of Israeli wines, an assertion that Palestinians too can make wine, and that they have a right to the land it is made on. Israeli settlers seem to have understood this in

⁴²⁷ Godenberg, “West Bank Christian Village.”

⁴²⁸ Sudilovsky 2015.

⁴²⁹ Porter, “West Bank’s Taybeh.”

the same way, and Nadim says that settlers around Birzeit have vandalized his property and uprooted some of his vines, forcing him to replant.⁴³⁰

Not only is land confiscation a worry, but also population decline. Young residents of Taybeh are leaving, seeking better education and job opportunities in bigger cities and abroad. To make sure that land stays in Christian hands, when local families move away they nearly always sell their property to other Christians, allowing Taybeh to remain one of the last villages in the West Bank with an almost entirely Christian population.⁴³¹ Even with such practices, a village whose children do not want to stay there can not survive forever, and Taybeh's former mayor, Nadim Barakat, appreciates what the Khourys are doing for their hometown. 'The economy is the major point and nothing else,' he says. 'We have to improve the economy in Taybeh so that people will not go, will not migrate. This is the only thing we can do.'⁴³²

In some ways there seems to be a more explicitly religious focus to the wine side of the company as well. At the winery's opening, priests and other Christian religious leaders from the Greek Orthodox, Melkite, Roman Catholic, and Coptic traditions were all invited to attend the celebration and to give the winery their blessing. A local report describes the ceremony, saying all the priests 'walked around the winery together chanting prayers and holding up crucifixes as they passed the big, shiny new wine vats and oak barrels.'⁴³³ The economic and religious implications of the event were not lost on visitors. A woman who now lives in the US but was visiting her family in Taybeh said, 'This gives a message to (Palestinians) living abroad that they should invest here. It lets the world know we are here, in this village of Taybeh, where Jesus passed through.'⁴³⁴

Since grapes are such a prevalent crop in Palestine, and the Khourys seem to have been making wine at home for just as long as they have been making homebrewed beer, it is interesting to consider why they started the brewery first and waited twenty years to enter the wine industry. Of course, it is entirely possible that this was simply based on personal preferences of the different generations: Nadim loves beer, and his son Canaan is more interested in wine. Yet it also seems possible that religious considerations were involved. As has been seen, brewing beer in Palestine is not without its complications and controversies, and making wine is


⁴³⁰ Sudilovsky, "Palestine's First Winery."

⁴³¹ Godenberg, "West Bank Christian Village."

⁴³² Godenberg, "West Bank Christian Village."

⁴³³ Godenberg, "West Bank Christian Village."

⁴³⁴ Godenberg, "West Bank Christian Village."




likely to be viewed as even more provocative. Beer can be enjoyed by both Jews and Christians, but it is mostly free from any religious symbolism or ritual use. Wine, on the other hand, permeates the rituals and symbology of both religions. In addition, wine and vineyards are used throughout the Jewish scriptures to indicate not only blessing and abundance, but also permanence. Especially in a place where land is often violently contested, the planting of a vineyard is no small act. When someone plants a grape vine, they expect to be there long enough to see it grow and bear fruit and make wine from it: they are settled, they are home, they own the land. And to make wine from this vineyard shows that they have been there long enough to do so, and that they have been blessed with abundance while there. No wonder, then, that the Jewish settlers who feel they have a right to the land tore up the Khourys' vines.

Winemaking would also be, if anything, a larger affront to local Muslims. Some schools of Islamic thought have occasionally seen beer as an acceptable drink for Muslims, but there has been virtual universal agreement that wine made from grapes – *khamr* in the Quran – is *haram* and cannot be consumed in any amount by a practicing Muslim. Especially when made by a Christian family whose name in Arabic means 'priest,' a religious connotation would surely also be seen. Clearly anything involving wine is going to have religious and potentially political overtones in Palestine, and it seems prudent for the Khourys to have started with beer, establishing trust and goodwill through their handling of one controversial product before trying their hand at a potentially even more inflammatory one.

Analysis

The similarities between Taybeh Brewing and Shepherds Brewing are striking. Both are located in Christian-majority towns and run by Christian families who were educated abroad and introduced to craft beer while abroad. Both have begun festivals that showcase local music and other forms of culture, but also bring in performers and tourists from around the world. And both are vocal and intentional about using their companies to increase Palestine's global status by changing perceptions about its identity.

Nadim Khoury and Alaa Sayej speak of their decision to start their companies not in terms of how it would benefit them personally, but how it would benefit all of Palestine. Both men clearly see their breweries as having a positive impact on the economy by providing a marketable export, creating jobs, and boosting tourism. In creating a craft beer culture




in their country, they also seem to see themselves as elevating Palestine's status in the eyes of the world, or at least changing public perceptions about what the country is like or could be like.

Both families also seem to be using alcohol production to highlight distinct but interrelated aspects of their identity. Brewing beer differentiates these Christian families from Muslim Palestinians, and brewing beer that is proudly Palestinian asserts the possibility and viability of Palestinian industry in a place that has been politically and economically dominated by Israel. Neither of these differentiations is inherently oppositional, but as a tiny religious minority in an occupied land, merely defining and declaring a distinct identity for oneself can be seen as an act of defiance worthy of reprisal. In interviews Nadim Khoury usually asserts that he and his company have never faced harassment on religious grounds, though this claim seems to overlook the 2007 destruction of alcohol-related establishments in Gaza, and there have at least been high tensions, as evidenced by the member of Hamas who directly denounced his business in a televised speech. Shepherds, too, has experienced some vitriol: recall that its festival was started because an imam preached against the company in Sayej's hometown. In 2016, an Israeli bar in Haifa received threats when it started serving Shepherds beer. Commenters on social media urged a boycott of the bar and called its owners traitors for serving 'beer made from Jewish blood.'⁴³⁵ Though both families try to portray their products and festivals as means of bringing people of all religions and nationalities together for peace and partying – and presumably genuinely believe them to be capable of doing so – their beer and its associated events clearly have detractors.

At the same time that making beer is being used to define and display a distinctly Christian Palestinian identity, it is also an endeavor clearly intended to elevate the nation of Palestine as a whole. Whether two breweries and a winery will be enough to elevate Palestine to that of a modern country in the eyes of the rest of the world remains to be seen, but the amount of global press coverage of the companies seems to indicate that there is at least curiosity about the enterprise. Regionally, they have already had a noticeable impact: people in the area seem to be drinking more beer. Between 2006 and 2016, beer consumption in the region increased by 44 percent.⁴³⁶ While any number of factors might influence this statistic, surely one of them is the increasing number of microbreweries. When Nadim started Taybeh Brewing in 1994, it was the only microbrewery in the entire Middle East. Today there are several in

⁴³⁵ Moore, "In Israel, the Sale of Palestinian Beer."

⁴³⁶ Laub, "Reviving Old Traditions."



Jordan and Lebanon, dozens in Israel, and a third, Wise Men Choice, has opened in Palestine.

Conclusion

Nearly thirty years ago, Nadim Khoury chose to return to Palestine, determined to use his newfound love of craft beer to revitalize his hometown's economy, and to show that Christian Palestinians should have a hand in shaping the future of their nation and its culture. In spite of both Israeli occupation and blockades, and opposition to producing, selling, or marketing alcohol in a Muslim-majority culture, Taybeh Brewing has succeeded in establishing itself as a regional fixture whose beer is now sold around the world. Well aware of the difficulties, his children have caught his vision of the significance of Palestinian-brewed beer, and are now the ones managing and expanding the family business, using beer and wine to continue to challenge assumptions about Palestine. 'When they started, there was a stigma that Palestinian products were inferior to their Israeli or international counterparts. We proved this was not true,' Madees Khoury remembers.⁴³⁷ Taybeh Brewing has also paved the way for a new generation of Christian Palestinian brewers outside of the Khoury family, including the Sayej brothers, founders of Shepherds Brewing, who have a similar commitment to both beer and a continued Christian presence in Palestine. Shepherds and Taybeh Brewing have both helped to articulate a uniquely Christian Palestinian identity, providing their communities not just with beer to enjoy, but with reasons to celebrate, and inviting others to celebrate with them. The Palestinian craft beer scene spearheaded by these breweries has made significant strides towards boosting the local economy, attracting tourists, perhaps changing public perception of the region, and giving at least a few young people reasons to stay in Palestine rather than leaving. As Alaa Sayej sees it, 'Internationally, we have many opportunities to live and you can find freedom in many ways. But, we decided, because we are rooted, and our ancestors are from this land, that we have to build something for this land.'⁴³⁸

⁴³⁷ Dhenin, "A New Generation."

⁴³⁸ Wilson, "Palestinian Pub Crawl."