

**REFLECTIONS ON A PALESTINIAN SOJOURN:
CHRIST AT THE CHECKPOINT 2012,
BETHLEHEM, WEST BANK**

By Abu Daoud¹⁵¹

1. Introduction

So who thought about ending this on a Friday? I had to leave early because the last bus from al-Quds to my destination left rather early. I got on the 21 bus, which goes from Bethlehem to the Damascus Gate, aka the Gate of the Pillar (in Arabic) or the Shechem Gate (in Hebrew). Yes, that is how messed up Jerusalem is.

So after the conference, I arrived two hours early at the bus station because the checkpoint actually was very efficient, so I'm here drinking an espresso on Purim, waiting, writing, and reflecting on Christ at the Checkpoint. While I have some concerns, which I will list shortly, they do not compromise the very real fact that this was a victory for a small and weak community of believers, who tried to situate themselves on God's side, rather than quoting this or that verse and insisting that God was on their side.

2. Some Concerns

But first, some concerns: I was not sure who the audience was. There were a good number of locals—Israeli Palestinians, West Bank Palestinians, Jordanian Palestinians, and if there were any

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Gazan Palestinians there I did not see them. There were also a fair number of experienced foreign professionals, from various NGOs, churches, and educational institutions. They added a lot, and several of them were speakers. Then there was a cohort of what one scholar called “young Americans” (Bowie 1975). I was not sure why they were there. Were they just curious? Were they studying the conflict? This all goes back to the purpose of the conference—was it to spread knowledge about the occupation, or was it actually to find a way forward? Was it to try the falafel?

Anyway, the girls were pretty, so I’ll let it pass. And also—maybe they will go back to Amrika and raise the visibility of this issue in their churches, and this would be a contribution. All this is to say, this was an unresolved issue for me and not so much an objection.

But on to a more serious issue: this was an evangelical meeting. I only met one Roman Catholic—a Hebrew Roman Catholic, considering entering the priesthood no less!—and since this was an evangelical affair, there was no shortage of evangelical theologizing. Which is to say, theology by catchphrase. This was not the norm, but it happened enough that I, and others, noticed it. Some of the slogans were catchy and helpful, I guess, like when Stephen Sizer said, “When Jesus comes back, I want to be on the Welcoming Committee, not the Planning Committee.” Here he is objecting to American evangelicals, like John Hagee, America’s most famous adulterer-Zionist, who act like they are moving around chess pieces on the international level to secure the return of their Lord ASAP. Knight to E4: Temple rebuilt. Rook to F6: droves of atheist Russians realize that Grandpa was buried in a Jewish cemetery, get religion, and make Aaliya¹⁵². And so on.

¹⁵² Hebrew for *ascent*, it refers to Jews immigrating to Israel-Palestine and receiving Israeli citizenship.

But most of the slogans were unhelpful, like, “I don’t believe in evangelizing Jews, I don’t believe in evangelizing Muslims; I believe in sharing the love of Jesus with sinners.” Yawn. So Israel-Palestine is 2% Christian. Who are the sinners then? A mission to the Druze, perhaps? Or maybe evangelizing the remaining handful of Catholics and Orthodox? Yeah, that tired strategy inherited from your uncreative American and European missionaries has been working great. And there were other slogans too. Like the edgy, relevant, earthy talk by Shane Claiborne, which was one prolix string of slogans. (Note to non-Americans: “relevant” is American evangelicalese for “rambling and vacuous”.)

And then there was the oft-repeated statement, “We have been here since Pentecost,” which is a reference to Luke’s list of nations in Acts 2, which includes Arabs. But what did Luke mean by Arabs? Nomads? In that case they are not Arabs because nomadic life is gone these days. Did he mean non-Hebrew Semites? Then it might work. Did he mean people whose ancestry originated from the Arabian Gulf? If so, then the Palestinian Christians are almost certainly not Arabs. And so on. This claim represents a facile and simplistic interpretation of Scripture—just what Christian Zionists are being accused of. Not helpful.

But there was enough good, serious, nuanced Scriptural engagement to atone for the mediocrity of the American evangelical theological method. The careful Biblical scholarship of Gary Burge and the aforementioned Stephen Sizer and (mostly) John Orton stand out. Manfred Kohl and Joel Hunter I could have happily foregone.

The young Americans brought a bit of romantic naivety to the meeting. During a Q&A session, someone asked about suffering, and the “thriving” Palestinian churches. Ain’t that close to love? I know a lot of Arab pastors, and they may well have hope (the theme of the conference, after all), but very few would

describe their churches as thriving. How about, “barely surviving by God’s grace”? That sounds more accurate.

Maybe it was for all these fresh-faced, tattooed newbies that I kept on hearing complaints from the podium about how Americans don’t know that there are Palestinian Christians. I recall this being voiced by Salim Munayer and Dina Katanacho, among others. I guess I’m so used to Palestinian Christians, who are scattered all over the Middle East, that this is about as newsworthy as being informed that there are two Testaments in the Bible or that Father Abraham had many sons or that Jesus loves me. But maybe that is the price that comes from mixed audiences and live webcasting.

In addition to the responsible handling of Scripture, there were some other great strengths, and they outweigh the complaints. Foremost among these is the emphasis on nonviolence, which Sami Awad emphasized, and which was the topic of his movie “Little Town of Bethlehem” (Hanon 2010). Also refreshing was the refusal of the Palestinian speakers to build their identity around victimization. Colin Campbell spoke on “radical” Islam, and in his own irenic manner helped address this difficult topic, but more on this later. Salim Munayer spoke passionately on communicating with Jews, and especially Messianic Jews. Salim and Colin did a good job arguing that we must get past labels and “othering” (though I hate to borrow such a trendy term from the whorehouse that is Western academia). I was waiting for someone to quote the great philosopher Wayne Campbell, who said, “If you label me, you deny me” (in Spheeris 1992, though some attribute this quote to the Danish Lutheran Soren Kierkegaard). These two factors—a clear renunciation of all violence and a refusal to be victims—stood out to me as great strengths of this local community of believers.

3. Engaging Scripture, demolishing dispensationalism

Meanwhile, dispensationalism and Christian Zionism were convincingly, I thought, deconstructed by Gary Burge of Wheaton and Stephen Sizer. Charges of Replacement Theology were variously refuted or acknowledged depending on the speaker. I felt that most speakers allowed for some role for ethnic Israel in the *eschaton*, but firmly refuted the idea that ethnic Israel had any salvific covenant with God outside of the one instituted by Christ the son of Mary: “This is my blood *of the new covenant*, shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins.” The consequence of this is that it is incorrect to identify the state of Israel with the Israel of the Bible.

Here are some other examples of verses that were tackled. Are the Jews the chosen people? Try 1 Peter 2:9 where it says you, Christians, are the chosen people. So when we bless the state of Israel, are we blessing Abraham, as we’ve so often heard? Nope, for they are not all of Israel which are called Israel, as Paul writes in Romans 9:6, or as Jesus said to a devout group of Jews, you are not children of Abraham, you belong to your father, the devil (Jn 8:44). And what about the importance of the city of Jerusalem? Think again. Your citizenship is in a heavenly city (Heb 12:22). Or if you really want to tackle the earthly Jerusalem, let’s do it. We read in Psalm 87 (NIV):

4“I will record Rahab and Babylon
among those who acknowledge me—
Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—
and will say, “This one was born in Zion.”

5Indeed, of Zion it will be said,
“This one and that one were born in her,
and the Most High himself will establish her.”

6The LORD will write in the register of the peoples:
“This one was born in Zion.” Selah

7As they make music they will sing,
“All my fountains are in you.”

And here we have all these non-Jews being granted citizenship in Jerusalem. Looks like Darby, Scofield, Ryrice, & Co have a competitor.

Jonathan Kuttab dropped what one person called a bombshell and declared the two-state solution DOA. He's right. Look at all the settlements in the West Bank and it's clear they can't be moved. Israel has dug its own grave here—at least in terms of remaining a majority Jewish state—IMHO. This really came home to me in visiting the Tent of Nations, a Palestinian farm on a hilltop in the West Bank, surrounded by at least five Jewish settlements¹⁵³. The family that owns the land has documents proving their ownership of it, from the Ottoman period, the Mandate period, and the Jordanian period. Nonetheless, their case has been with the Israeli Supreme Court for over twenty years, and they are not allowed to build anything. And the road to Bethlehem was blocked by settlers, who built a barrier of large stones. They get water from cisterns, and electricity from solar panels. Their motto is, "We refuse to be enemies." God bless this Christian Palestinian family.

Significant evidence was also presented to argue that the security wall was really a land-grab, and not in fact a security barrier¹⁵⁴. It should be noted here that according to International Law, Israel has been illegally occupying this land for forty years now. It is bad etiquette to build a wall on someone else's land. It might even be immoral.

But God gave the Jews the land, right? Who cares what the UN says! But not so fast. Remember that the "Biblical basis" for this claim was dismantled: "To your descendants" does not mean just Jews, and certainly not the modern secular state of Israel. According to Paul, in Galatians 3:16, the seed referred to in Genesis 12:7 is none other than Jesus Christ himself, and by

¹⁵³ For more info see www.tentofnations.org.

¹⁵⁴ For instance, in the film *With God on our Side* (Speakman 2010).

derivation, his bride. Christ himself is Israel. All disciples of Christ are Israelites. John the Baptist also chimes in here, and he expressed his valuation of blood-relation to ethnic Israel when he said, "Out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Mt 3:9). So goes the thread of the argument presented at Christ at the Checkpoint, insofar as I understood it correctly.

There were other valuable moments. The talks from Shireen Hilal on being a mother in occupied Palestine come to mind, also Yohanna Katanacho on the rich history of Christians in the Arab world, and so on.

4. A Possibility for Victory?

But there is one great weakness that was only hinted at here and there. And this is my main critique of the conference. Palestinian Christians want help to end the occupation. It is possible, I think, but would take a huge amount of exertion on the part of the worldwide evangelical community. But what is going to happen afterwards? Saint Paul and Sayyid Qutb¹⁵⁵ agree: we are all slaves either to God and his law, or to men and their laws. So is there any possibility of success here? Or are the churches of the world being asked to help the Palestinians move from one kind of slavery to another? Is an Islamist terror-state in Palestine oppressing Christians better than a Jewish occupation oppressing Christians? It is good and well to say that you want a secular democratic state (as Yohanna Katanacho and Samih Mouris did), but both secular polity and democracy grew out of the soil of European Christendom. When they have been

¹⁵⁵ A foundational thinker in what is now terms Islamism or radical Islam or what I like to call 'Islam'. His main book, wherein he presents this argument, is *Milestones*, which is available online or in various edition and translations.

transplanted to the arid lands of *Dar al Islam* they have invariably withered away and died.

Or look at it this way: a war, for it to be just, must present a reasonable chance of success. Having a just cause is not enough to make a war, ethically speaking, just. You must have a winnable cause. Is this a winnable cause? I don't think the case was made. Now if 10% of Israel's Jews became disciples of Messiah, like Wayne Hilsden and Evan Thomas, and 10% of Palestine's Muslims did likewise, then the answer would be yes¹⁵⁶. Yes we can! But with the present tiny number of hopeful, brave evangelical Christians—I just don't see it happening.

Now I'm not saying this is a good way to evaluate the situation, but I do think it is how many sympathetic Christians around the world will evaluate it, fair or not. As they say in English, better the devil you know than the devil you don't. And at least Jews are not flying planes into the World Trade Center and blowing up trains in the London Tube and in Madrid, and, well, you get the idea. *Khaliik 3ala mankhuusak layajiik ankhas minhu.*

5. Conclusion

But resignation and surrender are not an option. Christianity is built on the conviction that out of the most radical and disastrous despair, God turned the tables on the Empire and the Temple that killed his Son, and his resurrection was nothing less than the victory of God. The power of life in that resurrection flowed out into a community called out by God, the Church. That community was called to be a sacrament of secret life and an imperfect but real embassy of God's reign, which, like yeast in dough, spreads

¹⁵⁶ For more on the surprising increase in the number of Muslim converts see Miller 2010. For why Muslims convert to Christianity see my 2008 article 'Apostates of Islam' in *St Francis Magazine* Vol 3.

and leavens. Perhaps this conference was all foolishness. Perhaps the aspirations of these Christians are overly optimistic and naïve. But they are still wise. The foolishness of God is wiser than man, and the weakness of God is stronger than man. God is not on the side of the Jews; he is not on the side of the Palestinians; he is on his own side: that of complete justice and complete faithfulness to his covenant promises, recorded in Scripture, and *rightly interpreted*. This conference sought to locate God's side, God's kingdom, and move closer to it.

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¹⁵⁷ All articles from *St Francis Magazine* can be downloaded at the journal's website: stfrancismagazine.info.

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