

The Theological Challenge

The State of Israel poses to Palestinian Christians

By Salim J. Munayer
Musalaha Director
www.musalaha.org

1 FATE OF PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS AFTER 1948

The birth of the State of Israel in 1948 has had a large, long lasting, and well documented impact on Palestinian society. The Palestinian refugee ‘problem’ has been debated and discussed on a very public, even global forum. The outcome of the 1948 war has come to represent a traumatic and formative chapter of the Palestinian collective memory. However, while much has been written on what the establishment of the Jewish state has meant for Palestinians in general, the fate of the minority Palestinian Christians has received far less attention. In many ways, what the Palestinian Christians have experienced parallels the experience of all Palestinians, such as their dispersal throughout the Middle East, and the world as refugees, their loss of geographic unity, and loss of important institutions. Demographically, the Palestinian Christians have suffered greater setbacks than their Muslim neighbors, as many have chosen to emigrate to Europe, North and South America, and elsewhere. This phenomenon and its damaging consequences has been documented in the work of Dr. Bernard Sabella and others, and is the result of many contributing factors, the biggest of which was the birth of Israel.

2 THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS FOR PALESTINIAN CHRISTIANS

While the problem of dispersion was faced by all Palestinians, the Palestinian Christians also faced a number of theological issues that the State of Israel’s very existence brought to the surface. It is impossible, within the context of this essay, to deal conclusively with all these theological issues, and give them their proper space. However I would like to discuss a number of them as they find expression in the daily life of Palestinian Christians.

In my role as Academic Dean of the Bethlehem Bible College, I have the opportunity to teach the Bible to Palestinian students, and often find myself confronted with challenging questions concerning the theological implications of the current political situation that they face. Because of my position, they believe (optimistically) that I have the right answers, but it is a complex situation, and for the most part there are no clear-cut answers.

For example, my students often ask me how they should respond to the daily mistreatment they face by the Israeli army. Going through the checkpoints, and the humiliation and degradation that it involves, can leave a severe impact

on the human soul, and can cause anger, resentment, and even hate. Being unable to leave your own city (the situation faced by the citizens of Bethlehem), virtually trapped in a cage and being unable to decide for yourself where you go and when, can be a very psychologically, and also spiritually scaring experience. The wall/security fence surrounding the West Bank affects the lives of those who live on the inside of it in a huge way. Questions arise as to how God can allow this injustice to persist. Furthermore, how, as Christians, are we to respond to this kind of situation? Asking ourselves “What would Jesus do in this situation?” is a good starting point, but does not suffice, for we have the examples of Him as the merciful grace-giver, telling His disciples to love their enemies, as well as the righteously indignant teacher, speaking out against evil, or even physically chasing it out, as he faced the money-changers in the temple. While this kind of problem is common to all oppressed people of Christian faith everywhere, there are also some problems that are unique to the Palestinian Christians.

Once a student of mine came to me with a situation that perfectly represents the theological dilemma that Palestinian Christians face. Jewish Israeli settlers arrived one day on their family’s land with a tractor, and began building preparations. This was land that had for centuries belonged to this student’s family. When they sought help from the Israeli police, they were refused protection. When they confronted the settlers, demonstrating with their land deeds that

this was indeed their land, the settlers pulled out a Bible, claiming that this was their deed to the land. This episode left this young student deeply troubled, because the Bible that was used as a justification for the theft of his family’s land, was the same Bible that he studied in the Bible College. It was the same Bible that gave him, along with all Palestinian Christians, their religious identity, calling, sense of mission, and spiritual heritage. This one act had shaken his security, not only of his holy book and its meaning, but also of his land. The same land where his Savior was born, lived, taught, healed, was crucified, and resurrected. It was the land of the ancient prophets, the birthplace of his religious tradition and heritage, which has developed over centuries.

3 ‘DID GOD PROMISE THE LAND TO OUR ENEMIES?’

How are Palestinian Christians supposed to deal with this dilemma, where the scripture they believe in, promises their land to another people? Not just any people, but the very people who inflict pain and suffering upon them. Their spiritual forefathers, the Jewish people, who are the heroes of the Biblical stories they believe in, are the same people they struggle and fight against: their “enemies.” There have been numerous Palestinian Christian responses to this puzzling equation.

Some have chosen to repress or completely reject their spiritual and religious identity as Christians, sensing that it is in conflict with

their ethnic and nationalistic identities, and have embraced the secular Palestinian nationalist movement's political struggle for freedom. Others have chosen to downplay the importance of the Old Testament, and focus solely on the New Testament, avoiding the issue altogether. Another response has been to retain the Old Testament, but to subject it to a very selective reading, omitting all the passages that deal with the Jewish people, their covenant, and the promises made to them.

One of the responses expresses itself in Palestinian Liberation Theology, which has strong appeal among Palestinian Christians because it highlights the Biblical concept of justice in scripture, a rallying point that is understandable from their marginalized, oppressed, and wronged position. The interaction Palestinian Christians have with Jewish people (mostly Israelis, and mostly soldiers or settlers) cannot help but color their theological outlook, for better or for worse. It is a challenge that they must face, in a way that is unique among Christians everywhere.

4 WESTERN CHRISTIANS COMPLICATE THE ISSUE

For Christians in the Western world, the perception of the State of Israel and the Jewish people is different from that of Palestinian Christians, and is heavily influenced by several historical and theological factors. The profound impact of the Holocaust, and the guilt that it occurred in a modern, educated, civilized, and signifi-

cantly (traditionally) Christian European society, caused many Christians in the West to adopt a sympathetic outlook towards the Jewish people.

Especially when it is remembered that the history of Western Christianity's Anti-Semitism contributed to the European zeitgeist that made the Holocaust possible, the desire to treat the Jewish people better is understandable. Theologically, this was a significant change. It also brought about the shift, predominantly among Evangelical Christians, away from a theologically negative attitude towards the Jewish people, found for example, in Replacement Theology.

Coupled with the renewed interest among Christians in Judaism, and the Jewish roots of the Christian faith (that found expression in the enthusiasm for Biblical Archeology for example), political and theological support for the State of Israel seemed the only natural and decent stance for many Christians in the West to take. Not only was it deemed an appropriate compensatory action for centuries of persecution, but it was also hailed as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

The restoration of the Jews was needed in order to hasten the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. This eschatological reading of the events since 1948 (and 1967), popular especially in the United States but elsewhere in the Western world as well, has continued to translate into political support and genuine love for Israel. It has also caused many Christians to be steadfastly against any peace settlement or even negotiation with the Palestinians which would involve a compro-

mise on the land. This is seen as taking a step backwards, a blasphemous rejection of God's gift and promise, and an obstacle to Jesus' return.

5 THE NEED FOR A NEW THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

For Palestinian Christians, this theological argument has enormous repercussions. The implication is that for them to receive justice for their losses would be against God's will. Or that they and their community, by their very existence, are actually blocking the way for Christ's return. It also totally dismisses their centuries-old struggle to maintain their presence in the Holy Land as a minority. This shock of hearing this message from their own coreligionists is compounded by the callous attitude some Christian Zionists have towards them.

Many Christian Zionists have little patience for Palestinian Christians, who should in their opinion, either submit to the political aspirations of the State of Israel (which often come at their own expense), or leave. They believe Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians, who stay are only delaying the inevitable, and that their departure would make room for more Jews, the rightful owners of the land. Needless to say, this is a position that is much easier to advance when it is not your family, your home, or your land that will suffer the consequences. In this way, what to many in the West may be a minor theological issue, for Palestinian Christians becomes the central point upon which their entire

identity and existence as Palestinian Christians is based.

If the Palestinian Christian position of avoidance, and the Christian Zionist position of callousness are both wrong, the question remains: what is the right position? First, in order to deal with such emotionally charged issues, it is important to differentiate between the Jewish people, and the political State of Israel. While addressing the role of the Jewish people in the Bible, we must also take into consideration that a nation state is a political entity. When Paul speaks about the Jews in Romans, he is speaking about the Jewish people, and not the modern, political State of Israel. To differentiate between them is not an easy task, because the political State of Israel came into existence in order to be a national homeland for the Jewish people and therefore is seen as representing the Jewish people. Many Jewish people view its establishment as the fulfillment of God's faithfulness, based on biblical and historical reasoning. The complexity of this issue is no excuse for avoiding it. It is vitally important and must be dealt with.

Second, Palestinian Christians need to develop a theology towards the Jewish people. We cannot allow ourselves to fall prey to the Anti-Semitic practice of equating all Israeli injustice with all Jewish people. We must remember that through the Jewish people, the Bible was brought to us, as were the Prophets, and most importantly, the Messiah. Palestinian Christians cannot allow the political events of the last 60 years to influ-

ence their view of the Jewish people. Although it is difficult, they must also address the biblical claims the Jewish people have concerning the Land. However Palestinian Christians cannot deny who they are, or be ignored by the Western Church, for their very existence forces the discussion on issues such as theology of the Land, and God's covenant to come to the surface, and challenges easy assumptions about Israel's role in it all.

Much work still needs to be done. Palestinian Christians were never preoccupied have never been preoccupied with end time theology, God's covenant with the Jewish people, or theology of the Land. But the events of 1948 have caused them to begin studying these issues and asking questions. Some have returned to the Bible, and have a renewed focus on discovering answers to these complex theological issues and their political implications. A major split has occurred in the Christian world over the issue of Israel, and most Christians have fallen into one of two camps. The mostly Evangelical Christian Zionist camp, that is dispensationalist, pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian, and the usually more mainline Christians, advocates of justice and the social gospel, and tend to be more critical of Israel and inclined to be more pro-Palestinian. Any theology that puts us in favor of one people as opposed to another, is a contradiction of the fundamental principles of our faith. We must avoid falling

into this trap where we dehumanize others in the name of our religion. While we are far from reaching a final and correct treatment of this issue, this is a good starting point.

Palestinian Christians need interaction with Israeli Messianic Jews, within the context of reconciliation that Musalaha advocates. Musalaha is a non-profit organization that seeks to promote reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians as demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus. We seek to be an encouragement and facilitator of reconciliation, first among Palestinian Christians and Messianic Israelis, and then beyond to our respective communities. They need to sit, talk, and discuss together all of the issues, and present all the points of view in a safe atmosphere permeated by God's love. Through this process, we will be able to develop a theological framework that will address the needs of both communities. Any theology that neglects God's love, God's mercy, and God's justice will ultimately fail. We have already identified the issues and the needs that must be met. We are therefore on our way towards developing a theology of reconciliation. This theology must address the equally valid needs that each of these communities have, for justice on the Palestinian side, and for hope and security on the Israeli side. We must meet this challenge together.

Edited by Joshua Korn
Musalaha Publishing Manager