

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM AND THE CHRIST OF THE CROSS

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“Honest-to God-Gospel for a Dying World” is no joke. Its urgency was impressed on me during the sabbatical that I took during the 2005-2006 academic year. For the first six months, July – January, I lived in the West Bank, three months in Bethlehem and three months in East Jerusalem. During my time in Bethlehem I was a participant in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, or EAPPI. This program was initiated in 2002, when the heads of the churches in Jerusalem requested that the World Council of Churches send international observers to the West Bank. EAPPI is the WCC’s response to that call. In my second three-month term I was no longer with the EAPPI but I was working as a visiting scholar with Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land. He asked me to research and write a document about the city of Jerusalem, intended for use by adult study groups in American churches. I did complete the paper and it is now finding a publisher. The Palestinian Christian churches are unanimous in their hopes for Jerusalem, which they see as the key to resolving the entire conflict. Their hopes are also in agreement with Muslim and Jewish leaders and organizations that are working for a just peace in the area. They would like to see the status of Jerusalem negotiated in a way that involves five parties: representatives of two nations, Israel and Palestine, and representatives of three religions, Judaism, Christianity,

and Islam. They envision West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem as the capital of a future state of Palestine, with all the sites holy to any of the three religions administered by representatives of those religions with open access always, both to local believers and believers from around the world.

In order to help you see the urgency of the situation, I will share with you some pictures from my time there, focusing on the Bethlehem area and what is happening there now. [In the presentation at the conference, I gave a small slide show about the realities on the ground in the Bethlehem area of the West Bank, especially regarding land loss and home demolitions as the separation barrier is built.]

Israelis refers to this mess as "The Situation." What are we to make of the situation theologically? If prophecy is reading the situation through the lens of God's Law and God's promise, what is the prophetic word here? If we are to be prophetic, then (to use Crossings terminology) how do we diagnose this situation and what prognosis can we give?

Christians do not answer these questions in the same way, and my argument will be that the most prominent answer given by American Christians is wrong, deadly wrong. It is a misreading of the Bible in which the confusion of Law and the absence of Gospel has fatal results. I am talking about Christian Zionism. I will contrast with it the prophetic understanding of the local Palestinian Christian community, who center their faith on the Christ of the Cross, a much more promising reading, both of the situation and of the Bible, that keeps the Law clear and the Gospel alive.

First I will give you this little exercise on Christian Zionism, which has infused our culture and formed many of our assumptions

about what the Bible says and what is going on international politics today. Take a few minutes to read through these statements, made from a Christian Zionism viewpoint. Mark the ones that you have heard before or that are familiar to you.¹

1. When God promised the land to Abraham and his descendants, God was predicting the modern State of Israel (Genesis 12:1-3, 15:7-21, 17:8).
2. Since Palestinians are Arab immigrants to the land of Israel, they should move back to the countries surrounding Israel so that Israel can reclaim its ancient God-given land.
3. The terms "The West Bank" or "The Occupied Palestinian Territories" are improper, since the biblical names for these regions are Judea and Samaria, and they are part of Israel.
4. God's promise to Abraham is a Law that overrides all international laws regarding human rights.
5. Prophetic books like Ezekiel link the ancient Jewish return from exile with the modern establishment of the State of Israel after the holocaust.
6. The establishment of the State of Israel is a major sign that the end of the world and the beginning of the reign of God is near.
7. Books like Daniel, 1 Thessalonians, and Revelation fit together like a jigsaw puzzle to show how the destruction of the world will unfold through warfare.
8. True believers in Jesus will be spared the experience of the world's violent end because they will be "raptured" into heaven.
9. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is unresolvable because

not only is it rooted in centuries of ethnic and religious hatred, but it is also prophesied in God's Word for the end of time.

10. Peace will come only when Jesus comes to reign, cursing those who have criticized the State of Israel.

11. As the world's superpower, the United States should be funding the expansion of the State of Israel.

When local Palestinian Christians encounter this theology they are surprised. It is not like any Christian theology they know and they do not see any place for themselves in it except, perhaps, in hell, if not for eternity then certainly along the way. So, how do they read the situation and the Bible differently?

First of all, local Christians understand God's Law in a way much more familiar to Lutherans around the world: God's Law is not the promise made to Abraham but is the Word of God intended to preserve the creation. This is what is known in Lutheran circles as the civil use of the Law. It leads into God's judgment against humanity for failure to love God's creation, the theological use of the Law. This leads God to come in the person of Jesus to share in the life of flawed humanity in order to lead us through the judgment in himself, and to keep us alive by his breath, the Holy Spirit, who has gone out to all the world from Jerusalem. For Palestinian Christians, as for most Christians in the world, if the first piece of this is missing, God's intent for justice in the world, then the salvation brought by the Gospel will never come. One thing leads to another, as I will spell out.

If one begins, as Jews, Christians and Muslims all do, from "an assertion of the sovereignty of God as the ultimate ruler of the universe, and with the teaching that God [is] Lord over the

kingdoms of humankind,” then all governmental power is subject to the law of God and cannot be exercised arbitrarily without condemnation from God.² When the ancient people of Judah had returned from exile, the new Persian government required of them an account of how they would exercise the limited autonomy granted to them. What divine principles were going to rule them? The Torah was written to answer this question that touched on the people’s character and identity.³ It begins with Genesis, a story of creation. Mitri Raheb, a Palestinian Lutheran pastor, says about this,

A theology of creation can be very important to us in the Middle East, where several religions, as well as nations, co-exist. Such a theology holds that all human beings, no matter what their religion or nationality, are created in the image of God. To protect a human being’s rights is therefore a divine law.⁴

The idea that human rights are given by God when God creates human beings is a strong theme running through Palestinian theology. As Elias Chacour says, “I was not born a Christian. I was born a baby. We all are born babies with the same identity, in the image and with the likeness of God.”⁵

The Law is God’s recognition that the world God creates and loves is in the care of sinners, which drives God to put in place protective boundaries to limit human behavior. This Godly Law channels action toward the preservation of life and goodness and away from what is harmful. This Law is often summarized by the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21) or by Jesus’ words: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40; see also

Mark 12:28-34). There are variations on this in every religion and culture. The Law is God's call to us to care for what God has made; it is our human vocation. Here a triangular relationship is at work between God, you, and your neighbor. However, since the social structures of our world, including our laws, are shaped by sinful humans, they can be corrupt and unjust. They must always be evaluated to ensure that they are oriented toward God's overarching principles. Criticism and disobedience are sometimes necessary. When the Hebrew prophets tested the actions of their kings, they found them wanting. At a conference in Bethlehem in November 2005, George Tinker of the Osage nation gave a warning from his own people's experience: The "rule of law" is not always rooted in justice. Laws must be deconstructed when they are unjust.⁶

Doing our best to live according to the Law and doing our best to ensure that the laws are just does not, however, make us right in God's eyes. The Law exists because we are sinners; if we were not sinners, we would not need the Law. Therefore, its very presence convicts us in front of God even as it protects us from ourselves and each other. Since we are always sinners, even as Christians, we always need the Law.

This means, first of all, that "[n]o one is entitled to violate God's law, putting themselves in God's place."⁷ Injustice must not be perpetrated in the name of God. Secondly, it means that everything we are and have, including our neighbor, is a gift from God. Thus we are obliged to God. It matters to God what we do with these gifts.⁸

When we oppress others in the name of God, theological distortions are created. Mitri Raheb lifts up the example of God's promise of land.

It is interesting to note that most of the promises of land in

the Bible stem from the time of the patriarchs or from the time of the exile...and thus from a time when Israel actually had no land of its own. As a matter of fact, these promises were meant to be promises and words of hope to a people who were weak and stateless. ...But in situations when Israel had control over a state, a territory, and an army, God's word came instead to admonish Israel to do justice. As far as God was concerned, land without justice was out of the question.⁹

For Palestinians, expulsion from the land in the name of God has thrown them into a struggle with the Bible itself and, furthermore, with God. Naim Ateek, a Palestinian Anglican theologian writes:

With the exception of relatively few people within the Christian communities in the Middle East, the existence of God is not in doubt. What has been seriously questioned is the nature and character of God. What is God really like? What is God's relation to the new State of Israel? Is God partial only to the Jews? Is this a God of justice and peace? ...The focus of these questions is the very person of God. God's character is at stake. God's integrity has been questioned.¹⁰

Palestinian Christian Munir Fasheh expresses the anguish that such questions create in his own life's story:

I was born in Jerusalem in 1941 and was expelled along with my family from our home in 1948. Since then, our home has been inhabited by European Jews, whom I was told were 'chosen' by God to live in it, play with my toys, even eat the food we left. ...What makes things more irrational is the way Western media and scholars still place the blame on 'me', the Palestinian.

Many of the absurdities and hypocrisies I have had to live with are connected with God. It was very difficult for me as a

child to reconcile two Gods in my mind; one in whose name I was expelled from my home, and the other who was revealed in the beatitudes, who is the God of the scapegoats, the persecuted, the dehumanized and the poor. Not only have I never been able to reconcile the two but, over the years, I have watched the God of the deprived and scapegoats slowly retreating and being defeated, especially within official circles, religious institutions, official media, the clergy, scholars and leaders.¹¹

For many Christian Zionists it is clear that Munir Fasheh had to be displaced in order for the events described by the prophets to be fulfilled. In their eyes the time for human justice is over. It is now time for God to come with destructive power. So televangelist Jim Robinson can say, “‘There will be no peace until Jesus comes. Any preaching of peace prior to his return is heresy. It is against the word of God. It is anti-Christ.’ ”¹²

As outrageous as such a statement seems, perhaps there is a sense in which it is true, not in historical terms but in theological terms. When the world is teeming with injustice and the offspring of injustice, despair among the powerless and impunity among the powerful, there can indeed be no peace. Here there can only be the hopeless death of the victims and the judgment of God upon the oppressors. From these depths comes the voice of the psalmist crying to God in Psalm 88:7 and 16, “Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. ...Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me.” Reflecting on Martin Luther’s understanding of these verses, Bob Bertram wrote,

For that is the way it is with the law. “All it does is to increase sin, accuse, frighten, threaten with death, and disclose God as a wrathful Judge who damns sinners.” And “where terror and a sense of sin, death, and the wrath of God

are present, there is certainly no righteousness, nothing heavenly, and no God. ...Witness that cry of misery on the cross, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' ...A man who feels these things in earnest really becomes sin, death, and the curse itself'."13

Notice the way that the experiences of both victim and perpetrator are woven into the words of the Psalmist, and then notice that at the end of Luther's explanation "Jesus comes" to absorb and express all that human experience of vain misery and guilty condemnation in a cry from the cross. This is very biblical, as New Testament scholar Peter Walker points out:

[A]lthough they were faced with the very same Old Testament passages as we are today, the New Testament writers did not reach a 'Zionist' conclusion. Instead they reached a distinctively Christian conclusion which affirmed the faithfulness of God to his ancient promises and saw these as now fulfilled, even if in an unexpected way, in the coming of Jesus.14

As Mitri Raheb explains, "The Bible, the book of the persecuted, has the crucified Lord as its centerpiece. Only from this center...can the Bible be understood and interpreted correctly."15

If we look at this "crucified Lord," we see that in Jesus' time, his own beloved Jewish people were living under both external oppression and internal corruption. It was not an accident that Jesus was killed in Jerusalem and not somewhere else. "Jesus was claiming to be, in effect, the new or true temple, and...his death is to be seen as the drawing together into one of the history of Israel in her desolation, dying her death outside the walls of the city, and rising again as the beginning of the real 'restoration', the real return from exile... ."16

Therefore, those who are confused and in despair because so many

powerful forces are arrayed against them with the message that they are not loved or wanted must take Luther's advice and wrap Christ up

in our sins, our curse, our death, and everything evil. ...The Prince of life, who died, is alive and reigns. ...Therefore Christ, who is the divine Power, Righteousness, Blessing, Grace, and Life, conquers and destroys these monsters – sin, death, and the curse – without weapons or battle, in His own body and in Himself... .This circumstance, 'in Himself,' makes the duel more amazing and outstanding; for it shows that such great things were to be achieved in the one and only Person of Christ – namely, that the curse, sin, and death were to be destroyed, and that the blessing, righteousness, and life were to replace them – and that through Him the whole creation was to be renewed. ...To the extent that Christ rules by His grace in the hearts of the faithful, there is no sin or death or curse. ...This is the chief doctrine of the Christian faith.¹⁷

This is the advice Martin Luther gave for all who are being condemned with the Bible: “[I]f the adversaries press the Scriptures against Christ, we urge Christ against the Scriptures.”¹⁸ This is why, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the site both of the cross and of the tomb, a small stone pillar was placed and named the omphalos, Greek for “navel.” Bishop Munib Younan writes,

For Palestinian Christians, Jerusalem represents the navel of the world, symbolically located near the Holy Tomb in the Holy Sepulchre Church. Whenever we visit there, we make a point of touching this spot as a constant reminder of our place in the world. Our whole existence revolves around the belief in the crucifixion and the resurrection. It nurtures our faith that the hope of resurrection will overcome all suffering from injustice and oppression. The resurrection creates in us new

life, revives love, promotes peace, and calls for reconciliation to live together in the land. It provides us the only lasting security, which frees us up to be witnesses, engaged fully in a pluralistic society.¹⁹

As Chris Wright explains, Jesus was understood by the gospel writers to be the fulfillment of prophecy. Jesus never points beyond himself to some future fulfillment.²⁰ God's reign is not waiting for global warfare to end the world but has already begun among those who live in Jesus. Christian Zionism's "shift away from the Christocentric faith" worries the Middle East Council of Churches. "Jesus is de-emphasized, as is His death and Resurrection, while salvation and judgement are redefined."²¹ Bishop Younan writes of Christian Zionists: "They seek Christ the military general, not the Christ of the Cross. ...My Christ is always the Christ of the Cross that comes to save the world freely with his precious blood... ." ²²

The Christian Zionist program...[presents] a world view where the gospel is identified with the ideology of success and militarism. ...[It] is, therefore a dangerous reduction of the Christian faith and one that would advance the political cause of a state or particular people at the expense of other people within God's creation, even the living church.²³

The center of Christian faith is Christ, not the State of Israel. It is not one's support for the State of Israel's policies that gains salvation, but it is faith in Christ and what he has done for the world.

So as not to leave Jesus behind Munir Fasheh exercises his faith "to make sure that the God of the persecuted and the dehumanized is not defeated in our minds, hearts, actions and relationships with one another. Although this sounds like a simple act, it requires courage, intellectual honesty, and a sense of social

responsibility... ."24 By their baptisms into the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Christians share the very breath of Jesus, and begin to be conformed to his life. Their question then becomes not "How can I use my God/religion/Bible to get the result I want?" but as Lutheran pastor Ibrahim Azar asks, "How will I live here? How can I live without losing my belief? How can I make the best of this situation?"25 In Christ the politically powerless receive the power of the Holy Spirit, which is the "power of love over death, and hope over despair."26 It is the same Spirit, "the Lord and giver of life," who hovered over the chaos at the beginning to create the whole earth. Now the Holy Spirit creates new people as "God has reconciled Himself with the human being in Jesus Christ Incarnate."27

As Palestinian Christians try to be salt in their own societies, they call upon Christians in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States, to help. Rifat Kassis, director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, has made a list of actions for American and European Christians to consider. It includes the following:

...

b. Help strengthen the churches' structures and help them fulfill their mission.

c. Offer moral and financial support and encouragement to Christians with the aim of helping them remain in their home country and become authentic witnesses within society.

...

f. Visit Palestinian Christians to learn about their problems and to help them find solutions.

g. Work alongside Palestinian Christians in their attempt to rectify the misinterpretations of the Bible, especially on the part of so-called Zionist Christians.

h. Initiate and strengthen various levels of partnership with Palestinian Christians.²⁸

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