

## Introduction

### *A Call for a New Conversation on Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel*

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BETHLEHEM PALESTINIAN PASTOR AND theologian the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb has summarized the influence of the Zionist narrative in the media, in political discourse, and in most churches and synagogues across Europe and North America as “mythistory.”<sup>1</sup> While the term “mythistory” may be new to most of us, it has been discussed in academic circles at least since the Greek historian Herodotus. The central issue is how historians, theologians, politicians, and perhaps all of us distinguish between myth and actual historical events. How do the founding mythologies of a people shape history and the decisions of future political leaders? Whether we are discussing the Crusades, the conflicts in the Balkans, or the recent U.S. war in Iraq based on non-existent “weapons of mass destruction,” how do politicians urge or even manipulate their people to adopt certain political decisions based on invented myths, and what are the actual facts that may be displaced or eclipsed in that process?

One of the most hotly debated cases of the collision of myth and history arises in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Raheb references the work of Israeli historian Shlomo Sand<sup>2</sup> for the application of “mythistory” to the history of Zionism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Long before the issuance of the Balfour Declaration (1917), Zionists, both Christian and Jewish, had adopted the compelling public relations phrase “a land without a people for a people without a land.” While the phrase had a convincing ring, the

1. Raheb, *Invention of History*, 13.
2. Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*.

facts on the ground pointed to a different reality. The actual population of Palestine in 1897 was 94 percent Palestinian Christian and Muslim whereas the Jewish population was approximately 5 percent and the remainder was mostly Western businessmen and missionaries.<sup>3</sup> Some historians have noted that the source of the “land without a people” myth may have been the British evangelical Christian writer and lobbyist Lord Shaftesbury, who in an article published in the *Quarterly Review* in 1839 called for England to support a Jewish state in Palestine and used the phrase “a country without a nation for a nation without a country.”<sup>4</sup> Whether Shaftesbury invented the phrase or Zionist leaders generated it is beside the point. The mythistory of Palestine being a “land without a people” was successfully marketed and branded. The mythistory became a political program when the British Parliament adopted the Balfour Declaration (November 1917), and the Palestinian majority became invisible in the eyes of the Western powers, which readily embraced the Zionist narrative.

The goal of this volume is to call for a new conversation about the “mythistory” surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a “mythistory” that has become the foundation of political Zionism and various forms of Christian Zionism. This narrative not only has shaped the theological discourse in the churches and synagogues in the West but also has dominated the ways in which the conflict has been analyzed and discussed in literature, in film, in most academic discourse, and most clearly in the formulation of foreign policy regarding Israel and Palestine by European and American governments.

While this discussion may seem “heady” or esoteric to some, it is the daily life and blood of Israelis and Palestinians as their conflict plays out on the land that the State of Israel has come to control. However, in recent years a new spirit of critical debate has emerged and is raising awareness of the crisis in the Holy Land on university campuses, in churches, synagogues, and mosques, and certainly in the halls of Congress and the media. With this new interest in a more critical conversation about Israel and Palestine, we believe the moment has arrived for the book we have written.

There are a number of unique features about the essays you will be reading. We have chosen to write these chapters in a journalistic style in order to make them more accessible and hopefully more readable for the layperson and casual reader. Each author writes from his or her particular religious or theological tradition, and, as a result, each brings a particular

3. These figures are based on quotations cited in two sources: Farsoun and Aruri, *Palestine and the Palestinians*, 43–44, and Rubenberg, *Israel and the American National Interest*, 26.

4. Sokolow, *History of Zionism*, 1:127.

perspective to the topic. The authors represent an average of twenty-five years of research, writing, reflection, and lived history with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They recognize the urgency of this conversation, and some have paid a significant price in terms of threats to their livelihood and reputation as they have lived out the responsibility to speak the truth of prophetic justice on this issue. Obviously, those resident in the United States have several protections that Palestinians living under the Israeli occupation do not have.

We have arranged the chapters with the history of Zionism at the beginning to set the stage for the theological and religious chapters that follow. We encourage readers to purchase the study guide that accompanies the book as it will take them deeper into the major issues.<sup>5</sup> We also urge readers to form a study group in their religious or academic communities or simply in their homes. Chapters One and Two trace the history of the Zionist movement, beginning with its roots in nineteenth-century European nationalism and in reaction to the powerful forces of anti-Semitism. They then follow the steps by which Zionism began as a marginalized movement among European and North American Jews, accumulated power and influence in the British Parliament with the issuance of the Balfour Declaration, and finally gained access to a succession of U.S. Presidents and Members of Congress who embraced the Zionist narrative.

Chapter Three by Rabbi Brant Rosen, a congregational rabbi in Evanston, Illinois, author, and chair of the Rabbinical Council of Jewish Voice for Peace, presents a lucid and passionate essay, “Rising to the Challenge: A Jewish Theology of Liberation.” Rabbi Rosen calls for a recovery of the universal vision of justice and peace that is found in the Torah, the Hebrew prophets, and the early rabbinic tradition, yet is tragically absent in the current debate over the conflict in Israel-Palestine. Rosen warns that contemporary Zionism is becoming the “state religion” of most synagogues and within the organized and powerful Jewish establishment. He calls for a Jewish theology of liberation that uses different theological sources but finds common ground with Palestinian Christian (and perhaps Muslim) liberation theology and may provide a way forward that can bring the three Abrahamic religions together to reshape the discourse and even influence political formulations in the future.

Chapter Four begins the Christian theological section, starting with an ancient Christian ecclesiastical tradition, that of the Eastern Orthodox churches. Members of what is often called “the Mother Church,” Orthodox Christians trace their origins in Palestine to the day of Pentecost. Their

5. Israel Palestine Mission Network, *Zionism Unsettled*.

theological formulations about Palestine and Palestinian Christianity are still shaped by the early church fathers, many of whom lived in Palestine and neighboring regions in the early centuries of Christianity. Dr. Carole Monica Burnett traces this theological and spiritual trajectory forward from the patristic literature and explains the ways in which that literature reflects the universal message of Jesus and the early church concerning such issues as land, people, the Kingdom of God, and the divine presence within the Church. Eastern Orthodox theology generally rejects both Jewish and Christian Zionist tendencies to reduce a theological interpretation of the land to a divine land grant for a particular ethnic group or nation, a view that can lead to a form of idolatry.

In Chapter Five Rosemary and Herman Ruether trace the responses of another ancient Christian tradition, Roman Catholicism, to Zionism and the growth of the State of Israel. Influenced by the centuries-old notion that the Jews had been relegated to perpetual homelessness by divine decree, the Vatican's initial statements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rejected the possibility that Jews might ever have control over the Holy Land. Their disbelief in the divinity of Christ allegedly disqualified them. After World War II and the establishment of the State of Israel, however, the Vatican came to focus on alleviating the sufferings of the Palestinian people, both Christian and Muslim. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council, with its statements of tolerance toward non-Christian religions, made obsolete the earlier theological concerns about a Jewish state. For these reasons the concern for social justice is now the primary aspect of the Vatican's approach to the current situation in the Holy Land.

Next in order is Chapter Six, "The Mainline Protestant Churches and the Holy Land," which describes the influence of the Zionist narrative as having acquired dominance in the media, in political discourse, and in the Protestant churches. The chapter begins with a brief review of the idea that eventually came to be known as "manifest destiny" and the way in which most European settlers carried with them the Christian understanding that they were on a "divine mission" as the new Israel and were entitled to settle and dominate a land that was already home to the native American populations. In what seems to have been an unfortunate but natural political progression, successive U.S. presidents and Christian leaders embraced the Zionist narratives and translated them into a pro-Zionist foreign policy, beginning with President Wilson's embrace of the Balfour Declaration. The chapter notes the overwhelming impact of the Nazi Holocaust on both presidents and theologians, leaving justice for the Palestinian people lost amidst the understandable urge to establish a home for the Jewish refugees of Europe. The chapter looks at three case studies of mainline Protestant

Christian Zionism in the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Krister Stendahl, all theological giants in their time. The chapter concludes with the emergence of new movements within most Protestant denominations that work for justice for Palestinians and Israelis alike, although the jury is still out concerning their impact on the theological and political debate concerning the destiny of the Holy Land.

Chapter Seven by Gary Burge, Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College in Illinois, the flagship evangelical Christian college, examines the evangelical or fundamentalist Christian Zionist tradition. Dr. Burge summarizes and critiques the theology called “premillennial dispensationalism” and the ways it provides an interpretation of the Bible that lends itself to the privileging of the modern State of Israel not only as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy but also as a political movement. He reviews the rise of the Rev. John Hagee, pastor of the Cornerstone Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, who is president of the newly influential organization, Christians United For Israel (CUFI). Hagee has become the public face of evangelical/fundamentalist Christian Zionism, which now has representatives in every state in the United States and works closely with the powerful pro-Israel Jewish political lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Burge focuses on various ways in which the CUFI program and the theology that drives it contradict basic biblical principles concerning a reformed evangelical understanding of the land, biblical prophecy, and biblical justice.

Chapter Eight comes to us from Jerusalem, where Professor Mustafa Abu Sway is a Professor at Al-Quds University. Dr. Abu Sway presents a compelling Muslim theological statement that is punctuated by his personal experiences as a Palestinian Muslim who has lived most of his life under Zionism and Israeli military occupation, with its daily humiliation and losses. He draws upon the Qur’anic vision that clearly states that all people are created as equal before God, and he finds common ground with the theology of prophetic justice that calls us to be Allah’s emissaries of love, justice, and peace where there is no peace. His moving personal stories and analysis present a compelling call for a new conversation that is not confined to Christian-Jewish dialogue and action but must include the large Palestinian Muslim community if there is to be a truly just and durable peace in Palestine-Israel.

The final chapter, “A Concluding Theological Postscript,” which also comes from Jerusalem, has been written by the “father” of Palestinian liberation theology, the Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem. The Rev. Ateek summarizes the underlying thesis of the present volume:

Zionism is the problem. Zionism is a doctrine that provides the State of Israel with a firm—even dogmatic—religio-national identity justified by an appeal to God’s will, to historical memory, and to mythical racial ancestry. It provides many Jews in Israel and worldwide with a deep-seated, emotionally powerful, personal and social identity. As such, Zionism is a theologically infused ideology of Jewish identity that has changed the course of Jewish life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. . . . Zionism with its creation of “A New Jew” has a dark side that has resulted in almost a century of Palestinian humiliation, dispossession, and death.<sup>6</sup>

Ateek argues that Zionism is a false theology as it is the ideology that drives the daily humiliation, disenfranchisement, and dispossession of the Palestinians from their farms, homes, jobs, and future. As Zionist ideology is translated into evangelical, mainline Protestant, or Roman Catholic theology and church policy, it not only becomes an accomplice with the churches but the churches become Zionism’s instruments. Ateek calls us to embrace the theological document *Kairos Palestine*, published in December 2009, which declares the Israeli occupation “a sin against God and humanity” and calls us to redress the theological and political distortions that are bringing death and destruction to the Palestinian community.<sup>7</sup> He reminds us that the message of *Kairos Palestine* echoes the cry of the South African Christians struggling to end apartheid, who declared Christian support for apartheid a heresy and a sin against God and humanity. The challenge that the Palestine question brings is not an isolated issue in the Middle East or a problem only for the West, but it is a global challenge, and one that weighs heavily on the Christian and Jewish communities that bear much of the responsibility for creating this injustice.

When the highly regarded biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann reissued his important volume *The Prophetic Imagination* in 2013,<sup>8</sup> he noted in the new preface that the contemporary political, cultural, and religious context has shifted dramatically since the original was published in 1977. He points to the urgent need for courageous and principled lay people and leaders who can address our present political and social ills and articulate the prophetic tasks today. He names as the central issue of the twenty-first century the culture of consumerism that seduces Christian and other clergy,

6. Ateek. See pp. 218–19 of the present volume.

7. *Kairos Palestine*, section 2.5. The document is reprinted as an appendix to this book. It is also available at <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf>.

8. Brueggeman, *Prophetic Imagination*.

social critics, politicians, and nearly every sector of society and distracts them from addressing the most pressing injustices in today's world. The challenge before us is to return to the prophetic theology of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, the prophet Muhammad, and other great leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King.

We believe the “mythistory” promulgated by political and Christian Zionism and accepted as historical fact by many of our political and religious leaders has been a major obstacle to genuine understanding of the Palestine question. The conversation and the actions that we are suggesting in this volume call for an honest, sometimes controversial, but necessary journey toward that which is true, just, and liberating for all—Palestinian and Israeli, Christian, Muslim, Jew, or secular—whoever we are and wherever we find ourselves in this issue. We hope and pray that the God of justice will lead us into a new future where the healing of the nations is truly possible, even in the land we call “Holy.”

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