
The Elements of Palestinian Christian Hermeneutics of the Old Testament

The reader will at once recognize the inherent complexity of the title, “Palestinian Christian Hermeneutics of the Old Testament.” It contains at least four aspects. The first, and the foundation of the present discussion, is the question of hermeneutics, or as more generally described, the “art of understanding.”¹ The second facet of the title qualifies the task of hermeneutics and limits its scope to the understanding of a given text, namely, in this case, one in the Old Testament. This is further qualified by the interpretation of the Old Testament from a Christian perspective, and if that were not multi-faceted enough, the Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament under consideration here is modified by yet another factor, namely,

1. Hermeneutics can have two dimensions. “Used in a narrower sense, hermeneutics can refer to the method and techniques used to interpret a text. In a wider sense, it can refer to the conditions which make understanding possible and even to the process of understanding as a whole.” Bernard C. Lategan, “Hermeneutics,” *ABD* 3: 149.

a class of individuals and communities commonly identified as “Arab Christians” who live in Israel and Palestine. As the title states, this chapter examines Palestinian Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament (PCHOT).

Each of the aforementioned components has a significant bearing on PCHOT and thereby warrants a brief explanation. As intimated above, hermeneutics is generally referred to as the “art of understanding.”² It is the necessary mediation between two stages of communication, namely, “the art of presenting one’s thoughts correctly” and “the art of communicating someone else’s utterance to a third person.”³ Without this intermediate stage, “the art of understanding another person’s utterance correctly,” all communication fails.⁴ “Misunderstanding” persists and accurate explication (*das Auslegen*) is impossible.⁵ However, the possibility of “understanding” is not beyond reach. One must pay attention to the “grammatical” and “psychological” dimensions of an utterance.⁶ Even if someone adopts the “more strict practice” and “assumes that misunderstanding results as a matter of course,” as opposed to adopting a “more lax practice” and “assum[ing] that understanding results as a matter of course,” understanding is still possible and indeed open to all.⁷ As Schleiermacher contends, “The successful practice

2. Hermeneutics is a field in its own right. For a general introduction to the issues and relevant personalities see Werner Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (London: MacMillan, 1991); Bernard C. Lategan, “Hermeneutics,” *ABD* 3: 149–54; Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

3. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism: And Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

4. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 5.

5. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 11, 22.

6. Schleiermacher explains, “As every utterance has a dual relationship, to the totality of language and to the whole thought of its originator, . . . all understanding also consists of the two moments, of understanding the utterance as derived from language, and as a fact in the thinker.” Schleiermacher refers to the former as “grammatical” and the latter as “psychological.” *Ibid.*, 8–10.

7. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

of the art depends on the talent for language and the talent for knowledge of individual people,” but as “these talents (to a certain extent) are universal gifts of nature, hermeneutics is a universal activity.”⁸ “Understanding” is therefore universally possible, and this is true even for the text of the Old Testament. It is “in essence the same whether the text be a legal document, a religious scripture, or a work of literature.”⁹

Hermeneutics of the Old Testament proceeds from the above definition of hermeneutics. Understanding an Old Testament text requires one to inquire into the “grammatical” and “psychological” basis of its composition. One must first determine the “language area which is common to the author and his original audience” and then find out the “sense of every word in a given location” by looking at the text’s immediate literary context.¹⁰ This is the “grammatical” side of Old Testament hermeneutics, and the “psychological” side is not far removed from it. It builds on what was established by “grammatical” interpretation and asks about the “principle” that moved an author to write.¹¹ This is evidenced by looking at “the basic characteristics of the composition,” which betray the author’s individuality or originality.¹²

This way of looking at the Old Testament is not far removed from the classic historical-critical method, which “endeavour(s) to interpret any passage according to the natural sense of the words (‘grammatical’) and according to the possible meaning of the author in his or her own time (‘historical’).”¹³ This method governed Old

8. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

9. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 84. Cf. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, 16–20. As Schleiermacher puts it, “[E]ven if the writers were dead tools, the Holy Spirit could only have spoken through them in the way they themselves would have spoken.” *Ibid.*, 17.

10. *Ibid.*, 30, 44.

11. *Ibid.*, 90.

12. *Ibid.*

13. David C. Clines, “Methods in Old Testament Study,” 25–48 in *Beginning Old Testament Study*, ed. John Rogerson (London: SPCK, 1998), at 29.

Testament hermeneutics for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁴ Since then there has been what some describe as a “hermeneutical revolution” in the way the Old Testament is interpreted.¹⁵ Methods now abound,¹⁶ and some scholars believe this will help “contribute to a brave new world of kaleidoscopic biblical readings” in which “the future will be a paradise of different readings with none privileged and all equally valid.”¹⁷ This sentiment, however, is not universally received, not least by the present author.¹⁸ How, then, should one interpret the Old Testament? For now it suffices to show that there is a proliferation of methods prescribing how the Old Testament should be understood. Moreover, this cornucopia of options does not diminish when one inquires into the nature of Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament.¹⁹ As Bernhard Anderson writes, “Once the Church decided that the Old Testament must be retained in the Christian canon it committed itself to a major hermeneutical problem: what is the nature of the relationship between the Testaments?”²⁰ Some scholars rightly argue that the relationship between the Old and New Testaments “must begin with the premise that each speaks from its own complete integrity.”²¹ As Jon Levenson puts it, “Christianity is not the historical

14. For an overview of the history of Old Testament study see John Rogerson, “An Outline of the History of Old Testament Study,” 6–24 in *Beginning Old Testament Study*.

15. Francis Watson, ed., *The Open Secret: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM, 1993), 2.

16. See, for example, the variety of methods outlined in John Barton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*.

17. Watson, *Open Secret*, 2.

18. The reasons for this will become evident in subsequent chapters.

19. Not least among the issues are the different versions of the Old Testament Christians use. Traditionally, the Orthodox Church uses the Septuagint (LXX), Roman Catholics use the Vulgate, and Protestants use the Hebrew Bible. For an introduction to the various versions of the Old Testament see Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica* (trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; London: SCM, 1980).

20. Bernhard W. Anderson, ed., *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (London: SCM, 1964), 4.

21. Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 83.

context for a single religious idea in the Hebrew Bible, the latest of whose writings predate the earliest Christian material by a full two centuries.”²² Thus any Christian hermeneutic of the Old Testament must first seek to understand the Old Testament on its own terms. The question remains, however, “what is the relationship between the Old and New Testament and the religious ideas contained therein?” As Rudolf Bultmann writes, “The question . . . can be asked in such a manner that the Old and New Testaments are considered as sources for reconstructing the religion of Israel and the religion of primitive Christianity.”²³ The fact that these two religious histories are both present in the Christian canon begs the question of the relationship between the two religions. It is clear that they stand in historical continuity with each other, but that does not answer the question whether the connection between the “religion of Israel” and the “religion of primitive Christianity” should be described as a “historical development” marked by “progress” or “decadence.”²⁴ As Levenson puts it,

To say that the Hebrew Bible has complete integrity over against the New Testament is to cast grave doubt upon the unity of the Christian Bible. . . . [but] for Christians to say the New Testament adds nothing essential to the Hebrew Bible is on the order of Marxists saying that they have no objection to leaving the means of production in the hands of capitalists: the assertion belies the speaker’s announced identity.²⁵

This is the challenge of Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament: interpreting the Old Testament on its own terms and recognizing the continuing integrity and viability of the Old Testament as a religious text without being unfaithful to one’s own Christian tradition.²⁶

22. *Ibid.*, 39.

23. Rudolf Bultmann, “The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith,” 8–35 in *The Old Testament and the Christian Faith*, ed. Bernhard Anderson (London: SCM, 1964), at 8.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, 101.

The present discussion, however, is not limited to evaluating hermeneutics, hermeneutics of the Old Testament, or even Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament. It seeks to describe the nature of Palestinian Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament. Hence we need to begin by outlining the nature of Palestinian Christian identity, after which we will identify and describe six contemporary Palestinian Christians and their understanding of the Old Testament.

Palestinian Christian Identity

Is there such a thing as a Christian Palestinian or Palestinian Christian? Can a Christian understand himself or herself as a Palestinian? Can a Palestinian be simultaneously a Christian, and if so, how? Who are these Christian Palestinians? Where do they come from? What do they think? How do they define themselves? What are their distinctive characteristics and their problems? What determines their identity?²⁷

So Mitri Raheb opens a Pandora's box filled with the "questions of identity" Palestinian Christians face. These questions are not dissimilar to the wider issues of Arab Christian identity, but there are matters peculiar to Palestinian Christians that need to be explained.²⁸

26. In addition to this, Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament has also been profoundly influenced by the Holocaust and the foundation of the state of Israel. See Bruce D. Marshall, "Christ and the Cultures: the Jewish People and Christian Theology," 81–100 in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), at 81. Cf. Tod Linafelt, ed., *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible after the Holocaust* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

27. Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 3.

28. Kenneth Cragg introduces the complexity of Arab Christianity well when he says that the term "Arab Christian . . . has to do with an identity the elements of which are often thought to be dissociated. Arabism is so deeply involved in being Muslim, for reasons inherent in Islamic history, that it is thought to belong exclusively to that faith and culture. Yet 'Christian' was a descriptive of Arabs centuries before Islam, and there has been a Christian Arabism, an Arab Christianity, throughout the Muslim centuries since Muḥammad's day. The Muslim dominance of Arabness, however, from the beginning brought a tension and a tribulation into that Arab Christian existence under which it has labored and survived." Cragg, *Arab Christian*, ix. For further information on Arab Christianity and identity see also Joseph Maïla, "The Arab

The following section will unravel the entangled complexity of being a Palestinian Christian by defining what it means to be Palestinian, what it means to be Christian in Israel and Palestine, and finally what it means to be Palestinian Christian.

What Does It Mean to be Palestinian?

Most Palestinians distinguish themselves by their national identity.²⁹ As Bernard Lewis explains, the term “nation” can be used “without its connotations of territory or sovereign statehood.”³⁰ He adds, “In this sense, a nation means a group of people held together by a common language, belief in a common descent and in a shared history and destiny.”³¹ Most of the time this group of people would “inhabit a contiguous territory” and “enjoy sovereign independence in their own name.”³² However, this is not always the case. As Edward Said argues, Palestinians still identify themselves as a nation in spite of the fact they have no nation-state. He writes: “Despite the fact that we are geographically dispersed and fragmented, despite the fact that we are without a territory of our own, we have been united as a people largely because of the Palestinian idea,” namely the idea of a Palestinian state.³³

Christians: From the Eastern Question to the Recent Political Situation of the Minorities,” 25–47 in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); George Sabra, “Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17 (2006): 43–53; David Thomas, “Arab Christianity,” 1–22 in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian?: Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Pharos, 1995).

29. It is important to note that there are Palestinians who are Israeli citizens. In this case they are ethnically Palestinian but politically citizens of Israel. This group of Palestinians is known as Arab-Israelis. It is also important to note that for many Arab-Israelis the fact that they are not “nationally” Palestinian has more to do with geography than with affinity.

30. Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 81.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), x.

Where did this “Palestinian idea” come from? Three key factors are responsible for the rise of Palestinian nationalism: Arab nationalism, the political fragmentation of the Middle East after World War I, and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948.³⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether claims that Arab nationalism “emerged out of the colonial fragmentation of the region.”³⁵ This is not true, however, as Arab nationalism preceded the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. It certainly intensified after World War I, for Britain and France had “promised self-determination and ultimate independence to the Arab peoples who now came under their rule.”³⁶ When the Levant was split between France and Britain, subdivided into separate mandates, and the aforementioned promise of statehood for the Arab people was not kept, it certainly exacerbated the Arab national cause but it most certainly did not create it. It would be more accurate to say that Palestinian nationalism emerged in the wake of the “colonial fragmentation of the region.”³⁷

Palestinian nationalism arose out of and solidified in its struggle against the British administration, Zionism, and the establishment of the state of Israel.³⁸ Of particular importance was the British administration’s declaration that those who lived in the land of Palestine were to be referred to as “non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” Rashid Khalidi points out:

34. For more information on the political context of Palestinian Christianity, see the relevant sections in chapters 2, 3, and 4.

35. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether, *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 95. They also claim (p. 95) that “nationalism was itself Western, not an Arab idea, imported to the region in the late nineteenth century.”

36. Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 343.

37. Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath of Jonah*, 95.

38. Rashid Khalidi lists three main obstacles hindering Palestinian national expression: the external powers of Britain and the United States, the Zionist movement, and internal factors within Palestinian society. Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 24–26.

[This] . . . negation was an important prerequisite both for the denial of self-determination to the Palestinians, and for the British decision to favor Zionism: for if the Palestinians had no determined identity, they were unworthy of self-determination, or at least less worthy than the Jews, who clearly had a determined identity, now being posed in national rather than religious terms.³⁹

As a result Palestine could easily be described as a “land without a people for a people without a land.”⁴⁰ The Palestinian people could be ignored and the way opened for the foundation of a Jewish state. The countless skirmishes between the Palestinian people, the British administration, and the growing Jewish population betray the nascent nationalism that was growing among Palestine’s native population.

The establishment of the state of Israel and the “catastrophe” (*al-Nakba*) it meant for many Palestinians undoubtedly helped solidify Palestinian national identity, but it did not generate it. As Khalidi writes:

Were a basic core sense of national identity not already in place among key segments of the Palestinian people, the catastrophic shock of these events might have been expected to shatter the Palestinian people, eventually leading to their full absorption into the neighboring Arab countries. This indeed was what many of their opponents hoped would happen.⁴¹

39. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 23.

40. For a history of this infamous slogan see Diana Muir, “A Land without a People for a People without a Land,” *Middle East Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 55–62. A version of the phrase first appeared in 1843 in connection with the Church of Scotland minister Alexander Keith, who wrote that the Jews are “a people without a country; even as their own land, as subsequently to be shown, is in a great measure a country without a people.” Alexander Keith, *The Land of Israel according to the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob* (Edinburgh: William Whyte, 1843), 43. A year later *The United Secession Magazine* reviewed Keith’s book and wrote with regard to the land and the Jews that they are a “land without a people, and a people without a land.” Review of Alexander Keith, *The Land of Israel according to the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob*. *United Secession Magazine* 1 (April 1844): 189. This phrase was taken up and popularized in large measure by Christian and Jewish Zionists.

41. Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 22.

Regardless of the reasons why Palestinian nationalism did not materialize in a state of its own, the above shows that Palestinians did exist in the land with a certain degree of corporate and national identity prior to the establishment of the nation of Israel.

Palestinian identity is clearly informed by a national consciousness, but to what extent is this national identity held together by ethnicity, language, or religion? Bernard Lewis states that “the first, primal and indelible mark of identity is race.”⁴² In the Middle East and for Palestinians, however, race is not a major distinguishing “mark of identity.” Ali Qleibo argues:

Throughout ancient and modern history, the land of Palestine has been a veritable melting pot wherein diverse peoples and civilizations succeeded one another. As each civilization waned and lost its hold, its heritage was assimilated within the civilization that followed. Modern Palestinian cultural identity has taken shape under the influence of the various civilizations that reigned over the land of Palestine.⁴³

The fact, then, that Palestinians have emerged from a proverbial cauldron of cultures and are called “Palestinian” has little to do with any one ethnicity and even less to do with ancient Philistines.⁴⁴ What

42. Lewis, *Multiple Identities*, 40.

43. In Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, 14. Qleibo also adds that there is therefore “no specific ideal body type for the Palestinians that would distinguish them from the Europeans on the other side of the Mediterranean, be they Greeks, Italians, Southern-French or Spanish. Palestinian complexion ranges from olive tan to blue-white. . . . The highly diverse pool that the different peoples who inhabited Palestine bequeathed us is reflected in the marked absence of a single Palestinian physical type.” In Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, 13.

44. Bernard Lewis rightly details that, in response to the Bar-Kokhba revolt in 135 CE, the Romans not only exiled a portion of the population but “obliterated the historic nomenclature of the Jews. . . . Jerusalem was [therefore] renamed Aelia Capitolina, and a temple to Jupiter [was] built on the site of the destroyed Jewish Temple. The names Judea and Samaria were abolished, and the country renamed Palestine, after long-forgotten Philistines.” Lewis, *Middle East*, 31. The renaming of Judea and Samaria after the failed Bar-Kokhba revolt had less (if anything at all) to do with the connection with the ancient Philistines than with Roman disgust and the suppression of the Jewish revolts. Furthermore, the fact that Palestine and Philistine is the same word in Arabic is rather unfortunate for Palestinian Christians.

distinguishes Palestinians from other nationalities is not their race but their connection to the land.

To what extent then is Palestinian identity held together by language and religion? As Arabic is the mother tongue for Palestinians, they cannot be distinguished from other Arab nations on the basis of their language.⁴⁵ What sets Palestinians apart is their connection to the land. This relationship to the land embraces the Palestinian religious communities that live in it, namely, Muslims and Christians, all of whom have shared in the same national ideal of self-determination and self-governance and the same struggle with occupation and land. From the outset of the Arab Awakening, and in particular during the British Mandate, the majority of Christians and Muslims united within the emerging “Palestinian Arab National Movement.”⁴⁶ The extent to which this collaboration has broken down in the subsequent *intifadas* has no doubt been exacerbated by the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.⁴⁷ Whether Islamic fundamentalism is the primary or secondary cause of this rift is debatable.⁴⁸ Whatever the case, many Palestinian Christians are finding themselves marginalized as they struggle against the same adversary.

45. Some case could be made that the Arabic spoken by Palestinians is much different from Egyptian or Iraqi, etc. The reason for these differences has to do with geography and therefore strengthens my argument that Palestinian identity is distinguished primarily by its connection to a particular land.

46. Anthony O’Mahony, “Palestinian Christians: Religion, Politics and Society c. 1800–1948,” 9–55 in *Palestinian Christians: Religion, Politics and Society in the Holy Land*, ed. idem (London: Melisende, 1999), at 41.

47. Naim Ateek mentions that the first *intifada* was “patriotic and nationalist and was not based on religion.” Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 6. The second *intifada* and ensuing political turmoil, however, has been clearly marked by religious overtones and has caused a certain degree of tension between the Muslim and Christian communities.

48. Naim Ateek suspects Israel as the primary cause of this rift. He writes: “Some Palestinians, including myself, immediately suspected that Israel was attempting to interject religion into the conflict in order to shatter the national unity and solidarity of the Palestinians.” Ateek, *Palestinian Cry*, 7.

What, then, does it mean to be Palestinian? Palestinians are a community that is religiously, ethnically, and politically diverse and yet at the same time is for the most part united around its connection to the land, namely, its national identity.

What Does It Mean to be a Christian in Israel and Palestine?

When asked by a cardinal during an address to the Roman Catholic superiors general in Rome in 1986 whether he was in communion with Rome, Elias Chacour, who is now Metropolitan of the Melkite Catholic Diocese of Akka, Haifa, Nazareth, and all of Galilee, responded:

Your Eminence . . . you are a prince of the holy church of God and do not yet know that I am not in communion with Rome? It is rather Rome who is in communion with me! Nothing began in Rome. Everything began in Galilee. I want you to know, Eminence, that the pope is sitting over there in that high building because of me. I am not here because of the pope. We in Galilee believed what happened in our streets and our villages, and we came to Rome to tell you about Jesus Christ, to give you the message, to give you Christ himself.⁴⁹

The above exchange between the then Melkite priest and a Roman cardinal raises the question: “What does it mean to be a Christian in Israel and Palestine?” Does being a Christian mean being indigenous to the land or being a beneficiary of Western missionary work? The former Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, rightly states that as “Christians in the Holy Land, we are a small Church. We are the Mother Church, where every Christian was born, where all Christians have their roots. . . .”⁵⁰ This is the first point of what it

49. Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli Who Lives for Peace and Reconciliation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 174.

50. Michel Sabbah, “Christian Identity in the Holy Land,” 9–16 in *Palestinian Christians: The Holy Land Guardians* (Jerusalem: Laity Committee in the Holy Land, 2006), at 9.

means to be a Christian in Israel and Palestine: it means seeing oneself as part of the “Mother Church.”⁵¹

The second characteristic, which Sabbah touched upon above, is that the Christian Church in Palestine and Israel is small. Raed Abdul-Masih rightly notes that “Christianity hasn’t been the majority (religion) in the Holy Land except for a relatively brief period of time: from the Constantinian peace (313) until the Arab conquest in 638. . . . Apart from this Byzantine period, the Christians of the Holy Land have always been a minority. . . .”⁵²

Besides being just a small minority in Israel and Palestine, the Christian population is also declining.⁵³ “In British mandated Palestine of 1946 Christians numbered 148,910. At present, the Christian population counts less than 160,000 in both Palestine and Israel.”⁵⁴ On the surface one sees growth, but it is disproportionate to the population growth as a whole.⁵⁵ For example, the Christian population of British-mandated Palestine in 1947 was 7.3 percent of the total of 1,970,000.⁵⁶ If, as Soudah states, the Christian population

51. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, however, a number of Christian traditions in Israel and Palestine have come about via Western influence, namely, under the auspices of Catholic and Protestant missionary efforts. Nevertheless, most contemporary Christians in the land still see themselves as deriving straight from the time of Christ.

52. Raed Abdul-Masih, *La Iglesia Local de Tierra Santa: 2,000 Años Continuos de Transmisión y Testimonio de la Fe Cristiana* (Jerusalem: RAI: House of Art, 2005), 55–56. Author’s translation. Original reads: “El cristianismo en Tierra Santa no ha sido mayoría más que por un periodo relativamente breve: desde la paz constantiniana (313) hasta la conquista árabe en 638. . . . Aparte de este paréntesis bizantino, los cristianos de Tierra Santa han sido siempre minoría.”

53. For an alternative perspective see Malcolm Lowe, “The Myth of Palestinian Christianity,” accessed 16 July 2012: <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/2045/palestinian-christianity-myth>.

54. Romell Soudah, “Christians in the Holy Land: Across the Political and Economic Divide,” 9–37 in *The Sabeel Survey on Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Israel* (Jerusalem: Sabeel, 2006), at 9.

55. Michel Sabbah notes just one small example to illustrate this point and states, “Bethlehem 50 years ago counted 6,000 Christians out of a population of 8,000. Today it has 12,000 out of a total population of 40,000.” Sabbah, “Christian Identity in the Holy Land,” 11.

56. Bernard Sabella notes a different source than Romell Soudah. The Christian populations in 1946–1947 vary by 5,910. The sharp decrease could be because of immigration, but it is most likely a statistical discrepancy between sources. The numbers are similar enough to make a justifiable point. Bernard Sabella, “Palestinian Christians: Historical Demographic

of Israel and Palestine is now 160,000, Christians are approximately 1.6 percent out of a total of eleven million.⁵⁷ Christians, therefore, are not just a small percentage of the overall population in Israel and Palestine. Their numbers are rapidly shrinking as well.

What are the reasons for the decrease in the Christian population? Charles Sennott argues that there have been spiritual, social, and political pressures that have made life unbearable and fueled a desire for emigration.⁵⁸ Spiritually, he notes that a type of “carnival Christianity” from the Western Church has frustrated, neglected, and isolated the Christian community.⁵⁹ Westerners visit the shrines but neglect the Christians in the Holy Land and thus make a “mockery of the reality lived by the local community.”⁶⁰ Socially, the lack of tourism, the limited options for employment, and, as the Latin Patriarch echoes, the general “absence of peace; and [the presence of] injustices and instability” have corroded some of the cohesive social fabric.⁶¹ Politically, Sennott notes that despite the affinity that exists among Palestinians regarding “matters of occupation and land, self-determination and economics, and limited water resources,” the Christian community has felt marginalized since the second *intifada*.⁶² On the street the second *intifada* came to be known as the “Al-Aqsa Intifada” as religion (Islam in this case) began to be fused with nationalism. As a result the second *intifada* developed overtones of

Developments, Current Politics and Attitudes Towards Church, Society and Human Rights,” 39–93 in *The Sabeel Survey*, at 41.

57. “Israel Profile,” accessed 3 Aug 2007: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/803257.stm; “Palestinian territories profile,” accessed 3 Aug 2007: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14630174>. As of 2010 the total population of Israel and the Palestinian territories was estimated at 11.7 million. “Israel Profile,” accessed 7 Feb 2012; “Palestinian territories profile,” accessed 7 Feb 2012.

58. Charles Sennott, *The Body and the Blood: The Holy Land's Christians at the Turn of the Millennium* (Oxford: Public Affairs, 2001).

59. *Ibid.*, 432.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Sabbah, “Christian Identity in the Holy Land,” 11.

62. Sennott, *Body and the Blood*, 352.

being a “Muslim–Jewish” conflict and Christians became alienated and subject to attack as “infidels.”⁶³

In light of the above circumstances for Christians in Israel and Palestine, the prospect for a future Christian presence in the land appears dismal. Pope Benedict XVI, trying to stem the tide of Christian emigration and encourage the Christians in the land, affirmed that “Christian minorities find it difficult to survive in the midst of such a volatile geopolitical panorama and are often tempted to emigrate. In these circumstances, Christians of all traditions and communities in the Middle East are called to be courageous and steadfast in the power of the Spirit of Christ.”⁶⁴ Despite these efforts, most Christians in the West suspect that “Christians are going towards death rather than towards life. Others express their fear about the Holy places becoming a museum or a Disneyland.”⁶⁵

But in the midst of discouragement many Palestinian Christians are offering words of encouragement. The first Palestinian Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, has countered the aforementioned pessimism by saying: “A Christian vision of the future is essentially a vision of hope, a hope based on trust in the goodness of God as well as in the basic goodness of all human beings who are God’s creatures and children, ‘since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist’ (Acts 17:28).”⁶⁶ Elias Chacour, the person responsible for coining the term “living stones” to refer to the Christians in Israel and Palestine, recently wrote a book called

63. *Ibid.*, 377. For example, *Ha’aretz* reported on April 14, 2007 the bombing of a Christian bookstore and two internet cafés in Gaza City. “Heavy external damage was visible at the three stores. At the bookstore, which is funded by American Protestants and known as the Bible Society, a number of books were also burned by the explosion. . . . Palestinian security officials have said they suspect a secret vice squad of Muslim militants.” *Bulletin: Associated Christian Press* 451 (March–April, 2007): 25.

64. *Bulletin: Associated Christian Press* 450 (January–February, 2007): 12–13.

65. Sabbah, “Christian Identity in the Holy Land,” 11.

66. Michel Sabbah, “Forgotten Christians in the Holy Land?” *Cornerstone* 43 (Jerusalem: Sabeel, Winter 2007), 6.

*Faith Beyond Despair: Building Hope in the Holy Land.*⁶⁷ Each of these individuals, responsible for large portions of the Christian population in Israel and Palestine, are challenging Christians not to turn a blind eye to their struggles but to see beyond them and work toward a future in faith and hope.

In addition to the above characteristics, the Christian community in Israel and Palestine is not just small and decreasing in number; it is also quite “varied.” The term “varied” seems to suggest that the Christian community in Israel and Palestine is plagued by division. Raed Abdul-Masih underscores this point and paints one of the most sarcastic and depressing pictures of the Christian community in what he calls “A Minority Divided.”

One of the sad characteristics of the Holy Land is the reality of its divisions. In effect, obvious to the eyes of the most distracted observer upon coming to the place of Jerusalem is a mosaic of confessions and of rites. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is one typical example of this division. Under the same roof, one encounters Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Syrian, Copts, Latin, yet they certainly do not evoke for the world the diversity of Pentecost. In effect, in the course of the centuries their differences have degenerated into divisions, their traditions into traditionalism, their particularities into particularism, their confessions into confessionalism, their confidence into a lack of confidence toward one another, the withdrawal into distrust and aggression; ignorance has gone so far as to make them seem enemies . . . thus the sociological attitude, foreign to the evangelical spirit and the purifying profundity of the faith.⁶⁸

67. Elias Chacour uses “living stones” to differentiate the Christian community from the lifeless stones and shrines Western Christians visit. The Christian community, although connected historically to land and place, are what is living, and they consequently demand attention. Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (New York: Chosen Books, 1984), ix.

68. *(Una de las tristes características del cristianismo de Tierra Santa es el hecho de sus divisiones. En efecto, salta a los ojos del observador más distraído hasta qué punto Jerusalén es un mosaico de confesiones y de ritos. La Iglesia del Santo Sepulcro es un ejemplo típico de esta división. Bajo la misma cúpula se encuentran griegos ortodoxos, armenios, sirios, coptos, latinos, sin por esto evocar para nada al mundo la diversidad de Pentecostés. En efecto, en el curso de los siglos, sus diferencias han degenerado en divisiones, sus tradiciones en tradicionalismo, sus particularidades en particularismo, sus confesiones en*

The Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah also recognizes this division and says: “[W]e are many and divided.”⁶⁹ However, he goes on to say that “we have to recognize with a feeling of joy and satisfaction that relations between all these Churches are warm and fraternal. . . .”⁷⁰ This is confirmed by the fact that in recent years there has been an increased display of unity among the Christian traditions, as is evident in the many statements issued by the heads of the churches in Israel and Palestine, and most notably in the recent “Kairos Palestine Document.”⁷¹ It seems appropriate to conclude, therefore, that the Christian community in Israel and Palestine is “varied.” The term “varied” allows for the reality of tension that exists between the Christian traditions in Israel and Palestine, but it does not have wholly negative connotations; it also allows for the presence of positive relations among the “varied” Christian traditions.

Christians in Israel and Palestine have been described as members of the Mother Church, as small, as shrinking yet living, and as varied: both fragmented and unified. What, then, are the churches/denominations that make up the Christian community in Israel and Palestine? The Christian church(es) in Israel and Palestine are part and parcel of the wider Christian community in the Middle East. Many of the patriarchates, dioceses, and denominations extend beyond the boundaries of Israel and Palestine. It is therefore helpful to draw back

confesionalismo, su confianza en sí en desconfianza hacia el otro, el replegarse sobre sí en recelo y agresividad; ignorándose, han llegado a tomarse por enemigos . . . así como actitudes sociológicas extrañas para el espíritu evangélico y la profundidad purificadora de la fé.) Abdul-Masih, *La Iglesia Local de Tierra Santa*, 70. Author's translation.

69. Sabbah, “Christian Identity in the Holy Land,” 10.

70. Ibid.

71. See Melanie A. May, *Jerusalem Testament: Palestinian Christians Speak, 1988–2008* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); the Palestinian Kairos Document was issued on December 15, 2009 and is entitled: “A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love, from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering,” accessed 10 Feb 2012: <http://www.kairos-palestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf>.

for a moment to view the wider Christian church in the Middle East before looking at any one church in Israel and Palestine in detail.

The Christian churches in the Middle East can be and are often divided into four different families: the Oriental Orthodox, the Eastern Orthodox, the Catholic, and the Evangelical/Protestant. In short, the Oriental Orthodox family comprises those churches that rejected to varying degrees the christological statements established by the Council of Chalcedon. The Eastern Orthodox family includes those churches that embraced the decision made at the Council of Chalcedon and yet split away later for a variety of reasons, not least of them the issue of the *filioque*. The official division happened in 1054 when the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches sent each other official bulls of excommunication. The Catholic family consists of the Latin or Roman church as well as many Oriental Churches established as a result of Catholic missionary work and Orthodox conversion. These Oriental Catholic or Uniate churches are no doubt often a source of heated tension between the Orthodox and Catholic churches. The Evangelical family is made up of varying Protestant churches, including Anglican, Lutheran, Evangelical, Baptist, and even a growing Messianic Jewish population. The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) provides a helpful list of these four different families.⁷²

72. Adapted from O'Mahony, "Introduction" in *Christianity in the Middle East*, 11–12. Cf. "Member Churches," accessed 7 Feb 2012: http://www.mec-churches.org/member_churches/member_churches.htm. There are two key differences between O'Mahony's overview of the Middle East churches and that of the MECC. First, O'Mahony categorizes the Assyrian Church of the East and its Catholic counterpart, the Chaldean Catholic Church, as a separate family; second, he recognizes the Hebrew Catholic Church although it is not a member of the MECC.

1. The Oriental Orthodox Family
 - The Armenian Orthodox Church
 - The Syrian Orthodox Church
 - The Coptic Orthodox Church
 - The Ethiopian Orthodox Church

2. The Eastern Orthodox Family
 - The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem
 - The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch
 - The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria

3. The Catholic Family: Six Oriental, one Latin, one Hebrew
 - The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem (restored in 1847)
 - The Greek Catholic Church
 - The Maronite Church
 - The Syrian Catholic Church
 - The Armenian Catholic Church
 - The Chaldean Catholic Church
 - The Coptic Catholic Church
 - The Hebrew Catholic Church

4. The Evangelical and Anglican-Episcopal family
 - The Anglican and Episcopal Church (in Jerusalem and the Middle East)
 - Various other Protestant churches and denominations such as the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Evangelical, Messianic Jews, and others.

All the Christians in Israel and Palestine fall into one of the above families.

Now that we have established both what it means to be a Palestinian and what it means to be a Christian in Israel and Palestine,

it is time to ascertain how these identities coalesce when someone is asked, “What does it mean to be a Palestinian Christian?”

What Does It Mean to be a Palestinian Christian?

For some, the combination of the two terms “Palestinian” and “Christian” is inappropriate. When asked in an interview about Palestinian Christians, Johann Lückhoff, then director of the International Christian Embassy (ICE) in West Jerusalem, responded, “They’re not really Christians anyway. Christianity for Arabs is just a political commitment.”⁷³ When asked ten years later if his views had changed, he still maintained that “Arab Christians compromise their Christianity regularly when they embrace any of the Palestinian causes,” and said, “Promoting the restoration of Israel is the first sign of Arab spirituality.”⁷⁴ Yohanna Katanacho acknowledges that “some people are surprised by the presence of Christians in Israel and Palestine.”⁷⁵ In contrast to the ICE, who argue that there is really no such thing as a Palestinian Christian, that is, a Palestinian who is “truly” a Christian, Katanacho unabashedly claims, and rightly, that “Christian Palestinian Arabs” are Christians.⁷⁶

The inability of the West to see the authenticity of Arab (and in this case Palestinian) Christianity is nothing new. Kathleen Christison notes that “in a milieu so strongly perceived by the non-

73. Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 195. A similar account is also reported by Bishop Munib Younan of the Lutheran Church. “As I was walking once in Jerusalem, I came upon a woman with her church group from the United States visiting the Holy Land. I asked her where she had visited, and she gave me the usual list of places. Then I asked her if she had spoken with any Palestinian Christians, and she was quick to reply: ‘No, no, this is a church group. We’re not getting political.’” Munib Younan, “Religion and Politics” (lecture given at the WCC General Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Feb 2006), 1. Accessed 7 Feb 2012: <http://www.elcjh.org/resources/younan/lecturestalks/lectures.asp>.

74. Burge, *Whose Land?* 195.

75. Yohanna Katanacho, “Christian Palestinian Arabs: Spreading Hope in the Middle East,” 1–2 in *In the Gap: John Stott Ministries Newsletter* (London: John Stott Ministries, Fall 2004).

76. Katanacho, “Christian Palestinian Arabs,” 1.

Arab world to be Islamic and therefore alien, Arab Christians have always been the poor relatives of Western Christianity.”⁷⁷ The unfortunate thing is that little has changed. Christison notes that Western Christians are

unaware of the uniquely poignant dilemma posed for Arab and particularly Palestinian Christians by the existence of Israel as a Scripture-based Zionist state, for the very scriptures that Christians revere are those in whose name Palestine has been made over into an exclusively Jewish state with little or no room for Palestinians. Western Christians, if they know of their Arab co-religionists at all, are unsympathetic to this unique theological and national dilemma.⁷⁸

It is this dilemma that will be investigated in the remaining chapters of this book. How have Palestinian Christians responded, as an authentic Christian community in Israel and Palestine, not only to the formation of the state of Israel but, moreover, to the text that is used, by both Christians and Jews, to delegitimize their presence in the land? To answer these questions we need to examine Palestinian Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament.

77. Kathleen Christison, “Dilemmas of Arab Christianity” (review of Kenneth Cragg, *Arab Christian*), *JPS* 22, no. 1 (1992): 117–19. Christison adds that Crusaders despised Arab Christians as “*pagani*” and “*barbari*”; they were “subjects for conversion rather than partnership.”

78. *Ibid.*

Palestinian Christian Hermeneutics of the Old Testament



May 16, 2007 marked “Jerusalem Day,” the official starting point of a series of summer-long celebrations sponsored by the Israeli government and the Jerusalem municipality commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the reunification of Jerusalem. Banners and signs were placed throughout the city to mark the celebrations. Some signs read, “Something is special, for everything is one.” Others, such as the one outside the Jaffa Gate, simply marked the occasion with a special “40” placard. Most common were banners, such as the one illustrated here, that lined the streets of Jerusalem. On one of these banners just outside the German Colony, however, someone had conspicuously written “Occupation” under the word “Reunification.”⁷⁹

This is a telling sign of the nature of historical memory. For some, 1967 signals “reunification,” but for others it signifies “occupation.” Furthermore, 1948 signals “independence” for some but “catastrophe” for others. How then should one remember these events? Shall it be as “independence” or as “catastrophe”? Shall it be as “reunification” or “occupation”? Kenneth Cragg is right to point out that “the historian [then], given the controversies of the story and the passion in events, is very much liable to become the propagandist.”⁸⁰ He elaborates in his book, *This Year in Jerusalem*:

Facts themselves, even when satisfactorily established, may still be tendentiously selected or interpreted from prejudice. One can hardly see the history “whole” if one is taking it as an itemized sequence of prosecution and defense. It seems better, therefore, on every account of honesty and hope, to comprehend the whole by letting the partial perspectives of the protagonists present it thus partially than to attempt an elusive impartiality which must punctuate the story with interim verdicts and make the reader’s mind a sort of juror’s notebook.⁸¹

Cragg frames his book accordingly. He calls his first chapter “Achievement” to describe the foundation of the state of Israel from a Jewish perspective and titles the second “Tragedy” to indicate the views of many Palestinians. The next few paragraphs will briefly describe the foundation of the state of Israel from a Jewish perspective. The rest of the chapter will then enumerate the views and responses of contemporary Palestinian Christians.

79. William Andrew Stalder, “Jerusalem: 40 Years of Reunification/Occupation.” Photograph taken on June 24, 2007. © William Andrew Stalder.

80. Kenneth Cragg, *This Year in Jerusalem* (London: DLT, 1982), 2. This dilemma has led some historians to abandon the task of writing a history of Israel. One of them asserts, for example, that “we should not be writing a history of Israel at all: it should be the history of all the peoples of Syria/Palestine, or however we denominate the area. By even *trying* to write a history of Israel we are ‘privileging’ one people and neglecting the others.” So argue Keith W. Whitelam and Edward Said: cf. James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of the Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.

81. Cragg, *This Year*, 2.

Without a doubt, the formation of the state of Israel in 1948 was both “achievement” and “tragedy.” It achieved not least “A Solution of the Jewish Question,” to quote Theodor Herzl’s 1896 article in the *Jewish Chronicle*.⁸² The failure of emancipation in Europe signaled for Herzl a need to solve not just a religious issue but primarily one of national concern. For him the Jewish identity was not just religious but political. He wrote: “We are one people—One People. We have honestly striven everywhere to merge ourselves in the social life of surrounding communities, and to preserve only the faith of our fathers. It has not been permitted to us.”⁸³ He therefore requested: “Let the sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe large enough to satisfy the requirement of the nation—the rest we shall manage ourselves.”⁸⁴ In Herzl’s mind, therefore, the Jews were a nationality needing and awaiting a homeland. The formation of the state of Israel is consequently a story of “achievement” in the minds of many Jews.

For the Palestinians, however, the story is one of physical and spiritual “tragedy/catastrophe.”⁸⁵ Physically, some “531 villages were destroyed and 11 urban neighborhoods emptied.”⁸⁶ Spiritually, the

82. Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 533–38.

83. *Ibid.*, 534.

84. *Ibid.*, 534–35.

85. It is important to note at this juncture that the term Palestinian is broad. In the Middle East there are Palestinians who live in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Israel, and the West Bank. This book will focus on those Palestinians who live in Israel proper (commonly referred to as Arab-Israelis) and those who live in the West Bank (commonly referred to as Palestinians).

86. Ilan Pappé, “Calling a Spade a Spade: The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine,” *Cornerstone* 43 (Winter 2007): 10–11. Pappé asserts that the term “Nakba” is no longer satisfactory, writing: “I think it is time to use a different term: ‘The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine.’ The term Nakba does not imply directly any reference to who is behind the catastrophe—anything can cause the destruction of Palestine, even the Palestinians themselves. Not so when the term ethnic cleansing is used. It implies direct accusation and reference to culprits, not only in the past but also in the present.” Cf. Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007). The rest of this book, however, will use the word “catastrophe,” which is the English translation of the Arabic “*Al-Nakba*,” the word traditionally used by both Palestinians and Arab-Israelis in reference to the formation of the state of Israel.

establishment of the state of Israel and the ensuing conflicts caused a particular strain on the Palestinian Christian community. This “catastrophe” of faith has been detailed by a number of Palestinian Christians. Naim Ateek, a canon of St. George’s Cathedral in Jerusalem and founder of Sabeel, writes: “For most Palestinian Christians, as for many other Arab Christians, their view of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, has been adversely affected by the creation of the state of Israel.”⁸⁷ Mitri Raheb, who is pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, also describes how this change affected him. “The Bible I had heretofore considered to be ‘for us’ had suddenly become ‘against us.’”⁸⁸ The characters of the Old Testament “no longer seemed in continuity with Jesus, as they used to be. They were instead placed into a kinship with Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir. Their [Joshua’s and David’s] conquests were no longer for spiritual values but for land—my land in particular.”⁸⁹ This is the “catastrophe” of faith for the Palestinian Christian community. Is God “for us” or “against us?” Does God love the Jews more than us? Does the Bible actually warrant the removal of Palestinians from the land? The questions are endless, but they are symptomatic of a “catastrophe” of faith.

The rest of this chapter will investigate to what extent Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb’s sketches are correct. It will ask, in other words, “To what extent is this ‘catastrophe of faith’ indicative of the wider Palestinian Christian community? And how has it manifested itself in the manner in which contemporary Palestinian Christians read the Old Testament?”⁹⁰ Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb’s hermeneutic of the Old Testament will be analyzed first in order to establish a basis from

87. Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 77.

88. Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, 56.

89. Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, 56.

which to compare the views of other Palestinian Christians. Then the hermeneutics of Naim Khoury, Yohanna Katanacho, Michel Sabbah, and Atallah Hanna will be examined. These examples will provide a good picture of PCHOT across the breadth of the Christian church in Israel and Palestine.

Naim Ateek: An Anglican Perspective

Naim Ateek was born in Beisan (Beth Shean) in 1937, and he describes his first encounter with Israel as follows: “I had just turned eleven in 1948 when Zionists occupied my hometown, Beisan (Beth Shean). We had no army to protect us. There was no battle, no resistance, no killing; we were simply taken over, occupied, on Wednesday, May 12, 1948.”⁹¹ The events surrounding the foundation of the modern state of Israel undoubtedly impacted Naim Ateek’s early life and the lives of many Palestinian Christians. However, Ateek argues that it was the events of 1967 that have been “perceived by many Palestinians as a watershed in both the political and religious spheres.”⁹²

Having received his theological training in the United States, Naim Ateek returned to Israel and was ordained priest on May 21, 1967, just two weeks before the Six Day War.⁹³ He claims that the Six Day War was one of the two pivotal events that “impacted my ministry politically and theologically and contributed to the

90. It should be said that all the Palestinian Christians who will be surveyed in this chapter were born after 1948 except for Ateek and Sabbah. Nevertheless, as will be seen, the foundation of the state of Israel, along with subsequent Arab-Israeli wars and conflicts, are at the forefront of their minds. For information on the development of PCHOT among Palestinian Christians in the years after 1948, see chap. 4.

91. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 7.

92. Naim Ateek, “The Emergence of a Palestinian Christian Theology,” 1–6 in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim Ateek, Marc Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), at 1.

93. Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 4.

emergence of a Palestinian theology of liberation.”⁹⁴ He says, “Before that time the struggle of Palestinians for their national rights had not seemed to us to be a religious question, but rather a political and a human question. It was out of this [growing] challenge that the need arose for a Palestinian Christian theological response, a Palestinian theology of liberation.”⁹⁵ It was in this context that Ateek began his ministry and developed the notion of Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT).

Ateek recounts that the growth of a PLT was “influenced by four distinct factors.”⁹⁶ First, on a pastoral level, numerous people were imploring their clergy: “Where is God in all this? Why does God allow the confiscation of our land? Why does God allow the occupation and oppression of our people?”⁹⁷ Second, these emerging questions demanded a response from the indigenous Palestinian clergy. Ateek argues that “it is we, as Palestinian Christians, who have to define the meaning of this land to us in response to these theological and biblical claims, for it is our lives and also our faith which is threatened.”⁹⁸ Third, there was the unique dilemma of the Old Testament. Numerous clergy and parishioners began to abandon its use in liturgy and preaching. It seemed to have no relevance to their Christian faith, especially as it was being used as a tool to delegitimize their presence in the land. But as “the Bible is central to our faith,” claims Ateek, “so it was essential to work out our Palestinian Christian reading of the Bible. . . .”⁹⁹ Fourth, there were the theological questions about how Christ relates to the present historical situation.

94. The other key event was the first *intifada*. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

95. Ateek, “Emergence,” 3–4.

96. *Ibid.*, 4.

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Ibid.*

These grassroots questions and biblical and theological reflections eventually gave rise to PLT. In 1989, Naim Ateek penned *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. In March 1990 the First International Symposium on Palestinian Liberation Theology met at Tantur.¹⁰⁰ Demand for further programs and resources by the Palestinian Christian community followed and called for the establishment of a “more permanent center,” so that in 1994 Ateek founded Sabeel.¹⁰¹

As intimated above, the basic message of PLT is outlined in *Justice and Only Justice*. Ateek argues that the two core issues addressed by PLT are those issues of justice and the Bible.¹⁰² As to justice, he addresses the uncertainty of God’s justice in the minds of Palestinian Christians. He links the issue of justice with God’s character. “In the Hebrew Scriptures,” he says, “God is called the God of justice.”¹⁰³ He then articulates seven examples of God’s justice.

100. Its proceedings were compiled in book form in 1992. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Preface: The Conference and the Book,” ix–xiv in *Faith and the Intifada*, at ix. Later symposia have been published by Melisende Press.

101. Naim Ateek, “The Beginning of the Center,” *Cornerstone 1* (Spring 1994): 4–5. *Sabeel’s* purpose statement (published in *Cornerstone 61* [Winter 2011]: 20) is as follows:

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love.

Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word “Sabeel” is Arabic for “the way” and also a “channel” or “spring” of life-giving water. *Sabeel* also works to promote a more mature accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns. It encourages individuals and groups from around the world for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

102. These issues are examined in detail in chapters 4 and 5 of Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, 74–150.

103. *Ibid.*, 117.

1. Justice is God's measuring line and righteousness is God's plumb line (Isa 28:17).
2. Justice is inherent in God's essence and identified with all God's ways (Deut 32:4).
3. God's justice, righteousness, and kindness are extended to all people on the earth (Jer 9:23-24).
4. God's justice extends beyond the limits of one nation to encompass the whole world (Ps 9:7-9).
5. It is not only humans who should glory in such a God; God himself is exalted in justice (Isa 5:16).
6. The prophets stressed justice and righteousness over sacrifice (Amos 5:22-24).
7. For the prophets, morality and religion were inseparable. The unity between them derived from the very nature of the Creator God (Isa 56:1a, 2a).¹⁰⁴

After affirming the nature of this just God, Ateek heralds its importance for his audience. He proclaims: "Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, God shows special concern for the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, and the vulnerable."¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, God's interest, preference, and hope for the poor and the oppressed are authenticated in the death and resurrection of Christ.¹⁰⁶ For Palestinian Christians, this message of justice liberates. For PLT, once justice materializes, prospects for peace blossom and hope for reconciliation finally becomes promising. For now, justice remains the major issue.

Before the second core issue of PLT is addressed, namely, the need to establish a suitable hermeneutic of the Bible, it is appropriate to ask how Ateek's liberation theology compares with other political

104. *Ibid.*, 117-18, 201.

105. *Ibid.*, 130.

106. *Ibid.*, 141-42.

readings of the Bible. The following will first detail the nature of political readings of the Bible and evaluate the extent of their equivalence to PLT; then it will compare the thematic correlation between traditional liberation theology and liberation theology in its Palestinian context.

Richard Bauckham writes: “Many Christians have recently been rediscovering the political dimension of the message of the Bible. This is really a return to normality, since the notion that biblical Christianity has nothing to do with politics is little more than a modern Western Christian aberration.”¹⁰⁷ Before the modern emergence of political hermeneutics in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s the study of the Bible was primarily split between the equally non-political readings of the “congregation” and of the “academy.”¹⁰⁸ The distinctive characteristics of the three methods of reading the Bible thus noted are aptly clarified in Tim Gorringer’s comparison: “Where pietist forms are intended to strengthen the soul’s relation with God this [the political reading] asks first and foremost how the text bears on the political and social situation. Where academic forms have often been a variant of studies in ancient history this [the political reading] is concerned primarily about the text’s contemporary significance.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, political readings of the Bible focus on its significance and relevance to the present unjust or oppressive political and/or social situation.

The typical hermeneutic of political readings of the Bible falls in line with what Clodovis Boff classified as a “correspondence of relationships.” This reading works under the assumption that biblical texts are “witness(es) of faith rather than historical records.”¹¹⁰ As

107. Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (London: SPCK, 1989), 1.

108. Tim Gorringer, “Political Readings of Scripture,” 67–80 in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), at 74.

109. *Ibid.*, 75.

“witnesses of faith,” the biblical texts have particular importance for present faith communities. Boff states that this relevance is to be sought neither in connection with the level of context nor that of message, “but rather on the level of the relationship between context and message on each side respectively.”¹¹¹ It is this “relationship” between context and message that provides a model for action for later faith communities. In other words, present faith communities can examine the text and ask, “How might we then act in lieu of previous politically-situated faith communities?”

PLT follows the same hermeneutical basis for political readings of the Bible as that proposed by Clodovis Boff. The goal is to make the Bible relevant to a poor and oppressed community. In this venture the biblical texts “witness” an array of possible “relationships” for Christian communities to mirror and follow. In many cases PLT follows suit and looks to biblical texts to provide a “correspondence of relationships” for Christian praxis. It also interprets the political situation directly in relation to a particular biblical story, in what Boff calls a “correspondence of terms.”¹¹² In this way PLT coincides with other political readings of the Bible as defined by Boff.

PLT is distinguished from other political readings of the Bible, and traditional liberation theology in particular, by its theme. In the

110. Ibid.

111. Clodovis Boff, “Hermeneutics: Constitution of Theological Pertinency,” 9–35 in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: SPCK, 1991), 30.

112. Cf. Gorringer, “Political Readings of Scripture,” 68; Boff, “Hermeneutics,” 30. There are numerous examples of the same practice in Ateek’s writings, especially in articles published in *Cornerstone*. For example, he writes: “The Christmas story according to Matthew . . . includes all the human ingredients for making a modern contemporary political event relevant to people’s life in Israel/Palestine. The main actors are still with us and around us. There are the Herods, the chief priests, and the people of Jerusalem. . . . Those of us who live in Jerusalem are conscious of the presence of the Herods today in the form of government leaders and military powers that seek the good of their own people, but not the good of all; a military power that wants to impose its will on people without satisfying the demands for justice.” Cf. Naim Ateek, “Herod & the Star,” *Cornerstone 2* (Winter 1994): 1–2.

reading of the Bible, traditional liberation theology places particular emphasis on “the liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt, the prophet’s denunciation of oppression, and Jesus’ proclamation of the gospel to the poor and outcast.”¹¹³ PLT employs the prophet’s call for justice and Jesus’ gospel proclamation, but it dissociates itself from the theme of the Exodus. Naim Ateek explains that Palestinians find it difficult to appropriate the Exodus theme because of the way “its message 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.”¹¹⁴ In *Justice and Only Justice*, Ateek articulates three alternative biblical passages to serve as themes relevant to his Palestinian context:

1. “Naboth and the God of Justice”: 1 Kings 21
2. “The Ecstatic Prophets—A Cautious Warning”: 1 Kings 22
3. “The Cry of a Refugee—Hope in God”: Psalm 42, 43,¹¹⁵

In *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*, Ateek finds a prime biblical text and example in the book of Jonah. He acknowledges that he always recognized the inclusive nature of the book of Jonah and admits that he “interpreted the story of Jonah in this light in my first book. [But] since then, after much more reflection, I understand the text in a more radical and revolutionary way.”¹¹⁶ He adds: “For me, the writer of Jonah appears to be the first Palestinian liberation theologian, someone who has written the greatest book in the Old Testament.”¹¹⁷ Jonah has become one of Ateek’s governing narratives

113. Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 256.

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

115. *Ibid.*, 86–92.

116. Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry*, 71.

117. *Ibid.*

for his liberation theology, and in this way PLT is certainly distinct from other political readings of the Bible.

Now that we have detailed the nature of Naim Ateek's PLT as it has to do with the issue of justice and having compared it to other political readings of the Bible with regard to method and theme, it is appropriate to return to the second core issue of PLT, namely, establishing an appropriate hermeneutic of the Bible. According to Naim Ateek the principal questions raised by Palestinian Christians concern "whether what is being read in the Bible is the Word of God to them and whether it reflects the nature, will, and purpose of God for them."¹¹⁸ In other words, Palestinian Christians are looking for an appropriate hermeneutic.¹¹⁹ For Ateek, Jesus Christ is that hermeneutic. The "word of God" in the Bible should be interpreted by the "Word of God" incarnate in Jesus Christ.¹²⁰

Naim Ateek's hermeneutic affects how he reads the entire Bible. He explains: "From this perspective, the biblical material is not viewed in a horizontal way as having the same authority and the same theological value. What God has done in Christ for the redemption of the world is more authoritative and has greater value for the believer than anything else."¹²¹ Consequently, nationalist and Torah-oriented traditions in the Old Testament are useless for the Christian life,

118. *Ibid.*, 79.

119. Naim Ateek acknowledges that this hermeneutic must not substantiate "subjective claims and prejudices" of Jewish Zionists, Christian fundamentalists, or Palestinians. "The hermeneutic must ring true of a God whom we have come to know—unchanging in nature and character, dynamically constant rather than fickle and variable, responding to but not conditioned by time, space, or circumstance." *Ibid.*, 79.

120. *Ibid.*, 80. Note the cases chosen by Ateek to delineate his hermeneutic authority. Christ has interpretive primacy over the *word* of God in the Bible as the *Word* of God himself.

121. Ateek does not personally respond to the criticisms of Yohanna Katanacho, but because there is ample resource in Ateek's writings it is justifiable to conjecture how he might respond. The above sentence is therefore framed as such a response. See Naim Ateek, "Putting Christ at the Centre: The Land from a Palestinian Christian Perspective," 55–63 in *The Bible and the Land: An Encounter*, ed. Lisa Loden, Peter Walker and Michael Wood (Jerusalem: Musalaha, 2000), at 56.

whereas portions of the prophetic tradition, which heralds at times a more universalistic understanding of God, prove to be much more authoritative for a Palestinian theology of liberation, since these fall in line with the inclusive nature of God proclaimed by Christ.¹²² Old Testament narratives are used, but only as they correspond with what Palestinian Christians have come to know in Christ.¹²³ Christ, then, is the hermeneutical key. It is his nature and character that measure and regulate all biblical interpretation, even that of the OT.

Naim Ateek's hermeneutic of the Bible, and of the Old Testament in particular, is spelled out even more in his most recent book, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*. In one chapter, "The Bible and the Land," he dialogues with Walter Brueggemann and Brevard Childs over how the Old Testament should be read.¹²⁴ Brueggemann asserts that "Old Testament theology has been characteristically a Christian enterprise . . . whereby Jewish religious claims are overridden in the triumph of Christian claims."¹²⁵ Brueggemann disagrees with Brevard Childs that the Old Testament should be read as Christian Scripture, at least not exclusively, as if the Old Testament must bear witness to Jesus Christ alone. He complains that "such a way of presenting the Old Testament proceeds as if the community of Judaism was only an interim community, which existed until the New Testament and then withered into nonexistence and insignificance."¹²⁶ According to Brueggemann, a proper hermeneutic of the Old Testament must be "polyphonic."¹²⁷ It must allow the

122. These three streams of tradition are described by Naim Ateek in *Justice and Only Justice*, 93–100.

123. It is in this light that Ateek uses Jonah as a source of Palestinian liberation theology. He says: "While Jonah truly reflects the genius and climax of Old Testament theology, its theology also approaches most closely that of the New Testament." Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 71–72.

124. *Ibid.*, 53–56. Ateek references Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 729–33. He interacts, however, with Brevard Child's *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992) only in connection with Brueggemann's work.

125. Ateek, *Palestinian Christian Cry*, 53.

126. *Ibid.*

text of the Old Testament to speak on its own, thereby allowing a plurality of possible readings that are inherent in the text. A Christian reading may be one of them, but not to the exclusion of a genuine Jewish reading as well.

Naim Ateek argues against Brueggemann and states that as a Palestinian Christian he must read the Old Testament from a Christian perspective. He declares:

I maintain that as a Palestinian Christian I read the Old Testament through the lens of my Christian faith. It is a part of my religious heritage and my holy scriptures. It is integrally connected with the witness of the early church of the New Testament. What renders the Old Testament important for me is the presence of the New Testament. The Old Testament alone, without the incarnation and redemption, without its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, would be interesting reading about the history and heritage of the Jewish people but would lack personal religious significance for me.¹²⁸

Ateek does not negate the “polyphonic” character of the Old Testament, but he insists: “The text [the Old Testament] makes most sense when read primarily through the lens of Jesus Christ. In reading it with my Palestinian eyes, I see its meaning and its relevance for my social and political context.”¹²⁹

In light of his hermeneutic of the Bible it can be seen that Naim Ateek must read the OT from two perspectives. On the one hand he reads through the lens of Christ, that is, from a Christian perspective. On the other hand he reads the OT from a Palestinian perspective. Any other reading would do injustice to his context. As a result, some have criticized him and the work of the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem as a “source of systematic demonization of the Jewish state.”¹³⁰ But

127. Ibid.

128. Ibid., 53–54.

129. Ibid., 54.

130. Melanie Philips in Barry Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must be Challenged* (Nashville: Baker, 2007), 141.

even a cursory look at his writings will show that Naim Ateek does not desire that Israel be “thrown into the sea,” and neither do his hermeneutic of the Bible nor his PLT demand such a result. He demands justice, not violence, and he finds in Christ a biblical basis for this theology and hermeneutic.

To conclude: Naim Ateek has undoubtedly been influenced by the foundation of the state of Israel and the ensuing Arab-Israeli conflict. His work developed in a hope of redressing the “catastrophe” of faith that has plagued many Palestinian Christians. In Christ he finds a way to read the Old Testament again, and with his Palestinian Liberation Theology he offers hope and strength for many Palestinian Christians.

Mitri Raheb: A Lutheran Perspective

Mitri Raheb¹³¹ was born in Bethlehem on June 26, 1962.¹³² In his book, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, he relates that the Raheb family has been resident in and around Bethlehem for centuries and his name bears witness to the Christian presence in the Middle East. Raheb is Arabic for “monk,” and testifies to the presence and influence of desert monasticism in his family and in Palestine,¹³³ and his first name, Mitri, recalls in Arabic the name of “Saint Demetrius, a name prevalent in the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches.”¹³⁴ It was

131. This author is aware of the contributions made by Bishop Munib Younan, not least in *Witnessing for Peace: In Jerusalem and the World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). Younan’s “theology of *martyria*” is based on both the Old and New Testaments. He hopes that, as a result of providing a testimony and framework for nonviolent Christian witness for justice in the land of Israel and Palestine, dialogue and eventual societal reconciliation might come about among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. This author has chosen to focus on Mitri Raheb, however, not least because his work, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, has more explicitly tackled issues of Old Testament hermeneutics but also because it better relates to the current discussion about the extent to which the foundation of the state of Israel caused a “catastrophe of faith” for the wider Palestinian Christian community.

132. Mitri Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 3.

133. *Ibid.*, 6.

134. *Ibid.*