

CORNERSTONE

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Theologies of Palestine

Bible Study
Luke 7 : 1 - 23 (NIV)

MCC & Sabeel Staff

¹When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. ²There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. ³The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. ⁴When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, ⁵because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." ⁶So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. ⁷That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁸For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

⁹When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." ¹⁰Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

¹¹Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his

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disciples and a large crowd went along with him. ¹²As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. ¹³When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

¹⁴Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

¹⁶They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” ¹⁷This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

¹⁸John’s disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, ¹⁹he sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

²⁰When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

²¹At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. ²²So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ²³Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

As Palestinians, we feel that we are being imprisoned – surrounded by the wall, checkpoints, and military occupation. We do not see beyond the walls of our everyday prison. Our movements are restricted, and even our life inside the walls is strictly controlled.

The Nakba of 1948 was not just a social and land catastrophe but also a theological one. We stand like John the Baptist with no way to voice our faith in the Lord. Secluded, how can we have any hope in the dark? How can this hope be sustained amid hopelessness?

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Lk 7:20). Are you the One who will end the occupation and bring down the wall? Are you the One who will answer our prayers for justice? These questions are the same for us as they were for John the Baptist; they stem from the same land, under occupation, and a feeling of desperation.

These questions come about after the healing of the Centurion’s servant (Lk 7:1-10). However, this parable is about more than a cure – or even more than a miracle. If there is a miracle in this story, it is the recognition, by Jesus, of the Centurion’s faith: “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” (Lk 7:9), Jesus creates a crack in the wall – he lets a glimpse of light shine through. He brings into question the belief that only certain people have the right to faith, and only certain people are the ‘chosen’ ones of God.

These convictions, like the wall, must be broken down. Jesus sees beyond the wall of segregation and discrimination. He sees the faith in a stranger, in a soldier maintaining the occupation. He can see faith where no one else can see it. Everyone has eyes to see, but Jesus follows the example of Isaiah 11:3 “He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears;” Jesus opens the eyes of those who cannot see, those whose pain and suffering cause them to be unable to see the faith in the face of another. He heals our pain and offers us a glimpse behind the walls in our lives, giving us the will to recognise the ‘other’ as our brothers and sisters.



Shortly after his encounter with the Centurion, Jesus meets a widow crying over the death of her son. As today, there is a large crowd lamenting the death with the mother. Under occupation, the loss of a child

is not private grief – it is a social Nakba. The death carries the hope for liberation – a young man who bears the promise of an entire people. The death of any young person breaks the strength of a people under occupation – a social and political defeat. Jesus turns to the mother with compassion, “Do not weep.” We hear the echoes of the Beatitudes *“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh”* (Lk 6:21). The mother will laugh, and the whole crowd around her will laugh – their hope will be restored, their future will be renewed.

“Kumi!” the young man arises and speaks! His words are words of hope. Twice, the dead have been raised up – hope emerging from the devastation of death, opening up yet more cracks in the wall. Death will not have the last word – raised, the dead will announce the Good News of how life is stronger than death.



The crowd then *“A great prophet has appeared among us, they said. ‘God has*

come to help his people.” (Lk 7:16). A prophet has arisen, giving a voice to those who were removed from the living. God is truly here with his people. Do we see him as he visits, and will we arise?

In his prison, John the Baptist hears about these events but cannot see them. He doesn’t see outside the walls of his prison. He sends messengers to Jesus: one prophet talks to another through these messengers, breaking through the constraints of the prison – much like social media can be used to give voice to the voiceless today.

Is now the time to arise? Which direction shall we take? How can we interpret what we hear? “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?”

Jesus doesn’t give a yes or no answer to the questions of the messengers. He doesn’t provide them with reassurance and rest by saying yes – he sends them to announce what they have seen and heard. He doesn’t send them back to check the facts; instead, he quotes scripture *“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor”* (Lk 7:22).

Through Jesus, yes, the scriptures are fulfilled. They are alive because they are grounded in words and actions. They are rooted in our actions, in our faith, and our openness to the ‘other.’

Kumi! In the youth, in the sons and daughters, in the strangers, in the blind, in the lame, in the dead, we

can see the Good News told out. *“The one who is to come”* is amongst us, in everyone whose faith makes him or her arise from the oppression of our prison. Hope is the power that will make us rise.

Sabeel’s 1st International Gathering, held at the beginning of December 2019 in Bethlehem brought together a number of organisations including: Al Liqa, Bethlehem Bible College, Kairos Palestine, Dar al Kalima University College, and Musalaha Ministry of Reconciliation. These organisations have grown out of this need for Palestinians to rise with a new theology. Sabeel are thankful for the organisations for being willing to participate in this new way of bringing people together.

Out of this same sense of Kumi, comes this edition of Cornerstone. As part of an attempt to bring together the various organisations and theologies among the Palestinian Christians. Therefore, Sabeel interviewed a number of Palestinian theologians and the transcripts of those interviews make up this edition of Cornerstone. This collection of interviews aims to give the reader a wide overview of the different theologies among Palestinian Christians both within Palestine and Israel.



"Perhaps the most beautiful memories are those of a place." - Mahmoud al-Kurd

REV MITRI RAHEB

How does your theology respond to Biblical Texts which justify Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people?

First of all, for me, it is crucial to develop a theology that is not a response to Christian Zionism. My theology aims to respond to the experience of our people and the context of the Bible. So, I never wanted to do a reactive theology. I have devoted myself over the last 35 years to a pro-active theology. We need to tell our own story. It doesn't help our people to continue responding to the stories of others. Before the first Intifada, I was studying in Germany. Six months

after I returned to Palestine, the Intifada began, and I was not prepared for a context such as this. During that period, we had elders of the church who were imprisoned, we had young people who were imprisoned, and I began to receive letters from these people in prison. They were writing their letters on fine cigarette papers, and this gave me a new insight into the Biblical texts. I understood in a new way that the Biblical texts are texts of resistance. These texts were either written in prison, like the letters of Paul, or when people were expelled from the country, like John, in exile, like Jeremiah, or under occupation. These texts speak our language, and this

is really what we need to highlight. I think that this is a response to Christian Zionism. We don't want to simply react; we really want to tell our story and to give a new insight into reading the Bible. This is the land of the Bible; it was occupied in the time of Jesus, it is occupied today, so we as Palestinians can understand the land like no other.

What is your methodology for reading the texts?

First of all, for me, it is essential to look at the socio-political context of the text itself and to the power balance or imbalance. Secondly, we start with the people. This is what I had to learn when I came back from Germany; I had to listen to the people. I had a lot of questions, and the answers I had did not correspond to the issues of the people here. So, I had to learn to listen, listening to people is very important in developing our theology.

Thirdly, we have to pay attention to the context to understand that the State of Israel is like the empires of the Bible and that the Palestinians of today are like the Israelites of the Bible. To come to that understanding, you have to do a socio-political analysis of the context. Without it, you can become a Christian Zionist because you will believe that the Israelites of the Bible are the Israelites of today.

How is justice defined in your theology?

Justice, in the Bible, works to

intervene to change the unbalanced power to a balanced power. So, justice is lifting those that are oppressed so that they will get back their dignity. Justice makes sure that the oppressor cannot continue with his oppression. Justice works to put an end to oppression.

What good news do you have for the Palestinians and Israelis?

Our God is a God of liberation, not a God of occupation and colonization. The good news is that Jesus shared our destiny. Having been born under occupation, lived under occupation, and died on the cross. Even after the cross, they couldn't shut him up, and the good news went even further, to the extremities of the world. The resurrection changed everything in the face of occupation, and for me, that is the good news. Jesus says that the meek will inherit the earth.

What does resistance look like based on your theology?

The biblical texts are texts of resistance. Usually, we don't read them this way, but this is what they are. There is more resistance than we commonly think in these texts.

“Our God is a God of liberation, not a God of occupation and colonization.”

Resistance means that we won't allow others to tell our story. We have to tell our own story, which is resistance. We will not allow others to read the Bible through their eyes and tell us what we should think. God called us to be His witnesses here and now in Palestine. It means that we are not emigrating; we are not leaving this land. We remain here, resilient, and not giving up.

At the centre of our resistance is the hope that one day we will be liberated, and that one day Palestinians and Israelis will live together in equality. We have this hope, which is not the same thing as being optimistic. Hope is what we do and not what we see. It is a tangible hope; it is creating facts on the ground, like building this university [Dar al-Kalima], this is resistance.

I will give you many examples of our resistance, which are not just theory or abstraction. Here, in this university, we teach students to resist through the arts. We call it a creative resistance. Creative resistance is the word that was introduced in the Kairos document. It is a non-violent resistance because you are negating the negative. Creative resistance is a pro-active movement, just as the Bible is creative. As a matter of fact, if you look at the book of Revelation, people had to invent a secret way of writing, the apocalyptic, because it was very dangerous to write in a regular way. It was a life or death exercise, to create a form of writing which could be understood by the oppressed but not the oppressor.

How is it translated from theology to action within your church community?

Whatever we preach has to be translated into action, and this is what we do in this university. Here, Christians and Muslims work together through art. It creates new solidarities and a new vision of what it means to live together. Art creates the common ground in which Christians, Muslims, and others can come together and develop their skills.



Students at Dar al Kalima

What are the strengths of your theology?

It is the first attempt to develop a Palestinian theology that could apply worldwide. I think that before, many of the theologians tried to respond to the Western perspective. I admit that I did this for a long time. Ten years ago, I started to think that we have something to say here. We don't have to import theology. We have to develop theology from our own experience, which corresponds to the experience of the people of the Bible. I think that this is the strength: it speaks to the heart of the Palestinian struggle and experience like no other.

How do you see this helping those on the margins?

This is a theology from the margins as Palestine is a land on the margin of the world. The Bible is the book of people at the margin. The God in whom we believe is the God of those on the margins; he is the God of losers not of the victorious. The best expression of this is the cross. If you ask the Palestinians which symbol tells their stories the best, they will say it is the cross. But we couldn't connect these thoughts before as theologians because we were mainly importing concepts from the West that did not correspond to the experience of the Palestinian. Through the university, we try to empower the new generation – for example, a few months ago, one of our students won the third prize for documentary films at the Cannes Film Festival¹. He is from a refugee camp, and moving from the refugee camp to the red carpet, that is the transformation that we are interested in. We are committed to the younger generation and providing them with the tools so they can creatively tell their stories through songs, dance, theatre, film, and art. We wish for them to express themselves, but also that they develop the tools to communicate their stories to people abroad.

The meaning of the cross is an important point to consider. Could the cross be something oppressive for the people?

Yes, if someone from the outside comes and tells you that you

must bear their cross, this can be oppressive, but it is different if you feel that you are carrying a cross that Jesus carried before you, he died so that you can live. Therefore, I think that it is essential to nurture the culture of life and not the culture of death. If people believe that the cross is the culture of death, then it can be very oppressive. If you think this is the culture leading to life, it is entirely different. This is why it is so interesting, in the Bible, that the disciples after Good Friday, did not go out to the world to talk about their Lord being the victim of empire. They went out, proclaiming that empire does not have the last word. Death will not discourage us from proclaiming that the reign of God is bigger than empire – not carrying the values of power and death, but rather a culture of life and inclusiveness.

How do you see the future of the local theological community?

I am very optimistic about the future. If you think about it, local theology really started with the first Intifada and then we came, and now I see the next generation coming. I think we are just at the beginning. There is much, much more work to come, and more interesting things to come – I see young people at work.

1. *Ambiance* by Wisam al Jafari won 3rd prize in the Cinéfondation selection at the Cannes Film Festival 2019.

Rev Mitri Raheb is the former priest of the Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem and the Founder and President of Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture in Bethlehem. The most widely published Palestinian theologian to date, he is the author of 16 books including: Das Reformatorische Erbe unter den Palaestinensern, I am a Palestinian Christian; Bethlehem Besieged, Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes. His books and numerous articles have been translated so far into eleven languages. A social entrepreneur, Rev. Raheb has founded several NGOs including Dar annadwa Cultural and Conference Centre, Dar al Kalima University College of Arts and Culture, in addition to several other civic initiatives on national, regional, and international levels.



FR. RAFIQ KHOURY

How does your theology respond to Biblical texts which justify Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people?

We, as Palestinians, have a problem with the Bible. But the problem lies not with the Bible itself – rather with specific interpretations of it. There are several interpretations of the Bible – political, theological, spiritual, feminist, and so on. Unfortunately, the Bible is used for ideological interpretation and political aims by Christian Zionists and the State of Israel. When you interpret the Bible with the political objective of oppression, there are always problems.

For us, the key to reading, understanding, and interpreting the Bible is Jesus Christ. We interpret the Bible through Jesus' teachings and mission.

Other interpretations tell us that God

holds fast to his past promises to the Jewish people. To this, I answer that the faithfulness of God today – to his promises – has a name, and this name is Jesus Christ. We cannot ignore the significant historical event, which is Jesus Christ. When we approach the Bible in this Christological way, everything changes. The land changes, the people change – the people change because we do not understand them as specific people but as all the peoples of the world. The land is no longer a particular land, but the land of all peoples of the world.

All the churches in history have interpreted the Biblical texts according to their specific cultural and sociological contexts. Today, it is the same – we interpret the Biblical text according to our specific circumstances. What is different today is the awareness of the multiple different contexts such as the United States, Africa, South America, and

so on. The Palestinian interpretation of the Bible is one voice among the various liberation theologies of the world. Today, this awareness of the multiplicity of these emerging voices grounds our interpretation in a universal desire to seek liberation.

There is a constant danger in transforming the word of God into a political ideology. If the biblical texts are interpreted through a lens of political ideology, as happens with Zionists of all forms, then the word of God becomes oppressive and not liberating. The word of God wants to be liberating for all people. When the word of God is interpreted oppressively, it is no longer the word of God, but rather the word of human beings.

How is justice defined in your theology?

When we receive people from the West, they talk a lot about peace. When I meet them, I tell them that peace is undoubtedly an attribute of God, but that justice is also an attribute of God – justice, reconciliation, pardon, and mercy are all attributes of God. For us, justice comes first. Our task is to bring all of these attributes of God together to make peace. That is why Naim Ateek wrote his book *Justice and only Justice*. Justice is key for us because it is a key word in the Bible – if you want to make peace, you must make justice first.

Justice is linked with truth – the State of Israel is founded on injustice and lies. You cannot make peace with

injustice and lies.

What good news do you have for the Palestinians and Israelis?

Our message for the Palestinians is one of hope. We are in a difficult situation, but it is not the end of everything. In the present difficult situation, there is a way to keep hope alive for the future. We cannot forget that we are here in Jerusalem, five-hundred meters away from the Holy Sepulchre, where lies the empty tomb of Jesus. This means that Jesus surprises us with his resurrection, and this resurrection gives hope to all the people of the world. This hope means that the forces of evil do not have the last word in history; there is another world that can be realised through God and his liberating love.

What are the strengths of your theology?

I believe that the real problems of today are theological ones. For example: who is God? In the catechism, the first question is, who is God? God is a mystery. This is a theological question that is faced throughout Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Is God a nationalist God? Or a universal God? Is he a God of violence or mercy? We have to answer these questions. For Jews, who is God? For South America, who is God? All the theologies throughout South America, Asia, Africa, and here in Palestine, try to answer these questions for the good of humanity. Our theology has to offer its contribution to these questions of justice, peace,

and God. All theological questions must be answered from a theological perspective. As Christians, we can try to offer a contribution to a better world for all humanity.

How do you see this helping those on the margins?

God is the God of the poor. I am not saying something new here. In all the Bible, from the beginning until the end, God has a special relationship with the poor, the oppressed, the disabled, everyone who is weak – God is beside them. This is the choice of God that then becomes the choice of the Church. The Church and theology are both at the service of people, but we are not the only ones. Many in society are working towards that aim, and we have to join forces. We have to work together for a better world. But this is a process. Many came before us, and many will come after us. It is a process – a circle where we all offer what we have in our own time.

How do you see the future of the local theological community?

This is a big problem. The major protagonists of Palestinian theology started a process that offered much: Naim Ateek, Mitri Raheb, Jamal Khader, and many others. Now there is the question of the new generation of theologians who are to continue this process. We have done what we could, and now it is up to the next generation to create its theology. The problem lies in finding time to do theology in the middle of pastoral and administrative duties – there

are so many demands. All my life, I had this issue of finding time among these duties, but you have to commit yourself to the theological communities.

Also, concerning the future, there is an issue of the international dissemination of our theology. Sabeel's conferences do a lot to reach the international community, as does Mitri Raheb. We choose to be more local and to give strength to the local context of Palestine.

Born in the Palestinian Christian village of Taybeh near Ramallah, Fr. Rafiq has spent most of his professional career producing textbooks for the training of catechists. He can be considered the driving force behind the standardization of catechism in the Holy Land since 1973. Fr. Rafiq has a Ph.D. in Pastoral Theology from the Lateran University in Rome and has published a number of academic articles and research papers concerning the history of and current situation in Jerusalem as well as Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue in Palestine. He is a board member of the Al-Liqa' Centre and the Secretary General of the Synod of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem



JEAN ZARU

How does your theology respond to biblical texts which justify Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people?

My way of dealing with the understanding of the Bible is not to take the texts literally. The Bible was written by people who expressed their understanding of God in their time. It is not the full reality and nature of God. If we take the texts literally, it would mean that everything stops at the end of the Bible. It would mean that God could not reveal himself here and now. Also, it must be emphasised that the current State of Israel is not the Israel of the Bible.

The exclusive interpretation of the Bible is not healthy for anyone. Some Jewish people believe that God gave them the land. But in doing so, they are not respecting the Jewish faith itself. Furthermore, the faith of the Christian Zionists who wait

for the Armageddon is not healthy. This belief implies that those who are not converted to Christianity will die. Everything is confused by these interpretations. Initially, Zionism was a national liberation movement, not a religious one. Today, the Zionists work to transform the movement from the secular perspective to a religious one, and if you criticise Zionism, you are accused of anti-Semitism. This silences everyone who critiques anything regarding the actions of the State of Israel. However, the State of Israel is like any other state, and it should be open to criticism or praise on that basis.

It would be liberating for Jewish people to see that, initially, Zionism was a secular nationalist movement. This may help to evaluate its present-day goals. What are the purposes of this movement, and how does it contribute to the evolution of society? Does this movement help us to live

peaceably here – or not? What is the impact of an exclusive agenda for Jews only?

There is a paradox in the present exclusivist State Law which must be highlighted. The Jewish people want to be considered as equals with equal rights in every country of the world. But they do not want to do the same for those who have lived with them for centuries on the same land. If they want equality, so do we. We are not better or worse than anyone else. But there is no reason to treat the Palestinians as second-class citizens.

Equality is the basis of God's reality and understanding of creation. My understanding of dialogue and support means to accept anyone. These beliefs have a direct link with the interpretation of the Bible. According to my theology, an exclusivist understanding of the Bible does not fit the belief that we are all children of God.

How is justice defined in your theology?

Justice, for me, is basic; in my book, I refer to the Christ of justice. If Jesus would only have been feeding the poor and healing the sick, the authorities would have left him alone. However, Jesus did carry and bring to light the call for justice and equality from all the prophets. The teachings of Jesus all talk about justice. We are all created as equals, and there is something of God in all people. It is a gift, but we must nourish this gift. It means an ongoing effort if we want to be partners in God's plans.

It implies that we must live this gift with a particular concern for the oppressed, as Jesus did.

All my life, I have struggled with why there is so much darkness in the world. In difficult times there is nothing other than faith injustice which prevails. My faith is that injustice is in the structures and not the people. There is a structural and political injustice toward which we must exercise an active non-violent resistance. It must be remembered that, as I say in my book, it is not easy to sustain the path of violent resistance over a long time, with so many issues.

What good news do you have for the Palestinians and Israelis?

The good news is that we have to see everyone as a child of God, whether Jew, Muslim, or Christian. The good news is that the Kingdom of God is inclusive and calls for a pluralistic society, here and now, which is based on equality and justice.

In my work at the YMCA, I was involved in empowering women – Muslims and Christians, in a patriarchal society where women don't feel their power. How can you be an effective person in your community at these difficult times? What can we do? The women I worked with felt hopeless. They could see no worth in their lives unless they could find a job so that they could bring money to the family. Starting from their point of view, I had to find ways to empower them. The challenge was to enable them

to find ways to help the whole of Palestine by changing their culinary habits and maintaining healthy and more economic traditions in their everyday lives. Simple changes were at hand, especially involving buying local, encouraging farmers, and rediscovering the wisdom of the Palestinian food tradition.

The good news was on the ground with these women. Together, we searched out how they could change their economic situation with concerted action. Every dimension of their lives had to be re-appropriated. Besides, the occupation did not steal only our land and right but also our heritage and traditions such as embroidery. They stole our identity. This is why I thought that women had power in their lives by buying local, cooking local, and sustaining their families through respecting nature. I was preaching for the respect of nature long before today.

“The good news is that we have to see everyone as a child of God, whether Jew, Muslim, or Christian.”

Hospitality is one of the foundations of Palestinian life – sharing our food, sharing our house, sharing our time, and by doing so, building a community. This is an ancestral

way of life for Palestinians. Women's ability to build communities means that they have to be attentive to relationships and take the time to commit to others. All this is an invisible way of upholding Palestine. Good news often happens in invisible places. It is a form of *sumud*, which means insisting on doing the right thing in a difficult situation. This is how I see women: hidden figures of the Palestinian actions of liberation.

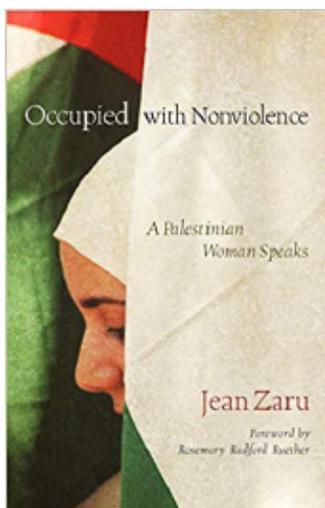
The future of Palestine is not only a political issue; it is in women's hands, in their everyday life. A considerable part of my voluntary work was devoted to teaching them to believe in themselves.

The good news is also that we have to go back to the basis of God's creation of all humans as his children. We must go back to the meaning of how God relates to nature. The creation story can inspire us toward equality and respect for nature. The story stops us justifying that one people are chosen and the others are not, or that men must dominate. Justifications and explanations of the Bible are unfortunately consistently made to oppress women. We have to read and re-read the Bible to find the good news of God's love for all his creation.

What does resistance look like based on your theology?

Each peace-making action needs to be accomplished with humility. If we want to cross the boundaries and to bring about social and political change, we need to be humble. However, as a woman, I am aware

that the difference between humility and humiliation is often a fine line. Many men, inside the Palestinian cause itself, didn't appreciate that I, as a woman, wasn't afraid to speak my mind. Therefore, it wasn't only my theology that had to be translated to actions, but also my conviction that men and women are equals. That was an everyday challenge. In churches, in organisations, in peace movements, women were second-class citizens amongst second-class citizens. This is not specific to the situation here: I see it all around the world. Women all around the world, who denounced this are silenced so that higher goals are not endangered. Resistance means standing up for your voice in every circumstance and standing for a pluralist and inclusive theology. Active non-violent resistance requires the maintenance of these standpoints.



Taking a step and talking about the structures of violence, and not only about the spirituality of non-violence, was also a commitment that wasn't always welcomed inside the Palestinian movement. This is why I wrote my book; *Occupied with Nonviolence*. When I began to talk

about active non-violent resistance, at first, it was rejected. But now it is everywhere with Kumi and Kairos and all the other movements.

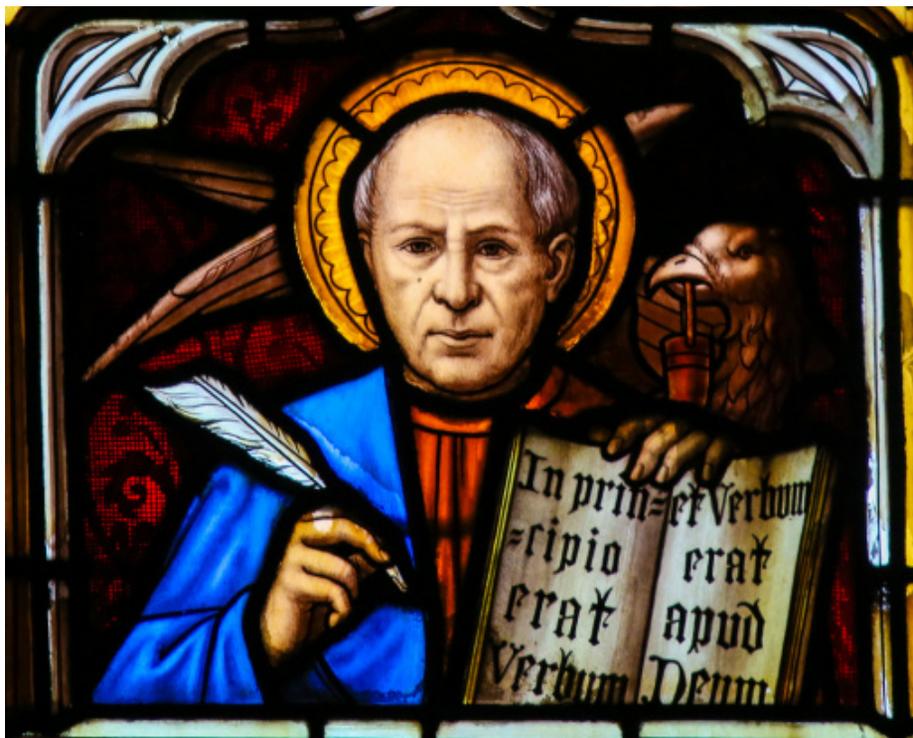
How do you see the future of your local theological community?

The future is that there is no other solution than to learn to live with one another and to have equal rights for everyone. The world is not meant to be different tribes living alone, separated. We need each other; we are interdependent – on every level, we depend on one another.

I have hope in the sumud of young people. We don't have social security, and we don't have health insurance. The situation is difficult on many levels. Unfortunately, many young people are leaving, and older people are left alone without adequate social structures to uphold their basic needs. The ones who are leaving are the educated ones. The Christian community is decreasing but, thank God that our influence is greater than our numbers. Christians have a message of hope that many understand beyond the limits of Christianity. The young generation that stays here understands that to hope for peace is to work for it.

Jean Zaru was born in 1940 to a Quaker family in Ramallah, Palestine. When she was eight, Zaru witnessed the Palestinian "Nakba," when 750,000 Palestinians were made permanent refugees during the creation of the State of Israel.

Zaru has been a leader in the Palestinian Quaker community and a pioneer for women's equality. In addition to serving as clerk of the Ramallah Friends Meeting, Zaru was a founding member and vice-chair of Sabeel, an ecumenical Palestine Liberation Theology Centre in Jerusalem where she is a former board member and currently serves as a member of the General Assembly.



REV YOHANNA KATANACHO

How does your theology respond to Biblical texts which justify Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people?

To respond to biblical texts which justify Zionism, the hermeneutic is very important. The Old Testament cannot be read without putting it into dialogue with the New Testament and the Christ event.

The best reading is a canonical reading that takes the Christ event seriously as the centre and the telos in a dialectical perspective. The Christ event must be the centre of the reading of the Old and New Testament. I consider all the books of the Bible as inspired and

authoritative, but I don't necessarily follow a literal interpretation of the texts. I advocate for a polyphonic interpretation of the texts, which means that there are many layers for the understanding of the texts. There is the spiritual layer, literal layer, canonical layer, doctrinal layer, and many others. I don't say that one layer is superior to another, and I don't say that every layer requires to be in harmony with the others. The text is rather polyphonic and can create tensions and questions, but these tensions and questions are holy spaces in which I discover God. I don't only discover God in a proposition; I can also discover Him in a question, or mystery, or in confusion.

That is why I think that the Christian Zionist reading of the Bible does not respect the multiple voices within the texts. It also separates ethics from their theology.

“I don't only discover God in a proposition; I can also discover Him in a question, or mystery, or in confusion.”

I have addressed the Christian Zionist reading of the Bible in several writings. For example, in my book *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry*, and another which is not yet published internationally, *A Reading of the Gospel of John through Palestinian eyes*. In this last book, I try to answer Christian Zionism through the Gospel of John: I argue that the Gospel of John is a re-reading of all the major components of Pharisee Judaism. This means that this Gospel is re-reading the holy space, in chapters 2 and 4; the holy time, in chapter 5; re-reading holy history – which are the events of the exodus – in chapters 6, 7, and 8; re-reading the holy community – including Abraham – in chapter 8; re-reading holy land in chapter 10; re-reading life in chapter 11. In light of the centrality of the Christ event, the way we read the Old

Testament is transformed, and our identity is broken down into seven distinct identities. We are people of love in chapter 13; people of the spirit in chapters 14 and 16; people of the vineyard in chapter 15; the persecuted people in chapter 16, we are the people of unity and prayer in chapter 17; we are the people of the cross in chapters 18 and 19; and we are the people of the resurrection in chapters 20 and 21. Each one of these identities is linked to our Palestinian context.

I also have a new book in Arabic that is a reading of Romans 9 – 11 in the Palestinian context. In this book and *A Reading of the Gospel of John through Palestinian eyes*, I emphasised Palestinians living in Israel. This is due to the fact that most Palestinian theology is dedicated to Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories. I feel that there is an important space to be filled in Palestinian theology addressing the concerns of the Palestinians living in Israel and developing a critique of the theologies which advocate that Palestinians are second class citizens in Israel. In the West Bank and Gaza, the goal is to challenge the Christian Zionism that justifies the occupation as the fulfilment of the promises of God. The theologies there focus on the Palestinians in the 1967 area, through the Kairos document, Rev Naim Ateek, and H.B. Michel Sabbah, amongst others.

How is justice defined in your theology?

Justice is a question with which

I struggle greatly; I see many Palestinian writings on justice which define it from either a philosophical or political point of view. I have not seen Palestinian work, which defines justice biblically. In my biblical work, I don't want to separate righteousness from justice; the horizontal, and the vertical perspectives of justice. The relation with God and the relation with our fellow neighbours are intrinsically linked. Also, there are questions that must be addressed in our Palestinian society, such as gender equality, our responsibility in loving our enemy, and our willingness to suffer for the sake of the Kingdom of God. I see the importance of political justice as it is advocated through the Semon on the Mount.

I develop the idea of orthopathos [suffering for the sake of justice], following on from the work of the South American theologian Dr. Samuel Solivan. It is something specific to the Christian tradition and is different from the praxis and doxy. I think it is crucial for us in our Palestinian context.

What good news do you have for the Palestinians and Israelis?

Jesus is the good news, his values, his work, and his love. From Jesus, we can create a civilisation of love. God is the best politician ever with his politic of love that is an alternative to the politic of hate, alienation, and discrimination. In order to understand the heart of Scripture, we have to see Jerusalem not as the City of David, but as the city of God. Jerusalem embodies a civilization

of love in which nations are born again in Jerusalem and are equal citizens of Zion. The civilisation of love and equality is the vision that was embodied by the New Testament writers. The good news for Palestinians and Israelis is that this civilisation of love, equality, and forgiveness can make us move beyond coexistence to a common existence, and that can happen by the grace of God. It might be too ideal for some, but in my theology, I think that dreaming is part of peace-making because our dreaming shapes our actions and expectations. For example, in Psalm 120, I see a dream for the Palestinians' future that can shape how we move forward.

How is it translated from theology to action within your community?

A part of my dream is also writing books for children. One is called *The Prince of Peace and his followers*. I wrote this book during the war in Gaza in 2014, while we saw children suffering on the television. It broke my heart, so I asked myself, what can I do? I thought that I could dream of a future of peace; I wrote 30 stories in this book from the Bible and contemporary realities, about Jesus as the Prince of Peace.

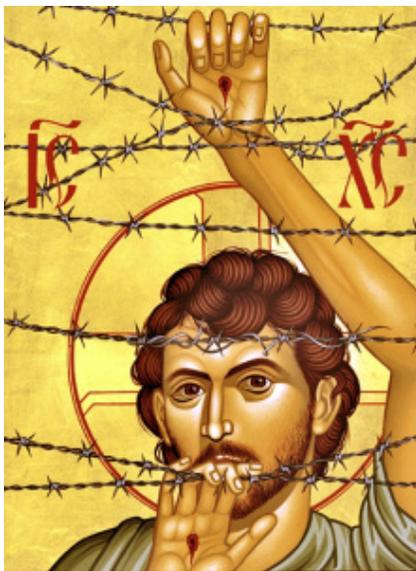
What are the strengths of your theology, and how do you see this helping those on the margins?

My theology aims to address conservative evangelicals. This group has a lot of influence but is generally outside of the circle of Palestinian theology. I go to the texts of the Bible,

and I discuss almost everything. For conservative evangelicals, this form of theology works well. They are not interested in talking about political issues and human rights violations. They want to remain inside the texts of the Bible, and unless we as Palestinians provide an alternative reading of the texts, they will never listen.

Another strength is that I am developing a theology of peace where I try to let the texts of the Bible speak for themselves without imposing a world view upon them. I want the texts to have their world view and to engage in a dialogue between them and our lived experience – for example; I published an essay where I made a correlation between the book of Lamentations and the Nakba.

Also, accepting the whole Bible for me is a strength of my theology. For me, this is the position of the historical Church, along with most of Christianity.



Christ of Maryknoll, Robert Lentz

I try to help those in the margins, in my writings, by engaging people in worship of God, and connecting political and social realities; also in books for children to empower them to be peacemakers; and by teaching leadership development to pastors and priests with contextual theology, like that of Rev Naim Ateek. I am also involved in dialogue with Jews and Muslims, trying to help the Church share their faith in an interreligious context. I try to advocate a form of Christianity which accepts everyone as brothers and sisters. I am very much involved and preoccupied with gender equality.

How do you see the future of the local theological community?

For a long period of time, in my theology, I struggled inside orthodoxy between what is right and what is wrong, but I am no longer interested in this question. My interest is in the question: how can I be a blessing today? I want to ask my Muslim and Jewish neighbours a similar question: how can your religious communities be a blessing to me? My interest in this question came from my research in Biblical theology, because in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, after describing all the problems of the world, God's response in chapter 12 was a blessing. So, this is now the question that dominates the background of all my theology. I don't try to do apologetics to prove that the other is wrong, I try to be transformed personally so that everyone who is around me can be transformed by a theology of love which promotes justice. We cannot

pursue justice in a spirit of anger because that is not in the spirit of the Beatitudes. Love is not an excuse to abandon justice; love is the opportunity to pursue justice with the right motivation. My neighbour is a blessing from God, and every human being is a blessing from God. My concern is with sin and not with whether you are Jewish or Christian, Israeli, or Palestinian. The problem is sin, not the person. Sin can be personal, social, structural, systematic, or political. I try to advocate a world view that challenges sin but not an ethnic group. I want to celebrate the diversity that God created and allowed in this country. In this, I try to help my evangelical tradition to be more generous.

Rev. Yohanna Katanacho is currently a full professor of Biblical Studies and academic dean at Nazareth Evangelical College. He taught courses at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (USA), Bethlehem Bible College (Palestine), and the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (Egypt). He is a Palestinian Israeli Evangelical who studied at Bethlehem University (B.Sc.), Wheaton College (M.A.) and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (M. Div.; Ph.D.). He is the author of, or contributor to, dozens of books in English and Arabic including "The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry". Dr. Katanacho is an Old Testament editor for Arabic Contemporary Commentary as well as Asia Bible Commentary. He is also one of the authors of the Palestinian Kairos Document.



BISHOP MUNIB YOUNAN

How does your theology respond to the Biblical texts which justify Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people?

In 1948, when the Nakba took place, some Biblical texts were used to justify that the creation of the State of Israel was the fulfilment of the prophecies of God. The mixture of politics and religion gave an eschatological dimension to these interpretations. This created resentment within the Palestinian Christian community, which resulted in an estrangement from the Bible and even an alienation from God. Therefore, many Palestinian Christians did not want to go to church any longer because they believed that the churches were Zionist. They did not want to believe in a God who was a real estate broker, a God that is one-sided and biased.

They did not want to believe in a God who does not listen to refugees, the oppressed, and those displaced.

The crisis began at that time. If it had only been a political situation, it would not have had the same repercussions. However, the amalgamation of a political situation with religion and the use of Bible verses to defend a political entity were offensive for our people. Moreover, the churches were living in shock and did not answer the queries of the people. The voice of the Palestinians was not listened to in the churches, and this crisis remained unresolved by the churches.

On the ground, the Palestinians believed that Western churches blessed the occupation and oppression. This created a feeling

of estrangement from God and spirituality. At the same time, because the refugees received financial help from the churches, the door remained open.

In the sixties, I remember an American pastor telling us that the occupation was God's will and that we had to thank God for the occupation of East Jerusalem. I was then a young believer, and I thought that I had to believe it because it came from a pastor. I thought that if I challenged the pastor, Christ would punish me. I was really struggling with God: why would God love one nation and not the other?

This struggle led me to study theology. I took my major in the Old Testament to understand if that pastor was right. I found that I was right and that this pastor was wrong because he politicised religion, making the occupation both eschatological and apocalyptic. So, I grew up intending to allow my people to understand the will of God in the Bible and not the will of the Christian Zionist interpretation of the Bible.

As a Lutheran, maybe it is easier for me to deal with the Biblical texts because I belong to the tradition of Martin Luther. He also struggled with the texts. Following Luther's interpretation of the Bible, I came to the understanding that the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This allowed me to read the texts in that light, even the controversial texts which justify

the occupation. Of course, there are certain texts which I cannot understand. Then, as Martin Luther said, I just take off my hat and continue on my way. The Bible has two hands: a divine hand and a human hand. This is why we have to find the Gospel in the Gospels, as Luther said. Today, we have to distinguish between these two hands. This is how we find the will of God, which is inclusive, not exclusive.



Martin Luther

For many years, I read the prophecies within an interfaith dialogue group with Jewish Israeli people. I asked them to read through the eyes of the situation in Palestine-Israel. The historical problem is that these texts have been read with a Western agenda which deals with the Holocaust and the atrocities carried out to the Jews in Europe. We Palestinians lived together with the Jews for more than 2000 years in this country, and we know how to live with them, just as we know how to live with Muslims. This is something that we can teach the world. Therefore, our problem is not with the Jewish people and their faith, but with the Christian Zionists

who make God biased and one-sided.

As to our methodology of reading the texts, in 1983, we established Al-Liqa, and we made a common declaration; we are an ecumenical movement for Christian-Muslim dialogue and studies. We continued in this declaration that what we find in the Bible is Christ crucified, and we started to do local theology and Christian-Muslim dialogue and Christian-Jewish dialogue.

We worked together with the aim of showing that Biblical texts are always liberating – they are never oppressive. Jesus is never one-sided because he understands all sides. Jesus is the fulfilment of promises. The Parousia will come on his own time, not according to the time frame of Christian Zionism.

Contrary to the approach of Christian Zionists, the interpretation of Biblical texts should never be carried out by picking and choosing one text and building a perspective based on this. You have to see the Bible as a movement and a process. We have to de-construct the partial readings of some passages of the Bible and read the texts within their contexts. This movement and process can be seen in the text of Paul writing to the Galatians when he says that we are all children of Abraham and that we all have our roots in Abraham. In light of the movement, we must not isolate one verse from the others. We have to keep the movement of liberation in the Bible alive and read it from the point of view of the oppressed.

How is justice defined in your theology?

The Biblical text is a book of justice. When we read the Prophets, we see how God worked through them in their call for justice. It was not only justice for one group but rather an inclusive justice. The Prophets criticised the social injustice among peoples, even when they considered themselves as the elected people. This is shown when Amos tells those who “oppress the innocent” to keep quiet.

The whole notion of justice is a biblical one. We have to find the theological seeds of justice in the biblical texts – in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. Take, for example, the struggle between God and Jacob. Jacob thought that he was elected and that he could do whatever he wanted. God stopped him and fought with him. Then Jacob repented, realising that he had betrayed his brother. He said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me,” but he remained wounded so he could not forget that God is a God of justice for all.

Another story is that of David. A powerful man who sinned with Bathsheba. He sent her husband to the forefront of the battle so that he would be killed. He destroyed a family due to his selfish desire. God did not let David go and sent the prophet Nathan to him. Nathan then tells a story to David about a rich man who had many sheep and who stole one of the sheep of a poor man. David is shocked by this story of injustice, Nathan tells him, “you

are the man!” and then David repents and recognises his injustice.

These stories are strong for us. God will not allow injustice to continue because he is a God of justice. Why is justice important? Because God created us in his image. This means that every human being has his full human rights in God’s creation. If anyone takes away one of our human rights, he trespasses on God’s rights – not only the rights of that human. That is the biblical foundation of justice. God created dignity, and anyone who does not respect your dignity is carrying out an injustice. Your dignity is enshrined in your rights, in your land, in having justice. We have to fight in a peaceful way and never give up on the God of justice.

We must not take lightly the fact that we are created in God’s image. When we come to look at the political perspective here in Palestine, how is God’s justice implemented? How will it come about? We cannot claim that we know the will of God. But I know some of it. I know that the will of God is justice and that he will hear the prayers of the people for justice. It might happen faster than we could ever imagine, like in South Africa. We are so ready to live justice: Palestinians are so ready to live justice.

What good news do you have for Palestinians and Israelis?

The good news is that today, the only path ahead of us is for us to live together. It is that God loves us and

the Israelis. This can be seen in Christ dying on the cross. He did not die for the few; he died for every human being – even the ones who killed him, even his oppressors, even Judas.

The good news is also that we have to share this country because this is God’s will for us today. The politicians have to decide how it will be done. But first of all, there must be a recognition that there has been injustice done to the Palestinians. This recognition will stop the violence, the killings, the occupation, and the confiscation of land. Europe learned it in the second world war: who would have said then that France and Germany would be such strong allies? History shows us that the time of animosity does not last forever. History shows us that the recognition of injustice leads to reconciliation.

This is why I believe in a living God, a God of justice. He will accomplish justice in His own way and in His own time. The powers of the world are against us today, and international law is not respected. But the good news is that together, as a people, we don’t give up on God’s justice.

What does resistance look like based on your theology?

Today, a lot of people believe in armed resistance. However, an armed resistance never liberated anyone. Violence begets violence. This is why we believe in non-violent resistance. Take, for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He resisted when he was imprisoned, and he paid with his life.

He resisted peacefully.

Take Martin Luther King Jr. We all see him as an example. He didn’t use arms; he used the power of words – non-violently. He was preaching against segregation and racism. We still need another Martin Luther King Jr. because of the white supremacists. The whole world needs such prophets who resist racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, anti-Christian sentiment, and xenophobia. Teaching with words is non-violent resistance, and the words of the Bible tell us that God created us all equal.

“I believe in a living God of justice. He will accomplish justice in His own way and in His own time.”

Many may think that I am naïve, but I really believe that the power of words is stronger than the power of arms. This is, of course, a challenge, and the path is not an easy one. It is the cross, knowing that human dignity is God’s dignity.

How do you see the future of the local theological community?

Talking about the future, I don’t think this theology will ever get old. The cry for justice will take different forms in history, but it will never get

old. It is as for the Prophets in the Old Testament: their voices took various forms but never got old. We have to seek the seeds of hope and make the world different.

How did the international church leadership respond to the local Palestinian theologies?

There are mixed reactions from the world. Sometimes churches around the world are selfish because it doesn't feel that what is happening here is their problem. Some churches don't want to talk, wondering what the price for it would be. Some other churches promote the justice for Palestine, understanding that justice is as good for them as for others.

But most of all, I believe in the grassroots movements in Europe, Africa, and even the United States. We must not underestimate the civil society and grassroots movements. They might not look powerful, but they are on the right track, and they create a public opinion that is supportive of justice. Often, the churches move and change because of grassroots movements. This is what I have seen in the Lutheran church around the world. If Palestine and Israel have justice, it will be a model for the whole world.

The future for us is to work together, to put aside institutions and look to our people. We have one aim, which is justice and reconciliation, and this is why we must unite our voices. To respect each other and our diversity – walking together in the same direction.

We need to empower our people in work for justice and not lose hope in a hopeless situation. If we lose hope, we lose everything. So, it is God's will that we raise our voices for those who clamour for justice. Hope is our strength, and our hope is in Christ.

Bishop Emeritus Younan was educated in Palestine and Finland and has been active in numerous faith organizations since his ordination in 1976, such as the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Fellowship of the Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC). Younan was the first to translate the Augsburg Confession, a key document of the Lutheran Church, into Arabic. He is an active member of various ecumenical and interfaith dialogue initiatives in Jerusalem that he helped found.

WITNESS VISITS 2020 ONWARDS

October 2020
Fall Solidarity Visit
October 13th - 21st 2020

March 2021
Spring Witness Visit
March 16th - 24th 2021

October 2021
Fall Solidarity Visit
October 5th - 13st 2021

May 2022
Spring Witness Visit
May 13th - 20th 2022

October 2022
Fall Solidarity Visit
October 25th - November 2nd 2022

For more information visit:
www.sabeel.org





CEDAR DUAYBIS

How does your theology respond to biblical texts which justify Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people?

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre grew out of a need to help Palestinian Christians to strengthen and draw on their faith to work for justice, peace and reconciliation. This took place at a time when many Christians worldwide saw, in the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 a fulfilment of God's promises to the children of Israel. Sabeel encouraged Palestinian Christians to read the Bible with Palestinian eyes rather than accept the Western-dominated theology that they grew up with

because of Western influence in this part of the world.

Religious education in missionary and Church-run schools during the time of the British Mandate tended to spiritualise religious concepts and trivialise the hardships of this life in favour of the life to come. Furthermore, the missionaries carried with them the belief that we should read the Bible literally, and we, Christians, were regarded as part of the "spiritual" Israel.

In 1948, with the establishment of the state of Israel, we became refugees, internal and external, our faith was all that remained with us. Still, even that failed us when the Bible was

used to justify the Palestinian Nakba. When we most needed our faith to sustain us, to give us hope and comfort and direction for our lives, it seemed that it provided divine approval for our predicament. Our faith clashed with the reality of our lives, and we could not reconcile the two.

People were going through extreme difficulties, and the Church helped us. It provided shelter, food, and clothing. It helped us with every material need we had but provided no theological answers to the many questions that people were asking. Many believed that the establishment of the state of Israel was a miracle from God and that God's will had prevailed.

With the emergence of Palestinian Liberation Theology, primarily through the insight and vision of the Rev Naim Ateek, we began to read the Bible with our own Palestinian eyes rather than filtered through the eyes of western missionaries. For these missionaries, the stories of the Old Testament were stories of long ago in a far away country. For us, it was here and now. Jesus became our key to understanding and interpreting the problematic passages in the Bible that seemed to justify our Nakba. The key was Jesus' life, his teachings and his parables. He too lived under an oppressive Roman occupation and showed us the way of non-violent resistance. He never missed a chance to speak truth to power, and that he did until his death.

How is justice defined in your theology?

The theme of justice runs through the Gospels from beginning to end, and many of Jesus' parables speak about justice. For Jesus, loving our neighbour as ourselves is as important as loving God. But Jesus goes beyond what is just to loving even our enemies and blessing those who curse us. Jesus' justice was always tempered with mercy and compassion; this is what Sabeel aspires to achieve when dealing with the conflict. We believe that there can be no liberation for one side with the enslavement of the other. Sharing the land, whether in one state or two, would constitute a just solution to the Palestine/Israel conflict. The Palestinians are asking for a minimum measure of justice: the establishment of their independent sovereign state on just 22% of historic Palestine. Sabeel's understanding of justice is also a move from exclusivity to inclusivity, from the God of some to the God of all, and we believe that God's love embraces all people.

What good news do you have for the Palestinians and Israelis?

We keep hearing from the Israeli side that, for self-preservation, there is no alternative to the discriminatory treatment towards non-Jews by Israel, such as is stipulated in the recent Nation-State Law. Such ideology chains both the oppressor and the oppressed in a constant, vicious circle of hatred and strife. Sabeel believes that justice with compassion can bring back goodwill and

reconciliation and lead to a peace that is enduring and that guarantees the aspirations of both sides for dignity and human rights.

What does resistance look like based on your theology?

Living under occupation is dehumanising in itself. The Israeli administrations emphasise this dehumanisation to achieve their aims. This in itself diminishes the humanity of the occupier in a downward spiral. It seems that responding in like fashion would be the normal thing to do. Still, following the example of Jesus, we learn to *"seek the humanity of the oppressor without losing integrity to appeasement or collaboration."* Naim Ateek 2008 p 96.

It is of the utmost importance for us to maintain our dignity and humanity in the face of Israel's oppression. This leads us to the path of non-violence, which was the way of Jesus while at the same time exposing the powers of injustice and oppression by speaking truth to power.

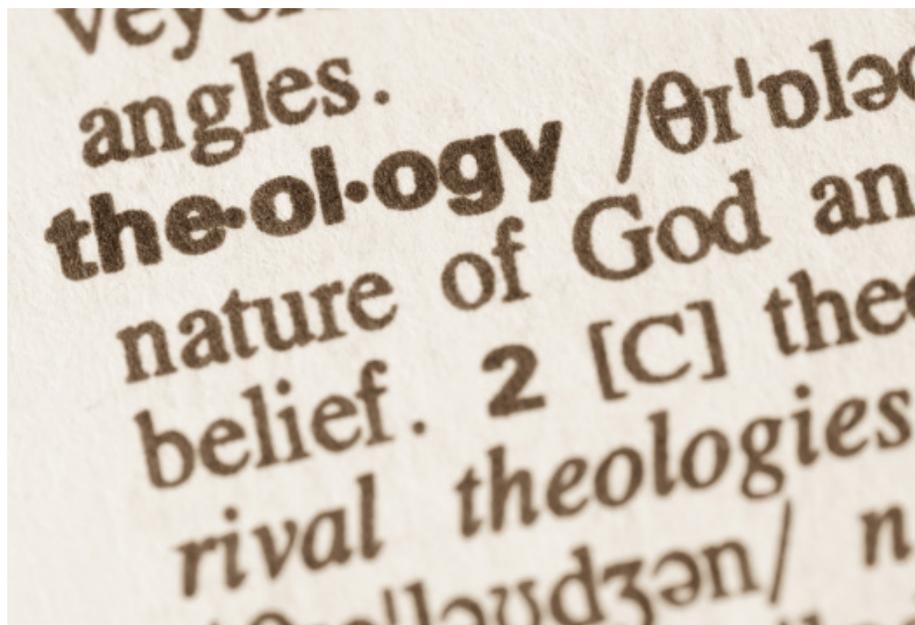
How is it translated from theology to action within your Church community?

Believing that any authentic theology had to be closely connected to the reality on the ground we at Sabeel, beginning with our context, our experience and our need, articulated a purpose statement that reflected how we intended to translate our theology into action. Following is some of what it states:

"Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians... Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. It encourages individuals and groups around the world to work for a just, comprehensive and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action."

Our programmes at Sabeel are geared to fulfil our purpose statement to the best of our ability. We work with women, youth, clergy, as well as the international community through our programmes, international conferences, and our writing.

Cedar Duaybis is a co-founder of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre and a former Sabeel board member. She currently volunteers at Sabeel.



H.B. MICHEL SABBAAH

How does your theology respond to Biblical texts which justify Zionism and the oppression of the Palestinian people?

The biblical texts are the word of God, and God is love. This way, the word of God cannot be used as a word of injustice against anyone. It is a word of life for the Jewish people, for the Palestinians, and the whole of humanity. If Zionists interpret the word of God as a way of oppressing Palestinians, it goes against the word of God – it becomes human word. God said to love each other, even in the Old Testament.

Undeniably there are expressions in the Old Testament about God giving the order to kill and destroy other nations. But all these are human expressions from the writers – interpretations of the word of God. The writers wrote according to their

culture and context. God told the Jewish people to adore one sole God and not to be idolatrous, He tells them to erase idolatry – but not to kill the idolaters. When there is bloodshed and injustice, these are the actions of human beings, which are a distortion of the word of God. The word of God is a word of life, and human words can be a word of death. As long as some of the Jewish people use the word of God for their interest, as an instrument to steal the land of the Palestinians, they deform the word of God.

When someone interprets the word of God in the direction of death, he is not anymore with God. Then, he is with himself, with his nationalistic interests. God is love, so the Jewish people have to choose: to be with God or to be with war. God cannot be with war. If they want to be at war, they cannot appeal to God and

the bible. If they appeal to the word of God, they must be peacemakers.

The war, the prisoners, the confiscation of the land, the tortures, the demolition orders, God is estranged from all this. God is the same for everyone. There is not a special God for the Jewish people. If there is, He is not God anymore. If they have a God who tells them to oppress the Palestinian people, then He is not God anymore.

How is justice defined in your theology?

Justice is simply what Jesus said; “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” That said if the Jewish people wish to have a state, fine. However, they must also want a state for others - let the Palestinians build their own state. If you don't want others to do the same to you, do not confiscate their land, do not destroy their olive trees, do not demolish their homes. Justice implies an Israeli state and a Palestinian state. The Israelis must not be oppressed, and neither must the Palestinians be oppressed.

From a political and judicial point of view, the Palestinians abandoned their rights long ago. They accepted that 78% of their land had been given to Israel, and they contented themselves with the remaining 22%. However, now some Israelis say that they want even that 22%. This is not justice. They want everything for themselves and nothing for others. International law condemns this kind of behaviour - what would happen in

the world if everyone was to take the land of their neighbour? This would bring about endless wars between all the nations. The Palestinians are not beggars; they do not ask for something which is not theirs. They live here; this is their land. The Israeli state took their land. The Palestinians have conceded much, shouldn't that be a sign of the possibility of making peace?

What good news do you have for the Palestinians and Israelis?

The good news is to love one another. But in politics, there is no love. In politics, the concerns are about security and all the ways to ensure that security. If there were just a small concern for love in politics, this would be good news. Love is one thing, but Israelis don't even have minimal trust in the Palestinians. Without trust, the routes to justice are closed. For those Palestinians whose houses are demolished, whose harvest is destroyed, whose rights are negated, what incentive do they have to trust the Israelis? The Israeli army breaks into the houses of Palestinians without any reason other than to terrify them and to make their life not only miserable but ultimately impossible. If the Israeli government and the army want trust from the Palestinians, they must cease this destruction of Palestinians' lives. It is not usually the Palestinians who attack – because they do not hold power. Indeed, there are some young Palestinians who throw rocks, but this is nothing in comparison with the power of the Israeli army. When a young man throws a rock or carries

a kitchen knife, it can be seen as a reaction to the military occupation.

The Israelis want what they call peace without Palestine as if the Palestinians did not exist. If they wanted peace, they would begin to leave the Palestinians to live in peace – and then peace would have a chance. As long as Israel is in this open war with the Palestinians, they will never have security. The reactions of the Palestinians are normal – they are under the boots of the army and have no way to defend themselves.

Israel must change its actions and its intentions towards the Palestinians. Herein lies the real problem; Israel has no intention of allowing the Palestinians to exist. The Roman empire had the axiom “Christians are not allowed to exist,” the Christians were persecuted. Today we hear the same from some Israelis “Palestinians are not allowed to exist.” The biggest mistake of the Palestinians is that they exist – not that they throw rocks. It is their demography; the simple fact that I am a Palestinian makes an enemy of me.

The good news is that we can live together even if the reality on the ground seems to be far from that point.

I think that society and mentality are changing on the Israeli side. The October election showed a significant division within Israeli society. Among intellectuals, many see the reality of the situation. Also, young Israelis do not want this war to continue any longer. It seems that there is

no longer a homogeneity within Israeli society. I believe that a new generation will emerge that will not embrace the right-wing and extreme right standpoint. There are more and more interactions between Israeli and Palestinians who are starting to understand that we can live together in peace. I believe that this progressive change of vision will continue. For now, they are not ready because they have been educated to see a Palestinian as an enemy. But the Palestinians are already changing; they are ready to accept any Israeli who says they want to live in peace.

When the Israelis are ready to live in peace, they will see that the Palestinians are ready to live in peace - this will take time, maybe one or two more generations. If peace does not occur, there will be significant instability, and this will be damaging to Israel. If they want to live and to survive, even if they have a powerful army, they need to make friends of those around them, starting with the Palestinians. The Palestinians are ready for a friendship with the Israelis.

“The good news is that we can live together even if the reality on the ground seems to be far from that point.”

What does resistance look like based on your theology?

The pacifist resistance can manifest itself in demonstrations – like in Gaza. Yes, there are some acts which should be avoided, as the fire kite, and I don't agree with these things. But the Israeli army reacts with lethal violence, even towards people who pose no threat and who are far away from the fences. There are already hundreds of dead people in Gaza for no reason other than pacifist marches. They don't have arms – they simply walk.

We cannot even say that they are martyrs because this word is reserved for dead soldiers in an organised state. These soldiers are recognised by the state, they have monuments, and their names are recalled. When poor pacifist people die in a land that is not a state, they are called terrorists. The Israelis are at war with the Palestinians, and even if the Palestinians do not want to be at war, they are. The Israelis have an organised army and arms when an Israeli soldier dies, he is honoured and called a martyr. The Palestinians don't have a state, don't have an army, don't have arms, but are considered as terrorists.

How did the international church leadership respond to the local Palestinian theologies?

The theological work of the Palestinians, with Sabeel, Kairos, Al-Liqa, Dar al-Kalima University, and many others has produced a lot of writing which has reached

the international community. We reached many churches through the World Council of Churches, and this has opened up many opportunities. There is a great echo in the world about Palestine. If we hadn't done that – all these publications and international conferences – it would be a significant loss in the west. The churches and the people show great support for the Palestinians. However, it must be said that the Catholic Church is too calm about Palestine – the Protestant churches are more active and involved.

Unfortunately, the western body politic is massively influenced by the Zionist movement. American politics have already caused a lot of damage, and there may be more ahead. The whole Middle East is linked to the Israeli situation. If the Israeli condition is stabilised, the rest of the Middle East will be stabilised and move towards peace.

All of this influences the situation of Christians in the Middle East. As long as the instability endures, the Christians leave and will continue to leave. The Christians leave, not because of a fear of Muslims – as the press suggests – but rather because of pressures of the American politic. The Christians are victims of American politics and not from the Muslims – whom they've lived amongst for 1400 years. The great danger for Christians is the American politic. The Israelis say that they are in danger when they have all the power of America behind them. The Israelis have a very harsh politic which encourages the Christians to leave – it is the explicit

goal of Israel that they leave.

I believe that there will always be Christians here, but we must give them a voice. There is no Holy Land without the Christians.

His Beatitude Patriarch Michel Sabbah was the Latin (Roman Catholic) Patriarch of Jerusalem from 1987 to 2008. He holds a PhD in Arabic philology. Patriarch Sabbah calls for rapprochement between churches, interreligious dialogue, and justice and peace.

He was involved in the drafting of the Kairos Palestine document, has travelled widely to speak in international forums, and continues to head the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, a think tank that addresses the issues that face the church in Israel/Palestine today.

2019 Sabeel Activities

Sabeel's Vision

Local Christians inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ stand for the oppressed, work for justice, and engage in peacebuilding.

Ministries

I. Palestinian Liberation Theology

Sabeel helps the Christian community in the land of the Holy One to be faithful to God today by:

- Taking a good look at their own churches' theologies and liberating them from biblical misinterpretation and misunderstanding.
- Helping ordinary Christians to use the Bible as a tool for justice and peace. The need is not only to critique the violence and the evil which is being done in the name of God and the Bible, but equally to point out the rich biblical traditions in both the Old and New Testament. This can help us in our pursuit of peace and freedom based on the biblical teachings of justice, truth, and non-violence.

Today, Sabeel supports over 28 contextual Bible study groups spread out across the West Bank (8 of these groups added in 2019). The groups are formed of youth, young adults, and women. The groups meet on a weekly basis, to read the Bible and explore what it means to be a Christian living in the land of our Holy One.



Roman Catholic Bible Study Group, Zababdeh

II. Building bridges among the community

- *Starting with the Christian community:*
Sabeel promotes ecumenical relations with all the Christians of the land, whether those living in the State of Israel or Palestine. It aims to strengthen Christian faith in, and love of, Christ, as it draws them ecumenically closer to one another. Through this they can transcend denominationalism; whilst at the same time appreciating their own particular rich church tradition. In this way Christians can value and admire the rich traditions of the various churches across the Holy Land. We need to preserve the rich mosaic while at the same time emphasising the importance of relating and working ecumenically together.



Training retreat in Tiberias for local Bible Study facilitators



2019 Easter Egg Hunt for 100 children from Bethlehem and Jerusalem

In 2019 Sabeel has held:

1. 5 Volunteer programmes including an Easter Egg Hunt.
2. 19 Ecumenical meetings including a local Way of the Cross, Ecumenical Christmas Dinner, and begun the compilation of a cook book of dishes from the various Christian communities in Jerusalem.
3. Over 55 clergy and spouses from Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon took part in a four day retreat in Jordan. They spent time with Christian communities, and visited tourist and holy sites in Jordan. This was the first Sabeel clergy retreat outside Palestine, as a beginning for our work in the Arab World.
4. Two ecumenical worship services in Nazareth.



The clergy retreat in Jordan



Reviving indigenous Palestinian food and theology



Carrying the Cross during the local Sabeel Way of the Cross in Jerusalem



Clergy retreat tour to Amman Citadel



Meeting for the youth of the different Bible Study groups at the Tent of Nations.

- *Building bridges among the Palestinian Christian and Muslim Communities.*

We cannot be faithful to God in our work if we do not address the interfaith relationships with our Muslim brothers and sisters. Although we belong to one Palestinian people, we are deeply affiliated to two faiths – Islam and Christianity. It is very important, therefore to work together for three essential interfaith objectives, namely, greater understanding between the two faiths, respect for one another's faith, and acceptance of the religious differences between us.

In 2019, as part of the ongoing work on the Palestinian Curriculum. Sabeel made over 40 recommendations to the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education which would make the curriculum more inclusive and make how 'the other' is viewed more positive. a number of these recommendations have been made in the new curriculum books.



Ecumenical Christmas Dinner

III. A third dimension is that of justice and peace.

- In many ways, this is the most important dimension and it constitutes our priority outside of our local work. Sabeel's work in this area takes into consideration both the demands of International Law and United Nations resolutions on one hand, and on the other hand, our strong faith in the God of justice and peacemaking. We believe that no permanent peace is at all possible if it is not built on justice.

It is on this level of Sabeel's ministry that we cooperate with individuals and groups; Christians, Muslims,

and Jews, locally and internationally, people of faith or with no faith, provided they believe in the power of non-violence and are willing to work through non-violent methods.

Our work for justice and peace falls into different categories.

I. Educational

Wave of Prayer

An ecumenical prayer movement with weekly news and related prayers, the Wave of Prayer aims to send a wave from Palestine around the world. Sent out by email every Tuesday, it is hoped that groups and individuals will pray with Sabeel at 12pm on the following Thursday. The Wave of Prayer is currently translated into 10 languages: Arabic, Dutch, English, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish.

Witness Visits

In 2019, Sabeel hosted 3 international groups on witness visits. These visits are designed to introduce people to the current realities on the ground.

1. North Park University - Educational Trip
2. Friends of Sabeel Japan - Solidarity Visit
3. Canadian and New Zealand Group - Come and See, Go and Kumi.

Ablan Wa Sablan

Providing the opportunity to meet with local Palestinian Christians, find out more about Sabeel and the current realities on the ground for Christians in Palestine and Israel. Groups generally meet with Sabeel for a talk and a simple Palestinian lunch. Sabeel in Jerusalem and Nazareth have hosted around 65 groups this year (over 2000 people), from 11 countries.

Conferences

In the past, Sabeel have held International Conferences every 2-3 years with a focus on specific issues. In 2019, Sabeel hosted its first International Gathering: a new format aimed at bringing together a number of organisations along with around 80 international

friends to explore Palestinian theologies and non-violent resistance. The Gathering featured lectures, workshops, trips, and other sessions aimed at updating those attending on the current situation in Palestine and Israel, the theology and work being done by the various organisations.



Sabeel 1st International Gathering Activities at the Tent of Nations and Dar al Kalima University College of the Arts.

Cornerstone

A Sabeel publication which is published a few times a year. 2019 has seen editions on interfaith and interreligious dialogue, and Christian communities in Palestine and Israel.

Theological Documents and Statements

Sabeel produces a number of theological documents based on Palestinian Liberation Theology.

II. Solidarity

Olive Picking

Helping Palestinian farmers under threat from settler violence to harvest their olives.

Rebuilding Homes

Home demolitions are a frequent occurrence in occupied Palestine. Being able to rebuild a home is essential to preventing the depopulation of areas under threat.

Street Theatre/Flash Mobs

Sabeel carries out open air acts of creative resistance to raise awareness of various issues and to challenge those in power.

Contemporary Way of the Cross

A half/one-day pilgrimage enabling visitors to Palestine and Israel to follow a Palestinian Way of the Cross with stations showing the realities of life under occupation. In 2019, Sabeel led 22 groups with over 360 participants on such trips.

Kumi Initiative

An initiative of over 100 Palestinian, Israeli, and international organisations, giving people the opportunity to rise up in support of Palestinians through simple, non-violent actions on a weekly basis. In 2019, Sabeel began work on a new version of Kumi Now which will bring more organisations together through the areas in which they work. For more information see www.kuminow.com.



Olive picking with Sabeel Nazareth

Looking forward to 2020

Young Adult Gathering, June 17th - 25th 2020

Document on Anti-Semitism

Kumi Now Vol. 2

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PURPOSE STATEMENT *of* SABEEL

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 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 to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

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