JUSTICE,
AND ONLY
JUSTICE

A Palestinian Theology of Liberation

NAIM STIFAN ATEEK

ORBIS BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545
how far the Jewish religion has been influenced by the Zionist ideal and nationalist tradition. This has been done at the expense of the prophetic tradition and by the suppression of the higher tenets of Judaistic faith and of the God who was portrayed by the prophets as the God of righteousness. In writing on “Judaism in Israel” in Religion in the Middle East, Norman Bentwich mentioned the need for Orthodox Jews to modify the halakha in order to adapt it to present-day life in Israel. Then he added,

One grave defect of the halakha is the discrimination against the Gentile in the Jewish law. The failure of the rabbinate and the religious political parties to oppose the reprisal policy of the government against Arab guerrillas may be due in part to their acceptance of two standards of conduct, to the Jews and to Gentiles.70

From my perspective as a Palestinian Christian, Zionism is a step backward in the development of Judaism. What the Jewish community had finally and unequivocally rejected in the second century A.D., with the defeat of the Zealots, many Jews have accepted again eighteen hundred years later. This has been done at the expense and even the weakening of the higher principles and demands of the Jewish religion. Ethical Judaism, with its universalist outlook, has been swamped by the resurgence of a racially exclusive concept of a people and their god.71

The tragedy of the State of Israel today is that it has locked itself up and entrapped its people in an impasse from which there is no escape so long as it espouses this exclusivist understanding of God.

Ironically, Israel today is in precisely the same position as the Palestinians in 1947. The Palestinians refused the partition of Palestine, insisting that the whole of Palestine was theirs. Unfortunately, they lost even the part they then still had. On the other hand, the Jews, who were eager to accept only their part, eventually gained the whole. At the end of the 1980s, the positions have been reversed. Many Palestinians, who once had the whole land, are willing today to compromise and settle for a part, while many Jews, out of a religious understanding of God’s exclusive claim for the land, are not willing to give up a part and share it with the Palestinians. Will they, too, eventually lose the whole?

Transcending the Zionist Claim to the Land

Since 1967, the issue of the land has become so central in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that it is mandatory to tackle it as an important issue in a Palestinian theology of liberation.

Both Jews and Palestinians claim indisputable right to the same piece of land—Palestine. The Palestinians base their claim on the observed facts of history: they have lived in the land for many centuries. It is quite probable that the ancestors of some have lived in the land from time immemorial. The land was never at any one time inhabited by one homogeneous population; the Bible as well as history attest to this. The Hebrew Scriptures themselves record that many ancient peoples—including the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, the Jebusites, the Gezerites, Maacathites,72 and the Philistines—lived in the land before the ancient Hebrew tribes joined them. The land was conquered and occupied. Great kingdoms came and went—the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Populations moved and shifted. Many people mixed and assimilated to form the population of Palestine in the early centuries of our era.

With the Arab Islamic conquest of Palestine in the seventh century, almost all of those who were living in the land (mostly Christians and some Jews) gradually became Arabized in language and culture. They were joined by an increasing number of Arab Muslims who settled in the land. Consequently the indigenous population of Palestine, although of different religious backgrounds, has lived in the land continuously for at least the last thirteen hundred years. Over time, the country witnessed shifting movements of tribes, clans, and families, but basically the indigenous inhabitants remained in the land.

The Jews, on the other hand, would claim that the land was given to them by God in the promise to Abraham over three thousand years ago.73 They occupied the land with the conquest of Canaan (c. 1250–1200 B.C.). While living in the land they set up first a united kingdom and then two separate kingdoms in the north and south of the country. The northern state was destroyed in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians, the southern in 587 B.C. by the Babylonians. Yet they continued to live in the land in lesser or greater numbers.
Although only small and scattered Jewish communities have lived on the land since the third century A.D., the majority of Jews (who lived outside the land in the diaspora, praying for “next year, in Jerusalem”) never forgot it, and some of them returned in the twentieth century and established the State of Israel in 1948.

Furthermore, Western anti-Semitism, culminating in the atrocities of the Holocaust in the early 1940s, helped speed up the process of Jewish immigration to Palestine and heightened the urgency of creating a Jewish homeland.

Most Palestinians do not deny the evils of anti-Semitism or the virulence of the Holocaust; but they feel that the solution of the “Jewish problem”—a Western phenomenon that had little or nothing to do with their home, Palestine—was achieved at their expense, by their loss of Palestine. Palestinians would argue, furthermore, that if people in different lands based their claims to territory on divine promises or conquests, our world would be a shambles; we would face major demographic shifts, social chaos, and personal injustices no less severe than those that Palestinians themselves experienced at the hands of the Jews in 1948 and 1967.

I have tried thus far to record the basic positions of the Israeli Jews and the Palestinians. It is easy to observe the unreconciled claims of the two groups, especially when seen from each proponent’s vantage point.

The Problem of the Land—Two Proposals

In the past, many people attempted to find viable explanations for the problem of the land. Three basic views have been suggested.

1. The promise of the land to Abraham and his descendants after him included both of his sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Since, it is claimed, the Jews are the descendants of the younger son, Isaac, and the Arabs of the older son, Ishmael, they should share the land.

2. Before the coming of the Zionists and the establishment of the State of Israel, the descendants of Abraham were already living in the land. The inhabitants of Palestine, whether Muslims, Jews, or Christians, are monotheists with a strong link to Abraham. The memory of these people, their traditions, their beliefs, and even their racial ancestry make them see themselves as Abraham’s chil-
dren. Abraham is their ancestor, whether physically or spiritually.

3. Most Zionists who came from Eastern Europe were not Semites at all and probably do not share blood lineage with the biblical Israelites. They are more recent converts to Judaism. The Semitic Arabs are, surely, more entitled to the land than are these Eastern European Zionists who, from a Palestinian viewpoint, are considered twentieth-century colonizers.

This is only a sample of the kind of theorizing that has been put forth. Although they are interesting and make for lively discussion, I have never found these theories helpful in seeking a solution, and I disagree with some of their basic assumptions. The existential situation that confronts us as Palestinians is the presence on the land of Palestine of a strong and powerful group of people, many of them fanatic, who refuse to share it with its historic inhabitants.

Some of them are willing to go to any extreme to implement their own understanding and interpretation of the biblical promises to the land and, without any scruples, to deny the rights, eviction, and even dispose of the indigenous population.

Without claiming total objectivity, I would like, as a Palestinian Christian, and in light of the hermeneutical key that I have already suggested, to look at the issue of the land both bibliically and theologically. This is not intended to be a detailed study; such scholars as W. D. Davies have already produced books on the subject. My aim here is to be concise and focused. I would like to propose two views of my own.

The Earth Is the Lord’s

It is clear in the Hebrew Scriptures that the land of Canaan really belongs to God. In the Hexateuch the land invariably is referred to as the “Land of Canaan.” In Joshua 24:8 it is called the land of the Amorites. Interestingly, the phrase “Land of Israel” (Eretz Yisrael) does not appear until 1 Samuel 13:19. It seldom appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, occurring only six times in all. It is very clear that the reason for this is that the land belongs to God. God is its owner.

In Leviticus 25:23, the divine claim to the land is so strongly emphasized that the Israelites are regarded as strangers and foreigners themselves:
The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.

Thus, the division of the land into different lots for the tribes of Israel, the cultic statements about the harvest, and the commandment that the land should keep a Sabbath to the Lord need to be understood in light of God’s ownership of the land.78 Consequently, since the land belongs to God, and the Israelites were only stewards of it, God “had imposed on the land—indeed upon nature—a sacred order or pattern or law, the violation of which produced a dissolution, a return to chaotic disorder and formlessness.”79 This is the sanction for the command

You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell.80

In Jeremiah it becomes clear that defilement of the land has actually taken place:

... when you came in you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.81

Again:

And I will doubly recompense their iniquity and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations.82

Those who want to live on the land, therefore, must obey the owner of the land. Disobedience to God defiles the land, violates its sacred character, and incurs the unequivocal loss of the land; it could even lead to utter destruction:

When you beget children and children’s children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a graven image in the form of anything, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, so as to provoke my anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess; you will not live long upon it, but will be utterly destroyed.83

W. D. Davies maintains that the land when defiled would thrust the inhabitants out because of its holiness. “The implication is that it is not even the Torah that lends the land holiness. The land was already characterized by holiness before Israel brought the Torah: it was already holy in Canaanite days because Yahweh owned it and dwelt in the midst of it.”84

In light of the contemporary conflict over the land, and the often-heard fallacy that the Jews came to a country that was a wasteland—and that it is they who developed it, built it, and made the desert bloom—Joshua 24:13 has a modern ring to it:

I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you dwell therein; you eat the fruit of vineyards, and oliveyards which you did not plant.85

For our purpose, the basic point to keep in mind is the insistence—so prominent in the Bible—that the land really belonged to God. So one can conclude that 3000 years ago the Israelites, in their own context at the time and their own understanding of God at that stage of history, accepted even then the basic fact that the land was really God’s.

One can go on to say that as a result of the development of the knowledge of God in the Old Testament, God is gradually perceived as not only the God of Israel but indeed the God of the whole world:

The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.86

This concept becomes clearer as we move to exilic and post-exilic times:

Thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it;
he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

In the literature of the post-exilic period, there is undeniable relocation of interest from the land to human issues. Some scholars would even point out that the book of Ruth reflects a universal dimension in post-exilic Judaism, in which lands other than Judah are accorded great significance. We have already seen how the whole history of Pharisaism reflects a concentration on the Torah rather than on political control of the land.

To summarize: as their concept of God matured, people began to understand that God’s concern was not limited or even focused on one particular land but on all lands. Davies insists that “at no point should the doctrine of the promise of the land be separated from that of Yahweh as creator of the universe.” In other words, our understanding of God today obliges us to conclude that the God who was perceived by the Israelites as the God who owned “the land of Canaan” is none other than the God whom we have come to know as the God who owns the whole world:

For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. The sea is his, for he made it; for his hands formed the dry land.

The land that God has chosen at one particular time in history for one particular people is now perceived as a paradigm, a model, for God’s concern for every people and every land. As God commanded the Israelites to obey God’s laws in their life in the land, so God demands the same from all peoples in their lands. God’s unequivocal demand that the Israelites not defile or pollute the land with injustice, lest the land thrust them out, becomes a warning to all governments and to the peoples of every land. God requires every human being to live according to the divine standard of righteousness.

The particular has become universal. The blessing of God’s concern for one people is universalized to encompass every people and every land. Consequently, every nation can say about its own country, “this is God’s land, God’s country, this is a part of God’s world. This is the Lord’s land and the Lord demands a life of righteousness and justice in our land.”

Such a blessing obviously does not exclude the Jews or the modern State of Israel. Neither does it justify their invoking an ancient promise—one that betrays a very exclusive and limited knowledge of God in one stage of human development—in order to justify their uprooting an entire people and expropriating their land in the twentieth century. To cling only to the understanding of God in those limited and exclusive passages is to be untrue to the overall biblical heritage.

The tragedy of many Zionists today is that they have locked themselves into this nationalist concept of God. They are trapped in it and they will be freed only if they discard their primitive image of God for a more universal one.

The Concept of God

My second proposal is closely linked to the first. From the point of view of a Palestinian theology of liberation, the whole issue of the land must center on a theological discussion of the nature of God: who God is and what God is like. Does God’s character change? If human nature in its sinfulness remains what it has been all along, would it not follow that God’s character and nature do not change? Indeed, God does not change. God was not bad yesterday and good today! God’s character or nature of goodness, love, mercy, righteousness, and justice is totally consistent.

The biblical heritage offers ample evidence of how people’s understanding of God and of the land had to be shattered. Early in their history, the Israelites thought that God was confined within the borders of the land, that God did not operate outside it. It was difficult for them to conceive of praying to God in a strange land, outside what they thought of as God’s homeland. This narrow concept of God persisted in spite of the strong words of Amos, who expressed a broad conception of God. Indeed, for Amos God was active outside the land. God had intimate knowledge of and grave concern for what was going on in the neighboring countries—Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab, as well as Judah and Israel. The land-bound concept of God was finally shattered
by the Babylonian captivity. There, the Israelites had to learn that God was not confined to "their" land.

In fact, some of the great events—if not the most important ones—in the ancient Israelites' history took place outside the boundaries of the land. The Exodus, the giving of the Torah, the making of God's covenant, all took place outside the land. The greatest prophet of Judaism, Moses, never set foot in the land. The great Babylonian Talmud was compiled outside the land. Among the greatest prophets were those like Second Isaiah of the Exile, who prophesied outside the land. Jeremiah finished his ministry in Egypt; Ezekiel finished his in Babylon. One can go on and on to show from the biblical material how often people's understanding of God had been limited, narrow, and wrong. In the beginning it was tribal and provincial. It took them hundreds of years to realize that God is the God of the whole world—not simply the greatest God among other gods, and not exclusively their God, but the only true God, the God of the whole world. Throughout their history the people vacillated between a narrower and a broader image of God, between attributing to God an exclusive or inclusive character. Indeed, as I have previously shown, one can point to different strands within the biblical material that emphasize the nationalist or the universalist perception of God.

I have no doubt that the universalist understanding of God—developed in spite of the resistance that it encountered—is the truer concept. I say this not because it suits my purpose as a Palestinian, but because it is the only worthy concept of God—the true God. It fits the nature of God, the God who is the God of all, inclusive in nature, just in all ways. One cannot deny the existence of the nationalist strand within the Hebrew Scriptures, but one can point to the development of a strong universalist trend reflected in the work of Second Isaiah and the book of Jonah, to give only two examples.

Obsession with the land has had disastrous consequences for the Jews at different times in their ancient history. For it is not the land that carries a blessing to the people, but faithfulness to the God of justice, righteousness, and mercy. It is true that the land of Israel-Palestine has been singled out as host to great events in history, but I do not believe that it is intrinsically more holy than other lands. If God has done great things here, God has done great things everywhere. If God loves this land and its peoples, that is a sign—a sacrament—that God loves each and every land and its peoples. The whole Earth is the Lord's. This is all God's world. The whole world should be holy. It is all sacramental. When God commanded Moses to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground, it was in Sinai and not in Canaan (Eretz Yisrael).94 I return to my insistence that, theologically speaking, what is at stake today in the political conflict over the land of the West Bank and Gaza is nothing less than the way we understand the nature of God.

History teaches us that whoever concentrates heart and mind on the land will be cursed and vomited out of the land. This is what happened to the Crusaders, Christians who fell into this trap. The land can, however, become holy to those who put their trust in the God of the whole universe, whose nature does not change—a God of justice for all, who desires goodness and mercy for all people living in this and every land.

Kenneth Bailey, who has been working on the interpretation of the prophetic literature for many years, tells us that the great exilic prophet whom we call Second Isaiah made the remarkable discovery that the promise of God to the people after the Exile was not about land and nationhood but about the outpouring of God's Spirit on the people:

For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my Spirit upon your descendants,
and my blessing on your offspring.
They shall spring up like grass amid waters,
like willows by flowing streams.95

Isaiah's great theological breakthrough lies in his realization that God's promise of outpouring the Spirit of God on the people is essentially more important than the possession of the land. The relationship with God did not depend on being in the land. God without the land is infinitely more important than the land without God. With God's Spirit poured on the people, they can be the carriers of God's blessing and become God's witnesses everywhere. That is why the great prophets were never hesitant or reluctant to warn the people that they could lose the land.

What I am trying to say in the present situation is this: if the
State of Israel clings to its obsession with real estate, it will only heap destruction on itself and on all the people living in the land. The blessing will only come when Israel transcends the narrow concept of a nationalist God and embraces the more universal image of God. For its own survival, Israel and Jewry must recognize that God is the God of the whole universe, who lives and cares for all people, the God who desires justice and mercy. The salvation of the Jews in Israel and the Palestinians in Palestine right here and now lies in acknowledging the truth of Micah’s words:

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with your God [6:8].

"This Property Belongs to God"—The Significance of the Land for Palestinian Christians

One of the most beautiful customs that a visitor can observe among Arabs in the Middle East is the way they give recognition to God’s ownership of the land. When people build their houses, many of them ask the builder to engrave on a stone in bold Arabic one of two phrases that will usually appear above the front door of the house: either Almk lllah, which means “property belongs to God,” or Hatha min jndli Rubbi, “this house has been built as a result of the beneficence of my Lord.”

Having conceded that all of life and all land belong ultimately to God, Palestinian Christians, like all other Palestinians, cherish the land and are loyal to it because it is the land of their birth and the land of their ancestors. It is their homeland, watn.

Those of us who have been born and brought up in Israel-Palestine recognize that it is indeed a privilege to have been born in the land that has witnessed some of the greatest events in history. The land is sacred to the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Each in its own way, and using its own vocabulary of faith, must express the significance of the land to its adherents and to the millions who choose to visit it.

As part of a theology of liberation for Palestinians, I would like to call attention to the significance of the land for its Christian population, especially at a time when the presence of indigenous Chris-
tians is rapidly dwindling because of emigration. There are three significant things that define and inspire Palestinian Christians’ devotion to the land:

The Land of Palestine Hosted the Great Event of the Incarnation

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, was baptized in the Jordan River, lived most of his life in the Galilee, was crucified, died, and was buried in Jerusalem. Jesus Christ’s resurrection took place in Jerusalem. Therefore, the first witnesses to the Resurrection were Palestinians; the Church was born in Palestine as the early disciples and followers of Jesus were Palestinians. In Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out, the Gospel of the living Christ was first proclaimed in Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem his witnesses went out to the ends of the earth.

The Palestinian Christians of today are the descendants of those early Christians, yet this is no cause for hubris. With a humility that befits their Lord, they accept it as a privilege that carries with it a responsibility for service. Palestinian Christians of today are the present generation of that great cloud of witnesses to Jesus who came before them, and who will, God willing, come after them until Christ comes again. They and their ancestors have maintained a living witness to Jesus and his Resurrection from the beginning of the Church, and they should see themselves dynamically continuing such a witness in the land, witnesses to the Resurrection.

The Witness of Our Land to Scripture

A seminal biblical scholar of the nineteenth century, when visiting Palestine in 1860–61, called it a “a fifth Gospel”. He saw a “striking agreement of the texts with the places, the marvelous harmony of the Gospel ideal with the country.” The direct personal knowledge and experience of the land of the Bible can supplement the accounts of the Gospels by enriching and deepening the faith and devotion of the believer.

In his Catechetical Lectures, St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 304–386) considered the various places of Palestine as bearing a true witness
to Christ. Such sites as the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and the Mount of Olives were for him an eloquent witness to Jesus Christ. What was true for St. Cyril, the archbishop of Jerusalem in the fourth century, is still true today in the experience of countless pilgrims. Palestine is a fifth Gospel to them. Indeed, the faith of the pilgrim can come alive through visiting the holy sites, from being where Jesus had been, and walking where he had walked. It is, however, equally important for Christian pilgrims to meet the living stones of the land—the Christians. To visit the holy sites is a very moving experience for many; meeting the “holy” people can be a very rewarding and enriching experience for both. Visiting museums can give a person an important sense and appreciation for the past; but to visit the churches of the land, to worship with the indigenous Christians, and to meet them personally can give the pilgrim both a sense of appreciation for the present and an invaluable experience and insight into the life of the living and pulsating Christian communities of the land, who with their ancestors before them have borne a continuing witness to Christ for the last two thousand years.

Indigenous Christians who are privileged to live in Israel-Palestine today have a responsibility to Christian pilgrims from all over the world—to make their pilgrimage a revitalizing experience of their faith. Their responsibility and privilege is to be host to their brothers and sisters from abroad.

Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace

Christians believe that the message of the only truly authentic peace first resounded from the hills of Bethlehem:

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men [and women] with whom he is pleased!98

Palestinian Christians, therefore, recognize their responsibility as peacemakers. As will be made clear in chapter 6, they should be actively involved in the work of justice, peace, and reconciliation, calling into remembrance the words of Jesus,

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons [and daughters] of God.99

A Palestinian Cry for Justice and Compassion

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

JUSTICE MISUSED

The most basic and crucial issue of the Israel-Palestine conflict is that of justice. The word itself has been overused and misused in our day. Everybody is looking for justice for his/her cause, nation, or self, but what they really mean by justice is often uncertain. More important, how can justice be justice for some when it is perceived as injustice to others? It is, therefore, important to begin with a definition of the word “justice.”

Aristotle defined justice as refraining from pleonexia, that is, from gaining some advantage for oneself by seizing what belongs to another—property, reward, office; or by denying a person that which is his or her due—the fulfillment of a promise, the repayment of a debt, or the showing of proper respect, for example.1 Webster's New World Dictionary defines justice as “1. the quality of being righteous. 2. impartiality; fairness. 3. the quality of being right or correct.”2