

DO NOT DISTURBE APART FROM PERMISSION FROM THE AUTHOR

ZIONISM IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Shaun C. Brown

In January of this year, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute rescinded its decision to give an award to civil rights activist and scholar Angela Davis because of her support of a boycott of Israel and justice for Palestinians.¹ Shortly after, statements by Rep Ilhan Omar (D – Minn) came under fire because of critical statements she made about Israel. In the midst of backlash, she said various members of Congress support Israel because of contributions from AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee). Some accused her of anti-Semitism.² The Trump administration has gone to lengths before not seen by a US administration to support Israel, including a) moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem³ and b) announcing that it will recognize Israel’s sovereignty in the Golan Heights, an area of Syria that Israel occupied after the 1967 war and annexed in 1981.⁴ Trump has also called the Democratic party the “anti-Israel” and “anti-Jewish” party for opposing some of these US policy changes.

I bring up these examples not to argue that we as Christians, and in particular Christians in the Stone-Campbell Movement, should support one party or another. My own position may more closely resemble one side than the other, but my intent is not to limit Christian responses to the Israel-Palestinian conflict to the two options on the table in US political debate. I instead raise these examples to show that it is a live issue in American society whether or not criticism of the modern nation state of Israel is automatically anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. In order to better answer this question, I will take this brief time to define Zionism, discuss Jewish and Christian

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/us/angela-davis-israel-civil-rights-institute.html>

² <https://www.npr.org/2019/03/09/701939232/barbershop-rep-ilhan-omar-divides-jewish-community>

³ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-u-s-embassy-in-jerusalem-1.6062554>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47697717>

responses to Zionism, and look to some distinctly Christian responses to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

JUDAISM AND ZIONISM

Michael Stanislawski defines Zionism as “the nationalist movement calling for the establishment and support of an independent state for the Jewish people in its ancient homeland.”⁵ Stanislawski notes that most Zionists consider Zionism to be a continuation of Jewish attachment to the land of Israel, but others argue that the Zionist movement, which arose in the late nineteenth century (though it was not without some antecedents), “was in fact a rejection of that age-old desire for the Jews to return to the Land of Israel, and not its linear fulfillment.”⁶ I will now lay out four types of Jewish Zionism as well as Jewish Anti-Zionism. There is a diversity of opinion within each of these camps and some may fall into more than one of these categories. I will actually begin with Anti-Zionism.

Anti-Zionism opposes modern Zionism because they argue that the return to the land is, within Judaism, connected with belief in the coming of the messiah, who would then bring the exiles back to Jerusalem.⁷ Others opposed Zionism for practical reasons.⁸ Stanislawski argues that contemporary anti-Zionism is relegated to two groups on opposite extremes: some among the ultra-orthodox (e.g., Satmar Hasidim) and antinationalists within the Reform movement.⁹

The founders of Modern Zionism opposed what they saw as the “political quietism” of this messianism. They argued that Jews should take their own future destiny into their own hands, seeking to liberate themselves instead of waiting for God to create a Jewish homeland. It assumes that the Jews, though scattered throughout the world, are first and foremost a *nation* and

⁵ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 1. See Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 362ff.

⁶ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 2.

⁷ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 2.

⁸ Stanislawsky, *Zionism*, 54.

⁹ Stanislawsky, *Zionism*, 54–55 and Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 295.

not a *religion*.¹⁰ Zionism was initially a minority position and was opposed by the majority of rabbis and Jewish leaders, though it became a majority view among Jews after the Holocaust.¹¹

Secular Zionism is a term used to refer to the fact that many of these modern Zionists rejected historic Jewish beliefs, including belief in God, and so did not root their Zionism in a belief in God or God's covenant with Israel.¹²

Cultural Zionism was a movement founded by Asher Ginzberg, who wrote under the pen name Ahad Ha'am (1856–1927).¹³ He called for the revival of Jewish culture and Hebrew as a spoken, not just a religious or written, language. Ha'am saw Palestine as the only location for a possible future Jewish state.¹⁴

Political Zionism. Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), the founder of the Zionist Congress, is often seen as the founder of the modern Zionist movement. He became convinced that anti-Semitism would be a permanent feature of European society and that Jews, as a nation, needed to establish a homestead (not necessarily a state) elsewhere. He did not necessarily think that land had to be Palestine. He at different times was open to Argentina and an unoccupied section of British East Africa in modern day Kenya. Herzl believed if the Jewish homeland was in Palestine, that Zionism could be of benefit to the not only Jews, but to the current Arab population of Palestine.¹⁵

Political Zionism got a boost from the Balfour Declaration, a letter to Lionel Rothschild, a leading British Zionist, and signed on November 2, 1917 by British foreign secretary Arthur Balfour. In this letter, Balfour passes along this message:

¹⁰ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 3–6.

¹¹ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 9, 54–55.

¹² Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 8.

¹³ Novak, *Zionism and Judaism*, 66.

¹⁴ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 378, 440ff.

¹⁵ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 23–26, 29, 32–34. The Zionist Congress rejected his Uganda proposal.

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object. It being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.¹⁶

The British did not specify what the borders would be of this Jewish home in Palestine. Also, it should be noted that the British also promised to create an independent nation of Palestine.¹⁷ The British also, after World War I, separated "Transjordan" from Palestine, and Jordan became an independent nation in 1946. This disappointed the Zionist movement for they wanted the land on both sides of the border.¹⁸ In 1947, Great Britain handed over control of the land of Palestine to the United Nations and that it would end its Mandate over the region on May 15, 1948.¹⁹ The afternoon before the mandate would end, on May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion "hastily made plans for a history-making event, the culmination of the Zionist dream since 1897: a declaration of an independent Jewish state in Palestine, to be called the State of Israel."²⁰ The text of the declaration was written from the perspective of a "secular, moderate, socialist Zionism of the majority of its signers."²¹ The declaration lacks any explicit mention of God or a divine promise of the land to the Jews.

Political Zionism can be divided into two main groups. First, labor Zionism, which is a socialist stream. The earlier leaders after independence, like Ben-Gurion fall into this camp. Second, Revisionist Zionism, which opposed what they perceived as the compromising stance of labor Zionists, as well as their economic policies. The Likud party, the party of Benjamin Netanyahu, descends from Revisionist Zionism.²²

¹⁶ As cited in Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 43.

¹⁷ Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 123.

¹⁸ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 44.

¹⁹ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 57.

²⁰ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 61.

²¹ Stanislawski, *Zionism*, 61.

²² Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 408–420.

Religious Zionism. A diversity of religious Zionism exists, but for the purpose of this paper I will look at the Zionism of David Novak, an American Jewish rabbi and theologian who teaches at the University of Toronto. Novak's perspective is characterized by Marcus Bockhuehl as "moderate Zionist perspective." Novak says to be a Zionist is "to be personally committed or loyal to the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish polity."²³ Novak sees Zionism as "a major, indispensable component of being Jewish today" (7).

Novak remains critical of aspects of secular Zionism that can be seen as coming from Baruch Spinoza. Spinoza introduced three inversions of traditional Jewish thought. First, instead of God electing Israel, Israel elects God (27; cf. Novak's *The Election of Israel*). Second, Jewish tradition had argued that morality needs a religious justification, but Spinoza inverts this and argues that religion needs a moral justification (30). This brought about the possibility of the later Reform movement within Judaism (33). Third, while previous tradition "had taught that the Jews must wait for the Messiah to apocalyptically restore them to national independence, Spinoza inverted that relation to assert that the Jews must restore themselves to national independence" (35). Ben-Gurion and other Zionists saw Spinoza as a proto-Zionist. Novak expresses concern that these secular Zionists have come to replace Judaism with Zionism (48ff).

Novak advocates for a primacy of theology in thinking through issues about the land. He puts front and center God's free choices—that there is an asymmetry between God and creation (106). He says, "Not to deal with Zionism as a theological question is to miss how deeply Jewish is the Jewish attachment to the land of Israel" (92). In doing so he raises four primary questions: 1) What does it mean that God created the universe? 2) What does it mean that God created humanity in his image and likeness? 3) What does it mean that God made a covenant with the

²³ Novak, *Zionism and Judaism*, 1. Subsequent citations in parentheses.

Jewish people? 4) What does it mean that God choose the land of Israel for the Jews (91)? For the purpose of brevity, I will focus primarily upon Novak's answers to questions 3 and 4.

God did not elect Israel due to their great numbers but because of his love for them (Deut 7:7–8). “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God” (Exod 6:7). God has promised that he will continue to uphold this covenant (Deut 8:8). God also reminds Israel that this promise is one of grace, for God did not make this covenant or bring them to the land because of their righteousness (Deut 9:4). Novak says, “Israel’s election is not because of what the Jews have been in the past. It is because of what they will be in the future, a future only God can truly anticipate” (128). Novak speculates that God does not reveal why he choose Israel because if he did then their chosenness would be “become their worldly possession rather than their task to fulfill in the world” (129). They are called not to be God, but to be God’s servants in the world (138).²⁴ Israel’s choice, according to Novak, is to decide whether they will “confirm or deny their election by God” (135).

God chose the land of Canaan for his people, giving it to them as a gift. “I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession” (Exod 6:8). While the land is a gift, Novak argues that does not mean the Jews receive it as passive recipients, but rather that the call to inherit the land is a command, though not one binding upon every Jew (140–141, 186ff). This is why it was not sufficient for the Jews to settle in Uganda. The Jewish claim on the land must not arise from a “historic connection” or “historic/natural right” as secular and political Zionists have argued, but from God’s election—God’s choice for the people (141; cf. 167ff on Israel’s *Declaration of Independence*). This does

²⁴ Novak later argues, “The Holocaust and the reestablishment of the State of Israel both pose great challenges to the Jewish people to remain faithful to the covenant. Each also poses a temptation: the Holocaust tempts Jews to believe they are so weak that the covenant and its responsibilities are beyond them. The reestablishment of the State of Israel tempts Jews to believe they are so strong that the covenant and its responsibilities are behind them” (249).

not mean that the land belongs to the Jews. As Novak says, “nothing in creation *belongs* to any creation. Everything and everybody belong to God alone” (144).²⁵ Novak argues, “Christians who are faithful to their own tradition ... believe or should believe that God’s covenant with the Jewish people and with the land of Israel as their inheritance is everlasting and forever valid. It has only been supplemented, not superseded or replaced, by Christianity” (143).

This does not mean Jews cannot live outside the land—Novak himself lives in the diaspora. It also does not mean that only Jews can live in the land. He says, “Jews can recognize the right of non-Jews to live in the land of Israel: either as individual citizens in a Jewish state there, or *even* having a state of their own within the boundaries of the entire land of Israel” (147). He again reiterates that this is the case because the land is not their possession. Novak draws upon scripture passages about resident aliens to discuss the place of non-Jews within a Jewish polity (200ff).

Novak’s proposal has a lot of promise theologically, but, as he recognizes, it is not likely that the UN or international law or Arab states will recognize Israel as a nation state based on theological claims of God’s election. Also, while Novak opens possibilities for recognizing Palestinians as individual citizens within the state of Israel or in their own state within Israel, he expects Palestinians, if they are to have their own state, to “recognize that their autonomy could only come from it being conceded to them by the Jewish state already in full control of the land of Israel” (223). While he is indeed correct that Israel does currently have that control in some sense, it is unlikely that Palestinians will agree to those terms in order to bring about a peaceful two-state solution.

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

²⁵ This is a common theme within Palestinian Christian theology. See Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 913ff. As Leviticus 25:23 says, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.”

There are not only Jewish Zionists, but Christian ones as well. In our contemporary context there are two principle kinds of Christian Zionists. The first type are dispensational Zionists, whose thought is often rooted in the work of John Nelson Darby and C.I. Scofield.²⁶ They have more confidence in their ability to plot out the sequence of the end time and tend to believe that Israel is above criticism.²⁷ They deny there is such a thing as a Palestinian people and often see them as an impediment to the fulfillment of prophecy. The Jews must settle the land and build a third temple in order to bring about fulfillment of prophecy. Some of these dispensational groups sponsor Jews to return to Israel or even to build additional settlements in the West Bank, promote the transfer of Palestinians from the land, lobby in Washington, etc.²⁸ Within this form of Zionism Palestinians are often ignored, in Weaver's words they "drop off the moral radar screen," or at worst they are seen as "obstacles to God's will that must be removed in order for Jewish restoration in the land to unfold."²⁹

The second subscribe to what Gerald McDermott calls "the new Christian Zionism." For the purposes of this paper, I am going to call them covenantal Zionists, another term McDermott uses.³⁰ McDermott puts forward this view in two recent books, one an edited academic volume entitled *The New Christian Zionism* (IVP Academic, 2016) and the other a more popular volume entitled *Israel Matters*. McDermott laments, as Ellen Charry did while she was with us last year, that Christians often move too quickly from creation and fall to Jesus, giving short shrift to Israel. These treatments either ignore or downplay Israel or simply treat Israel as a negative example. McDermott says, "We believe that the Bible claims that God saves the world *through* Israel and the perfect Israelite; thus the Bible is incoherent and salvation impossible without

²⁶ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 1086ff.

²⁷ McDermott, "Introduction," *The New Christian Zionism*, 14.

²⁸ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 1100ff.

²⁹ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 1116ff.

³⁰ McDermott, "A History of Christian Zionism," *The New Christian Zionism*, 47.

Israel. We believe that the history of salvation is ongoing: the people of Israel and their land continue to have theological significance.”³¹ The church’s understanding of the gospel message is distorted apart from the story of Israel.³²

While acknowledging the rise of political Zionism, McDermott and company define Zionism more broadly than historical treatments like Stanislawski’s. They instead define Zionism as the understanding that the land of Israel is the natural homeland for the Jewish people. This definition allows them to describe not only previous Jewish groups as Zionist, but several Christian figures and groups over the last two-thousand years.³³ For example, even the church father Kendall Soulen gives much attention to forming a more sophisticated account of supersessionism, Justin Martyr, “expected that the millennium would be centered in Jerusalem,” as did Irenaeus and Tertullian.³⁴ While Origen and Augustine spiritualized these promises concerning the land, McDermott notes that Hildegard of Bingen in the middle ages as well as various figures in the post-Reformation period, especially within Britain. These post-Reformation figures are often called “restorationists.”³⁵ McDermott also points to some postmillennialists, like Jonathan Edwards, who believed the Jews would return to the land and that in this return the land would become, in McDermott’s words, “a spiritual center of the world.”³⁶ Alexander Campbell also believed the Jews will return to the promised land. He points to Hosea 3:4–5³⁷, and says, “This passage, though sought to be applied to the Jews in their captivity in ancient Babylon, cannot, as we judge, be sustained, and is only fully verified in their

³¹ McDermott, “Introduction,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 12.

³² McDermott, “A History of Supersessionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 33.

³³ McDermott, “Introduction,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 15–20.

³⁴ McDermott, “A History of Christian Zionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 55.

³⁵ McDermott, “A History of Christian Zionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 59–61.

³⁶ McDermott, “A History of Christian Zionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 64. See also McDermott, *Israel Matters*, 37.

³⁷ “For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. ⁵ Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.”

present and prospective future destiny.”³⁸ One of my own theological heroes, Karl Barth, was a strong supporter of the state of Israel. As his biographer Eberhard Busch notes, in June 1967, during the Six-Day War, Barth sent a sizeable sum of money to Israel to help with their war effort.³⁹

Especially since the time of the Holocaust, but not only since then, Christians have been looking at the Scriptures with fresh eyes, reevaluating their perspective on the Jewish people. They have seen in Paul that “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (Rom 11:2). Or as Paul says later in that same chapter, “As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:28–29). While Gentiles have been grafted in, while the dividing wall has been brought down, Paul does not consider the distinction between Jew and Gentile to have been abolished, just as he does not consider the distinction between man and woman to be abolished.⁴⁰ Others have noticed how central the land is to this covenant. As Gerhard von Rad says, “Of all the promises made to the patriarchs it was that of the land that was the most prominent and decisive.”⁴¹

As McDermott observes, however, “the Torah never guaranteed eternal possession of the land.”⁴² Israel’s continued possession of the land depended upon their covenant faithfulness, their obedience of God’s law (Deut 5:32–33; 6:3; 8:19–20; 11:8–15).⁴³ McDermott also notes that one of the commandments here was that they should not only “you shall love your neighbor

³⁸ Alexander Campbell, “The Millennium—No. V,” *Millennial Harbinger* 4th series 6 (May 1856): 276.

³⁹ Busch, “Karl Barth and the Jews,” *Karl Barth, the Jews, and Judaism*, 36. See McDermott, “A History of Christian Zionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 71–73.

⁴⁰ Rudolph, “Zionism in Pauline Literature,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 180–182. Rudolph quotes Raymond Collins, who says that Paul’s statements that circumcision is “nothing” or “not anything” as saying that “neither circumcision nor lack of circumcision has ultimate bearing on salvation” (178). See also McDermott, *Israel Matters*, 70–71.

⁴¹ As cited in McDermott, “A History of Christian Zionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 49.

⁴² McDermott, “A History of Christian Zionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 51.

⁴³ McDermott, *Israel Matters*, 49–51.

as yourself” (Lev 19:18), but also, “you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Lev 19:34). In Deuteronomy, Moses commands the people to collect tithes for poor aliens (Deut 14:28 – 29; 26:12); they are told not to withhold wages from aliens (Deut 24:14); and “aliens were to use the same system of justice that was provided to Israelites” (Deut 1:16; 24:17; 27:19).⁴⁴ During those times that they were removed from the land due to unfaithfulness, however, it was in a sense still theirs. For example, Jeremiah 16:15b says, “For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their ancestors” (cf. Ezek 36).⁴⁵

This Zionism, to define it the way that McDermott does, does not end with the coming of Jesus either. Three of the authors in *The New Christian Zionism*, Joel Willitts,⁴⁶ Mark Kinzer,⁴⁷ and David Rudolph,⁴⁸ provide rather convincing accounts that the land continues to play a significant role in the Matthew, Luke-Acts, and Paul respectively. Simply spiritualizing or universalizing passages about God’s covenant with Israel is not sufficient.

McDermott says that by advocating for this form of Christian Zionism he and his compatriots are not arguing that Israel is a perfect country or beyond criticism. He also does not argue that the current nation state of Israel is by necessity “the last Jewish state we will see before the end of days.”⁴⁹ While they see the return of Jews to the land as a “partial fulfillment of biblical prophecy” or a “proleptic sign of the eschaton,” they critique the confidence that dispensational Zionists have in their ability to plot the sequence of the end times as well as their uncritical treatment of Israel.⁵⁰ Some of his co-authors in *The New Christian Zionism*

⁴⁴ McDermott, “A History of Christian Zionism,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 51.

⁴⁵ See McDermott, *Israel Matters*, 51.

⁴⁶ Willitts, “Zionism in the Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 107–140.

⁴⁷ Kinzer, “Zionism in Luke-Acts,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 141–165.

⁴⁸ Rudolph, “Zionism in Pauline Literature,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 167–194.

⁴⁹ McDermott, “Introduction,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 12.

⁵⁰ McDermott, “Introduction,” *The New Christian Zionism*, 14.

demonstrate this by offering some criticisms of Israeli treatment of the Maronites, a Christian minority group who were removed from the village of Kfar Baram,⁵¹ Others, however, spend most of their time denying that Israel is in violation of international law and calling Christian critiques of Israel anti-Semitic.⁵² These authors have a point in arguing that it often appears that the international community picks on Israel while ignoring more extreme human rights abusers like Turkey for its occupation of Cyprus or China's occupation of Tibet.⁵³ It also should be acknowledged that Israel "has almost two million Muslim and Christian Arabs, Druze, Bahá'ís, Circassians and other ethnic groups as citizens with full rights."⁵⁴ This does not excuse Israeli mistreatment of Palestinians and other minorities within their borders. These attempts are deflections from abuses. I find much of their theological proposal convincing, especially in relation to the acknowledgement that the work of Jesus does not abrogate God's covenant with Israel.⁵⁵ I want, however, to provide a corrective to their proposal by calling them to be faithful to their own acknowledgment that Israel is not a perfect nation.

REFUGEE CRISIS AND SETTLEMENTS

What Israelis refer to as their declaration of independence, Palestinians call the "Nakba," the catastrophe. Over 700,000 Palestinians became refugees. Many lost their homes, land, and opportunities. "Israel destroyed over four hundred emptied Palestinian villages, and Jewish

⁵¹ Khalloul, "Theology and Morality," *The New Christian Zionism*, 289.

⁵² Tooley, "Theology and the Churches," *The New Christian Zionism*, 197–219 and Nicholson, "Theology and Law," *The New Christian Zionism*, 249–280. In fairness, while Nicholson does not believe expansion of settlements in the West Bank is "illegal," he considers it "imprudent" (276).

⁵³ Khalloul, "Theology and Morality," *The New Christian Zionism*, 296.

⁵⁴ McDermott, "Introduction," *The New Christian Zionism*, 23.

⁵⁵ Weaver notes that Palestinian Christian theologians can also appreciate that God remains in covenant with Israel, but they want to emphasize that "God's election of the people of Israel was ultimately for inclusive, rather than exclusive, purposes." *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 902ff.

refugees, many from Arab countries, were resettled on many of those sites.”⁵⁶ The United Nations General Assembly ruled in 1949 that Palestinian refugees should be able to return to their homes as soon as possible, but in many cases this has not happened. Some of these refugees have settled in other countries while others remain in refugee camps to this day.⁵⁷ It is estimated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) that there are currently over five million registered Palestinian refugees.⁵⁸ In some cases, like the case of the village of Iqrit or Birum, Israel’s Supreme Court has ruled that the people can return to their villages, but the Israeli military has prevented them from being able to do so.⁵⁹ In 1949, the UN Elain Epp Weaver argues,

Within the Zionist narrative, Zionism entailed the return of a far-flung, oft-persecuted people to its land and the achievement of landed security within that land, with security guaranteed because Jews would no longer live as a minority population. For Palestinians, however, Zionism appeared as a colonial movement set on uprooting and displacing the native Arab Palestinian population.⁶⁰

In addition to the refugee crisis, we see Israel’s neglect of those in the Gaza Strip. While Israel did dismantle the settlements within this territory, this separation, as Weaver says, “left Palestinians in the Strip more isolated than ever in what international human rights organizations refer to as the world’s largest outdoor prison.”⁶¹ Israel has a blockade on the area and this has led

⁵⁶ Halevi, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, 82. “With the notable exception of Jordan, which granted Palestinian refugees citizenship, the Arab world has kept Palestinians as refugees, stateless and in camps, politicizing their misery as permanent evidence against Israel” (132). See also Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 129ff, 524ff.

⁵⁷ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 550. Weaver says, “The status of Palestinian refugees today varies from country to country. In Jordan, Palestinian refugees hold Jordanian citizenship. In contrast, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon lead a tightly circumscribed existence, including being barred by law from many professions and from purchasing property.

“Israel, for its part, has firmly rejected consideration of Palestinian refugee return” (loc. 557ff)..

⁵⁸ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 1415.

⁵⁹ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 135ff. See Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 79.

⁶⁰ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 540ff. Weaver later says there is an “asymmetrical conflict between two nationalist projects” (loc. 689).

⁶¹ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 677.

to a humanitarian crisis. Some U.N. observers estimate “that Gaza will become uninhabitable by 2020.”⁶²

DEBATE IN ISRAEL

Critique of Israeli policies toward Palestinians and other minorities exists within Israel, not just among Arab Israelis, but among Jews. While preparing this presentation, I read the recently published *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, by American-born Israeli journalist Yossi Klein Halevi. Halevi argues that a failure to listen to the other has kept the peace process from succeeding. He seeks to provide an account of Israeli self-understanding to his Palestinian neighbor—to describe to them that “the form that Jewish family takes is peoplehood.”⁶³ To describe the desire that the Jewish people had for the land over the centuries. While acknowledging how complicated partition will be, Halevi recognizes the disparity between Israeli and Palestinian, and for that reason supports a two-state solution (2)—a solution that a majority of Israelis support (70). Halevi argues that while some of his fellow Israeli Jews argue that “justice belongs to our side,” that after the first intifada Halevi and others have come to the conclusion that “the occupation was a disaster—for us as well as you” (9–10).⁶⁴ He criticizes the expansion of settlements, which demonstrates a “lack of good faith in the most literal way possible” as Israel tries to negotiate a two-state solution with Palestine (130).⁶⁵

⁶² Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 681.

⁶³ Halevi, 52. Halevi says, “Even Palestinian moderates I’ve known who want to end the bloodshed tend to deny that the Jews are an authentic nation” (52). See also 71, 118, *passim*. Subsequent citations in parentheses.

⁶⁴ The first intifada was characterized more by nonviolent action, while the second brought not only continued nonviolent action, but terrorist activity. Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 661.

⁶⁵ These settlements are also illegal under international law. Weaver says, “Because international law prevents occupying powers from moving their civilian population into occupied territory, most international law experts and almost all countries in the world consider the settlements to be illegal. Israel, however, views the territories as administered, not occupied, and so argues that settlements are a political matter subject to negotiation, rather than a legal issue.” *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 604ff. Weaver later says of the settlements, “The discriminatory nature of the two-tiered system of justice in the Occupied Territories, in which Israeli settlers maintain their full rights as Israeli citizens, while Palestinians are subject to Israeli military rule, becomes harder to avoid the more that settlements increase and expand and that Palestinians in the Occupied Territories are confined to ever more circumscribed parcels of territory disconnected by walls, militarized fences, checkpoints, and roadblocks” (loc. 611ff). See also loc.

This does not mean that Halevi is not also critical of Palestinian leadership or the action of certain Palestinian individuals. He critiques Palestinian leadership for their duplicity (meeting with Israeli leadership to discuss peace while telling other Muslim leaders that they have no intention of actual coming to an agreement with Israel), and also discusses the fear he felt during the second intifada that when he sent his son off to school he may never see him again (10). Halevi thus has some ambivalence about the wall. He knows that it ended terrorist attacks, but sees the damage the wall has done to Palestinians in the West Bank and the way that it has further cut Israelis and Palestinians from one another. The wall, or security barrier as Israel calls it, constructed in 2002, is not built on the internationally recognized border of the West Bank, but well inside of it.⁶⁶

Halevi calls upon Israeli Jews and Palestinians to “see each other as two traumatized peoples, each clinging to the same sliver of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, neither of whom will find peace or justice until we make our peace with the other’s claim to justice” (20–21). In the remaining part of this presentation, I want to look at a few examples of Christians in the land who are seeking to bring about peace. They are not necessarily indifferent to public policy within Israel, but each of them draw upon distinctly Christian resources and seek to faithfully follow God within their ecclesial contexts.

ELIAS CHACOUR

Elias Chacour (b. 1939) is a Palestinian Israel and Melkite Catholic priest. He was archbishop of Akko, Naifa, Nazareth, and Galilee from 2006 to 2014. When he was a child in the

1406ff. Weaver says, “Today, an estimated 400,000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank, while another 400,000 dwell in East Jerusalem” (loc. 1415).

⁶⁶ As Weaver says, “In 2002, Israel began construction on what it terms a ‘security barrier’ and that Palestinians refer to as a ‘segregation barrier’ or an ‘apartheid wall.’ This barrier consists of tall concrete walls and networks of militarized fences and patrol tracks snaking deep into the West Bank and in the process creating a de facto border that deviates markedly from the 1949 Armistice Line.” *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 667ff.

village of Biram, where his family had lived and cultivated the fields for centuries, a military commander came to the village and told them that their intelligence said that the village was in danger. The military could protect them, but they should move into the hills for a few days. The villagers evacuated as instructed. Some men from the village later came to look in on their houses and found many of the doors broken in and furniture and belongings gone. The soldiers there chased them out of the village. The government took possession of his family's land and sold it to a Jewish owner. His father then got a job working the land as a laborer. Though the Supreme Court of Israel said that they could return to the village, the military turned them away and refused to allow them to return home. They petitioned a second time and again the Supreme Court granted them permission to return home. This time the soldiers occupying the village told them they could return home on Christmas, but as the villagers approached Biram the soldiers opened fire on the village, destroying the homes.⁶⁷

Though Chacour would have every reason to hate Zionists who came to occupy the land his family had lived on for centuries, his father and other Christians in his life encouraged him to find ways to love the Jews, his "blood brothers." He also had an experience while studying for the priesthood that changed his life. He met some West Germany friends while in seminary and on one occasion he was taking a train to visit them. As he stood on the platform he says he felt as though he was transferred back in time to Germany in 1937. German soldiers with swastikas were demanding their papers and gathering Jews together to send them off to concentration camps or ghettos. He says,

I hurt for the Jewish people. Why had the civilized world allowed them to be persecuted? Other questions were just as troubling. Why did the world allow my people to be driven into diaspora only a few years after the Holocaust? Surely the Jews knew the horror of militarism—why had they used such violence against my people? How had the minds of

⁶⁷ Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, chs. 3–5. See also Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 79.

the nations been poisoned to think of Palestinians as an idle, worthless people capable of nothing but violence?⁶⁸

Chacour came to devote his life and ministry within the church to peacemaking. He first worked to bring about peace between Melkites in Ibillin, where he was sent to serve as a priest.⁶⁹ He then worked to bring about reconciliation between Melkites and Orthodox Christians in the village.⁷⁰ When the mosque in Ibillin was destroyed by a storm, Chacour allowed Muslims to pray in the Melkite church until the mosque was rebuilt. Christians in the village also helped them to rebuild it.⁷¹ Chacour has also worked to bring about peace between Jews and Palestinians, hoping to bring about “reconciliation with our Jewish brothers.”⁷² Chacour lives in hope that “one day we can reconcile with the Jews and live in dignity again.” one day we can reconcile with the Jews and live in dignity again.”⁷³ Chacour has also participated in nonviolent protest. Among other things, he lead an MLK-style a march to the Knesset made up of Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Druze on August 23, 1972 to protest mistreatment of minority populations by the Israeli government.⁷⁴

CHRISTIAN PEACEMAKER TEAMS

Stanley Hauerwas has been known to say that Christians devoted to peace should be as morally serious and interesting as Marines.⁷⁵ Christian Peacemaker Teams, which began in the mid-1980s, are an example of a group that carry this out. Supported by some Christian peace traditions (Mennonites, Brethren, Quakers), they place “teams at the invitation of local peacemaking communities that are confronting situations of lethal conflict. These teams support

⁶⁸ Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 118.

⁶⁹ Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 173–175 and Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 30–33. In both these texts he describes the time he locked the doors of the church and said he would not open them until they made peace.

⁷⁰ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, e.g., 64ff.

⁷¹ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 54–55.

⁷² Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 152.

⁷³ Chacour, *Blood Brothers*, 187.

⁷⁴ Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 90–93.

⁷⁵ Find source.

and amplify the voices of local peacemakers who risk injury and death by waging nonviolent direct action to confront systems of violence and oppression.”⁷⁶

They have a ministry in Hebron, a city in the West Bank.⁷⁷

CHRISTIAN HOLY LAND FOUNDATION

The Christian Churches/Churches of Christ have a ministry in Israel-Palestine called the Christian Holy Land Foundation. I recently had the chance to talk with Tim Ross, senior minister at Hopwood Christian Church, who is a member of the board. He told me the ministry currently supports some young Palestinian Israeli Christian leaders. They have succeeded in serving not only other Palestinian Christians, but have come to have the trust of some local Muslims and been able to serve them as well. They also have formed good relationships with Messianic Jews and some historic churches in the region.

CONCLUSION

I have been a part of many church groups that pray for persecuted Christians within Muslim majority countries. We should also be in prayer for Christians within Israel-Palestine. First, that they can maintain faithful witness. This is particularly important in the face of vast emigration of Christians from the land.⁷⁸ Perhaps through supporting ministries like the Christian Holy Land Foundation we can find ways to “show solidarity with the Palestinian church.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ <https://www.cpt.org/about> Hauerwas says, “Still, if you ask, “Stanley, what is your foreign policy toward ISIS?”, I don’t have one. But I do maintain that love to our persecuted brothers and sisters must mean facing the same dangers that they are undergoing. That’s why I’m a big fan of the [Christian Peacemaker Teams](#). For instance, they’ll go to Hebron where Jewish soldiers and Palestinian activists are toe to toe, ready to kill one another. The Christian Peacemaker Team will come in and say, “Can we fix you guys a meal?” It doesn’t sound like much, but eating together is a big deal. It’s a start.” <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/church-community/why-community-is-dangerous>

⁷⁷ “CPT Palestine is a faith-based organization that supports Palestinian-led, nonviolent, grassroots resistance to the Israeli occupation and the unjust structures that uphold it. By collaborating with local Palestinian and Israeli peacemakers and educating people in our home communities, we help create a space for justice and peace.” <https://www.cpt.org/programs/palestine>

⁷⁸ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 950.

⁷⁹ Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land*, loc. 960.