

2

Reflections on Sabeel's Liberation Theology and Ecumenical Work (1992– 2013)

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Evolution of Palestinian Liberation Theology: Historical Background

Palestinian theology of liberation is one of the latest expressions of liberation theologies that has emerged since the 1960s in Palestine. Five important factors and events make up the background to the emergence of this theology.

THE PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

On the eve of the Nakba (catastrophe) that befell the Palestinian people, the picture of the Palestinian Christian community can be described as a community divided into many denominations belonging to both eastern and western rites, a variety of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches. Most of the churches lacked indigenous leadership. Most of the indigenous clergy were trained as pastors, many of them with very little theological training. The Bible was not accessible to most Christians. Even for the small Protestant Churches, the availability of the Bible, in light of the establishment of the state of Israel, proved at times a liability

rather than an asset because of the misuse. After the catastrophe hit, the immediate need for the churches, was to address the humanitarian crisis of the thousands of Palestinian refugees who became homeless. In short, the Palestinian Christian faith was built on simple trust in God. It was not resilient enough or deep enough to withstand the political storm of the loss of their homeland, Palestine. The prophetic response was weak and individualized. As a result of the Nakba, the Christian community like its larger counterpart, the Muslim community was thrown into total disarray.

THE NAKBA

The 1948 Nakba and its aftermath was a devastating shock to the whole Palestinian people. Approximately three quarter of a million Palestinians fled in fright or driven out by force from their towns and villages, both Christians and Muslims. In those days very few people around the world were aware of the tragedy that befell the Palestinians. Yet the Nakba was the basic catastrophic event that shattered Palestinian life for years to come and condemned most of our people to a life in refugee camps on the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and in scattered camps in the surrounding Arab countries; and eventually to the formation of diaspora communities throughout the world. It is the Nakba, its consequences, repercussions, and ramifications that Palestinian Liberation theology eventually had to address. Most of the indigenous clergy of the land fled with their families, or were forced out. Those that remained within what became the state of Israel had to endure, together with their congregations, the agony of the imposition of martial law and a system of control that deprived them of their basic human rights (Ateek 1989, 32–38).

THE HOLOCAUST

What stood out in the West was the tragedy of the holocaust which preceded the Nakba by a few years. Western Christians, by and large, were glad to see European Jews find a home after their unbelievable loss, by the establishment of a state of their own on the land of Palestine.

It is important to remember, however, that the Zionist Movement had been in existence for over 100 years (1897) and the Balfour Declaration had been issued by the British Government 20 years earlier (1917) promising Jews a home in Palestine, During all those years, the Zionists were pressuring the British mandatory power to accelerate the fulfillment

of the promise. Indeed the increasing legal and illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine contributed to the escalation of violence between the indigenous Palestinian Arab population and the Zionists whose goals aimed at devouring the whole country.

Were it not for the Holocaust, it would be difficult to believe that the western leaders would have shown sufficient sympathy to the Zionist project as to grant them such a big share of Palestine. One cannot over exaggerate the psychological influence which the holocaust played in the creation of the state of Israel.

Paradoxically, in spite of all their cruelty against Jews, Hitler and his Nazi party have posthumously contributed to the creation of the state and/or certainly helped speed up the process of its creation. The tragedy of the holocaust, undoubtedly, must have affected the WWII victors and caused them to give the Zionist Jews over 50 percent of Palestine in the Partition Plan of 1947. If the Nakba eventually became the basis for the emergence of Palestinian Liberation Theology, the holocaust was an essential part of its background.

THE 1967 WAR

the war of 1967 was a watershed. The Israeli Army occupied the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, as well as large areas of the surrounding Arab countries. At the same time, it caused major internal shifts in the Israeli political parties moving the whole country farther to the right. By the second half of the 1970s the Zionist Movement started shifting from a secular to a religious form of Zionism; and from an emphasis on the holocaust to an emphasis on the Torah. This shift proved to be of great significance. It inspired and stimulated the confiscation of Palestinian land, the building of the settlements, and the whole settler movement. The use of the Bible proved to be a more potent tool to attract support for Israel than even the use of the holocaust.

THE FIRST INTIFADA OF 1987

Up until the first intifada, the Palestinians waited for justice to come from the outside, especially the UN, but the UN was unable to implement its own resolutions on Palestine due to the position of the western powers and especially the United States and its power of veto. The first intifada showed the world that the grassroots of the Palestinian community could themselves take a nonviolent stand for justice.

The Beginnings

St. George's Cathedral

When the first intifada erupted, I was the priest and pastor of the Arab Palestinian Congregation at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem. Every Sunday, the sermon revolved around the injustice of the Israeli occupation, its oppressive expressions, and the human toll it was exacting on Palestinian lives. Every Sunday after the church service, the Christian community of St. George's Cathedral together with some Christians from other churches gathered together to reflect, in light of the Gospel, on their life under the oppressive illegal Israeli occupation. People shared their stories and experiences. They struggled around the meaning of their faith. They were greatly inspired by Jesus Christ who lived all his life under the occupation of the Roman Empire. Jesus' life, teaching, and example became the standard and criterion for their own life. The most frequent questions were, how did Jesus respond to and resist the Roman occupation forces, and how can we respond today? How did Jesus help his followers maintain faithfulness to God living under the oppressive Roman occupation? The gospels provided guidance, invigorated discussion, and gave comfort, encouragement, hope, and strength to the local Christian community. The community of faith was doing theology on the ground in a deeply contextual, pragmatic, and meaningful way. The credit goes to the people themselves. The best critiques and ideas came from them. When reflecting on their faith and resistance, there was no doubt they were all sure that the way of Jesus is the way of nonviolence. Escapism and flight were not an option. It was clear to most of them that the armed resistance was not the way of Jesus, nonviolence was. This was the first established foundation for a Palestinian Liberation Theology. That is where it all began. If the Nakba of 1948 marked the destruction of the Palestinian community, the Intifada of 1987 marked the return to national consciousness; and for the Christian community in particular the return to a more authentic faith and hope in God.

JUSTICE AND ONLY JUSTICE

As this was going on, the manuscript of *Justice and Only justice, A Palestinian theology of Liberation* was being published by Orbis. As soon as the book came out in 1989, it was launched at St. George's Cathedral. This was followed by the first international Conference with ten international

theologians present and the participation of a good number of local Christians. It was held in 1990 at the Tantur Institute for Ecumenical Studies in Jerusalem (Ateek, Ellis, and Ruether 1992). The Palestinian Liberation Theology movement was modestly launched inside as well as outside the country.

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre

Sabeel was not established formally except a few years later. By then, a group of concerned Christians, clergy and lay, men and women became the founders and later the first board of directors. There was a period of discernment during which lectures and workshops were held sporadically in the Jerusalem and Bethlehem areas. At the end of 1992, the name Sabeel was adopted. Sabeel is Arabic for the path or the way and also a spring of water. We were determined to walk the way of justice and peace. Sabeel was established in two geographic locations, namely, Jerusalem and Nazareth and with three important agendas: an ecumenical agenda for the Christian community of the land (Ateek, Duaybis, and Tobin 2007); an interfaith agenda especially between Christians and Muslims; and a justice and peace agenda that involved people locally and internationally including the participation of Jewish peace activists (Ateek 1989, 151–59; 2008, 3–14).

Important Goals of Palestinian Liberation Theology

It is important to remember that Palestinian Liberation Theology was being addressed to a small Palestinian Christian community living in the midst of a larger Palestinian Muslim community all—Christian and Muslim—in urgent need for liberation.

Be that as it may, in order for it to be a theology of liberation, it was important:

- to analyze the context of injustice and oppression as realistically and faithfully as possible (Ateek 1989, 18–49; 2008, 15–48).
- to be anchored in both the Bible and in the reality on the ground (Ateek 1989, 74–150; 2008, 51–150).
- to empower Christians and encourage them to strengthen their faith in the God of justice and love so that they do not lose faith in God in spite of the oppressive occupation (Ateek 1989, 163–88).

- to give the people hope for the future and inspire them to resist the evil through tools that are authentically true to their faith, i.e. through nonviolence (Ateek 2008, 15–34; 95–96; 178–87).
- to emphasize that faithfulness to God and to Jesus Christ meant critiquing and condemning violence from whichever source. (Sabeel Documents 2005; Kairos Palestine 2009)

Essential Themes

The Concept of God

By and large, the people of the Middle East whether Muslims or Christians are people of faith. Ours is not a secular society. With the exception of relatively few, our people possess a monotheistic faith. This is proclaimed by Muslims five times a day from the minarets “There is no god but God. . .” and acclaimed daily at the beginning of Christian liturgy in the various churches: “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”—One God. What the conflict over Palestine had shaken and questioned was the nature and character of God. Is God the God of love and justice? Does God love all people equally? It was, therefore, essential to remind, restore, establish, and affirm the basic nature of God in the midst of the injustice and oppression against the Palestinians. Moreover, it was important to remind Christians that our clear concept of God has come to us experientially through the coming of Jesus Christ. This experience of God through Jesus Christ was handed down through the living Christian community since Apostolic times. It was the living witness of the life, teaching, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Christians wanted to know what God is like they needed to look at Jesus Christ; and if they wanted to have a glimpse of the nature of God, they needed to see what Jesus Christ taught us about God and showed us in his life and relationships with others.

In this way, Jesus Christ becomes the hermeneutic or criterion by which we can measure the authentic word of God for us. Christians need to differentiate between the written word of God, i.e., the Bible, and the living or incarnate Word of God, i.e., Jesus Christ. The living Word helps us discern and interpret the written word.

This means that through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ we have discovered that God is the God of love and mercy, the God of peace and forgiveness, the God of truth and justice. We discovered that

God's love is all inclusive and unconditional regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender. Once we are able to grasp and affirm the nature of the God we believe in, as we have experienced it in the coming of Jesus Christ, we are better able to judge whether what is written in the Bible or what we say or do is authentically of God and in accordance with God's nature, character and will or in accordance with human prejudices and self interest.

Due to the abuse of the interpretation of the Bible by Zionist Jews and western Christians, it seemed mandatory to establish this foundational truth about God's nature. In other words, the confiscation of the land and the expulsion of the Palestinians cannot be justified by biblical text as originating with God because they are contrary to the nature and character of God. Similarly, the violence of the occupation cannot be sanctioned by the God of love and justice. A Palestinian theology of liberation had to begin by an understanding of God. What kind of a God do we believe in? Everything else seemed to hinge on this basic tenet of faith.

Indeed, the Bible and especially the Old Testament contains texts that reflect a violent God. These texts cannot and must not be used as reflecting an authentic concept of God. They reflect a primitive human understanding of God that was discarded, challenged, and overcome even within the Old Testament itself. By using Jesus Christ's life and teachings as a hermeneutic, it is possible to a great extent, to judge whether God is involved or uninvolved in what is happening. It is wrong to transfer, assign, and allocate the crimes and injustices that are committed by the cruelty and evil deeds of human beings to the loving and merciful God. Once this is realized, it is possible to turn to the Bible and look carefully at the use, misuse, and abuse that were happening on a daily basis (Ateek 1989, 77-92; 2008, 72-77).

THE BIBLE

The Bible has been the object of much misuse and abuse; and the need to correctly understand and interpret it is a daunting task that is difficult to attain. We know from the history of the Christian church in various parts of the world, how the Bible has been used to justify many things. In fact, since the Bible is a large book and its writing spans hundreds and probably thousands of years, it is possible to prove anything if one selects random texts. Christians have justified war, slavery, polygamy, discrimination against women and many other evils by appealing to

certain biblical texts. When it comes to the conflict over Palestine, the examples are plentiful. What follows are a few examples that are relevant to our topic:

The Tribal vs. the Universal and the Exclusive vs. the Inclusive

In the conflict over Palestine, the Bible has been at the center of the conflict. If rightly used, it is capable of inspiring people for the work of justice and peace. However, when wrongly interpreted, it can drive people to violence and war. Unfortunately, the Bible, especially the Old Testament has been used to support Israeli injustice, the confiscation of Palestinian land, and their ethnic cleansing. It was clear to me from the beginning of my journey for a theology of liberation that the movement in the content of the biblical books as arranged, moves largely from a tribal and exclusive understanding of God to a gradual inclusive and more universal understanding. Although one can find the universal breaking through the tribal in some of the material, it took hundreds of years and the impact of political events to induce the emergence of the more inclusive concepts (Ateek 1989, 92–102; 2008, 53–56, 67–77).

In such a movement, and due to the propensity of human nature, it is easy for people of every century to mistake the tribal and exclusive as the authentic message of the Bible. This tension between the tribal and universal continues to affect us today. I have tried to show that in my understanding of the Bible, God has always been the loving and inclusive God, but people's understanding of God had to develop and mature over many centuries. This is due to the basic fact that people expressed their faith in God in accordance with their limited knowledge of God and the world around them. Therefore, the movement from exclusiveness to inclusiveness has been very slow.

As an example, I have used the story of the fall of Jericho (Joshua 6). According to the text, it is God who gives the injunction to Joshua to “utterly destroy all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword” (6:21).

“Is such a passage, which is attributed to God, consistent with how God is revealed in Jesus Christ? If not, we must say that it only reveals a human understanding of God's nature and purpose that was superseded or corrected by the revelation in Christ. In other words, such passages are revelatory of a stage of development of the human understanding of God that we must regard, in light of Christ's revelation, as inadequate and

incomplete.” (Ateek 1989, 83) Such passages have been used by Jewish militants to call for the annihilation of the Palestinians. Rabbi Israel Hess of Bar Ilan University stated bluntly in an article that the extermination of the Palestinians is mandated by the Torah (Ateek 1989, 85).

The Nationalist Strands vs. the Prophetic Strands

Similarly, it has been clear to me that after the Exile, one can detect the emergence of three strands that can generally be described as nationalist, law oriented, and prophetic. By the time of Christ, these strands become more pronounced in society. The nationalist strand reflected the human tendency to use the armed struggle and even go to war to defend one's own. While this strand continued to develop and expand until it led to the disaster of AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, there was another strand which emphasized faithfulness to God through observance of the law. At the same time, there was a prophetic strand that was developing emphasizing God's concern for justice and truth as well as concern for the poor and the marginalized in society.

Although the Jewish community decided to abandon the nationalist strand after the second Jewish revolt, I have interpreted the rise of the Zionist movement at the end of the 19th century as a return to the military and nationalist option. The Zionists were ready to use military force to displace the indigenous people of Palestine. The descendants of the Pharisees that emphasized loyalty to Torah developed what later became known as Rabbinic Judaism. Some of those have remained staunch anti-Zionists while others walked the way of Zionism and became strong supporters of the state of Israel (Ateek 1989, 92–100).

I believe that the prophetic tradition was picked up by Jesus who tried repeatedly to draw attention to the essence of the prophetic tradition, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23) (Ateek 1989, 97). This prophetic tradition was picked up by the Church, although at times it strayed from Jesus' message; and many Christian leaders are unwilling today to lift up their prophetic voice against the injustice and oppression of Israel's illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Today, the prophetic ministry of the church should still be one of its greatest priorities (Ateek 1989, 71–73).

Bible and Land

One of the most important aspects of the conflict over Palestine has to do with the theology of land. In fact, if one is looking at the conflict from its religious perspective, the theology of land constitutes the heart of the conflict. Land theology stands at the center of a Palestinian liberation theology. Although I have written much about this topic, I feel I am still barely scratching the surface.

One of the basic biblical and theological texts comes from the Torah itself, the most authoritative part of the Bible for religious, especially Orthodox Jews. The land belongs to God and the people are only strangers entrusted with the land by God: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Leviticus 25:23) (Ateek 1989, 103–9; 2008, 51–66). Although this theological principle is foundational and carries with it the principle of stewardship and responsibility before God, it has been interpreted by Jewish religious Zionists as well as Christian Zionists (Ateek, Duaybis, and Tobin 2005) in a very narrow, exclusive, and particular way to mean the Jewish people alone. This is a good example of how a broad theological principle can be abused through arrogance and ignorance. In primitive times and in various parts of the world, people believed that the land belonged to the god/gods who in turn entrusted it to the king or the tribe/people. This same view is expressed when God commands the ancient Israelites not to encroach on the land of Edom, Moab, and Ammon because God had already allotted it to their distant relatives (Deuteronomy 2:1–23).

In today’s world, Leviticus 25:23 can have a deeper and broader theological implication. The land of Palestine/Israel can be seen as a symbol or a paradigm for the whole world. The whole world belongs to God and every nation is entrusted by God to care for the land given to it. The land must not be defiled or polluted by injustice otherwise it will thrust its inhabitants out (Ateek 1989, 105–9; Ateek and Prior 1999, xi–xv).

The book of Jonah offers us another important example. Written towards the end of the Old Testament period, the writer critiques three exclusive popular theologies of his day, namely, the theology of God, people of God, and land. Jonah makes clear that God is the God of the whole world and has never restricted God’s activities to the people of Israel alone. Moreover, God is the God of love who loves all people and cares for all, even the Assyrians who were perceived as the worst enemies. The prophet Amos, several hundred years before the book of Jonah was

written, had said, "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). Furthermore, God is not concerned only about the "land of Israel" but all lands including the land of the Assyrians that historically destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.

The gifted author, not the prophet Jonah, uses Jonah, an Israelite prophet known for his bigotry and narrow nationalism to drive home to the reader through this allegory, God's inclusive love and care for all people and lands regardless of their race or ethnicity. "God shows no partiality to any culture or nation or race or ethnic group. God's love encompasses all of humanity, not just the people of Jonah" (Ateek 2008, 67-77).

In many ways, the New Testament theology of land follows from that of the book of Jonah. The New Testament moves beyond an exclusive theology of God, people, and land. God is the God who loves all people (John 3:16) and Jesus' ministry is not limited to Jews but is extended equally to Romans, Greeks, Samaritans, Canaanites, and others. The people of God are not limited to the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but extended to all those who believe (John 1:12-13). In Jesus Christ, the whole world is sanctified and God's love and mercy encompass the world.

The Way of Nonviolence

As mentioned earlier, although there are biblical texts that reflect primitive concepts of god and the violence of god, I believe that the central message of the Bible is about nonviolence and peace. I have made this point clear in all my writings because it is crucial for peace (Ateek 1989, 134-38).

It is important to point out that the early Christian community combined two messianic strands, son of David and suffering servant. The son of David strand was important for the early Christians in order to emphasize Jesus' lineage from King David in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies; and the suffering servant strand as expressed by the prophet Isaiah. It is clear to me that although the early Christian community believed that Jesus Christ came from the lineage of David, he did not adopt David's way nor was he inspired by David's actions. Instead, Jesus walked the way of the Suffering Servant through his suffering and death on the cross. The way of King David is the way of violence and war while

the way of the Suffering Servant is the way of nonviolence and peace where the person is willing to submit to suffering rather than to inflict it on others. Jesus was aware of the ideologies and theologies of the various religious and political groups of his day but he chose a different way. What then was the way of Jesus, “1) to stand for justice and truth without picking up the sword—that is, to resist evil without using evil methods; 2) to rise above the ways of the world without abandoning involvement and commitment to the poor and oppressed; 3) to seek the humanity of the oppressor without losing integrity by appeasement or collaboration; and 4) to love and worship God without adhering to a strict and closed religion” (Ateek 2008, 92–103).

Palestinian Liberation Theology rejects violence and critiques the way Christians, after the 4th century, militarized Jesus and moved into Christendom waging wars under the banner of the cross and killing people in the name of Christ. Since the establishment of the state of Israel, the Israeli government has chosen to walk the way of Christendom in their own “Jewishdom.” This is the way of violence and war and can never lead to a permanent peace with security (Ateek 2008, 100–103).

Jerusalem

Although it is possible to address the question of Jerusalem from its political side, I have chosen to lift a vision for its future by the use of several biblical texts. The first two texts come from the OT. Nehemiah 2:19–20 reflects the most exclusive vision for Jerusalem, “. . .but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem.” It is narrow and racist. Psalm 87 on the other hand, represents one of the most inclusive texts in Scripture.

I believe that Psalm 87 critiques the Nehemiah text and offers us a model and a vision that is worthy of Jerusalem. It presents God standing at the gate of the city and welcoming all people of the various ethnic backgrounds including some of the staunchest enemies of the ancient Israelites. All of them are welcomed as having been born in the city and are its citizens, “This one and that one were born in it.” Jerusalem belongs to them all. The significance of this psalm cannot be underestimated. Jerusalem must not be the monopoly of any one country or any one religion (Ateek, Duaybis, and Shrader 1997). It is equally holy to the three monotheistic religions. It must be shared politically and religiously. Psalm 87 can inspire a vision for the sharing of Jerusalem. It is an amazing tribute to an inspired writer who hundreds of years before the coming of Christ

saw the need for an inclusive approach to the city (Ateek 2008, 140–50; *Cornerstone* 2009).

POLITICAL VISION FOR THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT

Palestinian Liberation Theology does not separate the religious from the political. I have always held that we live our life in its comprehensiveness under God. Our life cannot be easily compartmentalized. We are accountable to God in all that we say and do in all aspects of our lives, the political, religious, social, and economic. Life must be lived in faith, and our love of God and neighbor must govern our actions.

How do we see the future of the conflict and the prospects for peace?

THE GENEROUS OFFER OF THE PALESTINIANS:

As we come to the vision for the resolution of the conflict, it is important to point out that since 2002 the Arab league including the Palestinian Authority have introduced a proposal for the resolution of the conflict on the basis of UN Security Council Resolutions. It accepts Israel on over 75 percent of the area of historic Palestine and makes peace treaties with it, provided the government of Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders and allows the establishment of a Palestinian state on the remaining 22 percent of Palestine. Although the Arab league proposal is very generous, Israel did not even consider it because, in essence, it curbs Israel's greed of attaining the vision of a much expanded Zionist dream. This proposal is based on the demands of international law but the international community of nations has lacked the will to enforce such a solution. Yet long before the generous offer of the Arab League, the Palestinians have been stretching out their hands for peace on the basis of the principles of international law.

Since the articulation of a Palestinian Theology of Liberation, Sabeel has made it clear that the one-state solution is the ideal for our small country, one democratic state that gives all of its citizens equal rights and demands equal responsibilities of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian citizens (Ateek 1989, 165).

Although this is the ideal one-state solution, Sabeel has been promoting the two-state solution in accordance with the demands of international law. When *Justice and Only Justice* was published in 1989, the government of Israel was against the two-state solution. In fact, Israel was practically creating a one-state on the ground under its powerful military,

taking advantage of the weakness of the Palestinians and the impotence of the Arab states and the international community. Only in the last two years did the government of Israel begin to talk about a two-state solution, not in accordance with UN resolutions but in accordance with what the government has been carving through its settlement building and the erection of its Separation Wall. In other words, Israel's vision of a two state cannot satisfy the demands of international justice, nor the Palestinian vision for peace. However, in the absence of an international will and the weakness of the American administration, Israel has managed to freeze the international community into inaction while it continues its settlement building and devours Palestinian land.

The two-state solution can still be salvaged but only if the borders of the Palestinian state are those of 1967 as a minimum. This means that any border adjustments must be in favor of the Palestinian state. I have also boldly proposed that, in principle, there should be no objection to allow those Jewish settlers that are willing to live in peace under a Palestinian state to stay and become Palestinian citizens. Jerusalem must be shared and a just solution for the refugees, in accordance with international law, must be found (Ateek 2008, 165–77). Peace based on justice is a realistic possibility if the government of Israel shows willingness to respect and implement the demands of international law rather than impose its own will.

Finally, Palestinian Liberation Theology does not stop with the doing of justice nor with the achievement of peace. It must work for the achievement of reconciliation and forgiveness. There are many people on both sides that are ready to do justice and to be reconciled together in peaceful living (Ateek 2008, 178–87).

KEY THEMES OF PALESTINIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY IN 2011

There are four prominent themes that have been pursued in the development of Palestinian Liberation Theology. Two are recurring themes and two are new ones.

The recurring themes have to do with the use and abuse of the Bible. Due to ignorance and misinterpretation, we must continue to address any biblical abuse, critiquing exclusive theologies, and emphasizing inclusive theologies of God, people of God, and land; as well as the biblical teaching on justice, peace, and nonviolence. Besides continuing to develop

a viable theology of liberation, we have a responsibility to address the liberation of much of the antiquated theologies which our churches have developed or inherited over the last 2000 years (Ateek 2008, 11–14).

A second theme must be the strengthening of the nonviolent resistance movement in Israel-Palestine and the world, especially among people of faith including Muslim and Jewish peace activists. At the same time, we must continue to awaken the consciousness of mainline church members in the West to their responsibility in resisting the evil of occupation and working for a just peace (Ateek 2008, 78–91).

The two newer themes deal with the question of empire which touches on the political and theological aspect of the conflict. (Ateek 2008, 113–14, 148–49) In addressing this, it is clear that it is important to be aware of the place of Israel as an extension of the American Empire. The question of Empire is crucial to peace. It is hoped that Sabeel's 8th international conference, February 23–28, 2011 with its theme, "Challenging Empire: God, Faithfulness, and Resistance" will provide a clearer agenda for pursuing this topic.

Finally, Sabeel needs to strengthen its relationship with the Muslim community especially in the interfaith program that brings together Christian and Muslim clerics. Sadly, many people fear the increasing influence of religious extremists in the Middle East. Islam has been cast as the enemy of the western world and the enemy of freedom and liberation. Islamophobia is a phenomenon that must be addressed. Sabeel has a role to play in tackling the local Christian-Muslim agenda as well as the international one. As Christian Palestinians, we have a responsibility to work with our Muslim brothers and sisters in presenting the true face of Islam. At the same time, we need to work together against extremist Islamists that damage the good relations between our two religions and mar the face of their own religion.

These are key themes that must be dealt with. They touch on politics and religion. At the same time, they are so huge in magnitude that it is difficult to know how best to tackle them in a way that can make a positive difference in our world today. We realize that for empire to exist, it needs an enemy. Unfortunately, Islam has been given that role. There is a great need for Palestinian Muslims and Christians to work together to change western perceptions of both Islam as well as Eastern Christianity (Ateek, Duaybis, and Tobin 2007, 210–20).

IMPACT OF SABEEL

An assessment of the impact of the work and ministry of Sabeel must be left to others, local and international, who have been touched by its ministry and involved in its activities. Such an assessment carries far greater weight and credit than anything produced by “Sabeelers” who can be accused of pretense and exaggeration. Be that as it may, it is possible to say that Sabeel, during its almost twenty years of existence, has made a modest but genuine contribution in the three areas of its work.

Ecumenically, it has transcended denominationalism and brought many Christians of various denominations closer together thus breaking down historical barriers, prejudices, and alienations. Sabeel has provided forums locally and internationally for new biblical and theological reflections and discussions, thus restoring faith and hope for many. Ecumenically, Sabeel has also enhanced women’s empowerment and leadership through their active participation in biblical and theological discussions. Sabeel continues to probe, critique, and promote the best in the culture and faith of Palestinians. It is possible to say that Sabeel has earned the respect of many people in the Palestinian community and its presence and contribution are felt and real.

Sabeel’s branch in Nazareth has had a similar impact in Galilee especially on the level of ecumenical relations bringing Christians closer together. Sabeel promotes equal democracy for all the citizens of the state of Israel—Jews and Arabs—and stands against discrimination. Through joint programs between the Jerusalem and Nazareth branches, Sabeel connects the different communities together reducing isolationism and building their sense of identity and self-confidence.

In this field of ecumenism, Sabeel has only scratched the surface. We are only at the beginning of a long journey.

In Christian-Muslim relations, Sabeel has been successful in cultivating understanding, respect, and acceptance between Christian and Muslim clerics leading to more fruitful relations. There are genuine possibilities for continued cooperation that can bring the two communities closer together and address sporadic communal problems.

Again, in this field of inter-faith or “life together” as Sabeel calls it, we have barely scratched the surface. We are only at the beginning of a long journey.

On the justice and peace level, hundreds of groups come to visit Sabeel Jerusalem and Nazareth every year to learn about the Christian

community of the land as well as the prospects for a just peace. This is in addition to the ongoing work of Friends of Sabeel in various areas of the world that carry on a fruitful work of educating people about the origin and ramifications of the Palestine-Israel conflict and witness to the increasing number of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, locally and internationally that have become advocates for a just peace based on non-violence and the demands of international law. As an example, Friends of Sabeel in the United States have conducted 32 regional conferences over the last seven years with thousands of people participating. Today, Sabeel has clusters of Friends in eleven countries around the world with local leadership that are working as volunteers. Furthermore, Sabeel has organized eight international conferences in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Nazareth with hundreds of participants from around the world dealing with cutting-edge themes that relate to justice and peacemaking. At the same time, Sabeel has circulated statements and messages on a regular basis that deal with theology and politics. One of the important actions is the sending of the “Wave of Prayer” every week to all our friends around the world asking them to pray with us at noon every Thursday when the Sabeel staff and friends join together in their weekly worship in Jerusalem. The “Wave of Prayer” contains the burning issues that we need to lift up to God. The impact of the wave of prayer cannot be underestimated.

In this area, we will continue to labor with God and all people of good-will until justice, peace, and reconciliation are achieved for all the inhabitants of our land—Palestine and Israel. Indeed, Sabeel’s ministry has touched the minds and hearts of many people.

Sabeel continues to provide a response to theological justifications for the Zionist claim to the land of Palestine. Through lectures, workshops, and publications in Arabic and English, Sabeel has provided a forum for clergy and laypeople to engage in active reflections and discussions; thus connecting people’s faith with the reality of their daily lives.

Sabeel will continue to be a movement that “encourages individuals and groups from around the world [and especially in Palestine and Israel] to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action” (Sabeel Purpose Statement, footnote 1).

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