

# An Arab-Israeli's Theological Reflections on the State of Israel After 40 Years

by Naim Ateek<sup>1</sup>

It was with some fear and trepidation that I accepted this invitation. My initial impulse was courteously to turn it down, but I could not say no. The topic intrigued and challenged me, and I felt bound to accept it. So let me begin by saying that I would like to express my gratitude to the Rev. Petra Heldt for this invitation.

## Introduction

I would like to point out two factors which make this presentation important for me:

First, as I worked on this lecture I could not extricate myself from what is going on around me with my people on the West Bank and Gaza. The events of the last ten weeks cannot be taken lightly. The uprising reflects the genuine outcry of some 1.4 million people for the right to self-determination. This outcry is still denied and ignored by those in authority who have the power to offer a solution.

Second, I have lived in Israel since its inception in 1948. Except for ten years which I spent in the United States as a student, I have lived continuously in the State of Israel. There are events in a person's life, and equally in the life of a nation, which leave a tremendous impact that cannot be erased or forgotten. Those events or experiences can, after many years, be recalled, retold and retraced with great precision. The same applies to certain words and sentences which have a great impact on those who hear them, who can recall them almost verbatim after many years. I believe this is the way the Gospels were written: the impact of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, His crucifixion, death

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1. Lecture given to the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel on February 25, 1988. See also Naim Ateek's subsequent book, *Justice and Only Justice* (New York, 1989).

and resurrection, was of such magnitude that the words and events were remembered, retold and finally written down with great accuracy.

Certain events in the lives of the Jewish people have had the same impact. The tragic events of the Holocaust are of that nature. They have been retraced by the survivors with incredible vividness, and have been picked up by Jews everywhere to become a part of the people's historical memory. Millions of non-Jews all over the world have joined the Jews in insisting that such a tragedy should never again be allowed to take place.

The events of 1948 have left a similarly indelible imprint on me and on my people. At the heart of what has been called the Arab-Israeli conflict is the Palestinian problem. The Palestinian problem is the core. Israel has for the last 40 years deluded itself into thinking that its problem is really with the Arab states around it, and that once it is able to achieve peace with them — and it is only a matter of time — the conflict will be resolved. The uprising of the last ten weeks proves that the problem in its core is not the Arab states versus Israel: it is, and will remain, the Palestinian problem. As the Holocaust has become and will continue to be for the Jews that great central event in their history which transformed their being and formed their identity, so it is with the Palestinians and the events of 1948. The Palestinian problem of 1948 which led to the sufferings of the Palestinians — their uprooting, dehumanization, oppression and the denial of their human rights — has become the great central event which occupies their hearts and minds and has formed their self-identity. As the Holocaust lives vividly in the historical memory of the Jewish people, so the tragedy of Palestine lives vividly in the historical memory of the Palestinian people.

For example, I can recall with great detail and precision how my home town Beisan (Beit Shean today) was occupied by the Jews without resistance. Some inhabitants fled out of fear. Many of us, however, stayed in our homes with nowhere to go. Fourteen days later we were ordered at gun-point to leave. We were assured that it would only be for a few days and then we could return. My father begged to stay. He was told, "If you don't get out we will kill you." We left Beisan with only the clothes which we had on, never to return to it.

Some Christian and Jewish scholars have asked whether theology can be the same after the Holocaust. I ask whether theology can be the same after **any** great human tragedy when humans are reduced to less than what God has created them to be. So the past of 40 years ago and the present of the last ten weeks, which makes the 40 years seem only 40 days, make this theological reflection profoundly relevant. It stems from a Palestinian's experience of the State of Israel.

## Theological Principles

There are three significant theological principles which undergird this reflection. I do not want to spell them out in great detail, but I would like to emphasize their importance to me.

## **1. God's Unfailing Involvement in History**

God has never isolated Himself from history. Creation itself expresses God's love and concern. God is very near to us. He is accessible. From a Christian point of view, the ultimate event that illustrates God's concern and involvement in history is the Incarnation. God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit is active in the affairs of people: saving, leading, guiding, encouraging, comforting, warning them and so on.

God's involvement does not minimize human free will and responsibility in and over the created order. The human being has a moral responsibility and God holds us accountable.

## **2. God's Unfailing Demand for Justice**

God demands justice in the world. This demand applies to and for all people everywhere and throughout all history. Abraham Heschel called righteousness "God's stake in human history." In Isaiah 28:17 we read that justice is God's measuring line and righteousness is His plumb line. Because God is a God of justice, He takes His unconditional stand with the oppressed and the neglected, the marginalized and the poor. God will not give up nor will He gloss over injustice. This principle applies to all people whether they know God or not. It is one of God's foundational principles for this universe. He will not abandon it.

## **3. God's Inclusive Character**

In the development of human knowledge of God, it has become evident that God has no favorite people or nation. To be "chosen" is not to be a "favorite." He is inclusive in character. In the biblical tradition this fact was not easily discernable. It grew gradually until it found greater clarity in the Prophets and found its culmination in the Gospels. I believe, therefore, that God does not look at one nation to prefer it over another. He does not employ two standards of judgment. He causes the rain to fall equally on the just and the unjust, on the good and the bad alike.

## **Reflections**

With these principles my basis, I want to reflect on three areas which I have observed and experienced while living in the State of Israel over the last 40 years.

### **Israel, Jesus and Israel's Western Friends**

By any standard of measurement, the physical development and progress of the State of Israel, the rapid creation and growth of new towns, new industry and modern technology, is undoubtedly phenomenal. This, I am sure, has been and is to most Jews the focus of their pride and joy: a vibrant State, pulsating with life and vigor. Most of the progress and development, however, have been the result of billions of dollars which Israel has received in aid from outside. Even so, one could not help but be filled with great admiration for this

modern state and its accomplishment, if it were not for one problem that lies at the core of its foundation and continues to haunt and menace it: the Palestinian problem. For those who do not recognize this problem, Israel must seem a wonderful place.

Among other radical effects, the creation of the State has given rise to a number of interesting phenomena in the relationships of Jews and Christians. Some Jews in Israel — mostly of Western origin — have become free enough within themselves to be able to take a new look at Jesus. They are few in number, but their rethinking is worth noting. Much more needs to be done to dispel the myths, blunders and falsifications which Jews have created against Jesus throughout the centuries. What has been done, to the best of my knowledge, has not filtered down to the grass-roots of Israeli society. Although many Western Christians feel a great affinity with Jews and Judaism and engage in constant dialogue with them, the general and acceptable line of most Jews is that Judaism is basically closer to Islam than to Christianity. This was articulated publicly in an article in *Hamtzan* on September 12, 1985, in which the Director of the Department of Religious Education in the Ministry of Education, Ya-coub Hadain, announced that Jews have more things in common with Muslims than with Christians. Muslims believe in one God like the Jews, while Christians believe in the Trinity, i.e., Father, Mother [*sic*] and Holy Spirit. So, much more needs to be done to break the stereotype and falsification of the Christian faith.

On March 16, 1987, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that the Ministry of Education had issued an order prohibiting schools from using Bibles containing both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testaments). Mati Dagan, Deputy Director of the Religious Education Division in the Ministry, said that the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures should not be taught as if they were equal, because the Hebrew Scriptures come from God and the Christian Scriptures were written by human beings. There is, I am afraid, a deep-seated hatred of Christianity lying just under the surface. I emphasize this because the Christian Church, since the Holocaust, has been doing a lot to undo the great damage and harm which Western Christians have perpetrated against the Jews. If antisemitism is by definition an irresponsible fear and hatred of the Jews, then "anti-crossism" is by definition an irresponsible fear and hatred of Christians. There is very deep evidence of this in history and in the Talmud.

This leads me to say more about Christian-Jewish dialogue. It has brought much fruit in the relationship between Jews and Christians — mainly of Western extraction. I note this as a phenomenon without delving into how far or how deep this journey has taken the two sides. As an observer and sometimes a member of the Consultation of the Church and the Jewish People of the World Council of Churches, I can vouch for the importance of such a relationship of dialogue. Undoubtedly, the existence of the State of Israel has helped Jews to meet their Western Christian counterparts as equals and to confront them on issues of history as well as theology. In many instances past events and theologies were looked at in a fresh way, going much further than simply understanding them in their proper historical contexts to reject them as shameful relics of past histories.

It is very interesting to note that such dialogue groups have never been too successful in attracting the participation of indigenous Christian Arabs. The presence of an Arab partner makes the Jews uncomfortable. The basis of dialogue between Jews and Western Christians since the creation of the State has been three-fold: antisemitism, the Holocaust and the existence of the State of Israel. Once the Western Christian accepts this, dialogue is possible. For Palestinian Christians an additional basis for any dialogue is the admission that injustice has been done to the Palestinians by the Jews, and the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination and the creation of their own state. While these remain denied, the presence of Palestinian Christians only keeps pulling the dialogue back to its unacknowledged basic referent: the Palestinian problem. So their presence is not genuinely desired. Moreover, it is not only the Jews who seem uncomfortable in such meetings; the expatriate Christians are equally uncomfortable. Their primary aim is a Christian-Jewish theological dialogue unhampered by any other issue. The presence of indigenous Palestinians would introduce a whole new agenda which these Westerners are not ready for, and which does not really constitute a priority for them. It serves their purpose well, therefore, if along their journey of dialogue they can find a docile and innocuous Palestinian Christian who will not disturb their agenda while making them look inclusive.

As a result of these interactions of Western Christians and Western Jews, a new Christian theology has risen. With it has arisen a growing number of Western Christian Zionists who seem to be totally dedicated to dialogue and to the support of the State of Israel.

There is, however, at the other end of the theological spectrum, another group which has risen to the defense and support of Israel — the Christian so-called Fundamentalists. These self-styled Evangelicals see in Israel the fulfillment of their eschatological interpretation of certain texts in Scripture. The existence of the State fits in with their concept of the end of times and the Second Coming of Christ. Some in Israel may consider them useful friends both financially and psychologically, but those in Israel who know something about what these Fundamentalists actually believe would, I am sure, abhor and reject them. As part of their biblical understanding of the last events in history is the annihilation of two thirds of the Jews and the Christianization of the last one third.

As a Palestinian Christian, I see these two groups of Western Christians as dangerous and to be rejected **for the sake of the integrity of the Jews**. The first makes itself the champion of the State of Israel and removes Israelis from the general plan of God in history by relegating them to a special and unique role. The second sees the State of Israel as a mere instrument fulfilling God's purpose in history. The first group puts Israel on a pedestal above all others — a very dangerous position for the Jews to be in. The second group makes Israel a tool in a scheme — a means to an end, victims to accomplish an end — an equally dangerous position.

Contrary to appearances, the best friends of Israel are those people who insist on its right to exist but who also possess the freedom and inner integrity to be critical as well as supportive as the occasion arises. Any blind support of Is-

rael, or as a matter of fact of any group of people or any ideology, is dangerous and in the end counter-productive for those receiving such support.

## Israel, Power and Justice

For centuries many Jews in the world have contended that they have a vocation of suffering. Judah Halevi wrote in the twelfth century that Israel — the heart of humanity, the suffering servant — bears the ills of all, and by this very fact allows God to reveal Himself on earth. One of the great rabbinic dicta was, “Be of the persecuted rather than of the persecutors” (Baba Kamma 93a). Sholem Asch cried, “God be thanked that the nations have not given my people the opportunity to commit against others the crimes which have been committed against it.”

The creation of the State has changed all of this. Menahem Begin has boastfully declared, “We fight, therefore we are. Out of blood, fire, tears and ashes a new specimen of human being was born, a specimen completely unknown to the world for over eighteen hundred years — the fighting Jew.” Since 1948 the fighting Jew has become a powerful entity in the State of Israel. When I reflect back on the last 40 years, power stands out above everything else as the one ingredient which has been held as essential for the continued existence of the State. More specifically it is military power that we are talking about.

Theologically and biblically speaking, God is the God of power and might. He is also the God of justice. In God, justice and power are in full harmony and unity. God, who is the source of all power, gives power to humans in order to fulfill His purpose for justice and peace in the world. Power is, therefore, entrusted by God to people; but like all other trusts it can be either used responsibly or abused terribly, it can carry with it a blessing or it can become a curse. Such consequences are not inherent in power itself but in the sinful human condition that puts power to irresponsible use. Power can be used to maintain justice, peace and order in society, or it can destroy it utterly. At its worst, power can be a “poison which blinds the eyes of moral insight and lames the will of moral purpose.”<sup>2</sup>

The possession of power by humans does not necessarily create or guarantee justice. It does in God. For human beings, it is not power that makes justice; justice itself is inherently powerful. This world, contrary to appearances, is governed by justice. This is so because God would not allow it otherwise, and in God both justice and power are harmonized. What is true of God regarding justice and power, however, is certainly not true of human beings. It is very easy for power to corrupt, intoxicate and deceive humans. A good example is found in the “woe” sayings of Micah 2:1–5. Micah is addressing the powerful elite of Judah’s society who had come to see their power as giving them the right to act as they desired. “The source of their dreams is opportunity created by their power. Might has become their right....”

Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil upon their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it because it is in the power of their hand. They

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2. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1960), p. 6.

covet fields and seize them; and houses and take them; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance.

The words of Micah seem remarkably relevant to our own situation today and to our experience with Israel throughout these last 40 years. Powerful modern Israel has been able to carry out, with exact precision, what Micah was warning his audience against. Under the guise of such slogans as national security or national interest, all kinds of injustice have been committed. One can point to a warning in the wisdom literature that illustrates this tendency: "Do not withhold good from those who have a right to it, because it lies in your power to do so" (Prov. 3:27). This verse brings out the extent of the intoxicating effect of power on people.

On the one hand Jews, I am sure, agree that justice is much better than injustice; on the other hand, once in a position of power their sense of justice becomes clouded. As one put it, "What is better for us in our powerlessness is not necessarily better for others when we are powerful."<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, part of the tragedy of the human predicament that justice is not usually given but almost always exacted. The powerful refuse to render justice, and power has to be challenged by power rather than by moral or rational persuasion. And if there is no power to match the power of the powerful and redress the wrong, injustice tends to be perpetuated and intensified.

I believe that Israel has fallen prey to the deception of power, and I would like to highlight two areas in which this is the case. The first is what Reinhold Niebuhr has called "the limitation of the human mind and imagination, the inability of human beings to transcend their own interest...." Human nature is such that, while it is conceivable for persons to consider the rights and needs of their families, relatives and friends, "there are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals which make it impossible for them to grant to others what they claim for themselves."<sup>4</sup> Power becomes a strong weapon for personal or national gain without any consideration for the rights of others. Self-interest or national interest blinds reason and logic.

This is epitomized in the Arab-Israeli conflict over the last 40 years. Many Western Jews have been in the vanguard of the struggle for human rights in the United States. This fact has been seen as stemming from the rich heritage of Judaism and rooted in the ethical teachings of the Prophets. Paradoxically, however, many Jews have lacked the capacity to discern acts of injustice by the State of Israel. Once the injustices are mentioned, they feel threatened and become defensive. They are quick to rationalize and justify those acts of injustice which they would have readily condemned had they been done by any party other than the State of Israel. (I am happy to say that in the last few weeks we have seen real exceptions to this.)

One common rationalization is to point out the great achievements of the State of Israel in raising the educational and economic standards of its Arab citizens in the occupied territories. "The Arabs have never had it so good," it is usually claimed. Israel's generosity and benevolence are supposed to be ad-

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3. R.B. Coote, *Amos Among the Prophets* (Philadelphia, 1981), p. 39.

4. Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 6 and p. 3 respectively.

equate compensation for any inconvenience or injustice which the Arabs feel. The fallacy of this principle lies in the old dictum, "A slave with a full belly is still a slave." People who have suffered from injustice look for justice rather than a higher standard of living.

It is part of the deception of power that Israel is deluded into believing that through benevolence it could lay the right foundation for harmonious relations with the people it rules. What the Palestinians really need is not benevolence but a sense of justice. A sense of justice is the "the produce of the mind and not of the heart. It is the result of reason's insistence upon consistency."<sup>5</sup> However, the ability of reason to be consistent becomes totally inhibited by the intoxication and deception of power. It is far easier for repressive governments and military regimes to resort to philanthropy than to justice. Sympathy and philanthropy in such cases reveal an underlying hypocrisy. The guiding factor is basically the self-interest of the powerful and their unwillingness to render justice to others. National interest can become so strong that **neither democracy nor religion** can be strong enough to guarantee the proper control of power when governments want to pursue their unjust ambitions.

The worst examples of this kind occur when the controlling power pursues an absolute goal. The absolute ideal for many Zionists in Israel is the achieving of a Greater Israel. Conversely, for many Palestinians it is the regaining of the whole of Palestine. Such an absolute cannot be achieved except through the use of force. This would risk the lives of thousands of people while gambling for the attainment of the absolute. Justice has no place in such ambitions; invariably military power will take over and the consequences of that will be unbearable tyrannies and cruelties. When the end in view is an absolute, no questions are raised about the means as long as they lead to the end. Moral and ethical principles are ignored so long as the end is guaranteed.

Some people will argue that such extremism could be checked only by the development of rationality and the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill. The situation in the West Bank and Gaza, which is prompted in part by the religious zeal of those in power, does not substantiate such a theory. Pursuit of the absolute goal negates the possibility of bringing this fanaticism under the domination of reason or conscience. The power of force and coercion are the only instruments that can achieve the ideal. In such cases justice is sacrificed on the altar of force and becomes power's first victim.

The second area I want to highlight is very similar to the first. It has to do with the ability of power to deceive us into believing that our desire for a life of security is possible only if we are able to subjugate and control others. Humans are unlike other creatures. In nature one can observe that animals kill when they are hungry and fight or run when they are in danger, but the human impulse for self-preservation can so easily be converted into the desire for self-aggrandizement. The will-to-live becomes transmuted into the will-to-power.

The understandably strong will-to-live of the Jews, after centuries of dispersion, has found expression in the creation of the State of Israel. Some would at-

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5. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

tribute such a phenomenon to the instinct of survival in human beings. This survival instinct, however, has the propensity to develop imperialistic ambitions. Its defensive armor becomes aggressive armor. Its will-to-live becomes its will-to-power. The human spirit experiences a curious mixture of the fear of extinction and the love of power. Once power is attained, the individual or group finds itself in a sensitive position because it believes that its security can be maintained only by the extension of its power. This is translated into the acquisition of new territory and the subjugation of its inhabitants. In this way, temporary peace might be achieved but is always an uneasy and shaky peace, because it is an unjust peace. It has not been attained by the implementation of justice but imposed by the power of the stronger party. It can last only until those who are weak become powerful enough to challenge that power. As Niebuhr put it, "The same power that prompts the fear that prevents immediate action, also creates the mounting hatred which guarantees ultimate rebellion."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the danger of impending conflict looms continuously.

In summary, it is important to re-emphasize the theological dimension of the extent of power's ability to deceive and to delude. People who have power, and wield it whenever they choose, usually confuse themselves with God. Theologically speaking, this becomes the greatest danger and menace in the abuse of power to those who wield it. It is idolatry in its starkest form, and human beings can so easily fall prey to this kind of idolatry. It is, therefore, my duty as a Christian not only to call attention to this basic danger but to expose its underlying fallacies. The ambiguity, deception and corruption of power must be exposed because power becomes a god that is worshipped and obeyed. Furthermore, the demands of power escalate daily. We see this here in the way that the occupying power has to increase its coercive power in order to maintain control. The god of power increases its demands and eventually heaps destruction on its user.

It is my contention that when such dangers have been recognized and faced squarely, we can hope that positive moves can be made to achieve justice for all the inhabitants of our area, including justice for the Palestinians, and that people will be able to live together in reasonable harmony because power will be used as little as possible and as non-violently as possible. Only thus can the destruction of millions, and the collapse of whatever justice and peace has been achieved, be prevented.

## **Israel and the Land**

From the point of view of an Israeli Arab, the creation of the State of Israel has not solved the Jewish problem which I recognize as serious and vital. The two outstanding menaces for the Jews have been assimilation and antisemitism, neither of which has really been solved. In an article in 1986, Prof. Roberto of the Hebrew University pointed out three worrying factors for the Jews, namely their low birth rate, mixed marriages (50% of all Jewish marriages are mixed), and assimilation. Equally, antisemitism has not subsided. The new factor in antisemitism today is that it is promoted and provoked by Israel itself: Israel

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

cannot blame the world for it. Israel cannot intimidate people and generate in them bitterness and hatred and at the same time hope to reap peace and understanding.

After 40 years, less than one fourth of the Jews of the world today live in Israel. Their presence in the Land has not solved either of their two great problems, nor has it given Israel a greater sense of peace and security. Israel has failed to create peace with its neighbors, and it is perceived by many people in the world as a land-hungry war-monger.

For me, the whole issue of the Land must begin with a theological discussion on 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? No, God does not change. He 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 the Land had to be shattered. Early in their history, the Israelites thought that God was confined to the borders of the Land, that He did not operate outside it. It was difficult for them to conceive how they could pray 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. He had intimate knowledge and grave concern for what was going on in the neighboring countries — Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, as well as Judah and Israel. The narrow, land-bound concept of God was finally shattered by the Babylonian captivity. There the Israelites had to learn that God is not confined to one land.

In fact some of the great, if not the most important, events in the ancient Israelites' history took place outside the boundaries of the Land: the Exodus, the giving of the covenant and the giving of the Torah. The greatest prophet of Judaism, Moses, never set foot in the Land. The great Babylonian Talmud was put together outside the Land. Among the greatest prophets were those like Isaiah of the Exile who prophesied outside the Land. Jeremiah finished his ministry in Egypt. Ezekiel finished his ministry in Babylon.

One can go on and on to show from the biblical material how often limited, wrong and narrow people's understanding of God had been: it had been tribal and provincial. It took them hundreds of years to realize that He is not simply the greatest god among other gods, that He is not exclusively **their** God, but that He is the only true God and the God of the whole world. Throughout their history the Israelites kept fluctuating between holding a narrower and a broader concept of God, between acknowledging an inclusive or exclusive character of God. Indeed, one can point to different strands within the biblical material which emphasize one or the other, the nationalistic or the universalistic concept of God.

For me, there is no doubt that the universalistic concept of God, which has developed in spite of the resistance which it encountered, is the higher concept of God. I say this not because it suits my Palestinian purpose, 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, just in all His ways, inclusive in His nature. One cannot deny the existence of the nationalistic strand within the Hebrew Scriptures, but one can point to the development of a strong universalistic trend reflected in the work of Isaiah of the Exile and the book of Jonah.

The State of Israel has to choose — or has it already chosen the nationalistic trend? Obsession with the Land has proven throughout ancient Jewish history a curse and a holocaust to the Jews. For it is not the Land which carries a blessing to the people but faithfulness to the God of justice, righteousness and mercy. This Land has been singled out as host to great events in history, but I do not believe that it is 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 but 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 spoke to Moses to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground, it was in Sinai and not in Canaan (*Eretz Yisrael*).

I return to my insisting 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 puts his heart and mind on this Land, he will be cursed and the Land will vomit him out: witness the experience of 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 and whose nature does not change — a God of justice for all, the God who desires goodness and mercy for all people living in this and every land.

Some Bible scholars have been working on a new understanding of a pattern of biblical poetry known as “chiasmus” or “inverted parallelism” which they believe occurs frequently in the prophetic literature. They observe literary patterns in some of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures where the theme of the lines or stanzas are repeated later in the text in an inverted order. One of these texts is Isaiah 43:25–44. I have been told by a friend, Dr. Kenneth Bailey, a Bible scholar who has been working on this for the last ten years, that the great prophet whom we call Isaiah of the Exile arrived at the remarkable discovery that the promise of God to the people after the exile is not about land and nationhood but about the outpouring of God's Spirit on the people. Isaiah's great theological breakthrough lies in his realization that it was no more the Land that was significant — God's concern was with the people on whom God's Spirit had been poured out. It is this fact which makes sense of another striking fact: the great prophets were never reluctant to tell the people that they could lose the Land.

What I am trying to say is this: if the State of Israel clings to this obsession with the Land, it will only heap destruction on itself and on all the people living in this land. The blessing will only come when Israel transcends the narrow concept of a nationalistic God and arrives at the more universalistic concept of God. For its own survival, Israel and Jewry must recognize that this God is the God of the whole universe who loves and cares for all peoples, the God

who desires justice and mercy. Their and our salvation in the 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 to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (6:8)

## Conclusion

I believe that the last 40 years have made many Palestinians accept the existence of the State of Israel, and they are willing to live with it. Does Israel accept the legitimacy of the rights and needs of the Palestinians for their own state? This is the crux of the matter. If Israel is genuinely seeking peace with security, it will have to look to the Palestinians. Put bluntly, only the Palestinians can give Israel security. I believe they want to do it. Likewise if the Palestinians want peace with justice, I believe that only Israel can give it to them.

If this longed-for peace, security and justice is to be achieved for **either** people, for **both** peoples, many Israeli attitudes toward the Palestinians must change. In the words of the Preamble to the UNESCO constitution, "Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."

## Discussion

**Petra Heldt:** I would like to thank you, Dr. Naim Ateek, for these very outspoken words. I am not sure if I speak for all of us, but I would just like to say that some of the words you chose to share with us tonight were against the love of the Jewish people which a number of us here have, and against the Jewish tradition which many of us regard as the roots of our Christian tradition.

**Malcolm Lowe:** Many of us are grateful for the challenge which you brought to us and are thankful that you spoke despite fear and trepidation. You have given us a very serious challenge, and if it is permitted we might challenge you as well, because many of the members of the Fraternity belong loosely to one of the two groups you mentioned — maybe not Christian Zionists, but at least Christian sympathizers with the State of Israel.

Certainly there is a danger in this group to which many of us belong, of over-emphasizing certain themes in the Bible, especially the ones which concentrate on Israel. Themes which, of course, the Fundamentalist group takes to a greater extreme. However, while it is correct to say, as you did, that in the Bible there is an increasing universalization, it is not necessarily in a straight line, as the promises made to Noah are already universal. I think it is not right to say that eventually the Bible becomes wholly universal in the New Testament, because there one sees also that the promises from God that start with Abraham and go to the Jewish people are eventually brought to the whole world through Christ. Yet even in the New Testament there is a strong emphasis on the particularity of Israel, whether in the saying of Jesus Himself that He was ordered to go first to the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Mt. 15:24, cf. 10:6), or in Paul. In Romans 9 there is an acute case when Paul lists the special privileges of the Jewish people in verses 4–5: "...theirs are the

adoption, the glory and the covenants, the giving of the Law, the worship and the promises; theirs are the Patriarchs and from them, according to the flesh, is the Christ." And Paul can certainly not be regarded as a blind admirer of the Jewish people. On the contrary, he expressed great criticism of them and of their understanding of keeping the Law, which he regarded as a divine gift.

One finds especially in Paul an attempt to weave these different strands in the Bible, and he refuses to choose: either we must take the universalistic strand or the nationalistic one. Paul tries to find some kind of balance or dynamic in which both are given a certain place. One may be stronger than the other and they may exist uneasily together, but at least there are two strands. He does not want to abolish one.

You are right to say that the danger among Christian Zionists, and even more among Christian Fundamentalists, is that they tend, in their love for Israel, to abolish one of these strands. But equally it is the tendency among Palestinian Christians — not merely in your lecture — that they wish to abolish the other one and say that everything is universal and forget the other strand. I think all of us are challenged to find a way to keep and not forget either strand, even if we give greater preference to one. If we do not face the challenge, then we are telling the Bible what we will accept from it and what not, according to our political stands. To excise either of these two great themes, which run through the whole Bible from the first book to the last, is to abolish the biblical foundation of our faith.

It is true that the Prophets had universalistic themes, and yet they talk almost exclusively of Israel. I mean they apply these themes in their discussions of Israel and very much less to other peoples. The Babylonian Talmud, of course, was written in Babylon, but the connection of Judaism to the Land of Israel is one of its most frequent concerns, invalidating the inference you wished to make. It seems to me there is a danger in those who have taken the plight of the Palestinians to heart, to try to abolish the other strand — instead of trying to find a way of giving it at least a limited place.

We know that the Anglican Church in New Zealand has a new prayer book in which it decided to censor the Psalms and to remove all the references to Zion and to Jerusalem. They even claimed, wrongly as I know, that they were following the example of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem. Some people came to me and asked: "What is this, do Arab Anglicans have a prayer book in which they have thrown out all the Psalms that mention Zion?" I took the trouble to look at the Arabic prayer book used in the Anglican Church here and I found it is a Book of Common Prayer and everything is translated in full, even the Magnificat. About fifty of the Psalms have been dropped out, but by no means all the Psalms which mention Zion and Israel.

However, even in this case one could ask, how does one use such a book? We know that there are Christian Palestinian churches here which do not use the Magnificat because Israel is mentioned, and there are ones who just cannot use those Psalms which mention Israel. I think this is a very difficult challenge. I can understand if Palestinians fail to meet it, because we live in an

area where theology is not something for the classroom and churches where people come to worship. But to understand this is not to accept it.

In the prayer book of the Arab Lutherans here, however, "Israel" and "Zion" have indeed been removed systematically from the Psalms. Only one mention of "Zion" survived, presumably by an oversight.

**Ateek:** Just briefly, personally, I believe that the nationalistic strand is mentioned in the Bible and it is the more natural one for people. I can prove from a serious study of the New Testament that it becomes less and less important, and I realize that in Jewish-Christian dialogue the whole emphasis has been placed on Paul and Romans 9–11. If you take Paul on the whole in his writings it is quite different. I believe that from a theological understanding of God one can see that a nationalistic strand should remain. In the New Testament this nationalistic strand existed, yes, but it was always shattered by people. In the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, in Luke 4, He shattered it and they tried to throw Him out of the country, out of Nazareth, because He shattered the nationalistic strand. You can see it throughout the Gospel. I can see it in my reading of the Gospels. In the Acts it was shattered continuously, in Ephesians, the great epistles, any nationalistic strand is shattered. Maybe this is what needs to be done.

We are approaching the Scriptures with our own spectacles. But I believe that on the whole, out of our understanding of the nature of God, we can never, never, even if it is written in the Bible, accept, if He is God, that He has favorites. This is the way people have viewed God, but they were wrong. God was always forcing them to see things in a different way — a more universal way. You can see this development, this progressive revelation. I am sorry if others see it differently, but I believe, personally, that this is the higher concept of God. If you accept the nationalistic strand as being still valid, fine, that is your privilege, but I personally would not accept it at all from the basis of the biblical development of the universalistic strand.

**Bruno Hussar:** I thank you very much Dr. Ateek for what you said, and also Malcolm, who answered most of the questions of many of us. These very important questions cannot be solved in a few minutes, for they are very complex and not as simple as they seem. I think the trend that Malcolm spoke about is not nationalistic. It is something else. As to the nature of God, I have not yet managed to know what is the nature of God. He has not revealed it to me yet. I know that God is God and He is so much above what I think, it may be a surprise. But I know, of course, that He is the God of love.

I just want to contribute some small information about the country. I very much agree with what you said about power and those who use it and who believe in it — I should say that is half of the people of Israel. Half of it, because Israel is a democracy, a very imperfect democracy. In this country we can have enormous demonstrations of Peace Now and other movements. We can have very constructive works for peace, such as Neve Shalom, to which I belong, who are very much against that policy of power, and who are very much for the freedom of Palestinians to determine their own future. In the same way they are happy that Jews have the freedom to determine their own future.

I specially want to say a word about the Jewish group in Israel that seems to bring together the two trends about which Malcolm spoke. It is the movements Oz veShalom and Netivot Shalom, composed of Orthodox religious Jews who do, of course, believe in the promise that God gave this land to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their sons, not to Esau or Ishmael. They say: believe in that, but only if you believe in what is more important in the Torah. In the Torah the most important things are the respect for human life and the respect of the stranger living in your midst. If, in order to implement our rights to this land we have to suppress one single human life, we had better come to negotiations to share this land in order to save the lives. I think this is the most logical movement in this country, because it maintains that theological Jewish vision which I think has some basis to believe in and the humanistic aspect of the problem.

**Ateek:** Thank you. Regarding one thing that you mentioned: One of the great quotations in the Old Testament is that of Ezekiel 47:21–23. Let me read it to you:

Thus says the Lord God: You shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as natural born sons of Israel. With you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the alien resides, there shall be assigned him his inheritance, says the Lord God.

Jews can take this if they want to. It begins with “Thus says the Lord.” If they will accept this, then it means that the aliens and the children of Israel should inhabit the land. My problem with the text, at least within its own context as I understand it, is that in today’s context I do not consider myself an alien. This is the Holy Land. But I accept it in its own context, and if you look at it in its own context, then it means that both the alien and Israel should inhabit the land.

**Pierre Lenhardt:** I would like to thank Dr. Ateek for these conclusions which are a very great opening for peace, if everyone is ready to do justice and accept the other. This is very courageous at such a time. But I do not agree with his assumption that God wants us to give up the theology of the election of Israel. As you know, the election has no direct link with the political or nationalistic right of today. You have Jews who believe and say in prayer that God has elected them out of love who are in the State of Israel and are loyal to the State of Israel. There are other Jews who are against the State of Israel and are saying the same prayer about the election of Israel. If we said that Palestinians should accept the reality of the Jews and justice on both sides, I think they could accept the Jews, they would both find themselves as elected peoples, since that election has no necessarily political consequences now. That might be my position as a Christian. I thank God for the election, because the election is the way of showing love. If you love somebody you start with something and then you come from the center to the end, and I could quote here a very beautiful anonymous tradition in Israel that says: Through the election given to Israel, God shows His love for everybody. If God is able to love somebody by election, then I can be sure that He loves me too in Je-

sus Christ. I am happy with it. It's a better guarantee that way. Thus I do not see a contradiction between the election theology and the problem of today.

**Joseph Stiasny:** My question is not exactly answered. Of course, I have enjoyed very much your lecture, but I am against prophets and for problem-solving agencies.

You spoke of the Prophets. Of course, in a given context I have nothing against prophecy and I even admire the Prophets. What interests me in the Prophets is that they are speaking against their own people. What I have never understood is that we could enjoy this prophetic claim against Israel while reading the Scriptures of Israel. It does not solve problems because we know that there is only one way to solve problems today — the non-blaming way. We have to use channels of communication, of dialogue which are always non-blaming, because otherwise people will react exactly the same way — they will blame you, so it is a merry-go-round and there is no end to it. I like very much Neve Shalom, all the people who say little and work, because you must always sit down and say: "How can we solve this problem?" So I am praying that people like you and people I know in Israel will sit down and talk to each other. Even God said once in Scripture "Now let's sit down, let's talk."

**Ateek:** Thank you for your comment. In the Scriptures the Prophets did not always speak about the problems of their own people. A person like Amos, before he spoke about the sins of Israel and Judah, he recalled the sins of all the countries around, because God is concerned about everyone and whenever there is wrong or evil it is the duty of human beings who know God, are called by God, to address those issues. You do not have to be a native of South America or South Africa in order to address the problem there. You can be a prophet and talk about the sins of South Africa now, even if you are not a South African. I believe that the Old Testament and this prophetic tradition is part of my heritage as a Christian.

Secondly, I believe that at this time of history we need prophets, because I do not see anything happening. This is the proper time for prophetic ministry. When people see evil or wrong or injustice, they should have the guts to speak out. My problem with Neve Shalom and others is that though it is nice for people to sit together and work for peace, many times they do not address the real issues underneath. When Arabs, Jews and Christians get together, I want them to address the core issue, which is that injustice has been done. I have no problem with the Jew or the Muslim — we are all human beings created by God. But do people in these places really say that Israel has done injustice to Palestinians? I do not hear it. Maybe they do.

**Hussar:** We held a demonstration with placards under the Prime Minister's window.

**Ateek:** Then you are prophets. Thank you.

**Peter Du Brul:** I would like to continue with the question that Malcolm brought up on universality and particularity. You spoke of universality and universalization and nationalism. I prefer to hold on to particularity. It might have a nationalistic face or it may be anti-nationalist, but it is particular and

it seems that in our research and in our discovery of categories that are helpful and advance the issue and perhaps close in even on solutions, I think it is very important for you from your position not to just hold on to universality as a solution, for you are also speaking from a particular point of view to other people with their particular point of view, and they should never give up that particularity. Neither Jews nor Palestinians should give up their particularity and their nationalism. That is why, I think, Father Bruno has put his finger on something very important in that we do not understand God and that God tempts us, He tries us, He provokes us. He does use particular peoples at particular times.

Abstracting now from the particular election — a unique election of the Jews. He is playing big games with us. What game is He playing with us now? Do we have as much faith as Abraham when he believed in God even when God asked him to sacrifice his only son? How can a living God ask us to kill? There is a paradox then, but that is the kind of mystery we are up against. He is a living God. Sometimes He appears nationalistic and sometimes universalistic. What is He up to? Not only that, He is unique and I think that is a category we have not used enough. It comes up especially with the notion of the unique election of Israel by God. That is, He is a unique God. He is not just universalizing or particularizing. He is one. If God made a unique election of Israel, if He likes that kind of relationship, is it not possible that God is trying to make that kind of unique election of other peoples? Is He calling other peoples into unique elections? Which means that nobody else can enter into it? I mean that no gentile can ever understand what it is to be a Jew. It is something unique. Also, I do not think any Jew or Armenian or Copt can understand what it is to be a Palestinian who is aware that God is also calling him in election. God might be calling us, but are we responding? It takes two to make the election, the covenant.

Are we aware, particularly as leaders of people, that God can be calling a people to an election? Then let us be faithful to it. For God is more vast and much more mysterious and vital than we are giving Him credit for. He is sometimes nationalistic and He can destroy the very nation that He has raised up. But, behind all that vacillation and vitality, He is trying to get at the core of the people, where it chooses and holds on to that election. This selective capacity is both in God and in the people.

**Ateek:** In Scripture, one of the Prophets says (Amos 3:7) “Are you not to me, O children of Israel, as the children of the Ethiopians?” “Did I not bring the Philistines from...,” and so on — amazing! I agree with you. God calls. Israel responds. But it is not as if God is not electing other nations who did not respond ... these people responded. But if God is God — and I do not differentiate between the God whom I have come to know through Jesus Christ and the God of the Old Testament — if God is really God, then He has from the very beginning tried to reach people. These people have responded. Personally, I do not accept that God vacillates between being nationalistic and being universalistic. He cannot. It is people who vacillate in their understanding of God. This is what I have come to discover in the Scriptures. Because I do not begin by looking at Scripture. I begin from this theological

principle — who is God? That is why I cannot accept that He appears sometimes nationalistic and at other times universalistic. Every time He appears nationalistic, in my interpretation, it is the people who thought that He was nationalistic. He cannot be. At least this is my discovery in looking at the Scriptures, because I begin with Jesus Christ and then from there I begin to look backwards and forwards and it makes sense to me.

Yes, in the beginning Israel had responded and was elected because it responded to the call. Through Christ the call has been to the whole world and now everybody — hopefully more and more people from every nation — have responded to the election of God. So we have all been elected. This is the way I would respond.

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