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ABSTRACT

When analyzing the Israel-Palestine conflict, one may be tempted to focus solely on the political and historical situation of the geographic land. However, it is also important to consider the deeply embedded religious traditions of the area. When doing so, one will come across Christian Zionism, an impediment to peace. Some of the most prominent voices find validation for their narratives and actions through Christian Zionism. Zionism, in all forms, is an ideology that anchors Jews to Eretz Yisrael, the land of Biblical Israel. Some forms of Zionism include a system of balancing accumulations of land, resources, and wealth with the displacement of Palestinians. This belief that the Jews have a divine right to the accumulation of land and resources legitimizes Zionism in their conquering of the past-legitimate Palestine. Thus, as Palestinian scholar Edward Said states, Zionism is an imported ideology in which Palestinians “pay and suffer” (Said, 1978).

Christian Zionism consists of a variety of beliefs that promote and protect the Israeli state and government, while also dehumanizing the Palestinians and equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. As a result, Christian Zionism is a challenging obstacle, one that is necessary to overcome to establish peace. Therefore, due to Christians being called to live peacefully (Colossians 3:15), the Christian tradition must seek and adhere to an alternative theology to Christian Zionism. Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology is a relevant way to interpret Scriptures based on the Christian tradition of peace found in the Old and New Testaments. Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology disputes dual-covenant theology and dispensationalism, two characteristics of Christian Zionism, while focusing on liberating the Palestinian from the oppression under the Israeli occupation. Therefore, Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology provides a workable road to peace, while Christian Zionism is solely a road block.

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIAN ZIONISM IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Although many have claimed that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a continuation of an ancient religious dispute, this is simply not true (Tessler, 1994). Contrary to the common narrative that war has always raged in the Middle East, one can pinpoint the beginning spark of conflict between the Israelis and Arabs to a century ago and, more specifically, November 2, 1917. On this day, Arthur James Balfour signed the Balfour Declaration, inspired by a surge in “national consciousness, aspiration, and development [...] providing an intellectual backdrop, inspiration and guide” (Morris, 2008). This momentous document stated, “His Majesty’s [King George V] government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of that object” (Balfour, 1917). Thus, Palestinian land was compromised and promised to Jews for a Jewish home. As a result, this declaration led to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Started by the Balfour Declaration, a chronic disease of conflict spread throughout Arab-Jewish relationships. Prior to the Declaration, Arabs and Jews lived in relative peace yet after 1917, violence spiked between Jewish settlers and Arabs (Morris, 2008). In 1920, the intercommunal conflict in Mandatory Palestine began due to violent Zionism and Arab nationalism, prodded along by the influence of international foreign

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influences, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. Central to this conflict was the ideology of the right to the land. Although the Arabs had been in the land since the Ottoman Empire overtook Israel in the early 6th century, Palestine was not recognized as a nation-state. Therefore, as with the Zionist phrase, “a land without a people, for a people without a land,” the presence of the Arabs was ignored.

The conflict between the Arabs and Jews rose to an all-time high in 1948. For the Israelis, 1948 is a year of celebration leading to their Declaration of Independence. The War of Independence, also known as the War of Liberation, celebrates the victory and creation of the modern state of Israel based on Zionist ideals. Influential in early discussions of conflict, Chaim Weizmann claimed 1948 is remembered differently in Israel Proper and Occupied Palestine (McDowall, 1987). Palestinians have come to refer to 1948 as the Nakba, the catastrophe. The Nakba refers to the more than 700,000 Palestinians expelled from their homes through the conquest and destruction of the war (McDowall, 1987). This War of 1948 was the “inevitable result of more than half a century of Arab-Jewish friction and conflict” (Morris, 2008). As a result of the war, Israel maintained the territory granted to them by the United Nations, gained nearly 60% of conquered Palestinian land, and occupied the remaining land in the West Bank and Gaza (Morris, 2008).

In 1987, the Holy Land saw another wave of violence due to organized Palestinian uprisings and boycotts protesting against the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The Israeli government responded quickly and violently through house raids and shootings. After six years of attacks, 1,162-1,204 Palestinians died (compared to the 160 Israeli killed) (Nasarallah, 2013). Despite major losses, the Palestinians received the right of self-government and the Palestinian Authority was established via the Oslo Accord (Cronin, 2012).

The Oslo Accord was “heralded as the beginning of a new era in the Middle East peace process” (Gopin, 2002). However, peace was short-lived. In 2000, a second wave of Palestinian uprisings began the Second Intifada in response to the breakdown in Oslo peace negotiations (Marton, 2004). This intifada included extreme use of military force by the Israelis, which was incomparable to the actions of the Palestinians. While the Palestinians would host demonstrations and throw stones, the Israeli government would respond with tear gas and bullets. “During this period, Israel’s tendency to believe in, and rely on, power intensified to a toxic level. Israel’s enormous military arsenal (endlessly renewed by the US) reinforces their reliance on the use of force” (Marton, 2004). Due to the extreme violence, the Second Intifada saw higher casualties, an estimated 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis (Terrorism, 2014). Despite protest from the United Nations, a large separation wall was built between Israel proper and occupied Palestine as a result of the conflict’s resolution in 2005. This wall drew new boundaries diverging severely from the Green Line boundaries established in 1967.

Since 1967, violence has continued through numerous attacks carried out by both populations. This violence is fueled, in part, by Christian Zionism, which contributes by inspiring funding and support for the Jewish State. Understanding Christian Zionism’s implication in the Middle East violence is particularly important for the United States, which houses the largest population of Christian Zionists in the world. As a result, American Christians must take seriously the threat of Christian Zionism and, therefore, consider alternatives, such as Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology. With the largest Christian Zionist population in the United States, it is critical for the United States to understand Christian Zionism and the role they play in the conflict. U.S. Christians must reevaluate and adopt another theology, in order for peace discussions to be successful.

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CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

Christian Zionism's rise to public awareness began with the formation of a Protestant America, where many prayed fervently for a restoration of a Jewish homeland, in order to usher in a new era of religious flourishing and vibrancy. There are more than 45 million active Christian Zionists in America, with the Assembly of God and the Southern Baptist Convention drawing the largest numbers (Harris, 2008). Many influential Christian Zionists leaders set up base in America, including Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. These dedicated Christian Zionists work to maintain and preserve Jewish control over Israel-Palestine.

Christian Zionism comes in many configurations, but the real-world effects of its varied forms are clear and devastating. Christian Zionism has contributed to the destruction and death of many Palestinians suggesting that Christian Zionism's theology is inimical to violence. Sadly, many arrive at Christian Zionism because they are unaware of any alternative theologies or other perspectives than the one their church teaches. Thus, they are unaware to the plight of the Palestinians.

Other Christian Zionists draw on the theology of dispensationalism. Popularized by Cyrus Scofield, dispensationalism states the Jewish return to Israel will begin the end times. This eschatology rests on creating a divide between the Christian Church and the Jewish people. Focused primarily on the Book of Revelation, Dispensationalists believe God's divine plan for the Church and the Jewish people are separate, but correlated (Woodbridge, 2006). A part of this plan is the reestablishment of the state of Israel as interpreted from Ezekiel 37:21-22:

Then say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms (NRSV).

Dispensationalists believe God's fulfillment of the Jewish covenant, including securing a nation, will lead to God's fulfillment of the Church's covenant. In doing so, dispensationalists believe this will be a precursor to the end times and establishment of a new Heaven.

Another group of Christian Zionists adheres to dual-covenant theology. The tenants of dual-covenant theology include the belief that the Old Covenant, contained in the Old Testament, is an active covenant for the Jewish people, while the New Covenant of the New Testament pertains only to Gentiles. The terms of the Old Covenant include Eretz Yisrael, the Biblical land of Israel, granted to the Jews unconditionally by God. As a result, dual-covenant followers do not view Israelis as the occupiers, but as the rightful owners of Israel-Palestine (Kaplan & Cantz, 2014).

Lastly, Christian Zionists may also connect to post-Holocaust theology. Post-Holocaust theology states that the world owes the Jews the land of Israel out of repentance for the Holocaust. Following the Holocaust, the Christian Church struggled to amend their theology to rid itself of obvious anti-Semitic literature. As a result, unquestioning support of Israel arose. In a process of repentance for past actions and inactions against the Jews, unwavering support of Israel is justified (Braverman, 2009).

Regardless of the reason, Christian Zionists share a call to work towards preserving the land of Israel. Based on an interpretation of Genesis 12:3a "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse," Christian Zionists believe their work will bring great reward. Although Christian Zionists have their own reasons for supporting Israel, their efforts are in turn encouraged by the Israeli government who

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supports and encourages Christian Zionism through the International Christian Embassy, which seeks to engage international Christians in activism supporting Israel's maintenance.

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In response to Christian Zionism, Rev. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem, pioneered Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology. This theology seeks to challenge Zionism through an emphasis on justice and nonviolence, which is manifested in creative resistance. Raheb and other faith leaders use this theological perspective to challenge the Jewish divine right to Israel, asking questions such as, "What is the promised land?" and "Are God's chosen people solely based on ethnicity?" Rev. Munther Isaac, the Academic Dean of Bethlehem Bible College, has dedicated his career to studying Christian Zionism and Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology. As a result, Munther believes in a one-state solution. In his book *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth*, Munther states the land must be shared in order for peace to be achieved. This peace is possible only if one allows for the idea of divine right extending to all people. By emphasizing the universality of divine right, Munther challenges Christians to advance peace by being Good Samaritans and refusing to turn a blind eye to Palestinians and their equal claim to the land.

Leading the advance of Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology in the United States is Rev. Walter Brueggemann, a pastor and Old Testament scholar. In his book *Chosen? Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Brueggemann argues Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology is the most peace-producing biblical interpretation of texts regarding Israel and is the way for modern Christians to react to the Arab-Israeli dispute. Brueggemann expands his argument by addressing questions Christians face when considering the role of Zionism, such as God's land covenant in the Old Testament and the conditionality of the land holding. Thus, Brueggemann challenges Christians to become advocates for human rights by moving beyond a place of ignorance and seeking an in-depth understanding of the conflict from the sides of all involved.

Many churches in the United States are responding to the call of Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology. The first denomination to respond was the Reformed Church in America in 2004. The Reformed Church declared the ideology of Christian Zionism an "extreme form of dispensationalism" and a "distortion" of the Biblical message (RCA, 2004). With growing agreement, the National Council of Churches called a workgroup to examine the topic of Christian Zionism. In 2007, the National Council of Churches released a statement condemning Christian Zionism:

The theological stance of Christian Zionism adversely affects: justice and peace in the Middle East, delaying the day when Israelis and Palestinians can live within secure borders relationships with Middle Eastern Christians relationships with Jews, since Jews are seen as mere pawns in an eschatological scheme relationships with Muslims, since it treats the rights of Muslims as subordinate to the rights of Jews interfaith dialogue, since it views the world in starkly dichotomous terms (NCC, 2017).

After the release of this statement, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Church of Christ declared their denunciation of Christian Zionist theology. The last to join in 2017 was the Mennonite Church USA, releasing a statement criticizing Christian Zionism and empathizing with the Palestinian experience.

Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology refutes all three positions of Christian Zionism, dispensationalism, dual-covenant theology, and post-Holocaust theology. While dispensationalism creates a divide between the Christian Church and the Jewish people, Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology analyzes

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the Old Testament to show how dispensations are replaced by a New Covenant. In this New Covenant, grace is found reconciling all to God and removing divisions. In Galatians 3:28, this New Covenant is described: “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). Additionally, Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology refutes the dual-covenant of Christian Zionism by including all under one covenant, instead of separating Jews and non-Jews. By doing so, both Israelis and Palestinians have an equal right to the land and the Israelis have no right to discriminate against the Palestinians. Lastly, post-Holocaust theology is debunked. Palestinian Liberation Theology states that the atrocities of the Holocaust do not merit the current harm to the Palestinians. Palestinian Liberation Theology urges the Christian Church to repent for the Holocaust, while also fighting for the rights of non-Jews in Israel-Palestine.

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CHRISTIAN ZIONISM AND PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Both Christian Zionism and Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology hold a special reverence for the Jews as God’s chosen people. This statement is found throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 7:6 states, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession” (NRSV). In the New Testament, this favor remains, “as regards election they [Israel] are beloved; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11: 28-29, NRSV). Christian Zionists use verses such as these to legitimize a holy Israel over the non-favored Palestinians. Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology explores these verses in a larger context of history to reach the realization that God supports the Palestinians too.

Although there is no doubt in the Bible’s statements of God’s love for Israel, much has since changed. The love of Israel was originally bestowed upon vulnerable Jews experiencing the repression of many conquering nations, including the Egyptians, Babylonians, and Romans. As seen in the Old and New Testaments, God loves the vulnerable. From favoring the second-born and crowning the youngest brother to eating with sinners and conversing with Gentiles, “the Lord lifts up the downtrodden [while,] He casts the wicked to the ground” (Psalm 147:6, NRSV). Therefore, the God that loved and intervened on the behalf of the downtrodden Israel is also at work on the behalf of Palestine. The Palestinians now suffer under the repression of Israel due to the Israeli hostile occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, as well as, the illegal seizing of land and settlements built in Palestinian territories. Thus, God’s support and love extends to the Palestinians too.

Another argument of Christian Zionism is that God ordained the State of Israel to be solely for the Jews: “for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever” (Genesis 13:15). When establishing the State of Israel, many Jews demanded that the biblical land of Israel be the only acceptable homeland. Many of these Jews stated that the land was promised unconditionally to Israel and, thus, is the rightful inheritance of modern Jews. Christian Zionists tend to support this view by seeing Palestinians as enemies to God for occupying Israel’s rightful land. Additionally, many Christian Zionists believe the Messiah will return only if the covenantal land is occupied. However, Palestinian Liberation Theology views this covenant quite differently on the basis of supporting biblical Deuteronomic Laws.

Although the land is given unconditionally, the land is held conditionally (Brueggemann, 2015). Isaiah 1:19 states, “if you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land” (NRSV, emphasis added). Although the land is unconditionally given, only through obedience will the rewards of the covenant be

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reaped. Due to their unfaithfulness, Jerusalem is continuously destroyed and the Jews sent into exile. It is within exile that the land becomes a “bedrock conviction” for Jews (Brueggemann, 2015). The idea of returning to the land becomes a part of the Jewish identity: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy” (Psalm 137:5-6, NRSV). With this idea came the belief in a homogeneous culture; the idea that only Jews can occupy the land. However, the homogeneous culture of Israel is not supported biblically. Throughout the Bible, God is continuously welcoming the outsider into the pact of Israel. For example, God welcomes Ruth the Moabite, as well as the repenting Nineveh (Brueggemann, 2015). Although Christian Zionists seek to exclude the other by giving exclusionary land rights to Israel, God, in fact, has given the land unconditionally to all, following Israel’s loss of conditional holding on the land.

One can understand the Christian Zionist usage of the Bible to exclude the other. Many throughout time have done so. For example, some Christians have used the Bible to merit excluding minority races, women, and the LGBTQ+ community from church involvement. When reading the Bible searching for reasons to exclude, a person can find verses to support his or her fears. In the case of Israel-Palestine, Christian Zionists read the Bible to say that God has chosen to love Israel and grant Israel land unconditionally and exclusively. As a result, a dangerous ideology appears that limits God’s love to God’s people to a one-dimensional possibility. However, through a closer reading of the Bible, one can see God’s abounding love for the vulnerable and the diverse (Brueggeman, 2015). This is the ideology that Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology embraces and seeks to use in order to facilitate peace.

THE CHALLENGE OF SUPPORTING PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Churches that reject Christian Zionism are frequently labeled “anti-Semitic” by both Israel and other churches. Israel is quick to label those who do not support Zionism as anti-Semitic in order to protect themselves from criticism. Some, including Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, believe it is in Israel’s best interest to erase the line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. Ben-Gurion stated that he sought to “prove that the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism is not a distinction at all” (Noam, 2010). Additionally, Christian Zionist churches are quick to label anti-Zionism as anti-Semitic. For example in, neo-conservative Jewish journalist, Jonathan Tobin’s article “Presbyterians Declare War on the Jews”, he discusses the Presbyterian (USA) statement against anti-Zionism as, “a full-blown attack against the very concept of Zionism and seeks to compare Zionism to the Christian anti-Semitism that led to the Holocaust and other historical atrocities. [It] not only swallows the Palestinian narrative about Middle East history whole, it is nothing less than a declaration of war on Israel and American Jewry” (Tobin, 2014). Thus, churches that deny Christian Zionism and embrace Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology face a tremendous obstacle.

Although Christians have much to regret for their role in the anti-Semitism leading to the Holocaust, a fear of being labeled anti-Semitic is not an excuse for unwavering support of Israel (Brueggemann, 2015). The atrocities of the Holocaust are just as real as the atrocities being carried out against the Palestinians. Christians cannot be indifferent to the reality of thwarted peace created by Christian Zionism. With courage and humility, those who adhere to Palestinian Christian Liberation Theology are challenged to respond to this new political reality with new duties (Brueggemann, 2015).

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CONCLUSION

Due to the heightened religious tensions surrounding the politics of Israel-Palestine, any peace solution must address religion. Marc Gopin, director of the Center for World Religions, Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution, discusses the important role of religion in the peace process in his book *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*. Gopin argues that the Abrahamic faiths have made war holy; however, in doing so peace has become holy. In the Abrahamic traditions, peace has become ritualized, therefore, in seeking peace in the Middle East, one must analyze the ritual of peace within the context of religion. Yet, “holy peacemaking” has been overlooked by scholars and activists who ignore cultural and religious factors (Gopin, 2002). Thus, the current peace aspirations “do not embrace the basic needs of average people on all sides” and “are bound to fail” through ignoring the religious sphere (Gopin, 2002). It is only through including religion that the peace process can move beyond its fragile state and look towards a longer lasting solution rooted in ritual and tradition.

In analyzing religion, one will find the challenge that Christian Zionism presents to the peace process. Christian Zionism protects the statehood of a Jewish Israel and demerits the Palestinians’ claim to the land. As a result, Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories and discrimination against Palestinians is declared legitimate. In order for this violence to end, Christians cannot “reduce the Bible to an ideological prop for the state of Israel, as though support of Israel were a final outcome of biblical testimony” (Brueggemann, 2015). Instead, Christians need to evaluate their faith traditions to find the God who seeks out and protects the lowly and oppressed. When doing so, one will encounter the Palestinian Liberation Theology, a satisfying and accurate alternative to Christian Zionism. Palestinian Liberation Theology is able to refute Christian Zionism through reevaluation of the Old Testament covenant through the lens of the New Testament, which describes a New Covenant. This New Covenant requires a renewed vigor for the care of the oppressed and is a foundation on which to build lasting peace.

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