

CORNERSTONE

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CHRISTMAS AMIDST MASSACRES¹

Samuel S. Munayer

Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT) has marked certain events within Palestinian history that have demanded a theological response. The events of the Nakba in 1948 were the birth of PLT where Palestinians not only experienced a physical Nakba, but a faith one as well. This crisis demanded a theological response from Palestinian theologians, a call which was amplified with the events of the Naksa in 1967. In the first Intifada in 1987 the world witnessed the emergence of PLT and since then it has remained a leading voice in spheres of civil society, academia, and churches globally. The leaders and founders of PLT have not only paved the way for generations to come but have borne witness – and to this day many continue to bear witness – to the liberating message of the gospel for oppressed peoples around the world.

Currently, we are experiencing another chapter within the 75-year history of settler colonial violence towards Palestinians. The unfolding events following the 7th of October are without a doubt a significant bloody chapter in Palestinian history and one which demands a renewed theological response. The discourse among many Palestinians reminds us of the conversations and attitudes in the Nakba of 1948. The magnitude of danger, death, massacres, ethnic cleansing, and the overall humanitarian catastrophe we are witnessing and experiencing in Gaza and the West Bank, in addition to the Western backing of Israel, draws parallels to 1948. Indeed, similar



existential theological questions are crying out today as in 1948: *“Where are you God? Why have you forsaken us? For how long O Lord will you let the suffering continue?”*

Whilst all Palestinians are suffering on different levels, the events in Palestine are a global catastrophe. Mosques, churches, universities, schools, hospitals are bomb damaged, and some have been completely destroyed. Furthermore, the fear that there will be no Christians left in Gaza is increasing. The Christians in Gaza belong to the oldest Christian community in the world, dating all the way back to the day of Pentecost. Since 1948, there has been a decline of the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza and the whole of Palestine in general. Before the 7th of October, there were less than 1000 Christians living in Gaza. The Palestinian Christians are deeply rooted in Gaza despite many of them originating from the cities of Jaffa, Ramleh, and Lydda, arriving to Gaza as refugees. Despite their small numeric size, Palestinian Christians in Gaza are an integral part of the Gazan society. However, the Palestinian Christian community in Gaza is perhaps facing the highest existential threat it has ever confronted.

For the first time in modern history the Patriarchs and heads of churches in Jerusalem have called to forego any unnecessary festive activities dedicated for Advent and Christmas. This is to appropriately commemorate Christmas with the catastrophic reality in Gaza and to stand in solidarity with all those who are suffering. Whilst many others around

the world celebrate as if no global catastrophe is occurring, thousands of children are being massacred akin to the nativity story. Palestine, the birthplace of Christmas, has chosen to focus on the meaning of the Word made flesh amidst what some report as genocide.

Once again, many Christians in the West are justifying the oppression and mass death Palestinians are experiencing through their Christian faith. Others remain complicit and are silent to the call for a ceasefire, lacking the courage to prophetically challenge the powers which partake and enable unjust suffering. The challenge that faced the founders of PLT remains relevant to contemporary times: how can the Christian faith be liberated from colonial use which justifies Palestinian oppression? How may one showcase the true message of liberation the gospel offers to the oppressed? These questions can be undertaken by contextualizing the Christian faith to contemporary times which will enable the gospel to be meaningful and a means of liberation for Palestinians and other oppressed peoples in their everyday lives.

Perhaps, there is no better story which parallels the reality and faith of Palestinians today than that of the nativity story. By dialectically interpreting the Nativity story within the reality of Palestine, specifically Gaza, one can understand the true meaning of the nativity and how its revolutionary message manifests today in Palestine. As this issue of Cornerstone is being written and eventually read, Palestinians are suffering under what

some describe as “Apocalyptic” realities. Thus, mediations on the incarnation of Christ must be the point of departure of those oppressed who yearn for their liberation. Through this, we will be able to understand the authentic message of Christmas and properly witness to Immanuel, God among us.

This issue of Cornerstone contains voices who attempt to understand the meaning and message of the nativity story by contextualizing its message to the Palestinian context. These voices attempt to point us towards the good news which was brought by a baby boy born in Bethlehem to a young virgin woman. This good news is one which demands repentance, revolution, courage to act and not be paralyzed by fear, recognition to those unseen, and liberation to those oppressed. Christmas amidst a Palestinian mass death is not a Christmas for all, especially for the King Herods, the Pharaohs, and the Pontious Pilates of today, rather it is for those who are the least of these. Christmas in Palestine this year is one which requires action and faith in a God who advocates for the oppressed and will judge all who enact and remain complacent to evil. Let us all remember the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero this Christmas:

*No one can celebrate
a genuine Christmas
without being truly poor.
The self-sufficient, the proud,
those who, because they have
everything, look down on others,
those who have no need
even of God- for them there*

*will be no Christmas.
Only the poor, the hungry,
those who need someone
to come on their behalf,
will have that someone.
That someone is God.
Immanuel. God-with-us.
Without poverty of spirit
there can be no abundance of God*

(Romero, Oscar. *The God We
Hardly Knew*, 1978).

1. Throughout this edition of *Cornerstone*, we are conscious of our wording. We are guided on references to what some refer to as genocide by Craig Mokhiber in his article available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/2/qa-former-un-official-craig-mokhiber-on-gaza-and-genocide>

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Image Credit: "Miriam" Sliman Mansour 2021



DO NOT BE AFRAID! A PALESTINIAN REFLECTION ON ADVENT

Shadia Qubti

In both gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, what strikes me most this year is the prevalence of fear. Fear is the first reaction of the characters in the stories: Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:30), Joseph's encounter in his dream (Matthew 1:20), King Herod and all of Jerusalem upon hearing the good news (Matthew 2:3), Zacharias' encounter in the temple (Luke 2:13) and the shepherds' reaction to the appearance of the angels (Luke 2:10).

In Luke's account, an encounter with the sacred is met with fear; this teaches me that faith, a strong faith, can harness fears. Despite the fear of being publicly disgraced, Mary accepts the call to be the place where God enters humanity. Zacharias, too, is afraid. He fears, he doubts God's

ability to achieve the impossible, and is unable to speak until the birth of his son.

The shepherds also fear the angels who disturb their watch and tell them to go and be the first witnesses to the birth of their liberator. While all of these actors are understandably afraid, they are assured that despite their fear, God is with them. They are our ancestors in faith.

As witnesses, they also represent the poor and lowly in their societies. Mary, a young girl from Nazareth – an unexpected place fraught with strife, resistance and trauma – finds favor in God's eyes and becomes the medium of liberation. *"For he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all*

generations will call me blessed.” (Luke 1: 48). Zacharias and Elizabeth, an older couple, serving in a small town in the Judean Hills, receive a blessing from God at a time when society deem them retired. The shepherds, nameless young boys most likely paid minimum wage to herd their landlord’s flock, are elevated to be among the first witnesses of God incarnate. Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus focuses on the reversal of unjust structural systems. *“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”* (Luke 1:52) Advent brings a promise of rejoicing. Advent reminds us of God’s justice where the poor – of all ages, genders, geographic locations, economic and political status – are liberated.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.

Luke 1: 52

Many Palestinians have been living with fear, which has intensified since October 7th. Fear in a harsh reality because their lives are disposable. The unprecedented loss of life in Gaza, reaching more than 15,000 lives (as of writing this)¹ is living proof. Despite ongoing international support for a ceasefire, it seems no one is able to stop injustices against Palestinians. Palestinian lives are destroyed because they are worth less.

In the Lukan nativity account, the angels tell the shepherds, go and find a child wrapped in bands of cloth ly-

ing in a manger (2:13). Over the past few weeks, Palestinians have found many babies wrapped in bands of cloth pulled from the rubble. Some estimate that 6,000 children have died in Gaza so far.²

As a Palestinian Christian, I ask is it enough to know that “it will be better?”

I’m trying to make sense of the barrage of Images and sounds of death...

numerous shots of Palestinian babies plucked from the rubble...

babies with death certificates preceding their birth certificates...

families being wiped off the registry...

We have been witnessing a high-speed and high-tech Nakba.

The same yet different

The same displacement and dispossession

Yet different, a digital Nakba on our humanity.

While the people of Gaza have no place to seek safety, many Palestinians elsewhere find themselves trapped in an existential siege: If we stay put, we are targeted; if we follow orders, we are targeted; if we speak, we are silenced. What are we to do? In the midst of ongoing devastation, we cannot grieve. We are forced to look beyond. We cling to a thread of the promise that injustices will not remain.

Can we see in ourselves one, or more, of the characters who played a positive role in the nativity story? Can we see a Mary, who goes against social norms, embraces her fears head on, is displaced several times, sacrifices her

body and youth to bring liberation to the world? Can we see a Zacharias in ourselves when we see God working in our doubts to experience impossibilities? Can we see an Elizabeth, as an older cousin, who does not judge Mary but accepts her part in God’s plan? We want to believe that if the Holy Spirit is calling on us today, we would not allow our fears to paralyze us, but we would push through despite them. And sometimes we push through because of our fears.

We are reluctant to see in ourselves the spiritual leaders in Herod’s court, who were also afraid, but used their position and knowledge of scripture to be on the right side of power. Or the soldiers, who follow their rulers’ orders and massacre the children in and around Bethlehem. They killed innocent babies just because they were born in the same place as God incarnate. Can we see these characters lurking within us as well? If we are honest, we need to acknowledge these lurkers that are part of us even if we do not want them there.

This is the context Palestinians face
Some of us are grieving the loss of loved ones

Others fear their loss

And many of us are grappling with hope

In this reality, we are afraid

The Advent season is when we look to the stories of our ancestors of faith and respond to the promise that God is with us

In this season, Palestinians look to the stories of our ancestors’ fears
And cry out: God be with us!

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/nov/22/gaza-children-death-toll-israel-hamas>
2. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/22/israel/gaza-hostilities-take-horrific-toll-children>



IMMANUEL BORN IN GAZA: RE-READING THE CHRISTMAS STORY

Yousef AlKhoury

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Image Credit: Wahaj Bani Moufleh (www.activestills.org)

"Immanuel... God with us" (Matt. 1:23) "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14a)

It is Christmas and Advent season, a time for hope and anticipation of a divine intervention to bring about order to a disorderly world. It also tells a story of an oppressed group of people longing for liberation. This short reflection offers new insights into Christmas from the standpoint of Palestinians, particularly in Gaza. Over the years, the celebrated Christmas narrative in the Gospel has become a commercial event, a capitalist holiday, individualized; an overly spiritualized experience detached from its deep meanings. Many Chris-

tians in Europe and North America read the Christmas narrative as a fairy tale from the comfort of their homes and churches. More or less like a Broadway show. They celebrate the birth of Jesus from the centers of empires, whereas it actually took place under Roman imperial colonization, on the margins of the empire. Christmas is a story of a forcibly displaced family from its hometown of Nazareth. It is the re-telling of a dreadful journey of a pregnant young woman in her last term riding a donkey through the mountains and valleys. She had to search for a place to sleep, rest, and later give birth to a child away from her family and community. Christmas is also about

a divine-human baby born under military occupation, to bring about redemption and liberation to the occupied and occupiers. Christians generally celebrate Christmas as a joyous event, however in reality it is a painful, yet inspiring one. It is about 'sumud', the resilience of a marginalized family amidst hardship.

In this season every year, we remind ourselves that God incarnated in our world. The incarnated God, Immanuel, was born of a woman under the law (Galatians 4:4), and under Roman imperial occupation. Immanuel, in the first century, was not born in the comfort of royal castles, or in Rome. Immanuel, which means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23) was born among the humble, the broken-hearted, and downtrodden. Likewise, God in the twenty-first century will not incarnate and be born in the magnificent mega churches of Europe or North America, neither in the White House, nor the European Parliament. This year, Immanuel will not even be born in a grotto in Bethlehem. Jesus will be born in an UNRWA school turned into a refugee camp, or a besieged hospital, or even under the rubble of a destroyed house in Gaza.

Moreover, the Gospel according to St. John paints another powerful picture of the incarnation of God (John 1:14a). It recalls the time in history when God was present with people wandering the desert, and like them, God dwelt in a tent. Once again, God is walking alongside the displaced Palestinians. He is running away with his family from mass killing holding a white flag and is

residing with them in their ripped tents. God is not removed from the realities of people, those who are created in the image of the Divine. He is experiencing their hunger and thirst. He is feeling the cold of winter with them. The depth of the Christmas story is that God becomes a human being and stands in solidarity with those broken humans. God "*emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men [humans].*" (Philippians 2:7) The incarnation reflects an example of God's radical solidarity with those who suffer the brutality of occupying power. God becomes human and identifies with those being dehumanized and degraded by their oppressors.



With what some refer to as genocide and ethnic cleansing unfolding before our own eyes in Gaza, Immanuel is among the people who have been forced to flee their homes, the parents weeping over their killed children, and children running around

in the streets and hospitals of Gaza looking for their parents with disbelief that they were killed. Like Gazans, Immanuel will not be seen on major media outlets and His presence will not be reported. His photo crying and running away from Israeli bombardment will not be posted on your social media feed. Even if it is, many western Christians will turn a blind eye to His suffering. For He deserves to die. The Empire has already declared all Gazans are terrorists and worthy of being removed from the land of the living. Hence, the words of Prophet Isaiah are realized once again, "*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*" (Isaiah 53:2).

When we re-read the Christmas story from its context, it confronts western imperial Christianity. It reminds Christians in the West, particularly those who support the Israeli colonial regime, that Immanuel does not stand on the soil of the powerful who glorify war and death. He does not reside among the haughty, those with mentalities of supremacy, and deny others their dignity and humanity. He does not walk the streets of nations who support and fund the killing of innocent people. Instead, Immanuel is ever present among those powerless and oppressed. Immanuel will be born in Gaza. Do not anticipate His birth and arrival somewhere else. Do not light your advent candles of hope, but in mourning and grief. God will not be present in Europe and North America. Mourn the loss of

the innocent and weep the absence of justice. Immanuel this year will be born in Gaza.



STANDING IN THE FURNACE AGAINST THE TYRANT: CHRISTMAS IN PALESTINE

John S. Munayer & Samuel S. Munayer

Introduction

As we reflected on Christmas in Palestine together, there were many moments of silence, questioning and pain. How could we think of Christmas when what some refer to as genocide is taking place? How does one juggle joy and mourning together? How do we engage our bodies, minds, and souls with the Christmas story amidst the cries of children in Gaza? Decorating Christmas trees and homes almost seems like a betrayal against us and our people who are facing immense suffering. However, when you and your people are suffering from mass killing, ethnic cleansing, and existen-

tial threat, it allows you to relate to God and scripture in new ways. Our embodied experience of trauma and suffering has unlocked somewhat deeper spiritual meanings, something which is hard to explain with words. Nevertheless, as brothers living in Jerusalem, we will try to share with you some reflections concerning Christmas and our current reality in December 2023. As we reflect on Christmas and the reality today in Palestine, we turn to St. Cosmos the Hymnographer or the Poet, who served as a bishop in Gaza in the 8th Century and whose hymns are still recited in many Eastern Orthodox Churches during Christmas day.

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Image Credits

Cover Image; Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac (Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem)

Text Image: www.fullofeyes.com



Christmas is Now

*And Herod's heart is troubled utterly,
Armed for war with God, in vain
Would he see that Infant slain
(Canon for Christmas Day,
ODE IX)*

The more we read and reflected together on the Christmas story, the more we related to the story. There are many parallels with what happened 2000 years ago, and what is currently occurring in Palestine today. Firstly, we live under the colonial rule of the empire. Likewise, we have modern day evil leaders like Herod the Great. All share a paranoia of losing their power, and will risk everything, including the lives of thousands of children, to stay in control. They very much echo St. Cosmos' words on Herod, they are at war with God and willing to slay infants in their foolish uprising against God. **Christmas is now.**

Moreover, like the Christmas story, we have religious leaders who stand up, sit down, and be quiet at the command of the King Herods of our time. Their gaze is directed at imperial power whether political or economic, instead of the people they ought to serve and God who they ought to worship. They may have the theological resources as the chief

priests and teachers of the law had, but they lack the dignity and courage to follow through with action. For the priests and teachers knew where Christ would be born but did not go to search for or worship Him (Matthew 2:4-6). Many of our Christian leaders are no different today in Palestine; they know but do nothing. Their silence is loud and clear. **Christmas is now.**

The most troubling parallel, which relates us to the story even more, is the massacre of children (Matthew 2:16). One can read this every Christmas, and sort of understand or connect to it, but when an actual massacre is taking place during the Christmas period to your people, you understand and connect to it on a different and deeper level. The fear, trauma, and deep desire for liberation among the Jews of Jesus' time, is not a distant feeling to us. We know what it is like to be terrified as Joseph and Mary must have been, fleeing to Egypt and then to Galilee. We too have considered escape routes should guns be pointed to our heads. The materialistic Christmas might feel distant to us, but the true story feels more real than ever. **Christmas is now.**

Christmas is a Revolution

*The Holy Children boldly stand
Against the tyrant's fierce command:
The kindled furnace they defy,—
No doom can shake their constancy
They in the midmost flame confess'd,
"God of our Fathers!
Thou art bless'd!"
(Canon for Christmas Day, ODE
VII).*

It is precisely because of the sense of despair, darkness and suffering in the Christmas story, that we feel connected to its context and to its message of liberation. For the Christmas story is exactly what we need in Palestine, a revolution. It is God's ultimate revelation and inauguration of his kingdom. Jesus, the true King, restoring his upside-down kingdom,

My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God
my Savior...
He has brought down rulers
from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry
with good things
but has sent
the rich away empty.

Luke 1:46-47,52-53

where the weak, poor, meek, naked, and hungry are welcomed, instead of the powerful and rich. Perhaps the person who understood the revolutionary message of the birth of Jesus best, is none other than his young mother.

What an honour it is to embrace this message of revolution and to proclaim it during what some refer to as the genocide of Gaza. All the power, glory and might are to Jesus the true king, and not to the empires of this world who toy with the lives of innocent people, including beautiful children. No army, government or religious institution can silence this message. The Christmas message is a reminder for us to follow our king. **Christmas is a revolution.**

However, we are not naive to this message. We know that the Christmas revolution is not an easy road to walk, and as we observe in the story, just the beginning of much suffering to come for Jesus and his followers. Embracing the Christmas message is not a promise that we will not suffer or be relieved of our physical oppression, rather, it means being faithful to the Jesus revolution amidst evil. And if needed, as St. Cosmos reminds us, standing against the tyrant in the “midmost flame” and proclaiming the blessed name of God. Let us continue to do so, wherever we might be in Palestine or the world, even when they kill, attack, hurt and fire us. **Christmas is a revolution.**

Christmas is a Mystery

*O wond'rous mystery, full of passing
grace!
(Canon for Christmas Day,
ODE IX).*

Despite our affirmation that Christmas is a revolution, providing good news to the oppressed through God's intervention in history, we cannot fathom fully what that means. One can state that God is in Gaza and in solidarity with all Palestinians, as we endure colonial violence. However, those statements are incapable of providing sense and more importantly comfort to those asking questions of “*Weynak ya Allah?*” (where are you God?) and “*La emta ya Allah*” (for how long O God?). Indeed, the cries of the oppressed cannot be answered with reason, and our understanding of the incarnation of Christ must be discussed in mystery. **Christmas**

is a mystery.

Mystery should not imply something veiled which must remain concealed, rather, mystery must be expressed and communicated beyond the checkpoints of our understanding. Hence, when we meditate on the mystery of the nativity story in relation to the current reality in Palestine, we are required to be humble since we are limited in our understanding. This is relevant to those who justify the 75 years of ongoing settler colonial violence and those who faithfully resist it. The mystery of hope born out of a virgin requires us to be silent and speak out simultaneously. We must proclaim that Christmas is a revolution, God is in Gaza and on the side of the oppressed globally. Yet, God's activity is one which transcends our rationality and offers no rational explanation to our minds; hence, we must be silent to allow us to discern God's movement. We are left with mystery, but it is a mystery centred around the incarnated God who loves and works for the liberation of the oppressed. **Christmas is a mystery.**

As we understand the Christmas story through our lived experience and recognize the revolutionary message it holds, we are left with great uncertainty and anxiety. We understand the message of hope better by witnessing and living through a hopeless situation. We understand the revolutionary message of the incarnation, Immanuel, by the seeming absence of God. During this Christmas we hope to deepen our encounter with God so that we may utter the words of the prophet Job “*My ears have*

heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (Job 42:5). We hold that this encounter will be met as we work for the liberation of the oppressed. **Christmas is now, Christmas is a revolution, and it is mysterious.**

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INVISIBILITY: THE INCARNATION AND GAZANS

Marah Sarji

In this time of Advent, as we reflect on the story of the incarnation, it is important to look and see those who are invisible to us in our daily life, to look at those invisible in the news, those excluded from among our communities, and even those who are obscured by the scriptures. As time passes quickly in our perception, reading the scriptures that barely brings to us the stories of the women involved in the birth of Jesus, as time passes by watching the settler colonial mass killing unfold in front of our eyes, the blood of Palestinian women interwoven with life and death proclaims the message of advent.

In this short reflection, I hope to give voice to these women, who in their sweat and tears, mediated the birth

of Jesus to us; toiled, suffered, some even died, as we read the story of the birth of Jesus with the backdrop of what some refer to as genocide in Gaza this season of advent. The story of the incarnation is a story of being seen, it is when invisible people are seen by God, are recognized and called by name. It is when the creator chooses to get involved in the life of humans because of love. Love sees, love sacrifices, and love saves.

As Gazans remain invisible to us, their suffering is mediated to us occasionally, we fail to recognize them as fully human. We fail to genuinely comprehend to the depth of our hearts that they are humans created in God's image. When we read the story of invisibility when Mary was seen, we must remember those invis-

ible to us. Because love sees.

Mary is on a donkey, pregnant and tired, wondering how real the news is that she had received from the angel, arriving to visit Elizabeth in Ein Karem near Jerusalem. Excitement and nervousness fill her heart. After a long trip from Nazareth, Mary reaches her destination and blesses Elizabeth with peace. The story of Jesus begins here in the blessed meeting of these two women and the proclamation of the alternative Kingdom of God announced by Mary, a Palestinian woman who encountered the love of God:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices
in God my Savior,
for he has looked on the humble
estate of his servant.

Luke 1:46-48

When we read the story of Jesus' birth in the biblical narrative, we find that it is particularly short and concise, lacking the details and representation of women in the events nor their thoughts and actions. The scriptures carry with them the patriarchal norms of their days. Most women are represented only when they are playing a major role and the writers deem them worth mentioning, nonetheless, their voices are mostly silent, and we don't get to see them for who they are compared to the men who dominate the biblical narrative.

The event of giving birth, as we might assume when we read the

texts, is not an individually experienced event, but various women are co-present and co-servants in the birth of new life while preserving the life of the mother. We find the caregivers during delivery; the cousins or neighbors provide warm cloths and attend to the needs of the mother and the midwives, the women who cook the food and clean up the space after the birth. One woman would never give birth on her own. When we read these passages so quickly, we fall into the trap of assuming that these multiple women were not there.

We do not know of the conversations that Mary and Elizabeth had, the division of labor, and how they both reflected on the miracles that were mediated through their wombs and bodies for the salvation of the world. All we know is that Mary left after Elizabeth gave birth, and we can safely assume she left knowing Elizabeth had all the support and help she needed from other women, neighbors and family members to care for her, to help in cleaning the household, to provide food, and to help her rest from delivering her son.



Invisibility does not mean overlooking the existence of the other. Indeed, we can conceive the other, even as they remain invisible to us. Their stories, anguish, needs, daily life, and their wholeness as humans who lead a life just like we do remains obscure to us. To know Mary existed and participated in salvation history does not render her seen, nor knowing that Gazans exist occasionally when Israel decides to bomb them, makes them seen by the world.

God saw Mary, and Mary knew that. We can attest from the Magnificat that she knew she was seen, fully seen and blessed by God.

This invisibility for Gazans is not a choice. They have been rendered invisible by years of siege, of repression and oppression. They have been rendered invisible by us, all of us, who only care for short amounts of time when they are under another bombardment. They have been obscured by the media, where dehumanization is normalized and any attempt to fight for the humanity of Gazans is delegitimized.

Mary experienced this. Mary, as a woman in a patriarchal culture, who got pregnant before marriage, as a woman who's role became that of a mother which was set by her son, she understood what invisibility means. It is to be outcast from society, to be blamed for a crime you never committed, to be hated for no fault of your own. Invisibility is to be stuck in our gaze which sees but does not recognize the humanity of the other. Nevertheless, Mary was seen, and she understood God's kingdom before so

many of us today.

In many conversations I've had, the great faith of Gazans made all of us wonder. 180 women are estimated to give birth in Gaza each day.¹ With barely any medical help left and with heavy bombings of shelters, mosques, churches, and hospitals, many women are going through horrific conditions, seeing death in their eyes as they give birth to new life. Countless women were bombed and are lying under the rubble of the home they built with their dreams for welcoming the new baby. Many newborn babies lost their mothers and have no surviving family members. And countless women are giving birth with the help of other women and midwives, but without proper follow up or clean water and sanitation. How, can they under such dreadful circumstances arise everyday with such strong faith in God's mercy?



The only answer is found in the Mary's poem and Jesus' incarnation. Because God looks, and God sees. God blesses the meek, and the humble, God blesses the ones that rely on the creator. God looks at Gazan women and knows their fears and terrors. God came through women to be incarnate and present within the community. God lived with the communities in Palestine, and saw them to the fullest extent, Jesus loved and lived. God is present within the oppressed communities, those

who, like Mary, need God's protection and vindication. The spirit of God is at work within the most horrifying conditions. We witness a similar kind of love and sacrifice, love until martyrdom, similarly to Jesus, these women can communicate God's love for others. They know God is greater, and they know God will seek vengeance for the sins that are committed against them. God will strike and scatter the proud and will bring down the mighty from their thrones. God will exalt the humble, the ones who rely on daily sustenance of bread, and bless them as promised.

We see the incarnation story happen today. Mediated by women's bodies and experiences, those who suffer from contextualities of oppression. Like Mary, Palestinian women are invisible, but they believe through their experience that God is faithful and will redeem their loved ones. Salvation through women is not only facilitated by the body of Mary alone, but it is mediated through the toil and sweat of all the other invisible women who took part in the salvation story, which the bible fails to recognize. Today, as we read the incarnation story, after God sees Mary and the people, we cannot but see women in Gaza as 'Mary's'. The lives of Palestinian women are sacred, their bodies are sacred as they witness the injustice and die for righteousness of what ought to be, the Kingdom of God. If we fail to recognize and see Palestinian women with their full humanity, particularly the women in Gaza, we fail to read the incarnation story and its core message as one of love that sees and

redeems. Similar to Mary, under oppression, while digging out the children from under the rubble, the last word that come out of their mouths is "Alhamdulillah", praise be to God. Loved, seen by God, and with faith that sustains life. This is the story of the incarnation.

1. <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/forced-closure-hospitals-midwives-are-lifeline-pregnant-women-gaza>

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Image credits

Cover image: www.wisconsinmuslim-journal.org

Mother and Child: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2015/08/506342>

If I Must Die

Final poem of Gaza poet Refaat Alareer.

If I must die,
 you must live
 to tell my story
 to sell my things
 to buy a piece of cloth
 and some strings,
 (make it white with a long tail)
 so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
 while looking heaven in the eye
 awaiting his dad who left
 in a blaze—
 and bid no one farewell
 not even to his flesh
 not even to himself—
 sees the kite, my kite you made,
 flying up above
 and thinks for a moment an angel
 is there
 bringing back love
 If I must die
 let it bring hope
 let it be a story.



JUSTICE AND REPENTANCE: REFLECTIONS ON THE PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN CALL FOR REPENTANCE

Tony Deik

On 20 October 2023, twelve Palestinian Christian organizations issued an open letter calling Western theologians and church leaders to repentance.¹ Since then, the letter has caught considerable attention. On the one hand, several articles have been written criticising it, by both Christian and Jewish Zionists. On the other hand, the letter has received positive responses from South African churches, the Latin American Theological Fraternity

(FTL),² and various groups in the Global North—including a special emergency session held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and an open letter from US and Canadian Christians.³ At the time of writing this article, the open letter from Palestinian Christians has collected nearly 19,000 signatures.

The idea behind the letter started at a prayer meeting of a few friends.

We were shocked and appalled at the responses of some Christian theologians and church leaders in the West with regard to the on-going mass killing in Gaza. We are cognizant of the fact that Christian Zionism has a big influence, especially in the US, and are well aware of organizations like 'Christians United for Israel' and the 'International Christian Embassy Jerusalem'. These organizations do trouble us, especially in the way they misuse God's name and the Scriptures, but we were not surprised by their responses.

Our surprise came from those whom we considered to be genuine followers of Jesus and his ethics: Western theologians and church leaders whom we thought were people of peace and justice. We expected them to differ from the responses and complicity of their governments. We thought they would shun away from the ways of empires and adhere instead to the way of Christ and his Kingdom. We were surprised, however, that these siblings in Christ did not seem to differ, even the slightest, from their own Western cultures, especially when it comes to war and imperialism. This fusion of Christianity and Western culture is what Ecuadorian theologian René Padilla calls 'culture-Christianity'. Instead of being salt and light in the world, some theologians and church leaders have simply echoed the positions of their governments. Not only have they rallied behind Israel's war on Gaza, but they have also supplied Israel with theological legitimacy, using Just War Theory and varying forms of Christian Zionist theology. In the words of Mitri Raheb, these

Western theologians and church leaders have sadly chosen to provide the ‘software’ for the war machine of the empire.

It seems that one of the main reasons behind the Christian support of Zionism is that some leaders and theologians in the Western church have not repented yet from the colonialism and imperialism still entrenched in Western culture. This motivated us to write our open letter urging our siblings in the West neither to follow nor to legitimize the ways of their Western cultures, but to repent from the ways of empires. Since the season leading up to Christmas is traditionally dedicated to penitence and repentance, it is apt to ask two neuralgic questions in relation to our open letter: what exactly is Christian repentance? And how does it relate to Western Christian attitudes towards Palestine-Israel?

What is Christian repentance?

In the Scriptures, repentance is closely associated with ‘changing direction’, ‘turning’, or ‘returning’ (see, e.g., Acts 3:19; 26:20; cf. Deut 30:2; Luke 1:16-17). But the question is: turning from what, and to which direction? Simply put, the biblical call to repentance is to turn from ‘one’s ways’—or the ‘ways of one’s culture’—to the ‘ways of the Lord’. The latter expression is synonymous with justice, as succinctly expressed in the Song of Moses: ‘the Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just’ (Deut 32:4). Repentance, therefore, is to turn from one’s own ideas of right and wrong to God’s

conception of justice.

In the ancient world, there were competing notions of justice. For example, in one of Plato’s works, the *Gorgias*, the reader encounters a model of justice espoused by one of Socrates’s interlocutors, which advocates for greed and the supremacy of the powerful. According to this justice model, referred to as ‘natural justice’, it is just and right for the strong to rule over the weak and to have the bigger share. Not everyone believed in this concept of justice, however. Plato and Aristotle, for example, tried to offer better models of justice. Plato suggested meritocracy: treating each person according to their worth or merit while avoiding greed. Likewise, in his theory of distributive justice, Aristotle underscored contribution: treating each person according to their contribution to society.

God’s conception of justice—i.e., God’s vision for righteous living—emerges in this context of competing notions of justice. In the Scriptures, God declares his notion of justice from the very beginning. In the law of Moses, justice is summed up in the two commandments: ‘love the Lord your God’ (Deut 6:5) and ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ (Lev 19:18). Jesus then broadens the definition of ‘neighbour’ to include every human being, regardless of background, class, or social status (see Luke 10:25-37). Nonetheless, there is a bit more to God’s concept of justice. In the Deuteronomic law, we are told that God ‘executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the sojourner’ (Deut 10:18).

We are then instructed to imitate God in extending special love to the sojourner (10:19). The sojourners here are selected for special divine love because they are at the margin of the marginalized. In the context of the OT, the orphans and widows are marginalized Israelites, but the sojourners are marginalized outsiders. This biblical concept of justice is what Gustavo Gutiérrez and Latin American Liberation Theology call ‘the preferential option for the poor’. We see this concept of justice in Jesus’s ministry: Jesus loves all human beings equally, but he does not treat everyone the same way. Rather, Jesus loves the powerful by rebuking them, but loves the downtrodden by lifting them up.

In light of this, Christian repentance means turning from notions of justice espoused in wider culture to God’s definition of justice—a (re) turn to God that is possible through Christ. Two features distinguish God’s conception of justice. First, God’s justice operates in ‘the logic of love’ (Kairos Palestine, §4.2.5). Second, God’s justice mandates love for all human beings, expressed according to one’s needs. For those who are at the periphery of society, or those crushed under the fist of the powerful, special love and solidarity should be extended.

God’s justice, therefore, radically opposes notions of ‘justice’ that legitimize the oppression of the powerless by the powerful. God’s conception of justice even subverts meritocratic ideas of equity and justice espoused by Plato and Aristotle, which are considered among the best in the

ancient world.

Repentance, Justice, and Western Christian attitudes towards Palestine-Israel

Unfortunately, the way Western powers have been treating the Palestinians reflects a model of ‘justice’ akin to the type of ‘natural justice’ espoused by some of Socrates’s interlocutors in Plato’s *Gorgias*. This notion of justice, which derives from fallen human nature, describes the dominance of the powerful and the suppression of the powerless as ‘just’ and ‘right’.

Within global power dynamics, Israel is a nuclear state supported by the imperial powers of the world. The Palestinians are the indigenous people of the land, who have been living there for centuries. They have no military, no nuclear power, and no one to defend them. In 1948, Israel was established on the blood of the Palestinians, and on their villages, lands, and livelihoods. For Western powers, this is right (i.e., just): ‘Israel has the right to exist’, we are told. The Palestinians conceded to this concept of ‘justice’, which calls settler-colonialism ‘right’. For more than thirty years since the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians have succumbed to the so-called two-state solution, giving in to the idea of establishing their state on 22% of their historical land. Israel, nonetheless, does not want to give the Palestinians even that. Why should it? Giving the Palestinians a state on 22% of their historical land violates ‘justice’ defined as the supremacy of the powerful. Israel is the powerful party here,

supported by the hegemonic powers of the world. Israel has the ‘right’ to having the bigger share. Although the US and their allies appear to be supporting the two-state solution, they make sure that Israel has all it needs militarily and politically to continue oppressing the Palestinians, expanding illegal Israeli settlements, and violating every provision of international law.

As Christians, if we adopt positions supporting Zionism and Israel’s settler-colonial project, we are simply adopting a concept of ‘justice’ that is in direct opposition to God’s vision for righteous living. Support for Zionism is based on twisted notions of justice that privilege the oppressor and the colonizer at the expense of the colonized. This is in direct violation of God’s conception of justice, which operates in the logic of love, privileging the powerless and the downtrodden. Therefore, for followers of Christ who are supporters of Zionism, repentance is an imperative. We, as Christians, cannot continue in the ways of the empires of the world. As James aptly asks: ‘Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?’ (James 4:4).

1. To read and sign the open letter, go to: <https://chnq.it/xYD4zDSvKX>.
2. FTL co-organized a webinar to discuss our open letter, drawing an audience of over 300 people. The recording is accessible at <https://youtu.be/ZgslKZ8u6KU>.
3. To access the recording of the special AAR session, go to: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1atZGrJDDi03Joljig9PXE>. For the open letter from US and Canadian Christians, visit: <https://www.endthenakbaletter.com>.

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Photo Credit: Photograph of street art on the wall in Bethlehem depicting slain journalist Shireen abu Akleh, Wikimedia Commons

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PURPOSE STATEMENT *of* SABEEL

Sabeel is an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians. Inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, this liberation theology seeks to deepen the faith of Palestinian Christians, promote unity among them, and lead them to act for justice and love. Sabeel strives to develop a spirituality based on justice, peace, non-violence, liberation, and reconciliation for the different national and faith communities. The word 'Sabeel' is Arabic for 'the way' and also a 'channel' or 'spring' of life-giving water.

Sabeel also works to promote a more accurate international awareness regarding the identity, presence, and witness of Palestinian Christians as well as their contemporary concerns.

It encourages individuals and groups from around the world to work for a just, comprehensive, and enduring peace informed by truth and empowered by prayer and action.

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