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We welcome your questions and comments: [sabeel@planet.edu](mailto:sabeel@planet.edu)

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For over a year we have been considering the publication of a newsletter to our friends, locally and abroad, in order to keep them abreast of the work and activities of *Sabeel: Palestinian Liberation Theology Center*.

From the very beginning, the work of the Center has had two goals. In the first place we have aimed at deepening the roots of faith of our own people here in Palestine and Israel. We strive to provide opportunities for theological reflection and to encourage people to do theology in their daily life as they reflect on what God is saying to them today. Without a theology that is biblically based and relevant to people's lives, it is difficult to maintain faith and hope under an oppressive occupation. Indeed, our people have become expert political analysts due to their constant exposure and subjection to the harsh realities of every day life. They have plenty of political analysis but a real shortage of theological anchoring. From their daily experience they pose questions such as "How can one live under occupation and maintain faith? How can one not lose hope? What is God saying to us today?"

*Sabeel* has been working with young people and adults encouraging them to reflect theologically. We believe that this is the work of the whole people of God. Once the people of God are given the opportunity, they truly excel in theological reflection that is relevant to their lives. People become empowered by the spirit of God and are filled with hope. Agonizing over issues of justice and peace becomes a theological necessity and not only a political one.

The second goal of *Sabeel* is to work with visitors and friends who come from abroad and are interested and concerned about the life and witness of the Christian community as well as a just political settlement. More and more groups come to the country showing their solidarity and wanting to learn about the situation. We welcome them and do our best to provide them with a picture of what is happening. We tell our story as Palestinian Christians.

The members of *Sabeel* believe that God has called us into this ministry of justice, peace, and reconciliation. We have a commitment to promote and speak the truth. It gives us, therefore, great pleasure to put into your hands this first issue of *Sabeel's* newsletter. We would like to keep you informed of our activities and invite your prayers and support.

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### **What is Palestinian Liberation Theology?**

Liberation Theology was a term that was created in the middle decades of this century to describe the attempt by Latin American theologians to make the Gospel of Jesus Christ relevant to the social, economic and political situation in which many people in Latin America find themselves. In a direct challenge to the existing situation where the established churches used Christian Doctrine to bolster and support oppressive regimes, these theologians embarked upon an interpretation of the scriptures which found in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ a wealth of positive, relevant, and liberating doctrines and ideas that were indeed "Good News" for the poor, oppressed people of Latin America.

One of the principle objectives of Liberation Theology is to proclaim the relevance of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It has to be reread and reinterpreted to make it relevant, refreshing, and liberating to the oppressed people living under specific circumstances in a particular geographic location at a particular point in history. This model was later followed by Liberation Theologians in other parts of the world, notably South Africa where black and other theologians offered a powerful theological critic of the Apartheid regime and pointed the way to a Christian response that is neither passive nor quiescent to the status quo.

Within the Palestinian context, the need for a unique Liberation Theology that is relevant and responsive to the needs of the Palestinian population was heightened by the fact that much of their oppression has a distinctly misinterpreted theological basis. Christian Zionism has been successful in providing not only theological justification

for Palestinian displacement, forced exile and continued oppression, but also is directly responsible for marshalling material resources to the Israelis.

In this context, it was necessary for the local Palestinian Church to respond to the challenges before it: the concrete material and political situation of oppression, deprivations, human rights violations and daily violence. It desired to provide a theological perspective for a population that was in revolt against this oppression.

In addition, Palestinian theologians needed to make a larger contribution to the ongoing ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

From this perspective, which is rarely fully understood by the dominant Christian Churches, Palestinians had to face the formidable task of formulating and disseminating their understanding of Christianity and the Gospel of Christ within the context of the lives of Palestinian Christians today.

To meet this formidable task, individuals interested in Palestinian Liberation Theology needed to address a wide variety of theological issues that have implications far beyond the limited political and socioeconomic situation in which they find themselves. This also has ramifications for Christians living in other parts of the world.

The fundamental issues addressed by Palestinian Liberation Theology include the following:

### **1. The Nature of God**

In the heart of the birth place of the three monotheistic religions, it is important to affirm the universal, non-exclusive nature of God. Some theologies and practices are clearly exclusive, racist, and discriminatory towards one group or another. In the face of this reality, one aspect of Palestinian Liberation Theology is to explore God's nature, universality and love for all people and individuals and to assert a theological basis for the rejection of all forms of racism and discrimination without exception.

### **2. The Concept of Choseness**

Palestinian Liberation Theologians have to deal with the claim that the Jews are a chosen people and have special status entitling them to specific political and economic as well as social and religious rights which are denied to others including Palestinian Christians. Palestinian Christians believe and assert that in Christ there is neither Jew nor gentile.

### **3. The Importance of Land**

Land has been a central issue in the conflict in the Middle East. Theological

arguments have been presented by various groups in order to lay claim to the land. Palestinian Liberation Theology studies the theological foundations to these arguments and offers a theological understanding and position based on justice.

#### **4. Issues of Nationalism, Peoplehood, Self Determination, and Universalism**

For an oppressed people whose self determination has been denied and whose very existence has been challenged, these issues have a special role. At the same time, many Palestinians are not unaware of the dangers of falling into a narrow and chauvinistic nationalism.

#### **5. Issues of Social Justice**

Palestinian Liberation Theology addresses a wide variety of social justice issues including economic justice, human rights, justice for women and the environment.

#### **6. Issues of ecumenism and relationship between the different denominations as well as between the hierarchy of the churches and the masses of believers.**

#### **7. Issues of War and Peace, and Non-violence**

Palestinian Liberation Theology addresses the day to day reality of Palestinians who have been living under an occupation that destroyed homes, confiscated lands, killed and jailed children, and closed institutions. As the possibility for peace becomes more real each day, Palestinian Christians need to see in their faith a source of courage and strength and vision for a better future.

This is the task of Liberation Theology. Palestinian Liberation Theologians follow the theological premise that if we preach the entire Gospel except for that portion of it which is relevant to the particular time and place and people we are speaking to, then we have not preached the Gospel at all. In this sense, it is the task of Palestinian Liberation Theology to truly preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Palestinian context. Nothing more, and nothing less.

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### **The Beginning of the Center**

An ad hoc committee for Palestinian Liberation Theology was formed in 1989 to implement, on a practical level, the theology outlined above (see *What is Palestinian Liberation Theology?*). On a pastoral level, some of the Palestinian clergy were working with the people at the grassroots and listening to their cries. They found themselves needing to give them help and respond, not only to their physical sufferings, but also to the way these sufferings were being

aggravated by the religious argument in the political conflict. People were asking "Where is God in all of this? Why does God allow the confiscation of our land? Why does God allow the occupation and oppression of our people?" We needed to work out a Palestinian theology of liberation as a pastoral response to many such questions. In addition, many of the Palestinian Christians wanted to abandon the Bible, particularly the Old Testament which was being used to justify their suffering. However, as Christians the Bible is essential to our faith, so it was necessary to find in the Bible the God of justice, the God who is concerned with the oppressed, who is concerned with the Palestinians as the oppressed of this land.

A committee of ten clergy and lay theologians gathered together to explore ways in which this theology could be developed and shared with fellow Palestinian Christians. They decided to host an international conference that would put Palestinian Liberation Theology in the context of other Liberation Theologies from around the world. Several local workshops were held to formulate ideas and prepare people for full participation in the conference.

In March 1990 the conference took place at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The themes of the conference were the Palestinian Reality; Palestinian Christian Identity; Power, Justice, and the Bible; Women, Faith, and the Intifada; and International Responses to the Quest for Palestinian Theology. Topics for workshops included Holy Land Christians and Survival; Reclaiming Our Identity and Redefining Ourselves; Biblical Justice, Law and the Occupation; The Intifada, Nonviolence, and the Bible; Women in the Intifada and in the Churches; and several presentations by Liberation Theologians from the U.S., Ireland and the Philippines. An editorial team consisting of Palestinian Liberation Theologian Naim Stifan Ateek, Jewish American Theologian Marc Ellis and American Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether compiled a book from the proceedings entitled *Faith and the Intifada* published in 1992 by Orbis Books.

The conference led to a more permanent center and the founding of *Sabeel*. The Center is located in Jerusalem where the majority of programs take place with participants from Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah and surrounding areas. In the future we hope to reach Palestinian Christians in a broader geographical area. This work has already begun in the Galilee where a sub-committee meets and holds programs in Nazareth.

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**We Are The Living Stones**

"The faith of the Palestinian Church and your courage and ability to speak the truth in love is inspiring and strengthening." This is one example of the comments that we receive from visitors who meet with Palestinian Christians. Several people have said that such a meeting was the highlight of their trip and a very important part of their pilgrimage.

Every year the Holy Land receives thousands of Christian pilgrims from around the world. They come to learn about history, to visit the holy sites, to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and to pray. They see many places and buildings but rarely do they meet with any local residents. They leave this place having encountered many "old stones" of their faith and of history, but without having met any of the "living stones" of the present day Christian community, who are descendants of the first Christians whose faith goes back to Apostolic times.

Members of *Sabeel* recognized this unfavourable situation and are determined to address it in some way. Some people travelling here knew of a few Palestinians from their writings and international travels and arranged meetings with them here as part of their itinerary. Requests for interviews became more and more numerous and it became difficult to meet the increasing demand.

*Sabeel* decided to increase the number of people available to meet with foreign groups by developing a Speakers' Bureau, where a number of skilled people would be available to speak to foreign groups. In order to meet this objective *Sabeel* contacted a number of young men and women from Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem, who are committed Palestinian Christians from different churches and who speak fluent English as well as French, German and other languages. We were able to recruit 25 such people, 20 women and 5 men, most of whom are university graduates. They all demonstrated a high degree of commitment to this type of ministry and general knowledge of the situation. A two month course was organized for April and May of 1992, in order to examine the issues in more detail and with deeper reflection.

The candidates studied the following subjects: historical and biblical background, religious argument, the occupation (human rights, land confiscation, settlements, the economic situation, health, water, military orders, education), United Nations Resolutions, the Peace Talks, the history of Christianity in the Holy Land, the Christian Churches and the challenges that face them, the role of the Church, issues for Christians today (emigration, fears and concerns), western Christians (Christian Zionists, Hebrew and Messianic Jews), the city of Jerusalem, Palestinian women, and communication techniques (how to effectively address foreign groups). The course also included films and a settlement tour. Classes met once a week for two hours and also for two one day seminars.

Since the summer of 1992, these speakers have addressed thousands of visitors (individuals, small and large groups) about issues of justice and peace, the Christian community in the Middle East and the current situation in Palestine and Israel.

After the success of the first course and because of the growing need for Palestinian speakers, we intended to start another course during the Spring of 1993. Due to the closure of the West Bank at that time, it was necessary to postpone the course after a few sessions. This was a great disappointment but we thought it would only be for a short time. After waiting several months for the situation to change, it was decided to go ahead with the course beginning in February 1994, even though the closure has not yet been lifted.

We lengthened the course to three months in order to cover more issues in greater detail and to include field trips to Gaza, Galilee and a city tour of Jerusalem. We began on February 4 with over 30 participants. This new course is progressing smoothly, despite having to postpone and reschedule several sessions due to the February 25th Massacre in Hebron and its political aftermath.

We believe that these encounters between Christians visiting and Christians who are part of the indigenous community are extremely valuable. They are a significant investment in mutual understanding and a peaceful future.

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### **Snapshots of Our Activities**

#### **Bible Study**

In January 1994, *Sabeel* held its first Ecumenical Bible Study Session. The study convenes for two hours weekly for fourteen weeks. It is focused on the text *The Upside Down Kingdom* by the American Mennonite author Donald Kraybill. The book explores the life of Jesus as someone who is building a new society, very different from the existing one. Jesus is teaching about a kingdom but it is a new "upside-down" kingdom, where the poor are lifted up and where the wealthy are challenged. Kraybill relates these ideas to contemporary society and challenges the reader to examine his or her own life.

The study is broadly ecumenical, with about 40 participants from the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Greek Catholic, Coptic, Armenian and Greek Orthodox churches. During each session one of the members of the study presents a chapter and a discussion follows.

The Nazareth Committee is also conducting a Bible Study. Arranged differently from the one in Jerusalem, it meets every fortnight and is organized around a presentation from a noted theologian or biblical scholar.

## **Workshops and Lectures**

*Sabeel* holds several lectures and workshops each year, taking advantage of the talents of local people and visiting friends and scholars. We strive to present a variety of topics that will address current affairs, present new ideas and approaches to theology, and offer opportunities to reflect more deeply on the life of Christian community and faith.

In 1991 we held a workshop in September on "The Bible and War - the Just War Theory", because following the Gulf War we felt there was a need to look at theological connections with the war.

In March of 1992, we responded to a request to repeat the workshop on "The Bible and War - the Just War Theory" in Nazareth. In July, Dr. Marc Ellis from the U.S., author of *Towards a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, presented a lecture on "Ending Auschwitz and the Renewal of Palestine in the Jewish Imagination". There were four panelists who responded to the speaker and questions generated from the 200 people who attended. In August the Rev. Dr. Michael Prior from Britain lectured on "Jesus in the Synagogue in Nazareth". Also in August we held a seminar on the topic of the collapse of law and order in Palestinian society.

In 1993 we began with two lectures in March, one from Fr. Elias Chacour, a native of the Galilee and author of *Blood Brothers* and *We Belong to the Land* titled "We Belong to the Land". American author and professor Walter Wink presented the other program on "Breaking the Spiral of Violence". In June we held a workshop on "The Christian and the Old Testament" in Nazareth.

We had planned a panel discussion on the recent "Vatican-Israel Agreement" for February 25, 1994. Because of the massacre in Hebron, however, we had to postpone it and we have not yet set another date.

These lectures and discussions are well attended by local and visiting Christians and generally give rise to lively discussions. The current political situation makes it difficult to plan large events, however we still have a long list of ideas that are waiting to be realized!

## **Youth Programs**

The current generation of Palestinian children and youth have grown up knowing only occupation and the *Intifada*, the uprising of the Palestinians begun in December 1987. Their education, work, and family and social lives have been disrupted, so there is a great need to foster Christian community among them and give them opportunities to express their many fears and questions. The primary youth program held by *Sabeel* was an Ecumenical Summer Camp for Youth July 12-17, 1993, held at the Evangelical Home for Boys and the school in Ramallah. Participants were recruited by personal contact through local schools and churches and 53 Christian youth (28 girls and 25 boys) 15-17 years of age, from Ramallah and five villages in the West Bank attended. It was a wonderful success!

The aims of the camp were to think about and discuss what it means to be Christian here and now, and also to provide a time of education, recreation and arts, to develop leadership and planning skills and to build a community based on cooperation and equality.

To achieve these aims, the camp program focused on the themes of violence/non-violence, democracy and freedom, the environment, women, and the example of Jesus. The schedule included daily worship, sports and recreation, large and small group discussion, creative time, community building and a full day field trip to Nablus.

Evaluations received from the campers indicated that they all greatly enjoyed the time. The most frequent comments revealed a desire for another camp the following summer and for a longer duration! *Sabeel* is currently planning two summer camps this year. One will be for new participants and will be modeled on last year's camp. It will be held in Ramallah. The other one will be for last year's campers and held in the Galilee. With the unpredictability and insecurity of the current political situation we are unsure whether we'll be able to go forward with the programs and are currently considering other options.

In the meantime, we feel that it is very important to keep in touch with the campers. We have therefore, planned follow-up programs. A full day Christmas program, including reflection and celebration, was held on January 3, between western and eastern Christmas. A similar program for Easter had to be postponed due to the political situation.

**Solidarity Between the Peoples of Palestine and South Africa**

In November of last year, members of *Sabeel* met with Mike Mailula, the Exposure Coordinator of the South African based Theology Exchange Program (TEP), which is a national, ecumenical and educational service agency working in South Africa. The TEP's commitment is to provide educational opportunities for people involved in justice and development issues within the country and to learn from comparable situations in the Third World and from each other. The TEP achieves its educational goals through programs of exchange with other groups struggling for justice, popular education, the development of theological resources and educational workshops.

The TEP presented *Sabeel* with a proposal for a solidarity exchange between South Africa and Palestine, inviting two Palestinian Christians committed to social justice issues, to visit South Africa for two weeks from mid-August to mid-September 1994. The two will visit various parts of the country, meet with individuals and groups and share experiences with them. Two South Africans will make a similar trip to Palestine and Israel, but it is still uncertain when this will take place.

*Sabeel* is very excited about this initiative, as our two peoples have much to share in the areas of theology and human rights. We believe that we can learn a great deal from each other. The final details of the program are still being arranged, and *Cornerstone* will keep you informed of the progress.

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### **The Declaration of Principles And Its Implications A Palestinian Christian Perspective**

On September 13, 1993, the eyes of the world were focused on Washington, D . C . , where the signing of a document and a handshake between Yasser Arafat and Yitzak Rabin took place. The sudden escalation in the negotiations between the Palestinian people and the state of Israel (this round held secretly in Norway) came as a surprise to many, Palestinians and Israelis included. The months following this Agreement were filled with much excitement, anxiety and speculation as everyone wondered what the next steps would be, and how the Agreement would be implemented. Hope, however, fell away as daily life under occupation did not change. The closure of the West Bank and Gaza persisted, violence continued and prisoners remained in jail. Despite the disappointment and mounting fears, many people remained stubbornly committed to making the Agreement work.

However, as dramatically as one date, September 13, could change things so did another, February 25. Since the day of the massacre of 29 Palestinians (this is one figure but other sources quote over 40 Palestinians killed) in the sanctuary of Al-Haram el Ibrahimi (the Mosque of Abraham) in Hebron, the situation has erupted like a volcano. Not knowing what the future holds, one remains gripped in the devastating reality of the present. Violence has escalated, and since the massacre another 86 people have been killed - 64 Palestinians and 22 Israelis. Strict curfews have been imposed on Palestinians and their daily schedules disrupted. In this issue, we have included the article on page 8 that presents a theological reflection on the massacre itself. But what about the future of the Agreement? Does this monumental event simply fade away? We hope that the answer is no, and there are several reasons for our continued hope.

For many Palestinians, the significance of September 13 is not primarily the Agreement itself, but rather the handshake that took place between Arafat and Rabin. In general, many people think that the document is a bad deal for Palestinians. Many feel that Palestinians were negotiating from a weak position which is reflected in this Agreement: it is a framework with major loopholes that offers no direct commitment for a Palestinian State, no freeze of settlements and no end to occupation. However, the act of mutual recognition that took place as part of the Agreement irreversibly binds the Palestinians and Israelis in a new set of rules, within a new reality where each group now has a stake in the security, protection and economic prosperity of the other. This can be seen as a paradigm shift from a situation of a zero sum game where one always loses when the other gains to a situation of mutual gain and loss. Both parties have to adjust and deal with these facts. If the paradigm shift is able to take hold and Israel acts on its obligation for mutual security, then the Agreement will have a chance.

If the Palestinian people feel assured of their rights, then they will be able to transform and translate the principles of the September Agreement and the recent Gaza-Jericho Agreement of Autonomy signed on May 4th, into tangible facts and actual practice. We can begin to live in the spirit of peace and harmony. We can work towards a true democracy. We hope that eventually all restrictions will be removed, all prisoners will be released and there will be an end to occupation. For the sake of our future we must retain this vision. "When there is no vision, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18, KJV).

As Christians, our faith in justice and peace puts us in the midst of the fight as spearheads; we have to be at the forefront of transforming the quality of life.

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### **Theological Reflections On The Hebron Massacre**

In the dawn hours of Friday, February 25, 1994, while Muslims were beginning their third week of the Holy Month of Ramadan, Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish settler from Kiryat Arba dressed in army uniform, passed the Israeli guards at the Mosque of Abraham in Hebron, fully armed with a machine gun and several loaded clips. As Muslim worshipers were kneeling to pray, he indiscriminately sprayed them with bullets, killing 29 (other sources quote over 40) and wounding many more.

The Palestinian community reacted with great shock, disbelief and anger. In a spontaneous response the entire community went on strike and all offices and businesses closed down. In the Old City of Jerusalem and throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip stones were thrown at the army. Anger and indignation spread swiftly to the Arab community in Israel and their reaction was quick. Unprecedented large demonstrations were organized in several key cities and towns.

The response of the army was also swift. A curfew was imposed, closing off the West Bank and Gaza. Hardship was felt by all Palestinian residents there as they were unable to attend school and work or buy basic food necessities. Injuries and deaths continued.

Reflecting theologically on this massacre, three misconceptions are evident. The first is a faulty theology of God. Some Jewish religious extremists believe in an exclusively Jewish God and think that by killing Palestinians, one is doing the will of God. A narrow interpretation of certain passages from the Old Testament gives rise to such ideas. Apparently, Baruch Goldstein absorbed these theological misconceptions for in the name of that God he was willing to kill. These misconceptions were revealed in an interview he had with an American documentary film maker the month before the massacre in Kiryat Arba. *The Jerusalem Post* of Sunday, February 27, 1994, ran excerpts from transcripts printed in New York newspapers. "There is a time to kill and a time to heal", Baruch Goldstein told the interviewer. He also said that Arabs are "Nazis" and that it was impossible to coexist with them. The article quotes, "throughout the interview, Goldstein portrayed himself as a deeply religious man who believed he was doing God's work". These quotes also exemplify Goldstein's belief in two other theological misconceptions .

Baruch Goldstein had a faulty theology of man/woman. He believed that his brothers and sisters are only those Jews around him, that his fellow humans included only those of his own ethnic, "racial", and religious groups. His understanding of humanity did not include the Palestinians, whom he viewed as beings not deserving of life. He had a faulty theology of neighbour.

Lastly, Baruch Goldstein had a wrong conception of freedom and democracy. Though he was raised in the United States of America, one of the strongest advocates of democracy in the world, he could not tolerate people who differed from him living beside him. His theology of freedom was at fault. He could not accept others, specifically Palestinians, as having rights and freedoms. His only response was to negate their right to life.

These three theological misconceptions of a faulty theology of God, a faulty theology of man/woman, and a faulty conception of freedom and democracy, are the tragedy of Goldstein and others like him, whether they be Jewish, Muslim or Christian extremists.

Already, there have been violent reactions to the massacre. Hamas declared that its people have planned a number of suicide attacks on Israelis, and on April 6th, 1994, one such attack was carried out in the city of Afula and seven Israelis were killed. A few days later on April 14th in a similar incident in the city of Hadara five other Israelis died. The cycle of violence continues to spiral and there is no indication that it will subside soon.

Religious extremism is a very dangerous phenomenon. It is almost a religion in itself. All extremists share the same wrong theology of God, humans, and liberty. Extremism is highly exclusive in content and character and contributes to bigotry and alienation. It can never be an agent of peace and reconciliation because its sense of justice is warped. It does not know true justice, for in the final analysis the doing of justice is an act of respect and love of God, neighbor and freedom.