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The Occupation of the Bible



Photo by Sebastian Scheiner / AP

E-1 area of the West Bank, vital for contiguity of a Palestinian State, and threatened by Israeli settlement building (Ma'ale Adumim settlement pictured right).

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The Letter Kills, But the Spirit Gives Life

by Naim Ateek

The Hebrew Bible, which is an integral part of the Christian Bible, has to a large extent been used by Christian and Jewish religious Zionists to deny Palestinian Arabs (both Christian and Muslim) of their internationally guaranteed rights to their land, livelihoods, culture and self-determination. They believe that God gave the Jewish people the land, and that the Bible is the title deed. They promote an exclusive theology of land, rather than an inclusive one of justice and human rights for



all peoples. Because of this, Sabeel's 9th International Conference in November 2013 has the theme, "The Bible and the Palestine-Israel Conflict."

During the conference, we are going to take a good look at the Bible; its significance for people's faith today; its authority and its interpretation; and also consider what international law says about the Palestine-Israel conflict. I am thankful for the local and international scholars who will help us find answers to these important questions.

Earlier Believers

In the history of faith, there have been various stages in the development and understanding of the concept of the "word of God." It is safe to conjecture that human beings from their early periods of life on earth felt and believed that God was speaking and communicating with them through the natural order. This was the belief long before there was a Bible or sacred scriptures. Thousands of years later, the Psalmist expressed a belief that God speaks to people through creation: *The heavens are telling the glory of God; And the firmament proclaims his handiwork* (Psalm 19).

Another Psalmist believed that creation itself came into being by the word of God: *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, And all their host by the breath of his mouth* (Psalm 33).

Another stage for the ancient Israelites was when people started to refer to God's word as being communicated through prophets. From an Old Testament perspective, the most prominent prophet was Moses.

Surely in the beginning, it was an oral tradition that people remembered and

passed on, and much later wrote down. At the same time, some of this tradition was authored by people of faith and edited by religious scribes.

For Christians, there is another stage that one can discover within the pages of the New Testament. On the one hand, some of the New Testament writers mentioned the importance of written scriptures as the following examples show: Paul wrote, *"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope"* (Romans 15:4-6).

»» "All of this led to an increasing number of people believing that the Bible was not meant to be taken as inerrant or infallible; and that the Bible does not present one consistent theological viewpoint."

The writer of Timothy: *"... from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The writer of Hebrews: *"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart"* (Hebrews 4:12).

The following prayer captures the significance of the Bible: *"Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ..."*¹

On the other hand, and more significantly, the New Testament





Photo by Magdi Mohammed / AP

A Palestinian woman waters flowers planted in used tear gas canisters shot by the Israeli military during non-violent protests in the village of Bil'in in the West Bank.

witnesses to a further stage in the development of the concept of the word of God. Two examples:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us...” (John 1:1, 14).

The early believers understood these and similar texts in the New Testament as referring to a new way in which God has spoken to humanity, i.e. through Jesus Christ. By the fourth and fifth centuries and as a result of the theological

discussions in the Ecumenical Councils of the Church, church leaders articulated their faith through doctrinal formulas. They emphasized that the word of God (logos) is eternal because it is God's self-expression and self-concept, and the logos has always been active in the world through creation, revelation, and redemption.²

All the above stages of understanding the “word of God” were experienced by people of faith long before the Bible had undergone any historical and critical study during the past, approximately 200 years.

The Bible Challenged

Since the development of modern

and scientific methods of research and study, more questions began to be raised about the Bible. Some people found it difficult to accept biblical texts that reflect a violent god.³ Others, due to archeological findings and scientific historical research, were shaken to discover that many events did not occur historically as recorded in the Bible.⁴ Some people found that certain texts gave little spiritual or ethical value to their faith and they considered them unpalatable in the 21st century.

All of this led to an increasing number of people believing that the Bible was not meant to be taken as inerrant or infallible; and that the Bible does not present one consistent theological



It is important to emphasize that faith for many Christians is not totally dependent on the historical accuracy of the biblical documents. They are liberated from the letter of scripture and they experience the liberation of the children of God.

viewpoint. Rather, they believe it was written by many people and reflected people's thinking about God. In the New Testament, the various writers expressed their love for Jesus Christ and the impact he had on their lives; and these writers addressed many of the relevant concerns of the early Christian communities. We certainly must not undermine the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring and guiding the early believers.

Indeed, God continues to speak to us through the Bible and especially in the coming of Jesus Christ. And we continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit in our study of the Bible. However, it is important to find a clear criterion that can assist us in understanding and interpreting the message of the Bible for today. Many Christians, including myself, have found that using the Christ hermeneutic (criterion for

interpretation) or the hermeneutic of love can be very helpful especially in the interpretation of difficult texts in the Bible.

It is important for preachers and biblical interpreters to help Christians come to terms with questions that are relevant to people's life today. Unfortunately, many preachers continue to give simplistic and antiquated answers and fail to give the spiritual and intellectual nourishment that most Christians need. It is extremely important to engage the 21st century men/women and especially the young people with the liberating Gospel of Christ that can strengthen their faith and give their life meaning and hope.

This is especially important for Palestinian and Arab Christians in the Middle East. Due to political upheavals and the presence of brutal religious extremists, many Christians are confused and bewildered and the foundations of their faith are shaken – especially since Jewish and Christian Zionists use some of the biblical texts to justify the oppression and dispossession of Palestinians.

Many of us believe that Christ calls us to work for justice and peace, and we need to speak the word of God prophetically in the face of injustice and oppression. We also believe that following Jesus Christ implies a commitment to serving our fellow human beings and to taking a courageous stand against everything that dehumanizes them.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that faith for many Christians is not totally dependent on the historical accuracy of the biblical documents. They are liberated from the letter of scripture and they experience the liberation of the children of God. As Paul wrote, "...for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6). They go to church to worship God and in their worship they meet the Christ of faith and not necessarily the Jesus of history. In their simple and sincere faith, they want to lift up their prayers to God. They want to pray for others and they want to receive spiritual strength and nourishment as they go about their daily life.⁵

Therefore, in spite of the many questions many people have about the Bible, the Bible and especially the New Testament continue to be for many Christians a source of inspiration and guidance for the life of faith that needs to be emulated. The focus of their faith is not so much on the written word as it is on the person of Jesus Christ. Ultimately, the faith experience of many Christians is not subjected to a scientific method of testing. As Paul wrote: "...we walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7). They love Christ and they have put their faith and trust in God who guides them through life and nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

The Rev. Ateek is Director of Sabeel

¹ The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer*, (Boston: Seabury, 1977), p. 236.

² See "Word of God" in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, edited by Daniel Patte, 2010, p.1331.

³ See Deuteronomy 2:26-37.

⁴ An example is the destruction of Jericho in Joshua 6.

⁵ See chapter 6 of "The Bible and Liturgy" in *The Once and Future Scriptures: Exploring the Role of the Bible in the Contemporary Church*, edited by Gregory Jenks, 2013, p. 95-111.

Reclaiming the Palestinian Christ

by *Munir Fasheh*

I cannot talk about Jesus in abstract terms. In my imagination, He always acted within context and His actions always embodied protecting people from the onslaught of power and calling on people to love one another, reminding them that this is their main protection. Reclaiming the Palestinian Christ is not an academic or intellectual topic, but one that is connected to the urgent need to unplug ourselves from the ideological world and put us back into the rooted world, where our thoughts, words, and actions are in harmony with one another and with the well-being of people, communities, and nature.

The Palestinian Christ is crucial today in nourishing hope among people in Palestine and among those around the world who are being used and abused by power. The love He felt for people was concrete; His 'bias' was clear. He chose John (an outspoken critic of Herod) to baptize him, and chose his first disciples from those who were considered at the bottom of the socio-economic structure: fishermen in Tiberius. His love was manifested in actions and in stands He took in confronting those in power. He was constantly defending/ protecting people by confronting those in power. Reclaiming the Palestinian Christ today means confronting big corporations that manufacture poisonous foods, harmful medicines, and lethal weapons; it means confronting those who

use money to crush people and tear communities apart.

I first 'tasted' the difference between being rooted in life and being in an artificial environment when I was five years old. Before this, I played with my two sisters in a real garden in our home in Jerusalem where there were chickens, trees, plants, soil, etc., and where I was learning about the garden and enjoying it. Gathering eggs from our chickens in the morning and making holes at both ends of the eggs and sucking them raw was my favorite activity. At age five, I was pulled out of this real garden and put in a kindergarten, where everything was artificial – and was claimed to be the path for progress! I rebelled, but my father forced me – complying it seems with compulsory education – to go to kindergarten. The rest of my life was a replica of uprooting me from what is real and putting me in what is artificial.

This was true in particular in relation to two aspects that were central in my life: mathematics and religion. I would like to elaborate a little on the connection between the two. In both, the ideological replaced the rooted. The person who made this clear to me was my illiterate mother. I learned from her without words and without being taught, and by observing her world and realizing how rich and rooted her knowledge was and, at the same time,



A seven-year old Munir with his family in 1948 (pictured with his mother, father and two sisters)

how easy it was for textual minds like mine to be deceived.

Being illiterate, my mother did not know Jesus through words (other than 'love one another'); but through His spirit that was transmitted from one generation to another over 20 centuries. Her heart and life were full of love; I never heard her say anything that stemmed from hatred. This does not mean she was naïve; after all, she was robbed by Zionists of the house she and her sisters built by sewing clothes for over 15 years. The evil done to her was part of her experience. Her math and Christianity were rooted in life. In contrast, my math and missionaries' Christianity were connected to institutions and control.

I first realized my mother's math¹ in 1976. Later, I realized other knowledge she possessed and manifested in her daily living, including religion, upbringing

of children, and managing of family affairs. How she got this various knowledge without reading a word or being taught was a puzzle for me. The way I explain it is first by remembering that learning is a biological ability and second, through a statement by Naffari (an Arab Muslim Sufi) who lived in Baghdad 1,000 years ago: “The wider the vision, the less the words we need to express it.”

Jesus’ wide vision can be expressed in three words: “love one another,” which was all my mother needed to grasp His message. Similarly, all she needed to make thousands of dresses for women – who all had different shapes and sizes – was a measuring tape; the geometric box they made us buy in schools was useless to her.

Since 1976, her story has been a main topic in my talks and writings, including my doctoral dissertation. Realizing her math liberated me and at the same time disturbed me: I realized that what I was teaching for years was questionable, to say the least.

The same happened in relation to Christ. I experienced the uprooting of the Palestinian Christ and the replacing of Him by an ideological one in my home. As a little child, I listened to missionaries talk about Jesus in our home in a way that made me imagine Him as a magician performing miracles rather than as a protector of people from the onslaught of those in power.

Having faith means that in most cases when we get sick, we should not listen to professionals but rather to our bodies, which were created with the miracle of being able to heal. In very rare cases we may need something extra, but that is the exception, not the rule. Reclaiming the Palestinian Christ today means regaining biological abilities that were corrupted by institutions that serve power, such as the biological ability to learn (corrupted by educational institutions) and the biological ability to heal (corrupted by medical institutions). It means regaining what people can do without institutions and professionals.

No missionary came to our home to feel the spirit of the Palestinian Christ; instead, they came to convert us into their denominations. Jesus’ connection to life was absent in their talks. When I hear American self-righteous Christians consider Christ the front man for a program of tax cuts for the rich and for wars in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, I wonder: Which Christ are they talking about?

His love was not abstract, nor detached from real life, but was manifested in acts that endangered His life. Defending the prostitute in public in Jerusalem was both an act of courage and love for the downtrodden; He defended her by confronting people in power publicly, regardless of the consequences. He did the same in the temple when He carried a whip and drove money

lenders out. When the Pharisees asked him to silence His disciples, He said, “I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” He also said, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar.” His love was manifested by being against anything that degraded or harmed people.

This is the Palestinian Christ we need to reclaim today – in Palestine in particular. Portraits and statues of Jesus and Virgin Mary in churches do not reflect their concrete reality. Mary is portrayed as an aristocratic European woman and not as Palestinian woman struggling to take care of her home and children.

Protecting life from what was fabricated by experts, scientists, academics, professionals, institutions, and corporations falls on the shoulders of rooted religions more than sciences whose purpose is ‘to subdue nature.’ Rootedness is connected to wisdom, and the first casualty of modern civilization was wisdom. Reclaiming the Palestinian Christ means regaining wisdom in our lives.

When modern civilization started on its current course some 500 years ago, it put the mind on the throne and jailed wisdom. The intellect became supreme ruler, and the heart was belittled. Science and technology were treated like royalty, while wisdom was treated as an outlaw. Reclaiming the Palestinian Christ means setting wisdom free to again accompany the mind in people’s life journeys. Without wisdom, the mind can do much harm. As E. F. Schumacher said, “Man is far too clever to be able to survive without wisdom.” Human survival requires respecting creation and protecting nature as the basis of wisdom; without this, humanity is doomed.



“As a little child, I listened to missionaries talk about Jesus in our home in a way that made me imagine Him a magician performing miracles rather than as a protector of people from the onslaught of those in power.”

The idea of neighbor is central in Jesus' thoughts and actions. His perception of neighbor did not only include physical closeness but also anyone with whom one can share mutual caring, who can be distant in place or time. The Native American principle, 'caring for the 7th generation,' is caring for 'neighbors' who are not yet born. The Good Samaritan is caring for someone who is a stranger, or even an enemy. Loving our neighbors as ourselves is crucial in a world governed by hatred, control, winning, war, and greed. Reclaiming the Palestinian Christ means bringing Jesus back to live in the hearts, acts, and relationships among people.

I am the last male of the Fasheh family who still lives in Palestine; a sister and two cousins also carry Fasheh as their family name. Each of us is over 70 years old. With our passing away, our family vanishes from Palestine – a family whose roots probably go back to the times when Jesus walked on this land. Our disappearance is a result of acts by British and American "Christian" governments.

Palestinian Christians are the only rooted Christian community in the world; and we have been under threat since 1948 when Israel was created. In a few years those in Palestine who will still carry the spirit of the rooted Jesus would die. With their deaths, the 'cultural genocide' of Palestinian Christians in Palestine will be complete. Churches tell us to focus on our sins, ignoring the sins of empires. Recently, however, we see hopeful signs concerning change of heart and mind among western Christians.

The Palestinian Christ was a 'neighbor' for me. The home I was born in is almost half-way between where Jesus was born and where He was buried. Most of what He said or did was related to places I know and to people who could be my ancestors. Jesus' images were connected to Palestine, such as, "as soon as... the leaves [of fig trees] come out, you know that summer is near" (Mathew 24:32). He is not talking about a place like India, Germany, Congo, or Sweden, but about a place called Palestine. Every time I go to Jericho and pass through the

hills of the Jordan Valley I see shepherds with their sheep, and the image of Jesus is invoked within me. When He was transformed by Constantine into a savior of his disintegrating Roman Empire, He became alien to me. When George Bush and John McCain talk about Jesus, they sound to me like new Constantines trying to use Him again to save a disintegrating empire.

The Palestinian Christ is the one that I know and love. It wasn't the divine but the rooted aspect of Him that attracted and inspired me when I was a child – and still inspires me today.

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¹ See my article, "Community Education is to Reclaim and Transform What Has Been Made Invisible." Harvard Educational Review (Feb. 1990).

The Stones Cry Out

The story of the
Palestinian Christians
a film by Yasmine Perni



For more information about this new documentary, contact us at Sabeel: cornerstone@sabeel.org

Glimpses of Our Activities

Jerusalem



An ecumenical prayer service for the people of Syria at the Dominican Church in Jerusalem

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Clergy retreat in the village of Artas in the Galilee

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Clergy wives retreat in the village of Artas in the Galilee

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Participants of the Global Young Adult Festival near the Wall in Bethlehem

.....

Nazareth

Youth meeting at the Mount of Precipice



Women's meeting to evaluate and discuss new programs for the coming year



Excavations at Bethsaida with the Sabeel Nazareth youth group and an Australian group



A film screening of the new documentary "Road 60"

Moving Mountains...

For one week in July 2013, a group of 150 young adults from 38 countries and 12 different time zones embarked on a journey in Palestine during the Global Young Adult Festival. A joint effort by Sabeel and its partners, the festival promoted human rights, environmental sustainability, community and economic justice.



Volunteers build an underground home at the Tent of Nations.

Volunteers rebuild a home in Beit Arabiya.



Along the way, the young adults heard presentations from local political and international law experts and local theologians; walked in solidarity with Palestinians through humiliating checkpoints; sang to child prisoners outside a prison wall; toured disappearing Palestinian olive groves near illegal Jewish settlements; visited a refugee camp; shared meals with Palestinian families; and participated in life-changing volunteer work: digging a well, and building and rebuilding homes for Palestinian families. The festival ended with a flash mob/dance for Palestine in Jerusalem, filling the steps of the Damascus Gate with the colors of the Palestinian flag: red, green, white and black. To read a full report about the festival, please see our website: www.sabeel.org

Reshaping the World

“It was coming together, standing alongside families and getting our hands dirty that moved mountains and allowed us to create a miracle in just two and a half days!”

Mariam (Egypt/UK), on rebuilding a demolished home in Beit Arabiya

“I will never forget my trip to Palestine. It was awesome! And very eye-opening...I can't describe the remarkable hope that I have found in the midst of pain and struggle.”

Madeleine (USA), posting on Facebook after the festival



Flash Mob / dance for Palestine



“Each experience, each moment, each smile, each handshake, each hug, each meal we shared together, the happiness we saw glittering in the eyes of those children when they saw their home; all the laughter, the singing, the dancing and all the support we gave to Palestine was worthy.”

Mofokeng (South Africa)

Participants take a break with a talent show.

Myth as Metaphor: A Palestinian Experience

by Samia Costandi

One of the most anguishing issues I had to deal with while I was a young student at the British Missionary School in Beirut (both at the elementary and secondary levels) was the notion of the Promised Land. For a Palestinian Arab Christian girl it was difficult to understand how the Bible could include verses that literally specified that God actually chose to give the land of Palestine to the Jewish people as part of a promise and as a gift! This idea was so problematic for me that it set me on a life-long journey.

As a child, I was puzzled about God's generosity towards the Jewish people, which came at the expense of my people, the Palestinian people. How could something that had caused my parents and my people so much anguish and pain be considered part of an agreement between the Almighty God and a Chosen People, as my Bible teachers ascertained?

Bible study became the source of so much anxiety for me. The questions surrounding this issue were not well-articulated but they were pressing and crucial. We had enough on our plates as Palestinians and I did not want to add to that by bringing the topic home. I understood in my gut that the perpetuation of such ideas went against the very core of who we were as Palestinians, and against the moral

grain of my upbringing. However, I constantly deferred dealing with it. In a way it became my secret, the dilemma I was going to resolve when I grew up. Thus the quest began.¹

As an adult, mother of two boys, teacher, activist, and graduate student at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, I came across a fascinating comparative mythologist, Joseph Campbell, in one of my graduate courses. This discovery led me to write a 226-page master's thesis entitled: "The Spiritual Aspects of Joseph Campbell's Hermeneutics in Mythology: An Examination Leading to Implications for Religious Education."²

Campbell's comparative studies in mythology revealed to him that culturally bred mythologies, despite their ethnic inflections, continually point to universal archetypes and a common human identity. It was this idea of a common human identity that appealed to me and seemed to override ethnic inflections and narrow, sectarian interpretations of religious texts. Campbell believed that myth, like art, should be interpreted metaphorically, in terms of connotation instead of denotation.

I agreed with Campbell, and this was my Eureka moment – meaning that failure to interpret myth poetically leads to religious, social, and political divisiveness. The deeper meanings of religious Biblical mythology began to unravel for me.

I was glad to see that one myth that Campbell elaborated extensively on was that of the Promised Land. He called it



A large Star of David made with stones by Jewish settlers on Palestinian land near Hebron.

the “elementary idea...of the Promised Land”³ or the “Old Testament motif of the Promised Land...”⁴ When relieved of its “ethnic associations,” this motif, as Campbell saw it, was a variant of a mythological archetype known from many parts of the world.⁵ He also connects it to the much later medieval idea of the Earthly Paradise representing “a spiritual region, or condition of the mind, wherein phenomenal forms are recognized as revelatory of transcendence.”⁶

In my quest I had finally come upon a comparative mythologist who understood the multi-layered and deeper meanings of the human spiritual condition that mythologies, including religious mythologies, all over the world pointed to. The horizon began widening ever so much for me and I was able to unshackle myself from the colonialist literal and politically weighted Biblical misinterpretations that had clouded my thinking as a Christian Palestinian who had been exposed to them in a British missionary school.

Today, as a seasoned Associate Professor in philosophy of education many generations older and many years of experience wiser, I am able to see clearly how the Zionist movement used the concept of the Promised Land to its advantage to justify the occupation of Palestine in the mind of millions of Christians, particularly in the West, who adhered to literal interpretations of Biblical text. The irony is that most Jewish immigrants in Palestine prior to 1948 and around this time who perpetuated the Palestinian Nakba were socialists and communists! This is an interesting and salient moment in the



Photo by UPI/Debbie Hill

A Palestinian shepherd boy watches over his flock near the illegal Jewish settlement of Har Homa, near Bethlehem.

context of understanding how religion can be used in the service of politics.

The passion, diligence, and academic rigour with which I invested the writing of my master’s thesis were a testament to how personal this issue had become for me. However, this was not a question of merely providing evidence of a grave injustice. It went well beyond that. I felt burdened as a Christian by the fact that the purity of the values

I believed in like compassion, love, humility, meekness, and justice were all betrayed by the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the connotations of Biblical text.

Rather than abandoning my faith or turning my back on the Bible, I was adamant on demonstrating that the Holy text of my Christian faith ought not be used in the service of crime and injustice, and that the Biblical text pointed to meanings that were truly transcendent. On the social, emotional, intellectual, and political levels it was quite clear that a mammoth injustice had been done to the Palestinian people; the plethora of United Nations resolutions (amounting to more than 350) were ample evidence of this. Our life experiences and narratives as Palestinians were clear testimony to this injustice.

However, I felt that what added insult to injury was that something as sublime as religion could be used to support the uprooting of Palestinians from their land and the denial of their inalienable rights. I wanted to contribute to a better understanding of those notions in the

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Biblical text that referred to my country, Palestine. Campbell's books provided me with fertile ground for a spiritual and metaphorical interpretation of religion, one that was not narrow or sectarian but truly universal and transcendent.

The beautiful land of Palestine, the homeland of my parents and ancestors, the millennia old olive trees, the orange groves, the majestic pine trees, the rich, syrupy ancient fig trees, the sparkling grapevines, my grandparents' home, my mother's beautiful village Birzeit, and my father's home in Jaffa (which I never saw) could not in my perception and comprehension be reduced to a bargaining chip in international real estate.

We visited the West Bank when I was a child, prior to its occupation in 1967. There was nothing more important to me during my years of growing up than our yearly summer vacation in Birzeit. These family reunions filled with affection, humour, and love were the fabric from which our identities were woven. The occupation of the West Bank in 1967 was for my generation, a new Diaspora that accentuated and magnified the pain and suffering of the 1948 Diaspora.

The images haunted us all: Jewish individuals from New York City coming to the West Bank to be given villas surrounding our villages or on the grounds of a Palestinian village; uprooted olive trees on Palestinian land; stolen water from indigenous Palestinians. These were especially difficult when the Jewish settlers said God told them they ought to do this or that this fulfills the will of God!



“I am able to see clearly how the Zionist movement used the concept of the Promised Land to its advantage to justify the occupation of Palestine in the mind of millions of Christians, particularly in the West, who adhered to literal interpretations of Biblical text.”

This was indeed why Campbell's words were like balm to my wounds and solace for my soul; he said that the Promised Land is not “a portion of the Near East to be settled by a people chosen of God...”⁷ I knew that I had come upon the key to the interpretation of religious mythology. Interpreting the mythology of the Promised Land literally rather than metaphorically and in the narrow context of an ethnic and cultural particularity; juxtaposing the misguided conceptions of God as a warrior god, conceived in the tribal imagination as willing to side with one people against another, as Campbell said, was tantamount to spiritual suicide.⁸

For Campbell, myth, as metaphor, stimulates the human spirit and imagination as it attempts to “render in contemporary terms the mysteries of inner lives and the relationship of these mysteries to the cosmic life.”⁹ Campbell believed that the Promised Land mythology connotes a spiritual state of the mind and heart to be reached by contemplation.

Today Campbell's ideas ring very true since we can see the consequences of literally-interpreted mythologies prevailing in contemporary and ethnic global warring. The world is fraught with religious, social, and political

divisiveness. Since social and cultural boundaries have collapsed due to modernity, the world community needs, as I suggested in my thesis on Campbell, a unifying mythology for the whole planet. This can only be achieved through metaphor.

Dr. Samia Costandi has a PhD from McGill University and taught in higher education for over 25 years in the areas of philosophy of education and humanities. She is a Palestinian Canadian who grew up in Lebanon, and she is currently Associate Professor at Ahlia University in Bahrain.

¹ Part of this article has been adapted from my master's thesis at McGill University, which can be found at the following link: http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/3E2XJSNHAELIP5ASAGU92L3MYQADA2XN4DAF7S9DPAB3J6VLJS-02198?func=results-jump-full&set_entry=000002&set_number=001185&base=GEN01

² Costandi, S. (1994). *The Spiritual Aspects of Joseph Campbell's Hermeneutics in Mythology*. Unpublished Master's Thesis: McGill Faculty of Education

³ Campbell, J. (1986), *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*. New York: Harper and Row

⁴ *Ibid.*, p61

⁵ *Ibid.*, p61

⁶ *Ibid.*, p61

⁷ *Ibid.*, p55

⁸ *Ibid.*, p55

⁹ Campbell, J. (1988), *Myths to Live by*. New York: Bantam Books



Photo by Suhailb Salem / Reuters

Protesters in Cairo

The Arab Spring's Elusive Democracy

by Khalil E. Jahshan

Editor's note: Although our theme in this issue is the Bible, we could not ignore the urgent and ongoing conflicts and crises in Syria, Egypt and other countries in the Middle East; so we asked Dr. Khalil Jahshan for his evaluation of democracy in this region.

On December 17, 2010, an obscure 27-year-old Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi committed suicide by setting himself on fire to protest humiliating treatment by a local municipal inspector in the town of Sidi Bouzid. The inspector allegedly confiscated Bouazizi's vegetable cart and

scales, thus depriving him of his modest means of livelihood and humiliating him in public.

The case quickly assumed a mythical dimension and became a rallying cry in Tunisia, leading to public demonstrations and widespread protests against corrupt and unpopular economic, social and political policies under President Zine El-Abidine Ben-Ali. The regime's attempts to placate the angry public failed particularly after news of Bouazizi's death spread like a brush fire throughout the country. The situation quickly escalated, causing the collapse

of law and order and the eventual flight of President Ben-Ali and his immediate family to Saudi Arabia after 23 years of autocratic rule in Tunisia.

The Tunisian uprising, nicknamed by media outlets as the "Jasmine Revolution," and the massive publicity it received throughout the Arab world, quickly captured the attention of the Arab street and inspired similar uprisings in several countries including Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and others. The overall series of revolts was dubbed the "Arab Spring" or "The Arab Awakening," implying the arrival of a new dawn of freedom and democracy long lacking in Arab societies throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

The agenda of this awakening quickly expanded beyond frustration over high unemployment and decreasing living standards to include demands

for greater individual freedoms, political participation, rule of law, and transparency in the governing process. The circle of participants also began to include disaffected minorities, trade unions, political parties, women's organizations and professional associations, in addition to internet savvy students and young people of all walks of life. Most of the early demonstrations remained strictly nonviolent despite the intense and heavy-handed crackdown by the authorities.

The mass uprisings that spread across the Arab world over the past 33 months have led to the fall of Hosni Mubarak's government in Egypt, the collapse of Muammar Qaddafi's regime in Libya, the departure of Ali Abdullah Saleh from power in Yemen, and de facto civil war in Syria that has delegitimized the Ba'athist Assad regime in that country. Although events are still unfolding, unprecedented change has clearly taken place in these countries. The situation in Bahrain, however, was quickly suppressed and the Al-Khalifa regime propped up with direct military help from neighboring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, for fear that similar events could spread throughout the Arabian Gulf.

The impact of these developments on Arab and world public opinion was intense and intoxicating at the same time. The general impression of academics, political analysts, media commentators, and general observers, in the region and beyond, was that



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democracy was finally at hand in the Middle East. This overly emotional and optimistic wishful thinking misled many experts and even some actual participants in the Arab Spring to assume that democracy was virtually around the corner. Therefore, most observers failed to anticipate going through the “frustration of rising expectations” so soon.

As we survey the region today, it becomes clear that democracy did not flourish as forecasted by many pundits throughout 2011 and 2012. Unfortunately, the dawn of democracy proved to be a more elusive and less attainable goal than anticipated. Except for Tunisia, where certain steps toward participatory democracy were partially implemented, the rest of the Arab Spring countries fell significantly short of realizing their lofty objectives.

Was the whole phenomenon a “fraud” as claimed by Ben Stein who wrote as early as May 15, 2011 that “The Arab Spring as a force for democracy, human rights and peace in Egypt seems to me to be a fraud?” Or was it, as claimed by Oraib Al-Rantawi, “one of the most sweeping changes witnessed by the Arab world since the age of renaissance

and enlightenment some 100 years ago?” In my humble judgment it was neither farce nor panacea. The Arab Spring was objectively a mixed bag; it had its successes and its failures.

In terms of long-term successes, the Arab Spring has first and foremost put an end to the condescending notion of “Arab exceptionalism” in the West. This is the prevalent impression that the Arab world is permanently immune to the winds of democratic change. That is not to say, as some media outlets have done, that the spirit of Jeffersonian democracy is suddenly sweeping the Arab world and converting every demonstrator it encounters into a Jeffersonian democrat. The Arab Spring does, however, show that a majority of Arab citizens are not immune to the universal yearning for personal dignity, liberty, justice and self-determination vis-à-vis the state.

Second, the Arab Spring has, in a relatively rare moment in Arab history, captured the initiative and restored the center of gravity of Middle East politics from the outside to the region itself. The Arab uprisings we witnessed over the past 33 months have been predictable yet surprising at the same time. They

have been especially surprising to outside powers, like the United States, which suddenly found itself in uncharted territory as it attempted to protect its extensive national interests in the region, maintain its political credibility, and control the damage resulting from its initial losses at the political level and particularly, the security level.

Third, the Arab Spring has contributed significantly to the crumbling of the so-called “wall of fear” that historically characterized the overall relationship in the Arab world between the governed and the government. We are today facing an unprecedented period in Arab history where the citizenry feels empowered enough to address the imbalance of that lop-sided relationship by demanding its rightful role in the equation of open and democratic governance. Arab youth today, who constitute more than 65% of the population, want to be transformed from “humiliated citizens” to “legitimate partakers” in day-to-day conduct of civil affairs, as Rami Khouri of the Issam Faris Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut stated recently.

Finally, the Arab Spring has brought about a sea of change in sociopolitical conditions in the Arab world. We do not know for sure how institutionalized and how permanent this change will be. As Sophocles said: “One must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day has been.” But that uncertainty does not detract from the historical significance of the process underway.



Protesters in Syria

Three long-term authoritarian leaders, close allies of the United States, namely Ben-Ali, Mubarak and Saleh, are gone. A fourth, Muammar Qaddafi, was brutally removed from power. Leaders in Syria are facing some existential challenges that have tightened the noose around the neck of their Ba’athist regime over the past two years.

Parliamentary elections have been held in Tunisia and Egypt. The drafting of new constitutions has been underway in both countries. Political reform has been adopted as a self-preservation tool in Morocco, Jordan, and even Saudi Arabia where King Abdullah granted Saudi women the right to vote and run for political office in future municipal elections.

The change is also occurring in less visible and less publicized aspects of political and social life. “In Egypt alone,” wrote Abdel Monem Said Aly, President of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, “almost six months after the January 25th revolution, the stage now

features 168 political coalitions (each coalition being a combination of other coalitions, groups, and movements); nine new parties in addition to 25 existing ones, 14 new satellite TV stations in addition to 58 existing ones, 31 of which are private; three new daily newspapers in addition to 21 existing ones, plus about 500 other publications; and 25 (public) squares ready for demonstrations by a million or more participants.”

Skeptics might still ask: Where is the freedom and democracy demanded by the angry masses from Tunisia to Yemen and from Libya to Syria? Why has the Arab Spring failed to achieve a tangible measure of liberty and democratic practices in these countries? Why did the hopes of the past 33 months vanish and lead to the dismal situation that prevails today in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen and Syria?

1. The Arab Spring was not a revolution, as assumed by many observers, seeking to overthrow the

existing order and replace it with a new democratic order. Unfortunately, it was more limited in scope and consequently produced an equally limited outcome in all the affected countries. Quickly, the honest but shallow calls for democracy and liberty fell through the cracks. According to Aaron David Miller of the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., “These aren’t quite secular revolutions like those of 1789 and 1917, and they certainly aren’t Islamic ones, like Iran’s in 1979, at least not yet. They more resemble popular uprisings like those in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991.”

Furthermore, Miller argues in the *Wilson Quarterly* (Summer 2011) that the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt essentially left the deeply entrenched old bureaucracy and governmental institutions intact. This fact came back to haunt the awakening process particularly in Egypt, where the “deep state” bounced back with vengeance to subvert the limited gains of the Arab Spring and impose its own truncated and defective version of democracy with the help of the Egyptian military that maintained its own agenda and power base throughout the process.

2. The uprisings of Arab Spring were led by a “lumpenproletariat” of politically alienated, disenfranchised, and frustrated activists, students, minority groups, labor unions, etc. They definitely had the energy and idealistic vision to bring down their authoritarian leaders, but they clearly

lacked the political experience and organizational tools to translate their lofty vision into political reality.

This weakness left them vulnerable to political manipulation by remaining institutions of the “ancient regime,” and an easy prey for opportunistic Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood who were better mobilized and much more politically savvy. The Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, quickly outmaneuvered the original organizers, hijacked the uprisings and skillfully turned them into a political victory — to the dismay of many in Tahrir Square.

3. This lack of political experience also impacted the second phase of the awakening, i.e., governing. The Arab Spring, armed with the broad international support it garnered, managed to dislodge well-entrenched authoritarian regimes through sheer force of will and persistence. However, they quickly ran out of steam once these rulers walked into the sunset. The Arab Spring failed to produce the political leadership needed to govern.

Egypt is a perfect example of this phenomenon where neither secular nor Islamist forces were able to govern



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democratically and effectively in the post-Mubarak phase. The political vacuum created by this failure invited the Egyptian armed forces to step in and essentially govern the country. Pro-democracy forces failed to realize that military intervention is not compatible with the roadmap toward liberty.

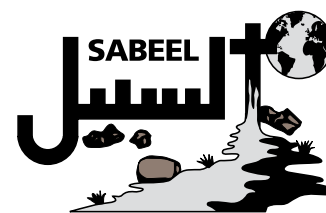
In conclusion, the Arab Spring has had both positive and negative consequences. It has succeeded in awakening the Arab street and transforming it into a vibrant polity demanding its rightful role in governance. However, it has not exhibited a long-term strategy and capacity to replace the old regimes with effective, democratic and representative forms of government. The challenges facing Arab citizens are formidable but the situation is hopeful at the same time. Democracy, rule of law, equality, political liberalization, respect for fundamental human and civil rights, and freedom of religion and expression are no longer farfetched objectives in the Middle East. The seeds of change have been planted and they are apt to bloom in the long run.

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PURPOSE STATEMENT *f* SABEL

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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