

Reclaiming Radical Witness through Prophetic Anabaptist Missiology

Andrew F Bush, DMin

Bethlehem Institute of Peace and Justice

Bethlehem Bible College, Bethlehem, Palestine

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Abstract

Christian mission's reason for being is to advance the kingdom of God in the world, that is, that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. God's will is for the full-orbed transformation of the world by peace replacing war, justice replacing unjust systems, and broken lives being made whole in Christ.

Professional mission theorists—missiologists—strengthen the global church's understanding of the radically transformative nature of the mission of God to which the church is called. When Christian mission goes awry and aligns itself with forces of oppression, missiologists must speak prophetically against such sin and call mission to its proper task.

Christian mission can do immeasurable harm when mission leaders are captives of popular trends and do not critique errant missions but promote them. Such is the case in Israel and Palestine, in which much Christian mission actively participates in the oppression of the Palestinian community by supporting radically unjust policies of Israel toward the Palestinian community.

This paper will discuss the need for Christian mission leaders and theologians to call for the radical transformation of Christian mission in Israel and Palestine. Such prophetic missiology can restore the integrity of Christian efforts in the Holy Land but also have far-ranging effects in underscoring the value of Christianity in speaking to places broken by war and social injustice worldwide. We should listen anew to Palestinian Christian theologians as they point the way to renewed mission in Palestine and Israel.

Introduction

God's mission is far-reaching, beyond the limits of our imaginations in its vast and profound transformation of all things. From the depths of the inner man to the vastness of the cosmos, God is seeking to reconcile all things to himself (2 Cor. 5. 19, Col. 1.20), and, through that reconciliation, make a way for the transformation of all creation (Rev. 21.5) This reconciliation and transformation which we look toward in the end of the age speaks of God healing and deliverance from the destruction of human sinfulness.

This is God's radical mission: complete transformation. Creation groans for renewal from the black holes of space to the snail on the seashore. How much more is the human heart, made in the image of God, and cognizant of something lost?

At the outbreak of the Second Intifada in October 2000, my family and I were living in an apartment building with a multi-generational Palestinian family. One night, as we huddled in the darkness on the lowest floor and the building shook from Israeli bombardment of a nearby Palestinian government building, one of the elderly Palestinian women in our host family spoke out in grief, "Why can't there be peace? My whole life has been war." Today, in Gaza, that cry has been uttered by thousands of men and women trying to feed, clothe, and shelter their families amidst the destruction of all that sustains life. The recognized need for and hope for the renewal of the world is heard in these cries, no matter how dimly such renewal might be discerned.

Jesus spoke of this transformation, which begins now and will one day be fulfilled, in the language of earthly rule: the kingdom of God. Many definitions of the kingdom of God have been offered, but *basileía tou Theou* speaks of God's reign, God's authority being brought to bear in the world. For this, we are taught to pray that God's authority will be brought to bear in the world so that God's will is as fully done *on earth as it is in heaven*. What is God's will? It is for the full-orbed transformation of the world by peace replacing war, justice replacing unjust systems, and broken lives being made whole in Christ.

Called to the Radical Mission of God

Followers of Jesus are called to join God's radical mission by witnessing to God's transforming purposes through the message of wholistic salvation through Christ Jesus and social action to transform structures and institutions in society that oppose God's justice and peace. The radical mission of God, indeed, demands a radical witness. Christians are called to be marked by radical mission, to be the salt of the earth, to be a *peculiar people* (1 Pet. 2.9), profoundly distinct, marked by pursuing the ultimate vision of a transformed world.

This essay reflects on this call to radical witness and mission as it pertains to Palestine and Israel in the context of conservative Christian and Mennonite congregations in the United States, which often overlap so significantly in church culture and theology, as to be indistinguishable, and which are spiritually kindred spirits to conservative evangelical congregations internationally. Further, this essay explores why such a transformative mission is tragically absent from Palestine and Israel, and how this can be reversed.

In terms of Mennonites becoming indistinguishable from their Protestant fundamentalist neighbors, Joel Stoltzfus describes in his essay, "Fundamentally flawed: How Mennonites failed to be faithful," the manner by which American Anabaptists absorbed fundamentalist teachings, radically moving Anabaptist congregations away from their original theological and spiritual roots. He writes,

Our relatives from a generation or two ago swallowed fundamentalist theological innovations hook, line, and sinker without realizing the divergent path this represented. It might have begun with a subtle change of focus, but the difference in final outcomes is huge. We have gone from the question of "Is it Christlike?" to "Is it biblical?" and many of us don't even know why that's a problem.

Our ancestors might have been radical followers of Jesus. Yet, most of us, despite our additional Mennonite packaging and a little Anabaptist flair, added back in to make us feel special about ourselves, are plain old biblical fundamentalists.¹

Due to the lack of a transformative mission in the Holy Land, it should be noted that while imbued with fundamentalist teachings, American Mennonites have widely become inculcated in Christian Zionism and its arguments for dispossessing Palestinians from their homes and land. There are various expressions of Christian Zionism; however, it popularly believes that all the prophecies concerning Israel in the Old Testament are to be fulfilled literally, that Israel has the ‘right’ to possess all the land of historic Palestine, and the gathering of Jews back to the modern State of Israel is a harbinger of the return of Christ.²

Christian Zionism is espoused widely internationally. European and Asian groups visiting Bethlehem Bible College in Bethlehem, Palestine, often repeat the same arguments commonly voiced by American evangelical Christians and conservative Mennonites. So, the burden for the lack of a transformative mission in the Holy Land falls on many shoulders. It should also be mentioned that in many less conservative churches, Mennonite and otherwise, in terms of Palestine and Israel, moral clarity is often shackled by an indecisive “both-siderism” that fancies itself wise and caring by “listening to both sides” without ever taking a stand against injustice, effectively normalizing injustice in Palestine.

¹ Joel Stoltzfus, “Fundamentally flawed: How Mennonites failed to be faithful,” *Anabaptist World*, October 23, 2017, <https://anabaptistworld.org/fundamentally-flawed-how-mennonites-failed-to-be-faithful/>, accessed February 25, 2025.

² For a further discussion of Christian Zionism and mission, see Andrew F. Bush, “The Implications for Christian Zionism and Mission,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, Vol. 33, No. 3.

Merciless Christians and 'Anti-Mission'

The call to renew a radical witness could not be more appropriate and timely. A recent article in a national newspaper declared, "Behold the Strange Spectacle of Christians Against Empathy."³ The author observes that Christians who support the new United States administration's incongruous cancellation of international aid, which includes food and medicine, to desperately needy countries. Similarly, while two million Palestinians in Gaza try to survive on the brink of starvation, Christians support the closing of the UN agency, UNRWA, whose specific purpose is to help Palestinian refugees.⁴ Eighty percent of the population in Gaza are refugees whose lives depend upon the relief delivered by UNRWA.

This hard-heartedness is hardly a new phenomenon in American Christianity. The unprovoked invasion of Iraq drew broad support from American evangelical Christians⁵, who also advocated following the military into Iraq to evangelize Muslims, not concerned with the association of the Christian gospel with military action.⁶ In the United States, such lack of mercy has been reiterated as Christians have called for tighter closure of the nation's borders, refusing

³ David French, "Behold the Strange Spectacle of Christians Against Empathy," The New York Times online, February 13, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/13/opinion/trump-usaid-evangelicals.html>, accessed February 13, 2025.

⁴ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

⁵ "Analysis: Do Baptist leaders regret justifying Iraq war?", Baptist News Global, January 10, 2007, <https://baptistnews.com/article/analysis-do-baptist-leaders-regret-justifying-iraq-war/>, accessed February 24, 2025.

⁶ Andrew Bush, "Bullets and Bibles: The Unhealthy Marriage of Missions and Militarism." PRISM, Palmer Seminary, Fall 2010.

entry to refugees seeking asylum from perilous conditions in their own countries, and have supported the deportation of millions who are in the US with temporary no visas.

These departures into a culture of cruelty are not merely a poor witness of God's transforming mission. They amount to 'anti-missions,' utterly antithetical to God's purposes to bless and make all that is broken whole. They are a witness not of the kingdom of God to come, a kingdom of righteousness and peace, but the promotion of the kingdoms of this world and the suffering they produce. Yet, these examples of cruelty within American congregations pale in comparison to the destructive Christian involvement mission in Palestine and Israel through the decades, and especially during the last eighteen months since the outbreak of the genocidal war in Gaza after the horrific slayings of Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023.

Christian Mission, Palestine and Israel

Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem live under the oppression of Israeli Occupation. This Occupation is effected by the suffocating control over Palestinian life, including its movement, trade, resources, and more. Jeff Halper, an Israeli activist and founder of The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (<https://icahd.org/>), refers to this as the 'matrix of control.'⁷ Under the enforced occupation, land is stolen, houses are demolished without meaningful recourse, and people are held under 'administrative detention' without charges filed. Israeli settlers, with the confidence that the Israeli government will not hold them accountable, have since October 7, 2023, instigated a reign of terror, marauding through

⁷ "The Key to Peace: Dismantling the Matrix of Control," Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, <https://icahd.org/get-the-facts/matrix-control/>, accessed, February 18, 2025.

defenseless Palestinian villages, killing herds, destroying orchards and crops, burning cars, and setting fire to homes. Their goal to drive Palestinian families from their land in many cases has been successful.

Responsible international agencies such as Amnesty International and Israeli human rights organizations such as B'Tselem have flatly stated that Israel is imposing an apartheid system on the Palestinian people.⁸ As for those of Palestinian descent who are Israeli citizens, they are rendered second-class citizens by the Nation-State Law passed in 2018 by the Israeli Knesset, which states explicitly that Israel exists for the self-determination of the Jewish people only.

Most troubling in terms of the persistence of injustice toward the Palestinian people is the broad and uncritical support of Israel by many Christians in the United States and internationally. Such support is not merely a political action but within the purview of Christian mission.⁹ For example, Christians have given millions of dollars for the construction of Israeli settlements on the West Bank, reckoning that this hastens the return of Christ. These settlements are regarded as illegal by the international community.⁹ They are an absolute hindrance to the promotion of the mission of God. They are a direct obstacle to achieving peace

⁸ See "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians," Amnesty International online, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/02/israels-system-of-apartheid/>, accessed January 22, 2025.

⁹"The presence and ongoing expansion of existing settlements by Israel and the construction of settlement outposts is frequently criticized as an obstacle to the Israeli–Palestinian peace process by the Palestinians and third parties such as the OIC, the United Nations, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, and the European Union have echoed those criticisms. The international community considers the settlements to be illegal under international law . . ." in "Israeli Settlement," Wikipedia, accessed Feb. 15, 2022.

because they are on territory that the United Nations has designated for a future Palestinian state.

In financing the construction of Israeli settlements within Palestinian territory, evangelical Christians have failed to be a voice of peace or act as agents of the mission of God. Instead, they have solidified the status quo of oppression. They have pursued anti-mission, a witness not to the transformation of the kingdom of God but to the perpetuation of the unjust and oppressive structures within the Holy Land.

The silence of Christians as Palestinians are driven from their homes, their crops burnt, and their children terrorized is deafening. Especially difficult is their attitude toward Palestinian evangelicals: Jack Sara, the president of Bethlehem Bible College in Palestine, states:

We, Palestinian believers, are very aware that our existence throws a wrench into the tightly organized theologies of some of our brethren overseas—and yet we are not ashamed of our existence. Like every other person, we can only trust that our presence and identity in our corner of the world are not an accident but part of His divine purpose.¹⁰

The uncritical support of Israel's unjust policies and even participation in them by Christians reached its nadir during the Gaza war. As the deaths of civilians mounted in staggering numbers – children have died in the conflict at a faster rate than at any time since the Second World War - not only did many conservative as well as liberal Christians fail to raise their voices in protest, but they devised ghoulish excuses to justify the slaughter of Palestinians. American Christians began to refer to Gazans as continuing the “spirit of Amalekites.” Scripture

¹⁰ Jack Sara, “I Am a Palestinian Evangelical and I Am Not Ashamed” The Christian Post, December 2019, <https://www.christianpost.com/by/rev-dr-jack-y-sara>, accessed January 29, 2022.

records that the Lord commanded Saul to slaughter the Amalekites -- “Now go and attack the Amalekites and destroy everything they have. Do not spare them. Kill men and women, infants and nursing babies, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys”(1 Samuel 15:3). Shockingly, Christians are turning to this passage as a validation of the carnage in Gaza in which more than 51, 000 civilians have been killed, the majority being women and children.¹¹

Well, one might say, such hateful and cruel sentiments are the views of the less educated fundamentalists. In response, consider that a United States congressman from Michigan, Tim Wahlberg, called for Gaza to be made like Hiroshima or Nagasaki.¹² Wahlberg is a graduate of Wheaton College, the flagship evangelical Christian university in the United States.

The Holy Land - Palestine and Israel - are so central to the faith of Christians of all traditions that what is promoted there will affect their spirituality widely. If anti-mission is suitable for the Holy Land, it implies it is also suitable for Baltimore or Amsterdam. Therefore, the ripple effect of the ‘anti-mission in the Holy Land is broad. Ultimately, Christian Zionism has the effect of diminishing the command of Christ to love one’s neighbor as oneself. It supplants the radical witness of the mission of God with nationalism. For example, one of the most influential pastors in the United States, Robert Jeffries, of the First Baptist Church in Dallas:

¹¹ Aldin Orly, “Christian Right Cites Violent Biblical Amalek Trope to Justify Israel’s Tactics,” Truthout online, October 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/christian-right-cites-violent-biblical-amalek-trope-to-justify-israels-tactics/>, accessed February 2025.

¹² Neil Vigdor, “Republican Congressman Says of Gaza: ‘It Should Be Like Nagasaki and Hiroshima’,” New York Times online, March 31, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/31/us/politics/tim-walberg-gaza-nagasaki-hiroshima.html>, accessed February 21, 2025.

“The Bible says this land belongs to the Jewish people — period. . . God has pronounced judgment after judgment in the Old Testament to those who would divide the land . . . and hand it over to non-Jews.”¹³

In this view, all Palestinians and those who support them are judged by God. What, then, is the gospel to Palestinians and those who support a sovereign Palestinian state? Is it ‘God judges you’? Such a narrow reading of God’s will for the land fails to account for biblical complexities such as the purpose and contingencies of the land promises, the captivity of Israel in Assyria and Babylon, and Jesus’ qualification, “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth (or ‘land’)” (Matt. 5.6). Concerning the harsh judgment that is based on the eschatology of Christian Zionism, David Bosch observes that over-realized eschatology has tended to justify injustice in this age because the coming kingdom will - it is assumed - prove the oppressor right.”¹⁴

Another example of how the eschatology of Christian Zionism influences the lack of a meaningful, transformational mission in Israel/Palestine is found in the often-expressed challenge, which this writer has personally had to address, “Why do you talk about peace between Palestinians and Israelis? The Bible says there will not be peace in the Holy Land until Jesus returns. To work for peace is a deception!”

In response, one should remind those who have this opinion that we should not subjugate the clear ethical teachings of Christ, which are the foundation of transformative

¹³ “Holy Land Christians Feel Abandoned by US Evangelicals,” F. Brinley Bruton, Lawahez Jabari and Paul Goldman, NBC News online, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/holy-land-christians-feel-abandoned-u-s-evangelicals-n867371>, accessed Feb. 15, 2022.

¹⁴ David Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) p.

mission, such as to love one's enemies, to forgive, to give to those in need, to speculative eschatologies. (If eschatology justifies the cruel anti-mission in the Holy Land, should it not also be considered that the coming of Christ will validate mercy, kindness, and love?)

Everywhere Except Palestine

What is troubling is that the established principles of modern missions, which in this case should be a corrective to the excesses of Christian Zionist anti-mission, are strangely ignored concerning Palestine. The vital mission principles, which are meant to promote a robust, transformative mission, including avoiding mission entanglement with colonialism, vigorous contextualization of theology and praxis, the pursuit of social justice, and acknowledgment of indigenous people and their culture, seem entirely irrelevant when they pertain to Palestine and Israel.

Mission and Colonialism

No argument needs to be made about the negative entanglement of Christian mission and Western colonialism. Oppressive colonial regimes cynically used Christian mission to justify their endeavors. Christian missionary efforts advanced colonial regimes through the institutions they established, such as schools, colleges, training programs, hospitals, etc. Although some argue that Christian mission was a positive influence despite its ties with colonialism, its insidious partnership with colonialism was widely evident. Today, the hint of Christian mission that communicates colonial attitudes – popularly labeled ‘white saviorism’ – is shunned.¹⁵

¹⁵ For example, see Joha Malik, “Are Missionaries Modern Colonizers?” The Bottom Line UCSB online, January 21, 2021, <https://thebottomline.as.ucsb.edu/2021/01/are-missionaries-modern-colonizers>, accessed March 16, 2024.

Nevertheless, Christians openly speak of Israel's unquestioned 'right' to the exclusive possession of all the land of historic Palestine and promote settler colonialism.

The British Mandate established Western colonial rule over historic Palestine. One of the effects of this role was the establishment of rigid sectarianism and the marginalization of the Palestinian Christian community.¹⁶ The British privileged the nascent Jewish community over the indigenous Palestinian community, as it departed from Palestine in 1948.

The project of Zionism, which had promoted its policies of ethnically cleansing Palestinians from the land since the first decades of the twentieth century, in the absence of the British, moved quickly to advance its control over all of the land. The infamous statement, "A land without a people, for a people without a land," encapsulates its colonial perspective. Despite the centuries-old association of Palestinian society with the land, Christian Zionists maintain that the land was essentially empty when Jews began to immigrate to Palestine. Such an idea is borrowed from political Zionism, which sought to obliterate Palestinian national identity.¹⁷ There were people on the land, but they were to be treated as non-people and removed from the land as much as possible. Such a policy is, of course, settler colonialism that seeks to remove the indigenous people to be replaced by the colonial population.¹⁸

¹⁶ Laura Robson, *Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) p. 1.

¹⁷ In 1969 Golda Meir stated, "There was no such thing as Palestinians. When was there an independent Palestinian people with a Palestinian state? . . . They did not exist" (Sunday Times, London, June 15, 1969; cited in Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *The Palestinian People: A History* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003], pp. xxvi–xxvii).

¹⁸ Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 187.

. Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian journalist, in his article entitled, “Palestinians lament Western response,” in the Anabaptist World Journal, comments on the alienation Palestinian Christians feel from the Christian West. He notes that Salim Munayer, founder of the Jerusalem-based Musalaha, which facilitates reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, describes Israel’s policies toward the Palestinian people as ‘settler colonialism.’ Munayer says, “An honest diagnosis reveals we are dealing with settler colonialism aimed at eliminating the ‘other.’”¹⁹

That Israel's settler colonial policies sought to cleanse the Palestinian people ethnically was one of the first stated goals in the Zionist movement, subsequently advanced with the expulsion of the residents of more than four hundred Palestinian villages in the 1948 war, as well as the onerous residency requirements that were placed on the Palestinian citizens of East Jerusalem. The confiscation of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem is an ongoing project. Israeli leaders have called for the total expulsion of all the Palestinian residents of Gaza.²⁰

It would appear in Christian missiology that colonialism is a non-issue today. Not that it no longer exists, but rather mission leaders do not see a contradiction between colonialism, which subjugates an Indigenous people, and the gospel of grace, which calls us to love our

¹⁹ Daoud Kuttab, “Palestinians lament Western response,” Anabaptist World online June 11, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/palestinians-lament-western-response/>, accessed March 14, 2024.

²⁰ “Israeli Officials Join Settler Groups to Call for Ethnic Cleansing of Gaza,” Democracy Now online, October 22, 2024, https://www.democracynow.org/2024/10/22/headlines/israeli_officials_join_settler_groups_to_call_for_ethnic_cleansing_of_gaza, accessed April 21, 2025.

neighbor as ourselves. Can a radical witness for the radical mission of God leave unchallenged colonial mission?

Mission and Contextualization

There could not be a more established conviction in modern missiology than that theology and ministry should have contextual relevance. As Stephen Bevan identifies several paradigms of contextualization, even the most fundamental contextualization, which he terms the “translation” paradigm, consideration must be given to how something will be made meaningful when it crosses from one’s cultural context into a receiving culture. This mode of contextualization is familiar to most Western evangelical and Mennonite missions. Bevans describes a more profound contextualization that occurs when theological ideas emerge from within a context rather than being imparted to it from an outside source. ,

The Palestinian Christian community, weary of the imposition of Western theologies, of which Christian Zionism is the most recent, is in the midst of their own profound conversation towards the formation of an authentic local theology. Mitri Raheb states:

Up to the present time, churches in the Middle East have been engaged in either recalling the patristic theology or importing Western theology . . . It is a time to develop a Palestinian Christian theology that reflects our situation and deals with the problems of the Christian community today.²¹

²¹Mitri Raheb, “The Spiritual Significance and Experience of the Churches: The Lutheran Perspective,” *Christians in the Holy Land*, eds. Michael Prior and William Taylor (London: The World of Islam Festival Trust, 1995) p. 129. For further discussion, see also Naim S. Ateek, “The Emergence of a Palestinian Christian Theology,” in Naim S. Ateek, Marc H. Ellis, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989) p. 60.

The resurgence of Palestinian Christian contextual theology is making its mark. Elizabeth Martejn, a Middle East scholar, notes that contrary to the frequent portrayal of the influence of Palestinian Christianity as dwindling, “Palestinian Christians have brought about a revival and played a significant role in creating a society based on the principles of justice, peace, and reconciliation.” Martejn further argues that this revival has been driven by “. . . the public role of Palestinian contextual theology as reflected in Palestinian theological works.”²² She notes the work of the Palestinian liberation theologian Naim Ateek, Salim Munayer's theology of reconciliation, and Munther Isaac's call for justice and peace.

When Christian Zionism does respond to the contextual realities facing Palestinian Christians, it is often inaccurate, perpetuating derogatory stereotypes of the Palestinian Muslim community, and falsely claiming that the majority of Palestinian Christians who emigrate do so because of friction with their Muslim neighbors. On the contrary, Palestinian Christians generally maintain positive relations with and share the same nationalistic hopes as their Muslim neighbors.²³

The decades of emigration of Palestinian Christians from their homeland generally is not because of the Islamic community but overwhelmingly the result of the adverse effect of the

²² Elizabeth S. Martejn, “The Revival of Palestinian Christianity: Developments in Palestinian Theology” Exchange: Journal of Contemporary Christianities in Context, 49 (2020), file:///C:/Users/akbus/Downloads/The%20Revival%20of%20Palestinian%20Christianity%20%20Elizabeth%20Marteijn.pdf, accessed March 20, 2025.

²³ For further discussion concerning Palestinian Christian and Muslim relations see Bernard Sabella, “Socio-Economic Characteristics and the Challenges to Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land” in Michael Prior and William Taylor, eds., *Christians in the Holy Land* (London: The World of Islam Festival Trust, 1995) p. 31-41.

Israeli occupation on their daily lives and prospects for the future. The occupation makes the pursuit of daily tasks such as going to school and the conducting of business an arduous task. Under occupation, roads to schools and markets are either completely closed or impeded by hundreds of Israeli military checkpoints in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.

Don Wagner argues that Christian Zionism itself is a factor in the stress on the Palestinian Christian community. He states, “In providing political and economic support for Israeli militancy against Palestinian Christians and Muslims, Christian Zionists are aiding the collapse of Christianity in the Holy Land.”²⁴

While the weight of the imposition of Western-driven Christian Zionist theology of Palestine falls upon Palestinians, Jewish Israelis are also its victims. However, they may not see themselves as such. I think of the journey of David and Lisa Loden, who immigrated to Israel in the early 1970s²⁵. As young Jewish Christians, they were caught up in the theology of Christian Zionism that was and is prevalent in Messianic Judaism. For many Messianic Jews, this theology separates them from their Palestinian Christian neighbors. It becomes a spiritual straightjacket. To the Loden’s credit, they saw firsthand the policies of Israel toward the Palestinians, which Christian Zionism justified and even actively supported. In time, they worked to form a different contextual theology in Israel, which set them apart from many of their Messianic Jewish neighbors. Having worked on a theology built on love and compassion, they could enter into

²⁴ Don Wagner, “The Evangelical-Jewish Alliance” in *The Christian Century*, June 28, 2003, pp. 20-24.

²⁵ David and Lisa Loden in personal conversation with Andrew Bush, March 2022, Netanya, Israel.

fellowship with their Palestinian Christian friends in Bethlehem. Lisa, with Palestinian Salim Munayer, developed an authentic contextual theology of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians in *Through My Enemies Eyes: Envisioning Reconciliation in Israel-Palestine*.²⁶

While the Western theological treadmill goes round and round, unresponsive to Palestine, dynamic Palestinian and Israeli scholars are digging deeply into the realities and tragedies of the Palestinian context and producing robust contextual theology. This effort is critical because Mitri Raheb argues that Palestinian freedom will come from Palestinian Christianity liberating itself from settler-colonial theology.²⁷

Despite Western Christians' lack of responsiveness to the imposition of non-contextual theologies, Palestinian Christian voices are making themselves known. The influential Christ at the Checkpoint Conference,²⁸ conducted biannually at Bethlehem Bible College, promotes a Palestinian theology of justice and peace. Influential Christian leaders have participated in these conferences for more than a decade.

Where are Western Christian missiological voices calling for a new listening to the Palestinian voice? Perhaps it is true as Samuel Escobar argues, that the West gives lip service to

²⁶ Salim Munayer and Lisa Loden, *Through My Enemies Eyes: Envisioning Reconciliation in Israel-Palestine* (Authentic Publishers: Milton Keynes, 2014) *passim*.

²⁷ Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2023) 141.

²⁸ <https://christatthecheckpoint.bethbc.edu/>

the global south, but it really doesn't want to hear what it has to say. And how much is lost when it doesn't listen as Escobar states:

The young churches needed to be able to respond to the pastoral questions that arose in their context for the penetration of their cultures with the gospel. However, it seems that the possibility of posing the kinds of questions that Western theology had never raised became controversial. With Protestant missionary work now more than two centuries old, why is it that we have only recently witnessed the development of theologies that amount to 'reading the Bible with new eyes'?²⁹

Some people are listening. In a book tour in March 2025 of his recently published text, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza*,³⁰ by Munther Isaac, a Lutheran Palestinian Christian, packed auditoriums stood and applauded after his presentations on the suffering of the people in Gaza and the silence of the Western church. Palestinian Christian theology is as uplifting to Western Christians as it is to Palestinians

Mission and Ethnic Identity

Closely aligned with the glaring deficiency of contextual theology among those who are ardent supporters of Israel is its perverse denial of the identity of Palestinians as an authentic people group self-identified as 'Palestinians.' This denial follows closely to the "land for a people without a land' canard. The argument is based on the false idea that Arab peoples immigrated

²⁹ Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003) pp. 133-4.

³⁰ Munther Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025).

to Palestine in response to Zionist immigration. It maintains that there never was a Palestinian people until it was artificially created after the rise of Zionism in the land.

This opinion is thoroughly refuted by the Israeli historians Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, who state emphatically in their book *The Palestinian People*: “We... reaffirm in this book that the origins of a self-conscious, relatively unified Palestinian people pre-date Zionism.³¹ The attempt to deny the national identity of the Palestinian people by bogus scholarship is further debunked by the important Palestinian scholar, Rashid Khalidi's *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*, in which Khalidi argues that a Palestinian national consciousness had its origins near the beginning of the twentieth century.³²

Denying a people's identity is essentially hateful. It contradicts the mission of bringing good news to all nations (Mt. 28.14). To strip people of their ethnic identity is the most direct attack on their culture and society. Yet, these statements go largely unchallenged in the mission of Christian West.

Mission and Social Justice

When examining the alliance today between Christian mission and colonialism, the lack of contextualization in mission, and the denial of ethnic identity in Palestine, the absence of an overarching theology of social justice is apparent. Social justice for Palestinians dispossessed of

³¹ Baruch Kimmerling and Joel S. Migdal, *The Palestinian People: A History* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2003) p. xxvi.

³² Rashid Khalidi, 10.

their human rights of freedom of movement, education, and health care is not emphasized by Christian Zionists. The concept of peace without justice for the oppressed is first impractical and, secondly, unbiblical. There cannot be peace on earth and between formerly warring nations until they reach a point of surrender to the fact of the 'other's human dignity.

Although the Lausanne Conference makes much of its stand for justice, social justice remains foreign to most Western evangelicals' spirituality and mission, who instead emphasize the conversional nature of Christian mission and are suspicious of anything that appears to be the social gospel. "The great reversal," when evangelical Christianity abandoned its social dimension of mission, remains stubbornly in place. Some younger evangelicals lead justice ministries, but the thrust of Western evangelical mission does not easily speak of social justice. This is true in any context, but it is especially evident in Palestine in a situation that so desperately cries for justice.

The absence of missional leadership to call out these flagrant abuses of mission is egregious. If Western mission still affirms colonialism, triumphal theology, denigrating indigenous people, and is impervious to social injustice, then what good is it?

The Way Back to Radical Mission from Anti-Mission

For mission in Palestine to move past these retrograde mission practices and reflect the radical transformative nature of the mission of God requires intentional reflection and an openness to new directions. An important step that mission leaders can take is to be open to theological discussion by parties usually excluded from one's conversation. Can we listen to non-

evangelicals and non-Western Christians? Perhaps, in terms of Israel and Palestine, we should listen to Jewish voices such as the Israeli-based human rights organization B'Tselem³³ and Rabbis for Human Rights,³⁴ or influential Israeli journalists such as Gideon Levy or Amira Hass, who speak frankly against Israel's oppressive policies. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé's *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* provides an essential corrective to the revisionist narrative of the founding of the State of Israel.³⁵

Additionally, mission educators and leaders should take to heart the contextual theology of Christian Palestinian leaders, who have already been mentioned, such as Munther Isaac, Salim Munayer, Rula Mansour, Mitri Raheb, and others. These authors contributed to the Kairos Document, a Palestinian contextual theology of liberation. It describes itself as "A moment of truth; A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering."³⁶

Furthermore, Christian mission leaders who have a romantic idea of the Holy Land and God's blessings on it should come and see what the apartheid wall means for people who live in Bethlehem and other locales. They should see for themselves the villages decimated by radical settlers. They should pass through the Qalandia checkpoint north of Jerusalem, sometimes waiting for hours to pass. They should try to drive in a Palestinian-licensed vehicle (white license

³³ <https://www.btselem.org/>

³⁴ <https://www.rhr.org.il/eng>

³⁵ Pappé, Ilan, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications Limited, 2007).

³⁶ "Kairos Document," <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document>, accessed April 17, 2025.

plate versus yellow) from Jenin in the north, with its ruined roads, to Hebron in the south. Such a tour will let people know what promoting a theology of ethno-supremacy means on the ground, and then they should reflect on all this ugliness in the light of the love of Jesus.

Some are making this journey, both physically in Palestine, and then spiritually and intellectually out of the silo-thinking of Christian Zionism. Saulo Padilla, a young Mennonite raised in Guatemala, describes his journey with the help of Mennonite theologians:

I remember as a child that some of my family members who owned guns would celebrate and show them off every time they acquired a gun made in Israel. It was as if they were holding David's slingshot. I was taught to believe that the nation and state of Israel were the people of God — no questions asked. It was sinful to question this belief. I did not understand the nuances, history or political implications.

I held the Zionist vision of Israel for most of my life. That is, until I studied history and theology at Goshen College in the Hispanic Ministries program. Professors such as Juan (John) Driver and Ron Collins helped me deconstruct these violent narratives and reconstruct a new Anabaptist peace theology with a different vision of God, Jesus and Israel. A new eschatological vision..."

After a learning tour in Palestine and Israel, Padilla writes:

By the end of our learning tour, our Christian Zionist belief system and theology had changed. Most of our leaders who had claimed unwavering support for Israel started to speak out about Palestine and Israel. No longer could they speak about it as a one-sided narrative.

As a result, at the MC USA convention in 2017, Hispanic Mennonite and people of color leaders were some of the first to approach the microphone to speak in support of the "Seek Peace" resolution. We did not forget about the people or the land of Israel. But our new narratives held the complexity of the stories we heard and of the shared humanity of Palestinians and Israelis. We committed to speaking out.³⁷

³⁷ Saulo Padilla, "My journey from Zionism to seeking peace in Palestine and Israel," *Anabaptist World*, March 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/my-journey-from-zionism-to-seeking-peace-in-palestine-and-israel/>, accessed April 16, 2025.

There are more glimmers of hope that prophetic voices will be raised. After the attack by HAMAS on October 7, 2023, concerned Mennonites in the US formed Mennonite Action, which describes itself as follows: “We are a movement of Mennonites taking public action for a free Palestine and the liberation of all God’s children.”³⁸ Mennonite Action has conducted numerous non-violent demonstrations on behalf of justice for the Palestinian people and a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

These are isolated examples of grassroots change, yet the fact that individuals are still searching for a new theology pertinent to Israel and Palestine is a harbinger of hope. The fact that some American Mennonites uphold their traditional stances on peace indicates that traditional denominations can strengthen and act upon their traditional values.

Conclusion

For decades, few Western Christians have called for a new direction for engagement in Palestine and Israel, one that sought the well-being of all in the land. This would, of course, have necessitated the acknowledgement of the oppression of Israel’s policies toward the Palestinian people. Few mission leaders have been willing to criticize the aberrant Christian mission practiced in Palestine and Israel. Palestinian Christian leaders have warned incessantly that if justice were not extended to the Palestinian community, there would be a significant breakdown. That occurred on October 7, 2023. How have many Western Christians responded? By the intensification of their calls to destroy Palestine.

³⁸ Mennonite Action, <https://www.mennoniteaction.org/>, accessed April 17, 2025.

If the conflict in Israel and Palestine represents anything, it is the failure of Christianity in the twenty-first century. Western Christians have failed to hold their governments accountable for their contributions to the conflict through deep financial support to only one side as well as their flow of armaments, which were subsequently rained upon the defenseless in Gaza. Western Christians have seemed to lose sight of the gospel of Jesus and the mission of God to make all things new, to foster peace instead of war.

Paradoxically, this time of conflict has been one of Christianity's finest moments because of the persistent faith of Palestinian Christians through impossible hardship. . As they have lost more and more of their freedoms and watched half of their society decimated in war, they have found the grace to continue to reach out to their Western brethren in Christ, to call for a reaffirmation of peace that Christ Jesus offers. Their example is a testimony that a radical witness of Christ remains, and a call for Western Christianity to return to such a witness on behalf of the mission of God.

The End