

Dedication

This booklet is dedicated in honor of Dr. Rosemary Radford Ruether – a friend, a scholar, a professor, and a strong advocate for justice for the Palestinian people. Rosemary was one of the first to support the emergence of Palestinian Liberation Theology as articulated in my first book, “Justice, and Only Justice, a Palestinian Theology of Liberation” (1989).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JERUSALEM

A Vision for Peace

The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek

Jerusalem is considered a holy city to the three monotheistic religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The adherents of each of these religions can make a strong case for the special significance, and even uniqueness, of the city for themselves and for their religion. This has become especially true since Israel closed off Jerusalem from the rest of the occupied territories, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in March 1993, making it uniquely Jewish. Since then, a number of conferences have been held inside as well as outside Jerusalem and abroad on this very subject. Dozens of articles have been written in newspapers and magazines on Jerusalem. And although President Donald Trump thinks that he has resolved the status of East Jerusalem by legitimizing its annexation by the government of Israel and endorsing the whole of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, East Jerusalem is still considered by the international community as a city under Israeli occupation. The city's future remains dependent on the resolution of the Palestine/Israel conflict in accordance with UN resolutions and international law. Neither President Trump nor any other leader has the authority or jurisdiction to decide unilaterally the fate of Jerusalem.

In this paper, I will be specifically addressing the topic of the significance of Jerusalem for the three monotheistic religions. It must be clear from the start that it is impossible to do justice to the enormous amount of material available on this subject. I will, therefore, be selective and brief in tackling the heart of this topic.

In my presentation, it is not my intention to gloss over difficult issues, nor am I looking for cheap reconciliation. I believe that there are realistic and workable solutions available, if and when people are genuinely seeking a life of harmony and wellbeing with each other. At the conclusion, I will be giving a number of suggestions that I hope will be taken seriously. They are not rhetorical. They are matters that I believe in and are realistic for the sake of a peace that can produce a good measure of security and prosperity.

The Name “Jerusalem”

Many people, when referring to Jerusalem, call it “the city of peace.” By doing so, they think that they are translating or interpreting its name etymologically. Actually, such a rendering is inaccurate etymologically and, sadly, it is unfitting and unrealistic historically. The name is a composite of two words: *Jeru* or *Yeru* which has the sense of laying a cornerstone. And *Salem* or *Shalem* which is a shortened version of the name of a semitic god

Shulmanu that was worshipped in that place. Hence the name *Jeru-Salem* or *yeru-Shalem* means the foundation of Salem or Shalem. Probably since *Salem* or *Shalem* are etymologically close to the semitic word for peace, health or wholeness, it was easy to develop a connection between the original name of the god *Shulmanu* and peace. Some scholars have also suggested the idea that the deity *Shulmanu* was invoked for peace, tranquility, and health. Be that as it may, Jerusalem has gone through innumerable vicissitudes, yet seldom knowing peace for any length of time.

Throughout its very long history, the city of Jerusalem was known by different names -- Moriah and *Jebus* or *Yabus* (before King David's time), *Yerushalayim*, and sometimes Zion (during the Davidic monarchy), City of David or Ariel. The Romans under Hadrian gave it the name *Aelia Capitolina*. The Arabs gave it the name *Alquds*, which means "the holy" and it is also referred to by Arab Muslims as *Alquds Asharif* (the holy and noble) and also *Bayt al Maqdes* (the house of the holy).

Religious Significance of Jerusalem in the Pre-Israelite Period

Jerusalem's religious significance pre-dated its ancient Israelite control. It was already a holy place for the Canaanite

tribes that lived in Palestine. It was a holy place long before it became sacred to the oldest monotheistic religion, Judaism, and subsequently to Christianity and Islam. We can also say that when Abraham, as the Bible records in Genesis 22, visited the place, known by one of its ancient names, Moriah, to offer his son Isaac (according to the Jewish tradition).¹ It was already a cultic holy place to which Canaanite tribes went to offer their sacrifices.²

Furthermore, the meeting of Abraham (originally Abram) with Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem as recorded in Genesis 14, probably reflects, as many Old Testament scholars tell us, post Davidic ideology to cement the association of the holiness of Jerusalem with Patriarch Abraham. It seems, therefore, that long before Abraham came from Mesopotamia (Iraq) to Canaan, Jerusalem was a holy place for the people of the land, and specifically for its Jebusite inhabitants.

Judaism

Let me first turn to the significance of Jerusalem to Judaism. Historically speaking, one can say that the

1 According to Islamic tradition, the son is Ishmael (As-Saffat 37:100-108 in the Qur'an).

2 It is interesting to point out that the Samaritans consider Moriah to be located at Mount Gerizim near Nablus (Shechem), and that Abraham went to offer the sacrifice of Isaac there and not in Jerusalem.

significance of Jerusalem to Jews begins with King David, approximately 1000 B.C. And without any shadow of a doubt, it was a stroke of genius on David's part when he chose Jerusalem to become the capital of his kingdom. According to the biblical account (2 Samuel 5:6), as already mentioned, it was a Jebusite town, and outside the control of any of the Israelite tribes.

By conquering the village of the Jebusites, a Canaanite tribe, and making it his capital, David avoided being accused of discrimination by the Israelite tribes. The choice, therefore, proved to be a political asset in promoting and enhancing the political unification of the tribes. Subsequently, David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. By so doing, he was able to capitalize on and exploit the already popular cultic religious significance of Jerusalem and make it the center of the religious life of his people.

Solomon, David's son (970-930 B.C.) consolidated the work of his father in making Jerusalem the political and religious center of the tribes. He expanded and enlarged the city and added to it his palace and the temple. The erection of the temple in Jerusalem, a magnificent and impressive shrine to which people would go for worship and sacrifice, fixed in Israelite memory a deep religious link with the place. The presence of the temple transformed Jerusalem forever into the center of Jewish

religion, although this transformation developed gradually over many years.

Soon after the death of Solomon most of the tribes that supported the kingdom seceded, due in part to heavy taxation which Solomon had imposed upon them and created another kingdom to the north. The northern kingdom, Israel, had its own political capital apart from Jerusalem. It also directed the ten tribes to new religious centers which included, at times, pre-monarchic religious centers such as Bethel and Shiloh.

After the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 BC, and the return from the exile in Babylon, the focus of the Jewish people centered on Jerusalem alone. The political and religious significance of the city to Jews became more embedded in Jewish consciousness.

Jerusalem became for Jews God's city that had been chosen for them as part of God's covenant with David and his descendants. This historic, religious, and political consciousness of the significance of Jerusalem is found throughout the Old Testament. Jerusalem and Zion became synonymous. The reference to the city became, at times, a reference to the whole land and to the Jewish people. The impression that one gets is that the city, the land, and the people have become one. Furthermore, one

cannot deny at all that throughout their long history, Jews, whether living in the land or outside of it, have focused on Jerusalem in their liturgical devotion, piety, religious symbolism and messianic hopes. “Next year in Jerusalem” became a symbol of their return to the “Promised Land.” One Jewish scholar, writing about the importance of Jerusalem for Jews, put it this way, “Jerusalem is not a city containing holy places or commemorating holy events. The city as such is holy and has, for at least two and half millennia, served as the symbol of the historic existence of a people hunted, humiliated, massacred, but never despairing of the promise of its ultimate restoration.”³

Christianity

It is possible to summarize the Christian perspectives on Jerusalem under two basic points:

The first point has to do with the attitude of the early apostolic Church to Jerusalem. The first followers of Jesus Christ did not give great significance to Jerusalem per se. Neither Jerusalem nor the whole of Palestine were considered sacred or holy in and of themselves. Whereas the Old Testament gives great emphasis to Jerusalem, the New Testament is not at all preoccupied with such issues.

3 R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (Adama Books, 1996), p 14.

In his ministry, Jesus was preoccupied with the Kingdom of God. For the early Church, it was not any one place that was more sacred than others, but the whole world had been made sacramental in God's incarnation. God's love for the world was shown in God's coming into the world in Jesus Christ. It is the incarnation, God in Jesus Christ taking on our humanity and living among us.

Theologically speaking, it is no more the specialness of one place, or one race or one nation as chosen, but "all those who believe," whether they are Jews or non-Jews, or in the New Testament language whether they are Jews or gentiles. The true worship of God cannot, after the coming of Christ, be localized in Jerusalem or at any other spot on earth, for "God is spirit and those that worship God must do so in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

It is difficult to conclude that there is any emphasis on the significance of Jerusalem in the New Testament. On the contrary, Jesus predicted its destruction, and the destruction of the temple, the most sacred spot for Jews. For Christians, the focus was no more on a place, but on a person. The holiness of Jerusalem and the temple have been transferred to the holiness of the person of Jesus Christ. Holiness has been de-territorialized. For the first three hundred years, this theological and spiritual understanding of holiness and significance was predominant among most Christians.

This theology was espoused by Eusebius, the bishop of Jerusalem whose See was in Caesarea. He represented the faith of the early followers of Jesus Christ. For the early Church, the holiness of Jesus Christ was more important than the holiness of the city of Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was the place from which the Good News of Christ was launched by his disciples to all the world. The early Church did not accord Jerusalem any special status for the first several hundred years. In fact, the great centers of the faith, the patriarchates, were Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, and later Constantinople. It was only in AD 451 that Jerusalem was recognized as the 5th patriarchate.⁴

With both Emperor Constantine's conversion, and the building of the Church of Resurrection (the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) in Jerusalem in the 4th century, Christians began to move into a second phase of their understanding of holiness. Without losing the holiness of the person, they began to lay great emphasis on the holiness of the place. It has been said that humankind cannot live without a sacred place. For Christians, Palestine becomes the holy land. Jerusalem becomes a holy city. Golgotha, where Christ was crucified and died, becomes the center of the world. Adam, they believed, was created and buried on Golgotha at the foot of the

4 Peter Walker, "Jerusalem in the Early Christian Centuries" in *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), pp. 79-97.

cross expressing the redemption of the world. The blood of Christ sprinkled over Adam's skull and redeemed him.⁵ It is in Jerusalem that the greatest salvific events took place, namely, the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Christ.

In the famous 6th century mosaic map in the Church in Madaba, Jordan, Jerusalem is placed at the center of the world. The tradition had already developed that Christians everywhere should focus on Jerusalem, where according to the New Testament, the Second Coming of Christ was to take place.

Furthermore, after the 4th century, not only Jerusalem, but the whole of Palestine becomes significantly holy because of the concept of the incarnation – Jesus was born in Bethlehem, brought up in Nazareth, baptized in the Jordan River, lived around the Sea of Galilee, and so on. Christian pilgrimages developed rapidly – people were coming on pilgrimages to Palestine for the sake of the holy places. And certainly, by the 5th century, Palestine had become a Christian country with hundreds of churches and monasteries built on or close to holy places. Theologically, Christians believed that Palestine, and no other country, had been chosen by God for the events of the incarnation and redemption. Heaven met

5 For information on the Chapel of Adam in the Church of the Resurrection see www.360cities.net/image/chapel-of-adam-the-church-of-the-holy-sepulchre-jerusalem.

earth in Palestine, and uniquely in Jerusalem.

One of the main proponents of this theology of the holy places, because they were connected with the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, was Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem who began to emphasize the holiness of the place.⁶

I believe that most Christians in the world would espouse either of the above views or a reconciliation between the two. On one hand, they would reject on New Testament grounds the great significance of the holiness of one spot in the Christian faith, while on the other hand, and due to our human nature, they would accept the value and significance of the land and places where the drama of salvation was enacted.

Before leaving the Christian view, and for the sake of comprehensiveness, it is important to allude to a further perspective on the particularity and specialness which Jerusalem has for Palestinian Christians. Palestinian Christians proudly point out to their continued and uninterrupted presence in the land since the beginning of the Church, over 2000 years ago. For them, the land of Palestine is their homeland. They have been handed down the faith through the centuries from their forefathers and

6 Peter Walker, "Jerusalem in the Early Christian Centuries." Ibid.

foremothers. They are, in spite of their small numbers or the frailty and fragility of their situation, the living stones of the land. They are the ongoing and living witnesses of the Church which found its inception on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2). They are the true hosts for their brothers and sisters who come from all over the world to visit and pray at the holy places. They are the living witnesses and links between the past, present, and future of the living presence of Christ and the reality of the Christian historic faith in their homeland, Palestine.

Islam

When we consider the significance of Jerusalem for Muslims, it is important to begin by saying that the prophet Muhammad, from the beginning of his mission, recognized Jerusalem as a holy and sacred city, and instructed his followers to face Jerusalem whenever they prayed. In other words, the earliest direction in prayer, *Qiblah*, has been Jerusalem. So, the holiness of Jerusalem is an axiom, a given, in Islam. Later on, according to Surah 2.142-150, Muhammad was divinely directed to change the direction of prayer, *Qiblah*, from Jerusalem to Mecca. Jerusalem is constantly referred to by Muslims, whether they are Arabs or not, as “*Ulah alqiblatain wa thaleth alharamain*,” the first *Qiblah* and the third *haram* (al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem) after the two most holy sanctuaries in Islam, Mecca and Medina.

However, the most basic and direct reference to the significance of Jerusalem to Muslims can be found in Sura 17.1 of the Qur'an where we read, "Praise be to Allah who brought his servant at night from the Holy Mosque (in Mecca) to the remote Mosque (al-Aqsa in Jerusalem), the precincts of which we have blessed." Muslims believe that Muhammad miraculously left Mecca in a night journey riding on a horse called *al-buraq* that brought him to Jerusalem, the site of the *al-Aqsa* mosque, i.e., the farthest mosque. Here he visited the Rock on which Abraham, according to Islam, came to offer his son Ishmael for sacrifice. And from the Rock of Abraham he was transported on a visit to heaven before returning to Mecca. One of the important feasts which Muslims celebrate every year is *I'ed Alisra' Wal Mi'raj*, commemorating the visit of Muhammad to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to heaven.

When the Arab Muslims conquered the city of Jerusalem in AD 638, Caliph Omar ibn Al-Khattab found that the area was being used as a garbage dump. Tradition says that he started to clean up the area with his own hands, and it was here, in AD 691, where Caliph Abd al-Malik erected the magnificent Dome of the Rock. In order to build *al-haram Asharif* (the noble sanctuary), the Caliph devoted all the tax revenues of Egypt for seven years in order to complete the construction. What makes this religiously complicated today is the fact that the Dome

of the Rock is built on the traditional site of the Jewish temple,⁷ which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. A prominent Sheikh in Jerusalem told me that Jerusalem is blessed by God. Muslims who worship at the Haram, the Aqsa Mosque, and the Dome of the Rock, are purged from their sins, and one prayer there has the efficacy of a thousand prayers.

The fact that Jerusalem was the first *Qiblah* for Muslims, combined with the miraculous nocturnal visit of Muhammad to Jerusalem and then to heaven, sealed the holiness of Jerusalem for Muslims.

In addition to this, it is important to emphasize that Muslims consider the land of Palestine, including the city of Jerusalem, as an integral part of the Arab world, which is predominantly Muslim and, therefore, significantly theirs.

For Whom Is Jerusalem Most Significant?

I have tried as best as I can to summarize very succinctly the most basic concepts for the significance of Jerusalem for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The question arises as to whom Jerusalem is most significant? It is hopeless to

7 This view has been contested over the years by various other theories. See Ernest Martin, *The Temples that Jerusalem Forgot* (The Academy of Scriptural, 1994).

argue for which of the three religions is Jerusalem more holy and more significant. This is an exercise in absolute futility. The proponents of each of the three religions have ample evidence to substantiate their position on Jerusalem's uniqueness for them. From my perspective, I believe it is equally holy and equally significant. That is why it must be shared.

Since its illegal occupation of East Jerusalem, Israel has been implementing a well-devised plan to Judaize the city by enacting and enforcing multiple laws that have forced many Muslims and Christians to leave and replacing them with Jewish settlers. Israel has also imposed a closure on Jerusalem, making it difficult for Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza to enter. By continuing to make Jerusalem, especially the Old City, exclusively Jewish, the government of Israel has been sending a strong message that Jerusalem is uniquely more significant to Jews. This is also evident in the repeated violations by the Jewish extremist rightwing religious settlers on the Muslim Haram area in order to seize it and establish a Jewish temple.

The increasing, almost daily, provocations by the religious extremists against the Haram and the Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem has sharpened the question of the significance of Jerusalem for the three monotheistic religions. What follows are multiple arguments that some

adherents of the three religions engage in:

Sovereignty Argument

For Jews: The argument of origins and sovereignty. As I stated earlier, it was King David who first conquered the village of Yabus (later Jerusalem) against the will of its inhabitants and made it his capital. He took advantage of the existing religious significance of the place. When we calculate the number of years that David and his lineage held sovereignty over Jerusalem until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and include the period of the Hasmonaeans/Maccabees until the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in AD 70, it amounts to less than 600 years. This includes Israel's illegal occupation of Jerusalem since the 1967 war.

For Muslims: *The argument of sovereignty and longevity.* With the exception of the 200 years of the Crusades, and the inclusion of the thirty years of the British Mandate period after WWI, the Arab and non-Arab Muslims⁸ have had sovereignty over Jerusalem for over 1200 years.

For Local Christians: The Byzantine Empire ruled Palestine for several hundred years, but most of the Byzantine Christians were not indigenous to the land of

8 The Ottoman Turkish Empire governed Palestine for over 400 years.

Palestine, and Byzantium's sovereignty over the land was tantamount to occupation. The indigenous Palestinian Christian community of the land has never aspired to political sovereignty, but as citizens of Palestine today, and as an integral part of the Palestinian people, with our Muslim brothers and sisters, we seek sovereignty over East Jerusalem according to international law. Moreover, UN resolutions 242 and 338 give us Palestinians — Muslims and Christians — the right to have our own sovereign state in Palestine.

I would like to be very clear. As followers of Jesus Christ, theologically speaking, Christians believe that the nature and essence of the Christian faith, as we and our ancestors before us understood it, has been handed down from Jesus Christ, the early apostles, and the early Church. Jesus did not talk about a political worldly kingdom. He preached about the Kingdom of God, a kingdom where God is sovereign. This means that God's kingdom is made up of God's people, of every race and nation, who can be found everywhere within or without borders, living under the rule and sovereignty of God's kingdom of love, justice, righteousness, mercy and peace. These people are God's people, transformed by God's grace, living as salt and light in their communities. At the same time, some of them have always emphasized an eschatological understanding of the kingdom of God, quoting Jesus' words, "my kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

Therefore, if we go by the “sovereignty” argument, it is clear that the Muslim control and rule over Jerusalem has been the longest, and the Muslim holy shrines, namely, al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, have existed on the Haram area far more years than the two Jewish temples combined. And today, the Palestinian people of the land, both Muslims and Christians, have the right to self-determination and sovereignty over their state of Palestine, including East Jerusalem.

The Founder’s Argument

There is another argument that some Christians have used. This has to do with the prophets who founded the three religions. The greatest prophet of Judaism is Moses. He never set foot on the land and never visited Jerusalem. Similarly, neither did the greatest prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Islamic tradition talks about his nocturnal short visit to Jerusalem, but we have no evidence of his visiting Palestine. In contrast, Jesus, the “founder” of the Christian faith, whom Christians believe to be more than a prophet, was born in Bethlehem, Palestine, brought up in Nazareth in Galilee, and spent most of his ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing around the Sea of Galilee. He walked with his twelve disciples the land from north to south. In obedience to God’s will, his ministry included feeding the hungry, healing the sick, exorcizing the demons that possessed individuals, as well

as teaching people about God's kingdom of righteousness, justice, and peace.

Moreover, because Jesus confronted the religious and economic corruption of the people of power, he was crucified as a rebel by the Roman Empire in collusion with the Jerusalem religious hierarchy. Christians, however, believe that God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. Contrary to what was expected, Jesus' community of followers was not crushed. His crucifixion, death, and resurrection energized them, revitalized their faith, and they began to proclaim him as messiah and lord who was victorious over evil and death.

Furthermore, the Christian Church was born in Jerusalem by the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The small community began to grow and expand throughout Palestine and beyond, and Jesus' apostles, the first leaders of the movement, were all from Palestine. Indeed, the first two martyrs of the Church, Stephen and James, were killed in Jerusalem,⁹ and the Christian faith spread from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. Certainly, for the indigenous Christian community of the land, Jerusalem has great significance, both locally and internationally. Even today, Christian pilgrimage and tourism to Jerusalem reflects the significance of the

9 See Acts 7 and 12:1-2.

city for Christians around the world. Yet, in spite of this foundational and essential bond between Jerusalem and the Christian community, most Christians believe that Jerusalem is equally significant to Muslims and Jews and that it must be shared.

Primacy Argument

This is another argument that some Jews use. For Muslims, Jerusalem is the third most holy city after Mecca and Medina, while for Jews, the city of Jerusalem is their most holy city. Therefore, Jews believe that the city of Jerusalem should be conceded to the Jewish people, and that they should have the right to build their temple on the Haram area. But there is a counter Muslim argument that the Haram area is the sole property of the Muslim Waqf. It belongs only to the Muslims. Why couldn't Jews build their temple somewhere else in Jerusalem? Why must they replace the most exquisite and magnificent Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque that have been the distinguishing mark and symbol of Jerusalem for over thirteen centuries? After all, Jews believe that all of Jerusalem is holy. If that is so, then the temple could be built anywhere in Jerusalem.

Capital Argument

As to the city itself, some Jews also argue that Jerusalem

has never been the capital of the country except when Jews had sovereignty over it. The Muslim counter argument emphasizes that due to its religious holiness, the Muslims intentionally refrained from making it their political capital. This is in line with Muslim practice in Saudi Arabia where neither Mecca nor Medina is the capital of the country.¹⁰

Concluding Suggestions

As we look with hope for a future of peace for our area, here are a few suggestions to consider:

1. It is utterly futile to enter into the polemics of arguments such as outlined above. I have mentioned them because they are so often used. We need to accept and acknowledge the fundamental axiom that the holiness and significance of Jerusalem is equally indelibly embedded in the historical memory, consciousness, psyche, and emotions, not to mention the beliefs and doctrines, of the adherents of the three religions – Jews, Muslims, and Christians. It is here where President Trump's religious and political blunders lay. By favoring the Jewish religious claim for Jerusalem, he showed total ignorance or conscious disregard for the equal significance of Jerusalem to Muslims and

10 The capital of Saudi Arabia is Riyadh.

Christians. He intentionally refuted the reality that cannot be historically disputed. Only someone completely out of touch with history would be guilty of such a blunder. Of course, he also took this step, in order to increase and solidify his Evangelical base.¹¹

At the same time, by recognizing, endorsing, and legitimizing Israel's political sovereignty over occupied East Jerusalem, President Trump not only contravened UN resolutions and international law, he totally disregarded the Arab Palestinian claim to sovereignty over East Jerusalem. By setting himself up as the only judge and arbiter, he reflects the epitome of hubris and the arrogance of power. Such oblivious rash actions must be confronted and reversed.

Tragically, President Trump missed the golden opportunity of a lifetime to be the real peacemaker. The opportunity presented itself and instead of seizing it by implementing international law regarding Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories, he chose to endorse

11 There are millions of Christian Zionists who believe in the significance of Jerusalem for end-time prophecy. According to their literal interpretation of certain biblical texts, these American Christian Zionists believe that Jerusalem belongs exclusively to the Jewish people and the rebuilding of the Jewish temple must take place in order to usher in the second coming of Christ and other scenarios relating to the end times. For more information regarding Christian Zionist theology, see Gary Burge, "Why I'm not a Christian Zionist," www.thebanner.org/features/2019/12/why-i-m-not-a-christian-zionist.

and sanction the Israeli way of domination, injustice, and racism.

2. Jerusalem is unique among the cities of the world. This beautiful religious mosaic of the three Abrahamic faiths is the way history has moved and evolved in Jerusalem. Some might even say that this is the way Providence has acted. Yet this Providence, indeed, this one God whom these three religions worship, has been, at times, wrongly understood and perceived as the three religions lived in conflict and rivalry with one another. It is time to allow Jerusalem to unite us for the sake of the one true God, the creator and sovereign over us all. We all belong to the one God and are all God's servants and children. If we choose the way of justice as defined by the great prophets and international law, we can live in peace with one another, respecting and accepting each other's rights and responsibilities, and lifting our praises and adoration to God according to our unique religious traditions.
3. I do not believe that the Israel-Palestine conflict, which is the cause of our pain and suffering, originated from God. It is we who initiated it. Each one of our religions believes that God is the God of truth, justice, and peace, and that God wills for us to live in justice and peace with one another. The problem lies in Israel's unwillingness to compromise for the sake

of peace. While the Palestinians have been forced to make tremendous sacrifices for peace (over 78% of their land), Israel, through its military power, has continued to devour more Palestinian land and deny them their basic human rights. It has been Israel's unchecked military power, as well as the failure of the international community, that have allowed Israel to dominate and oppress the Palestinians and keep them under occupation.

Sadly, for many Jews, both religious and secular, as well as for many western Christians, Israel's oppressive expansionism has been justified in the name of God and the Bible. They believe that God is the God of Israel in a special way, rather than being the all-inclusive God of humankind. At times, we all behave as if we have a special claim to God. I believe this is spiritually healthy because it reflects God's intimate relationship with communities and individuals regardless of background, so long as it does not negate the specialness of God for others, or, in other words, God's special relationship with others. Indeed, we must acknowledge that every one of our religions believes that God is all-powerful, merciful, and just. And because God is also the God of peace, God wills that all of God's children live together in peace and harmony with one another. Therefore, in our ongoing and lingering conflicts against each other, the most basic sin we have been committing is the sin against

love, the love of our fellow human beings. Although the governments of Israel and the United States are guilty of this sin in a special way, all of us are guilty, including our Palestinian people.

4. Many Jews, not all, would like to build or rebuild their temple in Jerusalem.¹² For those extremist religious settlers who are agitating to build it, the temple could be built close to the spot where it once stood without infringing on the right of the Muslims to their own holy places. Do we believe that God will be angry because the temple is built a few hundred meters/yards from the “original” spot? It is important to emphasize that, in the Talmud, peace takes precedence over the greatest of all commandments, the belief in the oneness and uniqueness of God.

Great is peace, because if the Jews were to practice idolatry, and peace prevailed among them at the same time, God would say, ‘I cannot punish them, because peace prevails among them’ (Genesis Rabbah 38,6).

The rebuilding of the temple on the Western Wall

¹² A number of years ago, I gave a version of this paper at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Several Jewish professors asked me the question, “Who told you that we want the temple to be re-built in Jerusalem?” I assumed that most of these professors were secular Jews. It is, however, important to emphasize that most ultra orthodox Jews are against its building. The rebuilding must await the coming of the Messiah.

plaza might pacify and stabilize the Jewish religious extremists in Jerusalem, and might eliminate the fears of Muslims who are weary of the threat of losing the Haram to these extremists.¹³ If that would happen, the anxiety and fear would be tremendously reduced. Every religion of the three would then have its own holy place, well-marked and defined, in Jerusalem. The holy places would need to be protected by national and international agreements.

5. The issue of the political sovereignty of Jerusalem must be resolved. I believe it is possible to arrive at a formula in which the political sovereignty of the city can be shared. Although there have been many creative visions for a solution to the issue of sovereignty, the government of Israel has flouted them and shown no willingness to a shared sovereignty. As I have already mentioned, Israel has been imposing its own vision for the future by the Judaization of the city. Israel's vision is exclusive and racist and will not be accepted. The US and Israel have been joined in an unhealthy alliance that flouts the just demands of international law. It has been apparent that Israel has almost achieved most of its unjust goals in the changes it has created in Jerusalem. Indeed, it has imposed and implemented

¹³ There are more Christian Zionist extremists who are agitating for the building of the temple than Jewish extremists.

its own exclusivist vision, and has totally disregarded and shunned international law and legitimacy. Such a vision will not render justice to the Palestinians. So long as this alliance keeps flouting and breaching international law, Israel will never experience a peace and security that can last. Its imposed peace will be a sham and will not produce security. The only peace that stands a chance is one that is built on UN resolutions and international law, because it will then satisfy the demands of justice for the Palestinians. When justice is rendered to the Palestinians, peace and security will prevail.

Many Palestinians still insist that the best resolution is found in the two-state solution that has been promoted by the UN and that is based on international law. Most of the countries of the world have endorsed it. The sovereign Palestinian state would be built on all the land that Israel occupied in the 1967 war, with East Jerusalem becoming its capital. And maybe in fifty or a hundred years, when peace and reconciliation are more firmly established, Jerusalem can become the federal capital of the Federation of States of the Holy Land. This federation can include Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, countries that have been historically part of the Holy Land.

6. We need to dream dreams and see visions of peace

for the future of the Middle East. It cannot be the vision of Israel's hegemony and domination which the Americans want. It needs to begin with the two democratic states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and harmony on the basis of international law where every citizen stands in total equality under the same rule of law. We must continue to work together diligently to achieve this resolution no matter how long it will take. What seems impossible and inconceivable today can change and become realistic if the will is there to respect the demands of international law.

7. If we are genuinely seeking peace, we can make Jerusalem a model city of peace that can be emulated and replicated wherever Muslims, Jews, and Christians live together globally. The whole international community must not allow Israel to make Jerusalem an example of racism and exclusivity. For the sake of billions of people in the world, we must struggle to make Jerusalem a paradigm for peace, equity, and harmony. Jerusalem can be truly a model for the best that human beings can produce, a place where people live together in respect and acceptance of each other.

Education will have to play a major role in shaping a new culture of peace, harmony, and toleration. This is not a mere fanciful and unrealistic imagination.

Indeed, the international community must insist that a new future vision of Jerusalem must be built on truth and justice, as defined by international law. Jerusalem's religious and moral fabric should override its political character. Its holiness and sanctity for the three religions should override its political importance. It can, as much as humanly possible, truly become the city of God where God is worshiped, praised, and adored by the three monotheistic religions. This is our hope and prayer. Such a vision is worthy of Jerusalem.

Naim Ateek

A Palestinian Theology of Jerusalem

Introduction

What is a Palestinian theology of Jerusalem? What makes Jerusalem different from Washington, D.C., Moscow, Cairo, or any other city? What is so unique about this city that it requires a theology? These and many other questions come to mind when we consider a theology of Jerusalem. I will attempt, as best as I can, to articulate a Palestinian theology of Jerusalem, stemming from my Christian perspective.

Historical Background

The city of Jerusalem has developed over the last 4000 years from being a small village that contained on its outskirts a cultic shrine for a Canaanite deity, to a metropolitan city, holy today to three major world religions. On a high place near the ancient village of Jerusalem, a local Semitic god called Shulmanu was worshipped. In those days, the mountain towering the village must have looked like a great acropolis.

The name Jerusalem is a composite of two words: *Jeru*

or *yeru*, which means “foundation of,” and carries the connotation of “laying a cornerstone.” Salem, or Shalem, is a shortened version of the name of the god Shulmanu. In the Amarna Letters of the 14th century BC, the town is referred to as Urusalim, which means the foundation of the god Shalem, or, in other words, the home and place of this god which gave Jerusalem its name.¹ The Shulmanu shrine was, undoubtedly, visited by Canaanite tribes to invoke the deity for health, fertility and protection. Hence, the connection with the word shalom or salam which, as we know, carries the connotation of peace, health and wholeness in Semitic languages. Although Jerusalem’s earliest significance was most likely religious, the political character of the town developed as well. Thus, Melchizedek, whom we read about in Genesis 14:18, is referred to as the king of Salem (Jerusalem) and a “priest of God Most High.”²

Many Old Testament scholars argue that the Genesis account of the encounter between Abraham and Melchizedek most likely reflects a post Davidic ideology intended to cement the association of the holiness of Jerusalem with Abraham, the patriarch of the people. When David captured the city, several hundred years later, he ingeniously selected it because of its geographic location. Since

1 Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, 1962. s.v. “Jerusalem.”

2 New Revised Standard Version (used for all citations).

Jerusalem did not belong to any of the tribes, he hoped it would facilitate the unification of the kingdom.³ Later, he brought the sacred Ark into the city, thus capitalizing on its already existing spiritual significance. Be that as it may, long before Abraham came from Mesopotamia (Iraq) to Canaan, and long before David conquered the city, Jerusalem was a holy place for the Canaanites, and especially for its Jebusite inhabitants, as well as the capital of their city state.⁴

A Palestinian theology of Jerusalem must necessarily take into consideration those salient points that characterized this city, its evolution and development since the time of the Canaanites. In other words, any theological reflection on the city of Jerusalem must consider a cumulative history that spans four millennia. Over this long period of time, Jerusalem was impacted by all the civilizations that have come to it and gone. The histories of many people superimposed themselves and affected Jerusalem: the many invaders and conquerors, the various ethnic groups and their cultures, the many times of war and peace, the exiles, deportations, and destructions, the intermingling and intermixing of people of different races and languages.

Every period impacted and influenced the city and its

3 Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, 1962. s.v. "Jerusalem."

4 The Standard Jewish Encyclopaedia, 1959, s.v. "Jerusalem."

people. Some conquerors attempted to erase and eradicate previous histories in order to establish themselves exclusively and give themselves prior and greater claims only to find themselves eventually rebuffed by Jerusalem. Jerusalem has defied them all. The mighty conquerors have come to it and gone. Jerusalem, however, has embraced and integrated the many people and civilizations that have come and stayed in it. She has embraced them as a mother – the Jew, the Muslim, and the Christian. They are all equally her children. Jerusalem, at the beginning of the 21st century, offers us itself as the cumulative sum of all her historic past. She presents us with a rich human mosaic that has taken thousands of years to create. A theology of Jerusalem, therefore, cannot escape taking into consideration all that made Jerusalem what she is today.

If one wants to do justice to this theology, one must include reflections on a long list of topics: theology of conquest and war, theology of occupation and exile, theology of religious fanaticism and injustice, and theology of suffering and hope. At the same time, we would have to consider a theology of peace, religious plurality and pilgrimage, as well as many others. Both the religious as well as the political have become an integral part of the theological composition of Jerusalem, and neither can be disregarded.

A Theology of Jerusalem

In this short paper, I would like briefly to highlight three salient points that are essential in a contemporary Palestinian theology of Jerusalem.

I.

One cannot think of Jerusalem without thinking of holy space. It is amazing that in the history of humankind, certain places are venerated as holy. These places began to be connected with a deity. Gradually or suddenly, they acquired a sacred character that developed and became transfixed in people's beliefs, emotions and psyche. Such sacredness is amplified when more than one religion claims holiness for the same place. Human beings seem to need holy space.⁵

One such place is Jerusalem. It is one of the very few places in our world that is shared in sanctity by more than one religion. A theology of Jerusalem recognizes, first of all, whether it suits our own theology or not, the presence of holy space in this city which millions of people have experienced throughout history. Faithful members of the three religions believe that in Jerusalem, more than in any other place, they can be closer to God. Jerusalem

5 For a detailed discussion of holy space, see Susan White, *The Theology of Sacred Space*, in David Brown and Ann Loades (eds.) *The Theology of Sacred Space* (SPCK: Great Britain, 1995), p. 14.

constitutes holy space for them. Some Jews would like to make a distinction between the holiness of the whole city of Jerusalem for them versus the presence of Christian holy places.⁶ It is a futile argument and ultimately leads nowhere.

The fact is that Jerusalem is holy space for the three religious traditions. Some call it the City of God. Jesus referred to it as “the city of the great king” (Matthew 5:34). The Palestinians call it “Alquds Asharif,” the holy, the noble. Whether or not it suits our modern way of thinking, it is difficult to deny the historic religious connection of this city with God. God has been active in this city in a special way, whether through a Canaanite deity and peoples who had a very primitive or elementary knowledge of God (Acts 17:22-34), or through some of the prophets of the ancient Israelites, or through Muslim beliefs and piety for the last fourteen hundred years, or for Christians, because of the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The simple and basic point is this: we cannot deny that the adherents of Judaism, Islam and Christianity firmly believe that God has in the past and continues in the present to hear them, speak and relate to them actively and authentically in this city. Pilgrims from the three religious traditions come, or

6 R.J.Z. Werblowsky. *The meaning of Jerusalem to Jews, Christians and Moslems* (Jerusalem, Israel: Universities Group for Middle Eastern Affairs, 1978), 14.

want to come, (political climate permitting) to offer their worship and devotion close to their holy places.

Let me illustrate this from the three religions: In the case of Judaism we know the familiar words from the Book of Psalms,

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy (Psalm 137:5-6).

In the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, the word *Jerusalem* and its corollary name *Zion* are referred to approximately 850 times. In the Babylonian Talmud, Jews are encouraged to live inside the land:

A person should always live in the Land of Israel, even in a city with an idolatrous majority, and should not live outside the Land, even in a city with a Jewish majority, for whoever lives in the Land of Israel resembles one who has God, and whoever lives outside the Land resembles one who has no God.⁷

For Muslims, Muhammed is reported to have said:

He who goes to Jerusalem for nothing but praying and prays the five prayers, i.e., morning, midday,

7 Ketubot 100b. *Babylonian Talmud*.

afternoon, sunset and evening, will be as free from his sins as the day his mother gave him birth.... He who visits Jerusalem God rewards him as one thousand martyrs.... The prayer in Al-Haram mosque [Mecca] is worth one hundred thousand prayers; in my mosque [Medina] one thousand and Jerusalem mosque five hundred.⁸

In the Christian tradition, the church of Jerusalem has been known historically as the “Mother of all Churches.” From the early centuries of Christianity, and from the different Eastern and Western traditions, the Christians desired to have a permanent presence in Jerusalem because of the city’s significance. These included the Copts, the Armenians, the Syrians, the Latins, the Ethiopians, not to mention, the Byzantine Christians and later, in the 19th century, the Anglicans, Lutherans and other Protestant churches.

Admittedly, some Christians find it difficult to give a special theological significance to a place. Some might agree with Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339 AD), one of the greatest Palestinian scholars who lived in Palestine. Eusebius was a Christian historian. When Constantine espoused Christianity, Eusebius was the metropolitan

8 Yunis Amer. Jerusalem’s Significance in Scripture and Tradition: A Muslim Perspective, in Hans Ucko (ed.) *The Spiritual Significance of Jerusalem for Jews, Christians and Muslims*. (Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1993), 68.

bishop of the Province of Palestine with his See in Caesarea. For Eusebius, Palestine was not more holy than other countries.⁹ Likewise, he did not think that Jerusalem was special.¹⁰ His theology tended to play down the role of the holy places and Jerusalem. However, Eusebius was on the losing end of an ecclesiastical struggle.¹¹ Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386 AD) witnessed the coming of St. Helena and the building of the Church of the Resurrection among others. Cyril began to develop an elaborate theology of the holy places. Whereas Eusebius concentrated on the universal and spiritual truths of the Gospel, Cyril, living in Jerusalem and in close proximity to the holy places, focused on the significance of the Incarnation and Redemption.¹² Jerusalem, for him, was the holy city and the holy places were a witness to Christ.¹³

Three hundred years after Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Sophronius (560-638 AD), Patriarch of Jerusalem, clearly sounded the same tune on the significance of Jerusalem when he said,

9 Peter W.I. Walker. *Holy City, Holy Places?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 10.

10 *Ibid.*, 198.

11 *Ibid.*, xii.

12 *Ibid.*, 402.

13 In spite of this new emphasis, the See of Jerusalem remained suffragan to Caesarea. It was only at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 that the Bishopric of Jerusalem was granted patriarchal status. The Church of Jerusalem, however, was respectfully referred to as the "the mother of all churches."

Here, it is Jerusalem we proclaim, where God has lived, bringing about miracles. Here we announce Golgotha, where God took the cross upon himself. Here we sing of the resurrection, where God rose from the tomb. Here we preach Zion... where Christ appeared risen from the dead. Here we glorify the Mount of Olives from where God ascended to the heavens....¹⁴

A distinction must, therefore, be drawn between the New Testament period and later Christian history, post-Constantine, when the theological significance of Jerusalem is discussed. The New Testament, in effect, de-territorializes the Gospel. Jesus was not at all preoccupied with the issue of the land. He preached the Kingdom of God, thus universalizing God's reign. Jerusalem and even the temple lost their significance for Jesus. In fact, he predicted their destruction. The scope of God's activity and concern were not limited to any one country or one people. Therefore, the Gospel must be preached beginning in Jerusalem and to all the nations and to the end of the world (Acts 1:8). The holiness of the place has been replaced by the holiness of the person of Christ. Christ has replaced the temple.¹⁵ Moreover, believers in Christ have also become temples of God, carrying within them the Holy Spirit. The worship

¹⁴ Ucko, 1993, 13.

¹⁵ W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

of God is no more geographically localized. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well in Nablus,

...the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain (Gerizim) nor in Jerusalem.... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (John 4:21-24)

This, I believe, is a basic foundation in the New Testament and throughout the first three centuries of Christianity.

The theological shift began generally in the 4th century, after the conversion of Constantine. By glorifying and highlighting the holiness of space, the new theological emphasis was, understandably, on the Incarnation and Redemption of Christ. God in Christ came to a specific country and to specific places. For Christians, the holiness of Jerusalem is not innate or intrinsic. The Incarnation of the Holy One has made the whole land of Palestine holy and the places where Jesus had been, holy places. Cyril of Jerusalem, therefore, distinguished between the Christian Jerusalem of his day and the Jerusalem which crucified Jesus when he wrote: "This Jerusalem now worshipped him."¹⁶ The God who loves the whole world in Christ has sanctified it and reconciled it to himself."¹⁷ The whole world has become sacramental. It is, therefore, legitimate

16 Walker, 1990, 401.

17 2 Corinthians 5:19.

to have a sacrament of geography without diminishing in any way God's activity in every other geography. It is humans who need a sense of holy space, not God. Since we cannot live without holy space, it is justifiable to accept the specialness and holiness of certain places more than others. God has acted in Jerusalem in a special way for the whole world.

In concluding this section, I would like to mention two points. Firstly, a human sense of holiness should not override ethical consideration. Because something is holy it should not license unethical action. The holiness of Jerusalem does not mean that people in power can, in the name of or for the sake of this holiness, commit injustice and get away with it. In the days of Jeremiah, the people thought that in spite of their evil and injustice, the city of Jerusalem would be spared from the invading enemy since the holy temple was standing in its midst. The prophet Jeremiah did not accept that kind of theology. Rather, he warned that the moral and ethical demands of God had priority over the sacredness of the place, even if that place were the temple itself (Jeremiah 7). Subsequently, Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed.

In one of his lectures in Jerusalem, Bishop Kenneth Cragg warned that it is wrong to do things in the name of the holy that violate the ethical. When the claim of the holy usurps the demands of the ethical, we are committing an injustice. The criteria of the holy is to bring about that

which is good, just and honest. In the name of the holy we must say with the prophet Amos, “Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

Secondly, before one’s mind turns to the political importance of Jerusalem, the religious importance takes greater priority and prominence. The religious and spiritual significance of Jerusalem to Judaism, Christianity and Islam supersedes the political. Many people legitimately believe that the religious significance cannot be complete without political sovereignty.¹⁸ Although the acquired holiness and significance of the city can be independent and separate of its political control, we need the political control in order to guarantee fairness for all. Historically, each of the three religions has, at one time or another during its long history in Jerusalem, experienced the absence of political control and consequently suffered religious discrimination.¹⁹ Theoretically, it is possible to fulfil one’s religious duties without having political sovereignty over the city. However, the lack of sovereignty hampers and hinders religious freedom. Palestinians can attest to this fact. It has been their daily experience under occupation. The closure of Jerusalem since March 1993 has prevented Muslims and Christians from free access to

18 Ucko, 1993. 46.

19 Under the Crusades, Jews and Muslims suffered. Under Islamic rule, Christians and Jews suffered. Under Israeli control, Muslims and Christians suffer.

Jerusalem. Most people have not been able to enter the city in order to worship in their holy places, especially on the major feast days. In its attempt to Judaize Jerusalem, Israel has suppressed that which is Muslim and Christian and magnified everything which is Jewish. In spite of all of this, Christians and Muslims cling tenaciously to their significance of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem itself, I believe, will ultimately withstand and defy any attempts to exclusivity. Jerusalem cannot be only Jewish. The sooner Israel recognizes that this holy space called Jerusalem must be shared equally, the better it would be for the peace and security of all. In other words, although the religious significance is not totally dependent on the political, the political cannot ignore the religious. Therefore, the best requirement for a just peace would demand the sharing of the political sovereignty. The political must bow down to the demands of the religious.²⁰ The political sharing of sovereignty must be our human response to the holiness of this space. The arrogance of an exclusive sovereign claim must be resisted vehemently. The world community must approach the issue of Jerusalem from its religious rather than its political

20 I am in no way advocating this as a principle that must be always followed. To the contrary, I believe in the separation of religion and state, but in the case of Jerusalem, and for the sake of peace, Jerusalem's religious significance outweighs its political. The religions need parity of rights because the three religions should take precedence.

significance. It is essential to comprehend deeply that what makes Jerusalem great is not its political character. Rather, it is its religious character which is equally important to Jews, Muslims and Christians. This is why it is mandatory for the political sovereignty to be shared. An exclusive Israeli political claim will drastically diminish the equal religious significance of the city for the three religions, therefore giving an unjust edge to one. The political should, therefore, serve the needs of maintaining the religious in the best possible way, guaranteeing the equal rights, privileges, duties and responsibilities of the three faiths. This can best be achieved through a shared sovereignty of the city.

II.

Christians cannot think of Jerusalem without thinking of suffering and resurrection. It is in this city that our Lord was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day resurrected. The passion of our Lord has become the passion of many oppressed people in the world, no less our own passion as Palestinians. Tragedy after tragedy has been our experience. Justice has been our cry. The cry of Jesus on the cross has been repeated by many Palestinians, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). The thirty-nine lashes are the lashes of our people, and his agony our agony. Jerusalem is for us the city of suffering, pain and crucifixion. It is where the prophet Micah in the 8th century BC challenged the

political leaders of his day when he said,

Hear this, you...who abhor justice and pervert all equity, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height. (Micah 3:9-12)

In Jerusalem, Isaiah cried out against the injustice of the leaders when he said, "...cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17).

Jeremiah could not find on the streets of Jerusalem anyone who did justice, and in the name of God he declared,

Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 9:23)

Indeed, a theology of Jerusalem must address itself to injustice, suffering and oppression. The cross and resurrection of Christ become extremely important in this theology. The cross is the epitome of what evil can do; the justice, mercy and love of God is revealed in the

victory of Christ over death, evil and sin. Jerusalem is, indeed, the city of the *Anastasis* (resurrection). Resurrection becomes the source of strength, hope and new life for us. As Christians we believe that Christ, through his death and resurrection, has broken the wall of enmity between people of different races and between us humans and God. He is our peace (Ephesians 2:14-15). Therefore, beyond the pain, suffering and the agony of the cross and all that it resembles in oppression and injustice, life here in Jerusalem can open itself to all of its inhabitants with new opportunities and possibilities for a new life of peace and reconciliation.

As Christians we can have an important role to play. We can be a bridge. Our role is to witness to the power of God who can reconcile Palestinians and Israelis together. As we believe that the resurrection of Christ was the surprise and the miracle of God, God can create in this City of the Resurrection another miracle where peace based on justice can become a reality and where reconciliation can become a fact of life. We only need to open ourselves to the reconciling power of God who can work in us and through us to bring healing and goodness to all the people of this land. The miracle can happen again in Jerusalem and its fruits would be peace and reconciliation for Israelis and Palestinians.

In his book, *Way of the Cross – Way of Justice*, Leonardo

Boff ends with the words:

The resurrection is a process that began with Jesus and that will go on until it embraces all creation. Wherever an authentically human life is growing in the world, wherever justice is triumphing over the instincts of domination, wherever grace is winning out over the power of sin, wherever human beings are creating more fraternal mediations in their social life together, wherever love is getting the better of selfish interests, and wherever hope is resisting the lure of cynicism or despair, there the process of resurrection is being turned into a reality. Those who believe in the resurrection are no longer permitted to live in sadness. The Way of the Cross, the painful journey of the Son of God and his brothers and sisters through the torments of this world, does have a real meaning. We are destined and called to live life to the full: joyous in our hope, confident in our love, and reconciled to the world, our fellow human beings, and God.²¹

III.

Christians should not think of Jerusalem without thinking of plurality and inclusiveness. Over the centuries, Jerusalem has evolved as a city for Muslims, Christians and Jews, both foreign and local. It is, indeed, a mosaic.

21 Leonardo Boff, *Way of the Cross – Way of Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980).

Plurality and inclusiveness imply at best acceptance of normal relationships, and life together as good neighbors.

In the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 15), we are faced with three philosophies of life, one being the philosophy of the robbers who are there to steal, dehumanize and exploit others. They are the criminals and terrorists who know no middle ground. Life with or next to robbers, who always want to grab more, regardless of the rights of others, is impossible. Their perceived end justifies the means. Nothing stands in their own way to achieve what they want. Next we meet the philosophy of the priest and the Levite who, in a lesser fashion than the robbers, see their own interest above all others and seem to have nothing to offer to solve the predicament of the wounded person. Unfortunately, many of our neighbors behave like the priest and the Levite, and we too could act like that.

The philosophy of the Good Samaritan, however, is that of a person who is willing to share what she or he has with others, even at personal risk, in order to be a good neighbor. The Samaritan theology reflects an openness to the enemy. The enemy is now a friend in need. The enemy is a fellow human being and the enmity must be stripped off. It must disappear and love must replace it. A fellow human being is there to whom love and acceptance must be extended.

In a vision of peace for the future, we, as Palestinians and Israelis, we as Christians, Jews and Muslims, must strive to be like the Samaritan. Unfortunately, for many years, we have competed with each other for the position of the victim, each claiming to be the greater victim, stripped and beaten by the robbers. It is time now to compete for the Samaritan's place. Only this will ensure healing and life.

Jerusalem, as well as our whole land, is full of mutual enemies where bitterness and resentment run high. At the same time, God in history has created in Jerusalem a mosaic of people of various backgrounds to live together. God places before us today the possibility of death or life.²² We have a choice of living as enemies and reaping the tragedy of a life of injustice or live with the ethic of the Good Samaritan. We see Jerusalem as our home where the enemy to each of us must become a friend. Where, even at our own risk, we must accept and include the other. Acceptance must replace alienation. Enmity must give way to friendship. Fear must be supplanted by trust. We should strive to make real a part of the dream of Micah and Isaiah where we beat our swords into plowshares and shears into pruning hooks... and not learn war anymore (Micah 4:3). Micah saw a vision of an inclusive Jerusalem whose inhabitants were of mixed races and of

22 Deuteronomy 30:19.

different religions where “...all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god...” (Micah 4:5). Jerusalem becomes a real place of diversity, plurality and inclusiveness for all its inhabitants.

***What Are the Practical Implications of this
Theology?***

1. We must consider Jerusalem as a *waqf*, a religious trust, a trust from God. Humans have long believed that in this city they encounter God in a special way. God has touched many people’s lives here. Regardless of how we have come to interpret it as Jews, Muslims and Christians, this one fact remains valid: we all witness in our different languages of faith that in Jerusalem we have an experience of the holy. God has met us and continues to meet us in Jerusalem in a special way. We do not own it. Jerusalem belongs to God. We are placed here by God and entrusted with it to be good stewards and to maintain it in such a way that it would continue to be a place of encounter with God for Muslims, Jews and Christians. For us Christians in particular, it would always be a place where we will continue to witness to the presence of a living Lord and Savior.

2. We should insist that political sovereignty over Jerusalem should begin with the acknowledgment of

the overall sovereignty of God. As Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar, we need to learn "... that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals..." (Daniel 4:24-25). For the sake of justice, lasting security and peace, we need a shared political sovereignty over the city, under God who is ultimately the only supreme sovereign. This means accepting each other as brothers and sisters and, in the name of God, honoring each other by granting equal justice for all. It is our moral obligation and responsibility to witness to the love and mercy of God who has entrusted us with Jerusalem. Jerusalem, in its plurality, challenges any narrow doctrine of God. The way we envisage a solution for Jerusalem would indicate whether we hold an inclusive or exclusive understanding of God. It also tests our faithfulness to God in being our brother's and sister's keeper. God offers us Jerusalem with a choice. We can either make it the city of perpetual strife or we can make it a paradigm for peace.

3. So far, might seems to have determined the right in the Israel/Palestine conflict. It is high time to let right guide us so that it may become our might and our strength. It would be indeed tragic if Israel would sacrifice the ethical and moral for the arrogance of an exclusive claim to sovereignty. The city of Jerusalem, I believe, will ultimately rebuff it. The religious significance of the three religions demands a sharing

of the political in order to guarantee the religious.

Conclusion

On his last journey to Jerusalem, Jesus agonized over the city and its people. He accused it of not responding to his passionate love. “Jerusalem. . . how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34). This was the statement of a person who felt the pain and hurt of a city and of a people who did not “know the things that make for peace” (Luke 19:41). Forty years later, the city was destroyed. Inevitably, those who contradict the ways of justice and truth will only reap destruction and cut themselves off from the city and land. Sooner or later the bitter end will come.

Towards the end of the first century, the persecution of the Christian community by the Romans intensified. The writer of the book of Revelation describes in visions and symbols the desperate situation of the people of God as well as looks forward to the ultimate victory of God. The world had become so corrupt with evil and sin that nothing short of a new creation could redeem it. A new heaven and a new earth would entail new relationships between God and people. A new Jerusalem would have to come down from heaven to replace the old corrupt

and destroyed city.

Figuratively speaking, Jerusalem cannot be built on the basis of old mentalities, old concepts and old covenants. It demands new approaches, renewed mentalities, and new covenants. The old Jerusalem must die. The Jerusalem that some people want to build exclusively for the well-being of one side must be destroyed in our minds and psyche, in our hearts and memory, if we truly long for peace and security in Jerusalem and the land. With the benefit of historical hindsight, any monopoly of Jerusalem by one nation or one religion, inevitably sows with it the seeds of its own destruction.

Put candidly, the survival of the Jews cannot be guaranteed by constructing a Jerusalem built on injustice. We must, with all our power, prevent it for their own sake as well as for ours. We must construct a new Jerusalem for Palestinians and Israelis for the 21st century. It is possible today to envisage a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. The Jerusalem that is fit for peace and security must be reinvented and recreated. Its new vision comes from God. Jews can keep Jerusalem, only if they let go of it. They can be a part of Jerusalem if they are willing to share it. They can enjoy Jerusalem if they liberate it from their exclusive control. They must love Jerusalem without choking it. These words sound folly to people absorbed by the arrogance of power and who never seem

to anticipate the possibility of losing that power. Yet such is the folly and absurdity of power. Be that as it may, today if Israelis and Palestinians are ready to be open to each other and to God, who should be acknowledged as the sole owner of the city of Jerusalem, it is possible to receive a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. In the first century, the earthly Jerusalem was destroyed because it did not know what makes for peace. The present contemporary Jerusalem is being constructed on the same basis. It cannot be permanent because it is not just. God offers a vision of a new holy city of Jerusalem adorned with precious stones whose gates are always open because it is safe and just, and there is no danger for any theft, or falsehood, or lies, or shameful or impure things.²³ God will dwell in it.

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

God is setting a vision before all the inhabitants of Jerusalem today, and especially before people in power. It is an offer from God of a recreated new Jerusalem, a Jerusalem

²³ Revelation 21.

which is more just and holy, a Jerusalem which is more inclusive and pluralistic. We have a chance today to be partners with God in reinventing a Jerusalem that can be a fitting place for the indwelling of God with all its inhabitants.

The deepest lesson of human life is when a person finds beyond time the secrets of living truly in time. If the city coming down from God can be imprinted in our hearts to become our dream and vision for the future of Jerusalem, God will give us the power to lift our present Jerusalem to that higher vision. God is offering us a new future. If we can envision it, conceive it, dream it, will it and work for it, it can, by the mercy and grace of God, become a reality.

Naim Ateek

A Theological Reflection on Jerusalem

Sabeel Jerusalem Day

I would like to talk about the religious and theological significance of Jerusalem for the three Abrahamic Faiths (three Monotheistic Religions).

There are three important common religious and theological features that have made Jerusalem special and unique to the three religions. After mentioning them briefly, I will end with three brief theological comments. The first common feature is the Holiness of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is considered sacred and holy to the three religions.

For Jews: (according to the OT), King David conquered it by force from its Jebusite native inhabitants and made it his religious and political capital. Later, his son Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem, thus sealing and confirming the holiness of Jerusalem for the Jewish people. Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, but years later was rebuilt and again destroyed, this time, by the Romans in AD 70.

For Christians: It is in Jerusalem where Jesus Christ was condemned to death by the religious and political powers of the day. He suffered death on the cross and, as Christians, we believe that God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead, and his disciples were witnesses to his resurrection. In addition, in Jerusalem, the Christian Church came into being by the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

Later, in the 4th century, the Church of the Resurrection (the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) was built on the place where Jesus was crucified and resurrected, thus sealing and confirming the holiness of Jerusalem for Christians.

For Muslims: the holiness of Jerusalem was sealed and confirmed when in the late 7th and early 8th centuries, both the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque were built. Muslims believe that their prophet Muhammad came in a night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem he ascended to heaven and met with Abraham, Moses and Jesus and led them in prayer. In Arabic, Muslims refer to Jerusalem as “Bayt Almaqdes,” the house of the holy or simply “Alquds,” the holy.

Therefore, the first common and theological feature of Jerusalem for the three religions is its holiness.

When we say something is holy, it means it is set apart,

special, sacred, and transcendent. Each of the three religions believes that God, according to its religious faith tradition, has acted historically in a special way in Jerusalem.

The second common theological feature is that Jerusalem is a place of pilgrimage and prayer for the three religions.

Jerusalem is the city of prayer par excellence. Local and international pilgrims who come to Jerusalem come to pray, meditate and contemplate. If you are a Muslim, you go to the Haram area to pray. If you are a Jew, you go to the Kotel (western wall) to pray. If you are a Christian, you go to the Church of the Resurrection to pray.

The third common theological feature of Jerusalem is that the Oneness of God is celebrated by every one of the three religions on a daily basis.

This is symbolized in the call to prayer by the muezzin from the minarets five times a day. It is expressed by religious Jews in their daily prayers, and similarly, when Christian clergy say the Divine Liturgy, or Mass, or Holy Communion daily. Every day, each one of the religions lifts its praise and adoration to the One Holy and sovereign God.

So, the three common theological features of Jerusalem are:

- A Holy place
- A place of pilgrimage and prayer
- A place that celebrates the Greatness and Oneness of God

Three theological comments to remember:

1. **A comment on Holiness:** Although we all talk about the holiness of Jerusalem, I believe that holiness is not really expressed in buildings and stones, but in the life of every one of the three communities that lives a holy life in love, charity, and service of others. True holiness requires doing justice to the neighbor and living in peace with each other. Because God is holy, every community needs to live a life of holiness, justice, and peace.
2. **A comment on Prayer:** Some adherents of the three religions believe that prayer in Jerusalem has a special or even greater worth and merit before God. But since we believe that God is everywhere, God hears the prayers wherever the person is. For us Christians, when the Samaritan woman from Nablus asked Jesus where is the best place to worship God, on Mount Gerizim or in Jerusalem? Jesus answered, not on Gerizim, nor in Jerusalem. God is Spirit and

those who worship must worship God in spirit and in truth. As humans, however, whether Muslims, Jews, or Christians, we like to come on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and offer our prayers to God because it is a holy place, but we need to remember that God is not limited to any one place. God's presence and love fill the whole universe.

- 3. A comment on the Oneness of God:** Jerusalem is a special place where a beautiful religious mosaic exists. Three major religions living in close proximity, each with its own religious tradition, lifting its daily praise and adoration to the One God.

The tragedy, however, is that since its occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967, the government of Israel has been Judaizing the city and shattering its unique mosaic by making it a city exclusively for Jews. Most indigenous Muslims and Christians cannot even come to Jerusalem to pray. Practically, Israel has monopolized Jerusalem in contravention of international law. Israel has been negating the religious, human, and political rights of the Muslims and Christians to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is equally holy, equally unique, and equally special to the three religions. Israel will never experience peace or security unless Jerusalem is shared in accordance with international law and legitimacy. It is only then that Jerusalem will return to its God-given vocation as a model city for the

three Abrahamic Faiths. People of the three faiths will hopefully learn to live together side by side in mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual acceptance, and mutual trust of each other. It is our hope and prayer that individually and collectively all the people of Jerusalem, regardless of their religious tradition, will continue to lift up their songs of praise and adoration to the One Holy and merciful God to whom alone belongs sovereignty, majesty and power forever.

Naim Ateek

A Bible Study on Jerusalem

Psalm 87

¹*On the holy mount stands the city he founded;*

²*The Lord loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.*

³*Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.*

⁴*Among those who know me
I mention Rahab and Babylon;
Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia
“This one was born there,” they say.*

⁵*And of Zion it shall be said,
“This one and that one were born in it”;
For the Most High himself will establish it.*

⁶*The Lord records, as he registers the peoples,
“This one was born there.”*

⁷*Singers and dancers alike say
“All my springs are in you.”*

With the loss of monarchy and the exile of the political leadership to Babylon, Jewish religious leaders began to take a more significant role among the exiles. Greater attention was paid to organizing the community along religious grounds and the stipulations of religious laws. At the same time, after the exile, the significance of Jerusalem started crystallizing, beginning probably with the

5th century BC. Some people were still caught between the idealized glories of the past that spoke of kings and princes, and the realities of the present as people lived under foreign rule or agitated intermittently for independence through military uprisings and resistance. Others, however, could sing of a God who puts an end to war. The theology of Jerusalem was directed more and more to what God could do rather than to what a former king was able to do.

Psalm 87 is one of the hymns or Psalms of Zion, i.e., Jerusalem. It is one of those rare Psalms that is radically progressive in its inclusive theological religious thought about God and God's people. It can be compared with texts like Micah 4:1-5 or the amazing message of the book of Jonah.¹

Psalm 87:1-3

*On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwell-
ings of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of
God.*

The Psalmist is expressing great admiration for the city,

1 See Chapter 5 in Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Orbis: Maryknoll, NY), 2008.

the city that God founded. The admiration is for the specialness of the city which has come to be known as God's city, loved by God more than all the other towns and villages in the land. There is no mention about the temple. It is not clear whether the Psalmist is actually physically present in Jerusalem when composing this hymn. The words, "Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God" may reflect an outside admirer or a person, a native, or a citizen who has been away for some time and is reminiscing on the beauty of Jerusalem.

Psalm 87: 4-6

*Among those who know me
I mention Rahab and Babylon;
Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia –
"This one was born there," they say.
And of Zion it shall be said,
"This one and that one were born in it."
For the Most High himself will establish it.
The Lord records, as he registers the peoples,
"This one was born there."*

After referring to the significance and specialness of Jerusalem, the Psalmist mentions incredible words about the city's residents. He says that among the people who know God (Yahweh) are the people of Egypt (the word Rahab is a mythological beast that represents Egypt) and

Babylon. Furthermore, more incredibly, the Psalmist says that the people of Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia belong to Jerusalem. They are all born there. They are all citizens of the city. Since God is the one who founded the city and established it, God decrees that all these nations belong to Jerusalem.

Let us pause for a moment and reflect on those nations. Egypt was the earliest and biggest enemy that enslaved the children of Israel for hundreds of years. Babylon was the great empire that destroyed Jerusalem, utterly devastated and shattered the temple, and exiled its elites to Babylon. The Philistines were those sea people who conquered the southwestern coastline of Palestine and made it their home. They were formidable enemies of the ancient Israelites. The city of Tyre, in its golden age, was the most powerful city in all of Phoenicia. While Ethiopia, referred to as Cush in the Bible, stood for a large area of land that we call Africa today. The Psalmist says that, in addition to the Egyptians and Babylonians, God includes the Philistines, and the people of Tyre and Ethiopia as having been born in Jerusalem. Indeed, they all belong to Jerusalem because the Most High has decreed it. Furthermore, the Psalmist portrays God making a census of the people of Jerusalem. God registers all those nations and God says that all of them are citizens of Jerusalem

What an amazing Psalm! God has included all the former

enemies of ancient Israel and Judah and even more. It is incredulous to see that the staunchest and most cruel enemies are considered by God's decree as citizens of the city by virtue of being born in it. Is this God's vision of an inclusive Jerusalem? Does this mean that God considers Jerusalem as the spiritual mother of all people? Does it mean that the Psalmist is giving us God's vision of peace for Jerusalem where enmities are erased, and all Jerusalem's residents can enjoy living together?

Psalm 87:7

*Singers and dancers alike say,
"All my springs are in you."*

Such an amazing inclusive vision of Jerusalem calls for a celebration. Let the singers and dancers come. Let the harps, flutes, and tambourines begin their music. Let all the people celebrate God's new vision of Jerusalem. "Those who faithfully ... embrace the way of God are the residents of the New Jerusalem. It is with these people that God lives: 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with the people, God will dwell with them and they will be God's people...'" (Rev. 21:3).

In conclusion, I would like to mention three points:

1. Against such a beautiful inclusive vision, we notice a

more morbid reality which the government of Israel has been building in today's Jerusalem. Israel is forcibly emptying East Jerusalem of its Palestinian indigenous inhabitants and replacing them with largely Jewish religious extremist settlers who harass, intimidate, and violate Palestinian human rights on a daily basis. Instead of being inspired by an inclusive vision of a shared Jerusalem, Israel is working tirelessly to establish an exclusive Jerusalem that negates the Palestinian's historic right to the city.

2. The hymns of Zion in the book of Psalms reflect a faith that God's presence in the holy city provides its people with protection and security. Yet these rabid religious settlers behave in a despicable and arrogant way by denigrating and insulting the Palestinian people of the land. Instead of peace and wellbeing, there is fear, anger, and grave injustice. It brings to mind the words of the Prophet Micah who condemned the leaders of Jerusalem of his day when he accused them of building Jerusalem with blood and corruption because they abhorred justice and perverted all equity (Micah 3:9-10). When we observe how much these settlers hate, loathe, and despise the Palestinians and treat them with disdain and brutality, it is difficult to imagine a possible future of peace and harmony. In spite of this, many of us cling to the hope that these extremists can be rehabilitated, and Jerusalem can

become a place of living in peace and respect of the other. Without justice for the Palestinians, there can be no lasting peace or security.

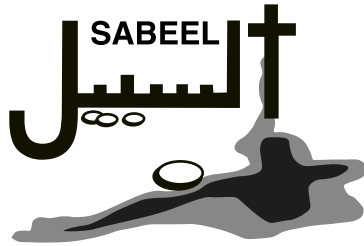
3. More important theologically, this inclusive Psalm expresses a strong critique of the narrow and exclusive theology of Nehemiah who was appointed by the Persian Empire as governor of Judea to administer the civil affairs of the people. For Nehemiah, Jerusalem belongs only to Jews. Non-Jews have “no share, or claim, or historic right in Jerusalem” (Nehemiah 2:19-20). This exclusive theology reflects the government of Israel’s position as it Judaizes East Jerusalem. The composer of Psalm 87 rejects such a narrow and closed theology and attributes an inclusive theology to God who wills that Jerusalem be an open city for all people, including the enemies of ancient Israel and Judah. God deems them as born in Jerusalem, thus belonging to it, and citizens of it.

If my interpretation of this Psalm is right, it must be ranked as one of the greatest Psalms that, most probably, was written by a liberation theologian who had an inclusive insight and understanding of God’s inclusive nature for all nations and people. Moreover, since Jerusalem is the city of God and has been established by the Most High, and since God is the creator of the world and loves all people equally, it makes great theological sense that Jerusalem must reflect the same inclusive character

of the God who founded it. That is why the theology of Jerusalem as expressed in Psalm 87 is absolutely the antithesis of Nehemiah's exclusive theology. Indeed, this inclusive theology does not only critique Nehemiah's exclusive theology, it overturns and invalidates it because of its exclusionary nature.

Living in the world today we are pulled asunder by two forces – the exclusive and the inclusive. We must never succumb to the exclusive forces. We must aspire to the inclusive because it is the only force that maintains the dignity of all the people involved. Psalm 87 provides us with the basis for sharing Jerusalem by the Israelis and the Palestinians and inspires us to build it in such a way that its diverse population can live in peace and harmony. Today's Jerusalem is in need of healing. In New Jerusalem, according to the books of Ezekiel and Revelation, is found the tree of life. While Ezekiel saw the leaves of the tree as being “for healing,” John sees that they are “for the healing of the nations.” This vision of New Jerusalem is of an inclusive community of faith that centers its life in God and looks to God's embracing love, healing and care.

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