

Palestinian Liberation Theology

A Lecture Given By

The Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek

in Memory

Of

Dr. Michael Prior

Dedication

On July 12, 2014, I gave this paper at Heythrop College, London on the 10th anniversary of the passing of Dr. Michael Prior, a personal friend, a colleague in the struggle for liberation, a good friend of Sabeel, and a passionate advocate for justice and peace for the Palestinian people. Father Prior was a Catholic priest of the Vincentian Order, professor of biblical studies at St. Mary's College, University of Surrey, and a liberation theologian. He was an open critic of Zionism.

As the original intent of this lecture, I dedicate it to Michael Prior's memory and honor.

**Michael Prior Anniversary Lecture
Heythrop College, London
Friday, 12th July 2014**

Palestinian Liberation Theology

Introduction

Palestinian Liberation Theology, one of the latest expressions of liberation theologies, was articulated almost 20 years after Gustavo Gutiérrez' landmark work, *A Theology of Liberation*,¹ appeared on the world scene.

I am often asked whether there is a relationship between Palestinian Liberation Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology. I usually answer, yes and no. If we are talking about an emphasis on justice – which all liberation theologies have in common – then there is a relationship. Indeed, justice and truth are the hallmarks of all liberation theologies. On the other hand, if we are comparing contexts, then the answer is no, because there is a great difference between the context described in Latin America and that of Palestine-Israel.

When I was in theological school in the mid-1960s, Liberation Theology (LT) was not fully articulated. Years

1 Gustavo Gutiérrez. *A Theology of Liberation* (NY: Orbis Books, 1973).

later, I found out that Gustavo Gutiérrez was already active in theological reflection and writing in the 1960s, but his first book did not appear until 1971 in which he coined the term, “liberation theology.”

Towards the end of the 1980s, I was privileged to meet Gustavo at Maryknoll in New York. We were able to connect from the first few minutes, because both of us were talking about the need for justice. He shared with me the situation in Latin America, while I shared with him the situation in Palestine. We talked about two different contexts, thousands of miles apart, but both of us were describing situations of injustice and the suffering of our people. He was talking about economic injustice. I was talking about political injustice. Both of us were emphasizing that the solution to our problems must begin by achieving justice. Yet, in each case, it is important to define what we mean by justice and how it could be achieved.

Both of us were trained as pastors in the church and as servants of the people of God. Both of us were keenly sensitive to the needs of our people. I felt so privileged to meet him and we became friends. The next time I saw him was at the 1988 Lambeth Conference when he was invited to address the Anglican bishops, and we spent some good time together.

I do not remember Gustavo's background and how he came to articulate a theology of liberation for the poor, but in my case, I did not start with a conscious decision. I can only testify that as far back as I can remember I left me, and I am thankful that I was able to become one.

Be that as it may, as many of us know, when we accept God's call, we accept to be guided by the Spirit of God in whatever way God chooses. This is what I believe had happened. It has been a wonderful journey so far. But when I consider the movement towards a Palestinian theology of liberation, I can identify with the words of Amos when he said,

I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people...' (Amos 7:14-15).

Amos also said, "the Lord has spoken; who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8).

Jesus Christ Liberator

The Beginnings of Palestinian Liberation Theology

I started my ministry at the end of the summer of 1966 as a pastor of a small Anglican church in lower Galilee that had not had a resident priest since the 1948 war. Approximately 20 years later, my bishop asked me to come to Jerusalem and serve at St. George's Cathedral. I resisted the move, but I had to go. Two years later, in December 1987, the intifada² started and that led to the development of what became known as Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT). It all started in the small parish hall at St. George's Cathedral where Palestinian Christians of different church backgrounds met every Sunday after worship to discuss the sermon which intentionally addressed one aspect of the intifada, its impact on our people, and what should be our faith response in light of the Gospel.

Contextual and Liberational Theology

PLT is both a contextual and a liberational theology. By contextual I mean that it started in a specific context, and addressed and continues to address, that context, i.e.,

2 Intifada in Arabic means "shaking off" or "shaking up." The First Intifada of 1987 was a Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

Palestine-Israel. But it is also a liberation theology because it has implications that are wider and broader than that one context. In other words, some of its fundamentals can be used in other contexts that are marred by injustice and oppression, as well as marred by inherited biblical interpretations and understandings that continue to be politically damaging to the Palestinian people.

This needs more elaboration. PLT is crucially needed because of the way the Bible has been used by the Zionists,³ and later by the government of Israel, as an instrument of oppression against the Palestinians. In this case, Palestinian theologians must address the local context.

But more than that, PLT is also needed to challenge western Christian theology because, generally speaking, the Bible has been used as a Zionist document. However, it is not used only by religious Zionists; it is used today by secular and atheist Zionists who have political power. They consider the Bible as their title deed to the whole land. Furthermore, many western Christians, and not only fundamentalists, in our mainline churches, including Catholics, Anglicans, and Orthodox, as well as Protestants, have “naturally,” and innately, accepted the Zionist interpretation of the Bible.

3 Zionism is a political movement that supported the creation and preservation of a Jewish state on the land of historic Palestine.

If my analysis is correct, this means that we have a responsibility to liberate western Christian theology by “de-Zionizing” it. Many Christians have been reading the Bible as a Zionist document. Millions of Christians come every year to visit, and are exposed to the land by mainly Jewish guides who consciously or unconsciously “indoctrinate” them, or at least point to the success of Zionism and connect it with the Bible. Such indoctrination influences people’s minds and psyche, and affects people’s Biblical understanding and interpretation. PLT is needed to undo the theological, spiritual, and political harm that results from these indoctrinations.

I believe that the Church of Scotland has taken the right theological leap and has led the way in its recent report on “The Inheritance of Abraham?” in 2013.⁴ I believe that the Church of Scotland has liberated its biblical theology. By liberating its theology, it has liberated its politics regarding the “Holy Land,” and the implications for justice and peace for its people. I am sorry that I cannot say the same about the Anglican Consultative Council Report, “Land of Promise? An Anglican exploration of Christian attitudes to the Holy Land with special reference

⁴ *The Inheritance of Abraham? A report on the ‘promised land’* produced by The Church of Scotland (May 9, 2013)

to Christian Zionism” (2012),⁵ though admittedly the Anglican report made important changes.

5 *Land of Promise? An Anglican exploration of Christian attitudes to the Holy Land, with special reference to 'Christian Zionism'* ISBN 978-0-9566596-1-3. A report from the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns.

What Is Palestinian Liberation Theology (PLT)?

Palestinian Liberation Theology is, therefore, the response that results when faith meets context. It is the outcome of one's view of God's justice confronting the dreadful injustice of human beings against their fellow humans. PLT has three components: faith, context, and response, or, in other terms, faith, situation in life, and action. The important question is: what does God expect me to say and do about the injustice I see before me? Let me reiterate in a different way. Three elements must come together to produce a theology of liberation.

The first is one's faith in the God of love and justice. For me, love and justice are two sides of the same coin. If you love, you do justice.⁶ When love is absent, injustice can ensue. To be committed to justice is to be committed to love of neighbor and vice versa. An important dimension of this faith is one's view of vision for the world. God wills that people live in justice and love, in mercy and forgiveness, in peace and reconciliation.

Second, the vision of God's love for all people must be followed by a truthful and honest analysis of the situation

6 Commenting on love and justice, Marcus Borg stated, "Justice is the social expression of love." Cornel West states that 'justice is what love looks like in public.'

at hand, in other words, a careful assessment of the context of injustice and oppression.

Third, it is important to ask the theological question, what does God expect me to say and do? or in the words of Micah, what does God require of us? The result is a theology of liberation.

The Great Discovery, Reclaiming the Historical Jesus

I mentioned earlier that initially PLT developed as a response to the first intifada of 1987. It is important to emphasize that, at that time, the PLO⁷ had no official presence in Palestine. Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership were in exile in Tunis. Furthermore, Israel and most western countries considered the PLO a terrorist organization. The Gaza Strip, at the time, was not an isolated entity; people were able to go back and forth more freely. The intifada erupted among the Palestinian masses as a reaction to the cruelty and heavy-handedness of the Israeli occupying forces. Whenever the Israeli army was deployed to squash the intifada in a given place, the resistance erupted in another. The intifada started in Gaza, but soon the West Bank was actively involved. In spite of the brutal measures of the Israeli army, and the suffering of the Palestinians, people felt a sense of exhilaration.

7 Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)

The years of waiting for the UN and the international community to redress the injustice had been futile. It was time for the Palestinians themselves to rise up and, through nonviolent resistance, to demand the end of the illegal occupation of their country. That is why people were enthusiastic and excited, hoping that they could bring a drastic change to their situation. Most of them did not realize that they were up against a stubborn settler colonialist group that was not easy to uproot.

At St. George's Cathedral, the Sunday gatherings of people became more popular and attracted both Palestinians and internationals. The discussion usually started with the sermon preached, but soon branched off both theologically and politically towards addressing the situation on the ground. The most profound theological ideas came from the local Christians who were reflecting on the meaning of their faith under the oppressive occupation, and their responsibility before God and their community.

The discussion became more viral and stimulating when it dawned on them that the person they call savior and Lord was himself a victim of an oppressive occupation. We did not have to go far to look for a liberator. Jesus Christ was a Palestinian as we were. He lived in the same land we lived in. He breathed the same air we breathed. His language and thought patterns were Semitic as ours were. The Palestine he lived in was always a multicultural,

multi-ethnic, multiracial, and multi-religious society, whether during his lifetime or ever since. Moreover, the political situation of his day, with its multi political and religious parties, showed great similarities to the political parties we have today.

Once that discovery was made, Jesus Christ was viewed as the paradigm of faith and our liberator. It is true that other liberation theologians had appropriated Jesus as liberator,⁸ but for Palestinian Christians he was more uniquely theirs. In fact, people saw him as a Palestinian who lived all his life under the Roman occupation, and was eventually killed by the occupation forces in collaboration with the religious leaders of his day. Such a discovery had important theological implications for most people and was great incentive for engagement.

Reflecting on this fact in 2014 did not seem like a groundbreaking discovery, but in 1988, a few months after the intifada, it was significant. It must be remembered that the early theological Christian controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries ended with the affirmation of the divinity of Christ. And although the early creeds affirmed both Jesus Christ's full humanity and full divinity, the great emphasis was on his divinity. The Nicene Creed says

8 An example is the Jesuit Catholic priest, Jon Sobrino, who wrote *Jesus the Liberator* (NY: Orbis, 1991).

clearly about Christ,

...eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father, through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man...

Our Eastern Christian liturgies are pregnant with the emphasis of Christ's divinity and many of our people take pride in stressing it. PLT, however, brought back the balance by reclaiming Jesus Christ's full humanity. It was a rediscovery of the historical Jesus who lived under occupation similar to today's Palestinians. For some Palestinian Eastern Christians it might have seemed sacrilegious at the time. Yet, when our people recognized and accepted his full humanity, it became a turning point that drove us directly back to the Gospels to study Jesus' life and teachings. Such an exercise inspired and encouraged us to work for justice and peace.

Moreover, there were important questions that needed to be asked, such as: How did Jesus live under occupation? How can he help us in our life under the Israeli occupation today? What does Jesus say about resistance? What lessons do we deduce from the Gospels that can help us

in relating to the occupation forces?

A Key Gospel Text – Luke 4:18-19

One of the first obvious key texts was the Luke passage which Jesus used in the Nazareth synagogue.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus appropriates this text for himself, and in the ensuing discussion with worshipers at the synagogue, he confronts their racist attitudes toward foreigners. He did this in Nazareth before his own town folks.

I remember inviting Michael Prior to speak on "Jesus the Liberator" at St. George's Cathedral using the Luke text. His analysis and exegesis of the text were good, but some of us Palestinians present felt that the application to our Palestinian situation in life was not as satisfactory as it could have been. His exegesis of the text was stronger and more satisfying than his contextualization of it. However, the more Michael Prior identified with the oppressed Palestinians, the more relevant his contextualization became.

Another Key Gospel Story – Luke 18:1-8

I would like to believe that the story of the widow standing before the unjust judge and saying, “give me justice” was more than a parable. It likely reflects a real life story that Jesus was aware of. It is also likely that he used it on different occasions and gave it different emphases. In Luke, it is placed in the context of persistence in prayer, but it can equally emphasize justice.

This story is very relevant to the Palestinian condition. The judge represents empire and the people of power, hence injustice and oppression; the widow represents the vulnerable, the poor, and the oppressed. Right before their eyes stands the oppressor and the oppressed. And Jesus’ commentary, as far as I see it, sums it up,

And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him, day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:7-8)

“Will we who care about the oppressed have the courage to take a stand and advocate for justice on their behalf? Will we be able to stand before the unjust powers of this world and insist that justice be done? Only true faith can produce such

courage.”⁹

For Palestinian Christians, liberation theology is anchored in Jesus Christ liberator and in its justice agenda. This is the basis on which we have been able to build our liberation theology.

A Theology that Imitates Christ

What are some of the main features of this Christ-centered theology that relate directly to the Palestine-Israel conflict?

1. PLT is a theology of love and justice, love of God and neighbor, and love of enemies. It does not seek the destruction of the enemy, but their transformation. Love of enemy means liberation from hate and animosity.
2. PLT is a theology of justice and mercy. Justice, on its own, can be hard and harsh. It must be tempered with mercy. In the conflict over Palestine, we must do justice in accordance with international law. This means giving the Palestinians their rights as international law prescribes, but still we must be sure that all the people of the land – Palestinians and Israelis

9 Naim Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 21.

- will live in security and peace. There should be no revenge or retaliation. This means taking the higher moral ground and implementing justice with mercy. This is the way of Jesus.
3. PLT is a theology that commits to truth. “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free,” Jesus said (John 8:32). Through the truth one can confront falsehood and deception. In the conflict over Palestine, the first casualty has always been the truth. The way of Jesus is the way of truth and integrity. Very often Jesus confronted some of the religious leaders of his day with the truth. One time he said, “You hypocrites, you tithe the herbs but you neglect the more important laws of God, namely, justice, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23).
 4. PLT is a theology of nonviolence. We must resist everything that is evil but we must use nonviolent methods. This we do because we believe it is the way of Jesus. In the conflict over Palestine, we promote Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) against the settlement products, because we believe that this is a nonviolent way of resisting the evil of occupation.
 5. PLT is a theology of peace and reconciliation. To be a peacemaker is a mandate from Christ himself. To live in peace and reconciliation is to experience liberation.

Reconciliation must precede worship – “... first be reconciled to your brother or sister...” (Matthew 5:24). Justice first, then peace, and afterward the long process of reconciliation.

6. PLT is a theology committed to champion the oppressed, the poor, the marginalized, and all those who are disadvantaged in the land.
7. PLT is a theology that is expressed through regular prayer and worship of God.
8. PLT looks to Jesus’ life and teachings because they offer us important guidelines that are essential to our everyday life.

The above features of PLT make Jesus Christ the model and paradigm of faith to the Christian. More than that, Christ becomes the hermeneutic that examines and tests the authentic word of God, and differentiates it from what is inauthentic and not binding to the life of the Christian.

Christ as Hermeneutic

One of the most useful hermeneutics I have found is Jesus Christ himself. With the use of a simple formula, it is possible to determine the relevance of the text to our lives today. Is what I am reading in line with the

spirit of Christ, and does it agree with the knowledge, nature, and character of God that have been revealed to me in and through Jesus Christ? Put differently: Is this text in harmony with the love of God for all people that I have come to know in Jesus Christ? I believe that such a simple formula can be of help to many Christians in determining the authenticity and usefulness of the text to people's life today.

Areas that Palestinian Liberation Theology Must Impact

First: PLT and the Bible

For the last 25 years,¹⁰ Sabeel has been able to address a number of themes relevant to the lives of our Palestinian people living under occupation.

In one of his parables, Jesus likened the Kingdom of God to a fisherman whose net caught all kinds of fish; he kept the good and discarded what he did not need (Matt. 13:47-50). I would like to paraphrase the parable and liken it to reading the Old Testament, which contains all kinds of material – legends, folklore, myths, history, poetry, proverbs, politics, stories, laws and regulations, religious material, and much more. The material it contains is of different value and worth. We have a responsibility to use what is worthwhile and put aside what is not. There are some religious pearls in it, but Christians need a criterion that can help them evaluate its contents.

Here I remember the words of Michael Prior about the Bible when he observed its misuse and abuse by the Israeli government, by settlers, and by Christian Zionists. He often talked about the need for a warning label that the

10 Note: This paper was written in 2014.

Bible can be harmful to your health. Therefore, for PLT, there are a few dominant themes that are essential from a biblical and theological perspective. In essence they all have to do with the “de-Zionization” of the Bible.

1. The tribal vs. the universal or the exclusive vs. the inclusive. In my studies I have concluded that Zionism has negatively influenced Judaism and caused it to regress to the most primitive and tribal period of its bygone history. It is a retrogression that reflects a very exclusive religious understanding of God and people. The texts that are used reflect a violent and bigoted god which later Hebrew prophets themselves critiqued and rejected.

It is important to point out that in my study of the Old Testament I have discovered an amazing fact where the same biblical writer vacillates between an exclusive and an inclusive theology of both God and people. However, it is possible to say that after the Exile the movement towards greater inclusivity becomes increasingly stronger and clearer, though not always dominant in the community. In fact, I believe that the movement towards inclusive theology was a dynamic development that gave courage to those writers after the Exile to critique the exclusive, narrow, rigid, and even the more nationalist views of God, land, and people, and opened up for them a

new inclusive theology.

2. Connected with this is the important theme of the theology of land. In many ways, the theology of land is crucial to PLT. An exclusive theology of land is a recipe for violence and perpetual conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. In contrast, an inclusive theology of land can create the right atmosphere for peace, and the sharing of the land, and can open the way for a just resolution of the conflict.
3. Christian Zionists: There are millions of Bible believing Christians around the world who believe that the creation of the state of Israel was a sign for the imminent Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world. For many others, such a theology is false and a gross misinterpretation of the Bible. Due to their uncritical literalist reading, Christian Zionists commit grave injustice against the Palestinians and justify Israel's oppressive policies.¹¹ I have placed Christian Zionists in this section because they seem to be more Old Testament Christians than New Testament, although one can address their theology from both the Old as well as the New Testament.

11 Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis and Maurine Tobin (eds.). *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, 2005).

I would like to give three examples. Every one of the following examples has relevance to the situation on the ground in Palestine-Israel and impacts the lives of our people.

I. The promise of land

[God to Moses] speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you (Numbers 33:51-52)

But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18)

According to the Books of Numbers 33:51-56 and Deuteronomy 20:16-18, God asks Moses to expel or annihilate the people of the land. After the Exile, God tells Ezekiel that the land must be divided as an inheritance

among all the people who live in it, regardless of their racial or ethnic backgrounds.

So you shall divide this land among you according to the tribes of Israel. You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God. (Ezekiel 47:21-23)

The first two Torah texts reflect a tribal and exclusive theology of God and land, while the Ezekiel text reflects an inclusive theology of God and land. In essence, Ezekiel is critiquing and rejecting the tribal and exclusive theology of the Torah. The tribal texts do not lend themselves to peaceful living in a multi-ethnic society, while the inclusive text of Ezekiel reflects justice and equality for all the people of the land and can contribute to peace and harmony in society.

II. Jerusalem theology: Nehemiah 2:20 vs. Psalm 87

Then I [Nehemiah] replied to them, “The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but

you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 2:20)

Nehemiah's position is that Jerusalem belongs exclusively to Jews. Non-Jews have "no share or claim or historic right in it." This is also the policy of the Israeli government and is supported by many Israelis, including right-wing settlers. They are adamantly against the sharing of Jerusalem. Such a view is an obstacle to peace. The Psalmist (87) position is totally the opposite.

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
the LORD loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.
Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God.

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."

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

The Psalmist sees Jerusalem as an open city where God welcomes into it people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, even the enemies of ancient Israel – the Egyptians, Babylonians, Philistines and others. All are welcomed as full citizens of the city. This inclusive vision of Psalm 87 critiques the exclusive position of Nehemiah. Sharing Jerusalem between Israelis and Palestinians can be a major contributor to a life of peace and well-being, not only for those who live in Jerusalem but for the whole country.¹²

III. The Book of Jonah

The short story of Jonah, in its simplicity and yet profundity, makes the writer of Jonah a very insightful liberation theologian. The writer critiques three major exclusive theologies of the day, namely, theologies of God, of the people of God, and of the land. The Book of Jonah challenges the reader to reject such exclusive theologies and to cling to a faith in God whose inclusive love and mercy embrace all people, irrespective of their ethnic or racial background. That is why, from a Palestinian

12 Naim Ateek. *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 140-150.

perspective, I have considered the theology of Jonah to be the climax of Old Testament theology, and, therefore, the first Palestinian liberation theologian.¹³

Our primary focus has been on the Old Testament because of the way it has been used to justify an exclusive Jewish right to the land of Palestine. But the New Testament is used continuously to strengthen and cement our faith in God's love in Jesus Christ our liberator. At the same time, the Gospels help us to see that in Jesus – in his life and teachings, and in his death and resurrection, and throughout the New Testament – the movement towards an inclusive understanding of God, people, and land developed much further and found a more solid foundation.

Furthermore, the New Testament challenges us with many other themes that need to be addressed and researched for PLT, especially in the areas of nonviolence, peace, and reconciliation, and I hope that they can be explored more deeply in the future.

Second: PLT and the Ecumenical Agenda

Our PLT strategy has been to work ecumenically (i.e., inter-denominationally) rather than to just preach

13 Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*, 67-77.

ecumenism. There are no denominational programs at Sabeel whatsoever. We have been conducting local programs in both Jerusalem and Nazareth that have been bringing Christians together from the various churches of the land. Over the last 25 years we have witnessed a significant shift in ecumenical relations among Christians. The ecumenical spirit has penetrated the psyche, emotions, hearts, and minds of many (probably in this order). It has brought people closer to one another and has led people to accept and respect the other. This ecumenical spirit has also touched some of the bishops, and certainly no bishop or archbishop or patriarch has refused to work or respond to the invitations of Sabeel. Moreover, on a number of occasions, Christians, regardless of their denominational backgrounds, have received communion together when it was celebrated by a priest of another Christian denomination. It is possible to summarize the ecumenical work of Sabeel in the following points:

1. Sabeel is totally ecumenical. It is not affiliated with any particular denomination.
2. Sabeel respects the integrity of every church tradition and prays for the unity of the church. We believe that in this world, and due to human diversity, our aim has been to work ecumenically and to break down the denominational barriers, and to contribute to the increase of love and acceptance between the brothers

and sisters. We understand unity not as uniformity but as diversity within the unity.

3. We thank God that Pope Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew are aware of the importance of working ecumenically, and that they can bridge the historical gaps and bring closer the two major historic churches – Catholics and Orthodox. I am afraid, however, that full communion between the two churches must take place at a faster speed.
4. There is a long ecumenical agenda that needs to be tackled. We have barely scratched the surface. In fact, the small number of Christians in our country place a great responsibility on bishops and pastors to do the work of ministry. The agenda must include what it means for all the people of God to be salt and light in our communities today.
5. There is a huge need to encourage Christians who are living in the country to find spiritual nourishment in their communities through Bible study and prayer.
6. The local churches and the Christian community must find ways to overcome basic living challenges that include the education of their children, housing for young couples, and employment.

7. There is a great need not only for the hierarchy of the churches, but for all the people of God, to be more courageously engaged and involved in issues of human rights as well as to speak out prophetically against injustice and oppression.

Third: PLT and the Interfaith Agenda

Christian/Muslim Relations

Although Sabeel has related to some Muslim academics and religious leaders and invited them for an iftar¹⁴ during the month of Ramadan, its interfaith programs have been intermittent. But I was always aware of the importance of the interfaith agenda and its indispensable relatedness to Palestinian Liberation Theology.

To begin with, in Palestine, Christians and Muslims are one people. We have the same language, the same culture, and the same aspirations, but we belong to two different religions. There was a time when, ethnically speaking, it was difficult to differentiate between us religiously. However, since the establishment of the state of Israel, a number of political, religious, and social factors have begun to mar the relationships between the two religious communities. Not least among these factors has been the rise of religious extremism in our country. It started with Jewish religious settlers, and then was followed by the upsurge of militant Islam. The need for better interfaith relations has become much more vital and fundamental.

14 Iftar is the meal that breaks the fast.

We have, therefore, identified three important ascending goals to our relationship with our Muslim brothers and sisters: 1. Personal encounter and better understanding of the other; 2. Respect of the other; and 3. Acceptance of the other.

Sabeel's ministry and theology are not complete without this important dimension. In this interfaith work, Sabeel is in partnership with Al-liqa Center, with Dr. Jeries Khoury as director.¹⁵ We have conducted conferences together, as well as regional meetings and workshops. One of the projects that we have been working on is village meetings that bring together Muslim and Christian leaders, including priests and sheikhs, to get to know each other and to create greater understanding and respect among them and the inhabitants of those villages.

We started doing this in the villages that have a mixed population of Christians and Muslims. Concurrently, we started university meetings with Muslim and Christian students. We have conducted a number of conferences together where not only priests and sheikhs participated, but where Christian patriarchs and bishops took part, including the Grand Mufti and other prominent Muslim leaders.

¹⁵ Dr. Jeries passed away suddenly in 2016 . His passing interrupted this interfaith partnership between Sabeel and Al-liqa.

Recently, we published a book in Arabic on the theme of “Nonviolent Resistance in Christianity and Islam.” The chapters were written by prominent Christian and Muslim scholars and activists. Unfortunately, the war on Gaza forced us to postpone the launching of the book. Eventually, it will be launched in a number of places, both in Palestine and Israel. Interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims have become absolutely essential these days due to Islamophobia, as well as to the rising number of Islamic political extremists. We at Sabeel and Al-liqa believe that it is one of our most important ministries.

Christian/Jewish Relations

Palestinian Liberation Theology cannot be complete in its effectiveness without relating to Judaism. From the beginning of the ministry of Sabeel, we recognized this, but due to the political conflict, we decided to relate primarily to progressive Jews, both religious and secular, i.e., those who believe that the occupation must end and there needs to be a just solution to the political conflict. We have related as well to Jewish organizations, such as B’Tselem and Breaking the Silence, that have taken a stand for justice and have been critical of Israeli government policies.

We have been aware of the interfaith activities between

Jews and Israeli Arabs, both Christians and Muslims. Our observation is that these groups have been hijacked by a pro-Zionist agenda, and their relationships have lacked the prophetic edge. These interfaith activities have become, what Dr. Marc Ellis calls, an ecumenical deal, where the Jewish participants control the agenda and the non-Jewish participants cannot be critical of Israeli government policies and must silence the prophetic.

The Sabeel Nazareth branch has related to some Jewish groups and has invited a few Jewish speakers to give lectures in Nazareth. Although these lectures have been well received, they were intermittent and need to become part of the ongoing agenda in order to continue to develop relations with Jewish groups in the Galilee.

It is important to note that Friends of Sabeel in North America (FOSNA) have a strong partnership with Jewish Voice for Peace in the United States. They have been working together for a number of years. At the same time, we have always had American Jews as members of FOSNA. Their active involvement has strengthened the work of advocacy for justice and peace.

Fourth: Sabeel and PLT

PLT preceded the establishment of Sabeel. In 1992/93, Sabeel came into being in order to translate our liberation theology into programs and activities on the ground. We have been careful not to interfere in the different churches' calendars. We have tried not to plan any activities during major church holy days. I have always encouraged our multi-denominational staff to be active in their churches. We have trained our staff to lead Bible study and prayer, and they have been able to use this training at Sabeel as well as in their own churches. In this section of the paper, I would like to mention a few programs and activities of Sabeel.

- Sabeel organizes ecumenical programs for clergy and laity on a regular basis. It conducts ecumenical retreats every year. Sabeel holds ecumenical prayer services periodically at St. Stephen's Dominican Church in Jerusalem, especially whenever there is a crisis in Palestine-Israel or in our region, such as the situation in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, as well as for prisoners and for Jerusalem itself. The homilies have been given by various bishops and patriarchs as well as others.
- At Christmas every year it has become a tradition to celebrate with an ecumenical Christmas dinner and Christmas music and carols. We usually invite one of

the patriarchs or bishops to give a short Christmas greeting.

- Over the years, Sabeel has developed two contemporary ways of the cross. One is usually conducted for tourists and pilgrims. It is a contemporary Via Dolorosa. A Sabeel staff person accompanies a bus of tourists on a visit to a destroyed village, a demolished home, a checkpoint, etc. At every contemporary station of the cross, an appropriate reading, prayers, reflection, and songs are used.
- During Lent, Sabeel conducts an ecumenical contemporary Via Dolorosa in Arabic. Its popularity has been building over the years and an increasing number of men and women, and especially young adults, have been participating in this annual event.
- Sabeel also has an active program of welcoming and speaking to visiting groups who come to hear a lecture on PLT and to be updated on the political situation.
- We also welcome a number of delegations from abroad that come to Sabeel, as well as Sabeel witness visits that are usually led by a member of our staff.
- Every week Sabeel Jerusalem sends out a Wave of Prayer to its friends and asks them to pray for us

and with us, using this short prayer that touches on relevant events of that week, not only in the life and work of the Sabeel community, but in the land and society. We ask them to pray at 12 noon according to their time zone on Thursday, so we have friends praying with us around the clock.

- A Sabeel sponsored Easter Egg Hunt, which began in 2004, is held each year for the children, both Muslim and Christian, of the orphanages and children care homes in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. This program started in Jerusalem, but due to the restriction of movement was moved to Bethlehem. Over 120 children participate.
- On the first week of the month Sabeel organizes a bible study for the women of Jerusalem, which deals with topics that are relevant to their daily life. Over thirty women attend each session.
- Sabeel's main publication is Cornerstone which originally came out 4 times a year.¹⁶
- Sabeel has organized nine international conferences, including "Faith and the Intifada" (1990), "Jerusalem" (1996), "The Challenge of Jubilee" (1998), "One New

16 Since Sabeel's inception, there have been 81 issues.

Humanity” (2001), “Challenging Christian Zionism” (2004), “The Forgotten Faithful” (2006), “The Nakba” (2008), “Challenging Empire” (2011), “The Bible and the Palestine-Israel Conflict” (2013).¹⁷

- Sabeel has published a number of books both in English and Arabic. Sabeel issues statements occasionally to address various subjects that relate to Palestinian life under occupation.

If Sabeel did not exist it would be important to invent it. It is needed because it attempts to stay on the cutting edge theologically as it addresses the concerns of the Christian community of the land.

In many ways, Sabeel feels the pulse of the community and, from a Christian perspective, tries to address those issues that impact people’s lives. Its agenda spans centuries old concerns that continue to challenge the life of our people today. Therefore, Palestinian Liberation Theology is an essential tool that, by the grace of God, can bring the liberation, whether religious, spiritual, or political, that is needed in the 21st century. We continually need the

¹⁷ Since the publication of this paper, a tenth international conference was held with the theme “Jesus Christ, Liberator” (2017). Sabeel has also introduced Kumi Now in 2019, an initiative of over 60 Palestinian, Israeli, and International organizations, giving people the opportunity to rise up in support of Palestinians through simple nonviolent actions on a weekly basis.

prayers and support of all our friends for the task ahead.

Remembering

Father Michael Prior

1942-2004

**A Friend, a Liberation Theologian,
and a Prophet**

Remembering Father Michael Prior 1942-2004

A Friend, a Liberation Theologian, and a Prophet

In April 14-18, 2004, Sabeel held its 5th international conference at the Notre Dame Center in Jerusalem with 500 people present from 30 countries. Michael Prior was one of the speakers. The theme of the conference was *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and the Israel-Palestine Conflict*. Three months after the conference, on July 21, 2004, Michael died in his home in London. It was a great shock to all of us friends. Due to his death, we could not obtain the text of his manuscript which he delivered at the Sabeel conference. Instead, in the conference book,¹⁸ we used the paper he had delivered a month earlier at the Society for Biblical Studies in Belmont, Massachusetts from Rev. Peter Miano. Tragically, after his sudden death, some right-wing and fundamentalist western Christians attributed his death to God striking Michael down because of his critical interpretation of the Bible and his liberal theology.

18 Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis and Maurine Tobin (eds.). *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, 2005)

Michael was a good friend. I cannot remember precisely when we did meet. I know from Dr. Duncan Macpherson's historical sketch that Michael came to visit Jerusalem in 1985 with another student group. We also know that "by that time his political analysis had begun to crystallize into a radical critique of Zionism."¹⁹

It is possible that I met Michael during this visit, but I am not sure. In January 1985 my family and I moved from serving St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church in Haifa to St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem.

First: Michael - a Person of Moral Integrity: "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Michael did not start his adulthood with a pro-justice position regarding the Palestinian issue or in solidarity with the Palestinians. From his writings, it is easy to deduce that his sympathies were on the Israeli side. During the 1967 war, he felt that he was observing a classic David versus Goliath conflict. He later wrote, "innocent Israel repulsing its rapacious Arab predators ... the startling, speedy, and comprehensive victory of Israel produced surges of delight in me."²⁰

19 Duncan McPherson, ed. *A Living Stone* (London: Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust, 2006), p.15.

20 McPherson, p. 202.

Slowly, however, his eyes began to be opened. He wrote,

...I made my first visit to Israel-Palestine in Easter 1972 with an international party of postgraduate biblical scholars. Although the visit enquired exclusively into the archaeological remains of ancient civilizations, it offered the first challenge to my totally favorable dispositions towards Israel. I was disturbed by the obvious apartheid nature of Israeli-Arab society, and by the oppression of the Arabs of the Occupied Territories.

During my second visit (1981) I began to see from the inside the reality of land expropriation, the increasing settlements of Jews in the West Bank, and the quotidian [experienced on a daily basis] sufferings of its Palestinian inhabitants. Yet, I had no doubt that Israel's occupancy was justified in terms of its security needs, a position I began to question only during the course of my sabbatical year in Jerusalem (1983-84). Prior to that period, I had never even given thought to the possibility that the oppression of the Palestinians, and the aggressive programme of Jewish settlement on their land, might in some way be related to the biblical narrative.²¹

21 McPherson, pp. 202-203.

What Michael describes is important because it represents the story of so many people, not only ordinary every day Christians, but clever and intelligent people that Michael represents, people who come and yet do not (or cannot or refuse to) see the insidious evil nature of the occupation. Sometimes it takes years for them to notice and begin to turn around. Others never do. For many of us, the great people are those who, when confronted with the truth, possess the courage to change. Michael is one of them. Another is Rosemary Radford Ruether. These are people of integrity.

Second: An Irish Palestinian

One of the things that I often reflected on was Michael's Irish background. He had enough problems in Ireland; why was he focusing on Palestine? Wasn't the Irish political agenda enough to keep him busy? But it was Palestine that I feel he adopted as his home. Once he was converted to justice, or once he put on his justice spectacles and began to see the reality on the ground in Palestine from the prism of justice and international law, he was possessed, or should I say was consumed, by it. "Despite his Christian pacifist commitment, in his frequently vigorous debate on the issues, no one was left in any doubt of his political sympathy for the Irish republican cause. However, it was the issue of Palestine that was to engage him

most.”²² This is where he decided to put his full energy.

At least two motives could explain Michael’s adoption of Palestine:

1. Michael could have been motivated by compassion for the oppressed. This could have reminded him of his Irish background and the situation in his homeland.
2. He could have been motivated to defend his faith and to stand against the misuse of the Bible.

Be that as it may, this is not totally unique. Many of us know people who have adopted Palestine in their heart, mind, and soul as a focus of their commitment due to their experience and regular visits.

Michael was a man of faith, but I see secularists and even atheists who have focused on Palestine and committed themselves to justice and peace.

One of the books Michael edited was *They Came and They Saw*.²³ Eighteen men and women, including Michael himself, wrote their stories of how they visited Palestine–Israel, some of them living there for a few years.

²² McPherson, p. 13.

²³ Michael Prior, ed. *The Came and They Saw: Western Christian Experiences of the Holy Land* (London: Melisende, 2000).

Consequently, their lives were turned upside down and they became totally committed to the work of justice.

Third: Michael and the Bible

It is in this area that Michael did not only contribute to the discourse, but he helped us through his various writings. He was a good researcher, and I have benefited from his work. I often wished for the possibility of translating some of his writing into Arabic.

Duncan McPherson mentions the four phases that described Michael's commitment to his work with the Bible and the increasing level of his commitment.

1. He was a scholar of the historical critical approach to the Bible.
2. He was an exegete and contextual theologian.
3. He moved into the phase of a contemporary liberation theologian.
4. He moved into the phase of considering the ethical consequences of the land traditions of the Bible.

One of the interesting comments of Peter Miano was that Michael "became disenchanted and impatient with

the moral emptiness of mainstream biblical scholarship,” and explored liberationist interpretations of Scripture. Michael and I often discussed problems in scholarly biblical interpretation where, at times, the concern is to show how scholarly they are in their critical and academic research, but how poor they are in relating that scholarship to everyday life.

Michael began to see the Bible as part of the problem of the world’s ills rather than as part of the solution. He often stated that the Bible should carry a health warning like what is found on cigarette packs, “Reading this book may damage somebody else’s health.” I believe that he also said, “Reading this book may damage your own health.”

One of his great contributions was the way he used his research. For example: we would often say that in our experience with Zionism and Israel, the Bible is used as an instrument of oppression. I would say this and would point to a few examples. What Michael did was to go and do the extensive research and document this far better than I was able to. In his book, *The Bible and Colonialism, a moral critique* (1997), he was able to examine the way the narrative of the Exodus and the conquest of the Land of Canaan had been utilized to justify colonialism in Latin America, South Africa, and Palestine.

I believe that he recognized the nature of settler colonialism

in what is happening in Palestine.

Indeed, Michael's research emphasized the moral imperative within biblical and theological studies. He was courageous in his prophetic stand, and was always ready to argue, debate, and discuss.

As our friendship grew and developed, and as a result of his frequent visits to the land, I started to feel that Michael was beginning to identify as one of us Palestinians. He would say things that we say. He started to feel the sinister nature of Zionism. He started to realize that one can argue against any moral problem anywhere in the world and receive a positive response, except when one is talking about Israel. When you begin to touch Israel or be critical of it, you will find many people who are ready to attack you and call you all kinds of names.

Michael's research will continue to help Palestinian theologians, and especially liberation theologians, not only in his books that touched on the Bible, but equally in his books that touched on Zionism and the state of Israel.

Fourth: Books Published

Michael wrote numerous books, papers and academic articles. Among his books are:

- *The Bible and Colonialism: a moral critique* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).
- *Zionism and the state of Israel: a moral inquiry* (London: Routledge Press, 1999).
- Ateek, Naim and Prior, Michael, *Holy Land, Hollow Jubilee: God, Justice, and the Palestinians* (London: Melisende, 1999).
- *They Came and They Saw* (London: Melisende, 2000).

Fifth: Remembering Michael

These are some of the words that describe how we remember Michael:

- Courage, humor, witty.
- Warm, close, friendly, very good companion.
- Humble, lovable, down to earth.
- Good theologian, very good researcher.
- Prophet, ability to confront and to challenge and change the discourse.

What is Michael's challenge?

1. Cast fear aside.
2. Stand for justice.
3. Work with others in community.
4. Never give up.

We thank God for the life of Michael Prior. We thank God that he came our way and identified with the oppressed and contributed to the work of justice as well as defending the Bible from Zionist and Christian Zionist abuse.

Concluding Words

On behalf of all of us who participated in this conference commemorating the tenth anniversary of the death of Michael Prior, I would like to express our gratitude to the organizers of this event, especially the Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust, and the Center for Eastern Christianity at Heythrop College.

We have come together to give thanks to God for the life and work of a friend, a scholar, a theologian, and a prophet, Dr. Michael Prior CM.

It is good to pay tribute to Michael for his great commitment to justice and peace. Although he had more than enough to keep him busy in his own homeland, Ireland, he focused his scholarly work and passion on his adopted home, Palestine.

It is fitting at the end of this conference to take a moment and reflect on the lessons we have learned from Michael's life. Through his work, I believe that Michael Prior presents us with at least four important challenges:

1. One of the greatest challenges that Michael presents us with is that of courage. He was courageous in addressing the falsehood and deception of those who justified the injustice against the Palestinians, especially on

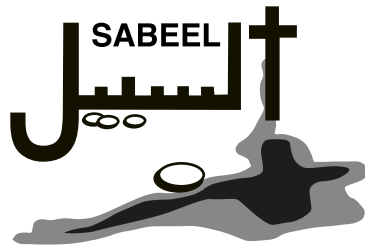
biblical grounds. We suffer from the lack of courage of most of our religious leaders. They are not willing to take a firm stand and to speak prophetically against the oppression that is being committed on a daily basis against the Palestinian people. But Michael, relying on original research using primary sources, presented his arguments with confidence and authority, and had the courage to communicate them articulately and convincingly.

2. A second challenge is to use the wealth of material he produced. The books and articles which Michael wrote are immensely useful. The bigger question is how to make Michael's research and work available to the general public and not just for scholarly use? Here it is important to consult with media experts. I would love to see selected pieces of Michael's works translated into Arabic and made available for Arabic readers.
3. A third challenge is to follow up the conference with a strategy of action. I believe that, as a liberation theologian, Michael Prior would want us to move into practical ways in supporting the oppressed, and especially Palestinians who are living under the Israeli military occupation.
4. A fourth challenge which Michael Prior presents us

has to do with theological education. It is important to challenge theological education today and make it relevant to the needs of the 21st century. This means training clergy to work ecumenically with other Christians, as well as being open to interfaith work, especially with Muslims. I believe Michael became disenchanted with, and even impatient with, the moral emptiness of mainstream biblical scholarship, and in his writings he offers us that challenge.

In conclusion, I would like to paraphrase the words which the writer of the letter to the Hebrews said about Abel (Hebrews 11:4) and apply it to Michael Prior. Michael died, but through his faith in the God of justice and mercy, as well as through his writings, he still speaks.

Naim Ateek



Sabeel

Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center
P.O.B. 49084 Jerusalem 91491
Tel: 972.2.532.7136 Fax: 972.2.532.7137
sabeel@sabeel.org | www.sabeel.org