

Cry Out, Do Not Hold Back!
Finding the Church's Prophetic Voice
for Palestine-Israel

Dedicated to
Bishop Edmond Browning

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Center

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Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to the late Bishop Edmond Browning, former Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church (1986-1997), and in honor of his wife Patti. Bishop Browning possessed an unflinching commitment to justice and compassion for all marginalized people including the Palestinians. He and Patti were close friends of Sabeel and among its strongest supporters. Patti continues their staunch advocacy for a just peace and liberation in Palestine.

Preface

From its inception, the ideology of Zionism on which the state of Israel was founded targeted the indigenous people of Palestine, the Arab Palestinians, with the purpose of expropriating the land. Theodor Herzl's vision was clear that the people of the land must be thrown out.¹ So long as Israel clings to the belief that Zionism must continue to be the *raison d'être* for its existence, it will be difficult to find a just resolution to the conflict. The time must come when Israel questions and critiques its founding ideology so that it can open itself to embrace the human and political rights of the Palestinians.

Another great obstacle to peace that needs to be confronted is the abuse of the Bible. Long before the Bible was Zionized by Jewish religious Zionists in order to justify the conquest of the land of Palestine, its core message was mainly misused by western "Protestants" – Bible believing evangelicals, and fundamentalist Christians by and large from Britain and the United States.

1 Theodor Herzl, Diary, June 12, 1895. "We must expropriate gently the private property on the state assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it employment in our country. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly. Let the owners of the immovable property believe that they are cheating us, selling us things for more than they are worth. But we are not going to sell anything back."

Instead of believing that God's purpose for the redemption of the world reached its fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ, and through his death and resurrection, Christian Zionists continue to place the Jewish people at the center of God's redemptive plan for the world. That is why I often refer to them as "Old Testament Christians." For Christian Zionists, Jesus' life and ministry are only an addendum to the story of the Jews. Due to their literalist interpretations, these Christians have become strong proponents of Jews and later, of Zionism. Their focal point has become the events of the end of the world. One wonders whether their love for Jews stems from a genuine love of neighbor or because they (the Jewish people) fit the biblical script of end time prophecy according to their interpretation.²

Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, as well as many of its international friends and biblical scholars, continue to address this biblical Christian Zionist aberration or heresy from its various angles.

At the same time, the government of Israel, through its pro-Israel groups like AIPAC, has tolerated the teachings of these fundamentalists, even though they are unfavorable and damaging to the Jewish people. More than

2 Pre-millennial Dispensationalist theology espouses the belief that at the end of time, two thirds of the Jewish people will be destroyed and the last third will ultimately convert to Christianity.

that, Israel has exploited them to its own advantage. In essence, Israel does not care what Christian Zionists believe so long as they are committed to its support and ongoing existence.

Indeed, Israel and its friends have developed “weapons” to silence the genuinely prophetic stance of many pro-justice western and eastern Christians who have been speaking out against Israel’s illegal occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people.

Over the years, however, many western Christian leaders including archbishops, bishops, presidents, moderators, priests and pastors, due to direct or indirect intimidation by Israel, have refrained or hesitated from speaking out. I believe it is not that they do not know the realities on the ground in occupied Palestine. Many of them have come to visit multiple times and have had a firsthand experience. They have chosen to avoid the discomfort and the hassle that will come from such a pro-justice (and thus seemingly anti-Israel) stance.

What are some of the most common reasons that have prevented many of our religious leaders from speaking out, and, therefore, contributed to the stifling and even the suppression of the prophetic?

1. Fear of being labeled antisemitic.
2. Sensitivity towards Jewish friends.

3. Ignorance of Arabs, including Palestinians, and their historic contributions to society compared with familiarity with Jewish contributions.
4. Negative perceptions of Islam.
5. A literal reading and interpretation of the shared scriptures between Christians and Jews.
6. Perception of Jews as peaceful and Arabs as violent.
7. Belief in divine Jewish entitlement to the land of Palestine.
8. Rationalization that because the Jewish people have only one state, while Arab peoples have several, that Israel should have the land.
9. Atonement for feelings of guilt for the suffering of the Jewish people.
10. Desire to be “balanced” (despite the fact that Israel-Palestine is an unbalanced situation).
11. Many western Christian leaders have difficulty identifying with the oppressed. They cannot place themselves in the shoes of a Desmond Tutu or a Martin Luther King. They might feel with the oppressed and might even imagine the oppression, but it is not a priority that makes them commit themselves to become engaged.

I am certain that these Christian leaders, our brothers and sisters, are committed to the Gospel of Christ and to ministry. They want to “do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God,” but they find it difficult to

stand alone or to take the initiative. They would be happy to stand with others. Consequently, many of them have found excuses, justifications, and rationalizations that ease their conscience for their silence and lack of active involvement. By doing so, however, they have quenched the spirit and choked the prophetic. Those who have allowed themselves to be silent and inactive in the face of the stark injustice against their Palestinian brothers and sisters have failed to fulfill their baptismal vows.

It has been painful to watch so many of our Christian leaders, people of conscience and integrity who have visited Israel-Palestine and have seen the injustice done at the hands of Israel against the land and its people, and yet have failed to speak a prophetic word of truth to the people of power. It is as painful as watching Christian Zionists who come to visit and yet fail to recognize the humanity of the Palestinians, fail to ask the right questions, fail to see the wounded, the oppressed, the afflicted, and the broken, and, like the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, turn their faces “and walk on the other side,” denying the reality of the injustice and oppression that is taking place.

The suppression of the prophetic has been one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the conflict over Palestine. In this paper, I would like to address this disturbing phenomenon, with the hope of remedying the situation

in our own times. It is my hope that Christian leaders who have come and have seen the reality on the ground would be moved by the spirit of God to take up the mantle of the prophetic, and with the courage of Amos say, “The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8) and “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing spring” (Amos 5:24). The words of Desmond Tutu come to mind, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” And also, Martin Luther King Jr. who said, “The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.” And again, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

What Is Our Baptismal Covenant?

Every candidate for baptism in the Episcopal Church affirms, either for themselves or through parents and godparents, the baptismal covenant composed of declaring faith in the Trinitarian God, resisting evil, and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ. The last two vows, according to the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, state:

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Response: I will, with God’s help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Response: I will, with God's help.³

Various church denominations have articulated these essential baptismal promises. I believe this baptismal covenant carries within it the duty and responsibility of every Christian to exercise the prophetic ministry by standing for justice and peace in his/her community and around the world.

We cannot win the battle against injustice without mobilizing the churches and their leaders. Yet, the prophetic work of the church is not confined to, nor is it the sole responsibility of the ordained. It is the responsibility of all the people of God, given to each of us through our baptism.

Jesus and the Prophetic Witness

Jesus Christ is both our paradigm and hermeneutic. I will consider briefly how he confronted the religious and political powers of his day.

³ The Book of Common Prayer. The Episcopal Church. New York and the Seabury Press, 1977, p. 305.

Confronting local religious leaders in Nazareth (Luke 4: 16-30). According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus assumed the prophetic mantle from the beginning of his ministry. One of his first public appearances was to attend worship in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus read a text from the prophet Isaiah (chapter 61) that he appropriated personally:

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)

In his commentary on this text, Jesus directly addressed the core of the problem that plagued his fellow citizens in Nazareth: their racism against non-Jews. Jesus had the courage to address such racism by using familiar Scripture:

...there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian. (Luke 4:25-27)

In the case of Elijah, God instructed the prophet to seek

refuge with a Gentile woman from Lebanon who cared for and sheltered the prophet for several months. In the case of Elisha, the prophet healed an enemy, the Syrian military chief of staff.

Here, Jesus emphasized that in his people's faith tradition God has always been loving and inclusive, caring for the widow and the needy regardless of their ethnic, racial, or even religious background. By doing this, Jesus acted prophetically to confront his own people's prejudice and bigotry. His points were clear: God is not racist. Xenophobia and racism are human creations.

Confronting regional religious leaders – Pharisees and Sadducees. The Gospels are full of incidents where local religious powers clashed with Jesus on a number of issues. The most common areas of contention had to do with Sabbath laws. Jesus confronted fundamentalist interpretation of the law and argued that the Sabbath was made for humans, not the reverse. Jesus rebuked the hypocrisy of those who prioritized meticulous ritual over the more important matters of life and religion:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. (Matthew 23:23)

Here again Jesus spoke courageously and prophetically,

insisting on the deeper meaning of the law and how it was supposed to be understood and practiced.⁴

On another occasion, Jesus was in a synagogue and confronted religious leaders when a man with a withered hand came seeking healing on the Sabbath. Jesus “was grieved at their hardness of heart,” and asked them: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4f). Then he healed the man. Throughout his ministry, Jesus challenged people’s exclusive theology of God, as well as its application vis-à-vis other people.

Jesus and King Herod. John the Baptist was active around the Jordan River before Jesus started his public ministry. In John’s prophetic calling he was not diplomatic in confronting the powers of his day. He publicly exposed Herod Antipas’ illicit relationship with Herodias, his half-brother Philip’s wife. Consequently, John was imprisoned by Herod, and eventually executed. Herod was known for his ruthless ambitions and devious and murderous ways. After John the Baptist was killed, Jesus withdrew for a while from public view, aware of the vicious nature of Herod. He knew that he could be targeted since he was a Galilean under the jurisdiction of Herod. However, Jesus continued his ministry among the people, primarily in the

⁴ Mathew 23 records a number of such religious aberrations which Jesus highlighted and confronted with courage and poignancy.

various villages and towns of Galilee. When some people came and told Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him, Jesus said: “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work’” (Luke 13:32). This is the answer of a person of faith and courage.

Jesus wholly entrusted his ministry to God and placed his mission and service to people before his personal interest, or even the security of his own life. Jesus was, in essence, saying that he was going to continue his ministry of healing regardless of such threats. He showed that there are times in a person’s life when commitment to God and to others takes precedence over one’s own life. Jesus wanted to focus on meeting the needs of others while leaving the future in the hands of a loving Father. With a larger faith perspective, even the threats of a king lose their intended harmful impact. Fidelity to God’s mission is stronger and more important than worrying over possible human menace.

The Gospels do not tell us much regarding Jesus’ relationship with Herod. However, they make it clear that Jesus had a profound message for the king. The Roman Governor Pontius Pilate was trying Jesus in Jerusalem, and upon realizing that Jesus was a Galilean, sent him to Herod, who was in Jerusalem during the Passover feast. Luke writes:

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer (Luke 23:8-9).

In this encounter, Herod sought entertainment, but Jesus refused to give him that pleasure. Jesus had no time to bolster and feed the appetite of a murderer.

Jesus and Pontius Pilate. Finally, consider the Gospel of John's account of Jesus' exchange with the Roman governor:

Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here'. (John 18:36).

However, throughout his ministry, Jesus preached about the kingdom of God, in essence implying that God alone is king. Jesus also notes that his life has witnessed to and stood for the truth, which he believed has a great power to liberate people (see John 8:32):

Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to

testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'. (John 18:37)

From this little exchange with the representative of the Roman Empire we can conclude that Jesus emphasized two things when facing the powers: 1) They need to realize that God is the only sovereign, and 2) those who follow God must have a commitment to truth. Therefore, standing for truth is what people who love and follow God must do before the powers of this world.

Jesus also pointed out that Rome does not hold the ultimate authority, which is in the hands of God:

Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin'.(John 19: 11)

Jesus highlighted the dilemma of people in power, for whom, too often, commitment to truth becomes a matter of convenience. They either ignore or spin the truth in accordance with self-interest, or they exploit the poor and vulnerable by twisting the truth. Jesus did not shy away from the prophetic, even in his last and darkest hours. The powers of the world, whether political or in collusion with the religious, invariably manipulate the truth for their interest. Under the guise of law, they can set aside laws that trouble them, and produce the

verdict they wish for. Many times, their verdicts reflect personal, national or imperial interests, and not a true commitment to truth and justice. In just a few words, Jesus here names one of the crucial entanglements of power: a lack of commitment to the truth. Truth and justice are interconnected.

It was clear to the early Christian community that following Jesus Christ in love and faith demanded a courageous witness before the powers, whether religious or political. For many Christians, their commitment was expressed in faithful witness even to the point of a willingness to die for their faith.

Martyria, Martyrs (Shahid) and The Prophetic Witness

An important term for the early church was *martyria*, which referred to the apostles being “witnesses” to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection: “...you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The word “martyr” soon was used for those Christians whose witness to their faith led to their death. The Book of Acts gives two examples. The first was Stephen, who was one of the seven deacons chosen by the apostles to serve the needs of the growing

number of believers in Jerusalem.⁵ Stephen bore witness to his faith through articulate speech and strong argument, reviewing God's salvation history from the Patriarch Abraham to Jesus Christ.

The second was James, the son of Zebedee, the brother of John. We read that King Herod Agrippa I "laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword" (Acts 12:1-2). According to Church tradition, all the apostles died as martyrs for their faith, with the exception of John, the son of Zebedee. Although he suffered terribly, he survived physically and died a natural death at an old age.

A martyr is thus a person who bears witness to his or her faith in Christ and is willing to suffer and die rather than deny their faith.⁶ Church history is replete with faithful Christians who suffered and died for their faith.

In the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupation,

5 The story of his martyrdom is recorded in Acts 7.

6 Some Christians have argued that the classic definition of martyr should be expanded to include those who have been killed as a result of taking a prophetic stand against injustice and oppression, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, and others. These are people who have borne witness and committed themselves to the struggle for justice and peace and consequently suffered for it (see Rowan D. Crews Jr., "Martyrdom," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky, Jose Miguez Bonino, John S. Pobee, Tom F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb [Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1991], 660).

the word martyr, in Arabic “*shahid*” has taken on a political meaning. In Islam there has never been a distinction between the religious and the political loyalties; *shahid* can be used for either. It is now used to refer to any person who was killed by the Israelis, directly or indirectly, because of violent or nonviolent resistance to the occupation of Palestine.⁷ This is in contrast to most western countries where the word “martyr” has not generally been used to describe people killed in wars, or in the defense of their country, or for the sake of freedom or democracy.

Although for Palestinian archbishops and bishops, *shahid* still retains a strictly religious connotation, for Palestinian Muslims as well as for some lay Christians, the meaning has been broadened to include all Palestinians, men, women, and children killed by Israel in resisting the unjust and oppressive occupation. For Palestinians, nowadays anyone who is killed for his or her faith in God or for Palestine is a *shahid*. In fact, the meaning has expanded further to include people who die although they are innocent of any charge. They were killed by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. So, the thousands of innocent Lebanese who died in the Beirut explosion during the first week of August 2020 were referred to as martyrs.

7 For a further discussion on martyr, see “Samson, the First Suicide Bomber,” in *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 115-129.

Therefore, in our Palestinian community today, the word *shahid* implies and refers to dying for the cause of justice and truth as well as for the cause of freedom and liberation. This includes the death of Palestinian prisoners whether indicted by Israel or only administratively detained for resisting the occupation.

From a theological perspective, if we are looking for a word that can capture the essence of public witness today, the closest is the word prophetic. There are many people, Christians, Muslims, and secular who testify to the truth of what they have seen and experienced without having to lose their life. This is not martyrdom, but it is *martyria* in the original sense of the word, i.e., bearing witness and taking a stand for justice and truth on behalf of the oppressed people. We call it a “prophetic witness.” If this witness leads to death for the sake of remaining faithful to the truth, then the words of the risen Christ to the church in Smyrna in the Book of Revelation is very applicable, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). The emphasis is on remaining faithful in championing truth and justice.

In the Old Testament, the prophets were those called by God to speak truth to people in power, whether religious or political. These prophets also knew that God demands the doing of justice for all who have been victimized by those that harass and intimidate the poor, the widow, the

orphan, and the stranger. These prophets did not answer to the king or his cronies nor to corrupt religious leaders. They answered to God and to their own conscience.

It is possible to say that today's contemporary prophets are those men and women who have a keen insight into the injustice and evil that have ravaged and assaulted their communities as well as assailed and overwhelmed the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. They know that God cannot condone such evil. God expects people of faith and conscience to take a stand on the side of the weak, the marginalized, and oppressed, and to do everything to achieve justice for them. In a special way, the religious leaders – archbishops, bishops, and clergy – due to their faith commitment, and by virtue of their position of leadership have a double responsibility to courageously lead the struggle for justice and liberation.

Amos was neither a professional prophet nor the son of a prophet, but God called him to address the injustices that were perpetrated by both the political and religious leaders of ancient Israel. He left his home and work to speak God's word to the king and priest: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Similarly, Micah cried out,

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your

God?” (Micah 6:8)

Because of our common human nature, we have discovered that many of the sins and evils these Old Testament prophets faced during their times, have amazing relevance to our contemporary political situation.

For example, Micah talks about the powers who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields and seize them, houses, and take them away, they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. (Micah 2:1-2)

From a Christian theological perspective, it seems problematic to use some of the harsh words of judgment which Micah uses against the people of his day (Micah 2:3). At the same time, it is true to say that evil acts produce evil consequences. The crimes of the Israeli government and the extremist settlers are very similar to what Micah was condemning in the name of God. Micah's analysis of the injustice has universal relevance since it has been replicated thousands of times in many subsequent historical contexts. Many people found it relevant under extremist dictatorial Islamic rules in the past, under the Crusades and during the colonial period. I find it tragically and poignantly relevant to the way the government of

Israel and its extremist settler population are using their oppression of the Palestinians to steal their land, oppress whole families, and devise wickedness, all “because it is in their power” to do so.

It is not only the prophets’ analysis, but their response that is relevant as well. When I compare the courage and risks that many of the Old Testament prophets took to remain faithful to God as they spoke about justice to the powers, and contrast this with the reluctance of many of our contemporary religious leaders to take such a stand, I believe the Old Testament prophets’ brave actions put us to shame.

While it may be perceived as presumptuous for anyone these days to claim that he or she is a prophet, to speak prophetically is every person’s calling. For Christians in particular, as noted above, this calling is a vow taken at our baptism. The Spirit of God moves us to take a stand against injustice whenever and wherever it is found. There are similarities between *martyria* and the prophetic.

The two most indispensable foundations on which a just-peace can be built are:

1. A clear biblical theology of justice and peace that is Christ-centered, inclusive, equitable, and based on the love of God in Christ for all people. Such an understanding can serve as hermeneutic in our

study and use of the Bible.

2. A basic commitment to truth. There are three key words that are intrinsically connected for us Christians: truth, justice, and mercy. Truth is the first essential requirement that can lead to justice. Justice, for Christians, should be implemented with mercy. These three values can produce peace that can prevail.

To speak the truth is synonymous with speaking the Word of God prophetically. It is allowing the God of truth to shed light on events. When that happens, the hypocrisy and self-deception of individuals and governments is exposed. At the same time, to know and to live by the truth offers liberation as Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). For the Church to keep the facts known and the truth exposed is to call attention to the pervasiveness of sin, evil, and injustice, and to call people to repentance and change.

This is a very difficult task, but it is an integral part of the prophetic imperative. It does not mean that the Church has specific answers to complicated political problems. What it means is that the Church has a sense of justice and is always ready to cry out against injustice and to encourage and promote justice and peace.... To speak the truth is to transcend both self and national interests

and to give allegiance to God.⁸

Other essential points include:

1. A clear articulation of the injustice at hand.
2. The courage to speak out.
3. Placing God's vision for justice and peace before the oppressor.
4. Readiness to suffer the consequences rather than to abdicate the faith.
5. Readiness to suggest practical steps to undo the injustice.
6. The ability to work for healing and reconciliation.

Palestinian Religious Voices

The Palestinian Christian community may not have produced a Desmond Tutu or a Martin Luther King Jr, but over the long years of political struggle, Palestine has had a number of clergy who have faithfully raised their voices against the injustice and oppression of both Zionism and the government of Israel and worked for the liberation of the Palestinians. The following is only a sample:

- Archbishop Gregorios Hajjar – Melkite Catholic (1875-1940). He was a Syrian by birth, but his major ministry was as the Melkite Archbishop of the Galilee.

⁸ Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice*, pp. 153-154.

- He was nicknamed the bishop of the Arabs.
- Archbishop Joseph Raya – Melkite Catholic (1916-2005). He was born in Lebanon but became the Bishop of the Galilee. (see later detail)
 - Archbishop Hilarion Capucci - Melkite Catholic (1922-2017). He was born in Syria but became Bishop in Jerusalem. He was imprisoned and deported by Israel.
 - Father Ibrahim Ayad – Roman Catholic (Latin), a member of the Central Committee of the PLO and exiled by Israel in 1967.
 - Bishop Elia Khoury – Anglican and member of the PLO Executive committee who was imprisoned and deported by Israel.
 - Bishop Aqel Aqel – Anglican.
 - Archdeacon Rafiq Farah – Anglican.
 - Patriarch Michel Sabbah – Roman Catholic (Latin).
 - Archbishop Elias Chacour – Melkite Catholic.
 - Archbishop Attallah Hanna – Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox.
 - Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal – Anglican.
 - Bishop Munib Younan – Lutheran.
 - Father Manuel Mussalam – Roman Catholic (Latin).
 - Father Yousef Sa` aadeh – Melkite Catholic.
 - Rev. Oudeh Rantisi – Anglican.
 - Father Abdallah Juliu Brunella – Melkite Catholic
 - Canon Shehadeh Shehadeh – Anglican.
 - Father Rafiq Khoury – Roman Catholic (Latin).

- Rev. Mitri Raheb – Lutheran.
- Father Jamal Khader – Roman Catholic (Latin).
- Father Boulos Allam – Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox.
- Father Aktham Hijazine – Roman Catholic (Latin).
- Rev. Munther Isaac, Lutheran.
- Canon Naim Ateek – Anglican.

There have been many other Palestinian clergy who through their writing or speaking have raised the prophetic voice, and the recent election of Bishop Hosam Naoum as the new diocesan bishop in Jerusalem gives us more hope still for the next generation of prophetic voices. I would, however, like to highlight the story of one of the giants who bravely raised the prophetic voice and had the largest and most significant impact.

The Archbishop Joseph Raya

Archbishop Raya (1916 - 2005) was Lebanese by birth but spent much of his youth and schooling in Palestine. Later, he was a parish priest to the Melkite church in Birmingham, Alabama, where he served for 17 years. After his service in the US, Raya moved back to Palestine, and was consecrated as archbishop of the Melkite church of all Galilee in 1967.⁹The Greek Catholic/Melkite church

9 “Discover the Riches of Byzantine Spirituality in the Works of Archbishop Joseph Raya.” Madonna House. Web 31 May 2013.

in Galilee is now the largest Christian church in the state of Israel. Bishop Raya had the least experience of any local priest with life under the Israeli occupation, but during Raya's years in Birmingham, he had marched with Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

Soon after his arrival in Galilee, Raya decided to champion the cause of justice and peace for Palestinians, focusing his attention on the Palestinian-Israeli Arabs. Raya lifted up the case of two Christian villages in the north of Israel: Iqrit and Kufr Bir'im.¹⁰ The former village was completely Christian Melkite, the latter predominantly Christian Maronite. Both villages were depopulated during the 1948 war when the state of Israel was established. Raya went to Israel's Supreme Court in Jerusalem to plead for the implementation of an earlier Supreme Court decision allowing for the right of return for the residents of both villages.¹¹

Archbishop Raya organized demonstrations and sit-ins and conducted various programs of advocacy and activism. He met with politicians and Israeli government officials. He challenged Israeli Prime Minister Golda

10 See Elias Chacour, "Marching in Jerusalem" in *We Belong to the Land* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990); and *Blood Brothers* (Chosen Books, 1984, 2003).

11 In spite of the Court's decision, the Israeli army refused to allow the villagers to return, and instead demolished both villages. One of these villages (Iqrit) was destroyed on Christmas Eve, 1951. Until this day, only the church buildings in both of these villages remain standing.

Meir to allow the villagers to return, but she stubbornly refused. However, Raya did not receive universal church support from around the world, which he desperately needed. Instead, Israel was successful in putting pressure on him domestically and internationally, which eventually forced Raya to resign his ecclesial responsibilities and leave the country.

In this case, like many others, the church showed its weakness and refused to take a strong stand for justice. Had the global Christian community rallied behind Raya and produced effective pressure on the government of Israel to implement United Nations resolutions regarding Palestine, it might have led to a nonviolent resolution of this intractable conflict. Looking back at that period, it was unfortunate that neither Prime Minister Golda Meir, nor the U.N. and the international community, nor the Palestinian leadership at the time were able to rise to the challenge. It was a missed opportunity.

Archbishop Raya was not a typical advocate in that he was an American citizen, a newcomer into Israel, and not a native Palestinian. Raya wanted Israel to live in peace and security, but also wanted to bring about justice for the two Christian villages with the hope of opening the way for peace and justice for all in the land. But Israel's psychological barriers (real and fabricated) of insecurity, fear and distrust – as well as its Zionist ideology – proved

too tough to shatter. The Israeli government was not ready to take a risk for peace. Had it done so, our country and people would have been spared the agony of much violence and many wars.

What Archbishop Raya did is worth pondering. Many questions can still be asked: Had the Catholic Church put its full weight behind Archbishop Raya, could it have made a difference? Had the Archbishop possessed the means and personnel to launch a more carefully planned and organized campaign, would he have made a greater impact? What if the churches of the land had rallied behind and supported him (though in those days all the hierarchy of the churches was foreign)? There was another missed opportunity because the church leadership lacked the courage and vision to take the right stand. The Christian community has never been able to replace Archbishop Raya with his nonviolent direct action.

To review and evaluate this campaign:

1. Raya could not create a dent in Israel's exclusivist psychology and Zionist racist ideology.
2. Raya's experience was a test for the inflexibility of the Israeli government.
3. Raya's experience had the right vision and revealed his personal courage but lacked a carefully planned strategy and was poorly organized.
4. Raya's campaign was a personal initiative but

- lacked a broad community and national base.
5. Raya's campaign lacked a solid foundation and could not be turned into a movement.
 6. Raya's campaign was an individual local endeavor that needed, but lacked, external support (including the support of the Jerusalem Christian hierarchy and international religious coordination and backing).
 7. Raya's campaign lacked depth and breadth, so when he left the country no one was able to sustain the flame.
 8. Although Bishop Raya's campaign failed to achieve the return of the Iqrit and Kufur Bir`am villagers to their homes, it showed that nonviolent resistance is a powerful tool that could have succeeded had Raya enjoyed a better strategy, organization, and support.
 9. Raya's unsuccessful venture awaits a future well-organized and funded national and international campaign with Palestinian Christian, Muslim and Jewish leadership that can pick up the torch of justice, and through nonviolence, complete the marathon and achieve the liberation of the oppressed Palestinians.

It is important to mention the great contributions of many Palestinian Christian laypeople in the struggle for liberation. Most of them did not emphasize their Christian

affiliation, but they were all raised in Christian homes.

It is also important to note that there are three categories of Palestinian Christians: those who became Israeli citizens after 1948 and have lived in Israel since 1948, those who remained in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip after the 1967 war, and those who live in diaspora. Some of these Christians chose and were engaged in the armed struggle. Others, out of frustration, despair, or apathy, stayed on the political margins, hoping, and waiting for the UN and the international community to implement its own resolutions on Palestine. Many others, however, believed in the justness of the Palestinian cause and have been active in a variety of nonviolent actions to resist the Zionist onslaught on our homeland, Palestine. Many of them published books and memoirs. Some used their art and music; others used journalism and teaching; some became politicians and lawyers. Even the simple folk told their stories, but all focused on justice and liberation for their people.

They include Khalil Sakakini, Wasef Jouharieh, Henry Kattan, Sami Hadawi, Shukri Harami, Musa Nasir, Emil Touma, Toufiq Toubi, Emil Habibi, Saliba Khamis, Mansour Kardoush, Khalil Khoury, Najwa Farah, Kamal Nasir, Edward Said, George Habbash, Naif Hawatmeh, Hanan Ashrawi, Afif Safieh, Mubarak Awad, Sameeha Khalil, Samia Khoury, Cedar Duaybis, Jean Zaru, Jonathan

Kuttab, Sabri Jeries, Hanna Abu Hanna, Jeries Khoury, Azmi Bishara, Rifa't Qassis, Nidal Abu Zuluf and Isam Makhoul.

The above is only a small sample that represents several generations, starting from the early 1900s. Every person, in his or her own way, impacted to some degree the political scene and kept the story of Palestine alive in the consciousness, not only of its people but the whole world. Due to the dedication of every succeeding generation, Palestine will not be forgotten, and its liberation will ultimately be realized.

The Kairos Palestine Document

In 2009, fifteen Palestinian bishops, clergy and laypeople, both men and women, of the various churches in Palestine launched the Kairos Palestine Document. This document clearly spelled out the reality of the political situation in occupied Palestine. It called on Christians everywhere to be engaged with their Palestinian brothers and sisters in the struggle against the Israeli occupation. The document was itself a prophetic witness. It called the illegal Israeli occupation both a sin and an evil and asked the churches abroad to stand with the Palestinians against it. The document recognized the importance of resisting evil “in all its forms with methods that enter into the logic of love and draw on all energies to make

peace.”¹² At the same time, it recognized that the Christian response must follow Christ’s teaching of resisting evil not through evil means. Therefore, the document recommended that:

Palestinian civil organizations, as well as international organizations, NGOs and certain religious institutions call on individuals, companies, and states to engage in divestment and in an economic and commercial boycott of everything produced by the occupation. We understand this to integrate the logic of peaceful resistance. These advocacy campaigns must be carried out with courage, openly and sincerely proclaiming that their object is not revenge but rather to put an end to the existing evil, liberating both the perpetrators and the victims of injustice. The aim is to free both peoples from extremist positions of the different Israeli governments, bringing both to justice and reconciliation...¹³

In one of its final statements, the document addresses the churches of the world saying,

We ask our sister Churches not to offer a theological cover-up for the injustice we suffer, for the sin of the occupation imposed upon us. Our question

¹² *Kairos Palestine Document, A Moment of Truth* (2009), 4.2.5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.2.6.

to our brothers and sisters in the Churches today is: Are you able to help us get our freedom back, for this is the only way you can help the two peoples attain justice, peace, security and love?¹⁴

Although many, largely mainline Protestant churches in the West, have welcomed and endorsed the Kairos Palestine Document, there are unfortunately still other churches that have not done so. While we thank God for all those who have been engaged in this important process, we lament that there are still Christian leaders who refuse to be openly critical of the unjust policies of the state of Israel. As Mark Braverman writes in *Fatal Embrace*:

American Jews have not created this situation by ourselves. We have been enabled by our Christian compatriots, who, because of their sense of responsibility for historical anti-Semitism, feel that they have no right to criticize any actions that Israel may take, even when these actions violate principles of human rights and justice cherished by Jews and Christians alike.¹⁵

The Challenge to Christian Religious Leaders

14 Ibid., 6.1.

15 Mark Braverman. "Introduction." *Fatal Embrace* (New York: Synergy Books, 2010), p7.

It has become clear that so long as the United States supports Israel politically, financially, and militarily, Israel will continue its violations of international law. No one will be able to curb the injustice so long as this continues. The world witnessed the overwhelming support given to Palestine when it was accorded Non-Member Observer State status in the U.N. in November 2012, the vote being 138 in support, 9 against, and 41 abstentions.¹⁶ The international community would like to resolve the conflict over Palestine. What has been lacking is the ethical and moral force of the world to make it happen.

Many of us believe that the church has a prophetic role to play. The lack of movement in the peace process is not only the responsibility of the political leaders, but also that of church leaders. Justice and peace are the business of the church. Tragically, however, there is a drought of prophetic witness. I am convinced that we can end this drought if the bishops and archbishops, moderators and presidents of our churches – Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant – would wake up to their prophetic responsibility. Together, with their clergy and laity, they possess the power needed to exert the right pressure on governments and the U.N. that could, in turn, pressure the Israeli government to accept the demands of international law

16 United Nations press release, "General Assembly Votes to Overwhelmingly to Accord Palestine 'Non Member Observer State' Status in United Nations." 12 Nov. 2012. Web. 31 May 2013

and accelerate a process that will lead to genuine peace and security for all concerned. Church leaders and their communities can tap into the power of the Spirit to affect change.

As a way of stimulating, motivating, and encouraging us, I would like to mention two examples:

In 2002, Archbishop Desmond Tutu spent a few weeks in the United States. He condemned the Palestinian suicide bombings that had taken place during his visit, but then strongly criticized Israel for what “it has done to another people to guarantee its [own] existence.” Tutu then explained that throughout his visits to the Holy Land, he was reminded of what happened to the blacks in South Africa. He detailed the black people’s humiliation. Then he added,

Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their own humiliation? Israel will never get true security and safety through oppressing another people. Israel has three options: Revert to the previous stalemate filled with hatred and vengeance; exterminate all Palestinians; or strive for peace based on justice – withdrawal from the territories and establishment of a viable Palestinian state with secure borders.¹⁷

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/29/comment>

Archbishop Tutu was calling on Americans to speak out. He emphasized that “peace is possible - we are free today in South Africa because of people like yourselves.”¹⁸

It is important to notice Tutu’s prophetic words. He condemned the Palestinian suicide bombings, but then focused on the heart of the conflict by challenging Israel to stop its injustice and end its occupation.

My second example is about the late Bishop Thomas Shaw of Massachusetts. In October 2001, Bishop Shaw, with two other bishops, protested Israeli injustice of the Palestinians in front of the Israeli consulate in Boston. This event shocked the local Jewish leaders “who felt Israeli suffering was being ignored.” They initiated an in-depth conversation between the two faith communities. Bishop Shaw felt that the Israeli and US governments “must also acknowledge the injustices that the Palestinians have suffered.”¹⁹ I was privileged to discuss with Bishop Shaw, more than once, the importance of that direct nonviolent action which he carried out and the need for further similar events.

It is important to emphasize that the justice we seek in accordance with UN resolutions and international law

¹⁸ Jane Lampman, Christian Science Monitor, April 18, 2002.

¹⁹ Ibid.

must usher in an inclusive peace that will give security and well-being to both Palestinians and Israelis alike. The objective of our involvement and nonviolent action is the liberation of our oppressed people. But once this is achieved, the aim becomes the attaining and realizing of reconciliation between the two nations.

Jesus and an Evil Spirit

The Gospels mention an incident in the life of Jesus that followed the experience of the Transfiguration. Jesus was on the mountain when someone brought his child, who had an evil spirit, to the disciples for healing. The disciples could not do it. When Jesus arrived, he healed the child. When the disciples asked Jesus why they were unable to drive out the evil spirit, he answered that such a spirit cannot be driven out except through prayer (Mark 9:14-29). In other words, the disciples needed to rely on an extraordinary power to accomplish the task, and prayer can evoke and access God's power. What is needed first and foremost is the power of God working in and through us.

Indeed, the occupation has been an evil, destructive spirit that has overwhelmed and controlled the Palestinian people for over 50 years. On the one hand, it is dreadfully oppressive to the Palestinian people. On the other hand, it is ultimately destructive to the occupiers themselves.

The occupation dehumanizes both the occupied and the occupier and needs to be exorcised. This can be done. First, we need to be sure of our own readiness and preparedness. “If we wish to cast out this demon, we must engage in the difficult process of confronting the illusions that paralyze us and the unconscious power of repressed trauma that keeps us silenced.”²⁰

Second, we need to get rid of “the despair that is dictated to us by the powers and principalities of this world [that] says to us that nothing can really change.... If we accept this life script and the despair that comes with it, the revolutionary vision and practice of the gospel are rendered impotent.”²¹

Third, “prayer is that personal and communal struggle against this temptation to despair. It is wrestling with the demons within us that tempt us to abandon the way of Jesus. Prayer is naming and casting out the demons that silence us and make us docile before the status quo of self and society.”

Fourth, “without prayer and a spiritual foundation, prophetic anger becomes disconnected from love, ideals become empty routines, social analysis becomes cynicism,

20 Ched Myers, et al. *Say to This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 112.

21 *Ibid.*, 114.

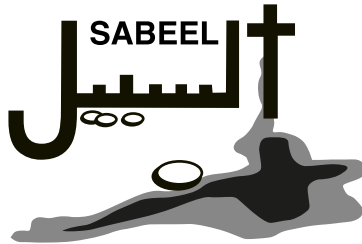
values lose their passion. The despair... that tempts us to hopelessness will not be disarmed until we name and face them together.”²²

Achieving a just peace for the Palestinians can be done if we are willing to stand and face together the internationally recognized illegal occupation. The challenge before our church leadership globally is to recognize the evil nature of this morbid occupation, and to confront it head on using the power of prayer and nonviolence. Let us remember the plea of Palestinian Christians expressed in the Kairos Palestine Document and addressed to the churches of the world, “Are you able to help us get our freedom back...?”²³ This cry is a word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering.

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22 Ibid., 115.

23 Kairos Palestine, *A Moment of Truth*, (2009), 6.1.



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