

Article

Israel and Zionism in the Eyes of Palestinian Christian Theologians

Giovanni Matteo Quer

Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry, Tel-Aviv University, Tel Aviv-Yafo 69978, Israel; giovanniquer@tauex.tau.ac.il

Received: 31 May 2019; Accepted: 1 August 2019; Published: 19 August 2019



Abstract: Christian activism in the Arab–Israeli conflict and theological reflections on the Middle East have evolved around Palestinian liberation theology as a theological–political doctrine that scrutinizes Zionism, the existence of Israel and its policies, developing a biblical hermeneutics that reverses the biblical narrative, in order to portray Israel as a wicked regime that operates in the name of a fallacious primitive god and that uses false interpretations of the scriptures. This article analyzes the theological political–theological views applied to the Arab–Israeli conflict developed by Geries Khoury, Naim Ateek, and Mitri Raheb—three influential authors and activists in different Christians denominations. Besides opposing Zionism and providing arguments for the boycott of Israel, such conceptualizations go far beyond the conflict, providing theological grounds for the denial of Jewish statehood echoing old anti-Jewish accusations.

Keywords: Palestine; Israel; Zionism; Christianity; antisemitism

1. Introduction

The way Palestinian Christian communities relate to Israel is defined by nationality and religion. As Palestinians, Christians tend to embrace the national narrative that advances a political discourse opposed to Israel’s policies and, at times, also questions its right to exist as a Jewish state. As Christians, Palestinians struggle with religious conceptualizations of Judaism and Zionism that have developed in the Christian world ever since the Holocaust. The stances of the Evangelical Christians, overtly supportive of Israel, are, all in all, condemned and rejected.¹ The ambiguous position of other Christian Churches toward Israel also conflict with the new approach toward Judaism, which revised traditional anti-Jewish tropes.

The Biblical roots of Jewish peoplehood intertwine with Jewish history and they shape both Zionism, as a national movement, and the discourse on Jewish statehood. Israel’s existence as a Jewish state and its national narrative are entrenched in the Biblical narrative. Israel’s Declaration of Independence, for instance, clearly states that the State of Israel is the modern definition of Jewish statehood, which was first attained in the Land of Israel, where Jewish nationhood came into being,² also stressing the historical continuity of Jewish nationhood from Biblical times to present day. Largely

¹ See (Ateek et al. 2005).

² The incipit of Israel’s Declaration of Independence states: “The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.” The historical continuity is then stressed by the following words: “After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom. Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland.” The excerpt was taken from the English translation available at https://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm. Part of the historical narrative of continuity is also the uninterrupted Jewish presence in the Land of Israel over the centuries.

sharing the same Scripture, Jews and Christians differ in the interpretation of those concepts that are at the basis of Zionist readings of the Bible, including the meaning of “the Promised Land.”

The Jewish–Christian dialogue, which evolved in both the Catholic and Protestant world since the 1960s, has progressively reassessed the Christian conceptualization of Jews and Israel. The idea of a Jewish state is sometimes embraced and supported, such as among Christian Zionists of protestant denominations,³ and sometimes merely tolerated, such as in Catholic doctrine.⁴ However, ambiguous as some theological positions may be, Jewish statehood is rarely opposed and one may maintain that Israel as the product of the Zionist project is accepted, even if not justified or welcomed.

In this respect, Palestinian Christians face the major challenge of incorporating Christian religious beliefs with nationalist narratives. For instance, how to conciliate the concept of Israel as a people and the existing Jewish State of Israel? How to reconcile between the Biblical concept of the Promised Land, the history of Jewish nationhood on the one hand, and the Zionist claims of Jewish statehood on the same land that Palestinians consider “historical Palestine” in its entirety on the other? Even those who are prone to recognizing the existence of Israel would, however, argue that its existence is the result of dispossession based on Biblical claims. More generally, what is the significance of the Old Bible for Palestinian Christians today who are caught between a Jewish State and an Islamic Palestinian Authority?

According to Bernard Lewis, the first Arabic response to the political challenges posed by Zionism was developed by Christian Arabs. Such a response rejected Zionism on a number of grounds, which also included antisemitic tropes, among which the idea that Zionism is a project for regional domination, the belief that Zionism is a peril because behind it world Jewry hides and with it, also its financial power, or the view that Zionism is used in order to dominate Western powers’ foreign policy to the benefit of Jews and to the detriment of Arabs.⁵ This last point was, according to Lewis, the main argument used against Zionism, whereby “from the literature of the time, it would seem that it was not as Jews or even as Zionists that the newcomers were feared and then hated, but as foreigners and especially as Europeans.”⁶ Some of these positions are shared by current Palestinian Christian thinkers, with the exception that today arguments against Zionism also move from theological grounds, with the consequence of touching upon Judaism as a whole.

³ Certain protestant theologies began developing positive views of Judaism as early as the 19th century, when the Restorationism evolved in Britain and in the U.S. Theologians and later also politicians held the belief that the restoration of a Jewish nation in the Land of Israel would lead to the second advent of Jesus. The support for a Jewish national revival in the Land of Israel motivated by Christian eschatological views has influenced politicians and their attitudes toward Zionism and Israel. See (Merkley 1998). From this early conceptualization, other Christian theologies have developed favorable views of Judaism that evolved to an unrelenting support for Israel and Zionism, especially in the context of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Often, such a staunch support is associated with specific political stances on traditional values and opposition to Islam. For an analysis of the theological and political motives at the basis of support for Israel among Christians and their criticism See (Spector 2009).

⁴ The Catholic Church, and particularly the current papacy, has often declared that antisemitism is extraneous to Christianity and, time and again, has condemned manifestations of antisemitism. Yet, the definition of contemporary antisemitism in the forms also of extreme hostility toward Israel and Zionism is seldom addressed. According to journalistic sources, Pope Francis has included attacks on Israel’s existence as forms of antisemitism, during a meeting with World Jewish Congress leaders in 2015. See (Pope Equates Anti-Zionism with Anti-Semitism, Says Israel has Right to Safety and Prosperity 2015). In 2015, the Polish Episcopate published a pastoral letter marking the 50 years of the *Nostra Aetate* encyclic; the Vatican document defines new relations with Jews and also recognizes the validity of the Covenant with the Jewish people. The letter, entitled “A Common Spiritual Heritage with the Jewish People”, also tackles the issue of antisemitism, defining it as “a sin against the neighbor’s love, a sin that destroys the truth about Christian identity.” See (Polish Episcopate 2015). In at least one public document, anti-Zionism is mentioned in connection to antisemitism. The Joint Declaration of the 18th International Catholic–Jewish Liaison Committee Meeting, held in Buenos Aires between 5 and 8 July 2004, encompasses “the total rejection of anti-Semitism in all its forms, including anti-Zionism as a more recent manifestation of anti-Semitism.” See (18th International Catholic–Jewish Liaison Committee 2004). However, the Special Assembly for the Middle East convened by the Synod of Bishops in 2010 seems to hold a different opinion. On the one hand, it states that “everywhere in the Church in the Middle East the religious sentiment in anti-Judaism has been overcome, at least in theory, by the pastoral guidelines of the Second Vatican Council”, and also opines that “widespread opinion seems to indicate that anti-Zionism is more a political position and, consequently, to be considered foreign to every ecclesial discourse.” See (Synod of Bishops 2010).

⁵ See (Lewis 1999).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

These three authors are identified with what is called Palestinian Liberation Theology, established in the late 1960s in South America and aiming to develop novel interpretations of the Biblical message for contextual responses to social, economic, and political oppression.⁷ Kuruvilla has analyzed the inception and development of Palestinian Liberation Theology focusing on its leaders and centers, describing it as “radical Christianity”.⁸ In a previous study, the same author analyzed practical aspects of Palestinian Liberation theologians and communities, compared to the South American liberation Theology of the 1960s; Kuruvilla distinguishes two main differences between the two theological movements.⁹ Regarding the Palestine–Israel context and the theological response to the conflict, he describes the object of Palestinian Liberation Theology as “a form of racism where Semites are discriminating against Semites”.¹⁰ The political message propagated by certain Palestinian Christian centers, some of which are associated with Palestinian Liberation Theology, was analyzed also by other authors, who take a different stance. Nerel, for instance, maintains that the theological discourse on the conflict results in a de-Judaization of the Old Testament and a novel supersessionism.¹¹ Other literature has analyzed Palestinian Christian organizations’ activism in the conflict. Van Zile, for instance, taking a clear stance against this type of activism, pointed out how the theological–political discourse is tailored to depict what he labels “anti-Zionist infrastructure.”¹² Besides the theological debate on Palestinian Liberation Theology, there is an underlining question that concerns the consequences of specific arguments used by certain authors for describing the conflict, Israel, and Zionism.

Among the several Palestinian-Christian leaders who have devoted considerable efforts to the Arab–Israeli conflict, one can mention Geries Sa’ed Khoury, Naim Stifan Ateek, and Mitri Raheb.

The late Geries Sa’ed Khoury, a Catholic, was among the first theologians to develop a contextual reading of the Scriptures in an effort to provide answers for Christian Palestinians torn between Arab identity and politics. He started working in the 1980s, when the Palestinian political consciousness rose to become the outbreak of the First Intifada. Khoury’s work focused primarily on the Church, including both the Catholic Church and the pluri-denominational local Christian community, and its role in the conflict as well as on the identity of Palestinian-Christian Arabs. For him, Israel is the occupier and the oppressor, while Christians are witnesses of sufferance and bearers of the cross.

In light of this situation, Khoury envisions an active Church that takes part in politics and in the struggle against oppression. Yet, his work refrains from directly attacking the Zionist project through theological assertions, and concentrates on Christian communities, which he sees as an integral part of the Arab Palestinian nation, and their role in the conflict.

Other thinkers and activists have built upon these political premises in order to develop a properly theological–political response to Israel and the Zionist narrative as a whole. In this respect, this paper further explores the portrayal of Israel and Zionism in the work of two Palestinian Christian theologians, religious leaders, and Palestinian activists: Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb. They belong to different Christian denominations, the former Anglican, the latter Lutheran; they are religious leaders among their communities, and they are activists who reach out to Christian communities in the Western world to seek support for the Palestinian cause.

Naim Ateek has prolifically written on Zionism and Jewish statehood, opposing the Christian interpretation of the Scripture and the national project of a Jewish state, which in his view is the product of a nationalistic reading of the Bible. This narrow interpretation stems, according to the author, from

⁷ See (Rowland 1988, pp. 126–29).

⁸ See (Kuruvilla 2013).

⁹ In South America the main issue was class, while in the Palestine–Israel context, it is, apparently, ethnicity; secondly, the Palestinian context is in itself more diverse because the people that lead the cause for liberation are mainly Muslim with a Christian minority; thirdly, Palestinian theologians, contrary to their South American colleagues, do not have a thorough formation. See (Kuruvilla 2010).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹¹ See (Nerel 2006).

¹² See (van Zile 2011).

a “tribal” concept of the divine, which is typical of early Judaism. In contrast with this idea, the prophets’ teachings and the Christian approach are universalist and, therefore, Zionism represents a regressive ideology.

Mitri Raheb, who belongs to the Lutheran Church, started his political–theological activities in the 1990s, with some publications which appeared first in German, on Palestinian national identity and the city of Bethlehem as a symbol of the Palestinian plight that appeals to Christians in the world.¹³ Since the 2000s and the numerous military confrontations between Israel and the Palestinian-armed factions, Raheb has developed a conceptualization of Israel as a ferocious Empire that is kept alive by its American allies and nurtured by the implementation of oppressive measures. Here, the use of the Biblical narrative is fascinating: each author uses different Biblical references in order to associate Zionism with the Pharaoh, wicked rulers, and foreign invaders, in order to construe Zionism as a historical manifestation opposed to justice.

Common to all authors is the emphasis on Zionism and the strenuous attempt to dispute its legitimacy both politically and theologically, which results in an uncompromising condemnation of the Jewish national movement. Ultimately, Zionism and Israel represent evil. Although Khoury and Ateek, the latter in his earlier writings at least, occasionally mention a future of two states, this does not imply that they recognize the legitimacy of Jewish statehood. Indeed, the resolute view on Zionism is the conviction of its wickedness, inhumanity, and inherent violence. Whereas Raheb seems more cautious to express clear views on the political future of the region, he resolutely denies any legitimacy to the Zionist project and to a Jewish state.

In an effort to dispute the validity of Zionist claims, these authors develop a theological–political argument that inevitably touches upon Judaism and Jewish political thought, in a manner that revives certain anti-Jewish beliefs. For instance, the traditional view of Judaism as a sterile, legalistic religion is echoed in portraying the Zionist project as the consequence of an ethnic, nationalistic interpretation of the Biblical narrative. Similarly, the traditional conceptualization of Christian supersession of the Biblical message is echoed in a number of arguments that describe the Christian reading of the Scripture as universalistic as opposed to the supposedly particularistic Jewish approach.

It is important to stress that Judaism in itself is not denied or refused. The arguments set forth are theological and political alike, and they aim to support the Palestinian political agenda. Therefore, Judaism is not denied or refused *per se*. Nor are Jews directly attacked. Yet, they are relegated to the role of a disempowered minority, of an ultimate icon of sufferance, of a symbol of persecuted people in exile, while Zionism is associated with aggressive and sordid power politics. Moreover, in an effort to define a Palestinian-Christian response to Israel, certain arguments appear to echo traditional and modern antisemitic tropes, such as the dichotomic view of particularistic Judaism as opposed to universalist Christianity, the consideration of Jewish political or social organized bodies as an alien, disruptive force, and the condemnation of an alleged plan to dominate, if not the world, then at least the region.

The intellectual struggle of these theologians focuses on Jewish nationhood, which is absolutely denied as it is a source of injustice given its particularity. In this sense, the juxtaposition with Christian-Palestinian nationalism is particularly striking, because the Jewish nation is considered incapable of creating a just or pluralistic polity, since it is defined as Jewish. Conversely, Christian-Palestinian nationalism is considered a political movement of liberation that is entrenched in the universalist message of inclusiveness, considered at the heart of the Christian faith. Jewish particularism is an anti-Jewish conception that has its roots in early Christianity, and was further developed in the Middle Ages not only to refute Jewish theology,¹⁴ but also to signify what was considered both Jews’ punishment to ever wander for refusing to accept Jesus and the supersession of the Christian Church in the Covenant with God.

¹³ See for example, Raheb (1994) and some chapters on Christian demography in Israel and the Palestinian territories on Christian–Muslim–Jewish cooperation, and on Christian theological and encounter centers in Bechmann and Raheb (1995).

¹⁴ See (Dahan 1991, pp. 125–36).

The same theme also evolved among the Illuminists,¹⁵ who expected Jews to abandon their particular identity. Levis Sullam argues that the “secularization” of religious anti-Judaic themes by the Illuminists paved the way for modern antisemitism.¹⁶ The same misconception of Jewish particularism and legalism influenced the German philosopher Bruno Bauer to describe Jews, considered both a religious and national group, as lacking of spirit and stubbornly opposed to historical evolution, therefore, incompatible with progress and coexistence with other peoples.¹⁷ Drawing from the same philosophic tradition, Karl Marx further juxtaposes Jewish particularism and sterility as opposed to Christian spiritualism for conceptualizing what he called “Jewish egoism” as the pillar of capitalism and world exploitation of the working masses.¹⁸ The themes of Jewish callousness and the supposed existence of a world Jewry pursuing capitalistic goals also influenced antisemitic tropes referring to Jews as a people conspiring to exploit and dominate. This symbolizes a shift toward political and racial antisemitism.¹⁹ The obstinate attachment to “obsolete” traditions is not just a Jewish religious trait, despicable in the eyes of the anti-Jewish believer, but also the source of a sense of exclusivity and separateness. In the antisemitic mind, the cunning Jew is constantly scheming for dominating other people and using their resources in order to maintain his own particular interests. From a despised group holding obsolete religious beliefs, Jews become a peril for the social, political and moral order. In the Western imaginary of the 19th century, the antisemitic idea of Jewish peril could emerge so strongly because of old anti-Jewish views that characterized Jews as sons of Satan, operating as evil forces and associated with wickedness, blasphemy, and deception.²⁰

The anti-Jewish trope of Jewish particularism and antisemitic concerns of Jewish peril are often transposed onto Zionism, which is thus considered not as merely a national movement or as a religious theology, but as a force operating against justice and order. In this sense, critiques of Zionism as a national, political movement, or of its theologically driven contributions are not per se antisemitic. However, there are certain voices that oppose Zionism, which echo traditional anti-Jewish and antisemitic themes. In some cases, opponents of Zionism resort to openly antisemitic “notions of the perfidy and diabolical cunning of the Jews; their corrosive, manipulative will-to-power; their insatiable love of gold and intrigue, mastery of hidden forces and domination of the international financial system.”²¹ Other times, anti-Judaism and antisemitism is disguised by historical and political arguments against Zionist ideology or Israeli policies, which portray them as an inherent violent and foreign force. By delegitimizing Israel, certain voices end up supporting the idea that “Zionism aims at racist hegemony or domination,” or “[repeat] on a collective level and within the international arena the discriminatory principles of traditional antisemitism which traditionally branded Jews as an alien element unassimilable into European Christian society.”²²

This is even more true when theological arguments are put forward against Zionism as the expression of Jewish nationhood. This paper analyzes some of these views and shows how the theological and political arguments do not merely refute the Jewish political project as opposed to Palestinian national aspirations, but extend their criticism to Jewish nationhood as a whole. It appears that the theological–political criticism of Israel does not confine itself to present the case for the

¹⁵ See (Schechter 2003, pp. 53–65).

¹⁶ See (Levis Sullam 2008, p. 18).

¹⁷ See (Bauer 1843). The same author in a later work develops a quasi-racial antisemitic argument, whereby the integration of Jews would be impossible because Jewish exclusivity and particularism are expressed in Judaism as people. See (Bauer 1863).

¹⁸ See (Wistrich 2012, pp. 75–88). Wistrich describes the anti-Jewish sentiment of the Young Hegelians and the influence of such views on Marxist conceptualization of Jews as a capitalistic parasite that dominated the bourgeois classes. The theme of Jewish mastery through money was later developed by Christian socialists, who capitalized on the image of Jewish usury, and influenced other antisemitic convictions such as supposed Jewish plan for world domination.

¹⁹ See (Levis Sullam 2008, pp. 32–42).

²⁰ See (Trachtenberg 1961). The author shows how the conception of Jews as agents of evil was firmly embedded in European imaginary not only through words but also through works of visual art, pp. 12–55.

²¹ See (Wistrich 2012, p. 510).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 511.

Palestinian cause, nor does it address theological arguments at the heart of Zionist claims. Rather, such criticism directs a much more profound denunciation of the Zionist project as a whole and addresses current Jewish statehood as a theological misconception and source of injustice in its entirety. Hence, the use of Christian theological arguments for addressing Zionist claims cannot but touch upon conceptions of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood.

It is precisely the blurry boundaries between support for the Palestinian cause and theological conceptualizations of Zionism that this paper addresses and the discourse on Judaism that unfolds.

The following sections will analyze the thoughts of Geries Khoury, Naim Stifan Ateek, and Mitri Raheb in relation to Israel and Zionism and assess the extent to which certain arguments echo anti-Jewish or antisemitic tropes.

2. Israel the Imperialist Evil, Zionism the Distorted Theology

The three authors differently conceptualize Israel as an imperialist state that represents an evil entity and as the product of a distorted theology. Specifically, these sections will analyze what arguments the authors advance in order to oppose the Zionist project.

2.1. Geries Khoury

Geries Khoury founded one of the first theological centers devoted to revive Christian theology in the area where Christianity was born—the al-Liqa'.²³ Khoury devoted his work to the local Christian community and reached out to the Catholic world, the denomination to which he belonged, and especially in Italy, where he pursued his studies and acquired his theological education, seeking support for the Palestinian cause.

The two main objectives of Khoury's work were to develop Palestinian theology and engage in a dialogue with Islam. This latter goal plays a very important role in his writings, where he constantly argues in favor of a cultural and historical commonality with Muslims. The construal of identity is national first (Arab Palestinian) and only after religious (namely, Christian or Muslim): Khoury states that Christians are Arab as Muslims are, who share a common language and history.²⁴ This is necessary in order to create a shared domain between Christians and Muslims in their opposition to Israel.

In his book *Christian and Muslim Arabs*,²⁵ Khoury analyzes the necessity and importance of the dialogue between the two religious communities, putting forth several historical and theological reasonings, a number of which touch upon Israel.

Christian–Muslim dialogue is necessary to oppose Zionism, which is defined as a “fallacious exploitation of the Jewish religion”, and is at the basis of the creation of the State of Israel. Such exploitation includes Zionists' political interpretations that led to the suffering of the Palestinian people.²⁶ In Khoury's view, Zionism, deemed as a specious utilization of the Jewish religion, has also affected Islam, by “encouraging” the development of similar currents that abuse religion for political purposes.²⁷ The cooperation between Christians and Muslims, Khoury maintains, plays an even more important role in resisting the “Israeli occupation” and its continuous “propaganda and aggression” on “Muslim and Christian Palestinians.”²⁸ Here, the argument repeatedly advanced is that, since, in the author's view, Israel's policy aims to create divisiveness, Christians and Palestinians need to defy the aggressor together by strengthening “national unity” and “the unity among members of this people.”²⁹

²³ Encounter, in Arabic.

²⁴ See (Khoury 2006, pp. 151–52).

²⁵ See (Khoury 2006).

²⁶ See (Khoury 2006, p. 133).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

The unity of the Palestinian people is firstly construed as a necessity to stand up to a common enemy, and then as a way of solidarity among Christians and Muslims. In this view, the dialogue among the two communities is also necessary given the misconceptions about Islam, in particular the idea of a violent Islam, furthered by Israel and the West.³⁰

Therefore, the Christian–Muslim dialogue is necessary for strengthening national unity and in fulfilling the historical role of the Christian community in the region. The author frequently stresses that Christians are Arab, they constitute part of the Palestinian people along with Muslims, and differ only in terms of religion. In Khoury’s words, the Palestinian Christian “is Arab as the Muslim is, and shares with him the language, the history, the civilization, the concerns, the pains, and the hopes.”³¹

Such views are also stressed in his semi-autobiographical “A Palestinian Bearing the Cross,”³² where the author dedicates an entire section to what he claims is the distortion of the Scriptures for supporting Zionist claims.

Khoury stresses that the promise of the land by God to the Hebrews and the Jews was first of all conditioned on the respect of the Pact and on the adherence to justice, which they did not respect and eventually were punished for with exile.³³ Quoting the prophets, Khoury defines the development of the concept of the Land as first national and then reviewed by the Prophets as linked to social justice.³⁴ This universalistic call is further confirmed by the New Testament,³⁵ which transcends the particularistic interpretation evidently attributed to Judaism and Zionism.

By juxtaposing the New Testament, which according to the author focuses on justice, to the reading of the Bible, Khoury comes to the conclusion that the Bible “rejects any Jewish politicized theology” and praises the Palestinian reading of the Bible motivated by a universalist mission in opposition to “exclusivist claims,”³⁶ attributed to Judaism.

The charge formulated against Zionism is for portraying an exclusivist, nationalist reading of the Bible, which coupled with the sense of divine election would be the reason for Israel’s alleged drive to conquer, invade, and systematically violate international law.³⁷ Khoury’s denunciation of the nationalist interpretation of God is supposedly directed against Israel as a Jewish State, but it is not always clear if there is a distinction between Zionism and Judaism.

A further argument made by the author explains the confusion that sometimes emerges between Zionism and Judaism. Khoury compares the Hebrew reading of the Bible to the Christian one, stressing the significance attributed to concepts such as nation and Promised Land in the two views. For the Jews, the nation means “the return to the holy land”. The author rejects such interpretation as wrong since it is based on a political reading of the Scripture.³⁸ On the contrary, the Christian meaning of nation is universal and goes beyond the limits of specific peoples.³⁹ Moreover, for Christians, the love of the nation is to be interpreted in the sense of serving the peoples living within one nation,⁴⁰ evidently opposing this view to Israel, which is deemed to systematically discriminate against those who do not belong to the Jewish national group.

The uncompromising condemnation of Jewish statehood is even clearer when compared to other competing, national movements. For the author, Zionism is responsible for pursuing a plan that brought “chaos in the Middle East”, and Zionist leaders for construing a sense of superiority of the

³⁰ Ibid., p. 134. The author specifically mentions Christian groups which support Israel, the Christian Zionists, who are another reason for strengthening Christian–Muslim dialogue (p. 133).

³¹ Ibid., p. 151.

³² Citing the Italian translation, (Khoury 2009).

³³ Ibid., pp. 129–37.

³⁴ Ibid., 139.

³⁵ Ibid., 140.

³⁶ Ibid., 143.

³⁷ Ibid., 145–47.

³⁸ See (Khoury 2007, p. 140).

³⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 145.

Jewish race.⁴¹ This would be the reason behind Israel's expansionist ethos and oppressive policies, which not only disrupted a historical harmony among different religious communities, but also brought an end to the Arab nationalist dream of peace.

Tellingly, the Jewish national project is deemed to be in itself exclusivist and particularistic, while the Arab nationalist project would be inclusive and universalistic. Jewish statehood is evil; it brings about oppression and hatred, while the not-yet-achieved Arab statehood will attain justice, liberation, and the triumph of love for the other.⁴²

The author states at times that Palestinians want peace with Israel and are ready to accept its existence, yet the whole spirit of his analysis is an absolute rejection of Israel and Zionism, as opposed to the Christian-Palestinian ethos that Khoury is eager to portray and adopt. An historical example described by the author clarifies this point.

Khoury eulogizes the figure of Sophronius of Jerusalem, the Christian patriarch who insisted to meet the Muslim Khalif after the conquest of Jerusalem by Islamic forces in the 7th century. By this insistence, Sophronius saved the Christian holy places from destruction and ensured the beginning of the Muslim-Christian dialogue.⁴³ His figure is revered as an example of Christian ethos and political sagaciousness. Such an attitude is, however, not even contemplated in the current situation, where, if we accept the author's reasoning, the "occupier" is Jewish.

For instance, the author characterizes the visits of Israeli officials to Christian leaders right after the Six Day War and the beginning of Israel's administration of the territories captured in 1967 as "embarrassing".⁴⁴ Again, he criticizes the "diplomatic" approach of the Vatican toward Israeli policies,⁴⁵ and, by and large, excludes any kind of dialogue with Judaism unless it is for the denunciation of Zionism and Israel.⁴⁶

In Khoury's view, Israel is considered the epitome of injustice and the occupation is the ultimate source of evil,⁴⁷ which obliges the Christian Church to "step in" and face, together with Muslim allies and compatriots, the challenges posed by Jewish statehood. This struggle against Zionism has the aim to restore justice.⁴⁸ It appears that the Christian-Muslim dialogue is also conceived in this framework and with this goal in mind, as a platform for opposing Israel, and not just as a venue for creating mutual understanding.

2.2. Naim Ateek

Naim Ateek, one of the founders of Palestinian liberation theology, developed a theology that not only refutes Zionism, based on similar arguments as previously discussed, but also exposes what is considered the American-Israeli alliance of empire against the Palestinians. Ateek formulates his claims in a fashion that goes beyond the accusation of particularism as set forth in Khoury's writings, by using a more intemperate language.

In 1989, Ateek published "Justice and only Justice", in which he copes with the Jewish Bible in light of the conflict and Israel as a Jewish state. Confronting what he calls the "political abuse of the Bible," Ateek claims that reading the Bible in light of the conflict questions "God's integrity" and "character."⁴⁹ Echoing Gustavo Gutierrez' understanding of Jesus,⁵⁰ Ateek claims that Jesus "was

⁴¹ See (Khoury 2009, p. 124).

⁴² Ibid., pp. 121–23.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 77–81.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 198.

⁴⁷ See (Khoury 2007, p. 96).

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 99–101.

⁴⁹ See (Ateek 1989, p. 78).

⁵⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez is considered the founder of Liberation Theology, a new understanding of the Christian message that puts the poor at the center of the faith and considers it addressee of God's preferential love. This theology was developed in

critical of the legalistic concept of God held by some of the Pharisees, and he tries repeatedly to draw their attention to the essence of the prophetic tradition.⁵¹ Yet, the author explains that the “old, more pervasive idea of God’s exclusiveness, which involved a special and unique relationship to Israel” typical of the Torah was challenged by “the newer, emerging view of God’s inclusiveness” encapsulated in the prophetic tradition and later in the Gospels.⁵²

The Zionist idea of a Jewish state, coupled with claims to the land as part of Jewish national aspirations represents, therefore, “a retrogression of the Jewish community into the history of its very distant past, with its most elementary and primitive forms of the concept of God.”⁵³ Hence, “[espousing] this exclusivist understanding of God”, Israel breaks away with the tradition of righteousness and exclusively focuses on the claims to the land that result in perpetual injustice to the Palestinian people. This “retrogression” is explained as a breach from the exilic tradition of an ethical Judaism that survives without a territory and with the Christian revolution of the concept of land as a territory on which to dwell according to principles of justice.⁵⁴

What is described as the Zionist’s rabid yearning of the land is explained as a theological fallacy that leads to the injustice suffered by Palestinians. This fallacy consists of a narrow reading of the Bible, which justifies the misleading entitlement to the land by restricting God’s promise to one people. Israel is accused of enacting supremacist policies that would deny the entitlement to the land and other rights to those who do not belong to the Jewish people.

Zionism is not only a theological fallacy, but also the essence of injustice. According to the author, the Zionist project is intrinsically criminal, since “the Zionists wanted the land without the people.”⁵⁵ Ateek maintains that Zionists allegedly adopted policies against the Palestinians, Muslims, and Christians alike who “needed to be eliminated or ethnically cleansed for the success of the Zionist project”.⁵⁶ Similarly, “Israel created policies to reduce the number of Palestinians in the land, including the number of Christians”.⁵⁷

The author also points to Zionism as the primary origin of chaos and violence in the Middle East, whose inception disrupted the balance of inter-communal relations that was in effect until the Zionists began implementing the project of Jewish statehood.

Ateek does not romanticize the past, admitting there was inter-communal violence stemming from economical, personal, and religious disputes, but it was limited and regulated by a social order that existed before Jewish immigration, and which Zionism completely disrupted.

The beginning of havoc is deemed to be the Balfour Declaration, which committed to create a Jewish national home in the British-administered region called Palestine. Moreover, “the increase of Jewish immigration into Palestine, both legally and illegally, brought an increase in violence. The violence of the Zionists was met with the reactionary violence of the Palestinians as they defended their rights to their land and country from the onslaught of the recent arrivals”.⁵⁸

Not only would Zionism be the essence of chaos and injustice, but also it bears the germ of ferocity and brutality that modern Israel is accused of. In Ateek’s view, “Zionists were using violence and terrorism unashamedly to achieve their goals,” and in the effort of creating “a state for themselves, they used violence—brutally, viciously, and relentlessly”.⁵⁹ Furthermore, seeking to dismiss Zionism as a corrupted and inhumane movement, the author compares it to modern violence in the region,

the late 1960s in South America, and later evolved in different contexts of oppression and discrimination, as a theological tool for signifying the scripture in light of injustice and as a means of mobilization of marginalized masses.

⁵¹ See (Ateek 1989, p. 97).

⁵² Ibid., pp. 92–100, at p. 93.

⁵³ Ibid., 101.

⁵⁴ See (Ateek 2014, pp. 123–35).

⁵⁵ See (Ateek 2007, pp. 67–74, at p. 74).

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵⁸ See (Naim 2008, p. 40).

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

which he, however, condones, stating that “in no way were the Zionists morally superior to Palestinian extremists who today use violence and terror to achieve the liberation of their country”.⁶⁰

This violent nature is deemed to have passed on to Israel, which is also uncompromisingly condemned as a genocidal state, maintaining that the “belief that Palestinians are worth less than Jews, hidden in the hearts of some Zionists, began to be put into practice over the time. It has been a sallow and creeping genocide.”⁶¹ Ateek goes so far as to suggest that today’s Israel also employs practices of Nazi Germany as a result of a progressive degeneration of its attitudes toward Palestinians.⁶²

The condemnation of Zionism is strengthened by the contention that it is a colonialist endeavor. Zionists are estranged as foreign settlers who allegedly took over the rule of the region as proxies of Western imperialist powers, in particular America. Palestinians suffer the collusion of imperialist, colonialist forces that enact different forms of oppression.

According to Ateek, “the state of Israel has become an integral part of American Empire” and “in its hegemony over the Palestinians and its use of military prowess it governs and behaves as an Empire.”⁶³ The author describes Zionism as an imperialist tool deployed for achieving the oppression of the Palestinians in such a fashion that theology becomes a fundamental component of the justification of violence and injustice. “The Zionists replaced the traditional biblical God with the new god of Zionism,”⁶⁴ a theological operation whereby “they adopted a literal understanding of an exclusive biblical tribal god who commands the expulsion and destruction of the indigenous people of the land.”⁶⁵ Ateek maintains that Israel’s new god is security,⁶⁶ dismissing any genuine concern that Israel has in front of military and security challenged for guaranteeing the security of its citizens. In his view, Israel’s militarism is yet another tool for exterminating Palestinians mantled by theological arguments.

Moreover, in occasion of the centenary of the 1917 Balfour Declaration in 2017, through which the British Empire committed to support the creation of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, Ateek expresses his most profound condemnation of Balfour’s views and the Declaration bearing his name. In his view, Balfour “made it possible for the Israeli government to dominate, dehumanize, and discriminate against the Palestinians.”⁶⁷ The condemnation is not only political, because “in a theological sense, the sin of Balfour was his failure to practice the love of neighbor.”⁶⁸ In this way, Ateek repurposes the same political–theological argument set forth against Zionism, in order to attack what is considered the primary international document that constitutes the legal basis of Israel’s legitimacy.

The following passage maybe best illustrates the author’s views on Zionism and Israel as by-products of and imperialist scheme:

“Today we can trace the varied forces that coalesced to bring about the tragedy of Palestine and ignite the original spark of the violence back to colonialism and imperialist, to poor and misguided biblical scholarship, to a Christian Europe that made Jews unwanted and carried out massacres and pogroms against them, to a Zionist movement that capitalized on the spirit of colonialism, for its own advantage, and to some influential Protestant evangelicals who used the scripture to support Zionist objectives while ignoring issues of justice and self-determination for the indigenous people of Palestine who had been living there for

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 42.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 47.

⁶² Ibid., p. 47. The author refers to the use of dogs by Israeli military forces and claims that “for many years, Israel refused to use trained dogs against the Palestinians because it brought to mind the Nazis. Now Israel uses dogs to attack Palestinians”.

⁶³ See (Ateek 2012, pp. 93–105, at p. 94).

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

⁶⁶ Ibid., particularly where the author uses the Hebrew word “bitahon”, spelled in the piece as “betahone”.

⁶⁷ See (Ateek 2017).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

millennia, In retrospect, it was a conspiracy to displace innocent people from their land and to replace them with another people. Is it surprising that violence ensued?"⁶⁹

2.3. Mitri Raheb

Other theologians mainly focus their work on Israel as an imperialist project, arguing that Israel has occupied the land of indigenous Palestinians and built an empire whose goal would be persistently negating Palestinian rights in pursuit of expansionist and colonialist plans.

While accusations of colonialism and imperialism are not new in the discourse on the conflict, the theologian approach is particularly interesting because it revises biblical history and adapts it to the current situation in a fashion that associates the State of Israel with foreign empires that in the past have ruled on the area called "holy land."

Such analogies taken from the biblical narrative include the comparison of Israel to the Egyptian Empire and the Pharaoh. The enslaved Hebrews and oppressed Jews come to represent the oppressed masses, which are nowadays Palestinians. Another analogy equates between the State of Israel and the Roman Empire, particularly expedient for the Christian narrative. Hence, the crucifixion of Jesus as the ultimate example of a criminal misdeed by the ruling regime becomes a tool for obliterating Jesus' Jewish identity and using him as the embodiment of today's Palestinian collective, persecuted at the hand of what is deemed ferocious Israeli rule.

Mitri Raheb proposes new biblical hermeneutics, which are based on the replacement of modern Israel as a Jewish state with an imperialist entity to be associated with, alternatively, the Babylonians, the historical regime of Herod, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and the Crusaders' rule. In his view, these regimes occupied a territory by controlling natural resources, limiting people's movement, building settlements, and uprooting people to exile, and Israel would act in their footsteps.⁷⁰

Raheb develops a political reading of the biblical narrative that re-signifies historical groups, by substituting them with contemporary political players in the Arab–Israeli conflict. While the Scriptures are often used to signify a specific historical or political context in the tradition of contextualized theology, the problematic aspect of this specific reading is the conclusion that the author draws, which is the alienation of Israel and the Jewish people from the regional context. In other words, it is not the hermeneutical exercise that is under scrutiny here, or its validity, but the conclusions it gets to, which promote a vision of Jewish Israel as an alien entity in the region.

Israel is nominated in the "list of empires that ruled Palestine: the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Ayyubids, the Ottomans, the British, and last but not the least, the Israeli occupation."⁷¹ The Palestinian fighters take the place of Jewish rebels that fought against the Roman Empire, assuming the role of the liberator against an unjust regime. Additionally, the Muslim Brotherhood takes the place of the Pharisees, the Jewish religious establishment at Jesus' time; while the ruling Palestinian elites take the place of the Sadducees, the Jewish political elite. Tellingly, the Palestinians who work with or for Israelis are defined as the Jewish tax collectors at the service of the Roman Empire, denigrated as collaborators of the oppressor. Finally, Muslim Salafists and conservative Christian churches take the place of the Qumran community.⁷²

This creative interpretation of the scripture obliterates the Jewish meaning of the biblical narrative, by replacing it with a contextual nationalist Palestinian narrative of oppression.

As Raheb urges, "we have to connect the Israel of the Bible with the Palestinians, because they are our forefathers, and we must connect the modern state of Israel with the Empire."⁷³ Through this interpretation, Israel becomes an alien entity that rules over the Palestinian indigenous people. Such a

⁶⁹ See (Naim 2008, p. 39).

⁷⁰ See (Raheb 2014a, pp. 55–62).

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 99.

⁷² Ibid., pp. 74–81.

⁷³ See (Raheb 2012, p. 51–55, at p. 54).

substituting narrative is at times supported by geographical arguments, since, as Raheb asserts, “Had we lived at the time of Jesus, and had we seen all the military checkpoints that Herod the Great created; or if we look from Bethlehem today towards the East and the South and see Herodian and Masada, the extent of the Roman Empire at the time would be obvious.”⁷⁴

The total dismissal of Israel as an imperialist project is also supported by the view that the ideology behind it, namely, Zionism, uses the bible in order to justify injustice and oppression.⁷⁵ Zionism and Israel represent the ultimate evil that are subjugating the holy land as other rulers had done in history.

The imagery used is at times vitriolic. Interpreting the Gospel of Matthew, which recounts Jesus’s transfiguration and healing of a boy possessed by a demon, Raheb speaks of demoniac powers as “a perfect symbol for the empire”⁷⁶ that subjugates people’s lives.

In this respect, the author cites chapter 17 of the Gospel of Matthew, which recounts the transfiguration of Jesus, a central event in the Gospel narrative. Talking from what has been identified as Mount Tabor, Jesus appears to the disciples James, John, and Peter as the Son of God. The event plays a fundamental role in ascertaining Jesus’s dual nature as human and divine. Moreover, the Gospel tells that Jesus healed a man possessed by a demon, which the author interprets as the oppression and despair of people under imperial regimes.

The process of liberation from demoniac powers becomes for the author a metaphor for the empowerment of masses in order to oppose oppression. The metaphor of the crucifixion is sometimes used in order to exemplify oppression, whereby the Palestinian people embodies Jesus crucified by “the Empire”.⁷⁷ As strong as this image may be, especially in a Christian context, it also restores old debates strongly connected to the antisemitic notion of deicide.

Not only is Israel responsible for the situation that Palestinians live in, but it also should be considered responsible for religious fundamentalism worldwide. According to Raheb, the imperialist plan of Zionism has been addressed theologically by Christians first, and then by Jews, who both saw in the victory of the 1967 War a divine attestation of Israel’s legitimacy. The author is of the opinion that the year 1967 is the fulcrum of religious fundamentalism, whereby Christian and Jewish theological understanding of the events, which substantially endorsed Zionism, triggered Islamic fundamentalism as a response. Israel’s military policy would then be the reason for all religious extremism in the world.⁷⁸

By portraying Israel as a wicked, even demoniac, empire, it follows that there is no good or right in it. Israelis are reduced to cruel soldiers, whose dominion of the land is supported by foreign powers. Raheb’s *Bethlehem Besieged* can help understand how Israelis are perceived.

Written in 2004, the book recounts the 2002 Bethlehem incident, which saw the Israeli army confronting Palestinian militants who took harbor in the Church of Nativity. The images of Israeli tanks settled out of the Church outraged the Christian world. Conversely, the use of a worship place as a refuge by belligerent groups was not unanimously condemned. Raheb describes the fear and uncertainty during Israel’s military operation in the city of Bethlehem. While the author can find humanity among the militants, he denies any compassion on the Israeli side. Even the politeness found in one Israeli commander described in the book was dismissed as a simple behavior upon orders, and not as a real kindness. On the contrary, when speaking of a Hamas militant who was in the Church and was later exiled to Gaza by Israel, he describes his compassionate attitude toward the Christian monk who provided food for those hiding.⁷⁹

The numerous pages that describe Israel’s brutality, humiliating military policies, and consequences of the war assume a theological understanding when the author refers to Saul-Paul and his embracing

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

⁷⁵ See (Raheb 2012, pp. 65–111).

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 100.

⁷⁷ See for instance, the speech given in March 2014 (Raheb 2014b).

⁷⁸ See the speech given at the 2014 Christ at the Checkpoint Conference organized by the Bethlehem Bible College in March 2014, (Raheb 2014c).

⁷⁹ See (Mitri 2004).

of the Christian message. When using his Hebrew name Saul, his figure is an analogy of Israel: “this former Jewish leader, zealot, persecutor, and hard-liner committed himself to making sure that a wall of separation was built and kept between his community and its enemies. He was ready to attack, terrorize, and even sanction the killing of whoever dared to question the importance of this wall for the security of his community”.⁸⁰ The wall is understandably a reference to the fence that Israel began building in 2002 roughly along the 1949 armistice line, but also becomes an allegory of Israel’s purported ideological isolation, whereby the author states that “for Saul the ideological wall of separation was necessary to preserve his people’s identity, demography, and security”. Only after embracing the Christian message, Saul becomes Paul, a peacemaker, a universalist lover whose “great discovery was that God in Christ broke the walls of hostility between the human and the divine,” tearing down the need of national, cultural, or communal divisions.⁸¹

This reference suggests how Israel’s perceived nationalistic goals of self-separation are directly challenged by the Christian message of universal love: yet another rendition of the juxtaposing forces of Jewish particularism, expressed in Israel’s closeness, and Christian universalism, expressed in Palestinian piety.

3. Anti-Israeli or Anti-Jewish Tenets?

The analyzed theologians eloquently advocate for the Palestinians’ plight for independence and see in Israel the worldly result of a distorted theology that abuses the biblical message in order to justify a nationalistic project. The opposition to the Zionist project combines harsh criticism of Israel’s policies in the conflict as well as the pursuit of a political alternative that entails the transformation of the Jewish state into another reality.

It is unclear whether this alternative would be bi-national state or the transformation of Israel only into a pluri-national state. However, these positions do not imply, apparently, any direct hostility toward the Jewish people. Their controversial aspect lies in the arguments put forth to support the demise of the Jewish state. They do not criticize the nation-state as a polity *per se*, nor do they criticize specific policies toward minorities. They focus on the entire Zionist project that supposedly creates a reality that clashes with the concept of divine justice, ending with the refusal of Jewish statehood.

The Jewish Zionist narrative is built on biblical history for reviving Jewish national identity. Israel draws from Judaism, both Jewish religion and tradition, in order to establish a polity that reflects Jewish cultural and spiritual heritage. In the effort to oppose the Zionist enterprise, the alternative formulated is not a polity that reflects Arab cultural and spiritual heritage, nor an Arab national project that may conflict with the existence of Israel. The arguments set forth seek to reject Jewish statehood in its entirety, since it allegedly clashes with Christian tenets. The point is made using theological and biblical arguments and references, and it directly opposes Israel because its Jewish, not because it has not yet brokered peace with the Palestinians and not because it has not adopted more favorable policies toward its minorities. Israel’s existence as a Jewish state is presented as incompatible with Christian tenets, and its unfolding is deemed to be a wicked entity.

The first of these arguments is the accusation of particularism, whereby Israel would be a polity based on Jewish exclusivism drawn from a tribal conceptualization of god. The alternative proposed is a Christian view of inclusiveness, to be found in the biblical prophets and above-all in the teachings of Jesus. This view is highly troublesome, because it reproduces, theologically, the ancient tenets of Christianity as superseding Judaism, and, culturally, the anti-Jewish idea that regards Jews as a self-isolating group unable to open to diversity or togetherness.

Even more vexing is the second argument, whereby the Israeli polity is a form of empire. Questioning Israel’s rule and policies in the post-1967 territories, the writings of these theologians end

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 145.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 145–46.

up contributing to the revival of other antisemitic views. When Ateek argues that “Israel has become an integral part of American Empire and . . . behaves like an empire” by wilding “hegemony over the Palestinians”,⁸² he also maintains that its legitimizing force is the Bible, which “has been used as an instrument of injustice and oppression” for vindicating the “theft of land of Palestine”.⁸³ Troublesome as it may be, this argument is used not only to further Israel’s demonization, but also for construing Zionism as an inherently evil enterprise that opposes God’s will.

These arguments have attracted the support of a number of international Christian leaders and activists as well. For instance, Anno denounces that the holy land was promised as “a sanctuary of the poor and the oppressed,”⁸⁴ not as a national project of one people, entailing, therefore, that the Jewish State defies divine will. In such a view, Israel is the ultimate evil that has to be resisted and combated. This situation of injustice requires a Christian response, rooted in a “concept of God who stands beside the oppressed and with whom the oppressed work for a better day and confront their oppressors with their sin.”⁸⁵

The third argument is the substitution and alienation of the Jews from the region and from the biblical narrative. If Israel is an imperialist enterprise, it is yet another regime that rules over the region and vexing its population. Here, the attempt is not only to invalidate the Zionist reading of the biblical narrative, but it endeavors to replace biblical Jews with today’s Palestinians. The slogan often used by activists “Israelis do not belong here,” assumes far-reaching consequences when transposed in a biblical context.

For instance, in a neo-Marxist reading of the Gospel of Mark, Myers describes Jesus as acquainted with the working class of time, especially with fishers, among whom he preached against the Roman oppressor and the Jewish ruling elite, beginning a mission of mobilization “to join him in overturning the structures of power and privilege . . . in order to restore God’s justice to the poor.”⁸⁶ Jesus’ prophetic message is substantiated in his attempt to renew religious attachment by politically engaging against Roman hegemony in order to liberate the oppressed masses, and Jesus’ revolutionary spirit becomes the essence of discipleship. In the attempt to contextualize this liberationist analysis, insurrectionary Jesus is associated with current movements of opposition to Israeli military and police forces, whereby modern Palestinian popular resistance replaces Jewish revolt to Roman authorities.⁸⁷ Jesus himself becomes a “Palestinian under imperial rule,”⁸⁸ whose engagement in non-violent resistance turns into a model for Christians today. As Wistrich emphasizes, the “image of the crucified Jewish people and of the Nazis as a metaphor of the eternal essence of evil has boomeranged against Jews with a vengeance”, because Jews’ moral terrain has been corrupted by Zionism and its military and power politics and, consequently, “they have been endlessly execrated for ‘crucifying’ the Palestinian people in the Holy Land”.⁸⁹

This view perpetuates the image of the Jew as a perennial victim of oppression and the ultimate victim of Nazi ideology. Hence, Jews are repository of God’s will. On the contrary, Zionism promotes exactly the opposite: a national movement of liberation that not only has given rise to a polity, but also inspires its military ethos. Therefore, Zionism is irreconcilable with such a Christian understanding.

Moreover, it is worth noting that while Israel is portrayed as a colonialist project endeavored by “foreigners,” meaning evidently European Jews who settled in the region in pursuit of the Zionism dream, there is no mention of those Jews who nowadays inhabit Israel and who are not of European descent. The categorization of Israel as a Western imperialist state fails to address the issue of the so-called Mizrahi

⁸² See (Ateek 2012, p. 94).

⁸³ Ibid., p. 105.

⁸⁴ See (Anno 2011, pp. 47–51, at p. 48). The paper is a collection of speeches given at the 2011 conference “Kairos for Global Justice,” which took place in Bethlehem. The texts are available at: <http://www.kairos-palestine.ps/sites/default/files/Kairos%20for%20Global%20Justice.pdf>.

⁸⁵ See (Ateek 1989, p. 134).

⁸⁶ See (Myers 2012, pp. 106–15, at p. 113).

⁸⁷ See (Horsley 2012, pp. 56–85, at pp. 63–64).

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 60–61.

⁸⁹ See (Wistrich 2010, p. 502).

Jews, who arrived in Israel as the result of mass emigration, forced or motivated by policies enacted by numerous Arab and Muslims states following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

The authors who have been analyzed apparently distinguish Judaism from Zionism and focus primarily on the latter. Their accusations are for the most directed against Zionism and not against the Judaism. Nevertheless, it is clear that Zionist Jews are the addressee of their speculation, which portrays Israel as inhabited by foreigners and associates it with imperialist powers. This distinction is futile when it comes to the antisemitic tropes such as Jewish particularism, Jewish obsolete legalism, and Jewish evil, which echo in the arguments put forward against Zionism. This is even more true, if one thinks that the object of their dispute is not Zionist policies toward Arabs, nor Jewish theologies that support Zionism, but rather Zionism as a Jewish national project.

The object of their dispute is Zionism as a Jewish political expression that gave birth to a Jewish polity. As a matter of fact, these theologians do not reject nationalism, national identity, or the idea of nation State as a whole. Indeed, they identify as proud Arab and Palestinians and support Arab and Palestinian nationalism. They rather focus on Jewish nationhood and statehood as a historical manifestation that they deem contrary to justice and the divine order. Even if we consider these authors' condemnation of Israel's policies in the post-1967 territories, or the rebuttal of Israel's stances in the conflict, which are commonly criticized, the problem persists in the arguments that are put forward, and that focus more on the essence of Jewish statehood rather than on a specific policies or military practice deemed incompatible with international standards.

This is even more evident when one considers how these authors use Christian figures and principles in order to describe the conflict.

The identification of Palestinians with the crucified Jesus results in a replacement that goes beyond the simple biblical narrative. Indeed, "such views revive the antisemitism of traditional Christian replacement theology, negating the legitimacy of an independent Jewish *political* existence in Zion."⁹⁰ The estrangement of Jews as foreign imperialists seems to go beyond the condemnation of Israeli policies deemed as a colonialist plan on Palestinian lands. Indeed, the use of the Biblical narrative against Israel fathoms the substitution of Palestinians with Biblical Israelites, and result in the shaping of a new supersession, that in a theological-political fashion substitutes the current Zionist Jews with Palestinians. In an effort to disprove Zionist claims to the land rooted in Jewish identity and its connection to the Land of Israel, certain arguments lead to a different conclusion, whereby the true heirs of such connection would be Palestinians. Hence, Zionist Jewish claims would be voided by the misinterpretation and abuse of the Bible stemming from exclusivist readings. This view echoes yet another anti-Jewish belief of replacement theology, which deemed Christians as the true Israel and considered the advent of Jesus as implying the invalidation of Judaism.

As Merkley eloquently observes,

"Marcion has won his long-postponed victory—not only in the local Christian communities of the Middle East, where the prevailing anti-Israeli spirit makes it seem politically astute to deny the God of Israel, but in ecumenical Christian circles, where political correctness has made the intellectuals and bureaucrats increasingly sensitive to the mindset of the oppressed Palestinians, and increasingly insensitive to the demands of dogmatic theology and historical truth."⁹¹

Seemingly, the underlining contention is that Israel is all wrong: it emanates from a distorted theology; it represents a corrupt political vision; it perpetuates brutality and oppression; it gave rise to religious extremism and political instability; it embodies imperial schemes and demonic forces.

⁹⁰ Ibid., emphasis in original.

⁹¹ See (Merkley 2001, pp. 79–80). Marcion of Sinope was active in the 2nd century C.E. and maintained that Christians should limit themselves to the New Testament given that the advent of Jesus replaced the community of Israel and its covenant with god. Consequently, the Old Testament has been invalidated in light of the new scripture (the New Testament on the making at the time).

If the political narrative aims to reject the Jewish State in pursuit of larger national aspirations over the territories that are now administered by Israel as well as on the territory that is part of sovereign Israel, the use of theological arguments fosters a treacherous intellectual climate. The peril here is not merely “demonizing Israel,” but rather it is nurturing antisemitic stereotypes that indirectly serve the political discourse against Zionism and Jewish statehood.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- 18th International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee. 2004. Joint Declaration. July 5–8. Available online: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20040708_declaration-buenos-aires_en.html (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- Anno, Ferdinand. 2011. Reclaiming the Good News of the Holy Land and the Imperative of Interfaith Solidarity to Resist Empire: A Philippine Theological Response to Kairos Palestine. In *Kairos for Global Justice*. Bethlehem: Kairos Palestine, pp. 47–51.
- Ateek, Naim Stifan. 1989. *Justice and Only Justice—A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. Marynkoll: Orbis.
- Ateek, Naim Stifan. 2007. Historical Factors that Have Affected Palestinians Christians. In *The Forgotten Faithful—A Window into the Life and Witness of Christians in the Holy Land*. Edited by Ateek Naim, Duaybis Cedar and Maurine Tobin. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, pp. 67–64.
- Ateek, Naim Stifan. 2012. Theology as a Tool of Empire. In *Challenging Empire—God, Faithfulness and Resistance*. Edited by Naim Ateek, Cedar Duabys and Maurine Tobin. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, pp. 93–105.
- Ateek, Naim Stifan. 2014. ‘Land of Promise’—How do We Understand the Promise of the Land? In *The Bible and the Palestine Israel Conflict*. Edited by Naim Ateek. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, pp. 123–35.
- Ateek, Naim Canon. 2017. “Balfour Declaration Centenary Service”. Liturgy of Penance and Hope St. George’s Cathedral. Available online: <https://sabeel.org/2017/11/02/balfour-declaration-centenary-service/> (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- Ateek, Naim, Duaybis Cedar, and Maurine Tobin, eds. 2005. *Challenging Christian Zionism—Theology, Politics and the Israel-Palestine Conflict*. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center.
- Bauer, Bruno. 1843. *Die Judenfrage*. Braunschweig: Friedrich Otto.
- Bauer, Bruno. 1863. *Das Judentum in der Fremde*. Berlin: Heinide.
- Bechmann, Ulrike, and Mitri Raheb, eds. 1995. *Verwurzelt im Heiligen Land—Einführung in das Palästinensische Christentum*. Frankfurt am Main: Knecht.
- Dahan, Gilbert. 1991. *La Polémique Chrétienne contre le Judaïsme au Moyen Âge*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Horsley, Richard. 2012. Jesus Confronting Empire. In *Challenging Empire—God, Faithfulness and Resistance*. Edited by Naim Ateek Cedar Duabys and Maurine Tobin. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, pp. 56–85.
- Khoury, Geries Sa’ed. 2006. *Arab MasiHiyun wa-Muslimun—MaDian, HaDiran, Mustaqbilan*. Bethlehem: Al-Liqa Center Editions.
- Khoury, Geries Sa’ed. 2007. *Arab Masihiyoun—Asala, Hudur, Infitah*. Bethleem: Al-Liqa Center.
- Khoury, Geries Sa’ed. 2009. *Un Palestinese Porta la Croce—Minoranza Cattolica in Palestina*. Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italiana.
- Kuruville, Samuel J. 2010. Theologies of Liberation in Latin America and Palestin-Israel in Comparative Perspective: Contextual Differences and Practical Similarities. *Holy Land Studies* 9: 51–69. [CrossRef]
- Kuruville, Samuel J. 2013. *Radical Christianity in Palestine and Israel—Liberation Theology in the Middle East*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Levis Sullam, Simon. 2008. *L’Archivio Antiebraico—Il linguaggio dell’Antisemitismo Moderno*. Bari: Laterza.
- Lewis, Bernard. 1999. *Semites and Anti-Semites—An Inquiry into Conflict and Prejudice*. New York: Norton and Company.
- Merkley, Paul Charles. 1998. *The Politics of Christian Zionism 1891–1948*. London: Routledge.

- Merkley, Paul Charles. 2001. *Christian Attitudes toward the State of Israel*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Mitri, Raheb. 2004. *Bethlehem Besieged—Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp. 24–31.
- Myers, Ched. 2012. Sea-Changes Part I—Jesus' Call to Discipleship as Resistance to Colonizing Economics. In *Challenging Empire—God, Faithfulness and Resistance*. Edited by Naim Ateek, Cedar Duabys and Maurine Tobin. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, pp. 106–15.
- Naim, Stifan Ateek. 2008. *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Nerel, Gershon. 2006. "Anti-Zionism in the 'Electronic Church' of Palestinian Christianity". ACTA (Analysis of Current Trends in Anti-Semitism), n. 27.
- Polish Episcopate. 2015. Wspólne duchowe dziedzictwo chrześcijan i Żydów—List pasterski Episkopatu Polski z okazji 50. rocznicy 'Nostra Aetate'" of 6 October 2015. Available online: <https://episkopat.pl/wspolne-duchowe-dziedzictwo-chrzescijan-i-zydow/> (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- Pope Equates Anti-Zionism with Anti-Semitism, Says Israel has Right to Safety and Prosperity. 2015. *The Tower*. October 30. Available online: <http://www.thetower.org/2506-pope-equates-anti-zionism-with-anti-semitism-says-israel-has-right-to-safety-and-prosperity/> (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- Raheb, Mitri. 1994. *Ich bin Christ und Palästinenser. Israel, Seine Nachbarn und die Bibel*. Guetersloh: Guetersloher Verlagshouse.
- Raheb, Mitri. 2012. Blessed Are the Meek. In *Challenging Empire—God, Faithfulness and Resistance*. Edited by Naim Ateek, Cedar Duabys and Maurine Tobin. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, pp. 51–55.
- Raheb, Mitri. 2014a. *Faith in the Face of Empire—The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Raheb, Mitri. 2014b. "The Bible through Palestinian Eyes". Conference Speech, Hartford Seminary. Available online: <https://youtu.be/OWzRVVJnkGo> (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- Raheb, Mitri. 2014c. "The Church, the Empire, the Kingdom". Conference Speech, Bethlehem Bible College. Available online: <https://youtu.be/0qEPmV060Z4> (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- Rowland, Christopher. 1988. *Radical Christianity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Schechter, Ronald. 2003. *Obstinate Hebrew—Representations of the Jews in France 1715–1815*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Spector, Stephen. 2009. *Evangelicals and Israel—The Story of American Christian Zionism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Synod of Bishops. 2010. "The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness—*Instrumentum Laboris*". (Vatican City: 2010, Libreria Editrice Vaticana) par. 90. p. 34. Available online: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20100606_instrumentum-mo_en.pdf (accessed on 18 August 2019).
- Trachtenberg, Joshua. 1961. *The Devil and the Jews—the Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.
- van Zile, Dexter. 2011. Updating the Ancient Infrastructure of Christian Contempt: Sabeel. *Jewish Political Studies Review* 23: 1–2.
- Wistrich, Robert. 2010. *The Lethal Obsession*. New York: Random House.
- Wistrich, Robert. 2012. *From Ambivalence to Betrayal—The Left, the Jews, and Israel*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).