

Decolonizing Palestine

*THE LAND, THE PEOPLE,
THE BIBLE*

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Introduction

For Palestinians, including the Palestinian Christian community, Palestine is a real land with real people. It is our homeland, the land of our ancestors. For Christians in the West, Palestine is an imagined land, a land that they know mainly from the Bible. It has little, if anything, to do with the real Palestine.

By “Christians in the West,” I am not talking just about evangelical theologians or Christian Zionists. I also mean well-regarded, mainstream, and accomplished theologians of many denominations. Over the last seventy years, many theological concepts have advanced and colonized the minds of generations of theologians worldwide. These concepts may have been well intentioned, but they perpetuate an orientalism that has dangerous implications in the current context of occupied Palestine.

In their naiveté, Christian theologians continue to use language and theological ideas that support current Israeli settler colonialism, causing great harm to the people of Palestine. It is time to decolonize this theology that strips the indigenous Palestinian people of their land, livelihood, and roots. It is time to rupture the theological software that enables Israeli oppression of the people of Palestine. It is time for a paradigm shift, and we must begin with the reality on the ground.

This book is not the theoretical exercise of a theologian living in an ivory tower. The issues at stake in this book pose an existential question to the Palestinian people in general and the Palestinian Christians in particular. This book was born from

the intersecting struggles of living as a Palestinian Christian in Bethlehem. As Palestinians, we witness Jewish Israeli settlers colonize our land on a daily basis. A reality experienced by all Palestinians living in historic Palestine, Israeli settler colonialism leaves no room for the next generations of Palestinians as the land around our homes is taken day after day. As Christians, we experience the weaponization of the Bible to drive this colonial project and endow it with a theological grounding. The Bible that is a part of our heritage is being turned against us to enshrine Jewish supremacy and promote the settler colonization of our land.

This book is a first attempt to bring settler colonial theory in dialogue with Palestinian theology. It is an exercise in the further development of a contextual and decolonial Palestinian Christian theology that addresses settler colonial theories. It is a wake-up call for people interested in Israel/Palestine to recognize the reality on the ground, to reflect critically and prophetically on the scripture, and to engage in a new paradigm. It is a wake-up call to perceive how the prevailing exclusive nationalist and expansionist ideologies are disguised in biblical language and motives. My hope is that this new paradigm shift will bring us closer to justice and closer to the spirit of God.

The Little Town . . . A Big Ghetto!

My family has its roots in Bethlehem, the place where I was born and where I still live. Its close proximity to Jerusalem has made it an important commercial, religious, and cultural hub in Palestine since ancient times. As a commercial hub, Bethlehem is a principal asset on the main road between Jerusalem and Hebron. As the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the city is also a key tourist destination in the region. As a meeting point between the fertile terraces to the west and the wilderness with its mon-

asteries to the east, the city is a vital cultural meeting point for farmers, shepherds, and city dwellers.

In the fourth to sixth centuries AD, this area became a magnet and center for monastic life. Within three centuries, over 150 monasteries were established in the Bethlehem wilderness. Besides the Christian monasteries, the Bethlehem wilderness has several Muslim shrines, the best known being Nebi Musa, where, according to Muslim sources, the prophet Moses is buried. Apart from its religious and monastic heritage, the Bethlehem wilderness is a tourist site with enormous potential for wildlife observation, hiking, camping, sky gazing, mountain climbing, desert biking, and quad biking. Yet, the reality today is that 86 percent of the land of Bethlehem Governorate is under exclusive Israeli control, whether that of Israeli colonies or by the Israeli military. Only 14 percent of Bethlehem Governorate is currently under Palestinian control. There is no land left for the native people of Bethlehem and the surrounding villages to start new neighborhoods. Under these circumstances, the use of the word *occupation* to explain what is happening in Palestine under the Israeli government does not accurately reflect the process of colonization and the aggressive expansion of settlements on Palestinian land throughout historic Palestine. These colonies are illegal under international law and constitute a human rights violation.

The Bethlehem Governorate covers an area of 254 square miles (658 square kilometers) and has a Palestinian population of about 230,000 people. Israel occupied the West Bank in June 1967, when I was five years old. During the past fifty-five years, Jewish settlers have been intent on strangling our town by surrounding it with Israeli colonies (settlements). Starting in the early seventies, Israel embarked on the construction of exclusive Jewish colonies on land belonging to Bethlehem Governorate. Today there are twenty-seven colonies with close to 150,000 Jewish settlers. The Israeli colonies are developed

by private Israeli companies and real estate brokers on prime Palestinian land. Jewish settlers with a Western mind-set are intent on grabbing and exploiting Palestinian land to transform it for exclusively Jewish life and recreation. Investment in these colonies reaches into the billions of dollars and often has financial ties to American moguls like Irving Moskowitz and Sheldon Adelson. The so-called Gush Etzion bloc, for example, strangles the Bethlehem quadrangle with over twenty Jewish colonies, including Gilo and Jabal Abu Gneim (Har Homa) in the north with close to seventy thousand settlers, several colonies around the Betar Illit colony in the west with its sixty thousand settlers, and Efrat and Tekoa to the south and southeast with eleven thousand and four thousand settlers, respectively.

The organization and location of the regional council named the Gush Etzion bloc was not a matter of chance but a deliberate choice. First, their proximity to the Green Line actively expands the area of the State of Israel by encroaching deep into West Bank territory. Second, most of these colonies are built on the western slope of the mountain range that runs from Jerusalem to Hebron with an altitude of 2,500 feet (750+ meters) above sea level, an area with enough annual rainfall to ensure very fertile ground. It is no coincidence that the Bible calls this area of Bethlehem *Ephrata*, meaning fertile ground (Micah 5:2). The Jewish colonies surrounding Bethlehem and its neighboring towns (Beit Sahour, Beit Jala, and Doha) are spread out to encompass the maximum amount of Palestinian land for future expansion, while choking Palestinian towns and making it impossible for them to grow. Most of these colonies are separated from the Bethlehem quadrangle by a nearly thirty-five-mile-long (fifty-six-kilometer), twenty-seven-foot-high (eight-meter) concrete wall, two-thirds of which has been completed, built entirely on occupied land inside the borders of Bethlehem Governorate, making Bethlehem the second-most-affected city by the separation wall.

The second group of Jewish colonies in Bethlehem Governorate was built along the Dead Sea shore and organized within Megilot Regional Council. It comprises seven small colonies with fewer than three thousand settlers. Although small in size, these strategic colonies control nearly twenty miles of Dead Sea coastline, the longest strip on the west of the Dead Sea. When tourists float in the Dead Sea, they seldom recognize that they are floating in water that belongs to Bethlehem but is exploited by a Jewish colony. The Dead Sea, a major tourist attraction and important source of foreign currency through international and domestic tourism, is a rich reservoir of minerals and potash. It is a unique, priceless cultural heritage, and an environmental, therapeutic, and touristic treasure. Along the Dead Sea, there are other attractions, including several freshwater springs: Ein-Faschcha, Ein el-Ghuwer, and Ein et-Turabe. These used to be popular locations for leisure, picnics, and swimming for West Bank Palestinians. During my school years, this was a popular area for outings and picnics, and we loved to swim in the freshwater pools.

Today, this same area is controlled and managed by an Israeli colony that offers recreation to Israeli soldiers and military personnel while access for Palestinians is restricted. The area along the Dead Sea shore makes up around 10 percent of Bethlehem Governorate. The east of Bethlehem Governorate borders Jordan, and Bethlehem should control the western shore and water of the Dead Sea while Jordan controls the eastern shores and waters. Yet Israeli military and settlers control the whole western Dead Sea shore with its mineral deposits, in addition to the water resources that belong to Bethlehem.

In addition to the two settlement blocs discussed above, a third area located to the west of the Dead Sea and east of Bethlehem is currently designated as a military zone and is used by Israel for military training. This three-mile strip in the Bethlehem wilderness runs from north to south, across Beth-

lehem Governorate, and makes up 40 percent of the land of Bethlehem Governorate. Although called a wilderness, it sits over a good portion of the Eastern Basin Aquifer with nearly 4.5 billion cubic feet of freshwater and is also an important habitat for wildlife. The wildlife and biodiversity of this area are of utmost importance.

This colonization process has been in practice for over a century, since European Jews started their first Jewish settlement in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1947, the Jewish population of Palestine owned only about 5 percent of the land. In the 1948 War, Israel took over 77 percent of historic Palestine and pushed over 750,000 Palestinians off their land. Palestinian property was seized, and 86 percent of the land taken was declared state or “absentee” land for use exclusively by Israeli Jews. This policy resembles the Doctrine of Discovery used in other settler colonial contexts. Palestinians were left with 6 percent of the land inside the Green Line, the border set by the Armistice Agreements of 1949. In 1967, Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in addition to the Golan Heights and the Sinai. Land colonization has been ongoing in the West Bank since 1967, and over half of the area is currently under Israeli military and/or settler control. In violation of international law and the Geneva Convention, Israel has invested heavily in building and subsidizing Israeli colonies, transferring over 800,000 Jewish settlers into the Palestinian territory, thereby altering the demography of the West Bank. Today, Palestine resembles a slice of Swiss cheese in which Israel has the cheese, that is, the land and the resources, while the Arab Palestinian population is pushed into the holes in overcrowded towns with no resources. Bethlehem, my hometown, is just one example of this settler colonial policy.

The settler colonial nature of the State of Israel is obvious, and the reality on the ground is crystal clear. The situation is not “complicated” as some claim in order to blur the issue. Interna-

tional law is decisive on this issue, as the many UN resolutions testify. Yet, biblical passages and terms such as “divine rights,” “land promise,” “Judea,” and “chosen people” are constantly repeated to bestow the colonization of Palestine with biblical legitimacy and thus political legality. This terminology is used in church circles, popular events, as well at the highest political levels like the UN Security Council.

The Hebrew Bible: Israel’s Last Resort?

On December 23, 2016, the UN Security Council met to discuss the expansion of Israeli colonization of Palestinian land in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Resolution 2334 (2016) was adopted by fourteen countries with one abstention by the United States under the Obama administration. The resolution reaffirmed the Security Council’s stance that Israeli settlements have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation of international law. The text reads as follows:

The Security Council,

Reaffirming its relevant resolutions . . .

Guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, and reaffirming, inter alia, the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force,

Reaffirming the obligation of Israel, the occupying Power, to abide scrupulously by its legal obligations and responsibilities under the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, and recalling the advisory opinion rendered on 9 July 2004 by the International Court of Justice,

Condemning all measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character and status of the Palestinian Territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, including, inter alia, the construction and expansion of settlements, transfer of Israeli settlers, confiscation of land, demolition of homes and displacement of Palestinian civilians, in violation of international humanitarian law and relevant resolutions,

Expressing grave concern that continuing Israeli settlement activities are dangerously imperiling the viability of the two-State solution based on the 1967 lines.

The US representative explained that the decision to abstain rather than veto was because settlements undermine Israel's security and erode the prospect of a two-state solution, thereby putting the peace and stability of the area at risk. Once all fifteen Security Council members had been given the floor, Danny Danon, the Israeli representative to the United Nations, addressed the Council:

Mr. President, today is a bad day for this Council . . . This Council wasted valuable time and efforts condemning the democratic state of Israel for building homes in the historic homeland for the Jewish people. We have presented the truth time and again for this Council and implore you not to believe the lies presented in this resolution. I ask each and every Council member who voted for this resolution: Who gave you the right to issue such a decree denying our eternal rights in Jerusalem? . . . We overcame those decrees during the time of the Maccabees and we will overcome this evil decree today. We have full confidence in the justice of our cause and in the righteousness of our

path. We will continue to be a democratic state based on the rule of law and full civil and human rights for all our citizens, and we will continue to be a Jewish state. Proudly live and reclaiming the land of our forefathers, where the Maccabees fought their oppressors and King David ruled from Jerusalem.

Just before ending his speech, something happened that captured my full attention. Mr. Danon pulled out a Hebrew Bible, lifted it up, and said, “This holy book, the Bible, contains 3,000 years of history of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. No one, no one can change this history.”

This is the contemporary context of the land of Palestine. The biblical story is used as history in support of a settler colonial project. Specific biblical figures are evoked to legitimize an exclusivist ideology of modern state structure. The Bible is used today by the current Israeli government, by the Zionist movement, and by Christian Zionists to colonize Palestine and to replace the indigenous people by pushing them, slowly but surely, out of the country. Critically for this book, as well as the Christian Zionists, many liberal theologians produce theological literature without context that provides, whether consciously or subconsciously, ideological cover for the colonization of Palestine.

The Structure of the Book

This book comprises four chapters. The first chapter analyzes the past one hundred years of the history of Palestine through the lens of settler colonialism, with emphasis on the interplay between religion and politics. It prepares the ground to understand the Palestinian issue not as a conflict between two parties

but as a deliberate and continuous settler colonial project where the Bible is weaponized and the international community is complicit.

The second chapter attempts to provide a new definition of the phenomenon of Christian Zionism, with emphasis on actions rather than beliefs. I argue that Christian Zionism should be defined as a Christian lobby that supports the Jewish settler colonialism of Palestinian land by using biblical/theological constructs within a metanarrative while taking glocal considerations into account.

The third chapter attends to the theme of land and its exploitation in the service of settler colonialism while introducing a decolonial Palestinian reading of the biblical land issue.

The fourth chapter looks at the notion of biblical election and chosen people, a theology that constitutes a theological dilemma for the Palestinian people. While the original context of chosenness was a feeling of powerlessness in the face of empire, chosenness today must be sited within the context of European nationalism, settler colonialism, and American exceptionalism. The chapter concludes with a Palestinian decolonial perspective on the notion of election and chosenness.

The book concludes with an epilogue that analyzes the complicity of the church and politics in support of the Israeli settler colonial project in Palestine. This is one of the last anticolonial struggles in an era largely regarded as postcolonial. Decolonizing Christian theology regarding the Palestinian land and its people is an urgent necessity. The time for a new paradigm is now.