

On Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel

Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society

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Introduction

The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. admonished us in *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* that, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”¹ This quotation is an adequate summary of our reason for offering this position paper. It is in the spirit of this admonition that we, the collaborative writers of this paper, share our reflections and proffer our vision for peace and justice in Palestine. This is not an undertaking that we enter into lightly, for even as we acknowledge that the history of the region may indeed make the land sacred, we recognize that the lives of the people, the “living stones” of the region, are even more sacred. We proceed with an abundance of caution, as we recognize that we live in a political climate in which all who would offer any critique of Israel are labeled as “anti-Semitic.” However, that is not the case in this instance. Our critique comes from a place of Christian love and concern for marginalized and oppressed people all over the world.

It is our intention to honestly and truthfully relay to you what we saw, heard, and felt during our pilgrimage with the people of Palestine and to reflect on those things from our social, religious, and cultural location as African-American Christians. We will also attempt to grapple with the biblical notion of “chosen-ness” and at its theological implications. We are prayerful that our efforts will ignite in you a deeper passion for justice and peace in the region.

¹Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait*, (New York: Penguin, 1963), 77.

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Why This? Why Now?

Some may say that it is providential that we are writing this paper, at this time. The recent decision by President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has propelled, once again the region, and its politics, into both national and international headlines, and subsequently into kitchen table, barbershop, and beauty shop conversations as well. No doubt, the subject has also been raised in Bible study and Sunday School classes in our churches. This, however, is not the motivation for the writing of this paper at this time. This paper was conceived in February of 2017 during a pilgrimage to occupied Palestine. Its content is the product of the intersectionality of our faith as Christians and our experience as black Americans. In it you would find both experiential and theological reflections. The experiential reflection will relate to you the things that we saw, heard, and felt during our pilgrimage from a distinctly African-American Christian interpretative lens. The theological reflection will deal seriously with the question of “chosen-ness” and explore some of its practical biblical implications. As an addendum to this paper, you will find an offering of recommendations to the 1) Israeli government, 2) the government of the United States of America, and 3) our Evangelical sisters and brothers for adoption regarding the ways in which we think that can best assist the process of brokering a real and lasting peace

Just Tell Them What You Saw, Heard, and Felt

Our pilgrimage to Palestine was more than a mere tourist excursion. It was a spiritual odyssey that offered us more than an opportunity to see the beauty of the landscape, marvel at the architecture, and wax nostalgically as we “walked where Jesus walked and stood where Jesus stood”. It afforded us the unique opportunity to interact personally and intimately with the

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Palestinian people. It was not the “Disney”-esque tour often offered to African-American Christians. Those trips generally amount to little more than highly-structured, well-choreographed, state-sponsored propaganda campaigns designed to leave one feeling a deep sense of pious satisfaction and appreciation for having visited the “Holy Land”. Moreover, and more importantly, the experience intends to create an exaggerated impression of Israel as a flawless and blameless nation. The problem with those tours is that on them one rarely interacts with the people of the “Holy Land” in their contexts, on their terms. Our experience did not furnish us the opportunity for self-indulgent spiritual sentimentality but rather, deep and critical reflection.

We met Palestinian Christians, Jews, and Muslims who shared with us their lives and allowed us a glimpse into their reality as citizens in an occupied territory. They encouraged us to share what “we saw, heard, and felt.” We saw, heard, and felt the countless injustices faced by the people of occupied Palestine. These inequities are rarely covered by mainstream Western media and, consequently, often go unnoticed. Our contention is that African-American Christians, like most in the west, are fed a steady diet of ultra-conservative, fundamentalist, propaganda that depicts the Palestinian people as aggressive, antagonistic actors with an irrational, and unfounded, hatred for the Israeli nation-state and an insatiable land lust. The situation is, however, not that simple. It ignores several factors that our visit allowed us to observe and experience.

Our journey began in Bethlehem and took us to Hebron, Ramallah, Nazareth, Galilee, and Jerusalem. Though we visited many of the historical sites, it was through our travels and conversations with the “living stones”, the Palestinian people, that we were exposed to the hidden socio-cultural and religious dynamics at play in occupied Palestine. Our experience

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revealed to us the ways in which the full power of the Israeli nation-state, and by default the might, influence, and the resources of the United States of America, are used to disenfranchise and systematically oppress the Palestinian people. It became clear to us, that cloaked under the guise of “chosen-ness”, and the protection of a Euro-American Christian hermeneutic framework, that seemingly gives the Israeli government the right to use any means necessary to maintain their existence with impunity, the Israeli nation-state was guilty of imposing a system akin to South African Apartheid and American Jim Crow-ism. Our concern, as African-American Christians, became less about the land and more about how the conflict over the land signified deeper, more systemic social justice and human rights issues.

What We Saw, Heard, and Felt

The things we saw, heard, and felt resurrected ghosts of the African-American struggle for civil rights and equality in America and the tensions, angst, and anxieties we observed in many of the young Palestinians we met were reminiscent of the tensions, angst, and anxieties seen today in African-American youth, particularly those in the Black Lives Matter movement. To be sure, the message of both groups is indeed the same: “STOP KILLING US!” However, there are many other points of intersectionality. One of our colleagues went so far to suggest that the plight of the Palestinians bore startling resemblance to that of African-Americans in America, particularly black youth. The parallels are as follows and are illustrative of the encumbrances brought to bear by their legal relegation to a second-class citizenship:

- Implicit bias and distrust based upon ethnicity
- High rates of incarceration
- Intimidation and brutalization by a state-sponsored, para-military style police force

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The similarities between the two cannot be ignored or disregarded as trivial or coincidental.

The Palestinian people are being forcibly removed from their homeland through systematic land confiscation by the Israeli nation-state. This is land that, in some cases, their families have lived on prior to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. They are often without access to clean water or electricity. Their neighborhoods are subjected to arbitrary raids and terrorism by the Israeli police force and vigilante militias formed by settlers in nearby settlements. They live constantly under the threat of state-sanctioned violence.

Furthermore, they are often, because of the constant expansion of illegal settlements, denied access to quality education. In some instances, if they build schools, the state deems them illegal structures and razes them. Frequently, young children are detained for extended periods of time and interrogated by the Israeli police without parental consent simply because they are Palestinian. Again, the lived-realities described here are reminiscent of the treatment of Black Africans in Apartheid South Africa and African Americans living in the Jim Crow South and segregated North. The Palestinian people live in conditions that are usually subpar, at best. They have been legally relegated to this condition by the Israeli government, in the name of the State's "God-mandated" right to exist. In the next section we will give some thought to Israel's use of the Bible as grounds for their social, political, and theological entitlement.

Chosen-ness and Conflict

Every interpersonal conflict has its origin in an affront to identity and the need for respect. Nowhere is this existential tendency more pronounced than in the complex situation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both parties in the struggle are desirous of the security which affirmation of identity affords. The persistence of this problem is complicated by the fact that

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one of the combatants claims a unique identity as God's "Chosen People".² This designation allegedly bestows upon the Jews an indisputable claim to the region's most contested commodity: the land. The consequence of "chosen-ness", as currently practiced, impacts the politics of the province by making the Israel nation-state virtually "untouchable", thus complicating the dynamics of a very complex situation even further. Therefore, to understand better this contentious rivalry, we must wrestle with the meaning of "chosen-ness."

The Lott Carey Foreign Missions Society, as a Christian communion grounded in a Judeo-Christian heritage which affirms the truth of the Bible as the cornerstone of Christian witness, will not dispute the Israeli nation-state's assertion of "chosen-ness." However, we are unwilling to accept imperialistic and colonial postures from "God's-elect" which render some people valued and others devalued. So then, we ask, "What does 'chosen-ness' mean?" Is "chosen-ness" a mere religio-ethnic marker of identity? Or does "chosen-ness" have some required moral obligations which typify and determine the very meaning of "chosen-ness"? In other words, does Israel as God's "chosen people" get a behavioral, moral, and ethical carte blanche due to their unique status?

While identity for both individuals and social groups is defined by numerous factors such as ethnicity, geography, social status, and pedigree, the identity of the Israeli nation-state is shaped by another factor, the Bible. Their audacious claim of "chosen-ness" is undergirded by the authority of scripture.³ Although this assertion is one unique to religion, its application is not exclusive to Israel. Both Christians and Muslims, and other religious sects adamantly assert and affirm their special relationship with the Divine as "chosen ones". However, the Israeli nation-

² Walter Brueggemann, *Chosen?: Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 15.

³ Ibid. 15-17.

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state's insistence on "chosen-ness" connects it mythically to the sacred history and narrative of the biblical people known as the Israelites.

Consequently, the Israeli nation-state feels a certain legitimization for its political actions regarding their Palestinian neighbors, and also the African immigrants that are currently being forcibly relocated by the State. Since scripture is evoked as the decisive criterion for identity, then scripture must equally be employed as the prophetic standard by which to critique the Israeli nation-state's behavior toward others with a shared humanity. "Chosen-ness", therefore, must be predicated not only upon a scriptural claim but also the ethical and moral standards of scripture. In other words, if the Israeli nation-state is going to assert their rights to the identity claims of the Bible, then it must live also by the precepts of the Bible. Values, in this instance biblical values, are not merely important contributors to identity but determining criteria for identity.

When ethics and morality become as much a part of the way people define themselves in the world as ethnicity, pedigree, nation, and geography, then a value-defined identity has both sacred and secular implications. It is sacred because faithful adherence to a particular set of ethics and morals becomes an integral part of who God calls us to be in the world. Simultaneously, it is secular because absolutely no scope of exchange is beyond the influence of those sacred values. Following this logic, living faithfully in the world is to "live biblically". Therefore, the Israeli nation-state can only be authentically the Israel of the Bible when it adheres to the values and ideals of its scriptures.

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