

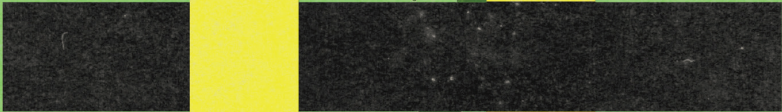
# Beyond Hashtag Activism



Comprehensive  
Justice in a  
Complicated Age

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*Social Justice  
Handbook*



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## The Middle East, Israel, and Palestine

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:*

*“May those who love you be secure.*

*May there be peace within your walls  
and security within your citadels.”*

*For the sake of my brothers and friends,*

*I will say, “Peace be within you.”*

*For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,*

*I will seek your prosperity.*

**PSALM 122:6-9 (1984 NIV)**

**I TOOK MY FIRST TRIP** to the Holy Land as a spiritual pilgrimage to see where Jesus lived, breathed, and did ministry. From the time I was a little girl, I couldn't wait to travel to Israel. I wanted to see the places we'd learned about in Sunday school, to visit the holy sites of Jesus' miracles, from the feeding of the five thousand to his walking on the water of the Sea of Galilee. I wanted to see the land of *Exodus*, which Paul Newman had so bravely conquered as a Zionist soldier seeking to establish a place for Jewish safety in their historic homeland.

After high school and into my college years, whenever I wanted to travel to Israel, a major life circumstance somehow intervened, including family illness and escalations of wars in the Middle East. Finally, while serving as a pastor in Northern California, I had the opportunity to take the trip that I had dreamt of for so long. At that point in my life, in

addition to my primary vocational calling as a pastor, I was also a doctoral student at the University of California studying American history. My first book, *Social Justice Handbook*, was on the way to the press and I thought I knew a thing or two about the world. Until I went to Israel.

Traveling into the country from the Jordanian border after a few days in Petra, I led the team through the various checkpoints and border patrol processes at the Allenby Bridge. I had never been to the region before but knew our guide would be meeting us on the other side of the Jordan River. Since I was the tour leader, I was stopped for questions. “Will you be traveling to the West Bank?” they asked. For someone well informed about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or even someone who knows the basic geography of the region, this would have been a simple question. I was already in the West Bank (territory that has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967 and is designated as land belonging to the Palestinians for an eventual state). However, when asked the question, I answered, “No.” Why? Because I didn’t know where the West Bank was!

Other than my geographic ignorance, over the course of two weeks of travel, I had several provocative experiences. Yes, I saw the holy sites and the sacred city of Jerusalem. As I ran my fingers along the stone walls of the Old City, I heard the verses that talk about Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem: if the people hadn’t called out to worship him, the stones would have cried out (Lk 19:40). Being in the very land where our faith began was deeply moving and spiritually transformative.

Something else happened in the midst of our travels. I began to see things that I didn’t understand. For example, one day when riding on the bus, I saw protesters and a sign that said “Free Palestine.” I thought Palestine was just a map in the backs of our Bibles! Then I had the opportunity to hear Bishara Awad, the founder of Bethlehem Bible College, tell his family’s story. As an Arab Christian, he had grown up in the area surrounding Jerusalem. But in 1948, around the time the state of Israel was established, his father was killed and he became a refugee. I learned about the resulting refugee population of more than 750,000 Arabs

who were displaced from their homes in 1948. What the Israelis consider their year of independence and freedom, the Palestinians call the *Nakba* or catastrophe. As Bishara told his story, I began to weep. My heart had long been moved by the historic and present suffering of the Jewish people, and that did not change. But my heart also expanded as I came to understand my own ignorance and the many ways Americans and our government so often contribute in destructive ways to the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

In the more than ten years since that first trip, I have developed deep friendships with both Israelis and Palestinians. Many of those friends have become closer than family. Often I am asked “why” I engage in peacebuilding and advocacy work in the Middle East. My response? Because of the people there whom I love. One of my closest friends is Shireen Hilal Awwad, director of community and development outreach at Bethlehem Bible College (BBC). Spending time in the chaos of her four children growing up, sitting down and doing homework alongside them, and learning about their daily realities has deeply impacted me. Her six-year-old daughter is called “Mae”—and her energy, determination, and childlike love and acceptance motivates me more than anything else to work for peace and justice for all children living under occupation in Palestine, and all the while to also advocate for peace for their Israeli neighbors.

### **Palestinian Christians**

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Christians have lived in the historic land of Palestine and Jerusalem since the time of Christ. Arab-speaking peoples were present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and experienced conversion alongside many other people groups (Acts 2:11). Today Christians in the West Bank are thought to make up at most 2.5 percent of the population—about seventy-six thousand people. Most of them live in the Old City of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the neighboring villages of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala. North of Jerusalem, the city of Ramallah is also home to a small Christian community. Reports today indicate that only about

one thousand Christians remain in the Gaza Strip, which is more than 99 percent Muslim. All together these three populations, from Gaza, the West Bank, and the Galilee region, make up the Palestinian Christian community—a community that can trace its roots in Israel/Palestine back to the time of Pentecost (Acts 2:11).<sup>1</sup> While European missionaries bringing Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity arrived only within the last couple of hundred years in the Middle East, Palestinian Christians truly have ancient ties to the Holy Land. (Christianity in the Middle East is discussed further in the next chapter on religious freedom.)

Many forms of Christianity owe a great deal to the pioneering contributions of Middle Eastern Christians—including Palestinians—to both Christian theology and practice. Our most basic beliefs about the Trinity and about who Jesus is were all hammered out by Christians living in the ancient Middle East 1,700 years ago. The creeds that form a part of many Christian statements of faith today all have their roots in those ancient debates among Christians in the Middle East. Middle East Christians have also passed along to us the traditions of baptism, Communion, and monasticism. Truly, Palestinian Christians are the caretakers of an ancient faith that gives us insights into the life of the early church.

Palestinian Christians today feel largely ignored by the church around the world. Because of political allegiances to Israel, American Christians often support one side of the conflict over another. When Palestinian Christians are asked what they would most like for American Christians to know about them, the first thing they say is not about the realities of living under military occupation or details of the conflict. The first thing Palestinian Christians say they want American Christians to know is that they exist.

### — **Contemporary Realities and Life Under Occupation**

Palestinian Christians, and their Muslim neighbors in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, have been living under military occupation since 1967. *Occupation* is an international legal term that refers to areas under a country's military control as a result of war. Occupying powers



have specific obligations toward civilians of occupied territories as defined by the Geneva Conventions. When we speak of the “occupied territories” in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, we are referring to the areas that Israel gained control over as a result of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. For a time, that included the Sinai Peninsula, but Israel gradually withdrew from there after signing a peace agreement with Egypt in 1979. However, that still left Israel as the occupier of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank—including East Jerusalem—and the Golan Heights. Occupation is normally a temporary situation that lasts between the outbreak of hostilities and the conclusion of a peace agreement. Israel’s occupation, however, has now lasted over fifty years.<sup>2</sup>

The territory between the west bank of the Jordan River and the Green Line (the armistice line from the 1948 war) is known as the West Bank, or as some Israelis call it, Judea and Samaria. It is the largest of the occupied territories, with an area of 2,263 square miles and a population of 2.75 million. Between 1949 and 1967 the West Bank was ruled by Jordan, even though it was part of the proposed Palestinian State according to the 1947 UN partition plan. After 1967 and the Six Day War, Israel maintained control of the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt), including the West Bank. Jordan gave up its claims to the West Bank in a treaty with Israel in 1994. Since the Oslo Accords in 1995, the West Bank has been divided into Areas A, B, and C. The Palestinian Authority (PA) is responsible for the civil administration and security of Area A, which comprises 18 percent of the West Bank and the majority of its Palestinian population. Area B is under the civil authority of the PA while Israeli forces retain control over security. Area C remains entirely under Israeli military control and comprises 61 percent of the West Bank’s area. This administrative restructuring was intended as a five-year transitional phase, but it has become a lasting part of Israel’s occupation. And it is important to note that, despite these designations, all of the Palestinian territories are ultimately under Israeli military control.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to 1967, the Gaza Strip (a small strip of land along the Mediterranean Sea that borders Egypt) was controlled by Egypt, even though it

was promised to the Palestinians in the 1947 UN partition plan. Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas on the planet, with a population now of more than two million people living within 139 square miles, which comes out to about 14,000 people per square mile. Since the 1995 Oslo Accords, Gaza has come under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. However, Israel still had settlements in Gaza until its unilateral disengagement in 2005. And while Israel removed all of its soldiers and settlers from Gaza, it still retains complete control over all air, sea, and land access to Gaza. This blockade, which Israel maintains with cooperation from Egypt, has severely restricted the movement of people and goods into and out of Gaza since 2007. Hamas is an Islamic Palestinian militant group and political organization deemed by the United States government as a terrorist group. Hamas took control of Gaza after winning the 2006 elections. Since 2015, Hamas has fired over ten thousand rockets into Israel, killing thirty-three people. On three separate occasions since Hamas's rise to power, Israel has conducted large-scale military operations in Gaza (in 2008–2009, 2012, and 2014) resulting in more than 3,500 Palestinian deaths.<sup>4</sup>

Over fifty years of occupation have transformed Israeli society. Security remains a preoccupying concern, and both the military and the police are extremely prominent within Israeli society today. Military service is compulsory for all Jewish Israelis with the exception of the ultra-orthodox and Palestinian citizens of Israel. As Israeli politicians debate the future of the occupied territories, the fate of Israel's political system hangs in the balance.<sup>5</sup>

The United States government under the Trump administration has also significantly shifted historic US policy vis-à-vis Israel.

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, once described the dilemma facing Israeli society this way: Israelis want three things, he said. They want a democracy, that is also a Jewish state, and for that Jewish democracy to control all of historic Palestine.<sup>6</sup> The problem with that, he said, is that at any given time, Israelis can only have two of those three things. This dilemma helps explain the dangers of the occupation



for Israeli society. At present, Israel appears on the path to becoming a Jewish state that controls all of the land. But controlling all of the land would give Israel a larger Palestinian population than Jewish population; the only way to remain a Jewish state in such a scenario would be to deny citizenship or full equal rights to the Palestinian population. In other words, democracy is incompatible with a Jewish state that controls all of the land. Alternatively, if Israelis wish to live in a democratic Jewish state, Palestinians must be allowed a sovereign state and minorities in Israel must be given equal rights. By giving up the West Bank and Gaza, Israel would retain the Jewish majority needed to be both a democracy and a Jewish state. Or, Israel could keep control over all of the land and grant citizenship to all Palestinians. In this case, Israel would be a democracy, but it would cease to be a Jewish state. For people who care about justice for both Palestinians and Israelis, ending the occupation through a negotiated peace settlement is the only viable option.<sup>7</sup>

One of the other major issues that has arisen over the decades of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the number of Palestinian refugees. The more than 750,000 refugees displaced in 1948 has grown to 5.15 million Palestinian refugees eligible to receive UNRWA (UN Relief and Works Agency) services. In 2018, 515,260 Palestinian refugee children attended UNRWA schools in refugee camps throughout the Middle East, and 3.1 million Palestinian refugees relied on UNRWA health services.<sup>8</sup> Prior to 2018, the United States provided approximately a third of the funding toward UNRWA. However, the Trump administration decided to completely eliminate the contribution of US funds to the refugee organization, which means that the United States has significantly shifted its role and potential as a broker of Middle East peace.<sup>9</sup>

## **Human Rights Concerns**

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Today, numerous human rights concerns are a direct outcome of the military occupation of the Palestinian territories, including the effects of settlements, the separation barrier, and limited access to water.

Settlements are communities Israelis have built on land designated for the Palestinians. As of 2018, the Congressional Research Service reported that there are 130 government-sanctioned settlements in the West Bank, excluding East Jerusalem, in addition to at least one hundred unauthorized outposts.<sup>10</sup> Settlements are problematic for several reasons. Not only are they on land designated by the Oslo Accords to be a future Palestinian state, but settlers also frequently confiscate resources and private land from the Palestinian community. Locations of settlements are most often the places where increased tension and skirmishes between Jewish settlers and Palestinian farmers occur. The Israeli military (in addition to private security forces) protects the settlers and often will not intervene when there are incidents of settler violence against Palestinians. One of the Palestinian villages where this happens the most frequently is Nabi Saleh. Palestinian villagers often gather on Fridays in popular resistance against the confiscation of their land and settlement encroachment.

The separation barrier, called the Security Fence by the Israelis and the Apartheid Wall by Palestinians, began to be built during the second intifada in the early 2000s. The wall has been deemed illegal according to international law since more than 80 percent of it is built on land designated for the Palestinians. According to the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, if the wall becomes a future boundary between Israel and Palestine, it would annex 9.4 percent of the West Bank's land to Israel.<sup>11</sup> The wall is also deeply problematic because of where it is built, in many places separating Palestinians from their land and Palestinian communities from their Palestinian neighbors. The Just Vision film *Budrus* shows the effect of the wall on a small Palestinian village in the West Bank. Palestinian farmers often have limited access to their own fields. And communities in Bethlehem are surrounded by the barrier. The stated purpose of the wall is security, but its route tells a different story as it snakes in and out of prime real estate and keeps assets like Rachel's Tomb on the Israeli side.

Even after the Oslo Accords in 1995, Israel remains in complete control over the West Bank. Area C—60 percent of the West Bank's

land—is still entirely ruled by the Israeli military. Israeli settlements dot the landscape, which now has a settler population of nearly six hundred thousand (including East Jerusalem). Israel maintains control over Area C through a maze of Israeli-only roads, security checkpoints, and the separation barrier. Because Areas A and B are islands amid the surrounding Area C, Palestinians who wish to travel from one Palestinian Authority (PA)–administered area to the next can only do so by navigating Israel’s security matrix.<sup>12</sup>

Limited access to and control of resources is another major problem for Palestinians. Water is one of the greatest needs. In 2016, the per capita daily water consumption for Palestinians in the West Bank was 82.3 liters of water per day. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends one hundred liters of water per day as the minimum for hygiene and other necessary uses.<sup>13</sup> The average consumption of water per day for Israelis is about 220 liters. (For comparison, the average Californian consumes about five hundred liters of water per day.)<sup>14</sup> In 2016, more than thirty thousand Palestinians in the West Bank did not have running water. One representative of a human rights organization said: “It is clear . . . that the water resources of the West Bank are a strategic asset for Israel and the placement of the settlements is also strategic—to ensure control over not just water, but other vital resources in the West Bank.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza**

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I wrote an article for *Sojourners* magazine about a 2017 trip I took to Gaza. Near the start of the piece I wrote these words:

The Gaza Strip is now a small territory to the southwest of Israel, bordered on the west by the Mediterranean Sea, with 1.8 million people living in only 140 square miles. During my visit there earlier this year, I was overwhelmed by the place’s incredible beauty; at the same time, the lack of functional sewage treatment plants, limited electricity, and other broken infrastructure result in Gazans experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis. Beautiful and tragic.<sup>16</sup>

Gaza's humanitarian crisis is so severe that the territory is "de-developing" even faster than expected.<sup>17</sup> According to Ron Piper, the UN coordinator for humanitarian aid and development activities in the oPt, "In a nutshell, Gaza continues to de-develop in front of our eyes," Piper adds. "From health care, to unemployment, to energy, to access to water, across all of these fields, Gaza's 2 million people are seeing faster and faster decline in their living conditions."<sup>18</sup> More than 96 percent of the water in Gaza is undrinkable. The average amount of electricity at any given point is three-to-five hours per day.<sup>19</sup> According to B'Tselem, there are more than one hundred thousand Gazans without running water, and the daily water usage is 58.7 liters of water per person per day. The infrastructure is so poor that 40 percent of the water pumped through the system is lost due to leaks.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, unemployment in Gaza is so severe that almost half the working-age population (49 percent) was unemployed in 1998. Unemployment among youth reached 65 percent in that same year. And 70 percent of the population of Gaza is dependent on foreign aid.<sup>21</sup>

In 2018–2019, many residents of Gaza participated in the Great March of Return. Of the two million people living there, nearly 1.4 million of them are refugees registered with UNRWA.<sup>22</sup> The Great March of Return was organized to bring attention to the "right of return" maintained by those refugees and their descendants from 1948.<sup>23</sup> According to *The Guardian*, within a year since the protests began, 190 Palestinians in Gaza had been killed with an additional 28,000 injured.<sup>24</sup>

The human cost of maintaining the occupation and siege on Gaza is high. In addition to the deaths and injuries sustained by Palestinians, it imposes a human cost on Israeli society. Since the first intifada in 1987, over one thousand Israeli civilians have been killed in the conflict. That figure is double the number of military deaths during the same period. And the psychological effect that such a high rate of civilian casualties has had on Israelis should not be discounted. It creates a mindset where security takes precedence over every other concern. It is equally important to remember that the number of Palestinian fatalities since 1987

is about ten times higher. However it is measured, there can be no doubt that the human price for continuing the occupation is too high for Israelis and Palestinians alike.<sup>25</sup>

### **Anti-Semitism and Christian-Jewish Relations**

How should American Christians think about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians? We need to understand how problematic our historical engagement has been with both the Jewish and Palestinian communities. In her book *The Misunderstood Jew*, Amy-Jill Levine writes about ways Christian theology has been historically anti-Semitic: “Jesus was a Jew talking to other Jews. . . . Once Jesus’s words became placed in the Gospel narratives and addressed to Christian churches, comments spoken *to* Jews became perceived by the church, as well as the synagogue, as comments spoken *against* Jews.”<sup>26</sup>

Levine also believes that liberation theology can lead people toward anti-Semitic thoughts and beliefs. When Jesus is framed as a liberator, she explains, there has to be a system that Jesus is liberating people *from*. Historically, Christians perceived the “enemy” of Jesus as the Jews, and thus liberation meant being set free from the presumed evilness of the Jewish people. Judaism, rather than Roman imperialism or colonialism, is seen as the creator of walls and divisions, the system that Jesus is there to demolish. Levine writes, “Taking their cues from the New Testament and nurtured by centuries of the church’s anti-Jewish teaching, these theologians . . . find Judaism and Jews to epitomize systemic evil.”<sup>27</sup>

James Carroll writes in *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews—A History* about ways the church has not significantly “owned” its role in promoting anti-Semitism. Citing theologies like replacement theology, or supersessionism, which asserts that the old covenant between God and the Jewish people is overridden (or superseded) by the new covenant through Jesus Christ, Carroll says, “Although we cannot assume that Jews and Christians will ever approach the Scriptures in the same way, surely Jews have a right to ask: Must the Christian understanding of

the very structure of God's Word include the derogatory 'replacement theology' that is so often found in the New Testament?"<sup>28</sup>

While there are differences of opinion regarding what constitutes anti-Semitism across conservative and liberal divides, commonalities also exist. Beliefs that are detrimental and could lead to physical harm against Jews constitute anti-Semitism. But not every problematic belief manifests anti-Semitism; a person can be inaccurate and wrong, and not be anti-Semitic. Unfortunately, often individuals form strong opinions on limited or one-sided information and although this is problematic, it is not necessarily anti-Semitic. Nonetheless, we must be informed and attentive to when anti-Semitic sentiment, rhetoric, or actions exist.

This is not to say that we can never legitimately critique Israel. Levine concedes that criticism of Israeli policy need not indicate anti-Jewish motivation.<sup>29</sup> Calling Israel to higher ideals because of its self-identification as a "vibrant democracy" and calling for the fair treatment of the approximately 20 percent of its citizens who are Palestinian does not constitute anti-Semitism.<sup>30</sup> And yet, we must also call out violations of human rights and acts of violence by other individuals, groups, and nation states, alongside our critique of Israel. Activists and advocates must not muddy the waters between anti-Semitism and legitimate criticism of Israeli policies.

The reality is that anti-Semitism in the United States and around the world has increased in recent years, and continues to do so. With the rise of neo-Nazis, white nationalists, and other hate groups, significant threats to the Jewish community exist. Christians and those of other belief systems must stand firmly in our solidarity with the Jewish community in response to anti-Semitism and its devastating effects. The October 2018 killings at the Tree of Life synagogue manifest this reality in its worst form.

In essence, while we seek and advocate for justice for Palestinians, calling leaders to account and responding to the human rights abuses we witness in the occupied territories, we must also acknowledge the rootedness of anti-Semitism in Christian history and its remnants in some



of today's Christian rhetoric. In our pursuit of justice for Palestinians, we must be diligent to not return to our previous egregious ways. We continue to walk a narrow path as we pursue these two realities.<sup>31</sup>

## **Christian Zionism**

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Christian Zionism is a very prevalent movement within the United States and is often based on the historical theology of dispensationalism. According to the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, one of the leading Christian Zionist organizations in the world, Christian Zionism can be understood this way:

The actual theology of Christian Zionism, also known as Biblical Zionism, supports the right of the Jewish people to return to their homeland on scriptural grounds. The biblical foundation for Christian Zionism is found in God's Covenant with Abraham. It was in this covenant that God chose Abraham to birth a nation through which He could redeem the world, and to do this He bequeathed them a land on which to exist as this chosen nation.<sup>32</sup>

One of the results of this belief is unbridled support of the political aspirations of the State of Israel, as the Christian Zionist movement conflates the modern State of Israel with the biblical Israelites and God's chosen people. This often includes support of the Israeli military, Israeli expansionist policies through settlements in the West Bank, and the elevation of Jewish aspirations over and above Palestinian attempts toward self-determination. Some Christian Zionist communities even send missions funds to settlements for swimming pools and playgrounds, often unaware that these building projects are being constructed on Palestinian land.<sup>33</sup> (The history and implications of Christian Zionism are covered more extensively in my book *A Land Full of God: Christian Perspectives on the Holy Land*.)

## **Palestinian Liberation Theology**

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I appreciate Levine's concern that quests for liberation from "Jewish oppression" in Palestinian liberation theology can lead to

anti-Semitism. This is something to be attentive to, and we should welcome the feedback and contributions of the Jewish community to help us understand these dynamics and to ardently stand firm in our commitments against anti-Semitism.<sup>34</sup>

The founder of Palestinian liberation theology is Palestinian Anglican priest Naim Ateek. While our readings of the sacred texts of the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament often come to different conclusions, I believe it is important to understand his perspective as a leading Palestinian Christian voice calling for liberation. He says, “Jesus Christ was a Palestinian [Jew], as we are. He lived in the same land we live in. He breathed the same air we breathe. His language and thought patterns were Semitic, as ours are.” Ateek believes that there is a call for justice at the heart of the gospel message: “First, faith in the God of love and justice means that one is already sensitized by the love of God and is committed to doing God’s will in the world. Love and justice are two sides of the same coin.”<sup>35</sup>

Justice and the quest for both existential and material freedom are imperative in a full expression of the gospel. This is my prayer for Palestinians, Israelis, and all of us who are seeking freedom and liberation:

The body of Christ must have a holistic understanding of both existential and material freedom in order to be an advocate on behalf of oppressed people around the world. Resting on the truth that justice and righteousness are the foundations of God’s throne, evangelicals—alongside so many others—must commit to being advocates of freedom, and to diligently pursuing liberation for all people by being voices for the voiceless and advocates for the disinherited, so that all may one day be free.<sup>36</sup>

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### **Intersectionality and Movements of Liberation**

Every year I have the privilege of taking pastors and leaders to Israel, the Palestinian territories, and other parts of the Middle East. In 2017, one guest was one of the leading voices for reconciliation and justice in the

United States. As an African American woman working in the predominantly white evangelical community, she was familiar with the realities affecting communities of color in the United States, including struggles against white supremacy and nationalism. In 2014, she joined dozens of other faith leaders around the country in Ferguson to highlight concerns about the fatal shooting of unarmed African American Michael Brown. During the peaceful protests, the crowd sang hymns and songs from the civil rights movement and heard Christian leaders preach and speak about God's heart for justice and the obligations we have to right systemic injustice. At that moment a young woman standing next to this preacher took her hand and raised their fists in the air, shouting, "From Ferguson to Palestine!"

This story gave me shivers down my spine when I first heard it. Although many people of color in the United States have never been to Israel or Palestine, oppressed communities often share an understanding of suffering that allows them to resonate with each other's realities even before understanding the details. This commonality is increasingly being expressed in movements of intersectionality that look at common themes in how the abuse of power plays out in unjust systems.

In July 2018, *Teen Vogue* published an article called "How Policing in the US and Security in Israel Are Connected."<sup>37</sup> In speaking about the relationship between Ferguson and Israel, the article reports, "Three years before the Ferguson protests, Tim Fitch—the chief of the very same St. Louis County Police Department responsible for firing teargas at activists and concerned citizens—had flown to Israel to receive training from Israeli police, intelligence, and military in a weeklong course on terrorism-focused policing."<sup>38</sup> Often policing techniques for crowd control in the United States are modeled after practices that are utilized toward Palestinians in the West Bank. As we better understand injustices in our own cities and communities related to race, power dynamics, poverty, and other justice issues, this awareness helps us to better understand imbalances of power and injustice in global contexts.

May our responses to the injustices we witness and experience seek to be integrated to address these realities of intersectionality.

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### **American Politics and Theological Imperialism**

American policies toward Israel not only further support the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian people; they are also not in the best interest of Israel. The Academy Award–winning film *The Gatekeepers* highlights how the ongoing occupation of the Palestinians is the greatest threat to the long-term security needs of Israel. Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza do not experience self-determination and are often subject to human rights abuses. These realities for the more than five million Palestinians living between the Mediterranean and the Jordan are not sustainable and unless resolved will only lead to more violence. All the while, US administrations, Republican and Democrat alike, give billions of dollars every year to Israel for military aid and assistance. For example, prior to leaving office, President Obama signed a historic agreement with Israel promising thirty-eight billion dollars of US funding for military aid over a ten-year period.<sup>39</sup> We should be very concerned about the United States' ongoing military support for Israel without accountability for the human rights abuses mentioned above, such as the expansion of settlements, the illegal separation barrier, the restriction of movement for Palestinians within the West Bank, and the ongoing blockade of Gaza.

These realities have worsened under the Trump administration. Since President Trump took office, the word *occupation* has been completely removed from the human rights report for Israel published by the US State Department. The United States cut almost all funding to UNRWA and humanitarian assistance funding to the Palestinian Authority. The United States de facto acknowledged Israel's annexation of Jerusalem and moved its embassy there from Tel Aviv, one of the only countries in the world to do so. And, in a complete shift in historic US foreign policy, the United States acknowledged the annexation of the Golan Heights from Syria, which has been occupied since the 1967

Arab-Israeli War. In June 2019, to show their appreciation, the Israeli government announced a new settlement in the Golan that would be named “Trump Heights.”<sup>40</sup> In November 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced another historic shift in US policy by stating that the United States no longer views Israeli settlements in the West Bank as illegal. In early 2020, Israeli politician Benny Gantz agreed to meet with the White House to discuss their plan for Mideast peace, which clearly neglected Palestinian contributions. These are just some of the foreign policy shifts by the US Administration that are having devastating effects on Palestinians and Israelis who long for peace, and that will make a negotiated settlement between Israelis and Palestinians all the more difficult.<sup>41</sup>

The theological and ideological beliefs that undergird these new policy decisions are even more disconcerting, though. In January 2018, Vice President Mike Pence delivered a historic speech to the Israeli Knesset affirming the United States’ strong relationship with Israel in no uncertain terms and in language that sounded very much like theological imperialism: “We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, in good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny.”<sup>42</sup> What specifically is problematic with this language? It seems to indicate that the “good” Jewish state of Israel (note that 80 percent of Israeli citizens are Jewish and 20 percent are Arab Palestinians) should triumph over “evil.” The assumption is that the “evil” forces are Arab Muslims who seek only destruction. Essentially, the vice president compared the American quest for freedom from tyranny with Jewish aspirations to return to their historic homeland. The affirmation of Jewish aspirations is not in and of itself problematic; what is problematic is the complete avoidance of any legitimacy of the same rights for Palestinian Arabs. In the rest of the speech, Pence recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and also promised to eradicate from the world all radical Muslims: “Together with our allies, we will continue to bring the full force of our might to drive radical Islamic terrorism from the face of the Earth. (Applause.)”<sup>43</sup>

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## Toward Peace

Prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians have never seemed more distant. US policies with unilateral support of Israel only diminish the potential for the United States to play any constructive role in brokering peace. How can US Christians get involved? Join movements like Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) in our work “to encourage US policies that actively promote a comprehensive resolution to conflicts in the Middle East with a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.”<sup>44</sup> Sign up for our weekly newsletter to be kept informed of what’s happening in the political situation and with churches in the Middle East. Consider coming to one of CMEP’s advocacy summits in Washington, DC, where you could have the opportunity to meet with your elected members of Congress and advocate for a holistic solution to the conflict that is honoring to the needs of both Israelis and Palestinians.

If you would like to learn more about the conflict, consider hosting CMEP’s five-week video-based curriculum on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict called *The Search for Peace & Justice in the Holy Land*.<sup>45</sup> Other opportunities to engage include hosting Israeli and Palestinian speakers at your church or community through CMEP’s Pilgrimage to Peace (P2P) tours that travel all over the United States and Canada. Since 2012, these tours have brought speakers face to face with more than forty thousand people in churches, synagogues, and mosques all over North America. Finally, if you have never had the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land, consider having CMEP create a multinarrative tour experience with MEJDI tours that focuses on creating space for the multiple narratives of the Holy Land, including those of the Israelis, Palestinians, and the three Abrahamic faith traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>46</sup> My first trip to Israel changed my life. Perhaps your traveling there will have a similar effect.

What is my prayer in all this? In our quest for justice may we ask for God’s mercy and wisdom. May our esteem of the Jewish people and our advocacy for Palestinians not cause harm to the other. But may we also not sit idly by as more than five million Palestinians suffer under the



weight of a military occupation that has already lasted more than half a century. Christians have often been “mischief makers in Palestine.” May our future engagement be more constructive.<sup>47</sup>

### For Further Study

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- Bourke, Dale Hanson. *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Tough Questions, Direct Answers*. Skeptic’s Guide. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.
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- Carroll, James. *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews—A History*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010.
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- Isaac, Munther. *The Other Side of the Wall: A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.
- Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006.

### Questions for Discussion

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- What ideas about Israel and the politics of the Middle East did you grow up with? Did people in your home or environment have certain perspectives and thoughts about the Palestinians?
- How has the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict shifted over the decades? Are the mechanisms employed in the conflict different now than they were in 1948? In 1967? During the intifadas? And today?
- Have you met any Palestinian or Middle Eastern Christians? Did you learn anything in this chapter about that community?

- How has anti-Semitism affected the relationship between Christians and the Jewish community?
- Have you ever traveled to Israel? What did you see? Did you travel to the West Bank? What stories do you have to tell?
- What human rights considerations were raised in this chapter? How did you first learn about these concerns? What do you hear in the news about this conflict?
- Is there anything about the Middle East that provokes you to want to get more involved? How might God be stirring your heart?
- Consider leading the curriculum mentioned above. How can you encourage further discussions about this within your community?

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