

# Theology as a Tool of Empire

## Introduction

The relationship between empire and theology is not unique to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Empires, throughout history, have used religion to serve their purposes. More specifically, since the rise of imperialism and colonialism, we have witnessed the way the Bible and theology have been abused. In 1997, Michael Prior wrote the *Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* in which he studied the effects of colonialism and imperialism on the people of Latin America, South Africa, and Palestine. He showed how the biblical narrative of the Exodus has been used to justify colonialism in those countries, and how the “divine mandate” to annihilate the indigenous people of Canaan was integrally linked with the divine promise to inherit the land.

Michael Prior mentions the adage of some African Christians, “When the white man came to our country, he had the Bible, and we had the land. The white man said to us, ‘Let us pray.’ After the prayer, the white man had the land, and we had the Bible.”<sup>1</sup>

I will limit my remarks to our situation in Israel and Palestine. As many of you know, one of the anchors of Palestinian Liberation Theology was laid down when some of us Palestinian Christians started to reflect on Jesus Christ living under the occupation of the Roman Empire. We asked ourselves: since Jesus was born, lived, taught, and died under empire, what can we learn from him? How can he help us to challenge and resist empire?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997), p. 260.

What is clear is that in the midst of the established sovereignty of Caesar's empire, Jesus proclaimed the sovereignty and rule of God. As for the early church, in the midst of being forced to confess that Caesar is Lord, they insisted that Jesus is Lord and so suffered the consequences.

### **First: the new god of Israel**

Those of us who have been brought up under Israeli rule believe that the state of Israel has become an integral part of American Empire and that in its hegemony over the Palestinians and its use of military prowess it governs and behaves as an empire. It has its own god that many of its people "worship" and revere. In fact, since the establishment of the state, we have experienced the invention of a god that fills most Israeli Jews with hubris and arrogance. Actually, it is not a new god, but an old one that many empires have used, one that Israel has resurrected and placed its trust in. What transpired was a theology of replacement. The Zionists replaced the traditional biblical God with the new god of Zionism. From the perspective of Jewish traditional faith, this was a revolutionary phenomenon that was well expressed by Agudat Israel (the umbrella political party for ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel) when it refused to participate in the Jewish National Council that was organized by the Zionists. The reasons they gave were very revealing. The ultra-Orthodox Jews were not willing to collaborate with a body that had issued "a solemn proclamation of the deposition of God and the Torah as sovereigns of the Jewish Nation.' The reason was not political; it centered instead on principled opposition to the new Jewish identity promoted by the Zionist movement."<sup>2</sup> How can we explain what Zionism has done?

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<sup>2</sup> Yakov Rabkin, *A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), p.138.

The answer lies largely in the way secular Zionist Jews that founded the state of Israel responded to the tragedy of the holocaust. It is important to note that the response to the holocaust did not come immediately after WWII. Most of the responses, whether Jewish or Christian, came after the 1967 war. Richard Rubenstein was one of the first Jewish theologians to recognize the holocaust as a major crisis for traditional Jewish theology. In his book, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (1966), he questioned the possibility of faith in God after the holocaust. For him, Auschwitz brought an end to the possibility of belief in the traditional God of Judaism. He argued that,

Belief in the God of history demands a theodicy to justify the ways of God to humans. The central problem of theodicy, or the defense of the doctrine of a providential God of history, is why God allows unjust evil to happen. If God allows it, God is not wholly good. If God cannot prevent it, God is not omnipotent and hence not Lord of history.... The classical strategy of the Jewish tradition for explaining evils ... is to assert that these evils are punishment for sin. God is chastening God 's people.... For Rubenstein, no such theodicy can rationalize the enormity of the unjust suffering of the Holocaust or vindicate divine justice in the light of innocent Jewish victims.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that what the Zionists did in the establishment of the state of Israel was much worse than many people had imagined. The secular Zionists did not only create a new god, they had no use for the traditional God. They were determined that the new state of Israel must be so strong that no holocaust can ever be committed again. That explains their often-heard cry of "Never Again," and so as early as the 1950's, the Israeli Zionist leaders started scheming to build nuclear weapons.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Augsburg Fortress, 2002), p. 194.

Zionism, therefore, in its secular form, represented a human resolve to reject the traditional God and to replace him with a new god they could trust. By doing that they compromised their faith.

‘Zionism alone was determined to uproot all the laws of the Torah and commandments’ (Salmon 1998, 33). Such was the origin of the slogan, ‘Judaism and Zionism are diametrically opposed to each other,’ which one can still read on the walls of Meah Shearim, in Jerusalem. In the face of the growing popularity of Zionism among the Jewish masses of Russia, some rabbis sought a compromise...Rabbi Reines suggested an accommodation and went on to form, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Mizrahi movement. But most rabbis remained opposed to any form of compromise....”<sup>4</sup>

When religious Zionism emerged after the 1967 war, the religious Zionists were able to amalgamate their traditional beliefs in God with the ideology of Zionism. Or better said, they were able to discover a religious form of Zionism within the pages of their own Hebrew Scriptures. They did not need the holocaust as a rationale for the establishment of the state of Israel. The Bible comprised the best rationale. In order to outdo the secular Zionist ideology in their ferocity, they adopted a literal understanding of an exclusive biblical god who commands the expulsion and destruction of the indigenous people of the land and emphasized their exclusive theology of God, people, and land thus claiming their “divine rights.” Obviously, they too were in favor of building a formidable military power that they could use to subject and oppress the Palestinians and dispossess them of their land. This time, however, in the name of God.

Zionism, therefore, in both its secular or religious garb constituted an aberration and a regression from Judaism. It is important to be reminded that due to Jewish

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<sup>4</sup> Rabkin, *A Threat from Within*, p. 151.

suffering, some rabbis had taught that Jews have a vocation for suffering, that they should accept suffering rather than inflict it as a means of changing the world. One rabbinic dictum stated, “Be of the persecuted rather than of the persecutors.” In the twelfth century, Judah Halevi wrote in *Al Khuzari* that Israel has a mission of suffering. “Israel, the heart of humanity, the suffering servant, bears the ills of all, and by this very fact allows God to be revealed on earth.” Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, “He who gladly accepts the suffering of this world brings salvation to the world.”<sup>5</sup> Apparently, the holocaust totally wiped out such a theology and perspective.

Sholem Asch (1880-1957) the Polish American Jewish novelist cried, “God be thanked, that the nations have not given my people the opportunity to commit against others the crimes which have been committed against it.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, he failed to reflect on what the Zionists did to the Palestinians in 1948, and did not live long enough to see what the Israeli government did to the Palestinians after the 1967 war.

I believe that most Israeli Zionist Jews today, both secular and religious, knowingly or unknowingly, worship a new god that Judaism had long rejected but that the Zionists, secular and religious, have re-invented.

It is important to note that religious Jews make up between 15-20% of the Jewish population in Israel. Among those are religious Zionists that have somehow, in their beliefs, combined the traditional God with their new acquired god. Most of

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<sup>5</sup> Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) Note 23, p. 210..

<sup>6</sup> Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice*, p. 160.

the others are secular Jews. A small number are not Zionists and even anti-Zionist.

The Hebrew name of the new god of Israel is "*Betahone*" (security). It is a masculine god in whose image the Israeli soldier is created, and one that the Israeli state worships. Today, this small country that includes less than 6 million Jews is one of the strongest military powers in the world. In the name of the god *Betahone*, Israel governs and dominates. After all, people worship the god/gods that they believe have power to save them. On the altar of the god *Betahone*, thousands of Israeli soldiers have been sacrificed and tens of thousands of Palestinians have been killed, supposedly in order to keep the state safe and secure. The strong arm of the god *Betahone* is the military, but its most ferocious killer machines are the fighter jets and the helicopter gunships. In the service of this "almighty" god, the government has employed tens of thousands of agents locally and internationally. They are all enlisted in the service of the god *Betahone*. Israel spends huge amounts of money in training local and international collaborators – all in the service of the god *Betahone*.

The god *Betahone* is an impatient god. Very often, he has no time for the rule of law or respect for human rights, or for international law. *Betahone* sees himself as a god above international law. He acts with vengeance and impunity to destroy his perceived enemies. *Betahone* is a pernicious god - merciless and unjust. He is the chief god of empire. Many people tremble at the sight of this god.

This god *Betahone* demands and requires constant vigilance by all that worship him. At his command his agents must be quick to act and to destroy, torture, assassinate, abduct, imprison and to do whatever it takes. *Betahone* requires

strict and blind obedience, and no one dares to obstruct or defy the god *Betahone*. Many Israelis sing his praises and shout in homage, holy, holy, holy. *Betahone* is the god of hosts (Sabbaoth<sup>7</sup>); the state of Israel is full of his glory and power. This is lord god Sabbaoth.

The god *Betahone* exists in other countries, and it is one of the gods of all empires, but in Israel the god *Betahone* reigns supreme. In order for this god to stay supreme, the American empire feeds and supplies him every year with whatever he needs, thus increasing his vicious and ravenous lust for power so that Israel will continue to dominate, oppress, and crush the Palestinians and anyone that stands in the way. This is our experiential picture of *Betahone*, the god of the state of Israel.

### **Myths related to the god *Betahone***

Since its inception, Israel has created and circulated many myths. I would like to point out three in particular that specifically relate to the question of military power.

1. The myth of security. The god *Betahone* was invented especially to give the state of Israel and its people security. Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967, Israel's security has always been tenuous because it was not built on a just and moral basis. In fact, Israel's security has been imposed by the heavy and oppressive hand of a police and military force with the hope that, with time, the Palestinians will forget their grievances, i.e., their denied and negated political rights to the land, and they will inevitably be resigned to

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<sup>7</sup> Sabbaoth, in Hebrew "Tsvaot" is translated as "the armies."

accept Israel as is, and so eventually Israel's security will improve. In actual fact, due to the strong hand of its god *Betahone*, Israel has in the past and continues today to determine and impose its own understanding of what is moral and good. From the Palestinian perspective, Israel's policies are unjust and immoral, and they can never produce real security.

2. The myth of peace is a close companion to that of security. Security is supposed to produce peace. However, since justice constitutes the foundation of peace, its absence cannot achieve any durable peace. In spite of its mighty military power, the god *Betahone* has failed to achieve a lasting peace for the Israeli state. *Betahone* keeps the situation in a permanent state of no war and no peace but cannot end the conflict or obtain peace. In fact, the situation in the state and in the occupied territories is closer to a state of intermittent clashes with sporadic Israeli military attacks on targets, killing Palestinians, destroying their homes, and creating unrest. In spite of *Betahone's* formidable military power, so long as the government practices injustice and oppression, no peace that can endure is achievable. So long as the occupation and domination of Israel over the Palestinians continues, no peace can prevail. It is a false peace because it is built on a shaky foundation. Indeed, Israel always talks about peace, it never talks about justice. The victims of its god *Betahone* are thousands of Palestinians who seek peace through justice.
3. The myth of democracy. The state of Israel was built by the "will power" of the Zionists combined with the moral, financial, and military support of the western powers including many western Jews and Christians. Consequently, Israel became a formidable military power. Moreover, due to



a number of reasons (the holocaust, the Bible, the presence of influential Jews in most western countries, Israel's arms exports, 4<sup>th</sup> largest in the world),<sup>8</sup> Israel has been able to acquire and gain much clout and influence around the world. The credit goes, to a large extent, to its new impressive god *Betahone*. In fact, *Betahone* has helped it to defend and justify, in the eyes of its western friends, and especially the American Congress and Administration, its frequent violations of the human and political rights of the Palestinians. Israel has been able to get by and rationalize those violations when other countries would have been immediately censured. One needs only to point out the dozens of times Israel was protected by the American veto in the Security Council.

Moreover, Israel has promoted itself as a democratic state (western European) and "the only democracy in the Middle East" in spite of its discrimination against more than 20% of its own Israeli Arab citizens, not to mention the violations of the human and political rights of over four million Palestinians<sup>9</sup> that still live under its hegemony in contravention of international law. Due to its military power and influence, Israel has been able to get by with the myth of its democracy. Israel has convinced all the western countries that its democracy is real. To a large extent, this clout stems from the power and respect which the god *Betahone*, its lord of hosts, has conferred on it.

It is important to clarify one other point. Generally speaking, the democracy that Israel has been able to produce can potentially be real and good. Its discrepancy lies in the fact that not all the citizens of the state

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<sup>8</sup> "The Link," January-March 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Estimated population of the West Bank and Gaza in 2021 was over 5.3 million.

enjoy it. That is why it is difficult to call it a democracy when two million citizens (Israeli Arabs) are denied its full benefits. Such conspicuous discriminations make a sham of the so-called Israeli democracy. In fact, the Arab Israeli citizens are subdued by the power of the same god *Betahone*. Furthermore, the fact that the state of Israel insists that it is Jewish and democratic, at one and the same time, makes a mockery of democracy and exposes the glaring bluntness of the myth. It also explains why Israeli Jewish extremists continue to cry out for the expulsion of all Israeli Arabs.

### **How do we understand and respond to this god of Israel?**

1. Due to the holocaust, the Zionists who built the state of Israel believed that they cannot depend or trust the traditional biblical god. He proved impotent in the face of Nazism. They realized that western Christians built Christendom on the basis of military power. They detested the weakness of their forebears and their contemporary fellow Jews. So, they were determined to build "Israeldom" as a counterpart to Christendom. Since their biblical god has seemingly failed them time and time again, they were determined to link themselves to empire, first to the British and then to the Americans so that no power can repeat the tragedy of the holocaust against their people. That is exactly what they set out to do, and they were successful.
2. The cry of "Never Again" must be a cry that includes all people around the world and not Jews alone. It is a cry against all forms of racism. It is important to remember that during WWII, the victims of the Nazi atrocities have been estimated at 17 million. In addition to Jews, Poles and other

Slavic people, Soviets, Gypsies, mentally retarded, physically disabled, homosexuals, as well as political and religious dissidents, were killed.

3. The Zionists invented their god to suit their needs and made him powerful with the most advanced military weaponry and the most sophisticated military technology. They believe that this god will not fail them as the old traditional God did.
4. The Zionist builders did this at a time when many Christians were beginning to critique the god of empire who is dependent on violence, war, and the military. At a time when Christians were critiquing Constantinian Christianity that led many Christians to glorify war and use it as the means for conflict resolution, the Zionist state was picking up the sword and promoting the violence and militarism of the state.
5. Palestinian Christians are now lifting their voices against any concept of god that reflects war or violence, because the God whom we have seen in Jesus Christ is not the almighty god sabbaoth, the god of hosts, but the vulnerable God of love who in Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. In other words, for us Christians, the power of God is not anymore seen and expressed in acts of violence – the killing, murdering, assassinating of others which empire, including Christendom, used and today is practiced by Israeldom. The power of God is shown in God's love and mercy, in standing on the side of the poor and the oppressed. Our God is a vulnerable God and when we pray to Almighty God, we are praying to God whose attributes of almightiness are reflected in love and forgiveness, in justice and mercy, in truth and in peace.

6. Israeldom is the way of empire. And as we reject Christendom, we reject Israeldom. We warn our Jewish brothers and sisters that the way of Israeldom will only lead to disaster and that their new god is a false god and will not eventually bring about their redemption. On the contrary, it will never give them peace or security and they will continue to live in fear and distrust. Their redemption lies only in the moral and just God who cares for the oppressed Palestinians and their need for liberation and freedom. Peace and security can be achieved when the foundation of the state is truth and justice rather than the false justice and truth of military power.
7. Because the state of Israel has invented its own god *Betahone* through the accumulation of military power and has placed its full trust in him, Israel is not willing to abide by international conventions except when it suits its own interest. The god *Betahone* is above international law, and in the name of *Betahone*, Israel is willing to commit crimes even when it is clearly in violation of international law.