

WHAT WOULD THEY SAY NOW?

ENCOUNTERS WITH PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE



Six Reflections for Lent (Or Through the Year)

Friends of Sabeel North America, Theology Committee

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Preface

It is impossible to ponder the people and events of the Bible without also considering the places. Bible stories took place in specific settings amid dusty roads and rocky ravines as well as ancient towns and conquering armies. The God of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures really and truly entered into human history in physical ways, and the servants of God experienced both physical and spiritual challenges.

The Holy Land is sometimes called “the Fifth Gospel” because it has much to teach us when we visit as pilgrims. Yet this land, comprising what is now the modern state of Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, bears a far from perfect resemblance to the geographical setting of the Bible because its cities, suburbs, and settlements sprawl over the hillsides. Universities, technology centers, and even a nuclear reactor have sprouted in the desert. On the other hand, however, some aspects of the setting have not changed at all because the parade of occupying powers has not ended.

The most recent link in the chain of conquerors—in the succession of Philistines, Hebrews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, European Crusaders, Ottoman Turks, and British—is that of the European Zionists who, following the utopian dream of Theodor Herzl, determined to settle in the storied land of their sacred Scriptures. The dream, however, has been a costly one, involving not only sacrifices of money, bloodshed, and toil, but also the compromise of ideals. Hearts hardened by ethnic hatred and ingrained injustice are currently rendering the Holy Land unholy.

What would God’s servants of ancient times wish to say to us about their homeland? Surely they would not want Western Christians to dominate the land as the Crusaders did; nor would they advise us to confine our visits to pious recollection of sacred truths without also applying those truths to the current events unfolding in the land. Whereas Westerners in the past have indulged in militancy or have enveloped themselves in pietistic reveries, today’s pilgrims can integrate the convictions of their Christian faith with the nitty-gritty of humanity’s foibles. We can hold the measuring-stick of the Bible up to the current realities that we see around us.

Let us journey through the Scriptures by immersing ourselves in the experiences of particular Biblical characters—in this booklet, Abraham, King Hezekiah, the exiled community in Babylon, Mary of Nazareth, the Magi journeying to Bethlehem, and Jesus on the Mount of Olives—and by subsequently pondering the similarities and differences between the “then” and the “now” in each sacred location. Our own personal experiences of life will help us to connect with the events of that far-away land, regardless of whether we have ever visited or will ever have any plans to travel there. By looking for some small role that each of us can actively fulfill in cultivating holiness in the Holy Land, that is, by promoting the growth of justice and compassion there, we can maintain a close relationship with the environment in which the Lord God chose to reveal the divine will to humanity.



First Encounter: Abraham and the Promise

Let us begin our Lenten journey as Abraham undertook his own adventure into the unknown. Lent is always a new experience for us because every year we bring fresh experiences and insights to it and we inhabit a social context different from last year's. There have been recent developments in our families, our neighborhoods and towns, our governments at all levels, our world. In encountering the various changes in our lives, we have been confronted by unfamiliar challenges and have discovered new insights. Thus Lent can never be "same-old-same-old," but is a fresh and verdant path into unknown territory.

Abraham is a paragon of boldness and openness to adventure—a model of faith that summons us into this holy season. Called by God, he relinquished the security of his father's household and plunged into an uncharted future. Not only is Abraham a paragon and a model, but the New Testament teaches that we are among Abraham's children. As Paul explains in Galatians 3, "those who believe are the descendants of Abraham" (3:7 NRSV). Abraham's legacy is not biological but spiritual. We inherit the promises of God that Abraham received.

God made a multi-faceted promise to Abraham, bestowing three gifts (Genesis 12:1-3):

1. Progeny ("I will make of you a great nation")
2. Perpetual blessing, by which Abraham's name will be great and he will be a channel of God's blessing to "all the families of the earth"
3. Land ("a land that I will show you")

How do these promises apply to us?

Progeny

In today's world, couples are having fewer children, and some couples choose to have none. Why would numerous offspring be important to Abraham? And what can this promise mean to us? In the culture of the ancient Middle East, reproductive fertility was an indication of prosperity and guaranteed that the family's name and possessions would continue on into the future. Today, however, the basic need is what psychologist Erik Erikson called "generativity," as opposed to "stagnation," in his concept of psychosocial stages. We want to feel that we have led productive lives, that we have made a difference, that we have done something to improve another person's future, that we have left a mark on the world that will survive after us.

The good news is that, by inheriting Abraham's promise, we are assured that our lives have eternal significance. Thanks to our life in God, not one of us will be a stagnant puddle, but each of us has inside us a "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14 NRSV). Nothing that we do or say will be worthless because God can take our failures and shape them into vessels of beauty. As the Jesuit paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin wrote in his sweeping *Hymn to the Universe*,

What my lips fail to convey to my brother or my sister he will tell them better than I.
 What my heart desires for them with anxious, helpless ardor he will grant them if it be good.
 What men cannot hear because of the feebleness of my voice, what they shut their ears against so as not to hear it, this I can confide to Christ who will one day tell it again, to their hearts.
 And if all this is so I can indeed die with my ideal, I

can be buried with the vision I wanted to share with others. Christ gathers up for the life of tomorrow our stifled ambitions, our inadequate understandings, our uncompleted or clumsy but sincere endeavors.

Blessing

What does it mean to be blessed by God? As we survey the story of Abraham in Genesis 11-25, we see that, throughout all the ups and downs of Abraham's life, God was never absent. It is this constancy of God's involvement with us that is the fundamental blessing giving rise to specific blessings such as fruitful relationships, guidance in the face of difficulties, and answers to prayer. We, too, can count on this perpetual, unwavering fidelity of God.

Moreover, God's blessing upon Abraham guaranteed that he would mediate God's blessing to all nations—not exclusively to Abraham's biological offspring. All people, regardless of their genealogies, are God's treasures, created in God's image (Gen 1:26-27). In Genesis 17, God changes Abraham's name. Formerly Abram, he now becomes Abraham because, as God says, "I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (17:5 NRSV). God's selection of Abraham is not exclusivist—quite the contrary! God's embrace is all-encompassing, and all people are chosen people.

A question for us is this: How can we implement this promise to Abraham in bringing God's blessing to others, regardless of race, ethnicity, creed, or sexuality? In general, we can give of ourselves in volunteering our service to the poor, sick, and marginalized, in sharing our faith with those who are spiritually hungry, in charitable donations, and in advocacy for justice through political channels and the media. As we progress through the reflections in this book, we will see that the Holy Land—the geographical setting of our Biblical stories—is a place of suffering and oppression that we can help to relieve.

Land

What benefits does land ownership bring? In an agrarian setting, of course, the land is the essential means of survival, and, if fertile, it can be a source of comfortable prosperity. In all times and places, home ownership can provide not only financial equity but also a sense of security, a safe territory, a personal space with boundaries, a place where we belong. Whether we own or whether we rent, we often identify with our homes, arranging and adorning them in ways that express who we are.

But must such a personal sanctuary always be physical? The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks to this question:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. . . . All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. (Heb 11:8-9, 13-14 NRSV)

This New Testament passage may seem puzzling because it describes Abraham as a sojourner and temporary immigrant in his own land, whereas the Old Testament narrative depicts Abraham as entering the promised land and settling down in it. A key to understanding it appears a little later in the epistle, in Hebrews 13:13: “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (NRSV). The foundational concept is that what we are all seeking is something permanent, not a land or building that can be destroyed, ravaged, or stolen from us.

What is that permanent something that we seek? Of course it is God’s own self. Abraham obeyed God through faith, not because of any self-centered desire for special gifts such as land or progeny. Because Abraham’s relationship with the Divine was the center of his life, there was no need for self-aggrandizing actions at the expense of others. Abraham’s personal fulfillment, purpose, and sense of worth came from adherence to the everlasting, indestructible God, not from perishable, tangible gratifications.

In fact, the ancient Jewish writer Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, emphasized Abraham’s emotional detachment from the land itself. Although the land was God’s gift, Abraham’s deepest attachment was to the God whose presence never failed him. In his treatise *On Abraham*, Philo points out that Abraham gave his nephew Lot the right to select the choicest portions of land, while Abraham took whatever was left over. (Gen 13:8-12) Obviously Abraham was not motivated by acquisitiveness or a sense of entitlement or a feeling of being exceptional.

Another indication of Abraham’s respect for the rights of others was his dealing with the indigenous people of Hebron, also called Kiryat-Arba (in Gen 23:2). It was here that his wife, Sarah, died at the age of one hundred twenty-seven, and Abraham needed to find a burial place for her. Despite the fact that God had bestowed this land upon Abraham, he did not appropriate for himself a plot of land or a cave; instead, he presented a respectful request to the Hittite inhabitants. He said, “I am a stranger and an alien residing among you” (Gen 23:4 NRSV), and insisted upon paying the full price for the cave of Machpelah when its owner offered it to him *gratis*.

Hebron is the place where Abraham himself was buried when the time came, as well as his son Isaac and wife Rebekah and grandson Jacob and wife Leah. (The tomb of Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph, is in Bethlehem.) Today Hebron is a sacred site for Jewish, Muslim, and Christian pilgrims because all three religions look to Abraham as their patriarch. What is happening there? Is Abraham’s sense of justice and respect for others operative in present-day Hebron? What would Abraham say about it?

Hebron Today

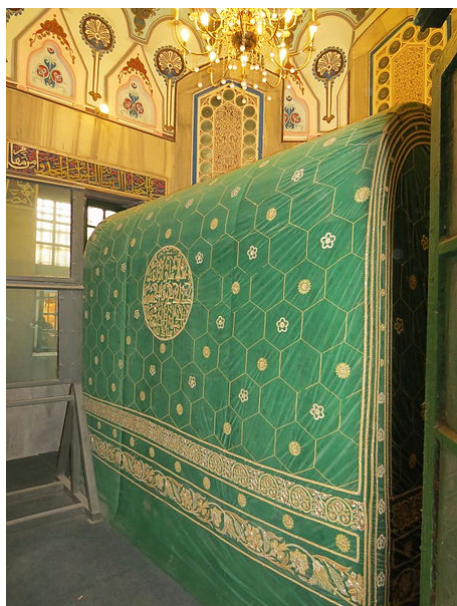
Hebron is located in the West Bank, an area that the United Nations assigned to the Palestinian Arabs in 1948, but which has been under Israeli control since the Six-Day War of 1967. The city’s Arabic name is Al Khalil, which means “The Friend,” referring to the characterization of Abraham as “the friend of God” both in the Old Testament and in the New

Testament (2 Chr 20:7; Isa 41:8; Jas 2:23), as well as in the Qur'an (*Surah* 4.125). Today the city is home to two groups of people: Arab Muslims and Jewish Israelis. Sadly, many of the current residents regard themselves as enemies, not friends, of the group with which they do not identify.

The reason for this hostile, polarized situation has to do with the history of the previous century. As the Zionist movement brought European Jews into the Holy Land, the indigenous residents were displaced (much as European colonization caused hardship for Native Americans in the Americas). Violence has flared periodically since the 1920s.



Steps lead up to the building that houses a mosque, a synagogue, and the tombs of three patriarchs with wives, with separate entrances for Jews and Muslims. (photo by Ooman - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11558569>)



The Tomb of Abraham, which must be viewed through bullet-proof glass. Separate viewing apertures are provided on the Muslim and the Jewish sides. (photo, [الفلسطيني محمد](#), Abraham in the Mosque of Abraham IMG 2289, via Wikimedia Commons)

Hebron is divided into two sections, H1 and H2. Four-fifths of the city's Palestinian Arab population live in H1, which is under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Governed by the Israeli military, H2 is inhabited by approximately 40,000 Palestinians and 500 Israeli settlers, although hundreds more settlers enter the city regularly from surrounding settlements (illegal under international law). The number of settlers grows as Palestinian property is seized.

The two most shocking episodes of terrorist violence in the city occurred in 1929 and in 1994. In the 1920s, when it became evident that the influx of European Zionists into the land would continue unabated, the indigenous Arabs were alarmed by the resulting drain on the land and its resources. In 1929 the conflicts that flared throughout Palestine, then governed by the British Mandate, took the lives of a total of 133 Jews and 116 Arabs. The violence was at its worst in Hebron. Arab gangs invaded Jewish homes, killing 67 Jewish residents of Hebron. It must be noted, however, that 19 Arab families of Hebron sheltered Jews in their homes.

In 1994 Dr. Baruch Goldstein of Brooklyn, an armed Israeli-American, entered the Ibrahimi Mosque and opened fire indiscriminately on Muslim men at prayer. He killed 29 worshippers and wounded 125 more. Dr. Goldstein has become a folk hero in the Israeli settler culture of the Hebron area. His burial place is located in the settlement of Kiryat Arba, where annual celebrations are held on the anniversary of his deed and where his epitaph praises him, calling him a "true son of Israel." What would Abraham say?

The responses of the occupying government to the massacre of 1994 have been to divide the Ibrahimi Mosque into its two halves, to exclude Palestinians from the main street of the city (Shuhada Street), to close down all the Palestinian shops along the main street by welding their doors permanently shut, to allow swelling numbers of settlers to take over Palestinian buildings in the city, and to install checkpoints staffed by soldiers whose mission is to protect the settlers.

Palestinian commerce is severely inhibited by the enforced closure of shops and the expanding encroachment by settlers. Approximately 1,200 shops have been closed. The central marketplace, still open for business, is ringed by settler apartments in upper stories of adjacent buildings. Because these settlers hurl objects including garbage from their windows, aimed at merchants and shoppers, Palestinians have installed netting across the open space. The netting, however, does not provide protection against noxious liquids dumped from settler windows.



Hebron shops with doors welded shut by the authorities are now closed on this street resembling a ghost town. (photo, PalFest, The Palestine Festival of Literature, via Wikimedia Commons)



The retail businesses in the marketplace of the Old City would lose customers if there were no netting to protect them from objects thrown down from settler dwellings overhead. (photo, PalFest, The Palestine Festival of Literature, via Wikimedia Commons)

School children and their teachers have difficulty in reaching their classes each morning because of streets that are permanently off-limits to Palestinians and checkpoints where there are often long waits, as well as unexpected roadblocks. Some of them take circuitous routes daily, traversing back alleys and rooftops. Only their families' solid commitment to education keeps the children in school. Even the Mayor of Hebron, Dr. Daoud Zatari, must take long, roundabout routes in his own city because he is a Palestinian.

Both in the city and in the hill country just south of Hebron, Palestinian children sometimes suffer physical assaults on their route to or from school. Organizations such as Christian Peacemaker Teams and Ecumenical Accompaniers (CPT and EA) send volunteers to walk with the children and to record violent incidents with photographs or videos. The Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem provides video cameras to Palestinians so that they can produce complete reports on these incidents.

In the picture below, a soldier patrols the streets of Hebron, training his gun on a Palestinian child. (photo, Christian Peacemaker Teams, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Share Alike 3.0 License, http://cpt.org/index.php?q=gallery&g2_itemId=2660)



What can we do?

Abraham made it a priority to resolve the conflict between his herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot, saying, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred” (Genesis 13:8 NRSV). As Christians, we are among his heirs. Surely we, followers of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, can do something to alleviate the strife in the city where the body of Abraham rests. The following organizations, mentioned above, are worthy of consideration and support:

Christian Peacemaker Teams Palestine, <http://www.cptpalestine.com/>

Ecumenical Accompaniers (World Council of Churches), <https://www.eappi.org/en>

B’Tselem (this Hebrew name means “In the Image”), <http://www.btselem.org/>

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. The introductory words for this session establish that Abraham was bold. He embraced a level of adventure more akin to a refugee or sojourner than to a recreational traveler (Hebrews 11:8-9). What is your basis for trusting God to call you into unknown territory in your work, travel, thinking, relationships, or faith?
2. We are heirs of Abraham (Galatians 3:7). We carry his spiritual DNA. When have you put your adventurous spiritual legacy to work in your life choices?
3. If all nations are spiritual heirs of God’s blessing of Abraham (Genesis 17:5; Galatians 3:8), how should we regard our “relatives” from other countries? How is the blessing of God extended through us in an era of growing xenophobia and continuing racism?

4. Abraham's beloved wife Sarah died in Hebron. He purchased a burial tomb which is still revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Does it trouble you that this tomb is divided into sections, has been the scene of violence, is patrolled day and night within a military occupation? Are there present-day situations in which sacred burial places, of Native Americans or of others, are damaged or destroyed for commercial purposes?
5. Ponder the spiritual alchemy of *trust* turning to *boldness* producing *obedience* and *bearing the spiritual fruit* of progeny, blessing and land. Can the blessings of faith be redeemed by leaving behind acquisitive application in exchange for openhearted inclusion? Should blessings from God be protected, defended, invested or shared?
6. Describe your vision for the legacy you will leave behind when your life on earth is complete. What do you hope Christ will "speak" into the future from your life? How does your life display the "spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14)?
7. Describe your personal spiritual sanctuary, your safe place. Does this "place" transcend physical ownership, as Abraham's example illustrates through his willingness to allow Lot to choose a land portion first (Genesis 13:8-12)?

Second Encounter: Hezekiah, Existing and Resisting

A journey backward in time, to seven hundred years before Christ, enables us to meet a person of unwavering faith confronting formidable odds. This is King Hezekiah, ruler of the Kingdom of Judah, characterized in the Bible as follows:

He did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his ancestor David had done. . . . He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. (2 Kings 18:3, 5-6, NRSV).

After vigorously eliminating the corruption and idolatry that had been rampant under his father's reign (including child sacrifice), and restoring the pure worship of the God of his ancestors, Hezekiah could not rest on his achievements because the ruler of the Assyrian Empire launched a siege against him in his royal city of Jerusalem. We find information about Hezekiah in these sources:

- chapters 18-20 of 2 Kings,
- chapters 29-32 of 2 Chronicles,
- chapters 36-39 of Isaiah,
- chapter 48 of Sirach, an apocryphal book (non-canonical among Protestants, canonical among Catholics and Orthodox)

Here is the background to his story.

The Historical Background

The Middle East was as unstable and volatile in ancient times as is it today. Two centuries prior to Hezekiah's birth, the kingdom of David and Solomon was split in two, resulting in the southern Kingdom of Judah and the northern Kingdom of Israel. It was the royal dynasty of the southern kingdom that eventually gave rise to Hezekiah. In 721 or 722 BCE, at the dawn of Hezekiah's reign, the northern kingdom was conquered by the dominant power of that day, the Assyrian Empire, whose capital was the mighty city of Nineveh, located in what is today the state of Iraq. Most of the indigenous Israelite inhabitants of the northern kingdom were uprooted from their homes and expelled from their land so that the Assyrian conquerors could seize possession of the territory.

After devouring the northern kingdom, the Assyrians set their sights on Hezekiah's domain. When an attempted alliance between Judah and Egypt proved unsuccessful, the Assyrian ruler, Sennacherib,¹ invaded Judah, destroying city after city, ravaging the countryside, and slaughtering inhabitants. Soon he was at the gates of Jerusalem. The year was 701 BCE.

¹ The name is pronounced like this: "sen-ACK-er-ib."

Hezekiah's Crisis

Nineteenth-century archeologists in Iraq discovered a clay prism, fifteen inches tall, inscribed in the language of Assyria. Its descriptions of Sennacherib's military aggression include a brief but boastful account of the siege of Jerusalem, Hezekiah's royal capital. Sennacherib's taunting language claims that he hemmed in the city of Jerusalem, imprisoning Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage."

Here is what the Prism of Sennacherib looks like:



Located in the Oriental Research Institute, Chicago (photo, public domain, Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication, via Wikimedia Commons)

Today we have seen slaughter, massive destruction, starvation, and thirst in Middle Eastern locations such as Gaza and Aleppo. Brutal occupation forces have vaunted their victories in the media, and scenes of both sudden and lingering death have haunted our electronic screens in the West. Thus we can reach back through the centuries to imagine the terror and tragedy that Sennacherib wrought.

Encamped outside Jerusalem, Sennacherib sent three of his imperial officials to speak to Hezekiah's royal officials. They did so in public, within the hearing range of the people of Jerusalem, and delivered speeches in Hebrew so that all would understand. Their tactic was to drive a wedge between the people and their king by claiming that Hezekiah had actually turned against the God of the Hebrews, that he had imprudently relied on Egyptian assistance with disastrous results, that God had commissioned the Assyrians to subjugate the city, and that Hezekiah was deceiving the people. Today we might call most of their statements "fake news."

Sometimes a situation is so dire that there is no human support in sight, especially for a leader who alone bears responsibility for the moral and physical welfare of the people. Abraham Lincoln once said, “I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go.” As for Hezekiah, not only did he turn to prayer, but also he had access to a man of God, the prophet Isaiah, whom he trusted to speak by divine inspiration. Having sent a messenger to Isaiah, Hezekiah went to the Temple to pray. He ended his prayer with these imploring words: “So now, O LORD our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O LORD, are God alone” (2 Kings 19:19). Soon Isaiah’s response arrived. God’s message through the prophet was that Hezekiah should persevere and trust in divine deliverance.

Hezekiah was a man of both prayer and action. He acted brilliantly when Sennacherib’s siege threatened Jerusalem’s water sources. To prevent the Assyrians from appropriating the city’s water supply, Hezekiah ordered that an underground tunnel be dug from a source outside the city walls, the Spring of Gihon, to the Pool of Siloam, located inside the city. This tunnel, invisible to Sennacherib’s forces, provided sufficient water for the population. Hezekiah’s Tunnel still exists today as a popular tourist site in Jerusalem. And it still holds water!

Hezekiah’s Tunnel (photo, Tamar Hayardeni, via Wikimedia Commons)



Water alone, however, could not rid Jerusalem of its implacable foe, bent on its destruction. Biblical accounts tell the story of God’s rescue of Jerusalem by means of the sudden deaths of the Assyrian warriors. Whether the cause of death was a plague (as some scholars speculate) or an unexplained blow from God’s hand, the Assyrians withdrew. The time of deliverance had arrived. The Lord had commanded Hezekiah to hang on without surrendering, and the king’s fidelity had now been vindicated.

Sometimes we are personally under siege, and just hanging on is all that we can do until a menacing situation is altered by some unforeseen change. Of course we are always on the lookout for opportunities to act, but meanwhile we must cling tenaciously to faith. Our refusal to surrender to the forces of death is what the God of life has willed for us. We may be under a demoralizing physical siege such as disease or disability, or we may be under a mental and emotional siege, such as when we must endure a painful relationship at our workplace or in our families. Perhaps there is someone trying to discredit us, diminish our reputation, or subject us to daily domination. Perhaps our financial status has sunk. At all times we must maintain awareness of our innate dignity, even when others do not acknowledge it. After all, we are members of God's royal family, created in the image of the Ruler of the universe. We can resist the negative forces in our lives by continuing to exist as the children of God.

“To exist is to resist” is a Palestinian slogan expressing the cultural value called *sumud*. The Arabic word *sumud* means perseverance under hardship while maintaining an ineradicable sense of dignity and identity. Throughout the seven decades of upheaval and displacement, as well as loss of health, life, and livelihood, which the Palestinians have suffered since 1947, it is *sumud* that has held them together as a people committed to their communal survival.

Hezekiah's Home Today

Hezekiah's royal compound was located in the oldest portion of today's city of Jerusalem, called the City of David, which abuts on the present-day southern wall of Jerusalem's Old City. Before it was settled by Hebrews approximately a thousand years before Christ, its inhabitants were Canaanites. In the past fourteen centuries its population has included a significant number of Arabs. It is a part of East Jerusalem, situated on land that the UN allocated to the indigenous Palestinians in 1948, but which was conquered by Israeli forces in the Six Day War of 1967.

Today the Palestinian Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, especially the one called Silwan, are under siege as Israeli settlers seize and occupy Palestinian homes and as the government imposes home demolitions in an ongoing process of replacing one ethnic population by another (somewhat similar to the Assyrian conquest and ethnic cleansing of the northern kingdom in Hezekiah's time). Settlers use a host of security cameras, strategically placed, to exercise surveillance of the Palestinian residents' activities. When a house or apartment is empty for a few hours, settlers move into it, changing the locks on the doors immediately so that the Palestinian family cannot return. Furniture, clothing, and household items either are placed out on the street or are simply appropriated for the use of the settler family. These acts of thievery are protected by Israeli soldiers and police.

Demolition orders are issued on the basis that a Palestinian family has added an unauthorized structure, such as a bathroom or porch, to their home, or simply for the purpose of claiming the property as state-owned land. Homeowners are required to cover the cost of the demolition; the only alternative is for the family to demolish its own house. Sometimes a family receives such short notice about demolition that their possessions cannot be moved and are crushed among the rubble.

In his day, Hezekiah witnessed the demolition of cities and towns in his kingdom and personally experienced a powerful aggressor's attempt to occupy Jerusalem. Would Hezekiah identify with the Israeli settlers, or would he empathize with the Palestinian families?



Home demolition in East Jerusalem (photo, 'Amer 'Aruri, B'Tselem researcher, http://www.btselem.org/photoblog/20140209_jerusalem_demolitions, via Wikimedia Commons)

The dilemma of a threatened water supply was foremost among the problems that Hezekiah faced, and it is still a menace to the health and welfare of the indigenous Palestinians of the Holy Land. The settlers' appropriation of water resources deprives the Palestinian population of the water that supplied their needs before the settler invasion began. Settlements are expanding and proliferating not only in East Jerusalem but throughout the West Bank, and while more and more settlers are watering lawns, washing cars, and splashing in swimming pools, Palestinian towns have running water only one or two days per week—or even less frequently in some cases. Running water is available for only 6 hours per week in Bethlehem's Aida Refugee Camp. Meanwhile, government orders prohibit Palestinians from digging new wells.

A minimum of 100 liters per day is required for personal consumption and proper sanitation, according to a 2003 World Health Organization report (which did not include water for agricultural uses in the minimum requirement). The average water consumption by Palestinians in the West Bank, however, is approximately 70 liters per day. Mekorot, Israel's principal supplier of bottled water, draws from aquifers in the West Bank and then sells the

Palestinians' own water back to them. Some Palestinian families have no other option than to spend up to 20% of their meager household incomes on water.

In war-ravaged Gaza, where resources and borders are tightly controlled by Israeli forces, the situation is even worse. A damaged sewage system leaks waste matter into the water supply. According to a World Bank bulletin (11/22/2016), only 10 percent of Gaza's population has any access to safe drinking water from the tap.

Palestinian homes are immediately recognizable by the presence of water tanks on their rooftops. During the infrequent times when water is available, either from household taps or from rainfall, the precious life-sustaining liquid is collected and stored in these water tanks. Unfortunately, during times of violence, gunfire can create holes in the tanks, by accident or by intention.



On April 14, 2009, settlers invaded a Palestinian home in Hebron (Al Khalil) and shot holes in the rooftop water tanks. (photo, ISM Palestine, via Wikimedia Commons)

What can we do?

We can follow and support the activities of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD): www.icahd.org.

We can also boycott products manufactured in the Israeli settlements or by corporations that profit from the settlements. Several religious denominations have established their own policies on boycotts and on divestment from certain corporations. These denominations include the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Unitarian Universalist Association. Moreover, Jewish Voice for Peace, an American Jewish organization, fully supports BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanction) as a means of ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and resources.

Corporations that have come under scrutiny include Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, and Caterpillar. Others are Ahava (cosmetics), ReMax Realty (which is reputed to deal in settlement

homes), and Airbnb (which is reputed to arrange rentals inside settlements). See the “What can we do?” section in the Sixth Encounter for information on a Christian boycott of Hewlett-Packard, launched and administered by Friends of Sabeel North America (www.fosna.org).

Why should we be involved? As Christians in a democracy—a democracy that provides 3.8 billion dollars as military aid to Israel every year—we bear responsibility for ending the unjust oppression that the Palestinians are enduring. Christian theology, specifically the Protestant “social gospel” of the early twentieth century as well as the liberation theology of our current times, tells us that “structural sin,” or societal sin, causes suffering and death. Oppressive situations would not be maintained without the direct or indirect support of political, economic, and social institutions and individuals. As beneficiaries of, and participants in, society’s structures, we must consider the moral imperative to effect change.

In this Lenten season, a time for pondering the possibilities for change, we can examine our own patterns of consumption. When we purchase electronic devices, foods, and household items from corporations that enjoy profits from the settlements in Palestine, we are complicit in structural sin. Consumption can be complicity.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How do comparisons between Biblical era events and contemporary events stimulate new understandings of Scripture (for example, the comparison of sieges imposed upon ancient Jerusalem versus contemporary Aleppo and Gaza)? Do these comparisons inspire fresh insights?
2. The Prism of Sennacherib boasts of military action that many would now define as a war crime. This ancient artifact documents the siege of a city—Jerusalem (likened to an imprisoned bird in a cage)—which in modern international law might represent illegal collective punishment of civilians. Have you ever found yourself tempted to view brutal behavior by a leader or a military campaign as something to rationalize or defend? Conversely, have you pronounced judgement on the behavior of your own or another nation's behavior and found yourself condemned as unpatriotic, immoral, or foolish?
3. Sennacherib’s three emissaries challenged King Hezekiah in public, proclaiming untrue charges against him in order to weaken public support for his leadership. Why do you suppose Old Testament writers chose to document this tactic, which aimed to undermine Hezekiah and confuse his followers?
4. Sennacherib of Assyria claimed a directive from God, calling him to subjugate the city of Jerusalem. How do you respond to leaders who pronounce themselves instruments of divine purpose? Compare Sennacherib’s claim with Hezekiah's decision to consult with the prophet Isaiah.
5. In our personal times of “siege” we hope to discover and utilize unseen resources to sustain us—much as Hezekiah's hidden tunnel carried life-saving water from the Spring of Gihon

outside the city to the Pool of Siloam within the city walls. What resources sustain you when more obvious or convenient assets are removed?

6. Do you find it ironic that home demolitions and house seizures take place in the Silwan neighborhood of East Jerusalem, located in the area once occupied by Hezekiah's royal compound? Take a moment to view this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbUQZ4GOqNA> (or access it by visiting YouTube and searching for "Israeli forces demolish home of two blind brothers in East Jerusalem," posted by ISM Palestine), as you ponder the question posed in this session: Would Hezekiah identify with Israeli settlers who seize the home of Palestinians, or would he identify with the Palestinians in their dispossession?

7. Are you motivated to dig deeper to identify companies that profit from the illegal settlements in Palestine? Here are two of the dependable websites for this information:

www.uscpr.org (U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights)

www.whoprofits.org

Third Encounter: Meet the Exiles

In the last encounter we saw how Hezekiah, ruler of the southern Kingdom of Judah, witnessed in his lifetime the conquest and deportation of the Israelites of the northern kingdom and how, through prayer and action, he prevented the same thing from happening to his own people. At that time (722-701 BCE) the conquering force was the Assyrian Empire.

In our third encounter we will examine the events that took place a century after Hezekiah's death, at a time when the Assyrian Empire had been subjugated by the might of the rising Babylonian Empire. The Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar achieved the goal that had eluded the Assyrian ruler: he added the Kingdom of Judah to his list of conquests. Because the Babylonians, like the Assyrians, employed a policy of deportation—or ethnic cleansing, as we would call it today—the inhabitants of Judah were ousted from their homes and exiled to Babylon on the Euphrates River.

Several striking personalities shine forth from the pages of our Biblical accounts of the Babylonian Exile. These include the anonymous author of “Second Isaiah” (Isaiah 40-55), the prophet Ezekiel, the prophet Jeremiah, and Jeremiah's scribe Baruch. Literature written long after the Exile recounts stories of folk heroes of that time: Daniel, Susanna, and the three young men in the fiery furnace (Babylonian names: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; Hebrew names: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah). In this encounter we will look at the writings that emanated from the exiles themselves.



“Neo-Babylonian” refers to the reigns of Babylonian rulers between 626 and 539 BCE, an era that includes the Babylonian Exile of the people of Judah (597/587 to 539 BCE).
(photo, ChrisO, via Wikimedia Commons)

Jerusalem Crushed

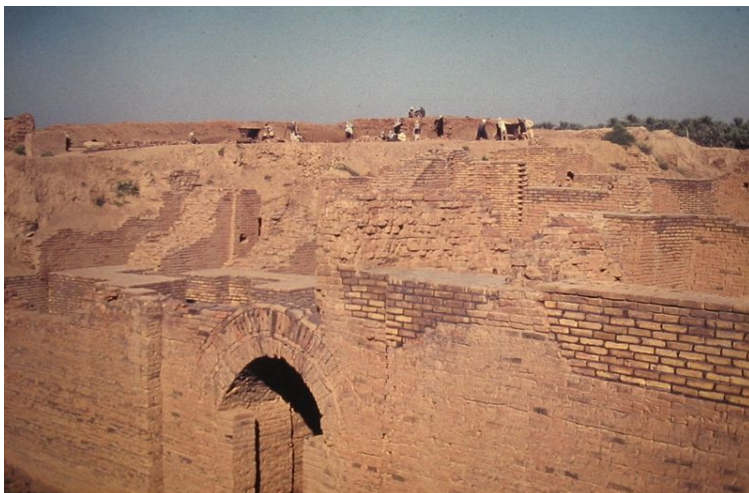
In 597 Nebuchadnezzar overcame the forces of King Jehoiakim of Judah, enthroned his own puppet king, Jehoiachin, and deported to Babylon the former leaders of Judah, including the prophet Ezekiel. In the following decade, popular sentiment among those remaining in Jerusalem tended to be optimistic. Some perceived a possibility of resisting any further repression by Nebuchadnezzar—a fantasy that Jeremiah mocked by weighing down his own shoulders with an ox-yoke, symbolizing the yoke that Babylon would surely impose. (See Jeremiah 27.)

It proved to be impossible to push back against the formidable power of Nebuchadnezzar. After a revolt led by Zedekiah (the next king of Judah after Jehoiachin), the Babylonian forces deported a much larger number of people than previously. They left behind the poorest folk, who were unlikely to attempt any further rebellion. They forced King Zedekiah to watch the executions of his sons, gouged out his eyes, and led him in chains to Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed, and its Temple was pillaged and razed. (See Jeremiah 52.)

Although the exiles settled in their own communities in Babylon (one of them being Tel Abib), their sense of identity as a nation and as a covenant partner with their God was shaken to its depths. In the ancient Middle East each deity was associated with a specific nation in a specific land. Thus the God of Israel was perceived as dwelling in the Temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Now that God’s dwelling-place had been destroyed, where was God? Now that God’s people had been transported so far away from Mount Zion, how could they possibly pray for divine assistance? How could they make sense of their lives?

The depth of this tragedy has been expressed in a well-known Psalm: “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. . . . How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?” (from Psalm 137, NRSV). The Book of Lamentations also paints a heart-rending picture:

Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens.
 We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows.
 We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we get must be bought.
 With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary, we are given no rest.
 (Lamentations 5:2-5)



Ruins of ancient Babylon in modern-day Iraq. The city was known for its “hanging gardens” and gigantic *ziggurat* (a kind of pyramid). Its deities included the god Marduk, patron of the city, and the goddess Ishtar, after whom the majestic main gate of the city was named. (photo, Herbert Reichart, via Wikimedia Commons)

Writings from Babylon

Daniel L. Smith observes in his book on the Babylonian Exile, *The Religion of the Landless*, that people who have been transposed into a different cultural setting can respond in opposing ways. Some are inclined to be assimilated into the other culture, while others cling more tightly to their ancestral identity; and adherents to these two perspectives may come into conflict with each other. In the case of forced exile, a minority population is surrounded by a much larger society, and yet isolated within it, in the same way as Native Americans have been treated—as foreigners with no state or land of their own, yet expected to show loyalty to the majority culture.

Now that the Temple worship had been discontinued, the exiles' attention to the written word of God was intensified. The effort to maintain the purity of Israel's faith and the vigor of its national identity is reflected in various Biblical genres. The first chapter of Genesis, which is in the form of a liturgy, reveals a priestly influence maintaining Israelite worship in resistance to Babylonian cultural dominance. For example, God's creation of the sun and moon on the fourth day occurs after the creation of light on the first day; thus these heavenly bodies, regarded as gods by the Babylonians, are clearly characterized in Genesis as creations of the supreme God, each functioning merely as a sort of lamp to hold God's light.

Another Old Testament genre, which was shaped into its final form during the Exile, is the portion of the Old Testament that scholars call the Deuteronomistic History. These Biblical texts tell tales of the early history of the Israelite people in the Holy Land—a history describing events taking place five centuries prior to the work of the exilic writers. Stories of invasion, conquest, and slaughter of the non-Hebrew tribes served the purpose of fortifying the collective self-confidence and sense of shared destiny that were necessary to bond the exiles together and to remind them that they did indeed have a land with a God. Did God really command the early Israelites to commit genocide in the Promised Land, or did they misunderstand God's intention? It is not possible to answer this question, but obviously the stories of massacre and domination must have bolstered the spirit of cultural resistance among the communities of exiles in Babylon.

Encouraging messages of a different sort came from the exilic prophets. Ezekiel emphasized the omnipresence of God, the sovereign God, who is absolutely free and not bound to any temple or any particular piece of land. Before the final downfall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, foresaw the impending disaster and pronounced judgment on the sins of the people. This early prophecy also includes a vision of four living creatures, which he identifies as the cherubim, and four gleaming wheels arriving in Babylon, which represented “the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (Ezekiel 1:28 NRSV; see chapters 1 and 10) accompanying the exiles in their new abode. In this way his predictions of Jerusalem's collapse specifically included a provision that God would not abandon the people. On the contrary, God is an accessible source of strength. An interesting linguistic note is that the name Hezekiah (see previous encounter) and the name Ezekiel mean the same thing in Hebrew, namely, “God strengthens.” Indeed, both of these men refused to despair in the face of national upheaval and massive destruction.

Especially uplifting are the prophetic messages of Isaiah 40-55, which date from the final years of the Exile. Scanning the horizon for signs of hope, the prophet has seen the rise of the Persian ruler Cyrus, whose strength he perceives as capable of loosening the iron grip of Babylon. In Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1, the prophet is so excited that he refers to Cyrus as God's "shepherd" and God's "anointed" (*mashiach*, or "messiah," in Hebrew; *christos* in Greek). His reference to a Persian emperor by the use of a title normally reserved for Israelite kings reveals a broad perspective—a perspective that discerns God's locus of loving concern as the entire human race, not merely a particular group of a particular genealogical descent. It was in fact Cyrus the Persian who in 538 BCE liberated the Jewish exiles from their captivity and enabled them to return to their homeland.

The universalist perspective is a distinctive advance in the development of the Hebrew understanding of God's relationship to humankind. This development does not represent any sort of assimilation or syncretism with Babylonian religion; the monotheistic devotion to the one true God has remained intact. The expansion of outlook has to do with the inclusion of all races and nations as recipients of God's covenant faithfulness. Although the people will be restored to their ancestral land, they are now to work toward the salvation of all nations, not merely their own.

[God] says,
 "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to restore the survivors of Israel;
 I will give you as a light to the nations,
 that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

(Isaiah 49:6 NRSV)

Here we see a divine command to implement Genesis 12:3c, God's promise to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Other Exiles

The experience of the Babylonian Exile must have entailed several different kinds of harsh suffering: the emotions of uncertainty, fear, grief, disorientation, despair, and loss of meaning, among others, as well as the physical hardships of hunger, thirst, cold, heat, and exhaustion. The future must have appeared to be nothing but a question mark. There was also the forced march on the way to the site of mass imprisonment preceding the daily life in captivity. Perhaps the closest equivalent in the modern era is the "Trail of Tears," which occurred when the Indian Removal Act of 1830, signed by President Andrew Jackson, was implemented by coercing a hundred thousand or more Native Americans—men, women, and children—to journey by foot, under armed guard, from their fertile lands in the southeastern U.S. to the Oklahoma Territory. Tens of thousands died along the route.

Today the experience of exile is encountered by people who are compelled by political or economic oppression, often involving stark physical danger, to immigrate to a Western democracy to preserve their lives. Although this migration may appear to be voluntary, it is

actually a forced exile when the immigrants have no other choice but to escape from their native land. If they are not welcomed in the host country, the uncertainty, loneliness, and disorientation are magnified.

Each of us can identify with particular elements of the exile experience if we have ever been shunned by our families or friends, relocated to a drastically different environment, stationed far away from home (perhaps in the armed services), or imprisoned.

A Tale of Two Disasters, Shoah and Nakba

The Jewish Disaster (*Shoah*):

The Diaspora (dispersion) of the Jews began with the return from the Babylonian Exile, when not all of the Jews returned to their homeland, but instead migrated to other lands. One location that attracted Jewish migrants was Egypt, where the Elephantine, an island in the Nile, became the home of a Jewish colony. Jewish migration out of the Middle East was accelerated when the empire of Alexander the Great and subsequently the Roman Empire provided trade routes and opportunities to thrive in diverse locations. The expulsion of 135 CE, following a Jewish revolt against Roman rule, caused further dispersion of the Jews of Judea.

The history of Jewish life in Europe during the Christian era is rife with instances of persecution and discrimination. Of course there were times and places in which Jews and Christians lived in harmony, but the depth of Jewish suffering had many facets. Jews were barred from certain professions, confined to restricted areas of habitation, and even—by order of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215—compelled to wear distinctive clothing so that they could be easily identified by the Christian populace. In addition to the massacres of Jews during the Crusades and the Inquisition, Jews were blamed for the bubonic plague of the fourteenth century and accused of murdering Christian children to consume their blood (“the blood libel”).

For Theodor Herzl of nineteenth-century Vienna, the last straw was the unjust conviction of Alfred Dreyfuss for treason in France in 1894, an injustice clearly motivated by anti-Semitism. Herzl decided that the Jews needed a safe haven where they could be the majority, free to be openly Jewish without fear. He is seen as the father of the Zionist movement, the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, then under the rule of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire. Jewish migration from Europe increased steadily between the 1890s and the 1930s.

The capstone of the horrific accumulation of Jewish sufferings in Europe was of course the *Shoah*, the genocide of the Jews instigated by Nazi Germany. Frequently Westerners call it “the Holocaust,” but this term is disliked by those who understand that a “holocaust” is a burnt offering given for God and therefore not analogous to the hate-driven mass murder committed by the Nazis. The Hebrew word *Shoah*, meaning “disaster” or “catastrophe,” is the preferable term.

The unspeakable crimes against humanity in Europe drove thousands of Jews to other shores. The U.S. severely limited Jewish immigration in the 1930s, turning desperate refugees away. Recently discovered documents reveal that Otto Frank, Anne Frank’s father, applied for entry to the U.S. for his family, but in vain. One consequence of the Nazi atrocities was that

Jewish migration to Palestine, now under British control, accelerated in the 1930s and 1940s. After the liberation of the death camps, the civilized world, reeling in shock, recognized the necessity to assure safety for the Jews. In 1947 the United Nations voted to partition the territory of Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state, and in 1948 the state of Israel was created.



Anne Frank, Shoah victim. Her family was denied a visa for immigration to the U.S. (public domain; Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License, via Wikimedia Commons)

The Palestinian Disaster (*Nakba*):

As one population fled from disaster (*Shoah* in Hebrew), another disaster (*Nakba* in Arabic) was inflicted on a different population, the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine.

In 1897, after the first World Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, two rabbis were sent as scouts from Vienna to Palestine to assess the prospects for a Jewish homeland. In their report they remarked, “The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man”; in other words, the land of Palestine is already inhabited. The indigenous people, however, were considered to be a removable obstacle. David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first Prime Minister, stated in 1937, “I support compulsory transfer. I don’t see anything immoral in it” (quoted in the book *Righteous Victims* by the Israeli historian Benny Morris and cited on the website www.palestineremembered.com). “Compulsory transfer” is of course the same strategy that the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians pursued.

In 1947 and 1948 thousands upon thousands of Palestinians were evicted from their homes. The Zionist leaders spawned “Plan Dalet,” with the goal of removing Palestinians from the land. The Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, using declassified government documents, has provided a detailed account of this operation in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.

The forcible expulsion of Christian and Muslim Arabs from their farms, towns, and villages resulted in at least 750,000 refugees. A massive humanitarian crisis was created, and in response the United Nations established UNRWA, the United Nations Relief Works Agency, which is still active today. This crisis was largely ignored in the United States. In 1950 the

American journalist Dorothy Thompson produced a television documentary about it, entitled *Sands of Sorrow*, but it was never broadcast. Palestinian refugee camps still exist in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza. At present approximately five million Palestinians are eligible to receive assistance from UNRWA. The fifty-eight refugee camps resemble urban slums. Other Palestinians are “internally displaced”; that is, they have remained within the boundaries of what has become the state of Israel, but their villages and farms have been either destroyed or resettled by Jewish Israelis. In our next encounter we will meet one of these internally displaced Palestinians.

Some Zionist apologists blame the Palestinians for their own sufferings by claiming that the Palestinians rejected the UN partition of the Holy Land into two states in 1947; otherwise, they argue, the Palestinians would have been enjoying independent statehood today. This argument ignores the fact that the partition was unjust because the Jewish population received more land per capita than did the Arab population: the Jewish allotment consisted of 54 percent of the land for 33 percent of the population.

Twenty years later, in 1967, the Six Day War resulted in the Israeli conquest of the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the West Bank, Gaza, and the Sinai, thereby producing 300,000 more Palestinian refugees. The Arab nations are sometimes blamed for starting that war, but conflicting accounts are in circulation. Some accounts accuse the Egyptian government of instigating a sea blockade, while other accounts point to the harassment of Palestinian farmers near the Syrian border or to an Israeli airstrike against Egypt.

The truly disastrous consequence of 1967 conquests was the inception of the Israeli settlement enterprise, which has swallowed up Palestinian land and water, displacing families and reducing the economic capability of Palestinian society. The Israeli settlements in the West Bank continue to grow, despite the fact that their very existence is a violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. In order to protect the settlements, checkpoints and a separation wall have been installed, which hinder transport of people and goods.

When the Sinai was returned to Egypt through the negotiations of President Jimmy Carter, Israel retained the Gaza Strip and built settlements there. In 2005 the settlements were removed, but Israel is maintaining tight control of Gaza’s borders and coastline. Fishing is restricted to six nautical miles from shore, and the import of goods into Gaza is strictly limited. Sanitation and water supplies are grossly inadequate to support the two million residents of this strip of land that is 25 miles long with a width varying between 3 and 7 miles.

It is obvious that the Israeli strategy is to diminish the Palestinian standard of living and thereby drive Palestinians out of the territories that Israel covets. The overall goal is ethnic cleansing.

Below is a set of maps illustrating the disenfranchisement, displacement, and ethnic cleansing of Palestine.



(photo, www.fosna.org)

What can we do?

Responsible citizens can and should exercise a critical approach to the news media. Our American journalists, commentators, and pundits often do not tell the whole story. Palestinians have been stereotyped as terrorists, and the truly horrifying tragedy of the *Shoah* has blinded Americans to Palestinian sufferings, which are a secondary result of Jewish sufferings. Watch the video *The Occupation of the American Mind*, and arrange a showing of it at your church or through another organization. Here is a link for information about the video:

<http://mediaed.org/occupationmovie/>

Alternative news sources also provide information that can serve as a counterbalance to mainstream media bias. The Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* is useful, as are the daily bulletins from Mondoweiss, an internet news source founded and directed by an American Jewish journalist, Philip Weiss. Here are the links:

<http://www.haaretz.com>

<http://mondoweiss.net>

Another link provides the history of Palestine that is often ignored. At the “Palestine Remembered” website we can get a taste of Palestinian culture and society that existed before the Nakba.

<http://www.palestineremembered.com>

Above all, spread the word to friends, neighbors, and associates. Write letters to newspaper editors and legislators. Like the ancient Hebrew prophets, speak the truth boldly—the whole truth and nothing but the truth!

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Discuss the forced removal of populations in American history. There are several. These include indigenous tribes, Africans, African Americans (during and after enslavement; with regard to the post-slavery era: “covenanted” housing and restricted access to public spaces), Japanese Americans, selective arrest and incarceration. What factors were at play to prompt them? How do forced removals mark a society and how do they shape cultures (of both winners and losers) in following generations?
2. Discuss the dual impulses of exiled populations to assimilate/blend in, or to separate/purify identity. What are positive/negative outcomes of each? How do these impulses appear in your own family history?
3. Consider the suggestion that Isaiah’s new theology of hope lay in the idea of God’s enlarged purposes. Is God more than a tribal god committed to a single people? How is a more hopeful understanding of God’s universal intentions reflected in the teachings of Jesus?
4. Can distinct experiences and epochs of suffering be compared in their evil, or ranked in their importance? Has the world’s appropriate and overdue remorse for its willful ignorance, apathy and brutality in the Shoah allowed another display of willful ignorance, apathy, and brutality against the Palestinian people?
5. The “myth of the generous offer” claims that Palestinians have caused their own suffering by refusing unjust prior proposals. As each new proposal from Israel allows less and less autonomy and access to resources to people who long for freedom and equality, are Palestinians justified in resisting efforts that would remove permanently their status as equal, free people entitled to self-determination?
6. Find out who lives in your community. There are likely Palestinian refugees/exiles nearby. How did they come to live in your area? When and why did they move? Are family members close-by or far away? Are they able freely to visit family members within or beyond Palestine? Explore various dimensions and shades of experience which might all come under the heading “exile.”
7. Today there are new pressures and an accelerating climate of fear as students, families, and workers from some Muslim countries may be banned from entering the United States. At the same time many undocumented workers from Mexico and Central and South America live in fear of being rounded up and sent back to their country of origin. How might we consider their plight and offer alternative solutions for them?

Fourth Encounter: Mary of Nazareth

In the previous encounter we considered the tragedy of exile and the longing for liberation. A beloved Advent hymn has used exile as a metaphor for the human condition of alienation from the knowledge of God.

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here,
Until the Son of God appear.

When the Son of God came as the universal liberator, he arrived first in the womb of one of the most lowly and vulnerable members of society—a young, inexperienced woman who herself had been born into a population that had been conquered by the military and economic might of the Roman Empire. Within that oppressed society itself, the social status of her family was low, for their geographical origin in the northern region of Galilee identified them as less prosperous and less sophisticated than the Jews in urban settings of the south. The town of Nazareth in particular was not esteemed; recall that in John 1:46, when Nathanael first hears a description of Jesus, he reacts with a sardonic question: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

The status of Galilee as an occupied territory would have been difficult to forget for the people of Nazareth because a Roman-style city occupied a hilltop only six miles to the northwest. This was the city of Sepphoris (preserved today and called Tzipori or Zippori). After the Roman conquest of Palestine, the puppet king Herod the Great established his capital there. Roman buildings with colorful mosaics lined its avenues. Upon Herod’s death, around the time of Jesus’ birth, a Jewish attempt to seize and claim the city was violently suppressed by the Roman army. Sepphoris was subsequently renovated by one of Herod’s sons, Herod Antipas (the tetrarch of Galilee who ordered the execution of John the Baptist), a collaborator with the Romans. Since these events took place nearby, Mary and her fellow Nazarenes would have been acutely conscious of the occupation and colonization of their native land.

This is the situation into which the Son of God entered. Thus in the circumstances of the conception of Jesus we see a prime example of God’s special concern for the downtrodden, as well as the very beginning of Jesus’ outreach to the needy and marginalized.

In early Christian theology Mary of Nazareth was regarded as one of the Biblical prophets. Several fourth- and fifth-century Biblical interpreters, including the famous St. Ambrose and the renowned church historian Eusebius, explicitly described her in this way. In fact, Luke 1:46-55 shows the pregnant Mary making a prophetic speech, which many churches refer to as *The Magnificat*. The speech includes these words about God’s actions in human history:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, . . .
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

(verses 46b-47, 51-53 NRSV)

Mary's words are often compared to those of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Having conceived and borne a child after many years of infertility, Hannah praises and exalts God, marveling at his powerful sympathy for the downtrodden, the defeated, the needy. Hannah says,

My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in my God. . . .
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap . . .

(verses 1b, 7-8a NRSV)

The words of both these women are in accord with the words of Jesus himself, who said, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16, with parallels in Matthew 19:30, Mark 10:31, and Luke 13:30). This elevation of those whom human society has relegated to its lowest stratum is called the "Great Reversal" by many modern theologians and is also characterized by the term "Option for the Poor," which is central to liberation theology. Ancient Christians reversed the socially accepted standards of "high" and "low," applying God's standards rather than worldly ones. In fact, the cognitive dissonance generated by this reversal was disturbing to residents of Thessalonica, who responded to the preaching of Paul and his companions by labeling them as "these people who have been turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6 NRSV).

Reversals Today

It is only human to enjoy the sight of a haughty person brought low and to exult when an underdog emerges as a winner from a challenging situation. The first case is often called by the German term *Schadenfreude*, that is, joy in another person's shame. As Christians, however, we know that we should pray and act for those who proudly dominate others—not in order to shame them, but to enlighten them so that they will assume responsibility for their actions. The second case, cheering for an underdog, is part of the so-called "American Dream," exemplified by the poor immigrant who becomes a business tycoon in the land of opportunity. As we rightly admire the hard work and perseverance of those who attain professional success, we must remember that God is stronger than the strongest and that those in the upper strata of society must not forget to concern themselves with the welfare of all.

The main thrust of the "Great Reversal" and the "Option for the Poor" has to do with where we should look for God's activity in history. If we desire to unite ourselves with God's agenda, the place in which to seek it is among the poor, the sick, the homeless, the downtrodden, the depressed, and folks who are perceived or perceive themselves as unimportant. This does not mean that God is indifferent to the healthy and affluent. Not at all! But it means that the comfortable should look for God among the afflicted and the people who work with them; this

will entail some discomfort. When God’s image in a human being is not acknowledged, we, as God’s ambassadors and agents in the world, must strive to affirm it by enabling each person’s God-given potential to flourish. In this way, we ourselves, like Paul and his companions, can participate in “turning the world upside down.”

Nazareth Today

Nazareth is located inside the state of Israel, in Galilee, which is in the northern part of the Israel. It is a modern city of 75,000 inhabitants, approximately 60,000 of whom live in the main part (“Lower Nazareth”). Lower Nazareth is an Arab (Palestinian) city that includes the ancient town of Nazareth, which is called the “Old City.” It is here where Jesus and his parents are assumed to have lived. There is also a Jewish town, Nazareth Illit (“Upper Nazareth”), which is not hospitable to Arab residents.

The main city is host to multitudes of tourists and religious pilgrims of all nationalities. Tourist sites include the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation and the Roman Catholic Basilica of the Annunciation. Outside the Orthodox church is an ancient well, which legend has identified as the well where Mary drew water and where the Angel Gabriel announced her pregnancy to her. The Catholic basilica is built over the traditional site of Mary’s home, which another legend designates as the site of the Annunciation.



A street in the Old City of Nazareth. Did Jesus walk here?
 (photo, Juandev, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license,
 via Wikimedia Commons)

The town of Upper Nazareth, or Nazareth Illit, houses many newly arrived Jewish immigrants from Russia. By Israel's "Law of Return," any Jewish person from anywhere in the world can immigrate to Israel or to one of its West Bank settlements (illegal under the Geneva Convention) and can immediately receive Israeli citizenship. On the other hand, Palestinians who were forcibly displaced may not return to their homes; the "Right of Return" that Palestinians advocate for themselves is rejected by Israel.

Shimon Gapso, the mayor of Nazareth Illit, has refused to open an Arab school for the Palestinian minority. He is proud of the ethnocratic nature of his town. In an essay he has made the following statements:

Yes—I'm not afraid to say it out loud, to write it and add my signature, or declare it in front of the cameras: Upper Nazareth is a Jewish city and it's important that it remains so. If that makes me a racist, then I'm a proud offshoot of a glorious dynasty of racists . . .

(Gapso, "If You Think I'm a Racist," *Haaretz*, Aug. 7, 2013)

In light of Nazareth's Bible role, this new voice is jarring. Mary proclaimed God's active support of the outcast and marginalized in *The Magnificat*. What would this Jewish prophet of Nazareth say to Mr. Gapso?

Palestinian Citizens of Israel

When the state of Israel was established in 1948, causing at least 750,000 Palestinians to be expelled or to flee, some Palestinians remained within the boundaries of what became Israel. Many of these were "internally displaced"; that is, they lost their homes and villages. These people and their descendants currently number 250,000. From 1949 to 1966 the Israeli government imposed martial law on the Palestinians inside Israel: their mobility was restricted within the country, and they were subject to curfews and incarceration without charge. (The same conditions currently prevail in the West Bank.) The affected areas included Galilee.

Today 20 percent of Israel's population consists of these Palestinians, sometimes referred to as "Arab Israelis" or "Israeli Arabs." Although they hold Israeli citizenship and are represented in the Knesset (Israel's Parliament), there are more than fifty laws that discriminate against them. For example, although Jewish towns in the Negev (the desert in southern Israel) are fully legal and receive public services such as electricity and water, Bedouin Palestinian villages are unacknowledged and are denied public services, although these villagers are fully legal citizens. In addition, some of these villages are being demolished.

Another example is that 93 percent of the land in Israel is unavailable for Palestinian habitation. It is owned by the state of Israel and the Jewish National Fund, and only Jews are permitted to enter into a lease on tracts of this land.

Palestinian schools inside Israel are not allowed to commemorate the *Nakba* (on this term see previous chapter), that is, the massive expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and villages in 1947 and 1948, and the massacres committed by Zionist forces. Any school in which such free speech is exercised will lose its funding.

Employment and housing preferences are given to Israeli citizens who have performed service in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), yet the Muslim Palestinian citizens of Israel are not permitted to serve in the army.

More information on the ethnically based discrimination in Israel is available from Adalah, an organization struggling for minority rights in Israel, at this website: www.adalah.org.

Meet Elias Chacour



Photo, Omar J. Harb, via Wikimedia Commons

Retired Archbishop Elias Chacour² of the Melkite Church (the Greek Catholic Church) is an Israeli citizen, a Palestinian who was born in 1939 in Biram, a Christian village in Galilee. The villagers enjoyed a friendly relationship with a nearby Jewish village, which was inhabited by Jews who were indigenous to the Holy Land. When the Zionists invaded Galilee in 1947, Archbishop Chacour's devout Christian parents, Michael and Katoub, instructed their children to have sympathy for these European Jews who had been so cruelly treated in their own homeland.

At first the Zionist soldiers demanded nothing more than to bivouac inside the Chacour home. Young Elias' mother fed them hospitably, and the family slept on the roof so that the soldiers could occupy their rooms. In the fall of 1948, however, the military commander ordered the villagers to vacate their houses, promising them that they could return after an unspecified period of time. The villagers complied without resisting, and families slept on the ground in the surrounding olive groves.

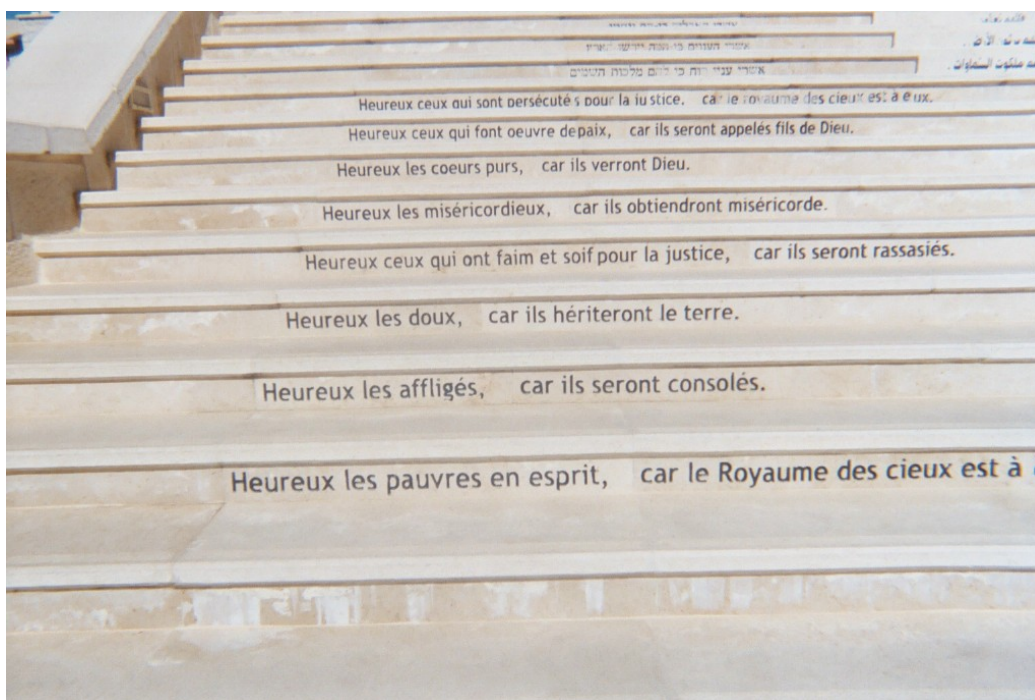
As winter approached, the villagers decided to look for shelter in the neighboring Christian village of Gish (also spelled Jish). They were shocked to discover that it was nearly deserted, with only a few elderly people remaining, and the homes had been looted and vandalized. They were even more shocked to discover dozens of corpses of Gish villagers in a shallow mass grave. Young Elias, nine years old, discovered the first corpse while he was retrieving a soccer ball.

² His last name is pronounced like this: sha-KOOR.

One day, soldiers demanded that all the adult males present themselves for deportation. Michael Chacour and his three oldest sons disappeared into the back of a truck. Three months later the Chacour men reappeared at home stealthily in the dead of night, skeletal in appearance, ragged, dirty, and exhausted. They had been transported to the border of Jordan and released to flee into the desert under gunfire. Slowly they had made their way back to Galilee, sometimes heading in the wrong direction. Their hunger had driven them to eat the insects that they found by groping in the dirt.

Archbishop Chacour relates these incidents and many others from the early history of the state of Israel in his autobiographical books *Blood Brothers* and *We Belong to the Land*. His writings glow with Christian love for his enemies. The solid faith that he learned from his parents has enabled him to assimilate the sufferings of the past into a larger vision of God's passionate love for all people, including both the persecutors and the persecuted. In fact, he sees the persecutors as particularly needy children of God.

One tangible expression of the Archbishop's radiant vision is his establishment of a school in the Galilean town of Ibillin. The Mar Elias School welcomes children of all faiths, races, and ethnicities. Today it has provided, and continues to provide, opportunities for a better life for thousands of children. Archbishop Chacour was a young priest at the time when he struggled to obtain a building permit and then to construct the school in the face of daunting obstacles. Throughout his struggles he has opened himself consistently to the unfailing guidance of his Savior, Jesus Christ. Because one of his guiding lights has been the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), he saw to it that these words of Jesus were inscribed in several languages—including English, French, Arabic, and Hebrew—on the stair-risers of the steps leading to the main door of the church on the school's campus.



Photo, Burnett, 2007

In the Beatitudes, Jesus speaks of reversal: fulfillment shall come to the poor in spirit, those who are mourning, the meek, those who hunger for justice (or for righteousness; the

underlying Greek word can be translated in either way), and those who are persecuted for it. As we contemplate these stairs, it is probably not necessary to ask: Would Mary of Nazareth smile in delight?

What can we do?

Here are four of the organizations that are worthy of our support:

Adalah, an advocacy group that asserts the rights of minorities in Israel: www.adalah.org

Pilgrims of Ibillin, a support group for the Mar Elias School: www.pilgrimsofibilin.org

Nazareth Project, a Mennonite organization that partners with Nazareth Hospital and School of Nursing in offering medical care and medical education, as well as youth and children's services: www.nazarethproject.org

Sabeel Nazareth: Among its projects is an effective ministry with women. Visit www.sabeel.org. Contact nazareth@sabeel.org for more information.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. The story of Mary takes place within a turbulent period of history. Mary lived under the stranglehold of the Roman occupation and during a season of leadership change following Herod's death. Additionally, the political climate of Mary's day produced violent efforts to obtain freedom for the Jewish people.

How do these factors appear in present-day Palestine? How does a political context for Jesus' life and teachings reveal new implications for his actions and words in his time and in ours? Think about examples of Jesus' challenge to Caesar's power, to militarism, and to collaboration by religious leaders in the repression of the powerless. What points of similarity or contrast exist between these New Testament examples and today's Palestinian population?

2. Does it surprise you that Mary has been considered a prophet? Compare her words in *The Magnificat* to other justice-oriented prophetic messages from Old Testament or New Testament sources. How does something as personal as Mary's unexpected conception of a baby bear a wider meaning for this woman of faith? How might Palestinian women today consider their own impending children's births as a sign of God's activity and the future of the Holy Land?

3. Retired Archbishop Elias Chacour often tells visiting delegations to return to their homes as stalwart friends of the Palestinian people, willing to stand in solidarity with their struggle for justice. However, he rejects any reaction of hatred toward Israelis. "If you hate the Israelis," he says, "please don't come back, for you won't be good friends and you won't be able to help us. If you hate our neighbors, your friendship will only leave us in pieces."

How does this comment reflect the discussion of *Schadenfreude* versus the aspect of the American Dream that cheers for the underdog? In what way does it reflect the brief description of Father Chacour's own life story? Does looking for winners and losers, and deciding whose fortunes to cheer, define the whole of seeking God's activity in the world? If not, what else should we be looking for?

4. Israel calls itself the single democracy in the Middle East, yet persists in robbing Palestinian citizens of Israel of opportunity, freedom, and access to basic resources. Current demands that Palestinians "accept Israel as a Jewish state" suggest this unfair injustice toward the Palestinian minority would never be corrected, since the laws and actions of Israel would exist for the explicit benefit of Jews. Having already affirmed Israel's "right to exist" (the definition once deemed sufficient), should Palestinians now be asked to forfeit forever their hope for equal rights in Israel?

Fifth Encounter: Traveling to Bethlehem with the Magi

From the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men [or *astrologers*; Greek, *magi*] from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at his rising [or *in the East*], and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd [or *rule*] my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men [or *astrologers*; Greek, *magi*] and learned from them the exact time the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising [or *in the East*], until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped [Greek, *saw the star*], they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

(Matthew 2:1-12 NRSV, with footnotes included in brackets)

This is truly a story to fire the imagination! Exotic foreign dignitaries led by a star, an ancient oracle of the Savior's birthplace (Micah 5:2), a devious king's evil ploy, and exquisite offerings to a divine infant—who could fail to be intrigued by such images?

Since the historical method of Bible study became widely known in the past hundred years, professional scholars and educated lay people have wondered about the details of the story. Was the star actually a comet that was recorded as occurring eleven or twelve years before our dating of the birth of Christ? Were there three Magi, or twelve, or perhaps another number? How old was the infant Jesus when they arrived? Did Emperor Augustus really order a census to be taken? As interesting as these details are, we would deprive ourselves of the wealth of the story if we were to confine ourselves such questions. In this encounter, let us ponder the story reflectively, utilizing and applying the insights of Scripture scholars to arrive at spiritual truths that it holds for us.



A basic feature of the Gospel According to Matthew is its presentation of Jesus as a successor to Moses. For example, Jesus' preaching is organized into five discourses, comparable to the five books of Moses comprising the Torah. Moreover, the sermon in which Jesus introduces his role as fulfilling the Jewish Law—Matthew 5-7—is the Sermon on the Mount,

delivered in an elevated location, thus evoking a comparison with Mount Sinai, where the Law was revealed. Yet another comparison to Moses resides in the story of King Herod's attempt to murder the newborn child by slaughtering all the babies and toddlers of Bethlehem, unaware that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph had escaped—a story similar to that of the Pharaoh killing all the male newborns of the Hebrews but overlooking the infant Moses (Exodus 1:8-2:10). The continuity of the Old and New Testaments is striking.

This story of the Magi in Matthew 2, however, is more than a Jewish story because its main characters are Gentiles from a land lying somewhere east of Judea. These Gentiles have not journeyed from afar merely to pay their respects, but they have come to *worship* the infant King. In the first place, there is no indication that the Magi are “three kings,” in spite of this popular epithet for them; thus it would not be accurate to perceive them as royal visitors arriving to congratulate a new monarch. In the original Greek text, the verb expressing the Magis' action (“pay him homage” in the English text of the New Revised Standard Version, above) is *proskuneō*, meaning “bend the knee.” Ancient Greek distinguishes between deep respect (*douleia*) on the one hand, and true worship (*proskunēsis*) on the other. Clearly the Magi have recognized the infant Christ as having divine status—not as a tribal or nationalistic god attached to a particular population, but as a universal Divinity evoking worship from both Gentiles and Jews.

The image of Gentiles traveling as pilgrims from a distant land to worship the “king of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2) appears to fulfill certain prophetic texts in Isaiah 56-66, the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah, which were written after the Babylonian Exile and are often called “Third Isaiah.” These chapters reveal a universal manifestation of the all-sovereign God, whom not only the Hebrew tribes, but all humanity will worship. Consider the following:

Nations shall come to your light,
 and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
 Lift up your eyes and look around;
 they all gather together, they come to you;
 your sons shall come from far away,
 and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
 Then you shall see and be radiant;
 your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
 because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
 the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
 A multitude of camels shall cover you,
 the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
 all those from Sheba shall come.
 They shall bring gold and frankincense,
 and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

(Isaiah 60:3-6 NRSV)

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
 to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
 and to be his servants,
 all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
 and hold fast my covenant—
 these I will bring to my holy mountain,
 and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
 their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
 for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

(Isaiah 56:6-7 NRSV)

The covenant between God and God's servants is no longer reserved for one nation, but is to be extended to all human beings. This progressive universalization of the divine-human relationship, which can be discerned in several other sections of the Old Testament, has been brought to light by Naim Ateek in his book *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*. (Rev. Dr. Ateek, an Anglican priest, is the founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem.)



Another crucial aspect of the Magis' mission has been pointed out by the renowned New Testament scholar Raymond Brown in his book *The Birth of the Messiah*. The Magi have received a revelation from God, but it has come to them through the natural creation, that is, through a star in the sky, rather than through the Hebrew Scriptures. As Raymond Brown notes, Paul in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans pointed out that Gentiles without the Scriptures can know God through the creation, showing that nature itself is a *bona fide* source of revelation, although in the story of the Magi it is necessary to consult the Hebrew Scriptures (Micah) to learn the exact location of the newborn King. Here the Biblical revelation and the natural revelation are not at odds, but they work together, enhancing each other.

Dr. Martin Luther King, too, has pointed to a moral law implanted in the universe, or, in his famous words, an "arc of the moral universe" that "bends toward justice." In one of the sermons compiled in his book *Strength to Love*, Dr. King says that "God has placed within the very structure of this universe certain moral principles that are fixed and immutable. The law of love as an imperative is the norm for all of men's actions" (p. 99, Fortress Press). All inhabitants of God's world, Jew or Gentile, operate within the framework of these embedded principles, whether aware of them or not.

Moreover, although Dr. King shouldered the specific task of liberating African Americans from the nightmare of racist oppression, his vision of the Beloved Community embraced all people of all colors and creeds. The goal is a global family in which all share in the resources of the earth, poverty is not permitted to exist, and conflicts are resolved by reconciliation. No one is excluded or marginalized, nor is anyone elevated by exceptionalism or special entitlement, because all are equally respected as beloved children of God with innate, indestructible dignity. (See www.thekingcenter.org.)

This authentic understanding of God's will is radically opposed to the mindset with which the ancient Israelites believed themselves entitled to steal land and kill its inhabitants—and the more recent version of racial exceptionalism that spurred Europeans and European-Americans to enslave, murder, starve, and forcibly dislocate non-white populations. Clearly the vision of Christ, which the Magi perceived and which Dr. King embraced with every fiber of his being, unites human beings with each other and with the entire creation.

What does the Messiah's arrival mean for our way of life?

King Herod knows intuitively that the "king of the Jews" whom the foreigners are seeking is much greater than an ordinary king; in fact, the child is the awaited Messiah. Why else would Herod have summoned the chief priests and scribes and "inquired of them where the

Messiah was to be born”? The religious scholars know where to look among the scrolls for the answer to the question, for the expectation of a Messiah has figured prominently in their studies.

The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has contrasted contemporary Jewish and Christian attitudes toward messianic expectation, a belief that is elevated in Judaism. In *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, Moltmann points out that Jews say “no” to Jesus as Messiah because the world still languishes in sin, just as it did before Jesus came. Certainly this perception is thoroughly understandable. It is undeniable that evils still run rampant throughout human societies. In Moltmann’s Christian view, however, God’s work of redemption has already begun with the reconciliation of God and humanity in Christ. God has entered our world physically in Jesus, who has voluntarily suffered with us, thus graphically revealing that God is on our side. Such assurance of God’s solidarity with us transforms our minds and hearts so that we can live as members of God’s Kingdom while waiting in hope for the completion of the world’s redemption. We are in the time of “already, but not yet,” as we work toward a world of justice and compassion that anticipates the coming Kingdom.

Therefore, we do not tire of doing good, we do not despair in the face of defeat, and we do not take our eyes off the ultimate prize of the complete fulfillment of God’s intention for the human family. Both Jews and Christians can actively participate in the Jewish ideal of *tikkun olam*, of repairing or healing the world, in hopeful expectation that the best is yet to come.

Bethlehem in need of repair today

Two thousand years later, the birthplace of Jesus is still a destination for pilgrims seeking the Messiah. The Church of the Nativity with its sacred grotto draws thousands upon thousands of visitors, and Manger Square at Christmas time is jubilantly adorned with a giant Christmas tree. The Christmas Eve liturgy is attended by happy throngs that include Palestinian Muslim officials. Surrounding the city center are comfortable hotels, shops, and cafes.

Yet the indigenous population of Bethlehem is as much in need of rescue from oppression as it was under Roman occupation when the Magi arrived. Unemployment is higher than 25 percent, and 35 percent of Bethlehem’s population is living in poverty. Mobility into, out of, and through the Bethlehem Governorate is limited. Workers who have been blessed with a Jerusalem work permit must spend two or three hours at a crowded checkpoint twice a day.



Bethlehem checkpoint (photo, Andrew E. Larsen, via Wikimedia Commons, link to license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/legalcode>)

In family homes, running water is available only one day per week, and no one knows in advance which day will be the one. The reason for this deprivation is that the water in the underground aquifer has been diverted into Israeli settlements. There is a nearly continuous loop of settlements on the north and west, and along the east is an Israeli-only highway.

A modern highway has been constructed around Bethlehem, but it is off-limits to Palestinians. The settlements, the “Separation Wall,” and Israeli-only bypass highways surround Bethlehem and the two contiguous towns on either side of it, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour (the traditional location of the fields where shepherds watched their flocks on the night of Jesus’ birth). A car trip from Bethlehem to the Palestinian capital city, Ramallah, should require only 25-30 minutes, but the human-made obstacles, including “flying checkpoints” (mobile checkpoints set up on an impromptu basis), can extend the time to two hours.



Graffiti on the “Separation Wall” in Bethlehem shows a reversal:
A little Palestinian girl pats down an Israeli soldier in this mural.
(artist: Banksy; photo: Pawel Ryszawa; via Wikimedia Commons)

The construction of the “Separation Wall,” often called the “Apartheid Wall” by Palestinians and sympathizers, was begun in April 2002. Two years later, while the Wall was under construction, the World Court of Justice declared it to be a violation of international law. Fourteen of the fifteen judges agreed. The only dissenting judge was the American—a fact that is not surprising in light of the unconditional support for Israel that the United States normally provides in international bodies.

The Wall has not been built along the “Green Line,” which is the border between Israel proper and the Palestinian territory of the West Bank. Instead, its course winds its way inside the West Bank, positioning Palestinian lands on the Israeli side of the Wall and thereby appropriating more land for Israel. This means that Palestinian villages and homes are cut off from each other, and that in order to travel inside the West Bank, a Palestinian must cross through a checkpoint. Often the Palestinian has no choice but to drive or walk a highly inconvenient distance along the length of the wall in order find a checkpoint.

Bethlehem is home to three refugee camps housing forcibly displaced survivors of 1948 and their descendants: Aida Camp, Deheisheh Camp, and Al Azza Camp. These urban slums suffer from high unemployment and are dependent on the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) to provide schools for the children. The residents have even less access to water than do other residents of Bethlehem; in fact, Aida Camp has water for only six hours per week. The children of Aida used to enjoy playing in the neighboring fields and olive groves, but since the Wall has been constructed, with its watchtowers staffed by hostile Israeli soldiers, the children are now confined to narrow, dusty streets and rooftops.

The Wall at Aida Camp, Bethlehem (photos, Burnett, 2007)



The Nassar family and the Tent of Nations

Three miles south of Bethlehem is a hilltop farm owned by the Nassar family. The Nassars, who cultivate fruit and olive trees as well as grapevines and almond trees, have owned the property since 1916, when the Ottoman Turks ruled Palestine. For more than a hundred years, the family has preserved its ownership documents and tax receipts from the Ottoman regime, the British Mandate, the government of Jordan, and, finally (since the Israeli conquest of 1967), the state of Israel. Despite its clearly authenticated, continuous ownership of the farm, the family has suffered harassment both from local settlers and from the Israeli government.

The family has been prohibited from maintaining a well on their property. This restriction would have caused them to purchase their water from an Israeli company, but the delivery truck could not traverse the access road leading to the farm because the Israeli army dumped piles of

rocks and dirt in the roadway. Therefore, the family relies on cisterns for collecting rainwater. On various occasions the family has awakened to find that hundreds of their trees and vines have been destroyed or that bulldozers are at work building a road through their orchards. For example, in May 2014, a host of trees numbering between 1,500 and 2,000 were destroyed without warning. Neighboring settlers have even invaded their property and held them at gunpoint.

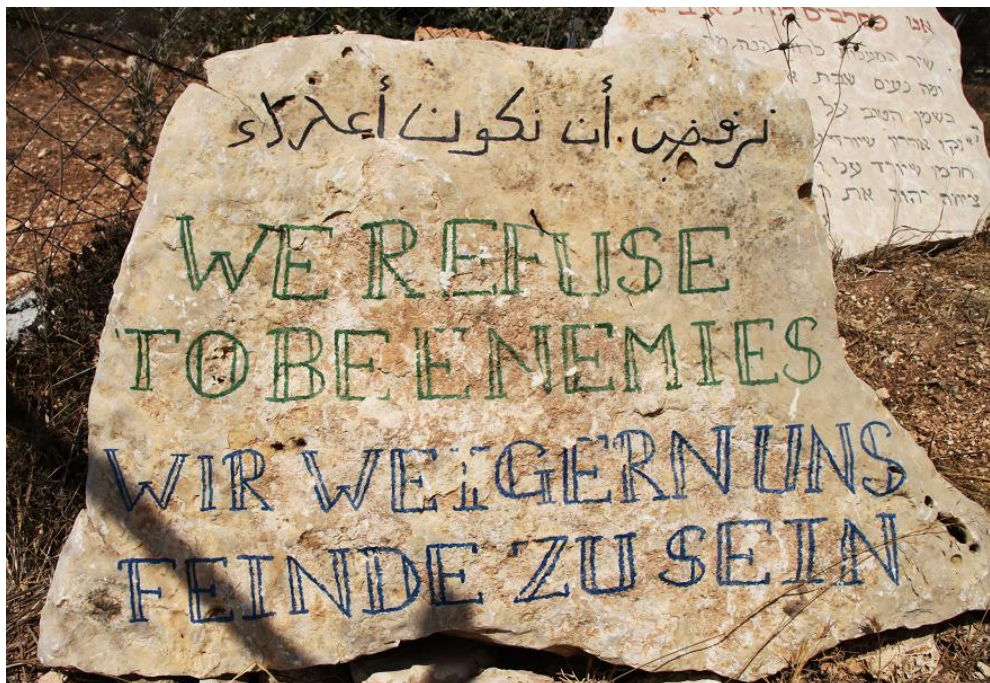
Photo below: Daoud (David) Nassar, family spokesperson, described by Rabbi Brant Rosen as “a gentle, honorable man, thoroughly dedicated to the cause of a just coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians” (photo and quotation: www.rabbibrant.com)



How has this family responded? They have struggled in the Israeli courts repeatedly, never giving up. After all, they are Palestinians, and *sumud* (perseverance with dignity) is a cultural value. Even more significantly, they are Christians with a commitment to love those who persecute them. In one of the many caves on their hillsides, the family maintains a chapel where they pray for their neighbors and for peace and reconciliation. Daoud Nassar has told how, upon meeting a settler on the road, they invited her for tea, and subsequently she and her husband became friendly.

But they have done much more. To implement their vision of international unity, they have established an organization called Tent of Nations, and through it they host summer camps for children and youth of different nationalities. Art, music, and drama help the participants to grow in love for each other and for the natural environment. Adults and youth do volunteer work on the farm and with the campers. The international support of volunteers and financial supporters enables the Nassars to retain their family farm, and in turn the campers, volunteers, and supporters share in uplifting experiences and personal growth.

Most moving of all is the inscribed rock that marks the entrance to the Nassar farm. In three languages—English, German, and Arabic—the inscription asserts: “WE REFUSE TO BE ENEMIES.”



(photo, www.tentofnations.org)

What can we do?

If you visit Bethlehem, please spend some time there. Hotels and eating-places abound in the city, and the atmosphere is cheerful. The economy of Bethlehem needs your business!

For tours, Friends of Sabeel North America (www.fosna.org) has a new Witness Trip Council consisting of colleagues who have organized Holy Land trips for decades. They are available to work with churches and individuals in organizing responsible travel to the Holy Land. Contact Dr. Linda Kateeb: lkateeb@sbcglobal.net.

There are many worthy schools, colleges, and charitable organizations to support. One of them is Bright Stars of Bethlehem (provides social services and activities for young and old): www.brightstarsbethlehem.org

The Tent of Nations is under constant threat from the Israeli government and settler movement, which covet their land. Will you enlist to contact your elected officials and the U.S. State Department if there are any attempts to seize all or part of the Nassar family farm? We can follow the Nassars' activities and challenges at this website: www.tentofnations.org.

The U.S. support group for Tent of Nations is called Friends of Tent of Nations (FOTONNA): www.fotonna.org

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. This encounter affirms Matthew's effort to present Jesus as the successor to Moses. Several specific narratives as well as the basic five-part structure of Matthew's gospel provide examples of parallel threads between Moses' story and Jesus' life and purpose. Do these points of connection increase understanding of Jesus' role in the life of the Christian? If Matthew presents Jesus as the New Moses, what new energy for transfiguration (compare Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9) might open fresh insights for God's revelation in Jesus Christ?

2. This encounter highlights competing visions of God's people. All people are God's people, not just certain people. Is God perceivable across diverse experiences (as by the Magi) or solely via authorized sources such as select holy writings? Can our individual encounters with God, our scientific learning, and our natural observations add to the total experience and understanding of God? Does the information outlining some of the contemporary hardships in Bethlehem raise theological questions along with humanitarian or political questions? What questions are raised for you?

3. How can the Jewish ideal of *tikkun olam* (healing the world) be applied to the suffering in modern-day Bethlehem?

Consider as well the Arabic practice of reconciliation—*sulha*—which brings opposing parties together, names wrongs that have been committed (with facilitation by a neutral third party), establishes acceptable compensation/restitution, and permits neighborly relationships to be rebuilt. See www.Alaslah.org, the website for the Wi'am Center, the Palestinian Conflict Transformation Center in Bethlehem.

Look also at the Kairos Palestine document, the 2009 statement by Palestinian Christians. Here is a website for accessing the document as well as a study guide:

<https://www.pcusa.org/resource/kairos-palestine-document-and-study-guide/>. An important emphasis is that establishment of justice between Israel and Palestinians is the necessary first step toward reconciliation. See section 4 on "Love and Resistance" and section 7 with its "Word to the International Community."

How do theological commitments and cultural resources such as these, as well as grassroots activism such as Boycott/ Divestment/Sanction (BDS) efforts, prove capable of building justice and repairing wrongs experienced by the Palestinian people living under military occupation?

4. The Nassar family of Bethlehem is committed to resisting Israeli efforts to claim their legally-held family land and force their departure. In the process of building local and international support, the family boldly applies Christian truth, which rests upon an ethic of loving one's enemies. Some would say "refusing to be enemies" is a commitment far more rooted in saying "Yes" than in saying "No." What do the Nassars say "Yes" to? What do they say "No" to? What deeply-rooted places in your life and faith compel you to say a strong "No" or a committed "Yes"?

5. The Magi traveled from afar to see Jesus in Bethlehem for themselves. By contrast, many contemporary "Christian tours" of Israel discourage modern visitors from exploring Bethlehem, one of the most accessible communities in the West Bank. With no justification, Israeli tour companies are discouraged from scheduling overnight stays in Bethlehem's comfortable, safe, affordable hotels and hostels. "Refusing to be enemies" can include refusal to be manipulated

and managed by economic or political interests intent upon impeding deep experiences and relationships with today's "living stones" (contemporary Christians) of Bethlehem.

Will you consider a journey to discover Bethlehem and other Palestinian communities for yourself or your church? Alternative tours abound. See www.fosna.org for sample witness trips, and contact Dr. Linda Kateeb for more information, lkateeb@sbcglobal.net. In addition to the sample trips on the website, many others are also available. Review some of the itineraries and discuss the quality of travel in the Holy Land which opens doors of relationship and understanding with Christians who live there today.

6. The Shepherd's Field neighborhood of Beit Sahour (adjacent to Bethlehem) is a Christian village, home to a sizable Christian community. Christian residents affirm longstanding positive relationships with Muslim neighbors, coupled with shared struggles that are experienced by all Palestinians (Christian and Muslim alike) living under Israeli military occupation.

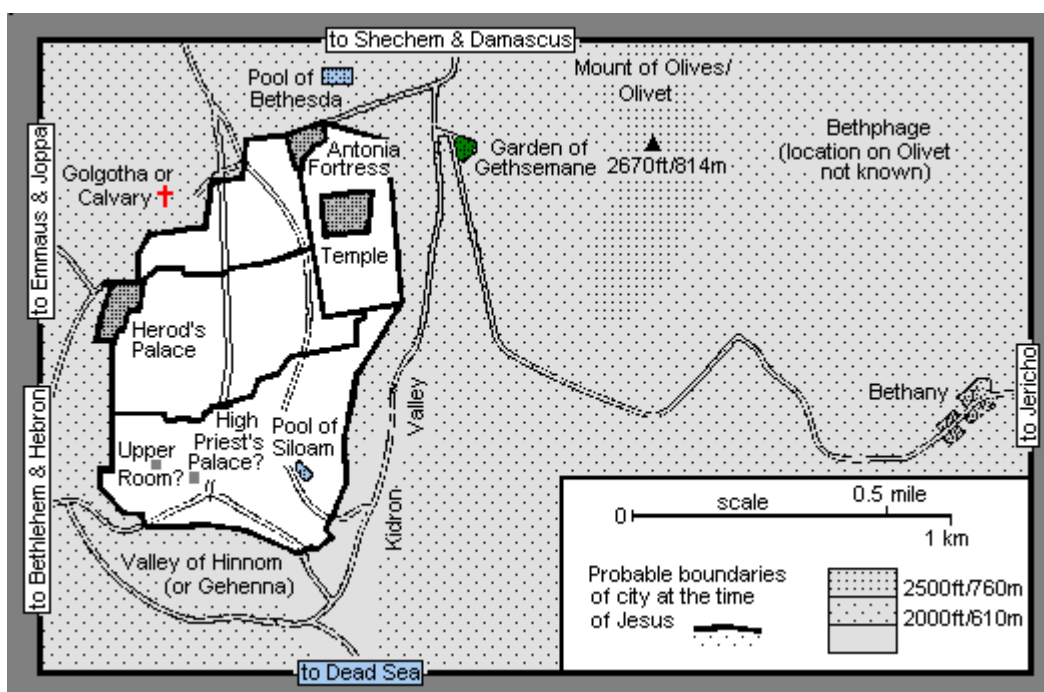
What opportunities exist for building relationships with Muslim or foreign neighbors in your community? Many of these neighbors may have been led by "stars" of faith, hope, or the longing for a better life. Many have stories of "angelic displays" that allowed them to reach their new home. Allow yourself the opportunity to meet these neighbors and to hear their stories. Then, share what you learn with others in your family, church, or neighborhood.

What are the challenges involved in maintaining daily relationships with folks whose customs and patterns of friendship and family interactions differ from yours? How can you seek common ground with "the Other" while simultaneously recognizing differences?

Sixth Encounter: Jesus and the Mount of Olives

For this final encounter we will travel back to the vicinity of Jerusalem. Previously in our encounter with King Hezekiah, we sojourned in the most ancient part of Jerusalem, the City of David, which is in the southeastern portion of the city. In the map below, it is the area where the Pool of Siloam is located. In conjunction with King Hezekiah and his underground aqueduct, we noted what is happening in East Jerusalem today—namely, the demolition of Palestinian homes. Now we will look eastward across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives.

Immediately to the east of the Old City of Jerusalem, and running along a north-south axis, is the Kidron Valley, a long ravine. The eastern bank of the ravine rises into a chain of hills comprising the Mount of Olives. At the base of the Mount of Olives, just across the Kidron Valley from the Old City, is the site identified as the ancient Garden of Gethsemane. The village of Bethany is located on the Mount of Olives, to the southeast of Gethsemane.



Map: <http://www.ccel.org/bible/phillips/JBPhillips.htm>

The Mount of Olives and the final week of Jesus' ministry

The Mount of Olives plays a conspicuous role in the climactic final days of Jesus' ministry. Although there is not total agreement between the Gospel of John on the one hand, and the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) on the other, regarding the activities and chronology of Jesus' last week on earth, nevertheless all four Gospels relate the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (the "Palm Sunday" route). All of the Gospels locate Jesus immediately beforehand in the village of Bethany or of Bethphage, or both—that is, in a village setting on the Mount of Olives (see map above). During the week following his Palm

Sunday ride, according to Matthew and Mark, Jesus lodged in Bethany, and Luke places his accommodations on the Mount of Olives without identifying the village. Moreover, it was from the Mount of Olives that the risen Jesus ascended into heaven (Acts 1:12).

In Matthew 26 and Mark 14 we see Jesus as a dinner guest of Simon the leper in Bethany. On this occasion an unnamed woman anoints Jesus with expensive ointment that she has brought in an alabaster flask. In defending the woman's action against accusations of extravagance, Jesus foretells his own suffering and death. Immediately afterward, on the same evening, Judas Iscariot slips out to arrange his betrayal of Jesus. John 12, however, places the incident at the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus; it is Mary who anoints Jesus' feet, wiping them with her hair, and in this depiction also, Jesus mentions that death awaits him. (Luke 7 has a similar incident, but it occurs in Galilee early in Jesus' ministry and does not involve a prediction of his passion and death.)

The Gospel of John highlights Bethany as the home of the siblings Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, all followers of Jesus. In John 11, it was after Jesus revived Lazarus, summoning him out of his tomb, when the chief priests and the Pharisees began to plot against him in deadly earnest. Aware of the danger, Jesus retreated to the town of Ephraim northeast of Jerusalem (in John 11:54, now a tourist-friendly town called Taybeh) to await the beginning of Passover week, and then he returned to the house of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha in Bethany. From here he made his entry into Jerusalem (John 12).

The Old Testament significance of the Mount of Olives

The association of the Mount of Olives with the completion of Jesus' earthly mission and his ascension into heaven can be considered in light of Old Testament references to it. There are two passages in prophetic books that connect this location with the power and glory of God. These occur in Ezekiel and Zechariah.

In the third encounter we saw that the prophet Ezekiel, forcibly relocated to Babylon in the first wave of exiles (597 BCE), had visions of wheels and living creatures or cherubim (Ezekiel 1 and 10). These came to him in cloud and fire (Ezekiel 1:4), reminiscent of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire that, in the book of Exodus, accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness. The message was that the glory of the Lord was not confined to Jerusalem but accompanied the people in their exile. In chapter 11, Ezekiel himself is transported by the Spirit to the Jerusalem Temple, where he receives a promise from the Lord:

I will give them one [or *a new*] heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

(Ezekiel 11:19-20 NRSV, with alternate reading inside brackets)

In other words, God is initiating a renewed relationship with the people. Immediately after these words of promise, Ezekiel again sees the cherubim and wheels, "and the glory of the God of Israel was above them" (11:22b). Then Ezekiel, still in Jerusalem, witnesses this:

And the glory of the LORD ascended from the middle of the city, and stopped on the mountain east of the city.

(Ezekiel 11:23)

Immediately afterward, the Spirit carries Ezekiel back to Babylon, where he tells his fellow exiles about his experiences.

It is safe to assume that this mountain east of Jerusalem is the Mount of Olives. Just as the Sinai Covenant, mediated by Moses, was sealed on a mountain, this new relationship is also connected with a mountain, the Mount of Olives. It is no surprise, then, that Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, spends time on the Mount of Olives and ascends to heaven from it.

The other prophetic text is more specific. This prediction in Zechariah 14, written about two hundred years after the end of the Babylonian Exile, expresses a vivid apocalyptic expectation in describing “a day” that “is coming for the LORD” (Zechariah 14:1). Verse 4 makes the following prediction:

On that day his [the LORD’s] feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley; so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward.

(Zechariah 14:4)

Many Jews of the modern era have taken this prediction so seriously that they have arranged to be buried on the Mount of Olives so that they will be present when the Messiah’s feet come to stand on it. This is why a Jewish cemetery now occupies a broad expanse of the Jerusalem-facing slope of the Mount of Olives.



A portion of the Jewish cemetery, Mount of Olives
(photo, lunaticoutpost.com, via Wikimedia Commons)

Two other texts from the book of the prophet Zechariah are quoted in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' final week. Matthew and John apply the words of Zechariah 9:9 to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives (in the Palm Sunday narrative). This text is quoted as follows in Matthew 21:5 (NRSV):

Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The quotation of Zechariah 9:9 in John 12:15 is similar. Both Gospel writers are using the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament that is called the Septuagint.

It should be noted that the humble, unassuming entry of Jesus through the city gate is strikingly at variance with the grandiose triumphal entries of ancient imperial rulers who displayed their military might in regal processions with gleaming chariots, horses, and phalanxes of armored warriors, and vaunted their prowess with parades of conquered people in chains as well as exhibitions of captured booty. By contrast, Jesus arrived with none of these symbols of raw power, but instead his action expressed solidarity with the poor.

The other Zechariah text is quoted in Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14:27. In each instance Jesus speaks these words to his disciples on the Mount of Olives after they have eaten the Passover dinner, sung a hymn, and crossed the Kidron Valley. Jesus foretells that the disciples will "fall away" from him, explaining his statement with the words of Zechariah 13:7: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered." (The phrase "of the flock" appears in Matthew but not in Mark.)

Thus we have seen that Gospel writers have highlighted two texts from Zechariah, a prophetic book that links eschatological (end-time) expectation to the Mount of Olives. Also, the Gospels offer ample evidence that Jesus was connected with the Mount of Olives. If we juxtapose all these facts, we can conclude that the Gospel writers perceive Jesus as the one who has been so long awaited. Our next step is to consider the fact that, as Jesus himself foretold, the Messiah would suffer death at the hands of adversaries.

The site identified as the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was arrested. Some of the olive trees here are ancient, possibly dating from the time of Jesus.
(photo, tripedia.info, via Wikimedia Commons)



Why was Jesus killed?

Was it really necessary for Jesus to suffer such a horrifying death? Why did he not spend decades in teaching people how to live in accordance with God's will, surviving to a serene old age while teaching and healing more than one generation of followers? How could a just God send the Son to suffer such cruelty? Christians of past centuries have asked the same question. Ancient and medieval Christian traditions have generated three principal theories explaining why it was necessary for the Son of God to be put to death.

1. One of these is that, through the sin of Adam and Eve, humanity offended God's honor so deeply that no human action could repay the massive debt. God's justice could be satisfied only by the sacrifice of a "God-man." In his mercy God sent God's own Son to pay the debt that retributive justice required. This is called the "satisfaction theory" and is associated primarily with St. Anselm of Canterbury (died 1109).
2. The second theory is linked with another medieval scholar, Peter Abelard (died 1142). This one, called the "exemplar theory," is more compatible with modern sensibilities because it says that the suffering and death of Jesus, who spread his wounded arms on the cross in an embrace of the world, compellingly manifests the depth and intensity of God's love for us and thus stirs up a reciprocal love in our hearts. Moreover, the persevering obedience of Jesus, even to death on a cross, is the example that we are to follow as God's servants.
3. The "ransom theory" is the oldest, dating from the early Christian centuries. A ransom has been paid to the devil, thereby liberating humankind from the devil's deadly grasp. A colorful fourth-century version of this theory, expounded by St. Gregory of Nyssa, speculates that the devil was deceived; having assumed that he had seized merely a righteous man, the devil was shocked to discover Jesus' divinity, which overpowered him and resurrected Jesus from the dead. The main point of this theory, with its variants, is

that Jesus Christ has delivered us from sin and death. By dying and rising again, Christ has vanquished all the forces that negate or diminish the dignity of human life, the forces that deceive us into thinking that our lives are meaningless, forces that distort the image of God in human beings. This theory of liberation from evil has been explained lucidly for Westerners by the Swedish Lutheran bishop Gustav Aulen in his invaluable book *Christus Victor*.



Although human expression cannot encapsulate the mystery of God's ineffable grace, these traditional theories are all worthy of our serious consideration. The primary question to be discussed in this sixth encounter, however, does not concern the cosmic significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. What we are seeking here is the immediate, or proximate, cause of Christ's crucifixion. Who or what is responsible for this heinous deed of torturing and killing the sinless Son of God?

For centuries upon centuries, Christians have blamed the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ, scapegoating the entire ethnic group as the source of societal ills and persecuting them viciously. Thankfully, the eyes of today's Christians have been opened to the enormity of the heinous wrongs against the Jews that have been rationalized by a false understanding of the crucifixion. We see now that there is no excuse for anti-Semitism.

Modern Christians often blame human nature for rejecting and killing Jesus. During Lent, and especially during Holy Week, when we focus on our own moral failures and spiritual immaturity, it is normal to embrace a sentiment of penitence in coming face-to-face with images of Jesus' fatal agony. A Good Friday hymn expresses it:

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended,
That man [we] to judge thee hath in hate pretended?
By foes derided, by thine own rejected,
O most afflicted!

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee.

(Johann Heermann; trans. Robert S. Bridges, 1897)



In addition to our individual self-examination and repentance, it is important to consider social sin. Of course we should look inward, scrutinizing our own souls—as a spiritual practice essential to the Christian life—but also we should focus outward, examining our social groupings and discerning how, whether knowingly or unknowingly, each of us functions as an enabler for

social sin. St. Augustine (354-430), the bishop of Hippo in North Africa, relates in his autobiographical *Confessions* that as a boy he participated in the theft of pears from a neighbor's tree. The memory of this behavior was painful to him. Although we may be inclined to remark, "Boys will be boys," excusing this escapade as a youthful prank, it is clear to Augustine that he and his comrades committed theft simply because of the perverse pleasure of wrongdoing; in fact, they did not eat the pears. Even more shocking to Augustine was his insight that the young marauders' enthusiasm was ignited by the excitement of running in a pack. That is, as a group they felt a much more powerful attraction to thievery than each of them would have experienced individually. (*Confessions*, Book 2)

As social creatures we feed on each other's energies. This is true both in informal groupings, as in the case of Augustine, and in formal institutions. The institutionalization of wrongdoing renders its evil grasp more difficult to break because it readily comes to be perceived as normal. Moreover, because the institutions of society exist in mutual dependence with one another, the reform or elimination of any one of them will affect the entire structure. An example is American slavery, which sustained the South's agriculture and the North's cotton textile industry as well as the notorious "rum-molasses-slaves" triangle of overseas trade; in fact, the entire way of life for whites in many states was built on the backs of enslaved people.

The Social Gospel

A hundred years ago, in the early twentieth century, various societal failings marred the moral landscape. The Industrial Revolution had brought about the exploitation of factory workers and coal miners, both children and adults. The cities were packed with the poor and needy. The effects of the opium trade and the liquor business were gravely harmful. The horrors of the slave trade and the bloodshed of the Civil War were not yet distant memories, and now the (First) World War had introduced the use of mustard gas in the trenches of Europe. How should Christians regard these developments?

Rev. Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), a Baptist pastor and theologian on the faculty of Rochester Theological Seminary, was awakened as a young man to the reality of social sin while serving in a New York City slum called Hell's Kitchen. Subsequently he shared his awareness as well as his new vision of the Kingdom of God through his writings. His most famous work is *Christianity and the Social Crisis*.

In one of his latest writings, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Rauschenbusch presents his analysis of why Jesus was crucified. As the faultless embodiment of God's will, Jesus remained steadfastly true to himself. It was the "super-personal forces" of human society, enmeshed in a web of sinful attitudes and institutions, that attempted to remove Jesus permanently from its midst through crucifixion. The six social factors identified by Rauschenbusch as responsible for crucifying Jesus are as follows:

1. "Religious bigotry," which sharpens social division with its zeal
2. "The combination of graft and political power," including the fleecing of the people by the money-changers in the Temple and the Roman tax system

3. “The corruption of justice,” illustrated by the trial of Jesus and rampant in the Roman courts
 4. “Mob spirit and mob action”
 5. “Militarism”
 6. “Class contempt,” which divides society
- (See pages 248-258 in the reprint of this book by Martino Press.)

Jesus' lament over Jerusalem

In Matthew 23, in the conclusion and climax of his reproaches toward the scribes and the Pharisees, Jesus speaks these poignant words about the religious and political capital of his native land:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

(Matthew 23:37 NRSV)

The same lament appears in Luke 13:34, spoken by Jesus in response to the news that his life is in danger. In Luke 19:42, during the Palm Sunday ride down the Mount of Olives, as Jesus approaches the city, he weeps over it and addresses these words to it:

If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!
But now they are hidden from your eyes.

(NRSV)

What would he say today?

The Mount of Olives today

The historic village of Bethany, located on the Mount of Olives, is called Al-Azariya by its indigenous Palestinian residents. This Arabic name is a variation of the name Lazarus. In fact, the site identified by local legend as the tomb of Lazarus is there. Sadly, the village has been bisected by the Israeli “Separation Wall” (or “Apartheid Wall”; see encounter 5), the result of which has been a drastic loss of business for retail merchants whose long-time clientele are now separated from them. Because mobility is limited, employment has suffered, and family members have less access to each other.

Below: Bethany, or Al-Azariya (photo, Burnett, 2007)



An important site on the Mount of Olives—an establishment that is especially crucial for health care—is the Augusta Victoria Hospital, which operates under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation in cooperation with the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA). Since 1948 the hospital has provided medical care to Palestinian refugees and to other needy patients, as well as to people of all ethnicities and creeds. This 164-bed hospital provides employment for 200 staff members and offers a variety of medical services, although it is best known for its oncology and kidney dialysis for patients of all ages.

The Wall and the checkpoints (see encounter 5) can be a cause of difficulty for patients trying to reach the hospital. Hospital vehicles transport patients to and from their treatment, but challenges can be encountered *en route*. Delays at checkpoints can halt vehicles for as many as four hours, causing anxiety and risking a possible exacerbation of medical conditions for patients suffering from acute problems or the labor of childbirth. Some patients are young children whose parents have no permit to accompany them into occupied Jerusalem from the West Bank.

In addition, the hospital is coping with an onerous burden of financial debt.

What can we do?

We can offer support to Augusta Victoria Hospital. In addition to our own donations, we can urge our U.S. Senators and Representatives to increase the assistance provided by USAID.

Here is the website for the hospital: www.avh.org

In regard to sinful structures of our society, we can consider the 3.8 billion dollars per year that the U.S. provides in military aid to Israel, with the U.S.-imposed provision that most of this money must be spent on U.S.-manufactured weaponry. Our taxes are supporting not only Israel's

military Occupation of Palestinian land, but also the international weapons trade. Our legislators need to hear from us!

We can also challenge the U.S. tax exemption that is enjoyed by financial contributors to Israeli settlements built on Palestinian land. Funds for swimming pools, social halls, or other amenities inside these Jewish-only settlements are categorized as charitable contributions by the Internal Revenue Service—in spite of the fact that the very existence of the settlements is a violation of international law. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits an occupying power from settling its own citizens on the occupied land.

There are also corporations that profit from the Occupation: Caterpillar (whose bulldozers demolish Palestinian homes), Motorola (which sells electronics used by the occupying soldiers), and Hewlett-Packard (which sells technology that enables the Occupation). A movement sponsored by Friends of Sabeel North America (FOSNA, www.fosna.org) is aimed at helping local churches to render themselves free of Hewlett-Packard devices. For more information, visit www.fosna.org/free-your-church-hp and contact FOSNA Organizer Rochelle Gause at rochelle@fosna.org.

Questions for discussion or reflection

1. Biblical place names sing to us as words full of dramatic and spiritual significance. Yet the Kidron Valley is actually a rather humble ravine; the Mount of Olives is a chain of modest hills; the Garden of Gethsemane is really quite small. Much of the powerful history of our faith takes place in everyday landscapes where events of great meaning nevertheless have occurred—just as in our own everyday lives.

What would a map of your holy places show? For your personal spiritual cartography, would you mark places of transformation or places of sacrifice? places of renewal or defeat? places of deep and persistent injustice or locations of transcendent heroism?

2. Lenten hymns often invite us to acknowledge a role in betraying Jesus. This is not because we literally “were there when they crucified the Lord,” but rather because we, like the disciples who fell asleep and fell away, find ourselves forgetting, ignoring, denying, and rationalizing evil.

Does it surprise you that much of the 3.8 billion U.S. dollars granted annually to Israel not only brings great harm to the Palestinian people, but also returns as profit to the U.S., enriching our economy through purchase of American-made armaments? If your denomination prohibits investment of church funds in military products, should it also divest from corporations such as Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions, and Hewlett Packard, which build and sustain the apparatus of military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and Occupied East Jerusalem?

3. The Social Gospel takes a wider view of sin than focusing solely on individual moral failure. Are we complicit when institutional racism in the U.S. devalues and destroys the lives of non-white populations? Do we bear responsibility for the Israeli Separation Wall, which (supplied by

U.S. taxes) illegally and immorally bisects villages, robs Palestinian land, eliminates freedom of movement, and compromises access to water, healthcare, farmlands, worship spaces, and family unification?

4. Christians ponder the reasons for Jesus' death. Doctrinal perspectives offer diverse theological explanations for this central facet of the Christian story. The death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the content and purpose of Christian discipleship, play an outsized role in Christian spirituality. How might you measure and expand the works of justice in your own expression of Christian practice? Where are crucifixion and resurrection reflected through your faith and discipleship? Do these key issues play a role in deepening your work for justice? How does your church (or might your church) assist you in this process of spiritual growth and witness?

5. Many churches include a children's procession during Palm Sunday worship liturgies. Challenge yourself with this task: Explain to an imagined (or real) Sunday School class today's everyday reality on the Mount of Olives. Tell about the historic Biblical village divided by an illegal wall, the Christian hospital whose patients can't always gain access, and the presence of large numbers of uniformed military occupation forces patrolling the hill from which Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and ascended into the heavens forty days following Easter.

6. The ride from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem and the Temple is a powerful statement about the values of the Kingdom of God—with a challenge to militarism, empires, and all forms of hierarchy, including the religious authorities. This is not an invitation to anarchy, but to Kingdom values, an alternative to the fear-based powers that the world has to offer. Liberation (or liberating) theology illustrates these values by emphasizing relief for the poor, compassion for victims of injustice, and the need to listen to, and even advocate on behalf of, the voices of the marginalized. Palm Sunday elevated these values and the type of Messiah Jesus was and is today. How does this orientation to the Bible and Jesus' message and ministry inform us as we focus on Holy Week this year? What does liberation theology say to the Palestinian people when the "powers that be" are ignoring the daily injustices that they are suffering?