

## OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES: LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE ISRAELI- PALESTINIAN CONFLICT\*

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### PRECIS

Ideas drawn from liberation theology are increasingly influential among critics of Israel and are shaping views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in mainline Protestant churches. Unfortunately, the importation of this Christian theological discourse by such critics has perpetuated hateful Christian stereotypes and images of Jews, even as many churches are rejecting historic anti-Jewish teachings. Whereas these liberation theologians, like those in other settings, have drawn on biblical passages such as the Exodus and Jesus' teachings to oppose political policies, the use of such texts has a very different resonance when applied to modern Jews. As does classical Christian *adversus Judaeos* literature, these theologians use the Jews' sacred texts against them and thereby turn political disagreements into religious indictments. This essay reviews some of the prominent scholarly works in order to reveal the perpetuation of anti-Jewish teachings in this new, modern context.

### *Overview and Sources*

Liberation theology is a new arrival in the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Though the roots of this conflict precede the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 by decades, only recently have Christian thinkers who

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have been influenced by the ideas of liberation theology become engaged in the dispute. Although liberation theology developed in an entirely different context, it has emerged as a central method of theological discourse among Palestinian Christians and non-Palestinian Christians who support the Palestinian cause. It furnishes an ideology of resistance and sympathy with the downtrodden that has proved popular among contemporary critics of the State of Israel. Though the influence of Palestinian liberation theologians among Palestinians is limited because of the relatively small number of Palestinian Christians, they have found a rapidly growing audience in the West, especially in the Protestant churches.

Some churches and church organizations (especially the so-called mainline Protestant denominations) are developing deeper ties with Palestinian Christians, and conferences with and church delegations to the Palestinian territories are becoming more frequent. Recent conferences run by Naim Ateek's Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem, for example, have drawn hundreds of participants from many denominations around the world.<sup>1</sup> Statements from Western church organizations on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict show the influence of liberation theology, and liberation theologians—both Palestinian and non-Palestinian—are often called upon to present their theological and historical views.<sup>2</sup> As the conflict grinds on and interested outsiders continue to be involved as advocates for one side or the other, the influence of liberation theology continues to grow.<sup>3</sup>

There are, however, serious problems associated with the emergence of liberation theology in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Liberation theology is preeminently Christian theology, and the decision to employ Christian theology as a response to the practices of the State of Israel distorts liberation theology in an unprecedented way. Even apart from this conflict, some Jews were uneasy about the central ideas in liberation theology.<sup>4</sup> Liberation theology

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<sup>1</sup>For more information, see <http://www.sabeel.org>.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Naim Ateek spoke to the General Synod of the United Church of Christ in 2003, and Mitri Raheb spoke to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2004. More recently, both have advocated divestment of church funds from Israel in meetings with American church leaders, and Ateek was awarded the 2006 Episcopal Peace Fellowship's John Nevin Sayre Award.

<sup>3</sup>Delegations from mainline churches regularly visit the Sabeel Center. Churches for Mideast Peace, which describes itself as an official "partner" of Sabeel, lists among its member churches the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the United Methodist Church. A recent Sabeel conference even included a speech by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. Representatives from many churches and organizations, such as the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the World Council of Churches, have established relationships with Sabeel and publish Sabeel-related documents on their Web sites. Further, many statements published by church organizations on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict show the clear influence of liberation theology, even when this is not made explicit.

<sup>4</sup>On Judaism and liberation theology, see Leon Klenicki, "The Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Jewish Exploration," *American Jewish Archives* 35 (April, 1983): 27–39; Jon D. Levenson, "Liberation Theology and the Exodus," in Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky, eds., *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), pp. 215–230; and Judd Kruger Levingston, "Introduction: Liberation Theology and Judaism," in Otto Maduro, ed., *Judaism, Christianity, and Liberation: An Agenda for Dialogue* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 1–19.

has always drawn heavily from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, especially the narratives of the Exodus and the life and teaching of Jesus; it derives from these narratives a religiously based ideology of resistance to injustice.<sup>5</sup> A fundamental claim is that God has an overriding concern with the poor and oppressed. However, the Exodus story—which to Jews is a narrative about God’s delivering the chosen people from bondage, bringing them to the land of Israel, and instituting a Law-based covenant—became for many liberation theologians a universal narrative of divine deliverance for all peoples. The focus on one people and the emphasis on the goal of entry into the land often drop out, along with attention to this broader Exodus theme of the creation of a covenant.

Moreover, the connection of the narrative to the historical people of Israel sometimes diminishes or disappears.<sup>6</sup> Liberation theologians’ claims that the Exodus is about the generic oppressed (sometimes even denying that the Jewish people were the people originally liberated) move the Jewish people out of their own story. This resembles classic Christian supersessionism in its hostility to the particular covenant between God and Israel.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the emphasis that liberation theologians place on Jesus’ teachings about oppression and injustice sometimes ends up repeating, even in different contexts, classic denunciations of Judaism. Also, there is a strong dualism at the heart of many liberation theologies, typified by the belief in a God who shows favor to one group. It is thus an easy move to develop a model of resistance to injustice based on an analogy to Jesus’ standing in opposition to a deficient, overly nationalistic Judaism of his time.

Before the late 1980’s there was little or no attempt to apply liberation theology to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Monographs on the topic began to appear only during the first intifada (1987–93).<sup>8</sup> The more recent appearance of liberation theology, in a conflict in which Jews and Christians sometimes find themselves on opposing sides, marks a dramatic change.<sup>9</sup> Though the most prominent religious component to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves Judaism and Islam, Christian liberation theologians began to employ theological critiques against Israel, Zionism, and what they identified as related failures of Judaism. At the same time, liberation theologians and those influenced by their ideas began to reintroduce some of the ancient anti-Jewish teachings that Western Christians have been working for decades to discard or alter. Since World War II, many Christian denominations and writers have made concerted efforts to alter their negative teachings about the Jews, including claims that Jewish

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<sup>5</sup>A classic work on liberation theology is Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, tr. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973 [orig.: *Teología de la liberación, perspectivas* (Lima: C.E.P., 1971)]).

<sup>6</sup>I use the term “Israel” to refer to the land or state (ancient or modern). I also use the term “Israel” or “Jews” for the people, regardless of time period. However, “Israelite” applies only to the Jews of the biblical period. All of these are common usages in English and should be clear from the context.

<sup>7</sup>See Levenson, “Liberation Theology and the Exodus.”

<sup>8</sup>One of the most important works was published in 1989: Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>9</sup>This is, of course, an incomplete description of the conflict; many Christians support the State of Israel, and most Palestinians are Muslims. Nonetheless, the conflict *in liberation theology* is between Jews and Christians.

teachings are legalistic and full of empty rituals and that the Jews are deicides and eternally rejected by God. Anti-Jewish statements from the writings of the first few centuries of Christianity have received particular attention. The issuing of *Nostra aetate*, the statement from Vatican II in 1965, on the relationship between Catholicism and other faiths, was a watershed event in improving Catholic teachings about the Jews, and there have been numerous other attempts by Christian scholars and denominations to correct the biased and unfavorable presentations of Jews and Judaism that characterized earlier treatments.<sup>10</sup>

In light of this progress, recent criticisms of Israel that are influenced by liberation theology are disappointing. Liberation theologians apply the stock concepts of the field to the parties in the conflict. Israel and the Jews fill the role of oppressors and serve as foils to the oppressed Palestinians with whom God stands in solidarity. Commonly, Jesus' message of an inclusive and loving God is used to critique the alleged exclusivism and intolerance of Zionism, the State of Israel, and the Jewish beliefs that are said to undergird both. I argue that liberation theologians, by reintroducing classical anti-Jewish concepts in their critiques of the State of Israel and Judaism, undermine recent improvement in Jewish-Christian relations. They introduce a distinctly Christian perspective that regrettably results in a dangerous return to historic Christian anti-Judaism and Antisemitism.<sup>11</sup> Their criticisms differ from other criticisms of Israel because of their presentation of the Israeli side of the conflict as deeply connected with and influenced by the Jewish tradition. Whereas most other critics of Israel legitimately focus on the actions of the State and its citizens, liberation theologians move the debate to a more complicated and troublesome level by explicitly assessing Israel and contemporary Jews in religious terms. Because they conflate the State of Israel and Judaism, they turn a political dispute into a religious critique of Judaism and modern Jews. The result is that they misread Judaism and perpetuate anti-Jewish accusations. Furthermore, they import their Christian ideas about how Jews should act as Jews, embroiling them in the centuries-old tradition of Christians' judging Jews for fidelity to both the biblical and the Jewish traditions.

Specifically, I demonstrate how they (1) set up a false dichotomy between supposed Jewish particularism and biblical (or Christian) universalism; (2) misrepresent the biblical covenant between God and Israel; (3) defend life in exile as both more moral and truer to the Jewish tradition than life within the Jews' own land, without regard for the Jews' actual experiences of exile; and (4) demonize Jews by applying anti-Jewish images and symbols to Israelis and modern supporters of Israel.

This essay analyzes some of the primary works in liberation theology by both Palestinian and non-Palestinian writers on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It illustrates the troubling reemergence of historic, often ancient, anti-Jewish and antisemitic tropes in these writings. It is important to note that this is not the

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<sup>10</sup>An annotated bibliography on Jewish-Christian relations can be found at [www.brite.tcu.edu/directory/cracknell/Bibliography/Jewish-Christian.PDF](http://www.brite.tcu.edu/directory/cracknell/Bibliography/Jewish-Christian.PDF).

<sup>11</sup>Many scholars differentiate between racial or modern Antisemitism and religious (usually pre-modern) anti-Judaism; the latter term is the one primarily used in this essay.

same as arguing that some liberation theologians make the *same* claims that were made by earlier Christians who were responsible for creating an entire genre of anti-Jewish literature. The claim being made here is that liberation theologians *perpetuate* many of these themes and criticisms in their writings on this conflict.<sup>12</sup> This is all the more surprising after the many attempts by Christians to reject or remove anti-Jewish and antisemitic claims from their teachings. There is little awareness in these theological selections about this valuable work to purge Christian liturgies of anti-Jewish claims, to evaluate critically the hostile descriptions of Jews and Judaism in early Christian sources, and to meet and speak with Jews to build up goodwill between the communities. On the contrary, liberation theologians' contributions to the dialogue about this painful conflict head in the opposite direction.

Because the present focus is on the perpetuation of Christian anti-Judaism and Antisemitism, this essay is based on the scholarship of one of the most important studies of the history of Christian anti-Judaism and Antisemitism, Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*.<sup>13</sup> This study is widely recognized as one of the most complete treatments of Christian hostility to Judaism, especially for the early-Christian period, and it has had a profound effect on all subsequent discussions of the topic.<sup>14</sup> Ruether thoroughly surveyed the so-called *adversus Judaeos* tradition in early Christianity. She found that most Christian writers had contributed to this large and diverse corpus. The present essay is divided into four sections according to some of the main topics in her presentation. After introducing my sources and criteria for their inclusion, I will analyze the texts according to this four-part division.

Each section begins with a Christian anti-Jewish claim and a quotation from Ruether's book that explains the accusation. Next, there is a discussion of the original claim, followed by a survey of selections from works by liberation theologians on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that illustrate how their arguments perpetuate many of these outdated and sometimes hateful anti-Jewish accusations.

The most obvious criterion for inclusion of texts in the following analysis of liberation theology is a focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Of the authors chosen, all focus explicitly on this conflict, and all are sympathetic to the Palestinian side and consistently critical of Israel. The decision about whether a text

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<sup>12</sup>Many writers covered in this survey denounce Antisemitism and anti-Judaism, and many explicitly seek to distance themselves from this history.

<sup>13</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, A Crossroads Book (New York: Seabury Press, 1974). See also idem, "The *Adversus Judaeos* Tradition in the Church Fathers: The Exegesis of Christian Anti-Judaism," in Jeremy Cohen, ed., *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), pp. 174–189. An earlier, very important work on this topic is James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1961).

<sup>14</sup>Lloyd Gaston, a prominent Pauline scholar, gave a sense of the importance of Ruether's work when he noted that she "has posed in all its sharpness what must surely be *the* theological question for Christians in our generation," i.e., the extent of anti-Judaism in early Christianity (Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* [Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987], p. 15 [italics in original]). See also John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 13–34.

can be said generally to represent a liberationist theological perspective is more subjective. However, most texts—whether monographs, sermons, liturgies, church statements, or essays—are by authors who either identify as liberation theologians or are affiliated with centers for the study of Palestinian liberation theology (particularly the Sabeel Center). The other selections are taken from essay collections on liberation theology. Four books by four liberation theologians are among the most important to the field and receive substantial attention. All contain detailed biblical and historical studies and present theological arguments of varying complexity and sophistication. The first two, both by Palestinian Christians, are recognized as “the two most important texts in English for the lay reader” on the topic.<sup>15</sup> They are Ateek’s *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, and Mitri Raheb’s *I Am a Palestinian Christian*. In addition to these two are works by Western liberation theologians: Michael Prior’s *Zionism and the State of Israel*, and *The Wrath of Jonah* by Rosemary Ruether (co-written with Herman J. Ruether).<sup>16</sup> Obviously, the fact that Ruether has become a prolific contributor to the field of Palestinian liberation theology influenced my decision to use her earlier work as a guide in the study of anti-Judaism. *Faith and Fratricide* remains one of the most important works on the subject and provides a superb summary of the relevant literature, making it ideal for this type of comparison. By contrast, her more recent writings illustrate the anti-Jewish and distorting effects of liberation theology when applied to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>17</sup>

*Classic Anti-Jewish Claim #1:  
Christian Universalism vs. Jewish Particularism*

Christianity is more moral, because it is universalistic and aims for the salvation of the gentile world, whereas Judaism is particularistic and aims for the salvation of the people of Israel alone. “All the prophetic texts saying that God will raise up salvation for Israel” apply to the “[c]hurch to prove that God intended to gather a true people of God from among the Gentiles, even in an *antithetical relation* to an apostate Israel.”<sup>18</sup>

The Hebrew Bible is the story of Israel. Though it is understood that the God of Israel is also the God of all humanity, the Bible never wavers from its

<sup>15</sup>Lance D. Laird, “Meeting Jesus Again in the First Place: Palestinian Christians and the Bible,” *Interpretation* 55 (October, 2001): 402.

<sup>16</sup>Ateek, *Justice*; Mitri Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, tr. Ruth C. L. Gritsch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995); Michael Prior, *Zionism and the State of Israel: A Moral Inquiry* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Rosemary Radford Ruether and Herman J. Ruether, *The Wrath of Jonah: The Crisis of Religious Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002 [orig.: San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989]).

<sup>17</sup>For a brief collection of responses to *The Wrath of Jonah* by authors criticized in the Ruethers’ book, see John K. Roth et al., “The Ruethers’ *Wrath of Jonah*: An Essay-Review,” *Continuum* 1 (Summer, 1990): 105–136. This issue includes essays by Mary Boys, Robert Everett, John T. Pawlikowski, Alice L. Eckardt, A. Roy Eckardt, Frank Littell, and Paul M. van Buren.

<sup>18</sup>Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, pp. 85 and 86; emphasis in original.

particular focus on one people and one land. Even from the perspective of the Bible, the world-changing accomplishments of the great emperors and kings are nothing more than divinely arranged steps leading to the ultimate redemption of Israel. For example, Cyrus the Great, who ruled over the massive Persian Empire in the sixth century B.C.E., is said to have been raised up by God in order to send home those Jews living in exile in Babylonia (Is. 44:28–45:1). God's concern is not with the massive empire but with the tiny people. The emperor is but a tool in God's plans for Israel. The earliest Christians—all of whom were, of course, Jews—shared this belief in the special concern of God for Israel. Jesus and his earliest followers saw his mission as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel (for example, Mt. 10:5–6; Lk. 1:68–79; Acts 1:6, 5:31). Even Paul, with his intense focus on gentile inclusion and disappointment with the response of his co-religionists, remained convinced of the centrality of Israel to the biblical narrative and the promises of God. Gentiles might now join the messianic community, though salvation is always extended “to the Jew first” (Rom. 1:16 and 2:9–10; Rom. 9–11:36; compare Jn. 4:22).

Within a few generations of Jesus, however, a remarkable shift occurred. Christianity was spreading widely among gentiles, while few Jews were choosing to believe the messianic claims made on his behalf. In many places the church thus began to change from having a majority-Jewish to a majority-gentile constituency. Many Christians began to resent nonbelieving Jews while, nonetheless, retaining the Hebrew Bible as their own sacred text. Much of the text was reinterpreted, in order to make it possible for gentile Christians to see the text as relevant to their own community. This led them to a widespread and vehement rejection of the Bible's particular focus on the Jewish people and the land of Israel. The specific promises to the Jews and the requirements of the Law (especially those such as food laws and circumcision that were most closely identified with Jews) were not only rejected as irrelevant but were also completely abrogated for the new community or reinterpreted in a way that made the break with Israel part of a divine plan. The Bible thus became the book of the gentile church. Specifically, there emerged a belief in universalism (that is, the rejection of the biblical God's special concern with Israel in favor of a view that God seeks the salvation of all peoples), which was opposed to Jewish particularism and to Judaism itself. God's traditional relationship with Israel was rejected as antithetical to the view of the Bible as a record of a universal God's dealings with all humanity. Although these claims are not surprising, having arisen during a time of intense polemics and shifts in the church's constituency, they could easily become anti-Jewish. By denying all particularity to the Bible, later Christians exaggerated its universalism and eventually wrote the Jews right out of their own story (ironically, even using biblical texts to do so).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>For more information, see Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); and M. F. Wiles, “The Old Testament in Controversy with the Jews,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 8 (June, 1955): 113–126. Many scholars have pointed out the unhelpfulness of terms such as “universalism” and “particularism” in discussions of Judaism and Christianity. Not only does Judaism typically appear less enlightened than Christianity in such comparisons, but Christianity—with its claim that salvation is through Christ alone—presents its own distinctive mix of particularistic and universalistic ideas. Much depends on how one defines the

Liberation theologians also overemphasize the universalistic trends in the Bible. In this they follow the early Christians, who made similar claims as part of their anti-Jewish polemic. They do not go as far as some of the early Christians and argue that God has rejected Israel and transferred all divine promises to the gentiles. Rather, they argue that God, as the God of the world, is as much the God of the gentiles as of the Jews, and, therefore, any reading of the Bible that focuses on the particular covenant with the Jews is to be minimized or rejected. In other words, they reject an anti-Jewish supersessionism (the belief that the Bible proves that the gentiles take over Israel's place in the covenant with God) in favor of an anti-Jewish universalism (the belief that the Bible undercuts the particular promise to the Jews).

Nearly every one of the authors under consideration argues for a universalistic reading of the Bible and denounces elements of particularism, in order to undermine the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Contemporary Jews, they argue, have used God's promises to the Jews to legitimate their presence in the land of Israel. However, these promises are from what the Ruethers call the "ethnocentric" part of the Bible, the part that speaks about the relationship between a "tribalist and exclusive" God and one people and is therefore morally offensive.<sup>20</sup> Whereas many Jews, they say, read the Bible in this particularistic way, as the work of a particularistic God, these writers argue that one should read the text with a higher morality and see in the Bible not the particularistic God of Israel but what the Ruethers call "God as Creator of all nations."<sup>21</sup>

While denouncing Jewish particularism, especially when it might support Israeli claims in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, liberation theologians also claim that Jews distort the extent to which the God of the Bible is concerned with Israel. Like the early Christians, they rely disproportionately on a few passages from the prophets to develop what Ateek calls a more "mature understanding of God," in which God expresses concern for all peoples, not just Israel.<sup>22</sup> His treatment of this issue is detailed and extensive. He identifies three traditions in the Bible—the "nationalist," the "Torah-oriented," and the "prophetic."<sup>23</sup> The first two are explicitly Jewish traditions; the third, although originally Jewish, is taken up and, in his view improved upon, by Christians. The focus of the nationalist tradition is on the promises of God to Israel in the Bible, which Ateek denounces as "very narrow" and "militaristic," because it emphasizes the land of Israel and God's special concerns for one people.<sup>24</sup> The focus of the Torah-oriented tradition is seen somewhat more favorably, because those who emphasized the study of the Torah as a fundamental religious obligation tended to reject political activity in favor of quietism and performance of the commandments. Nonetheless, this tradition is also denounced as tending "toward legalism

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terms; see Anders Runesson, "Particularistic Judaism and Universalistic Christianity? Some Critical Remarks on Terminology and Theology," *Studia Theologica* 54 (July, 2000): 55–75; and Alan F. Segal, "Universalism in Judaism and Christianity," in Troels Engberg-Pedersen, ed., *Paul in His Hellenistic Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 1–29.

<sup>20</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 231.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, p. 96.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 93–100.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 94.

and isolation.”<sup>25</sup> Ateek claims that even Torah-oriented Jews have an insufficiently mature understanding of God because they also emphasize God’s special relationship with Israel.<sup>26</sup>

According to Ateek, only the prophetic tradition is faithful to God. He argues that this is a late tradition—and the most evolved—because the focus is no longer on Israel but on “all nations.”<sup>27</sup> He recalls the story of Jonah, which is a favorite text for this interpretation. Though the only biblical text of its kind, this story of God’s sending an Israelite prophet to a foreign people to urge them to repent is seen as a disclosure of the most authentic portrait of God. This is a more pleasing idea of the God of all people, rather than the God who covenants with Israel, though Ateek’s excessive focus on this negates the far more dominant theme of the Bible.<sup>28</sup> As Ateek reads the biblical texts, he claims to detect a growing rejection of particularism and a new awareness of the gentiles in the later texts. Only at this point does biblical morality start to fit Ateek’s conception of what is right, because only here does the Bible reject “nationalism” and move toward ethics that reach their highest level in Jesus’ teachings.<sup>29</sup>

The problems with this universalistic interpretation, which is characteristic of many liberation theologians’ arguments, are very similar to those identified above in the early Christians’ universalistic interpretations. No one can deny the right of a theologian or exegete to prefer one value system over another. However, it is a misrepresentation to claim that these preferences can be supported by the Bible. This is what makes Ateek’s preferences troublesome. His interpretation is almost wholly unsupported by the text and is chosen because it serves his goal of de-Judaizing the Hebrew Bible. Ateek chooses to read the distinctly Jewish parts out of the text by using an explicitly anti-Jewish hermeneutic. Guided by his opposition to any text that might be used to support claims by the State of Israel, Ateek selects and rejects texts for reasons external to the Bible itself. The interpretations that he supports are those that most undermine the traditional Jewish and, by extension, potentially pro-Israeli interpretations.

Given the unfortunate and now mostly rejected tradition of contrasting so-called immoral Jewish particularism with moral Christian universalism, one would expect this theme to be excised in the works of contemporary, largely Western-educated Christian writers and theologians. However, contributors to Sabeel Center publications often make this claim. Sabeel vice president and Quaker theologian Jean Zaru, writing in Sabeel’s *Cornerstone*, condemns the

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 95. As almost all scholars, both Jews and Christians, now agree, the denunciation of Judaism as legalistic is a distortion with a lengthy anti-Jewish history, and it would be nearly impossible to find a mainstream contemporary New Testament scholar who still holds this view. For example, Ateek’s criticism recalls earlier widespread criticisms of Judaism as “the antithesis of Christianity” and “a legalistic religion in which God was remote and inaccessible,” discussed under the subheading, “The persistence of the view of Rabbinic religion as one of legalistic works-righteousness” in E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 33.

<sup>26</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, pp. 94–95.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 96, 110.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

Jews' "exclusive claim to God."<sup>30</sup> Their fault is that they are not "motivated by love [but rather] by law," by which she means that Jews focus on the specific biblical promises to Israel rather than the prophetic demands for justice and peace for all. It is the latter, she writes, that are the most moral and legitimate parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Najwa Farah presents similar views, in the essay "Women in the Eyes of Jesus," in which she denounces "Old Testament promises" for leading to "racism" and dispossession.<sup>31</sup> Writing in another issue, Samia Costandi demands that Christians stand up and say, "'Nay, stop, enough, No More!'" to "concepts such as the Chosen People and the Promised Land."<sup>32</sup> These "literal" interpretations are at the root of the Jewish "annihilation" of the Palestinians. What is needed, she writes, is a "metaphorical" interpretation of the Bible that offers hope of transcending these objectionable biblical ideas. All these authors connect biblical traditions that they reject to acts by the State of Israel, though they provide no examples of Israelis' appealing to these religious concepts to justify their actions. In their views, these traditions are atavistic promises of the Bible that need to be rejected in order to deny to modern Jews the warrant to commit these misdeeds. Importantly, some authors support their claims with statements from the biblical prophets, whereas others cite Jesus' words in order to denounce Israel. This "two-pronged" attack—use of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures—against Jews has a long history, as noted above, and both methods of rejecting Jewish claims to the biblical promises perpetuate anti-Jewish tropes.

In *The Wrath of Jonah*, the Ruethers also reject particularism and praise universalism, and they support an interpretation of the Bible and God's promises in which God is fundamentally the God of all people. The corollary to this is that it is morally unacceptable to claim that the biblical God is most significantly the God of Israel, because this shifts the focus to God's promises to one people, Israel, and legitimates the "racist nationalism" of the State of Israel.<sup>33</sup> Their criticisms mirror many of Ateek's criticisms. Using a comparable anti-Jewish hermeneutic, they too claim to find multiple interpretive possibilities in the Bible (and the Jewish tradition), and they argue that it is valid to prefer what they identify as the universalistic tradition rather than the particularistic tradition. In presenting this reading, they too show little concern with grounding their interpretation in a fair and balanced reading of the sources or Jewish history, and they selectively focus on a few examples of a universalistic perspective in Judaism.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Jean Zaru, "Jerusalem, 'Al-Quds,' in the Heart of Palestinian Christians," *Cornerstone*, no. 15 (Spring, 1999). [Ed. note: References to articles from *Cornerstone* have no pagination; back issues may be found at <http://www.sabeel.org>, then clicking on the "Cornerstone" tab.]

<sup>31</sup>Najwa Farah, "Women in the Eyes of Jesus," *Cornerstone*, no. 18 (Spring, 2000).

<sup>32</sup>Samia Costandi, "Resurrection in the Land of Resurrection," *Cornerstone*, no. 21 (Spring, 2001).

<sup>33</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 225.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 231. The Ruethers' claim that there are "universalist" Jewish traditions, especially in rabbinic literature, that are hostile to Jewish settlement in the land of Israel is unfounded; see W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), p. 157.

Jonah once again serves as the text *par excellence* for Christian theologians who want to read the Jews out of their own narrative. In the Ruethers' view, the Israelite prophet is an "angry, chauvinistic prophet" and a symbol of today's Jews who allegedly reject God's deeper concern with all peoples.<sup>35</sup> Like Ateek, they denounce Jewish ethnocentrism.<sup>36</sup> By this, they mean the view that God "elects only one people and is concerned with only one territory."<sup>37</sup> Other, more balanced interpretations are rejected out of hand just because they could be used to support the State of Israel. However, their interpretation, like those of Ateek and early Christians, lacks fidelity to the biblical text and Jewish tradition. It is animated by a consistent anti-Jewish hermeneutic that delegitimizes *a priori* any interpretation that supports fundamental biblical ideas of election or land.

The Ruethers present a sinister description of Jewish ideas of particularism. They go so far as to argue (without giving actual examples) that some Jews consider God's promises to Israel as a kind of inherent, even "racial" superiority and believe they confer "a special holiness on the Jewish people."<sup>38</sup> This is manifested in the behavior of the Israeli government. However, the Ruethers never clarify how any of the State of Israel's policies are rooted in what they say is a theological sense of loathing for non-Jews. Instead, they define a fundamental Jewish religious idea in such a pejorative way that it is made to seem self-evident that it is this belief that lies behind Israel's actions, without actually showing that Israel's policies are motivated by it. Their conflation of complex religious and political issues leads to such simplistic and hostile generalizations about Judaism, Jewish belief, and Israeli policies, as the result of their dualistic view of the concepts of universalism and particularism and of the behavior supposedly associated with each. The former teaches "loving the neighbor as oneself."<sup>39</sup> The latter, with a supposed belief in a "religious idea of election" for one people and one land, leads to violence and hatred of others.<sup>40</sup> According to the Ruethers, this moral failure is the predictable result of an interpretation of the Bible different from their own and is responsible for the misdeeds of Israeli Jews.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ironically, Ruether *denounced* this use of Jonah to criticize Judaism, in Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 84. However, Jonah serves this purpose in the Ruethers' book on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is even named after Jonah; see also Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, pp. xix–xxi and 13. Jonah figures prominently in Raheb's book and is the subject of an entire chapter; see Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, pp. 72, 92–97. See also Alain Epp Weaver, who praises the book of Jonah for its "more open" and "merciful" vision when compared to other biblical books, in his "Sitting under the Vine: A Theology of Exile and Return" (2002); this article can be accessed at <http://www.kairoscanada.org/e/partners/mideast/israelPalestine/sittingVine.asp>.

<sup>36</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 240.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 225 and 241.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 241. This is, of course, a quotation from the Hebrew Bible (Lev. 19:18).

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 232, 236. See also Prior, *Zionism*, pp. 254–255.

*Classic Anti-Jewish Claim #2: The Canceled Covenant*

The Jewish covenant with God is only temporary and can be revoked because of disobedience. “The Jews assume the status of a people on probation who fail all the tests and finally are flunked out. The message of election refers to a believing people. The Jews proved through their history that they are not this people.”<sup>42</sup>

The covenant between God and Israel was consistently misrepresented in the *adversus Judaeos* literature. Early Christians, supporting their own claims to the biblical heritage, focused on biblical passages in which God threatens a disobedient Israel with rejection, often applying prophetic denunciations to the Jews. At the same time, they ignored passages that emphasize God’s faithfulness to the people. Jews, it was argued, had by their disobedience (usually understood as disobedience in not becoming followers of Jesus) forfeited their own claims to the promises of God. These promises were transferred to a new people, the gentile Christian community. However, one of the hallmarks of the biblical covenant is its permanence; divine criticism and rebuke, rather than signaling the abrogation of the covenant, are signs of being in the covenant with God. Presentations that downplay or deny this feature of the covenant distort the biblical message.

Liberation theologians who comment on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict make strikingly similar arguments. They also claim that the Jews’ covenant with God is, even now, at risk of being canceled. This is a claim that many other Christian theologians, aware of the dangers of supersessionism and unwilling to distort the Bible’s presentation of the Jews’ relationship with God, have explicitly rejected. Using an anti-Jewish hermeneutic similar to that used by the early Christians, liberation theologians perpetuate this misreading of the Bible. Their presentations of the biblical covenant also mischaracterize the relationship between Israel and God, and their focus on God’s anger toward Israel and the penalties for noncompliance with God’s demands are given an emphasis that distorts the original presentation in the Bible. In their writings, Israel’s misbehavior is likely to lead to divine rejection, which, in the modern context, means a rejection of Jewish people’s right to live in the land of Israel.

Liberation theologians have, however, introduced their own innovations into the anti-Jewish hermeneutic. Judaism is no longer threatened by explicit supersessionism, in which gentiles take the place of Jews in the covenant. Now Jews risk incurring divine wrath because of acts by, or support for, the Jewish state, rather than opposition to Jesus or the prophets. Zionism has become a modern form of faithlessness and rejection of God. Though the Jews’ fault is no longer disbelief in Jesus, liberation theologians, like early Christians, indict the Jews for disobedience to God and the biblical tradition.

It is important to understand how liberation theologians connect Jewish support for the State of Israel—that is, the very existence of the country, not specific policies—with disobedience to God and with negative consequences for

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<sup>42</sup>Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 137.

the biblical covenant between God and the Jewish people. Some of the harshest arguments that support for Zionism is disobedience to God and the Bible are offered by Alain Epp Weaver, a Mennonite theologian who is active at the Sabeel Center.<sup>43</sup> In his writings, he repeatedly misapplies the prophetic indictments to contemporary Jewish supporters of Israel, similar to the way early Christians misapplied prophetic indictments to Jews of their time. In his “critique of Zionism,” Weaver redeploys prophetic accusations against ancient Israel (he focuses on Hosea 10), blurring the condemnations in a way that allows him to conflate sinful Israel of the past with sinful Israel of the present. Ancient Israel, which was, in his words, said to “trust in the multitude of its warriors,” is like modern Israel, and ancient Israelites are like modern Jews who support the Zionist project. All disobey God, in his words, by rejecting “a faithful life in the land.” For Weaver, the faithful life is lived by those who are more concerned with acting justly than grasping at territory. Just as ancient Israelites were rightly “cut off” from God, modern Jews and the Jewish state that, through its political policies, “plows wickedness, reaps injustice and eats the fruit of lies” risk divine rejection as well.

It is of course true that in the Bible God punishes the guilty of Israel. However, Weaver’s emphasis on the fragility of the covenant between God and Israel, and his claim that actions by the State of Israel are akin to the religious faithlessness and idolatry assailed by the prophets, is a gross misrepresentation of the covenant. Though he cites the prophets to support his criticisms and to cast political decisions as religious transgressions and even reasons for the complete rejection of the Jews, he neglects prophetic statements that emphasize the eternity of the covenant (for example, Hos. 2:21). Guided by his anti-Jewish hermeneutic, in which ancient prophets serve as the accusers of today’s Jews, Weaver criticizes the State of Israel from a biblical and specifically prophetic perspective. This leads him down the same road taken by the authors of the *adversus Judaeos* literature. He turns to the Jews’ sacred literature and adopts the position of a contemporary prophet, castigating the Jews in biblical terms for modern political views that he rejects. His goal is to delegitimize the State of Israel, and he uses the Bible tententiously to achieve this goal. In Weaver’s presentation, God is an anti-Zionist, storing up wrath for those who disobey the prophets by making claims to the land that Weaver considers immoral. Although not going as far as some early writers, he nonetheless perpetuates the same distortions.

Other writers also misrepresent the covenant. They focus disproportionately on threats of rejection and accusations of disobedience in order to portray support for Israel as not just wrong but also sinful, so sinful that today’s Jews disobey God as did the faithless in ancient Israel. This is a result of their conceptualizing a political conflict involving the Jewish state in Christian theological terms. Similar to authors of the *adversus Judaeos* literature, they apply the denunciations of the biblical prophets to later Jews. Ateek, for example, writes that

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<sup>43</sup>This section primarily focuses on the theological reflections in Weaver, “Sitting under the Vine. See also Alain Epp Weaver, “Constantianism, Zionism, and Diaspora” (2001); available at <http://www.mcc.org/respub/occasional/28.html>.

“the powerful Zionists have been able to carry out, with exact precision, what Micah was warning his audience against doing.”<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, Ateek says that modern Jews “insult their Maker” (quoting Prov. 14:31) or “afflict the widow and orphan” (quoting Ex. 22:22), again arguing that modern Jews, whether in the acts of the State of Israel or by their support for it, are not just acting wrongly but are also disobeying God and their own moral tradition.<sup>45</sup> Using the Bible’s imagery for idolatry, he warns today’s Jews that Israel also “defiles the land” and that as Jews they risk losing it.<sup>46</sup> Unable to live up to the holiness demanded by God, modern Jews fail to uphold their end of the covenant and therefore vitiate God’s promises, just as the evil Israelites who were eventually rejected by God did.

The divine rejection of the Jews for political acts of the State of Israel is a common theme in liberation theology. Lutheran pastor Bruce Burnside similarly condemns today’s Jews. They are like the generation sent into exile, he writes, which falsely trusted in the “deceptive words” of the prophet Jeremiah (see 7:4, 8) and vainly expected that God “will let you dwell in this place.”<sup>47</sup> Instead, like the sinful and idolatrous Israelites, the Jews of today face a similar punishment: cancellation of God’s promises to the people and dispossession from the land. Like other writers, Burnside says not a word about the strength of the covenant between God and Israel. Other examples of this criticism abound. Raheb, for example, gathers numerous biblical passages that, he argues, illustrate the strict limits to God’s covenant with the Jews. In his interpretation, it is not stable or secure, but fragile. Jews misunderstand God’s promises when they think they are “eternal” or “unchangeable.”<sup>48</sup> The God of the Bible, through the prophets, threatens the Israelites with rejection for evil deeds and false beliefs, which, Raheb argues, Jews are liable for even today because of the policies of the State of Israel. Again, despite the Bible’s emphasis on the faithfulness of the God of Israel, it is the fragility of the Jewish covenant with God that is emphasized exclusively and applied to a modern political dispute.

The Ruethers also misrepresent the covenant. Their anti-Jewish hermeneutic minimizes God’s promises to Israel and even God’s relationship with Israel. The very idea of a covenant of land is denounced as unbecoming the biblical God.<sup>49</sup> The final chapter of *The Wrath of Jonah*, subtitled “A Theological and Ethical Evaluation [of Zionism],” opens with a quote from Isaiah that introduces their argument that God’s relationship with Israel is no stronger or more enduring than God’s relationship with other countries—in this case, Egypt and Assyria: “In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of multitudes<sup>50</sup> has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed

<sup>44</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, p. 124.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 106. For further examples, see Naim Ateek, “The Zionist Ideology of Domination versus the Reign of God” (2001); available at <http://www.sabeel.org/old/conf2001/ateek.htm>.

<sup>47</sup>See Bruce Burnside, “Israel’s Policies on Palestinians Imperils Its Soul” (2003); available at <http://www.elca.org/middleeast/archived/2003Jan-archived.html>.

<sup>48</sup>Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, p. 67; see discussion on pp. 65-67.

<sup>49</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 231.

<sup>50</sup>The Ruethers’ translation of the Hebrew word “*sabaoth*” as “multitudes” is a mistranslation

be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel my heritage” (Is. 19:24–25).<sup>51</sup> Their purpose in choosing this passage is to delegitimize other biblical passages that might connect Jews with the land or uphold the traditional Israel-centric understanding of God’s promises. Yet, in light of their reliance on this passage—it is used to summarize the main themes of their discussion—it is fascinating to realize that modern scholars have noted the incongruity of this passage with much of the biblical message.<sup>52</sup> The choice of this passage in a discussion of Jewish election is disingenuous and emblematic of their distorted discussion of the covenant between God and Israel throughout their work. It fits with their overall goal of enlisting the Bible as a support for their strident attack on Israel and the Jews who support it. Although the Ruethers may themselves believe that God is concerned with all people equally, they go further and present this view as the authentic biblical view.<sup>53</sup> This is a distortion, reminiscent of earlier attempts to distort the covenant in order to vitiate God’s promises to the Jews.

#### *Classic Anti-Jewish Claim #3: Jewish Exile*

Because of their disobedience and sinfulness, the Jews suffer the punishment of exile. “It is axiomatic in the *adversus Judaeos* tradition that Jewish reprobation is permanent and irrevocable. The left hand of Christian victory and messianic ingathering is Jewish rejection and exile.”<sup>54</sup>

For the study of liberation theology, the Christian perspective on Jewish exile is of fundamental importance. Even within the Christian Scriptures, the disastrous war against Rome in the first century had a powerful significance for some Christians. The Romans’ destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. was seen as a providential event, a symbol of divine rejection of the Jews and their main religious institution, and a shifting of God’s favor to God’s new chosen people, the Christians.<sup>55</sup> Though some Christians were also zealous Jews and no

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intended to convey the idea that God’s “multitudes” refers to the different peoples of the earth. It actually has no such meaning but refers only to the “multitudes” of God’s angels who join God in battle.

<sup>51</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 219.

<sup>52</sup>E.g., this passage was “a later addition” because the claim is so unusual, according to Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 238. Another commentator calls Is. 19:24–25 “remarkable” because of how sharply it differs from Isaiah’s regular focus on Israel: Gerald T. Sheppard, “Isaiah 1–39,” in James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1988), p. 561.

<sup>53</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 229.

<sup>54</sup>Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 144.

<sup>55</sup>On views of the temple in the New Testament, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), pp. 37–97. For early Christian responses to its destruction, see G. W. H. Lampe, “A.D. 70 in Christian Reflection,” in Ernst Bammel and C. F. D. Moule, eds., *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp.

doubt shared the sadness that many non-Christian Jews felt at the widespread destruction, their voices are barely present in extant Christian literature.

By the late first century C.E., many Christians were gentiles and thus had no connection to the land and temple. Instead, many Christians advanced a supersessionist argument that the Jews—having lost sovereignty in the land and having seen their temple destroyed—were accursed by God. This became fundamental to their self-definition as the new people of God and facilitated their appropriation of the Hebrew Bible. In particular, they cited the biblical prophets' criticisms of the people exclusively as a sign of Israel's rejection, ignoring the complexities of the relationship, with its mixture of rebuke *and* promise, between God and Israel. Exile and loss of the land were interpreted as marks of divine reprobation and contained a powerful meaning for Christians: God sent the Jewish people into exile because of their faithlessness and immorality. The Jews' exile and suffering also served as a cautionary symbol for Christians. In the words of Augustine: "God demanded that Christians 'Disperse them!'" throughout all the lands, to illustrate, in their subjugation and weakness, the dangers of disobeying God.<sup>56</sup>

Liberation theologians are possibly alone among all modern Christian theologians in glorifying the centuries of Jewish exile and wandering. Their praise for exile is directed against the very idea of a modern State of Israel. Although in the Bible exile is a profound curse and return to the land a great blessing (for example, Is. 40:1–11), they praise past periods of weakness and dispossession as noble and moral. Only powerless and weak Diaspora Jews are faithful to their religious and moral traditions. In Weaver's words, Jews outside the land of Israel "whose power is not civil but intellectual" and who are "not in charge" are the Jews who work for "God's sovereignty," not their own.<sup>57</sup> Deprived of control over many aspects of their own lives, they are free of the temptation to rely on violence or coercion, which Weaver identifies as the pitfall of Christendom. For centuries, these powerless Jews issued pious pleas to God and clung closely to their religious traditions while state and church schemed together to orchestrate crusades, inquisitions, persecutions, and witch hunts. In some liberation theologians' reckoning, faith, backed by state power, led to Christian misdeeds, whereas vulnerable and subjugated Jews led authentic religious lives.

It is striking that liberation theologians' idealization of Jewish exile is largely theoretical. The historical experiences of Jews in exile are mostly absent from these accounts. When writers note that exile could be dangerous, they consistently downplay the disadvantages and limitations of exilic life. Prior, for example, denounces the State of Israel as an aberration, because, he says, most Jews in exile were "content" and never tried to return to the land before the modern period; to suggest otherwise is, in his words, to be fooled by "propagandistic Zionist history."<sup>58</sup> The main focus is on the symbolism of exile, rather than on the real experiences of a powerless people. For liberation theologians,

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153–171.

<sup>56</sup>Augustine, *City of God* 15:46.

<sup>57</sup>Weaver, "Constantinianism."

<sup>58</sup>See Prior, *Zionism*, pp. 51–66, 212–221. For a similar view, that most Jews lived under gentile rule "by preference," see Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 225.

exile symbolizes a commitment to ethical universalism because those Jews living in the Diaspora interacted with, and showed concern for, gentiles and Jews—unlike the parochialism attributed to Israelis and supporters of Israel.

More specifically, the Ruethers praise modern Diaspora Jews for their interest in “social justice” for both Jews and non-Jews and for their willingness to criticize Israel’s policies on “universal” moral grounds.<sup>59</sup> These Diaspora Jews, living among gentiles, display an admirable concern for all humanity and live rich religious lives. This is because exile, the Ruethers argue, is both feasible and moral, and the millions of Jews who live outside Israel implicitly reject “Israeli nationalism” in order to show their solidarity with “universal human life.”<sup>60</sup> Whether this is what Jews, not Christian theologians, think about the Diaspora and exile is unknown, because Jewish voices are almost never heard in these writings. What is important to the Ruethers is the symbolic piety of Jews who live outside the land of Israel, as vulnerable minorities under non-Jewish governments.

Jews in gentile society fulfill the prophetic ideal of the prophet Isaiah, serving as a “light to the nations” in their supposed concern with justice for all peoples.<sup>61</sup> By way of contrast, the Ruethers offer the example of modern Israelis. Because a fundamental feature of Zionism is, the Ruethers say, “an ethnocentric view of God,” and because Israelis, unlike Diaspora Jews, do not live among large numbers of gentiles, their moral system is selfish and reverts back to an immoral, tribal worldview, in which only Jewish rights matter.<sup>62</sup> The Ruethers even denounce Israel’s (Jewish) religious life, which is not “an appealing expression of religious life” but is, rather, intolerant and overly rigid, unlike Diaspora religious life.<sup>63</sup>

Other authors, in order to critique the idea of the State of Israel, look to the biblical period to make similar points. Uruguayan liberation theologian Julio de Santa Ana sets up a false dichotomy between the Exodus and the period of Israelite residence in the land. He contrasts the “spirit of the Exodus,” which he connects with liberation and justice for a powerless people, with the sinful behavior of the Israelites after they possessed the land.<sup>64</sup> Once freed from the domination of the Egyptians, the Israelites, in his forced interpretation, were consumed by “nationalist and exclusive aspirations.” They forgot the lessons of the Exodus and succumbed to “priestly arrogance” by placing the temple at the center of their religious life.<sup>65</sup> He develops this interpretation because it allows him to suggest a parallel to the behavior of modern Jews, who left the Diaspora but succumbed to a new, arrogant nationalism that also led them to forget the meaning of the Torah.

Raheb claims that the Bible praises exilic weakness rather than the exercise

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<sup>59</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 227.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>64</sup>Julio de Santa Ana, “The Holocaust and Liberation,” in Maduro, *Judaism, Christianity, and Liberation*, p. 50.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

of power in one's land.<sup>66</sup> He argues that prophets of God were sent to criticize the Israelites when they lived in the land, whereas prophets were sent to console Israelites when they lived in exile. The former group, though sovereign and politically self-governing, was the most sinful, whereas the latter group, though subjugated and powerless, remained in God's favor. His interpretation, however, reduces the complex message of the Bible to a simple dichotomy: Strong Israelites are sinful and merit only divine rebuke, but weak and stateless Israelites are beloved of God. In exile, he says, they learned the lesson of the potential for sin by those who possess land. Raheb further argues that the Bible proves that even God is skeptical about the possession of land. In order to delegitimize the modern State of Israel, he minimizes the repeated promises of land throughout the Bible. He also assembles passages in which the Israelites face criticism for misunderstanding God's promises or committing sinful deeds, as if these were faults connected with land ownership *per se* rather than with the Israelites' idolatry and disobedience to God generally.

Like de Santa Ana, Raheb distorts the biblical narrative in order to denounce possession of the land as sinful. Because much of the Bible takes place in the land, it is incorrect to conclude that land ownership itself is what draws God's ire, or that life in exile is inherently moral and allows the people to remain truer to God's demands. (Actually, it is worship of others' gods that most often leads the God of Israel to rebuke the people, something which is only incidentally connected with land and which also happens in the Diaspora.) These two theologians are most interested, of course, in rebutting modern Jewish claims to the land by arguing that Jews with power (that is, with land) live sinfully, while those who are outside the land of Israel, and therefore weak, live piously. Neither author shows fidelity to the larger biblical story or has any interest in the actual Jewish experiences of exile. Though Jews never saw exile as a divine blessing in biblical or postbiblical times, especially when it led to persecution (for example, Daniel 1–6), these authors overlook the intense Jewish suffering in exile and idealize it only because it is antithetical to the idea of a sovereign Jewish state.

There is a profound inconsistency here. No author ever suggests that the Palestinians or any other people are truer to their own traditions when residing outside their ancestral land or under the sovereignty of others. Instead, these authors continue the centuries-old Christian practice of seeing the Jews as somehow different from other people, and their advocacy of Jewish weakness (but not, for example, Palestinian or American weakness) perpetuates this idea. Noting the biblical suspicion of monarchy (for example, Dt. 17:14–20; 1 Sam. 8:1–22), Raheb attempts to apply this idea of ancient Israel's "essential difference" from the Philistines in order to justify treating modern Jews as essentially different from other modern people as well.<sup>67</sup> The legitimate aspirations of other peoples for such things as security, sovereignty, and self-determination are not granted to the Jews, who alone are singled out as different from the "ordinary" Philistines—or Palestinians today.

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<sup>66</sup>Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, pp. 76–77.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

Not surprisingly, all these liberation theologians strongly support Palestinian self-determination. The Ruethers, for example, insist that the Palestinians be assured of “genuine autonomy and the means of a dignified existence in a territory of their own.”<sup>68</sup> This opinion is echoed by other writers, such as Prior, who denounces the Palestinians’ loss of sovereignty in the land in 1948 and 1967 and demands “Palestinian autonomy” for a long-suffering people.<sup>69</sup> However, though opinions differ about what the ultimate fate of the State of Israel should be, this reasonable demand for Palestinian self-determination in a land of their own is never presented simply as applying to the Jews as well; when found at all, it is often qualified or undermined by unreasonable expectations.

Because the State of Israel is their primary target, liberation theologians offer distorted comparisons between the good Jews in the Diaspora, who lived under sometimes brutal foreign rulers, and the bad Jews in Israel, living freely and protected by a national army. They contradict Jewish biblical and religious traditions and impose their own Christian value system on Jewish exile.<sup>70</sup> They also idealize and distort Jewish history. In demonizing the State of Israel as irreligious, these writers end up perpetuating the idea from the *adversus Judaeos* literature that Jews should live outside their own land and should be weak, stateless, and utterly dependent on God and the gentile community. They no longer claim that exile, vulnerability, and abuse are God’s will for the Jews because they killed Jesus; now, exposure to exile, vulnerability, and abuse are God’s will because exilic life most closely conforms to Jewish biblical and religious values.

However, taking a broader view, it becomes clear that the ideals to which these writers constantly appeal are not Jewish but *Christian* ideals. Though there are some demands to accept exile in the biblical and Jewish traditions (usually as a punishment for sin), the liberation theologians imagine that the noble Jews in exile are Jews who, in essence, live out faithful Christian lives. Weaver is revealing on this point: Jewish life in exile is a rejection of the powerful and corrupting “Constantinianism” that, by the fourth century, with the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity, had begun to warp true Christianity. Further, it is “part of a larger biblical theme about reliance on God, a reliance which culminates in nonviolence, but also as a warning to ourselves about our self-deceptive tendencies.”<sup>71</sup> In short, Jews in exile live the way liberation theologians think Christians should live; that is, they live as Jesus did, because they are pious, quietistic, nonviolent, weak, willing to suffer, and accepting of the will of God. Even when noting the travails of exile, the authors bitterly condemn Jews who succumbed to the allure of power and, in the words of Weaver, other “entanglements of Christendom,” meaning the sins that result from the possession of political power. Today, this is manifest in the State of Israel.

Overlooking Jews themselves or their legitimate interests, some authors de-

<sup>68</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 245.

<sup>69</sup>Prior, *Zionism*, p. 260; also see Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*, The Biblical Seminar 48 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 257. Similar claims are found in Ateek, *Justice*, p. 178; and Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, pp. 112–116.

<sup>70</sup>See the paragraphs that follow.

<sup>71</sup>Weaver, “Constantinianism.” See also Ateek, *Justice*, pp. 97–100; de Santa Ana, “The Holocaust and Liberation,” p. 50; and Weaver, “Sitting under the Vine.”

find exile because it helps the gentile communities where Jews are exiled. Jewish exile is good, some argue, because of its effects on gentiles. For example, Jews in exile serve as “witness[es] to ethical monotheism,” showing others how to live in conformity with biblical law.<sup>72</sup> They demonstrate their commitment to universalism by mixing with, and caring for, many different peoples of the world, rather than developing the narrow particularism of modern Israeli Jews. Or, as a persecuted but faithful people, they teach the world about “the vocation for suffering.”<sup>73</sup> Without sovereign power, the exiled Jews illustrate the virtues of nonviolence and powerlessness and cultivate a deep dependence on God. For Weaver, the church, which is now losing much of its historic power, can learn from the weakness and vulnerability of the Jews in exile.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, no author ever suggests that non-Jews should disavow sovereignty, nationalism, and power. Only the Jews are asked to live in conditions of vulnerability and impotence. These ideas are not far from Augustine’s ancient views, mentioned above, and his endorsement of Jewish weakness and exile seems to be revived here, but for distinctly political reasons.

Jewish religious traditions, such as those found in Ezra and Nehemiah, that reflect a longing for the land and sovereignty are denounced by Weaver as irreligious, “ethnocentric,” and “exclusionary.”<sup>75</sup> The same denunciation is leveled against Jews from other periods in history, such as those from the Maccabean period (mid-second century B.C.E. to mid-first century B.C.E.) and the short period of the Bar Kokhba revolt, 132–135 C.E., when Jews were no longer living under the control of others. Building on the work of theologian John Howard Yoder, he groups together these historical periods, when Jews were briefly free from foreign oppression, and argues that periods of sovereignty actually clash with “the promise and vision of Zion.” This promise is not “one of sovereignty, with the violent control that almost always implies,” but powerlessness in exile, which Weaver admits is “fraught with pain and anguish.” He quotes Yoder on the Jews’ suffering in exile as part of God’s plan for Israel: “that is what the Jews learned to do, and do well.”<sup>76</sup>

This valorization of holiness in subjugation reveals an antipathy to the basic rights of the Jews, like all people, to security, freedom, and self-determination. One need not lionize Bar Kokhba or the Maccabees to imagine that a life free of foreign domination is more desirable. To suggest otherwise elevates Jewish weakness and vulnerability to a pure or ideal state, ignores the Jewish experience of powerlessness, and perpetuates some of the most offensive anti-Jewish themes in the Christian tradition.

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<sup>72</sup>Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 228.

<sup>73</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, p. 160. Sixty years after the Holocaust, it is hard to imagine that any Jew would voluntarily choose this supremely Christian role.

<sup>74</sup>Weaver, “Constantinianism.”

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*

*Classic Anti-Jewish Claim #4: The Demonization of the Jews*

Jews “are the type of the carnal man, who knows nothing spiritually,”<sup>77</sup> and they “are the very incarnation of the false, apostate principle of the fallen world, alienated from its true being in God.”<sup>78</sup>

Hostility toward nonbelieving Jews began in Jesus’ lifetime. However, this earliest period was characterized by intrareligious polemics, with different groups of Jews immersed in a conflict over claims made by Jesus’ followers. Within a few decades of Jesus’ execution, however, the polemical quality of this originally all-Jewish dispute changed dramatically. Most Jews remained unreceptive to Christian preaching, greatly angering believers. The gentile constituency of the early church rapidly increased, taking over and intensifying some of these arguments and criticisms. This change led to a dramatic development—the demonization of non-Christian Jews—as the conflict hardened. In some cases it ceased to be between two groups of Jews (Christian and non-Christian Jews) and became a conflict between two separate religions. Most gentile Christians, who soon made up the majority of the believers, felt no connection to the Jews, which may have encouraged the spread of the most hostile accusations.

Evidence for the views of these early Christians abounds in the Christian Scriptures and early church writings, and many of these themes reappear in the writings of liberation theologians. The original accusations include, for example, the claim that Jews commit violent acts against Jesus and his followers, hinder missionary activity, spur on outside hostility to the new movement, misunderstand God and God’s plan for salvation, and worship God incorrectly or not at all.<sup>79</sup> In particular, the authors of texts such as Matthew, John, and Revelation are well known for penning some of the most shocking claims about Jewish malevolence, propensity for violence, faithlessness, and worldliness. In both John and Revelation, the Jews are demonized and said to be rejected by God. They serve “[their] father the devil” (Jn. 8:23, 44) and worship in a “synagogue of Satan” (Rev. 2:9, 3:9). The Jews’ claim to the Bible is denied, cutting them off from their own history (for example, Jn. 5:37–40). In another famous example, the author of Matthew emphasizes the Jews’ guilt in the execution of Jesus, quoting Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries’ accepting blame for the deed upon themselves and all future Jews (27:25). Similarly, all the Gospels ratchet up the influence of the Jews in Jesus’ death and minimize Roman culpability, showing the Jews to be eager to commit a grave injustice in order to protect the Jewish community (for example, Jn. 11:50). Elsewhere, Jewish religious life is denounced as worldly and vacuous by writers who criticize Jews’ rituals as only “a shadow of what is to come” (for example, Col. 2:17) and serve paradoxically to deny rather than affirm faith in God (for example, Tit. 1:10–16).

These themes are developed by later writers. For centuries, this antipathy

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<sup>77</sup>Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 113.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup>Ruether’s treatment of this period is extensive, and she documents many of these claims in further detail; see *ibid.*, pp. 64–116.

remained largely unthreatening, but, with the establishment of Christianity as the official imperial religion in the fourth century, hostility toward Jews could be enforced by the state. The demonization of the Jews that was already present in the early period both justified and encouraged much of the mistreatment, from political and social discrimination to accusations that Jews fiendishly plotted to harm Christians and the Christian faith to blood libels and massacres. Jews were often believed to be plotting to harm innocent Christians, even in times of obvious Jewish powerlessness. These loosely connected accusations that Jews were hostile to Christians and betrayed God and the biblical tradition created a portrait of the Jews as fundamentally at odds with the values of Christian society and morality.<sup>80</sup>

Today, many Western Christians are critically reassessing these traditions, yet liberation theologians continue to perpetuate unsavory and reprehensible images of the Jews. Whereas earlier polemicists demonized the Jews as Jews (that is, members of the Jewish people or adherents of the Jewish faith), liberation theologians demonize the Jews as Zionists or Israelis. While the justification has changed—Jews are no longer attacked for their supposed opposition to Christianity and Christian society—much of the discarded imagery remains. This imagery now reappears in a different, thoroughly politicized guise. In one signal example, Ateek sees Jewish hatred as something timeless and unchanging. He writes that “the centuries-old hatred of some Jews for Gentiles has been incarnated in [Israeli Jews’] hatred of the Arabs.”<sup>81</sup> This section offers a review of some of the writings of liberation theologians on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in which they demonize Jews using terms and images right out of the *adversus Judaeos* tradition. When speculating about Jewish motives, the authors consistently offer the worst possible explanations for Jews’ behavior. Their propensity to see the Jews as irreligious, violent, malevolent, selfish, and indifferent to the suffering of non-Jews perpetuates the demonization of the Jews.

Liberation theologians turn to the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures for the anti-Jewish images in their accusations. The theologians’ decision to employ language and imagery taken from the canonical religious texts of Jews and Christians for their criticisms of the State of Israel and of Jews who support it turns a political conflict into a religious conflict. This is something most other critics of Israel wisely avoid. In place of legitimate political criticisms (of Israel’s values, policies, etc.) they move the dispute to an entirely new level, yet one with old antecedents.

To criticize Israel, liberation theologians mine the Hebrew Bible for exemplars of evil and sinfulness and present the country as the incarnation of the most infamous opponents of God. Examples abound, such as Pharaoh, who is likened to Israeli Jews. According to de Santa Ana, Israel’s acts are akin to “taking the Pharaoh’s side against the Hebrew slaves.”<sup>82</sup> Palestinian liberation theologian Alex Awad claims that, perversely, Israeli Jews by their deeds have symboli-

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<sup>80</sup>See Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993).

<sup>81</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, p. 179.

<sup>82</sup>De Santa Ana, “The Holocaust and Liberation,” p. 50.

cally appointed the Egyptian tyrant as their modern-day redeemer.<sup>83</sup> Raheb relies on similar imagery.<sup>84</sup> He inverts the original association of Pharaoh as the enemy of the people of Israel, and he accuses the State of Israel of being like Pharaoh to the Palestinian people. He exclaims, “How close is the parallel between Pharaoh’s policy and Israel’s!”<sup>85</sup> They refused to yield to God in strikingly similar ways, even at the level of political tactics (that is, Jews treat non-Jews as Pharaoh treated the Jews). Just as Pharaoh trusted in his “military superiority,”<sup>86</sup> yet was ultimately defeated by God, so Jews today risk divine rebuke and rejection. Furthermore, the story of the Exodus can be taken away from the Jews and claimed by the Palestinian Christians. Raheb proudly recalls the words of one of his students: The Exodus “is the story of us Palestinians!”<sup>87</sup> Much as early Christians claimed the biblical narrative for their own communities and denied it to the Jews, Raheb removes the Jews from their own story and puts others into it.

Ateek repeatedly links modern Jews with other ancient enemies of Israel. Israel is guilty of the “same misdeed” as the tyrant Ahab, who was a murderer and a thief (1 Kings 21).<sup>88</sup> Modern Jews embrace violence, contrary to God’s will, just like the false prophets who urged the Judean king Jehoshaphat to take up arms against his neighbors (1 Kings 22).<sup>89</sup> The prophets who denounced the immoral Israelites for being “intoxicate[d]” with power are called upon to rebuke today’s Jews. Their ancient words of condemnation are “remarkably relevant,” because Jews now repeat, with “exact precision,” their ancestors’ murderous sins.<sup>90</sup>

Prior demonizes Israel in a different way, by describing the thoughts he has had about the conflict at different times in his life. Seeing Israeli security policies, he recalled the most violent parts of the Bible. He repeats these sections, as if modern Jews, when deciding on such policies, turned to these morally troubling passages to justify them. For example, when he was passing through Israeli military checkpoints, he says, he was reminded of biblical stories of massacres of the ancient enemies of Israel and God’s promises to slay other peoples.<sup>91</sup> Traveling to Yitzhak Rabin’s grave, the phrase “the relentless progress of our race” echoed in his head as a description of Israeli policies.<sup>92</sup> Statements on the conflict by former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu made him think of the

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<sup>83</sup>Alex Awad, *Worship Litanies: A Responsive Reading*; excerpts available at <http://www.ird-renew.org/site/apps/s/content.asp?c=fvKVLfMVIsG&b=494491&ct=417527>.

<sup>84</sup>Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, pp. 81–91.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>88</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, p. 88; see full discussion on pp. 87–89.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>91</sup>Prior, *Bible and Colonialism*, p. 257.

<sup>92</sup>Michael Prior, “Studying the Bible in the Holy Land,” in Michael Prior, ed., *They Came and They Saw: Western Christian Experiences of the Holy Land* (London: Melisende, 2000), p. 122. Despite this phrase’s obvious similarity to Nazi ideology, Prior does not tell the reader the origin of this phrase.

God of Israel as “the Great Ethnic-Cleanser.”<sup>93</sup> He even sees a symbolic coincidence in his having read Exodus 17, the story of Israel’s destruction of Amalek, at mass the same day he gave his publisher his study of modern Israel.<sup>94</sup> Prior’s decision to share his own thoughts on the occasion makes clear the extent to which his biases lead him to associate modern Jews with terrible violence and inhumane treatment of others, from the biblical period until today.

Liberation theologians accuse modern Jews of being idolatrous and faithless, just as the prophets indicted their sinful ancestors. In Ateek’s view, for example, they worship a false god, though it is not Baal but their own safety. In his sermon “The Zionist Ideology of Domination *versus* the Reign of God,” he writes, “It has become an idol. . . . It is the irrational god of security.”<sup>95</sup> Or, as Weaver writes, “Belief ceases to matter in Zionism.”<sup>96</sup> For Jews in Israel, tribalism and antipathy toward outsiders replace the morality and goodness that unify humanity in religion, and religious faith is therefore abrogated. In particular, according to Weaver, Jews today nullify rather than affirm the prophets’ moral demands by living together in one land and consequently forsaking any “ethical concern for the Other.” A liturgy composed by the Christian Peacemaker Teams for Lent 2002, “Bearing the Burdens,” takes this accusation even further by making the State of Israel assume a devilish symbolism. Recalling Satan’s temptation of Jesus (Mt. 4:1–11), the liturgy connects Satan’s offer of worldly sovereignty with the “power and conquest” of modern Israel.<sup>97</sup> Today it is Israel that is devilish and that serves as a model for those who forsake God and grasp for land and power.

A related category includes the repetition of accusations drawn from scenes in the Christian Scriptures in which the Jews are accused of opposing Jesus, his followers, and God. Even more than in the above examples, these powerful scenes of Jewish malevolence are drawn from a deep reservoir of anti-Jewish imagery. These images have been deployed against Jews over many centuries, with often dangerous and even lethal consequences. Nonetheless, liberation theologians bring forward a stream of images of Jews as persecutors of Christians, murderers of innocents, Pharisees and tax collectors, representatives of the spiritual powers that stand opposed to God, and even modern-day crucifiers—heedless of the history of anti-Jewish hostility encouraged by these accusations.

By far the most infamous anti-Jewish image in all of Christian history is of the Jews as Christ-killers. Only a few decades after Vatican II cleared Jews of the accusation of deicide, liberation theologians repeatedly describe Israel’s actions as reenactments of the crucifixion of Jesus. Florid, often bloody imagery fills their accusations. A statement from the World Alliance of Y.M.C.A.’s that critiques the current conflict from the perspective of liberation theology makes

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<sup>93</sup>Michael Prior, “Introduction,” in Michael Prior, ed., *Western Scholarship and the History of Palestine* (London: Melisende, 1998), pp. 7–8.

<sup>94</sup>Prior, “Studying the Bible,” p. 115.

<sup>95</sup>Ateek, “Zionist Ideology.”

<sup>96</sup>Weaver, “Constantianism.”

<sup>97</sup>“Bearing the Burdens: Lent 2002—Bearing the Burdens of Injustice” (2002); available from [http://www.cpt.org/publications/lgt\\_lenthebron.html](http://www.cpt.org/publications/lgt_lenthebron.html). C.P.T. works in partnership with Sabeel on projects in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

this charge repeatedly.<sup>98</sup> The Palestinians are “the crucified of today.” Like Jesus, who “was crucified with the people who were branded ‘terrorists’ by the authorities of his time,” Palestinians “are currently crucified” by Israeli Jews. Don Hinchey’s liturgy “O Little Town of Bethlehem, 2000,” published by Sabeel, is strongly reminiscent of earlier anti-Jewish literature in his claims that modern Jews (“those to whom [Jesus] was sent”) have now burned down the “messiah’s home.”<sup>99</sup> It is significant that Hinchey does not just denounce the army’s activities. As with other writers influenced by liberation theology, he conjures up ancient, hateful images of Jewish persecution of Jesus to support his political critique.

Others, writing in Sabeel publications, make the same charge. Zaru, recalling the crucifixion, describes the present experiences of Palestinians as a modern Golgotha.<sup>100</sup> Costandi also says that there is no better way to understand what is happening in the region today than to recall the crucifixion.<sup>101</sup> As with Jesus, who willingly suffered at the hands of the Jews of his time, Costandi is not afraid to “follow the example of Christ” and, if necessary, suffer at the hands of modern Jews. Raheb claims that the Palestinians now go down the road Jesus “went down before [them],” and that they “bear [their] cross” today.<sup>102</sup> Ateek, likening the Palestinians’ experiences to those of Jesus (whom he calls “the Palestinian under occupation”), describes their existence as one unending “Good Friday.”<sup>103</sup> The Israeli army daily reenacts the crucifixion on the bodies of the Palestinians. Although there is nothing unusual about Christian theologians’ relating their own experiences to the sufferings of Christ, in these examples the accusations have the additional effect of echoing centuries of anti-Jewish polemics, because the ones causing the suffering are Jews. It is because of the sad history of Christian anti-Judaism that accusations of this sort are especially objectionable and perpetuate the worst elements of Christian teachings about Jews.

Besides presenting the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians as a reenactment of Jewish violence against Jesus, the authors deploy other anti-Jewish images in their criticisms. Modern Jews are repeatedly likened to the infamous Pharisees. In a Lenten liturgy, for example, the authors deploy imagery taken from John’s Gospel, which includes numerous scenes of the Pharisees’ opposing God and Jesus.<sup>104</sup> Drawing on Johannine imagery, modern Jews are fully aware of the evil they perpetrate, as were the Pharisees. John’s Jesus is quoted as if he were addressing modern Jews: “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains” (Jn. 9:41). His Jewish opponents then are like the Palestinians’ Jewish opponents now.

The refusal to heed God’s commands and wicked behavior characterize both

<sup>98</sup>“Y.M.C.A. Free Palestine Campaign” (2004); available at <http://www.ej-ymca.org/site/Display-Sub.cfm?SubId=7>.

<sup>99</sup>Don Hinchey, “O Little Town of Bethlehem, 2000,” *Cornerstone*, no. 20 (Christmas, 2000).

<sup>100</sup>Zaru, “Jerusalem, ‘Al-Quds.’”

<sup>101</sup>Costandi, “Resurrection.”

<sup>102</sup>Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, pp. 106–107.

<sup>103</sup>Naim Ateek, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” *Cornerstone*, no. 15 (Spring, 1999); also see Ateek, “Zionist Ideology.”

<sup>104</sup>“Bearing the Burdens: Lent 2002—Bearing the Burdens of Injustice.”

ancient and modern Jews. Ateek also denounces the ancient Pharisees and their modern descendants. In his view, “many Zionists today” cling to a worldview that retains the worst aspects of Pharisaism, in particular, the Pharisees’ supposed antipathy for non-Jews.<sup>105</sup> Raheb calls Israeli Jews “tax collectors,” likening them to the people who symbolize corruption and sin in the Gospels (cf. Mt. 5:46, 9:11).<sup>106</sup> Hinchey, in a liturgy he composed, and Ateek liken modern Jews to the evil Jewish king Herod. In the “Murder of the Innocents” in the Christian Scriptures, Herod murdered all the Jewish babies in Bethlehem in an unsuccessful attempt to murder Jesus (Mt. 2:16). Now Herod “has returned” in the form of the Israeli soldiers.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Burnside says Israelis “kill countless innocents.”<sup>108</sup> Keith Kimber laments the “blood of innocents slain.”<sup>109</sup> Ateek, in the most explicit connection, composed a sermon titled “The Massacre of the Innocents.”<sup>110</sup> In all these examples, the most malevolent enemies of Jesus and God and even of ancient Israel are deployed as symbols of Jews by liberation theologians, with no attention given to the long history of Christian anti-Judaism, which used precisely these symbols and this type of polemic.

Other writers also link the sins of modern Jews with those of their ancestors. De Santa Ana, for example, says that, just as Jesus liberated the poor from the “priestly power” of his generation (that is, the Jewish authorities), liberation theologians bring a message of liberation from today’s Jewish authorities.<sup>111</sup> Harkening back to a classic anti-Jewish polemic against legalism and vacuous ritualism, de Santa Ana condemns modern Jews for the same sins. Instead of the animals sacrificed by their priestly ancestors, for Jews today “the Palestinians are sacrificed.” In both cases the Jews misunderstand “God’s call” to live according to true biblical morality.

Accusations of false messianism against ancient and modern Jews furnish a similar parallel. Just as Jews from Jesus’ time onward were denounced for stubbornly clinging to messianic hopes that differed from those of Christians, modern Jews who express attachment to the land of Israel are denounced for false messianism. Zionism, Prior writes, did not inaugurate a “Messianic age” and is nothing more than “idolatry of the land.”<sup>112</sup> Such accusations are common. Ruether devotes an entire essay to this criticism,<sup>113</sup> and Ateek, summarizing such views, states that “Israel is not the Messiah for the Jews.”<sup>114</sup> Awad, as

<sup>105</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, p. 109.

<sup>106</sup>Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, pp. 109–111.

<sup>107</sup>Hinchey, “O Little Town.” See also Ateek, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem”; and idem, “Zionist Ideology.”

<sup>108</sup>Burnside, “Israel’s Policies.”

<sup>109</sup>Keith Kimber, “Prayer for use by those excluded from pilgrimage to Bethlehem 2000,” *Cornerstone*, no. 20 (Christmas, 2000).

<sup>110</sup>Naim Ateek, “The Massacre of the Innocents—A Christmas Reflection,” *Cornerstone*, no. 20 (Christmas, 2000).

<sup>111</sup>De Santa Ana, “The Holocaust and Liberation,” p. 50.

<sup>112</sup>Michael Prior, “The Moral Problem of the Land Traditions of the Bible,” in Prior, *Western Scholarship*, p. 64.

<sup>113</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, “False Messianism and Prophetic Consciousness: Toward a Liberation Theology of Jewish-Christian Solidarity,” in Maduro, *Judaism, Christianity, and Liberation*, pp. 83–95. See also Ruether and Ruether, *Wrath*, p. 235.

<sup>114</sup>Ateek, *Justice*, p. 71.

noted above, even charges that the Jews have made Pharaoh “the messiah of modern Israel,” in a complete inversion of Jewish messianic hopes.<sup>115</sup>

The charge of opposition to God’s demands can also be seen in a sermon by Ateek. The stones that Jesus says will “cry out” if the Jews deny God’s messiah (Lk. 19:39–40) now are said to “cry out” over Israeli misdeeds.<sup>116</sup> Using a different stone image, also from the Gospels, Ateek says in a sermon titled “Who Will Roll away the Stone?” that Jews today place barriers before the Palestinians that are “similar to the stone placed on the entrance of Jesus’ tomb” (Mk. 16:3).<sup>117</sup> Revealingly, in Mark it is not actually Jesus’ Jewish opponents who placed the stone there. Ateek, however, has altered this detail, so as to produce a powerful if inaccurate analogy between the ancient Jews who entombed Jesus and the Israeli Jews who “shut off the Palestinians in a tomb.”

Related to this association of modern Jews with the enemies of Christ and his followers is the idea that the Jews represent the so-called powers and principalities, which, as described in *Faith and Fratricide*, represent “darkness, materiality, and sin” for the Christian writers.<sup>118</sup> Conjuring up images of the Jews as worldly, sinful, and estranged from God, liberation theologians connect modern Jews with these symbols seen, for example, in the Pauline Epistles, where “cosmic powers of this present darkness” represent forces opposed to God (Eph. 6:12). Thus, Israeli Jews are similarly called “the Powers” and the representatives of the “worldly kingdoms” for neither recognizing their injustices nor rejecting sin.<sup>119</sup> Paralleling the stark dualism in John’s and Paul’s writings, in the writings of liberation theologians it is the Christians alone “who have eyes to see” what God demands. As a Christian critiquing modern Judaism, Ateek presents the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a metaphysical struggle on a cosmic level.<sup>120</sup> Rather than seeing it as a political dispute, he mythologizes the conflict as a clash between “the powers of God,” on the one hand, and the “destructive powers” and “forces of darkness that undermine life itself,” on the other. So that his analogy is not misunderstood, he makes this explicit: On one side are the Christians, who, like Jesus, boldly “confront evil.” On the other side are the Jews, who maintain “evil structures,” support the “evil of racism,” carry out the “evil of lies,” and symbolize “the spiritual forces of evil.” With his shocking use of such starkly dualistic language, Ateek goes farther than any other writer in this survey.

<sup>115</sup>Awad, “Worship Litanies.”

<sup>116</sup>Naim Ateek, “Who Will Roll Away the Stone? (Mark 16:3),” *Cornerstone*, no. 21 (Spring, 2001).

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup>Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 101.

<sup>119</sup>“Bearing the Burden: Lent 2002—A Litany from Christian Peacemaker Teams” (2002); available from <http://www.cpt.org/publications/ltgburden.html>; and “Bearing the Burdens: Lent 2002—Bearing the Burdens of Injustice.”

<sup>120</sup>Ateek, “Zionist Ideology.”

### *Conclusion*

Given both this intense criticism of the behavior and beliefs of modern Jews and the centuries of hatred of Jews for their perceived hostility to Christians, it may be no surprise that Christian liberation theologians end up with these interpretations. By tapping into deep wells of anti-Judaism in their analyses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they apply old images in new settings. Above all, this is a result of their decision to analyze a political conflict as a religious conflict, at least on the Jewish side. Their interpretation of the Bible and Jewish tradition is distorted by their hostility to the State of Israel; hence, they rely upon an anti-Jewish hermeneutic that leads them to misrepresent the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. Rather than recognize the complexity and depth in the Bible's presentation of this relationship, they reject outright any interpretation that emphasizes the centrality of the covenant with Israel as overly particularistic and immoral.

As with the early Christian writers of the *adversus Judaeos* literature, these liberation theologians accept only a universalistic reading of the biblical covenant because this has the effect of reading the Jews out of their own tradition. Their disproportionate emphasis on the fragility of the covenant and the consequences of Jewish sin replicates many of the elements in the anti-Jewish traditions of the earlier writers. Likewise, they perpetuate some of the most unsavory and vicious images of the Jews as malevolent, antisocial, hostile to non-Jews, and even ignorant of their own traditions. Foundational Jewish religious beliefs about messianism and the desirability of living in the land are scorned. These critiques lead to a demonization of the Jews. The writings do not illuminate the key issues in the conflict and offer little by way of guidance for those on all sides who seek a just solution. As such, liberation theology impedes rather than fosters any serious attempt at understanding or ending the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Jewish and Christian relations are also gravely affected. Looking back on Rosemary Ruether's impressive list of suggestions for improving Jewish-Christian relations and purging Christian teachings of anti-Judaism and Antisemitism, with which she concluded *Faith and Fratricide* in 1974, it is shocking to realize how liberation theologians, including Ruether herself, undermine nearly every one of them.<sup>121</sup> From the suggestion that Christians assiduously strive to free their own teachings from "anti-Judaic language in its hermeneutics" to the hope that this type of study and introspection will increase "face-to-face" contact between Jews and Christians, Ruether spells out an ambitious plan for healing a historic and painful rift. However, none of these writers contributes to any rejection of centuries-old traditions of anti-Judaism, and none of their writings has done anything to bring Jews and Christians closer together or to increase opportunities for respectful dialogue. Sadly, liberation theologians have only succeeded in reversing the powerful redemptive impulses in Christian theology to rid itself of the stain of intolerance of Jews that has existed in much of Christian history.

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<sup>121</sup>Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, pp. 259–260.