



‘Religions and Ideologies,
Polish Perspectives and beyond.’

International Council of Christians and Jews
in cooperation with the
Faculty for International and Political Studies
of the Jagiellonian University Cracow.
2011 Conference, July 3-6.

Presentation by Rev. Dr. Jamal Khader
Wednesday July 6, Collegium Novum, Cracow
Panel B: Promised Land, Land of Israel, Land of Palestine, Holy Land

Introductory remarks

First remark: Including a Christian Palestinian in the Christian Jewish dialogue gives not only a totally new perspective talking about a different context, but contributes to a new way where dialogue is done. We are not Europeans, although we agree that the Holocaust marked the type of relationships between Christians and Jews (this is part of world history), but the Holocaust is not part of our history. In a way, we are the victims of the victims of the Holocaust. On one hand, we are Palestinians, sharing the same sufferings and hopes of all Palestinians; on the other hand, we are Christians, and we need to connect with the Christianity all over the world, and reflect on the Bible.

Second remark: The land we are talking about here is the land where I live, where my forefathers lived for centuries, and where future Palestinian generation will live. The way we call this land will not change this reality; so first the way we call this land or the way we connect to this land is not a theological or ideological question, it is simply the place where I was born, where I spend my years, and where I will be buried; it is an existential connection to this land.

“Our presence in this land, as Christian and Muslim Palestinians, is not accidental but rather deeply rooted in the history and geography of this land, resonant with the connectedness of any other people to the land it lives in. It was an injustice promises, according to when we were driven out”. (Kairos 2.3.2.)

Third remark: The different names of this land have religious connotations: the “Promised Land”, “Eretz Yesrael”, “Phalasteen” and “Holy Land”! And with those religious connotations, the conflict over the land takes a clear religious dimension. Is the conflict a political one or a religious one? Even if the Israeli Palestinian conflict is a political one, it has a religious dimension.

Reading the Bible

The conflict affected the way the Palestinian Christians read the Bible. Reading the Bible in the Palestinian context is a painful and yet a healing experience. We always read the Bible, Old¹ and New Testaments. In the last few decades, this reading went through an important development. We still have sometimes those readings in a simultaneous way. I will try to summarize in the following:

The spiritual reading of the Old Testament: we read the whole Bible as one book, beginning with the Creation and ending with the Revelation of Saint John. God began his story with the human beings, and it culminates in Jesus Christ, until the Kingdom to come. The story told by the Bible is our story: we were in Egypt, we came to the Promised Land, and we were unfaithful to the Law of God. Then the All Merciful God sent his Word, Jesus Christ to fulfill the promises of the prophets. In that spiritual reading, we are the people of God; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are our forefathers, and the blessings of God continue in Jesus Christ. In that reading, we see the All Mighty opened the borders of his chosen people to include all the nations. And when we read that Jesus demolished the wall separating the Jews from the Gentiles, we see ourselves as descendants of the first, not the second half of the people of God. In that reading, we never gave any special importance to the land, as the whole earth is God's land, and all peoples invited to be part of his own people.

A new Marchianism: Then we began to hear different readings of the Bible, mainly the Old Testament, Jewish readings and then Christian readings. Those readings link the texts of the Old Testament with contemporary events: so the Hebrews of the Bible are the Israelis, and Israel of the Bible is compared with the State of Israel. The promises of the Old Testament are applied to the new political realities. Facing these new readings, some Palestinian Christians stopped reading the Old Testament, as it was seen as operating against us and justifying our sufferings and expulsion from the land. In some liturgical texts, we even used to replace the word "Israel" with Jacob, or the "people"... The local church kept the texts as they are, and tried to dissociate them with the political reality, and it always insisted on the unity of the Bible as the Word of God. One significant contribution of the church was the pastoral letter of His Beatitude Michel Sabbah in 1993, *"Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible"*. Although we may still find some Christians who express complexity when some texts are read in churches, that tendency is very limited.

Spiritualization of the Old Testament by the New: Some groups chose the spiritualization of the Bible: the Kingdom of God is the heavenly Kingdom, and "our country is in heaven, and we live here on earth as pilgrims, as in a tent"; the Jerusalem we look for is the heavenly Jerusalem. This reading has consequences on the engagement of Christians in public life; they may participate in the political life as Palestinians, not as Christians. Many Christians chose the left "Marxist" parties, as they did not receive any guidance from their churches. Local contextual theologies were the work of individuals, but the main line would focus more on spirituality with no link with the social or the political life outside the churches. When one Sunday in 2007, after the siege on Gaza, I preached on the Gospel of the multiplication of bread on the responsibility to feed the hungry, including those living in Gaza, that was the last time I preached in that parish!

The mission of the Land – a contextual reading: Based on our experience, and on the work of many theologians, there is a beginning of what we can call "Palestinian theology". It is not a developed or an agreed upon theology, but that theology is making its way. Some of the aspects of that theology is the following:

A Christological reading of the Old Testament:

¹ With respect to the different appellations of the Bible (Hebrew Bible, First Testament...), I choose to use the traditional name in Christianity: Old Testament and New Testament.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ came, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was near. He provoked a revolution in the life and faith of all humanity. He came with "a new teaching" (Mk 1:27), casting a new light on the Old Testament, on the themes that relate to our Christian faith and our daily lives, themes such as the promises, the election, the people of God and the land”. (Kairos 2.2.2.)

Refusal of ideological readings of the Bible on the land. Few conferences took place in Palestine on Christian Zionists, and we began contacts with some European post-Holocaust theologians. Those theologies have negative consequences on the Palestinians: theology is separated from the question of justice. Either Christian Palestinians are absent from those theologies, or they were told that their land is no longer theirs!

Furthermore, we know that certain theologians in the West try to attach a biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of our rights. Thus, the promises, according to their interpretation, have become a menace to our very existence... We call on these theologians to deepen their reflection on the Word of God and to rectify their interpretations so that they might see in the Word of God a source of life for all peoples (Kairos 2.3.3).

“Our connectedness to this land is a natural right. It is not an ideological or a theological question only. It is a matter of life and death... We declare that we want to live as free people in our land. We suffer from the occupation of our land because we are Palestinians. And as Christian Palestinians we suffer from the wrong interpretation of some theologians. Faced with this, our task is to safeguard the Word of God as a source of life..., "good news" for us and for all”. (Kairos 2.3.4.)

A contextualized vision of the land: Our link with the land is not an ideological or religious, it is in this land that we live and explore the will of God on us, here and now: what does He want from us? What is his plan for us? Reading the Bible, we try to discover the will of God. *Today we constitute three religions in this land, Judaism, Christianity and Islam... God has put us here as two peoples, and God gives us the capacity, if we have the will, to live together and establish in it justice and peace, making it in reality God's land (Kairos 2.3.1).*

God's purpose in the history of Salvation: God created the earth, the land is God's, and He created the human beings as stewards of this land, to live in it in peace and justice:

“Our land is God's land, as is the case with all countries in the world. It is holy inasmuch as God is present in it, for God alone is holy and sanctifier. It is the duty of those of us who live here, to respect the will of God for this land. It is our duty to liberate it from the evil of injustice and war.

It is God's land and therefore it must be a land of reconciliation, peace and love. This is indeed possible: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps. 24:1)”. (Kairos 2.3.1.)

An inclusive reading of the Bible: we read in the Kairos document:

“The Kairos is a cry full of prayer and faith in a God ever vigilant, in God's divine providence for all the inhabitants of this land”. (Kairos, Intro.)

“This means for us, here and now, in this land in particular, that God created us not so that we might engage in strife and conflict but rather that we might come and know and love one another, and together build up the land in love and mutual respect”. (Kairos 2.1.)

Universality versus particularity:

“We believe that our land has a universal mission. In this universality, the meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land. In light of the teachings of the Holy Bible, the

promise of the land has never been a political programme, but rather the prelude to complete universal salvation. It was the initiation of the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God on earth". (Kairos 2.3.)

- No theology with justice:

"Any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings, because it calls for violence and holy war in the name of God Almighty, subordinating God to temporary human.

We call on these theologians to deepen their reflection on the Word of God and to rectify their interpretations so that they might see in the Word of God a source of life for all peoples.

Conclusion:

Some considerations:

There is difference between reading the Bible to learn, and reading the Bible to confirm our ideas and choices. The difference is between the reading of the whole Bible and choosing texts (Canon within the Canon, Bible within the Bible)

There is the danger of the "idolatry of the Land", where the land becomes more important than the biblical message of justice in the Bible.

There is difference between a Christian reading of the Bible and a Jewish reading of the Bible. We learn from each other, and we can enrich each other; nevertheless we may not agree with each other.

Universal mission of the land is not versus the particularity, but in contraposition to the exclusiveness.

The Western categories are not applicable to the theology in the East or eastern churches. Those concepts of "replacement", "dispensationalism" and others are the product of the western culture and theology. When the Eastern Churches affirm being the new Israel, they mean it in a different sense than the Western Christians: they say who they are, not who the others are.

Let me end with a paragraph about Jerusalem. It summarizes what was said about the land, and it gives a vision for the future:

"Jerusalem is the foundation of our vision and our entire life... She is the city towards which all people are in movement – and where they will meet in friendship and love in the presence of the One Unique God, according to the vision of the prophet Isaiah: "In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it (...) He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Is. 2: 2-5). Today, the city is inhabited by two peoples of three religions; and it is on this prophetic vision and on the international resolutions concerning the totality of Jerusalem that any political solution must be based... The recognition of Jerusalem's sanctity and its message will be a source of inspiration towards finding a solution to the entire problem, which is largely a problem of mutual trust and ability to set in place a new land in this land of God". (Kairos 9.5)

"We believe that God's goodness will finally triumph over the evil of hate and of death that still persist in our land. We will see here "a new land" and "a new human being", capable of rising up in the spirit to love each one of his or her brothers and sisters". (Kairos 10)