

Jesus, Justice, and Gaza

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Around four weeks ago, the nations of the world gathered at the United Nations General Assembly. In that gathering, the Colombian president, Gustavo Petro, gave a historic speech in which he said the following words:

“The United States is not God’s chosen people; Israel is not God’s chosen people; all humanity is God’s chosen people.”

Now, President Petro is certainly not a theologian, but he put his finger on a deep and festering wound in Western theology — the idea of *chosenness*.

African American theologian Willie Jennings speaks about this powerfully in his award-winning book *The Christian Imagination*. He explains how white Europeans’ claim to chosenness became the foundation of domination — how it justified conquest, colonialism, slavery, and the creation of what he calls “the racialized other.”

Yet the solution Jennings proposes to fix what he considers a broken Christian imagination is one that is widespread within Western theology: *to centre Israel*.

Israel-centred theologies are widespread among Western theologians and scholars, regardless of ethnicity. One well-known example is the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann

In 2015, he wrote the following:

Like many Christians, progressive and evangelical, I was grateful (and continue to be so) for the founding and prospering of the state of Israel as an embodiment of God's chosen people.

This statement expresses the fundamental position of large swaths of Western theologians—not only evangelicals but also progressives, as Brueggemann rightly notes, and not only Protestants but also Catholics! Yet, such statements linking biblical Yisrael to the modern state of Israel constitute one the gravest theological scandals of our time. There are two main reasons for that—the first is *ethical* and the second *theological*. Let me unpack them for you.

1- The ethical problem

Statements such as Brueggemann's legitimize what we, Palestinians, call the *Nakba* (the catastrophe), and what Israeli historian Ilan Pappé rightly refers to as *the ethnic cleansing of Palestine*. This began in 1948, when Israel was founded, and continues to this day through Israel's unceasing aggressions in the West Bank and the ongoing genocide in Gaza. And, by the way, you only have to listen to genocide and holocaust experts, many of whom are Jewish, to realize that what is happening in Gaza is indeed a *genocide*. And this is now made official by the world's largest

association of genocide experts: The International Association of Genocide Scholars.

As part of the founding of the state of Israel, which many theologians celebrate as a sign of God's faithfulness, the Zionists committed no fewer than 30 massacres, destroyed more than 530 Palestinian villages, and forcibly displaced 750,000 Palestinians (almost 90% of those living in what eventually became the state of Israel).¹

At a personal level, my family suffered deeply from the Nakba of 1948.

On my mother's side, we are originally from *Shefa-Amr*, a town in the Galilee. In July 1948, my grandfather Najib, his mother, and his siblings, were forced to leave *Shefa-Amr* when Zionist militias invaded it. They had heard of the horrific massacres committed by the Zionists—especially the heinous massacre of Deir Yassin—and they feared meeting the same fate. So, they fled to Bethlehem, where they lived as refugees in garages for many years.

For the next twenty years, my grandfather was unable even to visit his home in *Shefa-Amr*—the house he had lived in until his late twenties. Finally, in 1968, he was able to make the visit he had long dreamed of. He travelled to Galilee with his sister and my mother, who was eight years old at the time, hoping to see the house he had grown up in. But when they knocked on the door, *a Jewish family met them!* This Jewish

¹ Numbers from Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé. See *Ethnic Cleansing*, 258; *History*, 128; *Ten Myths*, 64. See also the work of Palestinian historian Nur Masalha, esp. *Expulsion of the Palestinians*.

family was now the occupier of what had once been my grandfather's home.

My grandfather had another sister, Jalileh, who lived with her husband and children in Akka (Acre). Jalileh, sadly, did not survive the Nakba; she was killed in 1948 when the Zionist militias poisoned the water supplies of Akka in preparation for their invasion of the city.

A few years ago, I found an academic paper in the Journal of Middle Eastern Studies by two Israeli historians, Benny Morris and Benjamin Kedar. The paper provides evidence from the Israeli military archive that the water poisoning of Akka was only the tip of the iceberg. In addition to the levelling of villages, the massacres, and the expulsion of Palestinians that accompanied the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Zionists had a top-secret operation, much wider than Akka, to poison Palestinian water supplies. The operation had the codename 'Cast thy bread' (שֶׁלַח לַחֲמֶה) — which is a horrifying misuse and weaponization of Eccl 11:1: 'Cast your bread upon the waters'. According to Morris and Kedar, the aim of this operation was to use biological weaponry acquired from Europe and the United States to induce an epidemic among the Palestinians, to crush Palestinian resistance and to forbid the expelled Palestinians from coming back to their homes. Further, Morris and Kedar demonstrate that [quote] "The ... decision to use the bacteriological weapons was taken at the highest level of the

government and military and was, indeed, steered by these officers, with Ben-Gurion’s authorization” [end quote].²

This is, in a nutshell, the story of my family. And anyone who knows what befell the Palestinians in 1948, will know that this is a typical *Nakba* story: a story of horrifying massacres, war crimes, expulsion, and land and property theft. A much-cherished song in Palestine sums up the *Nakba* very powerfully. I will read a few lines from it in Arabic and then provide an English translation:

<i>Soldier came from far away;</i>	جندٌ أتوا من بعيد
<i>They entered my house, killed my son;</i>	دخلوا بيتي.. قتلوا ولدي ...
<i>They told me: get out;</i>	قالوا إرحل..
<i>They trampled on my body; they placed a bullet in my heart;</i>	مرّوا على جسدي زرعوا في القلب رصاصة
<i>And they constructed a tent for me;</i>	نصبوا لي الخيمة
<i>They said: get out.</i>	قالوا إرحل..

So, the question is: How can the *Nakba* be a sign of God’s *faithfulness*!? How can expulsion, theft, killing, and massacres, be a sign of God’s *faithfulness*?? The horrific atrocities of the *Nakba*, past and present, certainly have nothing to do whatsoever with the God who revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ. *Because our God is just and righteous*. As the book of Deuteronomy declares: “His ways are justice. A

² Benny Morris and Benjamin Z. Kedar, “‘Cast Thy Bread’: Israeli Biological Warfare during the 1948 War”, *Middle Eastern Studies* 0.0 (2022): 17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2022.2122448>.

God of faithfulness and *without iniquity*, just and upright is he” (Deut 32:4 ESV). And as tenth-century Egyptian Rabbi Saadia Gaon puts it: “God is upright justice,” *huwa al-‘adl al-mustaqīm*.

So, the first problem with celebrating the state of Israel as a sign of God’s faithfulness or as an embodiment of God’s chosen people is ethical: it is a celebration of the Palestinian *Nakba*—the ethnic cleansing of Palestine—which started in 1948 and continues today in Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

2- The theological problem

The second problem is theological! Saying that the state of Israel is an embodiment of God’s chosen people *replaces* Jesus with an ethno-religious state built and sustained at the expense of Palestinian lives.

Because, friends, the idea of election—chosenness—makes no sense whatsoever apart from Jesus!! And this is what I want to spend the rest of my sermon unpacking. I’ll do this in three parts: first, I’ll speak about the relationship between election and justice in scriptures. Second, I’ll give you some bad news. And third, I’ll give you some good news!

First: Election and Justice

Let’s start with the basics: why did God choose Abraham?

Some theologians explain the idea of election by emphasizing the *undomesticated* nature of God (we cannot fathom God); others speak of divine *randomness*. However, the book of Genesis gives us a better

answer: God chooses someone (Abraham) who responds to him by faith, in order to create through him an alternative human community—one that embodies God’s justice and righteousness.

Genesis 18:19 makes this very clear. There, God states his purpose for choosing Abraham. He says the following: ‘I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing *righteousness and justice* (Gen 18:19).

This summarizes the idea of election. God is neither tribal nor racist. He does not privilege one nation above another. As Deut 10:17 puts it, God “is not partial”. He did not choose Abraham for the color of his eyes or the complexion of his skin. God chooses people who respond to him by faith to charge them to actualize his justice and righteousness.

Now, God’s story with Abraham continues in the founding of Yisrael (God’s ancient people, not to be confused with the State of Israel). In the OT, Yisrael is established as a nation after the exodus from Egypt. Exodus 12:38 tells us that people from mixed ethnicities came out from Egypt with the Hebrews. Those who said “Amen” to the law of Moses became Yisrael. So, OT Yisrael is a people of *covenant* whose life revolves around *God’s law*. And God’s law is the primary expression of God’s justice (*tzedakah, dikaiosynē*). *Living out God’s justice* is the very purpose of Yisrael’s existence. This can be seen very clearly in Deut 4:5–8.

But there is a conundrum here. All laws are expressions of certain moral visions—certain conceptions of justice and righteousness. So, the

question that should be asked is: what is *God's* conception of justice (*tzedakah, dikaiosynē*) that OT Yisrael is commanded to display?

In the ancient world, there were competing ideas and definitions of justice. Perhaps the most intriguing ones are found in Plato and Aristotle. For example, in one of Plato's dialogues, the *Gorgias*, Callicles suggests to Socrates that privileging the strong and powerful over the powerless is *just* and *right*—what he calls 'justice according to nature'.

It is quite striking how often the language of *right* and *justice* is used to describe Israel's aggressions—the aggressions of a nuclear power, with one of the most powerful armies in the world, backed by hierarchies of global powers, against a people oppressed and subjugated for more than 77 years. Such uses of right language fit well with Callicles's definition of justice: i.e., supporting the powerful against the powerless.

However, is that God's definition of justice? Not at all! Deuteronomy sums up God's justice in the commandment to love God with the whole heart, soul, and strength (Deut 6:5; cf. 11:13, 22; 19:9). And the idea is that when God's people love God, they can *imitate God* in extending love and doing justice (*mishpat/krisis*) to the oppressed and destitute (Deut 10:17-19).

To sum up, the idea of election is inseparable from justice. In the Hebrew Bible, God chooses Yisrael for Justice. *Full stop.*

Second: the bad news

All this sounds wonderful, no? But there is bad news. If you are like me, you would wonder, *really?! Is humanity really capable of doing justice?*

From where we live in Palestine, it doesn't seem so *at all!!* It's what Isaiah said: *All like sheep have gone astray; ... all turned to their own way.*

Gaza has revealed the failure and total bankruptcy of humanity! We feel like Qoheleth (the sage of Ecclesiastes). In Eccl 4, he laments: 'I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them'. As if he's speaking directly about what's happening in Palestine now!

I saw the tears and the agony of the people of Gaza. No one to comfort them. On the side of their oppressor, there was power! Nuclear power, supported by hierarchies of world powers.

Even God's people in the OT failed to embody God's justice! You only need to do a quick scan of the OT. Immediately after the exodus from Egypt, having seen God's incredible act of liberation, God's people immediately fail to adhere to God's justice. The first law Yisrael is given after liberation—even before the ten commandments—is the *manna law*: a basic law that reflects God's way of distributing resources (God's concept of distributive justice). What happens? The Israelites fail to abide by it.

And we see this failure again and again throughout their forty years in the wilderness. And it doesn't get better in the land. The period

of the Judges: *catastrophe!* The period of the Kings: *a disaster!* OT history ends with failure. Just look at the endings of Ezra and Nehemiah: *a complete mess.*

So, have God's purposes failed? *Not at all!*

Third: The good news

In the fulness of time, God sends his only begotten son, *Jesus Christ*, from within the people of Yisrael! John describes him as the *logos* of God, who is God, and through whom all things came into being! And this *logos* became flesh and dwelt among us!

But John does not stop there. Beyond the majestic prologue, his Gospel is woven with the beautiful 'I am' sayings of Jesus. Some of them are immediately intuitive for us, but one of them is perhaps not as clear: '*I am the true vine*' (John 15:1). I asked ChatGPT to explain it to me, and it simply said that "Jesus is the source of life and fruitfulness for his followers."

But this doesn't capture the full picture! Why did Jesus say "I am the **true** vine"? For anyone familiar with the Jewish background of the *vine* metaphor, what Jesus is saying here is unmistakable. The vine is a well-known symbol of Yisrael (see Isa 5:1–7; Jer 2:21; Hos 9:10; Ps 80:8). So, Jesus here is saying *I am the true Yisrael!*

Many theologians today consider the idea that *Jesus is the true Yisrael* a theological scandal. But for John, centring anything but Jesus as the true Yisrael is the real theological scandal!

Last month, I gave a similar talk at a large conference in the United States. Afterwards, one of the participants sent us a message saying, “Tony came close to antisemitism; he said that Jesus is the true Yisrael!”

That’s the world we live in today! Saying that Jesus—the Jew of Jews, the Israelite of Israelites—is the true vine is antisemitic!

Western theologians like to call this proclamation of Jesus “replacement theology” or “supersessionism.” And the truth is, these theologians are the ones actually proclaiming a theology of replacement—a theology that replaces Jesus with a colonial state built on the blood and bones of Palestinians.

But we say to these theologians: *Far be it that we are saying that Jesus replaces Israel!* Before Israel even existed, Jesus already was! As He Himself said, “Before Abraham was, I am.” He is the Logos of God, through whom all things were created. And, by the way, immediately after Jesus says that—literally in the next verse—John says that “they picked up stones to throw at him” [8:59)]. Sadly today it’s the Christians—Christian theologians—who are picking up these stones!

Sisters and brothers, the idea of election apart from Jesus is pure absurdity. Because chosenness is all about justice and righteousness! And Jesus is the only one who truly and fully embodies the justice of God! Luke describes him as the *dikaios* ‘the just, the righteous’ Son of God (Luke 23:47; Acts 2:27; Acts 3:14), who is anointed “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18–19). And

Matthew tells us that Jesus fulfils all *dikaiosynē* (all justice, all righteousness; Matt 3:15).

John 15 is actually very crucial for our understanding of election, for two reasons: (1) it centres Jesus, and (2) it places us, his followers, in the right place so that we do not abuse the idea of election. Because Christians, before Jews, weaponized the notion of election to colonize and subjugate others (and to justify antisemitism)! In John 15, followers of Jesus, Jews and gentiles, are only branches in the vine—branches that can be cut off if we do not bear fruit. *What fruit?* The fruit of love that is emphasized in John 15, and which sums up all the law, all of righteousness.

But there is more in John 15. In the OT vine tradition, Yisrael is rooted in the land. Ps 80 says the following: ‘You brought a vine out of Egypt ... You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land’. So, the Israelites in this tradition are the *vine* planted in the *land*; but in John 15, Jesus is the vine, and God’s people are planted in Jesus. So, Jesus is not only the true Yisrael—He is the true Promised Land.

I was in Istanbul a couple of months ago, and we visited this beautiful ancient church, the Chora, not far from the Hagia Sofia. There, I was struck by a stunning mosaic at the entrance: an icon of *Christ Pantokrator* (Christ almighty), but what distinguished this version is the Greek script around it, which said the following: Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, ἡ γῶρα τῶν ζώντων, “Jesus Christ, the Land of the Living” (taken from Ps 116:9 MT). Jesus is the true Promised Land. And this makes so much

sense: because the Promised Land is the sphere of God's justice and righteousness. That's why, in the OT, the Promised Land vomits out those who defile it in their injustice.

Sisters and brothers, *heresies are measured by the distance between our theological center and Jesus*. And this distance should be zero. Jesus should be at the very centre of our theology and our witness. Amen.