



The Use of Scripture in the Current Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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If most of us had forgotten about the realities of the conflicts in the Middle East soon after the first Gulf War in 1992, our memories were harshly jogged on September 11, 2001. As CNN broadcast pictures of a small group of Palestinians in jubilation over the event, we were horrified by the violence issuing from a region that has challenged American perceptions of itself. Although the United States has itself contributed to the violence in the region, using various arguments of self-defense, its continued involvement (or lack of involvement) in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has, over the years, been driven by policies inconsistent with other American foreign policy objectives in the region. The American position on Israel/Palestine has involved a convoluted mixture of American religious public opinion, the heartfelt convictions of various elected officials, and pressure from various religious special interest groups. No other arena of foreign policy has been driven by American religious sentiment like that of Israel/Palestine.

IMPLICIT HERMENEUTICS

A colleague in Cairo recently shared an experience with a close relative regarding a discussion about the situation in Israel and Palestine. When the occupation of the Lutheran churches in Bethlehem by the Israeli army in 2002 came up,

Our response to the present crisis in the Middle East is heavily influenced by our reading of Scripture, and that, in turn, is influenced by many factors—not all of them self-evident. A helpful response will require us to think clearly about such things.

the conversation came to an abrupt end. “True Christians support Israel, of course.” Stunned, my colleague innocently asked, “Why?” He was met with an unequivocal, “Because the Bible says so, that’s why!” Such a common response has been given center stage recently with the controversial visit to Israel in July 2002 by House Majority Leader Tom DeLay who urged Israel to hold onto “Judea and Samaria,” the biblical names for what the UN has labeled the “Occupied Territories.”¹

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The modern conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians proves to be one of the most challenging hermeneutical quandaries for North American Christians. The political conflict involves not only issues of terrorism, human rights, national identity, disputes over sovereign territory, and access to natural resources (especially water); it is not only about justice or national rights of self-defense; more important, it concerns religious-communal identity: a holy people, holy land, and holy places. This article will survey various hermeneutical options used by Christians in responding to the current conflict. Whereas it has simply been assumed that North American Christians are either pro-Israel or pro-Palestine based upon an either conservative or liberal reading of Scripture, respectively, this article argues that there are more essential factors. Although how one reads a sacred text is important, more crucial are the atavistic cultural, national, and ethnic identities that guide particular interpretations—be they literal or not. For example, if one is a biblical literalist (which many Arab Christian leaders are), does one begin to understand the current conflict by turning to the promise of Canaan to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3) or with Christ’s assertion that he is the fulfillment of the promises of Scripture (Luke 24:25–27)?² If one holds a more liberal understanding of Scripture, does one begin with a belief that the “Judeo-Christian tradition” binds Americans and Israelis together in a culture of Western democracy, or that the “prophetic tradition” critiques all earthly forms of power and coercion? It is not enough simply to draw lines in the sand regarding literal or nonliteral interpretations of Scripture. Rather, in responding to this particular conflict, there are important historical and social-political factors that guide biblical hermeneutics. Usually these guides are used implicitly without a clear understanding of the methods being employed. It is this intuitive understanding of Scripture that often becomes problematic. Many

¹David Firestone, “Tom DeLay Is to Carry Dissenting Message on a Mideast Tour,” *New York Times*, 25 July 2003. See also DeLay’s “Be Not Afraid” speech to the Israeli Knesset. Online: <http://www.majorityleader.gov/> [cited 28 August 2003].

²On a Christian understanding of Jesus’ fulfillment of Old Testament law, see Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002) esp. 141–177.

North American Protestants from both “conservative” and “mainline” denominations would adhere to the belief that the modern State of Israel is in some way a manifestation of biblical prophecy.³ Yet, this belief may not be articulated by pinpointing a clear biblical hermeneutical method. As Charles Kimball has reminded us, interpretation of sacred texts forms the basis from which people of faith respond to the world. Still, many people of faith do not actually approach their texts with critical “clear thinking and honesty” but rather with assumptions.⁴ For example, the then-Lutheran theologian Richard John Neuhaus expresses a characteristic “mainline” position on Israel.

The U.S. has a signal responsibility to Israel. The churches may and should protest specific policies of Israel, deplore the injustices by which the State of Israel came into being, and plead the plight of Palestinians....Yet the steadiness and dependability of U.S. commitment to Israel’s survival as a state must never be permitted to be thrown into question....This thinking about Israel is singularly affected by the relationship between living Judaism and the church, a relationship which remains a great mystery and is marked by a much tortured history.⁵

Are “mainline” churches, particularly Lutherans, adopting such a view because of their explicit understanding of Old and New Testament covenantal “mysteries,” or because of German Lutheran guilt over complicity in the Holocaust,⁶ Luther’s anti-Semitic remarks about “the Jew,”⁷ Medieval Christian treatment of Jews, or possible anti-Semitic origins in the New Testament?⁸ Or are we motivated more by contemporary pain and anger over September 11, those images of jubilant Palestinians, and our belief that all Arabs are Muslim terrorists? It is the hope that this work will help North American Lutheran congregations begin to address the implicit and explicit hermeneutics that are used in addressing this complex struggle in the Holy Lands so that we might approach this vital issue with faith-filled integrity. (Note that, although it is beyond the scope of this work to address Jewish and Muslim hermeneutics, these too play a significant role in understanding and shaping the conflicts in the Middle East.)

DISPENSATIONALISM

No hermeneutic has affected the North American Christian viewpoint more

³Ronald R. Stockton, “Christian Zionism—Prophecy and Public Opinion,” *Middle East Journal* 49 (Spring 1987) 234–235.

⁴Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002) 59.

⁵Richard John Neuhaus, *Christian Faith and Public Policy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 90. Neuhaus is cited also in Hassan S. Haddad, “Christian Zionism in America: The Religious Factor in American Middle East Policy,” in *American Church Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Basheer Nijim (Belmont, MA: Association of American-Arab University Graduates, 1982) 113.

⁶Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Zionism and the Ideological Manipulation of Christian Groups,” *American-Arab Affairs* 22 (1987).

⁷See Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies” (1543), *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 47:121–306 (hereafter *LW*).

⁸See John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

than dispensationalism. Colin Chapman calls this a subliminal hermeneutic, the influence of which “has been so pervasive that many people have absorbed this way of thinking without knowing it.”⁹ Pop American culture has assimilated much of this hermeneutic through Hollywood’s *Omen* trilogy and the more recent quasi-science fiction *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins.

Dispensationalism is a literal interpretation of Scripture that makes use of several Old and New Testament prophecies. According to dispensationalists, these prophecies point to specific historical events in the present and future that are clear markers paving the way for the return of Christ (Matt 24:1–31; Mark 13:3–37; Luke 21:23–28; Dan 9:24–27; much of Ezekiel and Revelation as a whole and esp., Rev 20:1–15). In order to interpret these prophecies coherently, dispensationalists argue that Scripture is divided into seven dispensations (or covenants) that God has contracted with humanity throughout history. Each new covenant is in some way parallel and does not supersede the previous covenant. Thus, the promises made to the Israelites in the Old Testament are still applicable (Rom 11:1–12, 27). Orthodox Christianity, since the time of Augustine, has held that the church is the New Israel. But dispensationalists would disagree, attacking this “replacement theology” or “supersessionism,” which they feel has laid the roots of anti-Semitism, “the shameful atrocities as the Crusades and the Inquisitions in ‘the name of Jesus.’”¹⁰

In dispensational theology the fulfillment of the promises to the Jews includes bringing them back to “Zion,” which will then bring about the advent of the last dispensation, the return of Christ and the millennium (Christ’s one-thousand-year rule on earth). The establishment of the State of Israel and the capture of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967 are seen as a fulfillment of Zech 8:3 and thus a harbinger of the next dispensation.

According to those who hold these millennialist views, apocalyptic passages are to be read in historical-futuristic terms that predict historical events that will precede and even usher in Christ’s return and thousand-year reign. A prominent author holding this view is Hal Lindsey, whose books *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, *There’s a New World Coming*, and, most recently, *The Everlasting Hatred*, have been among the most popular reads of this hermeneutic.¹¹ Other outspoken figures in this vein have been Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.¹²

CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

An important precursor to the return of Christ and his thousand-year reign

⁹Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* 253.

¹⁰Hal Lindsay, *The Everlasting Hatred: The Roots of Jihad* (Murreta, CA: Oracle House, 2002) 26. See Stockton, “Christian Zionism,” 235–236, note 1, in reference to Augustine’s use of “Israel” in the *City of God*. See Rom 9:6b–8.

¹¹Hal Lindsey, *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970); *There’s a New World Coming* (California: Vision House, 1973); *The Everlasting Hatred*.

¹²See Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1987).

on earth (based upon a literal interpretation of Rev 20:1–3) is the “return of the Jews to Zion” (Zech 1:16; 14:1–3). Millennialists understand this passage as referring to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the possession of the

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temple mount in 1967.¹³ This biblical hermeneutic leads to a political activism that supports the State of Israel, known as Christian Zionism. Supporting Israel and its possession of the Holy Land is necessary for Christ’s return. The International Christian Embassy of Jerusalem (ICE) is the most vocal Christian Zionist organization.

Thus Christian Zionists simply seek to give voice to that which Jesus Himself has already said; namely, that the modern-day restoration of the State of Israel is not a political accident, or merely the result of a secular, political, Zionist movement, but rather the fulfilment of God’s own Word. Moreover, it heralds the dawn of a soon-coming Messianic age. For Christian Zionists then the restoration of the State of Israel to its ancient soil is evidence that there is hope and redemption for this world.¹⁴

The ICE, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson are notorious advocates of Christian Zionism, and they command a large following. Some estimates argue that there are forty million self-proclaimed Christian Zionists in America.¹⁵ This implicit hermeneutic has not only been championed by Jimmy Carter, Billy Graham, Ronald Reagan,¹⁶ Tom DeLay, and Campus Crusade for Christ,¹⁷ but is also found within most North American mainline pews. An uncounted number of mainline North American Christians espouse some form of Christian Zionism because of an implicit view that the modern State of Israel is in some way to be equated with biblical Israel and therefore related to salvific history.¹⁸ At the time of the first intifada in 1987, 57% of American Protestants and 35% of American Catholics affirmed that the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 fulfilled biblical prophecy.¹⁹ What is

¹³Lindsey, *New World Coming*, 115. Lindsey has stated: “There remains but one more event to completely set the stage for Israel’s part in the last great act of her historical drama. This is to rebuild the ancient Temple of worship upon its old site. There is only one place that this Temple can be built, according to the law of Moses. This is upon Mt. Moriah. It is there that the two previous Temples were built”; cited in Halsell, *Prophecy*, 95. The Temple Mount is the current location of the Muslim holy shrines of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.

¹⁴Malcolm Hedding, “Christian Zionism” (February 2001). Online: <http://christianactionforisrael.org/4thcongress2.html> [cited 29 October 2003]. The irony here is that although Christian Zionists are staunch supporters of the politics of Israel, they do so for ulterior motives: that the Jews will help to bring about the return of Christ and ultimately be converted to faith in Christ. However, the majority of “liberal” Christian theologies that are very critical of Israel’s policies usually support Judaism as a valid monotheistic faith.

¹⁵Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* 252.

¹⁶Halsell, *Prophecy*, 40–50.

¹⁷See Josh McDowell, *A Ready Defense* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993) 67–73.

¹⁸Haddad, “Christian Zionism,” 111.

¹⁹Stockton, “Christian Zionism,” 234–254.

often conspicuously absent in such perspectives is a recognition of the Arab Christian church. Often it is assumed that all Palestinians are Muslims. And, if it is acknowledged that there is a Palestinian church, they are sometimes labeled as “not really Christian.”²⁰

MANIFEST DESTINY OF THE “NEW ZION”

An analogous hermeneutic for U.S. Christians is a deep historical self-perception of the United States as the “New Zion,” the “New People of Israel.” From their earliest days until the present, Americans have understood their role as a “light to the nations” (Isa 42:6). This hermeneutic is manifested throughout America’s “civil religion,” most recently in the pervasive mantra “God Bless America.” American economic, military, and political (i.e., democratic) might has commonly been considered a blessing from God.

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John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, saw the settlement in the New World as the newly covenanted people of God.²¹ The image of the “New Israel” in the early seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to a small but dangerous Protestant interpretation of the Native Americans as the new “Amalekites” (1 Sam 15:16–18). This gave North American Christians biblical license to “have dominion” over the land and its indigenous people.²² By the nineteenth century, America’s image of its own “manifest destiny” was cemented by Western expansion and the industrial revolution. The role of the United States in the two world wars of the twentieth century supported the image of a moral America as a called people. Following the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the United States as the only superpower has cemented this self-identity as the beacon of the nations. This atavistic identity “is an important aspect of American thinking...which Americans have of their origins and of their ultimate national destiny...[and] is [also] an important component of how Americans—especially evangelical Protestant Americans—view Israel, Jews, and their own country.”²³ “Israel is seen by many Americans as a kind of ‘double’ for America in the Middle East.”²⁴ This hermeneutic does raise troubling questions. One must ask why there is

²⁰Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2003) 244.

²¹John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630). Online: http://www.winthropsociety.org/doc_charity.php [cited 29 October 2003].

²²And by implication, the Israelis are given license to “have dominion” over the Holy Land and the Palestinians. See Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Rise and Fall of Palestine* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

²³Stockton, “Christian Zionism,” 234.

²⁴Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The Wrath of Jonah* (New York: Harper & Row, 2001) 81.

a National Holocaust Museum in Washington and not additionally a permanent memorial to Wounded Knee or to the slave trade as well.

HOLOCAUST REFLECTIONS

The Holocaust has itself affected mid-twentieth-century Protestant theology. Barth and Tillich built upon the views of Reinhold Niebuhr and supported Jewish emigration to Palestine. Quite often Western Christian support for the State of Israel has been explained as a “compensation for Christian guilt for anti-Semitism and the Nazi destruction of European Jewry.”²⁵ Some Christian denominations, primarily evangelical churches and organizations, are outspoken in their desire for the church to repent of its past sins of commission and omission and to make sure that it never again abandons “God’s Chosen.” Although Western guilt cannot explain all of contemporary Western Christian response, it certainly cannot be dismissed. Even if the most recent Lutheran repudiation of Luther’s anti-Semitic tract, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” was not driven by guilt, it has certainly been understood this way.²⁶ There is a perception among Jews and Arabs that German Lutherans “have particular reason to be aware of that judgment in view of the European Holocaust.”²⁷

PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR²⁸

A very different hermeneutic has been a focus on Old Testament justice. Spurred by contextual theology movements of the 1960s and ’70s, this hermeneutic prefers to look at the prophetic literature (Amos 5:10–24) and sections on justice in the Pentateuch (Lev 19:35; 25:18–24; Deut 16:20). This has been a prominent view of the peace churches and the Mennonite activist Christian Peace Maker Teams²⁹ as well as the Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding.³⁰ Colin Chapman has argued that the promise to Abraham regarding the land “should not be separated from other promises” of faithfulness to the whole covenant, which includes practicing righteousness and justice.³¹ Gary M. Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College (a prominent evangelical institution), has argued that the State of Israel is indeed part of God’s chosen plan but that “like an ox that has forgotten its master and its home, Israel has forgotten the voice of God (Isa 1:3).”

²⁵Ruether, “Zionism,” 63.

²⁶See “Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community”; online: <http://wwwtest.elca.org/ea/interfaith/jewish/declaration.html> [cited 30 June 2002].

²⁷Haddad, “Christian Zionism,” 113.

²⁸The term “preferential option for the poor” comes from the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops at Pueblo, Mexico, 1979. For the development of this thought in Roman Catholic liberation theology, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) xxvi–xxviii.

²⁹See Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997). See also the “Peacemaker Ministries” website at www.hispeace.org/html/bas.htm [cited 27 May 2002].

³⁰See Donald E. Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995).

³¹Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* 139.

Just as God punished the Jews for their faithlessness in 587 B.C. they currently have forgotten “their higher calling.”³² “If Israel does not obey God’s laws, then the land itself will vomit the nation out” (see Lev 18:24–30).³³

Mainline voices (both Western and Arab), including the National Council of Churches, the ELCA, and the Middle East Council of Churches have tended to use the rhetoric of human rights in giving voice to the biblical foundations of justice.³⁴ Although the mainline views have held to the same principles of justice toward the Palestinians as the evangelicals, they often subscribe to some form of the orthodox view of “replacement theology.” Although the Jews still have a special place in God’s plans, the church is seen as the “New Israel” based upon righteousness of faith in Christ, not literal lineage from Abraham (Matt 3:9–10; Rom 4:13–25). It is Christ who has ultimately fulfilled the promises to Abraham rather than possession of the land or adherence to the law.

PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES OF LIBERATION

Several Palestinian Christians have developed an articulate theological hermeneutic developed along the “preferential option” paradigm. Naim Ateek, Mitri Raheb, and Munib Younan have helped to create an indigenous Palestinian liberation theology. Although they are not representative of most Palestinian thought and mood, they certainly have opened a door in challenging the hermeneutics of North American Christians. By virtue of their identity as Anglicans and Lutherans, they have forced their sister synods to take notice. Ateek, along with the Greek Catholic priest Elias Chacour,³⁵ has been instrumental in the work of Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem.

“the Holy Land first and foremost belongs to God”

While Ateek and Raheb support human rights as an important issue, they begin by addressing the issues of the promises of the land, held by the Jewish and Christian Zionists. The Holy Land, they say, first and foremost belongs to God (Josh 24:13; Jer 2:7). It is God who offers the promise of the land conditionally, based upon observance of the whole of the law (Jer 16:18).

God’s commandments and human rights are here seen as interrelated (see also Ezek 33:21–26). That is the way Israel’s obedience or disobedience is made evi-

³²Burge, *Whose Land?* 270.

³³*Ibid.*, 73.

³⁴U.S. Policy and Israeli-Palestinian Relations: An Overview of ELCA Concerns,” Lutheran Office of Governmental Affairs. Online: <http://www.loga.org/MiddleEast/ELCApolicyoverview.htm>. See the MECC “Second Statement on Occupied Territories” (October 10, 2000). Online: <http://www.mecchurches.org/posandpress/news.asp?id=25> [both cited 24 June 2002].

³⁵See Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers* (Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen Books, 1984), and *We Belong to the Land* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

dent. Obedience remained the condition for a repossession of the land (Lev 26:39–45; Deut 30:1–10).³⁶

For Raheb, the eschaton has already begun in Christ. Thus, the fulfillment of the promises of the return to Zion are not only applicable to Jews, but to all the faithful of Christ. Because of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Land (more importantly, the holy places) is a gift to all people. “The benefits of God’s jubilee are for all the inhabitants of this land, Israelis and Palestinians, Muslims, Jews and Christians.”³⁷

The kernel of this gift, however, is the Palestinian church. This, in some way, is a return to the orthodox Christian view of the “New Israel.” The Holy Land has new gifts—the “living stones.” The Palestinian Christians stand as a sign of that fulfillment of the divine promise to gather all people into Christ’s household.³⁸ This is a dangerous assertion to make in such a tumultuous region. However, both Ateek and Raheb underline that the Palestinian church must adhere to a strict pacifism in fulfilling its call to love one’s enemies (Matt 5:43–44).

Christian Palestinians are often placed in a very difficult quandary: the European and American Christians accuse them of nationalism and the extremist Arabs accuse them of lack of patriotism. If the former demand that they love their enemy the latter demand militant resistance on their part. What can they do?³⁹

The bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan (ELCJ), located in Jerusalem, Munib Younan, has provided an important hermeneutic in this vein, focusing upon a theology of *martyria* (“witnessing”). Taking images from Acts 1:8 and Heb 12:1, he provides a very helpful play upon the contemporary Palestinian-Muslim view of “martyr” (*shaheed*) and the historical image of Christian martyrdom, emphasizing an active, nonviolent witnessing to the Christian faith.⁴⁰

The nationalist-pacifist option adhered to by Sabeel and the three authors above has been a minority voice among Middle Eastern Christians. The nationalist-activist option has not. From as early as the nineteenth century, Arab Christians have been prominent in the development of an Arab nationalist identity. This brought them into conflict first with the Ottomans, then with the British and French, and then ultimately with the Israelis. Orthodox ideologues of the twentieth century, such as George Antonius,⁴¹ ‘Isa al-’Isa (founder of the journal

³⁶Mitri Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 76.

³⁷“The Challenge of Jubilee: What Does God Require,” Third International Sabeel Conference (February 14, 1998). Online: www.sabeel.org/events/3rdconf/message.htm [cited 2 May 2002]. Chapman follows this line of thinking even further, arguing that in Christ the redemption of the land has moved beyond the Holy Land to the whole of creation. See Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* 141–177.

³⁸Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 114; Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, 75.

³⁹Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, 102.

⁴⁰Munib Younan, *Witnessing for Peace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

⁴¹George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965).

Filastin),⁴² Michel Aflaq (founder of the Ba'ath party), Sami al-Jundi,⁴³ and most recently George Habash (leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) have all supported social-political activism, even violent activity, based upon Arab nationalist claims. By the 1960s a distinct Palestinian identity formed around its own nationalist claims.⁴⁴ Under Israeli occupation, however, such Christian ideologies have been subsumed under a more powerful Islamic hermeneutic.

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THE “TURK”

The last implicit hermeneutic which should be mentioned delves into the contemporary American anger and fear in response to September 11, the war on terror (including al-Qaeda and the Taliban), and most recently Iraq. Since September 11, 2001, there has been a massive surge in publications dealing with Islam, focusing upon the violent nature of the faith. While it is true that current radical Islamists use religion to justify and guide their actions, what has been lost in North American media and publications are the arguments among Islamic scholars regarding more appropriate Islamic interpretations of the current crises.

For most Americans, current events have been fit into an atavistic mold of emotional responses toward the Middle East and Islam. Anger over OPEC's oil embargo in the 1970s, images of blindfolded hostages during the 1980s, along with flag-burning crowds calling for the death of the “great snake,” feed into the responses of anger after September 11, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Hal Lindsay's *The Everlasting Hatred* presents a radical Christian view of Islam, arguing that all Arabs are the descendants of Esau and Edom and therefore preordained to an eternal battle against their “cousins” the Jews. The book supports the common assumptions, however, that all Arabs are Muslims (nowhere in Lindsay's work is there a mention or recognition of Christian Arabs) and that all Muslims are violent. In this case, Lindsay uses a biblical argument to support such a view.

The fact that a handful of Palestinians would dare to be seen in jubilation over September 11 or that crazed suicide bombers would kill innocent civilians high-

⁴²Rashid Khalidi, “The Formation of Palestinian Identity: The Critical Years, 1917–1923,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, ed. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 176.

⁴³Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 40–50.

⁴⁴Musa Budeiri, “The Palestinians: Tensions Between Nationalist and Religious Identities,” in *Rethinking Nationalism*, 199.

lights American images of the violent “Turk” (to use Luther)⁴⁵ and provides a focus for American emotional responses in threatening times. Little attention has been paid to the broad spectrum of Muslim opinions regarding violence or even to the presence of the Palestinian Christian community itself.

OUR RESPONSE

It is especially important that North American Christians take the time to explore how their implicit views of this conflict affect their reading of Scripture. As North Americans, we are part of a system that has implicated us in the violent conflict. We have been shown the spent tear-gas canisters and shell fragments picked up off the streets of Bethlehem and Beit Jala that were produced in factories in the United States. By virtue of our citizenship we are involved. As Christians, we are involved by virtue of our relationship with the Old Testament. In all of this, God’s law clearly convicts us of the sin of humanity, a sin that must be confessed. However, the new covenant in Christ has shown us that, for all its groaning, the entire creation (including the Holy Lands) can live in hope (Rom 8:19–21).

A proper response to the hope that we have received in Christ is to begin thinking about the atavistic guides that frame our interpretation of biblical texts. This article has tried to demonstrate that there are many such guides, perhaps often unexamined. As Walter Brueggemann reminds us, for example, “It is likely that our theological problem in the church is that our gospel is a story believed, shaped, and transmitted by the dispossessed; and we are now a church of possessions for whom the rhetoric of the dispossessed is offensive and their promise irrelevant.”⁴⁶ A life-affirming and creative response to the present crisis in the Middle East will require us to take this into account, along with the various implicit assumptions that shape us as we approach the sacred texts. ⊕

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⁴⁵See Martin Luther, “On War Against the Turk” (1529), *LW* 46:161–205, and “Appeal for Prayer Against the Turks” (1541), *LW* 43:219–241. See also Sarah Henrich and James L. Boyce, “Martin Luther—Translations of Two Prefaces on Islam,” *Word & World* 16/2 (1996) 250–266.

⁴⁶Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 206.