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Mission and the Palestinian Diaspora

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Abstract

Palestinians are a diaspora community. Christian response to Israel and Palestine is polarized. Often the Christian supporters of Palestinian tend to focus on the political dimension of their plight to the extent that the greater need for support of their spiritual life and mission is neglected. Whereas historically Palestinian mission has been somewhat stunted, this paper will describe and explore the development of a Palestinian Protestant Christian missiology and mission. The author proposes that a valuable service to the Palestinian Diaspora is to acknowledge their effort in forming an indigenous missiology, to be constructive listeners as they speak, and friends as they search for a better expression of the mission of God in a context of conflict.

Introduction

With the growth of the global Christian movement, innovative and courageous new directions in mission are emerging in the quite unexpected places. Such vital mission is developing from the margins of the global Christian community, advanced by majority world Christians who have customarily been viewed as needy recipients of the largesse of Western Christians. These communities on the margins include diaspora Christian communities who are refugees due to famine, war, economic stress, or other hardship. The importance of this mission from the margins, in addition to its obvious importance as a vehicle of the life and message of Christ to those they serve, is that it may be a source of spiritual renewal and insight to Western mission as the later tries to find its place in the new global mission of the 21st century. Western Christians face the challenge of coming alongside diaspora Christians in a way that is at the same time both supportive and open to learn from their mission.

Palestinian Christians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip¹ are a diaspora community which is persevering both existentially and in faith in spite of ongoing

¹ Palestinians refer to these three areas collectively as 'Palestine.' Although they do not have full sovereign national status, as a result of a raised status in the United Nations, the Palestinian National Authority has renamed itself, 'The State of Palestine.' Israel refers to the land, except for East Jerusalem which was annexed by Israel to West Jerusalem in 1967, as a 'disputed territory', or as the "Palestinian Territories." Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem is not recognized by any international body.

intense pressure from several sources. As a diaspora community they are unique in that not only must they face the immediate pressures of their context, but also respond to the ambivalence towards them of significant segments of the global Christian community. Despite these pressures, they are exploring new paths for mission both theologically and in praxis; this is especially true of Palestinian Protestant Christians on whom this discussion will focus. It is worthwhile reflecting on their progress, as it offers insights concerning several critical issues facing Western mission. To appreciate their efforts in mission it is useful to first consider their diaspora status.

The Palestinian People as a Diaspora Community

Most of the Palestinian people including its Christian community on the West Bank and Gaza are refugees, having been relocated from their villages during the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. During this war either as a result of the fear of attack by Israel's military forces, or direct force by the same, Palestinian Arabs fled from almost 400 villages which were located in what today is the modern State of Israel. Along with this exodus, known as the Nakba, or the Destruction, to Palestinians, Christians transferred en masse to the West Bank which was at that time under Jordanian Mandate control, or to neighboring countries. Some emigrated further afield to Europe or North or South America.² A lesser number relocated within the area that would become the modern State of Israel. The trauma of this uprooting has been told in several autobiographies such as Palestinian Israeli cleric Elias Chacour's *Blood Brothers*.³

² "Palestinian Christians," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinian_Christians, acc. Feb.1 2014.

³ Elias Chacour, *Blood Brothers: The Dramatic Story of a Palestinian Christian Working for Peace in Israel* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1984)..

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war produced further hardship for the Palestinian community. With the defeat of the combined Arab forces by Israel, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights fell under military occupation by Israel. The occupation of the West Bank has remained in effect until the present. Although Israel has removed its settlements and military from within Gaza, this territory remains under partial Israeli blockade, putting extreme economic stress upon the 1.4 million Palestinians – including its two thousand Christian citizens- who live within its closed borders.

Following the occupation in 1967, Israeli's began to colonize the West Bank and Gaza, forming settlements that now range in population from a few dozen to tens of thousands in the largest. In spite of peace negotiations, the presence of Israeli settlers on the West Bank has dramatically increased in recent decades under the protection of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and with the support of the Israeli government. For example, the population of Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has grown from about 10,000 in 1972 to approximately 530,000 today.⁴

The futility of peace efforts combined with the loss of land that would comprise part of a future Palestinian sovereign state, gave rise to the first and second Intifadas (Uprisings). While the first Intifada (1987-1991) largely pitted unarmed youth against the Israeli military, the second Intifada (2000-2004) was much more violent, resulting in the deaths of more than 3,200 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis.⁵ Thousands more were seriously wounded.

⁴ "Comprehensive Settlement Population 1972-2010," Foundation for Middle East Peace, http://www.fmep.org/settlement_info/settlement-info-and-tables/stats-data/comprehensive-settlement-population-1972-2006, acc. Feb. 1, 2014.

⁵ "Intifada toll 2000-2005," BBC News online, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4294502.stm, accessed March 12, 2014.

The second Intifada, and the consequent construction of a separation barrier by Israel, has resulted in greater loss of land as well as freedom of travel for Palestinians not only into East Jerusalem and Israel, but also within the West Bank. Bethlehem, an important center for Palestinian Christians, has suffered significantly due to the wall construction as it separates people in and around Bethlehem from their work, schools, and hospitals. It also has had the effect of constricting the already fragile economy. The presence of the wall discourages tourist traffic into the city. (Tourists must pass through an imposing Israeli military checkpoint in the wall.)

The dispossession and marginalization of the Palestinian community from 1948 to the present has resulted in the emigration of many Palestinian Christians. In 1948 the population of Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Gaza numbered about 400,000. At the beginning of the second Intifada in 2000 there were approximately 80,000 Christians remaining in Palestine. The conflict has furthered reduced the community to about 60,000 at present.⁶

Not only has the population of the Palestinian Christian community been significantly reduced during the last 60 years since the Nakba, their percentage of Palestinian society continues to dwindle. The total Palestinian population (West Bank and Gaza) was approximately 4.4 million in 2013.⁷ Palestinian Christians are now less than 2% of this community.⁸

⁶Abe Ate, "Exodus of Palestinian Christians," *Quaker Life*, 23 March, 2003, p. 6-7. Also, there are 130,000 Palestinian Christians in Israel, and 300,000 scattered throughout the world. In total there are approximately 500,000 Palestinian Christians who comprise about 7-10% of the total global Palestinian population, according to Mitri Raheb, "Sailing through Troubled Waters: Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land," *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 41, no. 2, 2002.

⁷ Palestinian National Authority, Central Bureau of Statistics, June 2013.

⁸ Before the Nakba there were approximately 1,200,000 Palestinians in Israel/Palestine. Almost 500,000 became refugees outside of Israel/Palestine as a result of the Nakba. Thus the Muslim Palestinian community has grown significantly since 1948.

There is significant debate concerning the reasons for the continued emigration of Palestinian Christians from the West Bank. Primarily, it is argued this emigration is a result of the continued pressure on Palestinian society of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the resultant constriction of the Palestinian economy and the consequent lack of employment possibilities.⁹ However, as I mentioned in *Learning from the Least: Reflections on a Journey in Mission with Palestinian Christians*,¹⁰ another factor in the emigration of Palestinian Christians which is often publically downplayed by Palestinian society itself (in what might be an attempt to avoid the painful fact of the reality of tension within its own community) is the tension between Palestinian Christians and Muslims. While there is daily interaction and cooperation, deep friendships, and a shared nationalism among Palestinian Christians and Muslims, there are also sharp prejudices between these communities.¹¹ The late Palestinian journalist Said Aburish describes this complicated dynamic:

There is an implicit and explicit attempt to deny the existence of a 'Christian problem'. Christians and Muslims alike practice this denial. On both sides, most people either relegate the problem to a secondary position, behind that of the Israeli occupation, or dismiss it as transitory and insignificant. This is dishonest, harmful, a mere wish to concentrate on the common enemy, Israel. It is a wish to maintain Palestinian solidarity, or a reflection of the fear that talking about it will make things worse – or a hope that it will disappear.¹²

9 Bernard Sabella, "Socio-Economic Characteristics and Challenges to Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land," in Anthony O'Mahoney, ed., *Palestinian Christians: Religion, Politics and Society in the Holy Land* (London: Melisende, 1999) p. 92.

10 Andrew F. Bush, *Learning from the Least* (Cascade Books: Eugene, OR, 2013) p. 60.

11 Rafiq Khoury, "Living Together: The Experience of Muslim-Christian Relations in the Arab World in General and in Palestine in Particular." In *The Forgotten Faithful: A Window into the Life and Witness of Christians in the Holy Land*, edited by Naim Ateek et al. Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, 2007.

Some Christian families do not see much hope for their children's success in a society in which they are such a diminished minority and in which they feel there is bias against them. This has resulted in further motivation to emigrate.

In any event, the pressures of the conflict with Israel, the dwindling population of Christians due to emigration, and the historically restricted social status since the rise of Islam in the 7th century has resulted in a psychologically embattled, 'hold the fort,' non-missional posture in relation to the majority Muslim community on the part of the majority of the Palestinian Christian community. What mission that does occur frequently is expressed in schools and hospitals which serve the majority Palestinian Muslim population.¹³ These are not insignificant efforts by any means. They bring an important service to the Palestinian community; however, engagement with the majority Muslim community with the gospel of Jesus and the related hope of conversion to Christianity is minimal.

If mission to their Muslim neighbors is limited, how much more so is mission to the Jewish community in Israel. Whereas the conflict renders such mission almost impossible, the language and culture barrier in themselves places mission to Israeli Jews beyond the abilities of many Palestinian Christians. There are however important exceptions to this withdrawal from mission on the part of some Palestinian Protestant Christians which will be discussed. In any event, the mission of the international Christian community to the Palestinian diaspora in response to their marginalization has been valued, but has also been problematic.

12 Said Aburish, *The Forgotten Faithful: The Christians of the Holy Land*. London: Quartet Books, 1993. p. 154.

13 Mitri Raheb, "The Spiritual Significance and Experience of the Churches: The Lutheran Perspective," in Michael Prior and William Taylor, eds., *Christians in the Holy Land* (London: The World of Islam Festival Trust, 1995).

Mission to the Palestinian Diaspora

Mission to the Palestinian diaspora – both its Christian and Muslim communities - is a complex topic that challenges any effort to formulate a concise summary. Nevertheless, as abbreviation is necessary it should be obvious that the response of the international Christian community to the needs of the Palestinian diaspora has tended to be polarized. On one hand there has been the response of Christians who interpret God's will for the peoples in the Holy Land through the theological lens of premillennial dispensationalism. The result of this theological perspective is strong support for the State of Israel which is presumed to be the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and the consequent casting of the Palestinian, as opponents of Israel, in a negative light. On the other hand, there are those Christians, many of whom adhere to a covenantal theology who are ardent supporters of Palestinians in the land. They are motivated by the pursuit of justice for Palestinians and support its political objectives of achieving a sovereign state. This approach in turn tends toward a harshly negative view of Israel.

Concerning the former, dispensationalism emphasizes a more or less literal interpretation of biblical prophecies concerning Israel. Essential to these prophecies is the restoration of the Jewish people to the land and of the establishment of the state of Israel which is regarded as a condition for the return of the Lord. This restoration includes the possessing of the land promised to Abraham and his descendants, and the renewal of worship in a rebuilt Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁴ These are key eschatological events which will pave the way for the return of Christ to Jerusalem and to initiate his one thousand year reign on earth. Accordingly, those who oppose Israel's possession of all the land of ancient Israel, which of course is the Palestinian position as

¹⁴ Andrew F. Bush, "The Implications of Christian Zionism for Mission," *International Bulletin of Mission of Missionary Research*, Vol. 33.3, July 2009, pp. 144-50.

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it claims the West Bank and Gaza for its own sovereign state, are opposing God and are cursed according to the foundational proclamation of God to Abraham which states, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you," (Gen. 12. 1-3).¹⁵

This missional movement, which is often referred to as Christian Zionism, has a tendency to devolve into uncritically promoting nationalism and the marginalization of an indigenous people, the Palestinians, by force.¹⁶ It discounts the authenticity of the Palestinian people as an ethnic group. For example a leader in the Christian Zionist movement states:

To suggest that "Palestinians have legitimate rights stretching back millennia to the lands of Israel/Palestine," reveals an appalling ignorance of both secular as well as Biblical history. The notion of distinct Palestinian people is the creation of Yasser Arafat's propaganda machine after the 1967 war. The non-Jews in the region have always been Arabs who speak Arabic and whose religion is Islam. **There is no such thing as a "Palestinian people"** (emphasis my own).¹⁷

This represents a type of anti-mission that is contrary to the teachings of Christ. It promotes a colonial posture towards a diaspora community.

Supporters of the Palestinian community and its aspirations represent a wide range of denominational affiliations. Many identify with covenantal theology which stresses the significance of the new covenant and the messianic community initiated by Jesus' call for whoever will – either Jews or Gentiles – to follow him. These advocates for Palestine often argue

¹⁵ The Holy Bible, New International Version, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2011).

¹⁶ It should be noted that this movement does have various expressions; however, as this movement is depicted in popular Christian media in the United States, it normally depicts Palestinians negatively. A major proponent of such ideas is the organization Christians Untied for Israel (CUFI) which denies that Palestinians are an authentic nationality, which was a fixture in Israeli propaganda but today is little heard in Israel.

¹⁷ "Evangelicals Supporting a Palestinian State?", James M. Hutchens, Special Guests, <http://special-guests.com/guests/viewnews.cgi?id=EEIVZlpEppBvfZXYMc&style=Full+Article> accessed February 7, 2014.

for justice for the Palestinian people by the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state. Some in their zeal to support Palestinians can tend to promote a Palestinian nationalism which is as equally uncritical as Christian Zionism's support for Israel. For example, Christian movements which support the boycott and divestment of businesses based in Israel – which by the way is not supported by the Palestinian Authority leadership – must consider that their actions might have the effect of weakening Israel generally and thus also harming Arab Israelis who constitute 20% of the population of Israel. Further, by weakening Israel they also open themselves to the criticism of being anti-Semitic; to threaten Israel's existence is synonymous with removing the national protection of the Jewish people, effectively casting them on the mercy of the nations which have persecuted them for centuries.

While without doubt this support for their political objectives is appreciated by Palestinians, in the retelling of Palestinian grievances and the emphasizing of Israel's offenses toward the Palestinian community, the possibility of Palestinians forging true reconciliation with their Israeli neighbors is hindered. The fact that the Palestinian diaspora community - and especially Palestinian Christians - does not need more hindrances on its journey toward peace is well expressed by Palestinian Israeli educator and author Elias Chacour who has stated, "We appreciate your friendship. But may your friendship for the Palestinian community not mean hatred of Israel. Our land does not need more hatred."¹⁸

Clearly all Christian mission to the Palestinian community and its Christians do not fall within extremes which demonize the 'Other.' There are efforts to respond to Palestinian humanitarian needs such as for adequate food and water, education, health care, etc. including

¹⁸ Elias Chacour, "What Things Make for Peace," Lecture, Eastern University. Saint David's, Pennsylvania, December 3, 2013.

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the work of the Mennonite Central Committee which supports agricultural research and development, the improvement of wells and water pipes, and the sponsorship of a Palestinian school.¹⁹ The Society of Friends founded and has sponsored the influential Friends Boys School and Friends Girls School in Ramallah since 1905. Christians from many denominations have helped support Bethlehem Bible College in Bethlehem which educates Palestinian Christians as well as Muslims who are enrolled in its Tour Guide Program.²⁰ World Vision sponsored programs assist economic development, education, child welfare, conflict resolution, and more.²¹

Other mission efforts toward Palestinians beyond these include training for Palestinian Christian leaders such as those sponsored by the Palestinian Bible Society,²² support for dialogue efforts between Palestinian Christian and Muslims and Israeli Jews, and the general spiritual support as expressed in the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Israel and Palestine.²³

Mission of Diaspora Palestinian Protestant Christians

19 Mennonite Central Committee, "Middle East – Israel and Palestine," <http://middleeast.mcc.org/palestine-israel>, accessed March 3, 2014.

20 Bethlehem Bible College, "Tour Guide Program," <http://www.bethbc.org/academics/tourism>, accessed March 3, 2014.

21 World Vision, "Jerusalem, West Bank, Gaza," <http://www.worldvision.org/our-impact/country-profiles/jerusalem-west%20bank-gaza>, accessed March 3, 2014.

22 The Palestinian Bible Society, see www.pbs.org.

23 World Council of Churches, "Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Israel and Palestine," https://www.google.com/search?q=world+council+of+churches+%27+ecumenical+accompaniment+programme+in+palestine+and+israel&rlz=1C1CHFX_enUS570US570&oq=world+council+of+churches+accompani&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0l3.12756j0j4&sourceid=chrome&espv=210&es_sm=122&ie=UTF-8, accessed March 3 2014.

Besides these missional efforts toward diaspora Palestinians, there has been in recent years an increasingly vigorous mission of Palestinian Christians. This mission is breaking new ground. It goes beyond traditional mission of education and other humanitarian services to the Palestinian community. Led especially by Palestinian Protestant Christians, who are the focus of the discussion, new Palestinian mission efforts are seeking to creatively engage Palestinian Muslims with the gospel of Jesus, explore avenues of reconciliation with Messianic Jews, promote justice and peace for all who are in Israel/Palestine, and beyond the land, demonstrate to the West mission from below, mission from a posture of weakness which is especially relevant as Western mission seeks to find its place in the new global mission of the 21st century.²⁴ This mission is being advanced both by missiological writing and praxis.

Their experience of suffering as diaspora Christians has pressed Palestinian Protestant Christians toward a deeper reflection concerning a theology of the land and of Israel, of engagement and reconciliation with Messianic Jews, of new directions for missional engagement with the Muslim community, and the role of Muslim background believers, or MBBs, in ministry. While the West historically has attempted to place certain theological frameworks on Arab Christians, the latter is finding today its own theological – and missiological - voice. Much of this missiological reflection comes out of the intense experience of the conflict and efforts to salvage their own humanity and affirm the humanity of those who oppose them. In this way Palestinian missiology also responds meaningfully to triumphal theologies of Western Christians which justify – and even promote – the marginalization of Palestinians, as has been mentioned. Also, from sincere attempts to engage the Palestinian Muslim community with the gospel of Christ Jesus, rich discussion is occurring which is opening new avenues for

²⁴ Bush, *Learning from the Least*, *passim*.

understanding and witness. Taken together these missiological reflections of Palestinian Protestant Christians represent a significant contextual missiology and point toward creative new directions in mission praxis.

Palestinian protestant Christians have produced a significant body of missional writing. Yohanna Katanacho, a leading Palestinian theologian, in his helpful article entitled "Palestinian Protestant Theological Responses to a World Marked by Violence" identifies four genres of such work. These included autobiographies, apologies, liberation theologies, and reconciliation theologies.²⁵ Katanacho observes that autobiographies such as Audeh G. Rantisi's *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: A Palestinian Christian in the Occupied West Bank*,²⁶ and Munib A. Younan's *Witness for Peace: In Jerusalem and the World*²⁷ "...are important shapers of Palestinian Protestant theology... They also promote peace and human dignity instead of war, advocating a loving God instead of a militant one and making theology relevant to culture."²⁸

Younan describes how his cousin, a deaf and dumb carpenter who worked for an Israeli, was a victim of *Palestinian* suicide bomber on a bus in Israel. Younan writes that in the suffering of their own community they can empathize with the pain of Israelis who have also lost family members to suicide bombing. He states, "We mourn all victims whenever such an attack occurs,

25 Yohanna Katanacho, "Palestinian Protestant Theological Responses to a World Marked by Violence," *Misisology*, July 2008 vol. 36 no. 3, 289-306.

26 Audeh G. Rantisi's *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: A Palestinian Christian in the Occupied West Bank* (Zondervan Books: Grand Rapids, 1990) p. 19.

27 Munib A. Younan's *Witness for Peace: In Jerusalem and the World* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2003).

28 Katanacho, "Palestinian Protestant Theological Responses," p. 301.

whoever that person may be.”²⁹ With a similar emphasis for the need to empathize with their Israeli neighbors Rantisi states:

The deepest lesson I have learned in my life is also the simplest: God loves me and others equally. I may dispute what another does, but he or she is not my adversary. I have suffered, but so have others. I do not want Jews to suffer. Down deep where it is important, my Jewish brother and I are very much alike. We have the same need for security and the same need for acceptance. We must learn to provide for each other's security and well-being.³⁰

Concerning apologies, Katanacho notes the formative influence on Arab Christian theology historically of Islam, that is the fact of Islam's challenge of foundational Christian doctrines such as the trinity, Christology, and the corruption of biblical scriptures necessitated a response from Arab Christian concerning those doctrines.³¹ These apologetic efforts continue today, as well they should since Islam's doctrinal challenges to Christianity remain. Some contemporary Palestinian Christian writing is evangelistic and sharply critical of Islam; other authors seek to identify common ground and build bridges of rapprochement. Labib Madanat a leader in the Palestinian Bible Society, whom I will discuss further below, writes movingly of his journey toward an a deeper and more empathetic understanding of the Palestinian Muslim community.

Palestinian Protestant liberation theological writing, most notably that of Naim Stifan Ateek in his *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, calls for a rethinking of the modern State of Israel and of the Palestinian people in light of God's justice and

²⁹ Younan, *witness for Peace*, p. 100.

³⁰ Rantisi, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, p. 19.

³¹ Katanacho, p. 303.

of his love which was ultimately revealed on the cross.³² Ateek emphasizes the message of the Hebrew prophets of justice for the poor, the outcast, and the stranger or foreigner, and their inclusion into the blessings of God as especially relevant for Palestine and Israel today. In his *A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation and Peace* he goes on to state that justice must move toward forgiveness. He writes,

In conflict resolution, whether between individuals or nations, the highest objective is to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness between the conflicting parties. When forgiveness is given and received, healing commences. This constitutes the mountaintop in peaceable relations among the people.³³

As a traditionally agricultural society, the identity of the Palestinian people is deeply tied to the land. Already uprooted from their homes and villages in historic Palestine, the present Israel proper, Palestinian Christians are attempting to respond to popular Christian theologies that justify this disenfranchisement. Ateek challenges an exclusive theology concerning the land, and argues for a peaceful coexistence of peoples in the land together. Katanacho himself also proposes a new biblical perspective on the land in his article "Christ is the Owner of Haaretz."³⁴ Both authors maintain that the simplistic formula based on Abrahamic texts in the Old Testament (Gen. 12. 1-3) that God gave the land to Israel, therefore the modern State of Israel, has an exclusive claim to it, does not reflect the complexity of the biblical testimony and the difficulties of relating present political realities to the biblical texts. In seeking to develop a contextual Palestinian theology of the land, both Katanacho and Ateek underscore that in speaking of God's

³² Naim Stifan Ateek and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

³³ *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2008) p.183.

³⁴ Yohanna Katanacho, "Christ is the Owner of Haaretz," *Christian Scholar's Review* Volume XXXIV, Number 4 (Summer 2005).

will for land and for both of the communities of Israel and Palestine within it, justice and peace for both peoples must be a priority (Micah 6.8).

Besides their own need to validate their place in the land, Katanacho emphasizes that responding to Western popular dispensational theologies concerning Israel and the land is important because Muslims presume these ideas represent all of the Christian community. This hinders Palestinian Christians in their witness to their Muslim neighbors in Palestine and beyond.³⁵

Finally Katanacho discusses reconciliation theologies that seek renewed relationships both within the Palestinian community between Christians and Muslims as well as with Messianic Jews, and Israel. Within this genre Salim Munayer's work is important. He suggests that justice is critical for reconciliation between Palestinians and Jews, and that Christians, who know the forgiveness and peace of the cross, have a critical role to play. He states:

If I am called a Christian Palestinian, I have a commitment and obligation toward my Palestinian people and their future and welfare. At the same time I have an obligation to my Lord to love my enemies, to break the circle of hatred and enmity and violence, to be a peacemaker, and to look for practical ways for peace between Jews and Arabs. We as Palestinian Christians can play an important role, and be an avenue of peace.³⁶

Again, together these Palestinian protestant Christian texts comprise a significant attempt at developing a coherent contextual missiology. Generally, they seek to advance healing in the land through reconciliation, peace building, and justice. They challenge anti-missional triumphal

35 Ibid.

36 Salim J. Munayer, "Relations between Religions in Historic Palestine and the Future Prospects: Christians and Jews." In Michael Prior and William Taylor, eds. *Christians in the Holy Land* (London: The World of Islam Festival Trust, 1994) p. 149.

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theologies of exclusion which demonize and diminish Palestinians and their concerns, as well as challenge attempts to justify unjust violence against Israel. As such they share the concerns of important Jewish authors such as Rabbi Michael Lerner³⁷ and Mark Braverman.³⁸ Recent Palestinian protestant Christian missiology recognizes that demonizing Israel falls far short of the mission of God, and only continues the tendency to act destructively from the logic of retribution.

As the theologizing process is not complete without application, so the integrity of the Palestinian Christian mission is demonstrated in their mission through praxis toward both their Jewish and Muslim neighbors. As the task of identifying, however necessarily briefly, several emblematic Palestinian Christian mission efforts could be quite arbitrary, emphasis will be placed on those exceptional Palestinian Christian missions with which this author has had significant acquaintance. These include efforts to bridge the chasm of misunderstanding between Palestinian Christians and their neighbors, both Muslims and Israeli Jews, in the Palestinian Bible Society (PBS), and the attempt to build bridges of understanding with Messianic Jews from Israel and internationally in Bethlehem Bible College's Christ at the Checkpoint Conferences in the West Bank.

The Palestinian Bible Society (PBS) has enjoyed unusually creative leadership. One of its key leaders is Labib Madanat, the General Secretary of the Palestinian Bible Society from 1993 – 2007, and now the Coordinator of the Palestinian and Israeli Bible Societies. As is mentioned in *Learning from the Least*, Madanat experienced a unique awakening and growing compassion

³⁷ Michael Lerner, *Embracing Israel/Palestine: A Strategy to Heal and Transform the Middle East*. (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2012).

³⁸ Mark Braverman, *The Fatal Embrace: Fatal Embrace: Christians, Jews, and the Search for Peace in the Holy Land* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2010).

toward his Muslim neighbors as he matured in his faith as a young man and then as a leader in the PBS. He describes several experiences that were pivotal in this spiritual journey. These include experiences with his Muslim roommates in university in Iraq, correspondence with Palestinians in Israeli prisons and their families, encountering the questions of a young Muslim man in Gaza and his father, and more.³⁹ As a result of these encounters Madanat took action to include Muslims in the PBS's planning and even staff. He states:

Where friendship and trust and courage are, many fears and taboos simply dissolve. When we were able to know our Muslim neighbours afresh we were able to see through their eyes. When we invited our Muslim neighbours to help us see them the way they see and know themselves, we were able to see ourselves through their eyes.⁴⁰

The significance of this inclusion was summarized by this author in *Learning from the Least*: "Rather than ignore the complexity of the context of Israel/Palestine, this inclusiveness invited the complexity of Palestinian society into the PBS. This unusual partnership provided a way to deepen its relevancy and provide creative directions in its effort to serve the community."⁴¹ This prophetic leadership gave to other workers in the PBS the freedom to explore deeper relationships with their Muslim community.

Such missional leadership not only serves its immediate context, but also opens new possibilities for Western mission's engagement with the global Muslim world. First, it suggests a shift of attitude of the Christian West toward the Muslim world, an attitude historically characterized by hostility. It calls for a change of perspective from seeing Muslims as enemies to seeing them as neighbors on this planet and as potentially close friends. It furthermore calls for creative new directions in working relationship.

³⁹ Bush, *Learning from the Least*, p.98-103.

⁴⁰ Labib Madanat, *Beyond Self: The Story of the Palestinian Bible Society, 1993-2005*. Unpublished Material, July 2006 as quoted in Bush, *Learning from the Least*, p.103.

⁴¹ Bush, *Learning from the Least*, p.103.

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Mission is not just toward Muslims, but it is also toward ourselves as Muslims help us grasp our own unhealthy attitudes.

Madanat also demonstrated courageous leadership toward the non-Christian Jewish Israelis. During Israel's invasion of Gaza in 2008 hundreds of Palestinian civilians were killed. Madanat described his anger and frustration at this massacre.⁴² However, rather than become one more victim of the invasion by succumbing to bitterness, he took decisive action. After loading his car with toiletries and small gifts he drove to the hospital in the Negev where Israeli soldiers wounded in the invasion were being treated. Entering the ward he visited with soldiers from bed to bed, identifying himself as a Palestinian, praying for them, and wishing them well. He recounts that several broke into tears and expressed their longing for peace between their peoples.⁴³

Again such mission forges courageous new paths. Rather than pigeon-hole the Jewish people to a role in eschatology – one which ends in a terrible suffering – Madanat was dealing fully with his Jewish neighbors as humans, acknowledging their pain, and their hopes. This is mission that is willing to accept the risk of vulnerability. The wounded soldiers could have responded very differently – with anger and resentment.

In a similar direction, Bethlehem Bible College has sought through its Christ at the Checkpoint Conferences (2010, 2012, and 2014) to build bridges of understanding with those whose approach of mission to Israel has fostered – however unintentionally - hostility toward Palestinians.⁴⁴ These conferences have provided a forum for interaction between ardent supporters of Israel and of Palestine. It

42 Ibid.

43 Madanat, *Beyond Self*, in Bush, *Learning from the Least*, p. 104.

44 The author of this paper recalls how while speaking in a large traditional denominational church in Denver, Colorado concerning the danger of placing more priority on nationalism that reconciliation in Israel/Palestine how a man stood up in midst of the congregation of 800 and started shouting how this idea was just propaganda!

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has allowed the Palestinian Christians to describe and display the embracing of the humanity and dignity of the Other as their mission focus. Through these conferences several questions have been asked including, what is the nature of mission? What is the relationship of mission to nationalism? What is the relationship of mission to eschatology? Who has a right to the land?

Conclusion

While not advocating a heightened sense of sacred geography, it is significant that Palestinian Christian mission is being thoughtfully advanced in the land where Christ Jesus first gave the gospel of forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation to his disciples. Through the mission of Palestinian Christians the mercy and grace of Christ continues as a witness to the world. It is a mission which, carried forward by all too human messengers, has embraced the fullness of God's grace as an act of faith, as Palestinians still face on a daily basis the facts of life under occupation - military checkpoints, the death of more Palestinians in the conflict – which could again drag them under the rip tide of bitterness and hatred that has already destroyed so many Israelis and Palestinians spiritually, and even physically. As Jack Sara, the president of Bethlehem Bible College, has said, "... still forgiveness is something I must decide every day."⁴⁵

Palestinian Christians are exerting great effort to overcome packaged Western theologies that many seek to place upon them, and to reflect upon their experiences and biblical texts with integrity in order to form an authentic Palestinian missiology. While this missiology may be sharpened by pressing deeper still into scripture, this is saying no more than what is true of every theology. The great value, though, of emerging Palestinian mission is that it calls all Christians to the heart of the gospel – to value the humanity and dignity of the Other, to reconciliation, justice and peace. It would be well for Western Christian mission to the Palestinian Diaspora to

⁴⁵ Bush, *Learning from the Least*, p. 182.

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recognize the cost - the suffering from the conflict, the loneliness, the pain of being shunned by brothers and sisters in Christ - Palestinian Christians have paid for this mission to emerge and be sustained. It would be well for Western Christians to come along side this suffering community with respect, laying aside their own agenda to learn from those are seeking to heal the wounds of the land.