

## **Palestinian Protestant Theological Responses to a World Marked by Violence**

According to an ancient Jewish commentary, the struggle over parts of the Holy Land goes back to Cain and Abel (Freedman and Simon 1983:187). Cain murdered his brother in order to possess Zion, the future place of the temple. Sadly, since that time Zion and its environs continue to be a locale marked by violence, suffering, and death. Both Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews continue this tradition of violence justifying it in many sociopolitical and religious ways. Some Israeli Jews claim the Holy Land as their ancestral inheritance and as their divine right. Similarly, some Palestinian Muslims claim Palestine as a sacred Islamic land. Just like Cain, both groups use violence defiling the Holy Land and spilling the blood of innocent people. Both groups advocate violence not only against each other but also against minorities within their own groups. Sadly, all Palestinian Christians are caught up in this violent world.

What should they do when someone justifies injustices and killing in the name of God in the land called Palestine or Israel? How do they respond to such a world? Tsimhoni (1993; 2002) provides an Israeli understanding of the sociopolitical and religious diversities among Palestinians and how they respond to a world marked by conflict. She focuses on the church-state relations and consequently minimizes the role of many Palestinian evangelical communities who don't own significant real estate in Israel or Palestine and are not occupied with political activities. Also, O'Mahony (1999; 2003; O'Mahony, Gunner, and Hintlian 1995) provides a well documented study of the emerging Palestinian theology among the different Palestinian Christian denominations. His valuable studies indicate many prevailing Palestinian Christian responses to oppression and violence. However, he has not paid enough attention to the diversity within contemporary Palestinian Protestant theology and consequently did not do justice to their various theological contributions. This essay seeks to remedy this deficiency.

The rest of this essay will sketch out and evaluate the different Palestinian Protestant theological responses since the establishment of the state of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, these responses will enrich our understanding of Palestinian Christian theology. The pertinent responses have the potential not only to pave the way for a better understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict but also to highlight the elements that must be addressed in a violent world. It will no doubt increase our appreciation of the diversity and richness of Palestinian Christianity. At the risk of oversimplification, the essay presents four main categories: biographies, apologies, Liberation theology, and Reconciliation theologies. Although these four responses are interrelated and shouldn't be viewed as mutually exclusive, they are still useful taxonomical groupings.

### **1. The Biographies**

The first response is the biographies. Similar to the well-known story of the Melkite priest and now Bishop Elias Chacour (2001; 2003), Shorrosh the Baptist Evangelist (Hefley and Hefley 1975), Rantisi the Anglican Minister (1990), and the Lutheran Pastor Raheb (2004) among others provide captivating personal stories.<sup>2</sup> Their works focus on the establishment of the state of Israel and its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>3</sup> Shorrosh recounts his heartbreaking story at its establishment in 1948 while the latter two describe the hardships of living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

Through their stories, they provide a framework that combines their cultural concerns with their religious beliefs. The common pattern of these stories is a description of the dehumanizing Israeli injustices against a Palestinian Christian family. These injustices raise many theological questions and social concerns in the life of the narrator. The latter usually experiences divine transformation at a young age and is led to a Christian life committed to nonviolent resistance, reconciliation, justice, and forgiveness. The narrator becomes a model for

following Christ in the context of the Arab-Israeli strife and the biographies usually present few comments reflecting on vexing theological questions pertinent to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>4</sup>

The biographers succeed in presenting their tragic stories in a Christian spirit, in raising thoughtful questions about the justice of God, in advocating love and reconciliation instead of hate and violence, in promoting peace and human dignity instead of war, in advocating a loving God instead of a militant one, and in making theology relevant to culture.

However, their works have weaknesses in at least the following two areas. First, the dominating Israeli picture in their works is negative. The Israeli Jews are seen mainly, not exclusively, as oppressors and seldom as peace partners. Even if some Israeli peace partners appear, their efforts are usually marginal and rarely influential in changing the destiny of Palestinians. Consequently, the reader seeks justice for Palestinians but is less concerned with the complex problems of Israeli Jewish society. Simply put, the biographers present the issues in black and white and in very general terms. Palestinians are the oppressed; Israelis are the oppressors.

Second, the biographers' overemphasis on cultural concerns instead of biblical ones might eventually lead to creating a canon within the canon and to providing very limited insights concerning the biblical interpretation, especially of militant Judaism. Unfortunately, their hermeneutical model jumps to application without any indication of rigorous biblical research or dialogue with militant Judaism. As a result, similar to militant Judaism, they are in danger of eisegesis and of creating a tamed national God.

## **2. The Apologies**

Apologies are the second Palestinian Protestant response. Before the advent of Islam, Arab Christians employed it in Greek, Syriac, or Coptic languages.<sup>5</sup> However, in the context of

Islam, Arabic became the lingua franca and more specifically it became the main language of Christian theology in the Middle East. Since that time Islamic concerns have shaped the direction of Christian theological works in Arabic (Griffith 2002:vii; 1992; Gervers and Bikhazi 1990). Muslims question the Trinity, the incarnation, and accuse Christians of distorting the Scriptures. Many apologists respond to these challenges and defend Christianity demonstrating the veracity of the gospel and some inconsistencies in Islam. Some of the more famous early apologists who wrote in Arabic include Theodore Abu Qurah, Habib Abu Ra'itah, 'Ammar al-Basri, and Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'.

Several contemporary Palestinian Protestants follow in their footsteps addressing three concerns: Trinity, Christology, and the corruption of Scriptures. Shorrosh and Shehadeh are two clear examples.<sup>6</sup> Shorrosh is the son of a Palestinian Arab evangelist who suffered brain damage as a result of an attack by angry Muslim fanatics (Hefley and Hefley 1975:16-17). This violence against his father shaped the future of his life, his views, and interests in Muslims. He describes the prophet of Islam as the antichrist and points out several mistakes in the Quran (Shorrosh 1979:112-113).

At the same time, he writes several books hoping to lead Muslims to Christ. Some of his most influential works are *Islam Revealed* (1988), *Islam: A Threat or Challenge* (2004), and *The True Furqan* (2002). In the first book, Shorrosh finds many linguistic mistakes, logical contradictions, and theological inaccuracies in the Quran. In the second, he raises many questions related to the nature and spread of Islam pointing out its violent nature.

His third book, *The True Furqan*, is a unique contribution. It responds to the following Quranic challenges. The Quran asserts that all humankind and Jinn (spirits) cannot produce a book like it (Sura 17:88). Then it modifies the challenge reducing it to ten Suras or chapters

(Sura 11:13). Last, the challenge is further reduced to one single Sura (Sura 2:23). In other words, no one can combine fifteen to twenty Arabic words that resemble the style and quality of any portion of the Quran. Interestingly, *The True Furqan* is a three hundreds sixty six pages book with more than seventy-seven Arabic Suras that seem to resemble the language and style of the Quran but challenge its teachings presenting the Christian gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike Shorrosh, Shehadeh, the president of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, is more cautious.<sup>8</sup> He tactfully says that the “study of Islam helps refine Christianity’s own understanding of itself” (Shehadeh 2004b:14). In four helpful articles, Shehadeh summarizes some of his essential concerns that are pertinent to Islam.<sup>9</sup> First, he seeks to understand if Christians and Muslims believe in the same God by probing textual, lexical, historical, and theological factors (Shehadeh 2004b:16). He concludes that though “Muslims and Christians may believe in the same God as *subject*, the *nature* of God as conceived by Islam is not at all identical to the nature of God in the Judeo-Christian faith” (Shehadeh 2004b:26). Second, he seeks to understand the Islamic reasons for rejecting the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation (Shehadeh 2004c:142). He evaluates Islam’s monotheistic understanding of God clarifying that, according to Islam, the attributes of God stem from his will, not his nature. Consequently, their God is “essentially capricious,” and “cannot be known or trusted” (Shehadeh 2004c:162). Third, he discusses the reasons for Islam’s rejection of biblical Christology in two articles employing Sura five of the Quran. He concludes that Islam’s rejection of the deity of Christ is based on an unbiblical system of theology (Shehadeh 2004d:288; 2004a:412).

On the one hand, the above apologies have many theological and philosophical insights. They not only sketch out some of the key differences between Christianity and Islam but they also inspire Palestinian theologians to consider the importance of sharing God’s good news with

Muslims. Further, they pave the way for addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict in light of Islamic doctrines. On the other hand, the pertinent apologies overemphasize logic and coherent argumentation overlooking the important relational mentality that dominates many Middle Eastern minds. It would have been helpful if they had discussed doctrinal differences not only in philosophical categories but also in relational ones highlighting some points in Islam that provoke respect and appreciation.

In addition, both Shehadeh and Shorrosh subscribe to a form of dispensationalism that not only accepts the ancestral connections of Arabs to Ishmael and Jews to Isaac but also predetermine the nature and future of these two groups based on a literal interpretation of the Abrahamic promises (Shehadeh 1986; Shorrosh 1979). Put differently, they are theologically supportive of a national Jewish state and find it difficult to find a theological justification for a Palestinian one. This belief accompanied by sharp criticism of Islam hinders their effectiveness among Palestinians. Shorrosh says,

The strangest thing in the world of today's politics is the fact that the Arab's control 3,000,000 square miles of territory, but cannot let Israel, their kinfolk, have 10,000 square miles. The hallowed parcel of land, called Palestine, has actually been in the hands of the Arabs longer than the descendants of Jacob. Yet God promised it to the Israelites (Shorrosh 1979:72).<sup>10</sup>

Such statements not only overlook the diverse pool of genes among both Israelis and Palestinians, but it also does not reflect sufficient understanding of their unique and complex identities.

Last, the spread of Dispensationalism among Palestinian evangelicals and its widespread influence in Israel has provoked a Palestinian Christian response (Ateek, Duaybis, and Tobin 2005). For example, Odeh (2003), a Galilean Baptist pastor, provides an apology for Amillennialism. After teaching dispensational theology for many years, he changes his beliefs

and decides to write a book on eschatology. He describes different eschatological systems and then employs Scriptures and history to uncover several tenuous points in Premillennialism. Odeh helps Palestinian Christians to see Amillennialism as a plausible biblical option. It would have been helpful if he had not limited his discussion to the traditional Amillennial response that does not take the unique Palestinian situation into consideration. Elsewhere I also have provided a biblical study responding to dispensational Zionism that promotes giving Palestinian lands to the state of Israel. I argue that Christ is the owner of the land or more precisely of *Haaretz* (Katanacho 2005).

### **3. Palestinian Liberation Theology**

The third Palestinian Protestant response is Liberation Theology and the Anglican theologian Ateek is its ardent supporter.<sup>11</sup> He is no doubt one of the main pillars of contemporary Palestinian theology. He says, “A theology of liberation is a way of speaking prophetically and contextually to a particular situation, especially where oppression, suffering, and injustice have long reigned” (Ateek 1989:6). Conditioned by the Arab-Israeli conflict, he moves “from an existential phenomenon” into seeking an understanding of the “metaphysical and ontological essence of the real” i.e. the integrity of the Old Testament and the identity of God (Arthur 2002:1). This theological pursuit becomes more significant in light of his call to “de-stereotype” Western images of the people of the Middle East, to “de-zionize” the Bible, and “de-mythologize” the state of Israel (Ateek 1989:159).

Put differently, Ateek proposes a Palestinian Liberation theology that focuses on the “heart of the biblical message,” namely the liberating aspect of the Word (Ateek 1989:6). He believes that a proper hermeneutical and bibliological understanding is crucial for coining an effective Palestinian theological response. Consequently, he seeks to de-zionize the Bible

purging it from racist and Zionist abuses. His purging process entails several important aspects. First, he formulates a christological hermeneutics of the Old Testament. Jesus is the true hermeneutical tool for understanding the Bible and is its center. The incarnate Word of God interprets the words of Scriptures (Ateek 1989:80). Second, he argues that some Old Testament texts are racist (Ateek 1989:82). He divides the Old Testament into three main traditions: nationalist, Torah oriented or legalistic, and prophetic (Ateek 1989:93). The nationalist tradition bases its arguments on Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings. From this perspective, God instituted the usage of force in order to accomplish the desired goal. The Torah oriented focuses on religious beliefs instead of political power. Last, the prophetic tradition bases its teaching on the prophets who have a strong ethical and inclusive message. According to Ateek, this tradition entails the most mature understanding of God and consequently the first two traditions are useful only for pedagogical purposes.

Ateek raises valid concerns related to the nature and contribution of Scriptures to a contextual Palestinian theology. First, how can Palestinian Christians understand the “violent” passages in Scriptures and the holy wars that were executed on the ancient non-Israeli inhabitants of Palestine?<sup>12</sup> Second, what is the significance of land for Palestinian Christians? Third, what are the prophetic and peacemaking roles of the Palestinian church? Fourth, what is the meaning and role of justice in a Palestinian context?

Ateek presents a stimulating work. Nevertheless, there are several dangers in his proposal. First, his proposal creates a canon within the canon rejecting portions of the Old Testament and as a result it deprives Palestinian Christians from seriously considering the whole council of God. Second, his subjective theological reading does not allow the text to challenge or transform his assumptions and it denigrates its authority. He says,

When confronted with a difficult passage in the Bible or with a perplexing contemporary event one needs to ask such simple questions as: Is the way I am hearing this the way I have come to know God in Christ? Does this fit the picture I have of God that Jesus has revealed to me? Does it match the character of the God whom I have come to know through Christ? If it does, then that passage is valid and authoritative. If not, then I cannot accept its validity or authority (Ateek 1989:82).

Third, Ateek insightfully gives a lot of attention to justice, albeit he defines it mainly in philosophical and cultural ways without unpacking its canonical biblical meaning (Ateek 1989:115-116). As a result, there is neither sufficient emphasis on the important correlations between righteousness, justice, and holiness nor on the correspondences between human and divine justice. His sociopolitical justice calls political oppressors to philanthropy but it does not call sinners to radical conversion. It does not present the full picture of biblical justice.

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem, is another important voice that advocates Palestinian Liberation Theology. In his book, *I am a Palestinian Christian*, Raheb presents a cultural analysis of Palestinian Christians probing the sociopolitical, historical, and religious characteristics of their identity (Raheb 1995:1-52). Then, he deals with important hermeneutical and theological concerns. First, he briefly examines the relationship of the Holocaust to a Post-Auschwitz Western theology demonstrating that the latter has not been sensitive to the sociopolitical changes of European Jews. They are no longer the oppressed. On the contrary, they are oppressors in Israel/Palestine. Raheb adds that Post-Auschwitz theology has not paid sufficient attention to Palestinian sufferings due to hermeneutical flaws (Raheb 1995:57-58). Thus, he suggests corrective interpretive principles that are more sensitive to Palestinian cultural concerns. These include: (1) the Bible is “nothing but testimonies of faith,” (2) biblical interpretation must respond to historical critical questions employing a socio-historical investigation and it shouldn’t employ typology or allegory, (3) interpretation must consider the history of reception, (4) no interpretation that excludes faith and love is legitimate,

(5) it is not possible to rightly interpret the Old Testament without the New Testament and vice versa, (6) both testaments are testimonies to the one God, the God of justice, (7) the Bible is mainly a book about minorities and persecuted peoples, and (8) law and gospel are the hermeneutical keys for interpreting it (Raheb 1995:59-64). Raheb applies these principles to election, the promise of land, and the Exodus. He concludes that the church must be consumed in promoting justice and righteousness in creative nonviolent resistance. Their ministry will eventually lead to peace and coexistence between two equal peoples in Israel/Palestine.

Although Raheb has raised many astute questions and important concerns, he does not address them in depth. Not providing sufficient reliable sources or counterviews in his arguments creates many doubts in thoughtful critical readers. Interestingly, Raheb combines his Lutheran theology, his historical critical methodology, his social scientific reading, his Liberation theology, his rejection of typology, and his commitments to the authority of Scriptures, the centrality of faith, and love without pointing out any conflicting points! Critically discussing how he relates these elements would have provided more credibility to his cumbersome methodology.

#### **4. Reconciliation Theologies**

The fourth Palestinian Protestant response is reconciliation theologies. It exists in two major shapes: Sulha and Musalaha. Sulha is the Arabic cultural way of conflict management and of advocating peaceful coexistence through societal reconciliation and compromise (Abu El-Assal 1999:119-124). Any offender is considered part of a particular group. His offense implicates his group and exposes them to revenge. At the same time, the offended person is part of a community whose honor and dignity is insulted whenever one of their members is violated. Thus, there are no personal problems in the traditional Arabic community and consequently

religious leaders and dignitaries are continually involved in keeping the peace. Their activities include reconciling disputing families, religious communities, and different ethnic groups. Further, they emphasize understanding their identity and world in relational ways highlighting what is common between different faiths.

Some examples of Sulha theologians include the Anglican Bishop Abu El-Assal (1999), and the Lutheran Bishop Younan (Younan and Strickert 2003).<sup>13</sup> First, they try to describe the group they belong to in order to establish their rights, help others understand their complex identity, their loyalties, and their unique contributions as peacemakers. Second, they highlight their common ground especially with Muslims. Third, they focus on coexistence and the importance of dialogue and compromise.

Abu El-Assal, for example, describes his identity saying, “[a]s a Christian I look to the Old and New Testaments for the origins of my faith. As an Arab I can trace my presence in the land at least to AD 33 . . . . As a Palestinian I look for my ancestors among the Philistines” (Abu El-Assal 1999:57). In the same breath, he classifies himself as a brother of Muslims and a cousin of Jews (Abu El-Assal 1999:57). In other words, Muslims have closer family ties. They are part of the group that represents him before his offenders, the Jews. Consequently, he highlights the common grounds between Islam and his understanding of Christianity. He says, “My studies taught me that Islam supports our faith in nearly every doctrine” (Abu El-Assal 1999:126). Then together with Muslims, he works towards creating a future in which coexistence in dignity and honor is possible.

Younan has a more sophisticated approach. In the first part of his book *Witnessing for Peace* he discusses the roots of his Palestinian Christian identity in the Jerusalem church, in the church of the Arabs, and in the inhabitants of Palestine before “the arrival of the Israelites under

Joshua” (Younan and Strickert 2003:4-5). After establishing the identity of the group that represents him, he describes his mission to other groups around him employing the theology of *Martyria*, i.e. being a witness in word, deed, and in suffering (Younan and Strickert 2003:42). He identifies three areas in which he applies the theology of witnessing. These relate to land, justice, and nonviolence. First, he sees the land as a gift from God, as the fifth gospel, and as sacred geography that witnesses to salvation history. Second, he asserts that justice is a prerequisite to peace. He explains that justice entails the end of occupation, and the sharing of Jerusalem by the three monotheistic religions. Third, he condemns Palestinian violence and the violence of the Israeli occupation clarifying that the way of nonviolence never abandons the way of justice or tolerate evil.

Like Abu El-Assal, Younan highlights the common grounds with Islam shunning away from confrontations. He praises the prophet of Islam and his religious contributions seeing Islam as a loving and peaceful religion (Younan and Strickert 2003:89, 113). Then he asserts that Christians and Muslims must seek coexistence even if it means obviating discussing “the nature of the Triune God, the divinity of Christ, or his salvific work through the cross” (Younan and Strickert 2003:133). Further, with coexistence in mind, the doctrine of incarnation is redefined as “the willingness of God to engage himself fully in humanity and restore its dignity” (Younan and Strickert 2003:95). In other words, Younan is advocating an anthropocentric view of the incarnation that sees the restoration of dignity as its utmost concern. By not pointing out the sinfulness of humanity and their need to substitutionary atonement, Younan is trying to provide an incarnational model that is less offensive to non-Christians.

In short, Sulha theologians have made several contributions in building bridges with Muslims. They have made it easier for Christians and Muslims to be neighbors and to seek the

common goodness of both groups. At the same time, it seems that they have paid an unnecessary high price. What does Christianity have to offer if it does not discuss Trinity, Christology, and atonement; or if it agrees with Islam in nearly every doctrine? Is it the same Christianity that the apostles proclaim? It seems that the superficial agreement with Islam cannot satisfy an informed critical mind and the doctrinal disagreements with Muslims don't necessarily lead to conflict. It would have been better, if Younan and Abu Al-Assal had followed the path of the ex-crown prince of Jordan, Al Hassan bin Talal (1995). As a Muslim, he respectfully discusses the major Christian doctrines and then advocates coexistence. Or, they could have followed the pattern of Brother Andrew. As a Christian, he respectfully addresses four hundred *Hamas* members presenting a message centered on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Andrew and Janssen 2004:182-190).<sup>14</sup>

### **Musalaha Theology**

It is now fitting to discuss Musalaha theology. Massad and Munayer are two clear examples of this school of thought.<sup>15</sup> Massad, the Baptist Pastor from Gaza, examines Scriptures seeking to reconcile Palestinian Christians and Messianic Jews. He says, “[t]he basic thesis of my dissertation is concerned with the theological foundation for reconciliation between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael, through the crucified and risen Christ who is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant” (Massad 2000:210). After highlighting the different historical and theological factors that led to the hostility between Palestinians and Israeli Jews, he rightly concludes that violence is not the answer to the Arab-Israeli conflict. He then discusses pertinent dispensational and non-dispensational theological differences focusing on both the relationship of the diverse Scriptural covenants and of biblical Israel and the church. Through his theological analysis, Massad discovers that Christ is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises. His death

and resurrection provide the best foundation for reconciliation and his cross is the best model for it. He says, “[t]he cross of Christ for us is not only the place of salvation where our sins are forgiven, or where we are to be reconciled to the Father, but it is also the place where we can experience healing of wounds which we have inflicted on one another” (Massad 2000:212). Massad adds that both Palestinian and Messianic churches have been focusing on the social and political dimensions of their dissensions overlooking peace education and the biblical message of reconciliation (Massad 2000:221). He clarifies that Israel’s essential identity is inseparable from its calling as a divine agent of reconciliation (Massad 2000:168). The ultimate fulfillment of Israel’s calling has been recognized in the ministry of the cross where God reconciled humanity to himself. This reconciliation with God through the cross is the means for creating a new reality between both victims and oppressors, a reality in which all humans are sinners and the only allowed hostility is the enmity of enmity and the hatred of sin. The cross provides expiation for the guilty, power for the victimized, a new nonviolent social reality for belligerent communities.

Massad’s fair and peaceful proposal has a lot to offer. However, he fails in at least two areas. First, he neither substantiates the notion that modern Arabs are the descendants of Ishmael and contemporary Jews are the descendants of Isaac nor engages those who believe that Palestinians are the descendants of the Philistines and other ancient inhabitants of Palestine.<sup>16</sup> Such a belief creates different dynamics and requires a different course of action especially when God doomed some of these ancient nations and their descendants to utter destruction. Their territorial losses are both a sign and a result of their curse. Would the cross reverse God’s curse on them? In the wake of the cross, would God be reconciled to the descendants of these nations and would this reconciliation and restoration entail a territorial dimension?

Second, Massad makes justice secondary. He says, “[l]et us pursue not justice but a community of love. We will never reach perfect justice, but let us pursue confession, repentance, forgiveness, and love, which will prepare us to embrace one another as members of one body and will allow us to experience reconciliation” (Massad 2000:273-274). It seems that Massad is misunderstanding the biblical nature of justice. Biblical justice is at the core of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and love. The cross is equally a sign of God’s love and of his justice. Without the latter, there is no true reconciliation whether with God or with people. Justice was never secondary in the Bible. Perhaps, Massad’s sincere longing for unity with Messianic Jews has clouded his judgment on this issue.

Unlike Massad, Munayer, the academic dean at Bethlehem Bible College and the director of Musalaha Reconciliation Ministries, asserts that justice is an uncompromised condition for reconciliation (Munayer 1995:147). He first seeks to understand the Palestinian identity from the perspective of social and developmental psychology (Munayer 2000:110). Then in quest of reconciliation, he combines the social sciences and the theology of creation. He wants not only to understand the Palestinian Christian identity but also to bring it closer to the Christian identity intended in the new creation. In his sociopolitical analysis of both Palestinian Christians and Israeli Jews, he highlights the importance of sociopolitical justice. He asserts that in order to have a fruitful dialogue between Palestinian Christians and Israeli Jews, the latter must accept that all Israeli citizens, including Palestinian Israeli Christians, should have “equal rights in all spheres of life” (Munayer 1995:147). Further, Israeli Jews should end the occupation allowing Palestinians to have their own state. Only then, it is possible to have a healthy dialogue. Second, he points out that although the traditional issues discussed in Christian-Jewish dialogues in the West, mainly anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and the existence of Israel are relevant to Palestinian

Christians, they don't take into consideration the unique situation of the Christian minority under the sovereignty of Israeli Jews. Third, describing the encounters of Palestinian Christians and Messianic believers, he observes that most Messianic Jews are not sympathetic to the injustices that Palestinians face under Israeli occupation, and that some of them deny the existence of the Palestinian people. On the other hand, Palestinians don't show sufficient understanding of the complex Jewish identity (Munayer 1998a:103-106). They too participate in dehumanizing and demonizing the other claiming moral superiority (Munayer 2001:34-36; 2002:105)

After sketching out Munayer's sociopolitical analyses, it is apt to point out some of his theological insights. He asserts that we are equally created in the image of God. "This realization counters the effects of dehumanization that we are subjected to in the circumstances of daily life in this country" (Munayer 1998b:79-80). He adds, "Being created in God's image means that we act as He acts—that we interact with others and treat others as He would treat them—because we are His children" (Munayer 1998b:80). In other words, there are ontological and functional dimensions to being in the image of God. Ontologically, we are his children; functionally we act like him. The ontological dimension shapes the functional one. Our identity shapes our behavior and the latter indicates our true identity.

Munayer not only asserts the first creation but also the new creation (redemption).<sup>17</sup> In relation to the first creation, the recognition that humanity is created in the image of God should counter the dehumanizing misperceptions and demonizing attitudes (Munayer 2001:36). In addition, reconciliation is part of the core identity of the new creation; it is the "heart of the Christian faith" (Munayer 1998a:103). Similar to Massad, he asserts that peace is inseparable from the redemption of the cross. He says, "[t]he whole theme of the work of the Messiah on the cross was to break down the dividing wall of partition and to widen the tent to allow more people

to come into the kingdom of God. It was a work of reconciliation through Jesus the Messiah” (Munayer 1998b:71). Munayer clarifies that the cross “models a response” for reconciling Arabs and Jews (Munayer 2006). First, it transforms our identity from sinners, victims, or oppressors into atoned and redeemed followers of Christ. Then it transforms how we interpret our reality and prompts us to view others in relation to creation and redemption. Put differently, Christ’s way of reconciliation requires practicing peace with all people. More specifically, it demands loving the neighbor and the enemy. It equally requires forgiveness, restitution, and a favorable sociopolitical atmosphere (Munayer 1998a:105-106). Munayer goes beyond Massad in asserting restitution and in highlighting the value of a favorable political situation. However, the need for a Palestinian biblical theology of justice is still left unmet. Further, both Munayer and Massad don’t pay enough attention to the contributions of the Old Testament when constructing their theology of reconciliation. Unpacking the polyphonic voices of reconciliation in both the Old and New testaments as well as the way these voices relate to each other will enrich their understanding. For example, Psalm 87 provides a bold voice that resists polarizing Israel and her neighbors. The Zion of Psalm 87 becomes a model of reconciliation especially in a book (Psalms 73-89) that has many xenophobic and inimical voices asking for revenge and seeking the destruction of the enemy.<sup>18</sup> In this psalm holy geography becomes a point of unity rather than division.

### **Reflections and Concluding Remarks**

Understanding other cultures/religions helps us to perceive ourselves in a better way. It not only facilitates healthy acculturation in the midst of globalization but also equips us to effectively present the multifaceted transcultural truth of the gospel in pluralistic societies and in a world polarized by the violent clashes of civilizations. Thus, the following comments might

be helpful not only to Palestinian Christians but also to their brothers and sisters around the globe.

First, Christians will benefit from dialoguing with each other. The different Palestinian Protestant responses sketched out in this paper seldom interact with each other. Sadly, they neither challenge nor enrich one another. Further, they have not produced any significant literature that reflects a discussion with non-Protestant Palestinians. In fact, the relationship between the two groups is tense and there is a lot of disrespect. However, Palestinian Protestants have the opportunity not only to initiate the reconciliation process with non-Protestants but also to inspire them to be reconciled to each other. Their disunity raises questions about their credibility before Muslims, Jews, and other inhabitants of Israel/Palestine.

Second, Palestinian Protestants are called to engage Islam respectfully, truthfully, and lovingly. They can present their faith in relational ways. In other words, neither the apologies nor the Sulha theology is sufficient in itself. A doctrinal analysis of Islam should not be divorced from a sociopolitical analysis of Muslims in the Middle East. Palestinian Protestants as well as all Christians need to see Islam as both a religion and a sociopolitical system. In fact, after *Hamas* won the Palestinian elections and became the dominant Palestinian voice, separating the Islamic religion from its sociopolitical system in Israel/Palestine will be a fatal mistake. In short, some apologies help us to understand the doctrine of Islam while Sulha theology points out important sociopolitical dimensions. It seems to me that formulating a historical Arabic theology will help both groups to present their concerns. They can investigate the socio-historical and cultural backgrounds that shape the theology of the “church of the Arabs” since its inception (Jarjour 2003:20-21). Within this enterprise, they might clarify the relationship of Islamic doctrines to folk Islam and to coexistence between Muslims and Christians. Such investigation

might help Christians to better understand some of the major events that shape the identities of both Palestinian Christians and Muslims and their attitudes toward each other.<sup>19</sup> It also helps Palestinian Christians to be more effective in presenting an Arabic gospel to Muslim Arabs. This could be a joy to the global church who is struggling in addressing Islam effectively.<sup>20</sup>

Third, Palestinian Protestants will benefit from engaging Israeli Jews and vice versa. Gladly, some of them are faithfully carrying the flag of reconciliation between Arabs and Jews. Musalaha theology in particular rightly highlights the significant contributions of the theology of the cross and the doctrine of new creation in bringing down the walls of enmity. However, there are still many areas that can be advanced. Palestinian Protestants can help modern Israel to reinterpret its identity in light of the Old Testament. This enterprise entails formulating a Palestinian theology of the Holocaust and an understanding of biblical Israel's calling to be an agent of reconciliation and a light to the nations. The Palestinian theology of the Holocaust should help Palestinian Protestants not only to understand the complex identity of Israeli Jews but should also equip them to be more sympathetic and effective in their Christian-Jewish dialogue. Further, this dialogue should enhance their self understanding. After all, the Holocaust has shaped the events and theologies that impact their own destiny and identity.

In addition, dialoguing with Israeli Jews might protect Palestinian Protestants, more specifically some Liberation theologians, from modern Palestinian Marcionism that denigrates the value of the Old Testament (Register 2000:46-50). It will also demonstrate the diverse hermeneutical Israeli approaches to the Old Testament that disagree with Christian Zionist interpretations of the promise of land, the election of Israel, and its eschatological program.

Fourth, dialoguing and partnering with Western Christians will result in mutual benefits in several areas. Taking advantage of the Western freedom of speech, Palestinian Protestants can

critically study the history of relationships between Muslims and Christians providing a culturally sensitive approach to dialoguing with Muslims without compromising the truth of the gospel. They can employ their linguistic, cultural, and theological skills in presenting an accurate understanding of the challenges of Islam.

Further, Younan rightly points out the importance of the witness of the Holy Land. Cooperation between global and Palestinian Christians will bless the latter and help them to prepare all the components that will advocate a spiritually refreshing pilgrimage to the earthly homeland of Jesus of Nazareth. The study tours will encounter not only rich history and archeology but also an active church serving God in a multi-religious community. It will facilitate utilizing Israel/Palestine as a witness to salvation history; witnessing to many tourists, and to Jewish and Muslim pilgrims about the ways of God and his salvific acts.

Finally, in light of a better understanding of the church of the Arabs, Western churches have a great opportunity to effectively reach out to their brothers and sisters in Israel/Palestine. They can become divine agents and participate in quenching the Middle Eastern thirst for divine justice, biblical love, security, and shalom. Together with God's people in the Middle East, they can present to Muslims and Jews a captivating biblical form of Christianity; not the violent Christianity of the crusaders that hurts Muslims or of the Holocaust that victimizes Jews but that of the Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>Palestinian Protestants are the Palestinian churches that trace their origin to the Protestant reformation. For understanding non-Protestant Palestinian Christians and some of their perspectives, see Prior and Taylor (1994), Horner (1989), Tsimhoni (1993; 2002), Wagner (2001), O'Mahony (1999; 2003), as well as O'Mahony, Gunner, and Hintlian (1995).

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Shorrosh is a Palestinian productive author and an active evangelist. He was born in Nazareth and resides now in the United States. Rev. Rantisi is an Anglican minister who died in 2001. He founded the Evangelical Home for Boys in Ramallah, a city north of Jerusalem, and was an active non-violent politician. Last, Rev. Dr. Raheb is an internationally known Bethlehemite Lutheran Pastor and a prolific author. He is the founder of the International Center of Bethlehem located in Palestine.

<sup>3</sup>For a brief Palestinian introduction to the Arab-Israeli conflict, see Awad (2001). Awad is a Baptist Pastor and the dean of Students at Bethlehem Bible College. He explains the Arab-Israeli conflict to a Western audience describing it through the eyes of the victims i.e. Palestinians. Then, he writes some theological reflections.

<sup>4</sup>See also Kincaid and Brackin (2002) who narrate the stories of several Palestinian evangelical leaders. The biography of Abu El-Assal (1999), an Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, does not follow this pattern. He weaves many personal stories with some helpful socio-political analyses.

<sup>5</sup>Arab Christians precede Islam. For further details about Pre-Islamic Arab Christians, see Trimmingham (1979). For a general history of Arab Christians, see Cragg (1991). Last, Maalouf (2003:20-21) informs us that the label "Arab" is ancient and it may be associated with some of the following Old Testament figures: Joktan, Ishmael, Keturah, Cush son of Ham, Job, Jethro, Jael, Jether, Queen Sheba, the authors of Proverbs 30 and 31, and the Recabites. In addition, many pre-Islamic Arabic kingdoms had become Christian (for example the Nabateans, Ghassanids, and Lakhmids).

<sup>6</sup>Munayer also addresses these concerns. Nevertheless, his main ministry focuses on reconciliation between Palestinians and Israeli Jews. Consequently, he is discussed under reconciliation theology. In his coauthored work, *New Creation Book for Muslims* (Goble and Munayer 1989), he aims at evangelizing Muslims in a style and language familiar to them.

<sup>7</sup>In addition to the seventy seven Suras, it includes the opening prayer and an epilogue.

<sup>8</sup>Dr. Shehadeh is a Palestinian who graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary. He is the founder and president of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary. The conservative evangelical inter-denominational Seminary is in Amman Jordan. In addition to Shehadeh's administrative role, he is actively involved in teaching, preaching, and writing.

<sup>9</sup>Shehadeh's dissertation (1990) has been the foundation for several insights found in his four articles that are cited in this essay.

<sup>10</sup>Sakhnini (1971), a Baptist Palestinian Pastor in Nazareth, accepts the state of Israel as the fulfillment of prophecy but at the same time asserts the importance of justice. On the other hand, the president of Bethlehem Bible College Bishara Awad (2000:184-185) sees depriving Palestinians from the land of their ancestors as a "crime against God and humanity."

<sup>11</sup>Rev. Dr. Ateek is Canon of St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, pastor of its Arabic-speaking congregation, as well as the founder of *Sabeel*, an ecumenical liberation theology center, located in Jerusalem. He is considered the father of Palestinian Liberation Theology.

<sup>12</sup>Several Palestinians associate themselves with the ancient inhabitants of Palestine. However, I am not aware of any convincing studies that demonstrate this connection. In fact, Sabella (2005:421-324) points out that some Palestinians are originally from the Caucasus' mountains, North Africa, sub-Saharan African, central Europe, Armenia, Ethiopia, Egypt, and other places.

<sup>13</sup>See also Mansour (2004), a Palestinian Melkite Catholic, who presents a positive picture of Palestinian Christian-Muslim relations and share some of the characteristics of this school of thought. Younan is the bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Palestine and Jordan and a co-founder of Al-Liqa' Center for Religious Studies. Bishop Abu El-Assal is responsible for the thirty one Anglican parishes in Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

<sup>14</sup>*Hamas* (حماس) is the Arabic Acronym for *The Islamic Resistant Movement* (حركة المقاومة الإسلامية).

<sup>15</sup>Dr. Massad is the senior pastor of Gaza Baptist Church, the only evangelical church in the Gaza strip. He is also a teacher at Bethlehem Bible College. Dr. Munayer is the Dean of Bethlehem Bible College. He is the founder and director of Musalaha Reconciliation Ministries. He is also the author of a number of publications on the subject of reconciliation.

<sup>16</sup>Unfortunately, the most widespread Arabic Bibles neither distinguish between Palestinians and Philistines nor differentiate modern Israelis from ancient ones. The employed Arabic labels for ancient Philistines and Israelites are identical with modern Palestinians and Israelis. With this in mind, imagine reading the story of the "Israeli" David and the "Palestinian" Goliath. Thus, the Arabic Bible might become a politically embarrassing document. Its God could be wrongly characterized as anti-Palestinian.

<sup>17</sup>Munayer has also used the concept of new creation in evangelizing Muslims. For further details, see Goble and Munayer (1989).

<sup>18</sup>I am reading the Psalter as a book and Psalm 87 is part of its discourse. For further details, see Katanacho (2007).

<sup>19</sup>Some of the major turning points in the relationship of Muslims and Christians in Israel/Palestine came about as a result of the advance of Islam in the Middle East, the agreement between Umar ibn al-Khatib and Sophronius the Patriarch of Jerusalem (560-638 A.D.), the persecution of Christians during the rule of Abu Ali Mansur al-Hakim (996-1021 A.D.), the Crusades, the ministries of Francis of Assisi and Raymond Lull, the Turkish rule, the Protestant missionary movements, and the Christian Zionist movements.

<sup>20</sup>The recent Muhammad cartoons controversy testifies to this struggle. The public controversy began on September 30, 2005, after a Danish newspaper (Jyllands-Posten) published cartoons depicting the prophet of Islam in provocative ways. However, the roots of this controversy were present since a long time and unfortunately were ignored by most of the followers of Christ in the West. Another major conflict between Muslims and Christians was caused by the Pope's lecture on September 12, 2006. Newspapers around the globe reported the incident. While lecturing on "Faith, Reason, and the University" at the university of Regensburg, he quoted an ancient author who characterized the message of the prophet of Islam as "evil and inhuman." Many Muslims were angry and accused the Pope of attacking Islam and its prophet.