

A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation

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In Review

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Orbis

In a time when many conflate Palestinians with Muslims, one rarely hears the voice of the indigenous Palestinian Christian community. One such voice is that of Naim Stifan Ateek, a retired Anglican minister who is a Palestinian citizen of Israel and the present director of Sabeel (“The Way”), an ecumenical liberation theology movement among Palestinians that he helped to found in the early 1990s. Ateek’s Christian family was driven at gunpoint from their largely Muslim village in Galilee in May 1948 when he was 11 years old. Apart from his postsecondary education in the United States, he has lived his entire life in the vortex of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation, the sequel to Ateek’s 1990 book, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, is keyed between the popular and specialist levels. In Part I, Ateek outlines his personal history and the history of Sabeel against the background of the conflict between his Palestinian people and the nation-state of his citizenship. Confronting Palestinians’ demand for justice and their offer to trade land for peace with Israel’s unwillingness to make that trade, he offers an exposition of Luke 18:1–8, the parable of the widow petitioning the indifferent judge: “Grant me justice.” In Part III, titled “The Peace We Dream Of,” Ateek sketches out what he believes the Israelis and Palestinians can yet craft together.

But it is Part II, well over half of the book, that contains Ateek’s most telling work. A pastor who throughout his life has witnessed the use of scripture to disallow his people’s call for justice, Ateek here turns to the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible, where he explores a series of texts from below, written from the perspective of the disempowered. What he unearths there differs drastically from what is read by many Christians and by all biblical Zionists, both Jewish and Christian.

Ateek hears within the Hebrew canon distinct and diverging themes related to the scale of God’s compassion. The result is a cluster of questions. Is God the Hebrews’ tribal or national deity, covenanting exclusively with and blessing only them—in perpetuity on into the present conflict? Or is there amid nationalist, exclusive and often violent texts, perhaps as early as the book of Amos, an arc bending increasingly toward an inclusive—indeed, universal and nonviolent—vision, particularly after 587 BCE? Are nationalism and exclusivism an intrinsic part of the timeless structure of life in covenant with God, or are they expanded and transformed across the history of the ancient Hebrews, especially after the end of

the monarchy (that institution that was never better than God's *penultima*)?

In short, is there major development within the canon? And what is one to make of the seeming continuity between the inclusive texts in the postmonarchy period and both the way of Jesus (who, Ateek reminds us, lived under and was executed by an occupying army) and the opening of the early church to the gentiles?

Ateek begins this scripture section with the story of Jonah ("the first liberation theologian"), an ethnic nationalist and exclusivist who flees west, unable to countenance God's compassion toward the hated Assyrians, the cruelest oppressors the ancient Hebrews ever endured. Counterintuitively, brutal Nineveh repents; God responds with mercy, and Jonah is denied his wish of the city's destruction. With Jonah still begrudging God's patience and mercy, the book abruptly ends, seemingly to toss its challenge to the reader. Ateek is incredulous at how literalists have gotten stuck on the great fish while evading the point of what he views as the most important book in the Hebrew Bible: the astonishing scale of God's compassion. He does commend the Hebrew religion for having retained as canonical a book so counter to the exclusive model.

Later in Part II, Ateek cites other inclusive paradigms that are ignored by Zionists, Jewish and Christian alike. He contrasts the Davidic model (monarchy and violence) with that of the suffering servant of Isaiah, whose liberation issues from an embrace of the suffering of others, then he contrasts the Maccabees with the prophet Daniel. He muses about how both Judaism and Christianity have been tempted toward the former in each case—Christianity fatefully beginning to do so early in the fourth century. While acknowledging that the early church acclaimed Jesus as the Son of David, Ateek argues that the content of that kingship was much more that of the suffering servant. To his examples of inclusion bending toward the universal, Ateek adds parts of Psalms, Jeremiah (a new covenantal relationship with God), Ezekiel (land reform involving Jews and aliens alike), and Isaiah (Cyrus as "God's anointed," the Hebrews as "a light to the nations" and the suffering servant material).

Ateek's argument is directed toward those who use the Bible in the present conflict, particularly Christians, and he sees many applications: the universality of the biblical vision for justice cannot be trumped by appeals to ethnic exemption. Furthermore, in the postexilic material and on into the Christian scriptures, the understanding of land is transformed. An expanding awareness of God's care renders more inclusive the people of God, and this inclusion gives rise to a more encompassing access to

the land. Ateek questions how the land can be held exclusively when both God's love and God's people are understood as spilling beyond all ethnic boundaries.

Another implication of Ateek's argument concerns the means that are employed in work for social and political change. Here Ateek clearly embraces the way of Jesus in continuity with the growing inclusive and non violent strand in postexilic Hebrew literature. It is this nonviolent Jesus, who rejects zealotry, collaboration, escapism and religiosity, whom Ateek sees as crucial to the shaping of Palestinians' response to Israeli oppression. In this regard, he unequivocally calls upon all his coreligionists, and to all Muslim Palestinians as well, to renounce actions like suicide bombing for reasons both biblical and pragmatic.

Ateek's earlier book and his work with Sabeel have been attacked as efforts to unhook Christianity from its Hebrew roots. One caricature paints Ateek as a modern Marcion, rejecting the first Testament and de-Judaizing the second. This book is a forceful counter to that charge. Ateek contends that the Hebrew writings have not been taken nearly seriously enough and that their minority report on the scale of God's compassion has been trivialized or ignored, often in the interest of modern politics. He pleads guilty to challenging the imposed homogenization of the Hebrew canon on the question of exclusion and inclusion, and his defense rests on his conviction that the Bible itself allows no other conclusion. This lifelong shepherd of souls has lived in the scriptures since he was a child, and he will not surrender them to a hermeneutic that has profoundly scarring consequences for all concerned.