

The Cross in the Palestinian Context

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In November 2002, the Church of Sweden approached me, asking if we would have one or two paintings of Christ from a Palestinian perspective. They were preparing an international exhibition for a Swedish audience, titled “The Christ of the World,” showing different paintings of Christ done by African, Asian, Latin American, and other international artists. The exhibition was to have its grand opening in June 2003 at the Cathedral of Uppsala before touring different cities, galleries, and churches in Sweden. The exhibition aimed at presenting the beautiful and colorful world of the Christian church to the Swedes and to say that the Church is neither ethnic nor nationalistic, but rather crosses borders! At the same time, the exhibition was meant to offer a tool to Swedish parishes to work on their own image of Christ.

Knowing that one of the missions of our university is to work on a contextual Palestinian Christian art, they approached us hoping that we could help them find and identify two such paintings. When I received this request, I was so excited. This fits perfectly into our mission. But at the same time, Bethlehem had been under a 24-hour curfew for weeks and no one knew when the curfew would be permanently lifted.

For those unfamiliar, a 24-hour curfew means house imprisonment. No one is allowed to leave his or her home, neither do children go to school, nor workers go to work, and people cannot even go shopping except for a few hours a week.

I immediately called our art coordinator in her home to see what she thought we could do. After some discussions, she suggested that instead of us just choosing one or two paintings, we should rather organize a competition between all interested Palestinian artists and then choose the best out of them. This suggestion was indeed intriguing, but the question was, How could we organize such a competition under curfew? Then we thought, actually, a curfew indeed might be the right time to do this. There were all these Palestinian artists under curfew and house imprisonment. They had time. So why not challenge them to use all their creativity and imagination? This way they could overcome their depression and imprisonment, and we would not only have one, but many diverse and good paintings of Christ in the Palestinian context. In a way, organizing the competition under such circumstances was an act of creative resistance.

On February 6th, all paintings were to be exhibited at our Gallery. The gallery was badly damaged during the April invasion 2002. Yet, with the help of a few organizations and churches, we were able to rebuild them even under the most difficult of circumstances. The exhibition “Christ in the Palestinian Context” was to be the first shown at the reopened gallery. When the opening of the exhibition was advertised,

the announcement said “4 p.m. on February 6th, if curfew is lifted on that day.” By chance or by divine intervention, the curfew was lifted on that day for a few hours and the opening of the exhibition took place as scheduled. Regardless of the curfew regime, the gallery hosted sixteen Palestinian artists coming from different places all over the West Bank: Nablus, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron. Some of the artists were well known, while others were still young, beginner artists. What gathered them together was “Christ in the Palestinian Context,” the topic of the exhibition. Each artist searched deeply in the personality and life of Jesus Christ and expressed a part of it in relation to his/her own surroundings.

After reviewing all the paintings, I could not believe my eyes. Of all artists participating, sixty percent who submitted paintings were Muslims. For me, this was not the most astonishing factor, since over half of those who attend our programs are usually Muslims. Rather, I was amazed for a different reason. It was interesting to see that so many Muslim artists dared to paint a biblical figure, something that is actually forbidden in traditional Islamic theology and spirituality. More amazing was that all of the Muslim artists, except one, submitted paintings of the crucified Christ. Only one of the Christian artists had the cross as the theme of their painting.

I could not stop thinking of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Muslim painters chose Christ on the cross to represent the context they are living in. We know that in the teachings of Islam, Christ was not crucified. For Christ to be crucified means really nothing else than for God to be on the losing end, and that is impossible in Islam. God is greater than being a loser. Nevertheless, why did these Muslim artists paint Christ, the crucified? I started asking myself, what is this power that lies in the cross that gives so much inspiration to Palestinian artists, both Christians and Muslims? What is the message in the cross that they feel is important for the Palestinian people to hear? What is it that they want to communicate through this image? Why are artists and famous Palestinian Muslim and Christian poets so captured by the cross? The answer is simple: When they thought of their suffering and what is the most meaningful message for them in that circumstance, they could not but think of Christ, the crucified. The cross was for them the best symbol to tell the story of our people. In a God sharing their bitter destiny, they find strength, comfort, and power. The message captured them. It captured their minds and imagination.

This story might seem very strange to western Christians who were trained to understand the cross through the lens of substitutionary atonement: Jesus died to pay for our sin; He suffered as a substitute in the place of and on behalf of our fallen humanity; His death made it possible for those who believe in him to be saved. Some have even gone so far as to declare that the bleeding Christ on the cross was the only sacrifice to still God’s wrath, thus achieving retributive justice. No doubt, there are several biblical verses that might be understood supporting an atonement theology. Jesus himself describes his death a “ransom for many” (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28); Paul uses the term, “sacrifice of atonement” (Rom 3:25); First John writes that God

sent his son “to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10); and Isaiah 53:4-6 was interpreted by the first church in such a way:

“Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.”

This Isaiah chapter was the text that the Ethiopian eunuch was reading on the way from Jerusalem to Gaza. When meeting Philip, he asked for a hermeneutical key to reading this text: “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” (Acts 8: 34). The early church saw in this chapter a prophecy about Jesus and his death on the cross.

But what if Isaiah was not talking about himself nor about Christ, but about the people of Palestine; not about one individual, irrespective who that individual is, but rather about a whole people?

A major problem in western theology is that it has individualized and spiritualized scripture. Salvation was understood as something for the individual (for me) and for one’s soul. Western theology has been obsessed with sin. It invented the idea of the original sin and was busy developing codes of conduct to fight sins.

German theologians in the 19th century (like Wellhausen) started reading the “servant songs” in Deutero-Isaiah as originally describing the collective “Israel” or the people in Southern Palestine. This text was written after the Babylonian invasion of southern Palestine. The Babylonians devastated the land, destroyed Jerusalem, detained the young people, and sent many of them into exile. After the 587 B. C. catastrophe, the people of southern Palestine were indeed “despised and rejected by mankind.” Their “suffering and pain” (Isaiah 53:3) was unbearable.

Such suffering and oppression was a recurring experience of the people of Palestine, irrespective of their religion, ethnicity, or political alignment. This has less to do with the religion of the people and more with the geopolitical location of Palestine. Palestine is a land on a crossroad of three continents. Palestine is a land on the cross. Palestine is a land at the periphery. The prophet Ezekiel understood this well when he described Jerusalem as “in the centers of the nations, with countries all around her” (Ezekiel 5, 5). Indeed, the small strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River called Palestine became the place where the different magnetic fields

of the surrounding regional powers would collide. Geo-politically, Palestine is a land on the margins. Situated between different empires, the fertile plains of Palestine often became the most suitable battlefield to keep wars and their tragedies away from the heartland of those empires. Many of the regional wars between empires took place on Palestinian soil. It is no coincidence that Armageddon was envisioned as taking place in the most fertile and largest plain of Palestine. This wasn't a revealed vision of the end times, but it corresponded to the political reality of the region. Wars constitute reality in Palestine. I know this not merely from history books, but from my own experience.

Due to geo-political positioning between powers, Palestine became over and over again an occupied land; occupied by the ancient and modern empires: by Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottomans, British, and the Israelis. Sadly, it seems as if Palestine and occupation are synonymous, like Palestine and the cross are synonymous.

Not only is Palestine on the cross, but so also, Palestine's inhabitants are on the cross. The people of Palestine have been occupied, crushed, and oppressed by one empire after the other. It is a distinct and unique challenge to be placed in a buffer—and often—war zone. It is tough to see one's country a battlefield; to see it divided and torn apart. It is enervating to feel that one's country and people are occupied not by an equal but by an empire, albeit by proxy.

It is not easy to live in Palestine and survive physically and even more, psychologically and emotionally. But this is the context in which the people of Palestine have repeatedly found themselves. This is the context in which the Bible was written. And it is the context Palestinians face today. Throughout history, the people of Palestine have been "marked by the cross." Palestine and the cross became synonymous. When looking for an identity code for Palestine, nothing is more powerful than the cross.

What happened at the times of the prophet Isaiah in 587 B.C. is little compared with what is happening in Gaza today. Israel's ultimate goal in its assault on Gaza is to make life in the Gaza Strip unlivable. How else can we explain the targeting of Infrastructure (65% of road networks damaged), residential buildings (60% damaged), commercial facilities (80% damaged), hospitals (90% out of service)? With the destruction of schools (88% damaged) and universities (100% of the universities destroyed, including Dar al-Kalima Campus in Gaza), Israel is committing a scholasticide. With the destruction of most of the major cultural institutions, museums, ancient archeological sites, and Gaza's cultural heritage sites (206), and places of worship (556 mosques and three churches), Israel is committing a culturicide.

Consider the number of Palestinians murdered in Gaza (50,000), missing (10,000), injured (100,000), and displaced (2 million making 80% of the population). In addition to depriving people of adequate medical assistance, access to adequate shelter, clothing, and hygiene and sanitation, thousands of patients are suffer-

ing and dying from kidney failure, heart disease, and cancer, dying for lack of access to health care. Thousands are getting polio, hepatitis, and other infections out of lack of vaccines, clean water, and hygiene. Israel is committing a humanicide.

In addition to all of this, Israel has been using starvation as a weapon by depriving people of access to adequate food and water and blocking supplies from entering Gaza. In terms of weapons, Israel has dropped close to 100,000 tons of explosives on the Gaza strips, including 2000-pound dumb bombs, equivalent to several nuclear bombs. The assault on Gaza resulted in serious bodily and mental harm that would take decades to heal. All the above policies and practices with its excessive and unproportional use of force amount according to the International Court of Justice to a genocide. Israel's aim is to make life in Gaza a hell, so that those surviving the genocide will have no choice but to seek refuge somewhere else, thus ethnic cleansing Gaza.

This is the cross that Palestine is living on right now. The suffering of the people is unbearable. The assault of Israel on Gaza is not only against Hamas, but against the entire Palestinian population there, a whole population is despised! They are experiencing the state terror of the empire. They have to be the atonement for Europe's sin against the Jewish people. They have to be the testing ground for the empire's last AI-operated military inventions. The entire people in Gaza are being "led like a lamb to the slaughter."

Western theologies were obsessed with the sin of the individual rather than the systemic sin. It is the combination of state terror of the Roman Empire and religious establishment of that era that brought Jesus on the cross. The servant who was "cut off from the land of the living" becomes a symbol of the "necropolitics" of all times. In the words of Achille Mbembe, what we experience in Gaza is necropolitics where "weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destructions of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*."

Over the last thirty-five years in ministry, I have come to realize that there is something very deep, something very existential in the cross that connects it to the struggle of our Palestinian people. There is a kind of a correlation that is so profound and intense. Throughout these years and as a Palestinian, I was and am still living under Israeli occupation, feeling the systemic humiliation, segregation, and oppression.

Throughout these years, I have been a Pastor who had to climb the pulpit Sunday after Sunday to preach texts from the scripture. I struggled to make sense of what we go through as Palestinians and to give sense to those ancient texts to a small Palestinian Christian community.

And, along the way, I started understanding why the climax of the New Testament could not have been any other than Jesus, and him crucified (I Cor. 2: 2). It is

the suffering and crucified Christ that can best speak to us as an occupied nation in our suffering.

It is He, the Palestinian Jew, that was crushed on the cross by the Roman empire, who can best tell our story to the world. It is the cross that can open our eyes to the systemic necropolitics of our time. Jesus died “for the people” so that “the whole nation” is not destroyed (John 11:50). The cross is thus the clearest judgment against the necropolitics of our times.

Jesus died “for the people,” for every people, so that they might live and flourish. Every people deserve to have life and life abundant. It is the cross that is followed by resurrection that gives us the strength to resist those necropowers of our time, thus proclaiming an alternative life-giving vision for our world.