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Introduction to the Special Edition: "The Bible and Israel: Contents, Contexts, and Contests"	Michael Janapin
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INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL EDITION: "The Bible and Israel: Contents, Contexts, and Contests"

Michael Janapin

The Samahan ng Teolohikal na Edukasyon ng Pilipinas (STEP) – *Association for Theological Education of the Philippines* – is composed of Philippine member schools of the Association for Theological Education in South-East Asia (ATESEA). Established in 2009, it aims to bring together Filipino scholars to conduct theological forums as a platform for reflections and for doing contextual theology on current issues.

In this special edition of the PJRS are papers from a STEP-hosted theological forum that tackled the pressing issue surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are four presentations and four corresponding responses. Scholars reflected on the contested and multivalent meanings of "Bible" and "Israel." Both terms carry religious, historical, cultural, and political weight — shaping identity and fueling debates in global theology and geopolitics. The contributions here explore these complexities, demonstrating how biblical language and narratives are never neutral but contested sites of meaning, power, and hope.

Revelation Velunta's opening article, "Diversity in Meaning," sets the stage for the various key issues involved in this discussion. There are conflicting interpretations among various stakeholders on how to define key words such as "Bible" and "Israel." In sum, words are never static; their meanings unfold in lived history and conflict. From this conceptual framing, we now move on to the next article's geopolitical analysis.

Building on the idea of meanings created within the context of lived history, Joffrey Almazan's "Divine Narratives and Earthly Conflicts" traces how biblical history has shaped the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The article examines the conflicting narratives used to support claims and how politics played a role in perpetuating atrocities committed in the name of deity.

In response, Myra Patrocenio's paper expands on Almazan's thesis, stating that the conflict is more political than religious. She agrees with him on several key points and offers a possible solution through responsible hermeneutics as a path to resist the weaponization of sacred texts.

In a somewhat tangential yet fruitful approach, B. Moreno Bragas's paper highlights some thoughts that might provide a middle ground for the conflicting sides. He argues that instead of focusing on the concept of predestination, Romans 9-11 is better read with God's *Eleos* (mercy) as the framework. In the end, Bragas argues that all will work out through the covenant in Jesus Christ.

Asami Segundo, in her response, affirms Bragas's emphasis on mercy. She warns against extremes of Calvinist predestination, if one is not careful in reading this particular section of Romans. She suggests that the framework of mercy indeed could be used as a theological foundation for inclusivity and reconciliation.

As a presenter himself, Revelation Velunta focuses on the ancient roots of *El* in Ancient Near Eastern religions. His paper "The House of El" traces how El's attributes ultimately become Yahweh's. He argues that divine identity was shaped by redactions and theological negotiations. He finds this relevant because this ancient syncretism still informs faith at present.

Delia Ayabo responded by affirming Velunta's explorations but pressed further. She argues that readings of El/Yahweh narratives can either perpetuate or resist power imbalances. She further suggests that these sacred readings of the text can serve as foundations for peacebuilding and inclusivity, rather than exclusion and hatred.

The final paper is presented by Alvin Peñamora. His presentation begins by juxtaposing two national traumas experienced by the major players in the conflict: Shoah (Holocaust) of Israel and Nakba (Catastrophe) of the Palestinians. He argues that a lasting solution to the conflict requires theological engagement with both, without minimizing either. Being a peace builder himself, Peñamora understands that violence is not the solution. He argues that the recognition of suffering leads to constructive futures, and the avoidance of violence that causes such suffering is a more productive step in addressing the issue.

Wella Hoyle-De Rosas responds with care and acknowledges the power of pairing Shoah and Nakba. However, she warns against oversimplification. In her response, she urges theological engagement that avoids binary oppositions. She further suggests conducting empathetic dialogue, where both histories are honored without erasure.

These presentations and their corresponding responses bring forth key motifs surrounding the discourse of this conflict. First, there is no univocal meaning for words such as "Bible" and "Israel." Second, we find sacred texts used as weapons, justifying violence. Third, theologians must remain vigilant against the misuse of scripture and promote just readings of the text. Fourth, we see how trauma and memory shape theology and current discourse. Finally, from a tangent, the focus on God's mercy is a promising start for healing and reconciliation – thus giving peace a chance.

Inasmuch as we desire that this dialogue of voices from different sectors be the final say on this issue, we can only hope. But it is this hope that brings front and center the issue that theological reflection on "Bible" and "Israel" is both urgent and fraught. Our prayer is that through these contributions, spaces for a more just, compassionate, and peace-oriented engagement will emerge. Readers are exhorted to see these articles not only as academic exercises, but as acts of theological responsibility, showing how faith and scholarship might respond to contested texts, histories, and conflicts with integrity and hope.

Baruch haba b'shem Adonai!

Michael Janapin was born again during his college years in Intramuros, Manila through the ministry of Darrel Seale at Joy Student Center. In 1993, he received his call from God to be in full time ministry. He was advised to finish his studies in engineering first. So while studying full time, he also worked as volunteer staff of Joy Student Center, and part of the pastoral team of the church. After graduating college, he worked for a while as an engineer, then he proceeded to follow his call. He finished his Master of Divinity at the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary and Doctor of Theology at the Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary. He serves as professor of the Hebrew Bible and as Academic Dean of PBTS. He is happily married to Elizabeth Rodis and God blessed them with two children: Calvin and Violet.

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DIVERSITY IN MEANING
Exploring the Terms "Bible" and "Israel"

Revelation E. Velunta

Introduction

The Samahan ng Teolohikal na Edukasyon sa Pilipinas (STEP) hosted a theological forum at Central Philippine University (CPU) on July 30-31, 2024. Entitled "The Bible and Israel: Contents, Contexts, and Contests," the forum brought together presentations that now occupy the pages of this special journal.

I suggested this topic to Dr. Michael Janapin, STEP President from 2018-2024, and he agreed. His leadership made possible the diverse and interdisciplinary articulations that you, dear reader, are now reading.

The "Bible" and "Israel". These two words are loaded terms. Especially these days, when the world is seemingly divided on the genocide being perpetrated by the State of Israel against the Palestinian people. And both sides, including everyone in between, use these two words to justify their positions. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's position on the matter is but one among many justifications.[1]

The words "Bible" and "Israel" are deeply woven into the fabric of global history, spirituality, and culture. While most people think that each term seems straightforward at first glance, both are layered with complex meanings that shift depending on context, tradition, and interpretation. To understand the breadth of their diversity, one must embark on a journey through ancient languages, religious evolutions, peoples' histories, and modern socio-political landscapes. This very short essay seeks to explore and illuminate several of the many faces these terms present, revealing just how multifaceted they truly are.

Diversity of the Term "Bible"

Etymology and Basic Definition

The term "Bible" comes from the Greek "ta biblia," meaning "the books." It reflects the fact that the Bible is not a single book, but rather a collection of multivocal and pluriform writings composed over centuries. Simply put, the Bible is a library. The Greek term itself was adopted from the ancient Phoenician port city of Gebal,

[1]"Netanyahu's references to violent biblical passages raise alarm among critics", NPR, last modified Nov. 7, 2023 https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics

known as Byblos to the Greeks, a center for papyrus production, which underscores the connection between the word and the idea of written documents.[2]

The Bible Across Religious Traditions

The shape and content of the Bible vary dramatically across religious traditions:

- Judaism: The Hebrew Bible, or *Tanakh*, consists of three main sections: the *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). These texts are foundational to Jewish identity, law, and worship. The Hebrew Bible has 24 books.
- Christianity: For Christians, the Bible comprises the Old Testament[3] (a Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament, which includes writings about Jesus of Nazareth and the early Church. The contents of the Old Testament vary among Christian denominations—Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox—each including or excluding certain books (the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books).
- Other Traditions: Some religious movements, such as the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, include additional books not found in most other Christian canons. Meanwhile, other faiths, like Islam, acknowledge the Bible as a previous revelation but have their own sacred texts, such as the Qur'an.

Simply put, the Protestant Bible has 66 books. The Roman Catholic Bible has 73. The Orthodox has 79, while the Ethiopian Orthodox has 81.

Languages and Translations

The Bible's linguistic diversity is immense. Originally composed in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, it has been translated into thousands of languages, making it the most translated and published book in human history. Each translation brings nuances and interpretative choices, influencing how diverse faith communities understand their teachings. Moreover, there are presently more than 5,800[4] Greek manuscripts of the New Testament (each one unique) and over 18,000[5] manuscripts in other ancient languages (again, no two alike!).

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[2]Mark, Joshua J.. "Bible." *World History Encyclopedia.* Last modified September 02, 2009. https://www.worldhistory.org/bible/.

[3]The Hebrew Bible has 24 books. Christians expanded these 24 into 39 by making 2 books each out of Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. They also turned the single book of the Twelve into 12 Minor Prophets (Hosea to Malachi). Moreover, Christians re-arranged the ordering of the books.

[4]There were 5,360 Greek Manuscripts when I was in Graduate School.

[5]Sean McDowell, "What is the Most Recent Manuscript Count for the New Testament?" *SeanMcDowell.org*, March 13, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/mrymswyz

Cultural Impact and Interpretations

The Bible is not merely a religious document; it is a cultural touchstone. Its stories, laws, poetry, and wisdom literature have inspired art, music, literature, and philosophy across civilizations. Interpretations range from literalist readings to allegorical, metaphorical, and historical-critical approaches, each yielding different meanings and applications. Of course, the connection of the use of the Bible to centuries of imperialism and colonialism requires no special pleading.6

The Bible in Public Discourse

In politics, education, and ethics, the term "Bible" can refer to an authoritative guide, even outside religious contexts (e.g., "the gardener's bible," "the cook's bible"). This metaphorical usage illustrates the term's flexibility and the reverence it commands in diverse arenas. For Donald Trump, MAGA, and ICE7 the Bible remains the primary prop.

Diversity of the Term "Israel"

Origins and Biblical Significance

The word "Israel" first appears in the Hebrew Bible as a name given to the patriarch Jacob after wrestling with a divine being (Genesis 32:28). Thereafter, "Israel" denotes Jacob's descendants, who became the Israelites—a confederation of tribes bound by religious and cultural ties.

Israel as a People

In the Bible, "Israel" often refers collectively to the children of Jacob, forming the core of the ancient Israelites. In later Jewish tradition, "Israel" came to mean the Jewish people as a whole, regardless of geographic location. This sense of peoplehood, transcending state or territory, has persisted throughout centuries of dispersion and diaspora.

Israel as a Land

"Israel" also signifies a physical place—the Promised Land described in biblical narratives, stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates in some descriptions, but historically centered on the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan

[6]The works of Musa Dube, Robert Warrior, and Fernando Segovia, among others, are excellent resources on this topic.

[7]Make America Great Again (MAGA) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

River. This land plays a pivotal role in religious imagination, pilgrimage, privilege, and identity politics for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The Modern Nation-State

Since 1948, "Israel" refers to the modern nation-state established in the historical region of Palestine. As a sovereign country, Israel is home to a diverse population of Jews from around the world, as well as Arab citizens (Muslims, Christians, Druze), and other minority groups. Its imperial heritage, creation, development, and ongoing conflicts have made "Israel" a symbol of both national revival and contested narratives.

Israel in Religious and Theological Discourse

For many Jews, "Israel" has remained a central pillar of identity, signifying both the ancient covenant community and the aspirations for return and restoration. For Christians, "Israel" adopts additional meanings—sometimes representing the Church as the "new Israel," or serving as a symbol of fulfillment of prophecy. As noted earlier, the Church as the "new Israel" has played a key role in the history of imperialism and colonialism. In Islamic tradition, "Bani Isra'il" (the Children of Israel) are a people to whom many prophets were sent, and whose stories offer lessons and warnings.

Israel in Political and Cultural Contexts

The term "Israel" evokes different associations depending on one's political or cultural perspective. For some, it is a beacon of democracy, innovation, and resilience. For others, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it carries complex connotations of displacement, struggle, unresolved grievances, and, since October 2023, genocide! The word has become shorthand not only for a country, but also for a host of ideas about identity, privilege, belonging, and chosenness.

Overlap and Divergence

The diversity of the terms "Bible" and "Israel" reflects their intertwined histories and evolving significance. In some contexts, they reinforce one another—the Hebrew Bible as the story of Israel, or Israel as the people and land shaped by biblical narrative. In others, they stand apart: "Bible" as a universal text for multiple faiths, "Israel" as a contemporary nation-state or an ancient community with no modern analogue.

Conclusion

The terms "Bible" and "Israel" are not static. They are fluid, flexible, and functional. Their meanings shift and expand across time, space, and tradition. For some, they are sacred, for others, historical or political. Each term is at once singular and plural—embracing diversity within itself. To appreciate their full significance is

to recognize not only their roots but also their branches, which stretch wide and bear fruit in unexpected ways.

Through understanding the diversity encapsulated in "Bible" and "Israel," we open ourselves not only to richer perspectives on faith, culture, and humanity but to unfathomable horrors and unimaginable violence when these terms are deployed as "texts of terror."[8]

Rev. Velunta's biographical information is at the end of his article, "The House of El."

[8]See the works of Mieke Bal, Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, Marcella Althaus-Reid, and Phyllis Trible.

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On Divine Narratives and Earthly Power Conflicts: The Role of Biblical History in Shaping the Contemporary Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Joefrey M. Almazan

Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict stands as a poignant reminder of the enduring struggle for land, identity, and sovereignty in the Middle East. Rooted in historical grievances and fueled by religious and political aspirations, this conflict has persisted for generations. Amidst the complexities of this ongoing struggle, the influence of biblical narratives cannot be overlooked. The land of Israel-Palestine has been central to the biblical tradition for millennia, and the stories of the patriarchs, prophets, and conquests continue to shape contemporary perceptions and actions.

The biblical narrative provides a foundational myth for both Jewish and Palestinian identities, shaping their historical consciousness and territorial claims. Stories of Abraham, Moses, and the Israelite conquest of Canaan imbue the land with religious significance, framing it as a promised inheritance from God. These narratives serve to legitimize Jewish settlement and statehood in Palestine, while also evoking memories of dispossession and displacement for Palestinians (Avraham 2018). Interpretations of biblical texts have been heavily politicized, with competing narratives used to justify conflicting claims to the land. Zionist movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries invoked biblical promises of land as a theological justification for Jewish return to Israel, thereby legitimizing Jewish settlement and statehood (Hasson 2018). Conversely, Lustick (2014) explains, "Palestinian nationalist movements have drawn upon alternative interpretations of biblical texts to assert indigenous rights and resist settler colonialism. These differing interpretations underscore the contested nature of biblical history in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

Gaza holds particular significance within biblical narratives as one of the ancient Philistine cities, symbolizing both cultural exchange and conflict. The biblical city of Gaza serves as a backdrop for narratives of conquest and resistance, shaping contemporary perceptions of the territory (Said 1992). Today, Gaza remains a focal point of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, characterized by recurrent cycles of violence and humanitarian crisis. The biblical imagery of Gaza as a contested territory continues to influence contemporary actions and perceptions, with both Israeli and Palestinian actors invoking historical narratives to justify their claims and actions (Smith 2002).

While religion has often been implicated in perpetuating conflict, it also holds the potential for peacebuilding and reconciliation. Interfaith dialogue initiatives, grassroots movements, and religious leaders advocating for nonviolent solutions offer

avenues for dialogue and reconciliation (Suleiman 2011). By engaging with biblical texts critically and promoting inclusive interpretations that emphasize shared values of justice and compassion, stakeholders can transcend divisive narratives and work towards a just and lasting peace in Gaza and beyond.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza is deeply intertwined with biblical narratives, which continue to shape perceptions, identities, and actions on both sides of the divide. From the ancient stories of conquest and liberation to the contemporary realities of occupation and resistance, the interplay between divine narratives and earthly power conflicts underscores the complexity of this enduring conflict. Acknowledging the role of biblical history is essential for understanding the depth of this conflict and for fostering dialogue and reconciliation in pursuit of peace.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. Biblical Narratives and Claims to the Land

The historical connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel/Palestine is deeply rooted in biblical narratives, particularly in Genesis 12:1-7. These narratives hold significant religious and national importance for the Jewish identity, shaping their collective consciousness and connection to the land throughout millennia.

1. Jewish historical connection to the land of Israel/Palestine

Genesis 12:1-7 marks the beginning of the covenant between God and Abraham, where God promises to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation and to bless them with the land of Canaan. This covenant is foundational to Jewish faith and identity, symbolizing God's chosen people and their inheritance of the land. Abraham's journey to the land of Canaan, as described in Genesis, represents the first instance of the Jewish presence in the region. The narratives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants living in Canaan establish a historical and cultural connection between the Jewish people and the land, laying the groundwork for future claims to territorial rights.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, numerous references reaffirm the divine promise of land to the Jewish people. The Exodus narrative, the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, and the establishment of the Davidic kingdom further solidify this connection. The land of Israel/Palestine becomes central to Jewish religious rituals, festivals, and laws, emphasizing its spiritual and symbolic significance. The biblical narratives of the land of Israel/Palestine play a crucial role in shaping Jewish religious and national identity. For Jews, the land represents not only a physical territory but also a sacred inheritance bestowed upon them by God. This belief fosters a profound sense of attachment and belonging to the land, transcending mere geographical boundaries (Finkelstein and Silberman 2002).

The concept of Eretz Yisrael, or the Land of Israel, is deeply ingrained in Jewish tradition and theology. It is viewed as a homeland where Jewish history, culture, and

spirituality converge, serving as a focal point for Jewish identity and unity. Throughout centuries of exile and dispersion, the longing for return to the land remained a central theme in Jewish prayers, literature, and collective memory (Hertzberg 1997).

The modern Zionist movement, which emerged in the late 19th century, sought to actualize the biblical promise of a Jewish homeland in Israel/Palestine. Zionist leaders and thinkers drew inspiration from biblical narratives, framing the return to the land as a fulfillment of ancient prophecies and a renaissance of Jewish nationhood. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 marked a monumental milestone in Jewish history, reaffirming the enduring bond between the Jewish people and their ancestral homeland (Laqueur and Rubin 2008).

The Jewish historical connection to the land of Israel/Palestine, rooted in biblical narratives, is a foundational aspect of Jewish religious and national identity. From the covenant with Abraham to the modern State of Israel, these narratives have served as a guiding force, shaping the collective consciousness and aspirations of the Jewish people. As debates over territorial claims persist, understanding the biblical roots of this connection is essential for comprehending the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the enduring significance of the land in Jewish heritage.

2. Islamic historical ties to Palestine, including Jerusalem and its surroundings.

Conversely, the Palestinian national identity, while diverse and multifaceted, also intertwines with religious narratives. Islam, which has a significant historical and cultural presence in the region, includes references to the land of Palestine. The Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, is located in what Muslims refer to as the Haram al-Sharif. This site and its religious significance are deeply woven into the Palestinian identity and their claim to the land (Said 1979).

Moreover, the Palestinian narrative, though significantly shaped by Islamic references, also includes Christian and secular dimensions that emphasize the Arab population's continuous presence in the land for centuries. This multifaceted identity has been mobilized in the Palestinian struggle for nationhood and sovereignty, challenging Zionist claims with a counter-narrative of indigenous presence and rights (Khalidi 1997).

3. Christian narratives and their historical influence on the region.

Christian narratives have played a significant role in shaping Israel's claim to the land of Israel/Palestine, intertwining biblical theology with historical interpretations that support the Jewish presence in the region. These narratives, derived from both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, have contributed to the theological and ideological foundation of Israel's territorial claims.

The Christian Old Testament, which shares many texts with the Hebrew Bible, contains numerous references to the land of Israel as the promised land of the Jewish

people. These narratives, including the covenant with Abraham and the conquest of Canaan, establish the divine mandate for Jewish ownership of the land. Christian interpretations of these biblical passages often reinforce the idea of Israel's historical right to the land, framing it within the context of God's promise to the Jewish people (Barton 2016).

Additionally, Christian narratives from the New Testament further cement the theological connection between the land of Israel and the Jewish people. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who was born and raised in the region, are central to Christian theology. The New Testament accounts of Jesus' ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection unfold within the context of Israel/Palestine, imbuing the land with spiritual significance for Christians worldwide. Moreover, the early Christian belief in the fulfillment of biblical prophecies through Jesus' life and resurrection underscores the enduring importance of Israel in Christian eschatology (Jeremias 2013).

Throughout history, Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land and support for the restoration of Israel have been influenced by these theological narratives. From the Crusades to contemporary Christian Zionism, these narratives have shaped Christian attitudes towards the land of Israel/Palestine and its significance in biblical prophecy (Halsell 1986). Christian narratives have historically influenced Israel's claim to the land by reinforcing its theological and historical connections to the region. By drawing on biblical texts and theological interpretations, these narratives have provided a spiritual and ideological basis for Israel's territorial identity.

II. Biblical Narrative and the Rise of Political Zionism

Zionism, the national movement for the return of the Jewish people to their homeland and the resumption of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, has been deeply influenced by biblical narratives. The Jewish connection to the land is chronicled in the Hebrew Bible, which recounts the promise made by God to Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites, granting them the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-7). This divine promise has been a cornerstone of Jewish historical and religious identity and has played a central role in Zionist ideology.

Herzl's political Zionism, though primarily a secular movement, adopted the biblical narrative to bolster Jewish claims to the land, arguing that the Jewish people were returning to their ancestral homeland after millennia of exile. This narrative was not merely a historical or religious claim but became a powerful tool in the political and ideological justification for the establishment and expansion of the State of Israel (Pappe 2004).

The relationship between the biblical narrative and Zionist ideology is deeply intertwined, with Zionism drawing heavily on biblical texts to legitimize Jewish settlement and statehood in Palestine. This research explores the multifaceted connections between the biblical narrative and Zionist thought, tracing the historical development of Zionist ideology and its appropriation of biblical narratives to justify the establishment of a Jewish homeland. Through an examination of key texts and

historical events, this study seeks to shed light on the complex interplay between religious myth and political ideology in shaping the Zionist project.

1. The Origin of Zionist Thought

Zionism, as a political and ideological movement, emerged in the late 19th century in response to the challenges faced by Jewish communities in Europe and the Middle East. The term "Zionism" derives from "Zion," a biblical reference to Jerusalem and the land of Israel. This movement aimed to address the plight of Jews who faced discrimination, persecution, and violence by advocating for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine (Shapira 1992). At the forefront of the Zionist movement was Theodor Herzl, often regarded as the father of political Zionism. Herzl, a Jewish journalist and playwright from Austria-Hungary, was deeply troubled by the persistence of anti-Semitism in Europe. The Dreyfus Affair in France, which revealed deep-rooted anti-Semitic sentiments within European society, further galvanized Herzl's commitment to finding a solution to the "Jewish question." In his seminal work, "Der Judenstaat" (The Jewish State), Herzl articulated the need for the creation of a Jewish state as a response to anti-Semitism (Herzl 1896).

Herzl recognized that achieving a Jewish state would require international support and diplomatic negotiations. In 1897, he convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, bringing together Jewish leaders and activists from across Europe to discuss and promote the Zionist cause. The congress marked the formal beginning of the organized Zionist movement and laid the groundwork for future endeavors (Patai 1987). The Zionist movement gained momentum in the early 20th century, propelled by waves of Jewish migration from Eastern Europe to escape persecution and poverty. The decline of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent British Mandate over Palestine provided an opportunity for Zionist aspirations to take root. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British government expressed support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, further bolstered the legitimacy of the Zionist cause on the international stage (Balfour Declaration 1917).

However, the Zionist project was not without its challenges and controversies. The idea of Jewish settlement in Palestine sparked opposition from Arab communities who also laid claim to the land. The tension between Zionist aspirations and Palestinian national identity laid the groundwork for the conflict that persists to this day (Khalidi 2007). Zionism emerged as a response to the social, political, and economic challenges facing Jewish communities in Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Led by visionary figures like Theodor Herzl, the movement sought to address the "Jewish question" by advocating for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. While the Zionist project achieved significant milestones, its implementation also gave rise to complex geopolitical realities and ongoing conflict in the region.

2. Biblical Foundations of Zionist Ideology

Central to Zionist ideology is the belief in the historical connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel, as articulated in the biblical narrative. Biblical texts such as the Book of Genesis, which recounts the covenant between God and Abraham promising the land to his descendants, are foundational to Zionist claims to the land (Genesis 15:18-21). Additionally, narratives of Jewish exile and longing for return, as expressed in Psalms and the writings of the prophets, serve to legitimize the Zionist project by framing it as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Psalms 137:1-6; Isaiah 11:11-12).

3. The Role of Biblical Imagery in Zionist Discourse

Biblical imagery and language have been instrumental in shaping Zionist discourse, providing a powerful narrative framework for the Zionist movement. The concept of "Zion," derived from the biblical name for Jerusalem, symbolizes the aspirations of the Jewish people for national rebirth and redemption in their ancestral homeland (Psalms 137:5-6). Similarly, the idea of "ingathering of the exiles," drawn from prophetic visions of a future restoration of Israel, has been invoked to inspire Jewish immigration to Palestine and the establishment of Jewish settlements (Isaiah 43:5-6).

4. Challenges and Critiques of Zionist Interpretations of the Bible

The relationship between the biblical narrative and Zionist ideology is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the intersection of religious myth, historical memory, and political aspiration. Through its appropriation of biblical texts and imagery, Zionism has sought to establish a narrative of Jewish return and redemption in the land of Israel, shaping the collective identity and aspirations of the Jewish people. However, this interpretation of the biblical narrative has also been contested and critiqued, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of the role of religion in shaping political ideology and national identity.

While Zionist interpretations of the Bible have played a central role in shaping Jewish national consciousness, they have also been subject to critique and reinterpretation. Critics argue that Zionist readings of biblical texts are selective and ideologically driven, neglecting alternative understandings of the biblical narrative and the diverse religious and cultural heritage of the land of Israel (Sand 2012). Furthermore, some scholars have challenged the notion of a seamless historical continuity between biblical Israel and modern-day Israel, pointing to the complexities of ancient history and the diverse ethnic and religious communities that have inhabited the land over millennia (Pappe 2006).

III. The Role of Biblical History in Shaping Contemporary Conflicts: Case of Israel and Palestine

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is deeply rooted in historical, religious, and political complexities. One significant dimension is the role of Biblical history, which profoundly influences the narratives, identities, and claims of both Israelis and Palestinians. This section explores how Biblical history shapes contemporary conflicts, examining its impact on territorial claims, national identities, and international perceptions.

The invocation of biblical history has had profound implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in shaping the ideological underpinnings of territorial claims and policies. Israeli settlement policies, especially in contested areas like the West Bank and around Gaza, have often been framed within the context of a biblical mandate to reclaim the Jewish homeland. This narrative has not only justified the expansion of settlements but has also fueled tensions and violence, as it is perceived by Palestinians as a manifestation of religious and historical disenfranchisement (Gorenberg 2006).

On the Palestinian side, the appeal to religious and historical narratives has been instrumental in mobilizing resistance against Israeli occupation and in framing the struggle as not merely political but also as a defense of sacred land. This has been evident in the two Intifadas and the ongoing resistance in Gaza, where religious motifs are often invoked to inspire solidarity and perseverance against perceived injustice (Tamimi 2007).

1. Biblical History and Territorial Claims

The land of Israel, known biblically as Canaan, holds significant historical and religious importance for Jews, Christians, and Muslims. For Jews, the Biblical narrative begins with God's promise to Abraham, extending through the conquest under Joshua, and the establishment of the Davidic kingdom. These narratives are enshrined in texts such as Genesis 12:1-7, where God promises Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. This divine promise forms the foundation of Jewish claims to the land, influencing Zionist ideologies and modern Israeli policies (Shapira 1992).

On the other hand, Palestinians, predominantly Muslim, view the land through the lens of Islamic history and its Biblical connections. They trace their heritage to the Canaanites and Philistines, and Islamic traditions hold Jerusalem as the third holiest city in Islam after Mecca and Medina. The Qur'an references the Israelites and their prophets, acknowledging their historical presence but also emphasizing the Islamic belief in the supersession of previous Abrahamic faiths by Islam (Qur'an, Surah Al-Isra 17:1).

These contrasting historical and religious narratives fuel the territorial disputes. For Israelis, the re-establishment of a Jewish state in 1948 is seen as a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and a restoration of historical rights. Palestinians, however, view this as a displacement and a continuation of colonialist expansion, often referring to

the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948, when many Palestinians were displaced from their homes (Pappé 2006).

2. National Identities and Biblical Narratives

Biblical history significantly shapes the national identities of both Israelis and Palestinians. For Israelis, the connection to the land is intertwined with their Jewish identity. The Zionist movement, which emerged in the late 19th century, heavily drew upon Biblical themes and imagery, portraying the return to Zion as a redemption and renewal of the Jewish people (Hertzberg 1997). The modern state of Israel incorporates these elements into its symbols, such as the national emblem featuring the Menorah, an ancient Jewish symbol (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "The State Emblem.").

Palestinian identity, although diverse, is also deeply connected to the land. Palestinians view themselves as the indigenous people of the region with a continuous presence dating back to ancient times. This connection, as pointed out by Khalidi (1997), is reinforced through narratives of resistance and resilience against various occupiers, including the ancient Israelites. Islamic and Christian Palestinians alike see their heritage as linked to the broader history of the Holy Land, incorporating Biblical sites and stories into their cultural identity.

3. The Role of Religious Symbols and Sites

Religious symbols and sites play a crucial role in the conflict. Jerusalem, a city of immense religious significance, is perhaps the most contentious. For Jews, it is the site of the ancient Temples, central to Jewish worship and longing, encapsulated in prayers and cultural expressions over millennia (Pseudo-Phil. Biblical Antiquities, 19.7). The Western Wall, a remnant of the Second Temple, remains a focal point of Jewish prayer and pilgrimage.

For Muslims, Jerusalem houses the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, sites associated with the Prophet Muhammad's night journey and ascension to heaven, as described in Islamic tradition (Qur'an, Surah Al-Isra 17:1). The control and access to these sites have been flashpoints of violence, particularly during the Second Intifada, which began in 2000 following Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif complex (Barari 2004).

Christians, too, as claimed by Murphy-O'Connor (2008), regard Jerusalem as holy, with numerous sites connected to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, believed to be the site of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, is a major pilgrimage destination. The overlapping religious claims to these sites complicate any efforts towards a peaceful resolution.

4. Political Exploitation of Biblical Narratives

Politicians and leaders on both sides frequently exploit Biblical narratives to bolster their positions and legitimize their claims. Israeli leaders often invoke Biblical promises and historical ties to the land to justify settlement expansion and territorial control. For instance, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly referenced the Biblical connection to Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) to affirm Israeli sovereignty over these areas (Netanyahu 2000).

Conversely as Said (1992) further explains, Palestinian leaders and activists highlight the historical and continuous presence of Palestinians in the land, framing their struggle as a resistance against a settler-colonial project. They draw parallels between their plight and other indigenous struggles worldwide, seeking to garner international solidarity and support.

5. International Perceptions and Biblical History

Biblical history also influences international perceptions and policies. Many Western countries, particularly the United States, have populations with strong Judeo-Christian cultural foundations. These populations often view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through a Biblical lens, sometimes leading to unequivocal support for Israel based on religious convictions (Carter 2006). This support is evident in political lobbying groups like Christians United for Israel (CUFI), which advocates for pro-Israel policies grounded in Biblical prophecy (Christians United for Israel. "Our Mission").

On the other hand, countries with significant Muslim populations or those with a history of anti-colonial struggles may sympathize more with the Palestinian cause. They often perceive the conflict as a fight against occupation and for national self-determination, viewing the Palestinian narrative as part of a broader anti-imperialist struggle (Abu-Sitta 2016).

6. Challenges and Prospects for Peace

The deep entrenchment of Biblical history in the conflict poses significant challenges to peace efforts. The religious and historical dimensions make compromises difficult, as they are often seen as betrayals of divine promises or ancestral heritage. However, acknowledging these narratives and addressing them respectfully is crucial for any lasting resolution (Burg, 2008).

Interfaith dialogues and initiatives that promote mutual understanding and respect for the religious significance of the land for all parties are essential. Programs that educate about the shared histories and commonalities among the Abrahamic faiths can foster a more inclusive perspective, potentially easing tensions (Firestone 2008). Moreover, international mediators and policymakers must be sensitive to these historical and religious contexts, crafting solutions that honor the diverse narratives without privileging one over the other (Khalidi 2013).

Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis offers insights into how biblical narratives and divine claims have contributed to the complexity and intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the context of Gaza. The interplay between historical claims and contemporary geopolitical realities highlights the need for a nuanced approach to peacebuilding that respects the depth of both sides' attachments to the land.

Biblical history plays a profound role in shaping contemporary conflicts between Israel and Palestine. It influences territorial claims, national identities, and international perceptions, making the conflict deeply rooted and multifaceted. While this historical dimension poses challenges to peace, it also offers a framework for understanding and addressing the deeper issues at play. By recognizing and respecting the complex interplay of Biblical narratives, religious significance, and historical claims, there is hope for a more nuanced and empathetic approach to resolving this enduring conflict.

The role of biblical history and divine narratives in shaping the contemporary Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in Gaza, underscores the complexity of disentangling historical, religious, and political claims. These narratives serve not only as justifications for territorial and political claims but also as sources of identity and legitimacy. As such, any resolution to the conflict must address these deeply ingrained historical narratives and the real grievances they encapsulate. A path forward requires acknowledging the legitimacy of both peoples' historical narratives while forging a shared future based on mutual recognition, justice, and peace.

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RESPONSE
On Divine Narratives and Earthly Power Conflicts

Myra G. Patrocenio

Introduction

The Israel-Palestine geopolitical conflict has been one of the most highly publicized global conflicts since the 19th century and continues to this day. Unlike other wars, this conflict uniquely impacts the global community, including academia, in an unprecedented manner. It is often framed with notions of violence being "sacred," "biblical," and "divinely appointed," diminishing the reliability and authority of biblical texts by reducing them to ideological propaganda and myth. Throughout history, many war heroes, from Cyrus to Constantine to Lincoln and Hussein, have attributed their victories and atrocities to divine favor. This political hermeneutics overshadows the true essence of these sacred texts. By building upon Dr. Almazan's thesis, this response investigates how sacred texts and their historical interpretations shape contemporary political ideologies and actions. While both sides of the ongoing conflict invoke Scripture, I contend that the root of the issue is political rather than theological. To foster dialogue and resolution, responsible and just interpretations of biblical narratives are essential, which I hope would also transform political mandates and policies in the future.

This paper aims to identify overlooked biblical perspectives that can contribute to peace and reconciliation. It challenges the common assumption that the conflict is primarily religious, arguing instead that politics is the driving force. The first part summarizes Dr. Almazan's paper, highlighting his main arguments and their implications for the ongoing discussion. The second part offers suggestions on how the biblical narratives that shaped this conflict could also be powerful conduits for lasting resolution, as briefly mentioned by Dr. Almazan. By highlighting the texts referenced in his paper and other related scriptures, particularly Genesis 12:1-7 and Deuteronomy 25:19, I aim to demonstrate that the same fragmented and polarized narratives used for political agendas could provide possible resolutions to the conflict between Israel and Palestine if read within the framework of divine justice and compassion. Through this dialogue, we hope to reclaim the beauty of these sacred texts, often negated by political interpretations.

Summary and Implications of Dr. Almazan's Arguments

Dr. Almazan's paper explores the profound influence of biblical narratives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the case of Gaza. It argues that both Jewish and Palestinian claims to the land are deeply rooted in these ancient stories. For Jews, the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-7 serves as a foundational myth, shaping their historical connection and the religious significance of the land. Other biblical narratives - such as the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, the Davidic kingdom—as well as several Jewish rituals, festivals, and laws further emphasized Israel's ingrained connection to the land.

Palestinians, while their identity is multifaceted, also draw on Islamic references and a sense of continuous presence in the land. Dr. Almazan noted that the presence of the Palestinians in the land for centuries, including their multidimensional identity, "shaped their struggle for nationhood and sovereignty." The rise of Zionism, the movement for a Jewish homeland, heavily relied on biblical narratives to legitimize Jewish settlement and statehood in Palestine. Biblical texts and interpretations provided a theological and ideological basis for Zionist claims to the land, with Christian narratives adding further complexity to the issue. Among these biblical texts used to promote Israel's legitimate claim to the land are Genesis 15:18-22, Psalms 137:1-6, and Isaiah 11:11-12, 43:5-6.

He argues that these religious texts continue to shape modern political ideologies and identities. He provides thought-provoking evidence for the deep-seated role of biblical history in the conflict. He highlights how both Jewish and Palestinian identities are shaped by their religious narratives, which in turn influence their historical consciousness and territorial claims. This entanglement of religious narratives with political agendas is effectively illustrated through his analysis, demonstrating how these stories are used to justify territorial claims and actions.

While Dr. Almazan's analysis effectively reveals the role of religious narratives, it could benefit from considering alternative perspectives. Including the viewpoints of secular and non-religious actors would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of the conflict. Divergent interpretations of biblical narratives (rather than the narratives themselves) have become a source of ongoing division, not just between Israel and Palestine, but also within academia, where these differing viewpoints exacerbate tensions and hinder a balanced understanding of the conflict, as well as of the texts.

Dr. Almazan further explores the politicization of religious narratives and their impact on the ongoing conflict. He emphasizes how the invocation of sacred texts exacerbates tensions and complicates peace efforts. The use of religious narratives for political purposes reinforces existing divisions and hinders the possibility of finding common ground. This underscores the need for a more nuanced approach that recognizes the potential for these narratives to both divide and unite, which I hope to shed light on through this response.

Dr. Almazan's arguments extend beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, highlighting the influence of religious narratives on contemporary conflicts in general. Understanding this influence can offer valuable insights for policymakers and negotiators dealing with such conflicts. I concur with Dr. Almazan that interfaith dialogue, coupled with a deeper understanding of the historical context of the texts and the conflict itself, as well as the shared histories and identities of both Palestine and Israel, could pave the way for a potential resolution. These pathways emphasize creating spaces where both Jewish and Palestinian narratives are heard and valued, promoting a more inclusive approach to peacebuilding.

The success of these pathways relies on considering the biblical narratives' historical contexts and the current geopolitical landscape. The historical context provides a framework for understanding the meaning of the biblical texts and the conflict's origins and evolution, while the current geopolitical landscape influences the feasibility and implementation of resolution strategies. Dr. Almazan's analysis underscores the need for a nuanced approach that considers both historical and contemporary aspects, ensuring proposed solutions are grounded in a realistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities present today.

The Bible can be interpreted in countless ways, as the Jewish tradition recognizes (*"shi'vim panim latorah,"* Numbers Rabbah 13:15). Both Israelis and Palestinians draw heavily on biblical narratives to justify their claims, making the conflict deeply complex. While these interpretations have been weaponized for political gain, they also reflect deeply held beliefs. To achieve lasting peace, it is essential to acknowledge and respect these diverse perspectives. Ultimately, the misuse of scripture to oppress others contradicts the core values of love and justice found within the Bible itself.

There are striking parallels between ancient and contemporary times, such as the close relationship between religion and government, the use of divine authority to justify political actions, the misuse of power by leaders, the importance of systems to control power, and the role of religious figures in challenging those in authority.[1] The Israeli-Palestinian narratives and conflict exemplify how the Bible can be misinterpreted to support political oppression. Yet, this same religious text can also inspire a different perspective, one that aligns with the scripture's ideals of justice and accountability.[2] This was, in fact, one of the primary messages of the prophets during their time—social responsibility and accountability.

A colleague from a Malaysian Methodist seminary once observed a striking paradox: the Bible can be a catalyst for cruelty when wielded by the powerful to serve their own ends, yet it offers profound healing and liberation to those who approach it with humility and empathy.[3] This crucial distinction often escapes politicians who selectively quote scripture. As Asian Old Testament scholar Jerry Hwang notes, the

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[1]Anelle Sabanal, "Leadership, Power and Authority," in *Exploring the Old Testament in Asia: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. By J. Hwang and A. Rotokha (Manila: Langham, 2022), 97.

[2]Sabanal, "Leadership, Power and Authority 97.

[3]EE Yan Tan, *Society of Asia Biblical Studies Biennial Meeting* (panel discussion, Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary, Hualien, Taiwan, July 13, 2024).

Old Testament's portrayal of Israel's relationship with other nations embodies a form of postcolonialism that challenges and dismantles the power abuses endemic to most nations in the ancient world.[4] Contrary to the appearance of colonialism, the Bible's core principles are rooted in compassion and justice, which are often overlooked when the Bible is read and interpreted by tyrants. An example of this was the Six-Day War between Israel and Palestine in 1967, which echoes the six days of creation in Genesis.[5] Genesis 12:1-7, as mentioned by Dr. Almazan, also provides a compelling illustration of how the Bible is used for political purposes.

Genesis 12:1-7 is frequently invoked to bolster Israel's national identity and territorial claims. Primarily recognized as Abraham's divine calling to found a new nation, this passage outlines the sevenfold blessings of the Abrahamic covenant: land, personal prosperity, renown, a source of blessing for others, divine protection, divine retribution, and universal blessing. Paradoxically, proponents of a pro-Israel stance often overlook the latter two blessings: being a blessing to others and a blessing to all nations. By employing scripture to legitimize violence and colonialism, these interpretations eclipse Israel's covenantal responsibility to serve as a beacon of hope for humanity.

Another passage, Isaiah 19:22, offers a poignant counter-narrative to those who misuse scripture to justify violence and war: "The Lord will strike Egypt with a plague; He will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the LORD, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them." This divine mercy extended to Egypt is one of many passages often overlooked by those seeking biblical validation for aggression. Isaiah 19:25 further underscores God's compassion for other nations: "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance." This covenant-like declaration is striking in its inclusion of Egypt and Assyria alongside Israel, a fact often ignored by both Israelis and those who view the Bible as a proponent of violence or colonialism. Palestine, notably absent from these verses, should be included among the nations to whom God's covenant love extends. Deuteronomy serves as a sobering reminder that even Israel is not exempt from divine judgment. God's wrath, directed at both Israel and other nations, is a serious matter. Yet, paradoxically, this divine discipline is always accompanied by an even greater outpouring of God's care and restorative love.[6]

A final passage worthy of consideration is Deuteronomy 25:19, which states: "When the Lord your God gives you rest from all your enemies around you in the land

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[4]Jerry Hwang, "Israel, the Nations, and Missio Dei" in Exploring the Old Testament in Asia: Evangelical Perspectives, ed. By Jerry Hwang and Angukali Rotokha (Manila: Langham, 2022), 73.

[5]Mitri Raheb, "The Cross, the State, and Religious Terror," in *The Cross in Contexts: Suffering and Redemption in Palestine*, ed. by Mitri Raheb and Suzanne Watts Henderson (Ossining, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 43-44. Some important reading about this century-old conflict are as follows: Rashid Khalidi, The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance, 1917-2017 (New York, NY; Metropolitan Books, 2017); Sara Roy, Failing Peace: Gaza and the Palestinian-Israel Conflict (New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2007), eBook; Dov Waxman, The Israel-Palestinian Conflict: What Everyone Needs to Know (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[6]Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 272.

the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget." The interpretation of this text might be relevant for Dr. Almazan's paper in terms of demonstrating how scripture can be misapplied. This verse has been repeatedly invoked by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to justify attacks on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and even in Lebanon (though it is essential to distinguish between Netanyahu's perspective and that of the broader Israeli public). Such a selective and instrumentalized reading of scripture is ultimately counterproductive.

Deuteronomy 25 is a collection of miscellaneous laws emphasizing social justice and responsibility, including guidelines for responding to adversaries like the Amalekites, as recounted in Exodus 17:8-15. Given Deuteronomy's homiletic structure designed to elucidate the law's essence for Israel, verse 19 cannot be isolated. Moses' command to "blot out the memory of Amalek" specifically targets the Amalekite warriors who defied Yahweh and oppressed Israel during a time of vulnerability. This should be a warning to Israel as well as to Palestine, to make sure that they will not act like the Amalekites to their neighbors, especially the vulnerable.

Conclusion

The Israel-Palestine conflict, a complex and enduring struggle, is deeply intertwined with biblical narratives. This paper has explored how these sacred texts have been both a source of inspiration and division, shaping political ideologies and actions. Yet while the Bible and other ancient Scriptures are used to explain this conflict, there are other sources that need to be explored and studied to understand this conflict as a whole. Archaeological and non-biblical texts, including other geographical and interdisciplinary studies, must be undertaken to deconstruct and reconstruct a more balanced understanding of this conflict.[7]

While Dr. Almazan's work effectively highlights the role of biblical narratives in fueling the conflict, it also underscores the potential for these same narratives to foster peace and reconciliation. By examining key biblical passages, including Genesis 12:1-7, Isaiah 19:22, and Deuteronomy 25:19, we have demonstrated how these texts, often misinterpreted and politicized, can offer alternative perspectives on justice, compassion, and coexistence.

It is imperative to move beyond the simplistic and divisive interpretations that have dominated the discourse. Instead, we must embrace a more nuanced understanding of these biblical texts, recognizing their capacity to inspire hope, reconciliation, and a shared commitment to a just and equitable future for both Israelis and Palestinians. By reclaiming the true essence of these sacred narratives, we can contribute to a

[7]See Gregory Harms and Todd M. Ferry, *The Palestine-Israel Conflict: A Basic Introduction*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2017) for a more balanced and history-centered presentation of this conflict from the ancient times until the time of Barrack Obama that are often overlooked if we insist that this conflict is religious and theological rather than political.

meaningful and lasting resolution to this enduring conflict. To look at Scripture as pro-Israel and anti-Palestine or vice versa is an attack on the message of peace and reconciliation that propels the biblical narratives. To read and interpret biblical and historical narratives without the virtue and attitude of fairness, empathy, altruism, amity, and bridge-building is a theological and philosophical myopia that results in the tragedy we all now are seeing—not only in Israel but in every part of the world.

It would be deceitful to deny that the Bible had been used by Israel and other colonizers to exploit people, nations, and the entire creation. All of us, I presume, are here because we are all witnesses to how biblical narratives have been interpreted and fabricated to oppress the powerless—the indigenous and the poor. But it would be unjust to look at the Bible as fiction and myth simply because oppression, deception, and manipulation by power players have misused it for their agenda. It is interesting how the Bible is used by finite creatures like us—who, in trying to protect one perspective,destroy another. In trying to promote emancipation, we oppress others. Scripture is a powerful tool: it can either promote war and hostility or advocate for peace and harmony. In the hands of the power players—the colonizers—scripture is an atrocious sword; but in the hands of the righteous, if there is one, it is like a healing balm of Gilead that makes the wounded whole.

Ultimately, the path to peace lies not in further entrenching positions based on selective biblical interpretations, but in fostering a spirit of dialogue, empathy, and mutual respect. By engaging with biblical texts in a spirit of humility and openness, we can begin to bridge the divides and build a future where the promise of these sacred narratives is realized for all. Our readings and interpretations of scripture should be guided by profound wisdom and fairness. This venture may not result in halting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other wars globally, but this small step, this still small voice, could be a springboard that would propel us toward a peaceful dialogue and humble reverberations of our own metanarratives.

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GOD'S ELEOS IN THE CLIMAX[1]

B. Moreno Bragas

Author's Disclaimer: It is highly necessary to first note that this paper has a theological interpretation that should not be taken anachronistically. That is, usage of some terms – especially that of 'Israel' as God's chosen people – does not necessarily represent and perfectly fit the geopolitical condition in relation to the issues of our time. In fact, for reasons that are exhausted in this conference, the contemporary disposition of Israel as a nation may be opposed to the faithful understanding of the whole counsel of God.

Introduction

A "puzzle in the middle." This is what's thought of about Romans 9-11. As many well-meaning Christians see it, the Epistle to the Romans is composed of eight chapters of salvific theology in the beginning, five chapters of Christian living instructions (including the closing remarks of the letter) in its last portion, and a sort of disruption in the middle. However, this can only be the case if one reads the first eight chapters as a portion that addresses how one can be saved. Then the last chapters are read as instructions complementary to it to make up the individual salvation-application theme of the epistle. It has become the usual way of reading Romans contemporarily, especially in Evangelical circles. In this reading, however, the middle section becomes problematic in coming up with a cohesive thought flow of the whole epistle's message.2 In fact, as C.E.B. Cranfield observes, some might consider this section as simply an inserted digression due to Paul's extreme emotional anguish over the Jews' rejection of the gospel.3

It is for this reason stated above that I would like to deal with this text in Romans, focusing on chapter 9. Inappropriately, Christians tend to read this passage in isolation from the whole letter and then come up with arguments to support the doctrine of the denomination to which they belong or simply favor. But this clearly does not

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[1]This article appears as the fifth chapter of *Paradox: Interdisciplinary Essays on Christian Theology* (Quezon City: Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 2020), 107-31. Since the essay is reviewed again, improvements are necessarily reflected.

An underdeveloped essay about this topic was written during my undergraduate degree in Theology at Asian Seminary of Christian Ministries. This essay then won an exegetical award in Asian Theological Seminary in March 2011. Finally, this is a synthesized essay after reading Wright's *Climax*. The initial essay is the substance of the first section.

[2]N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant* (London: T&T Clark Ltd, 1991), 18-40, 231-257. For the entire essay the *Climax of the Covenant* will be referred to as the *Climax*. The "puzzle in the middle" phrase is drawn from p.231 as a term of disapproval by many who fail to see the intrinsic connection of these three chapters to the preceding and following chapters.

[3]C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 214.

demonstrate a "commitment to truth wherever it may be found."[4] This is predominantly true in churches with strong conviction about the doctrine of predestination - that God has ordained all that has happened and will happen, even the election of His people and the damnation of some.

Basically, *eleos* is the "attribute of God which is occasionally described as love but more characteristically as *mercy.*"[5]

God's Eleos in the Divine Promise of Old

Among all New Testament sources, Romans 9 is the passage most used by theologians to make their strong points on predestination issues. "As it is written, 'I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.' What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!" (Romans 9:14 NRSV). This is a statement that silences somebody whenever one would try to argue against God determining who will be saved and who will be condemned, or who will be loved and who will be hated. Everything happens according to God's purpose and glory. We may complain, said Luther in one of his lectures on Romans, "It is harsh and wretched that God should seek His glory in my misery." Then he went on to answer back his rhetoric, "Note how the voice of the flesh is always saying 'my,' 'my'; get rid of this 'my' and rather say: 'Glory to Thee, O Lord!' and you will be saved."[6] However, although these verses tell much truth about God's preordained plans, the message of God's *eleos* in all His plans should be further considered in this essay.

Some also use this passage to classify who the elect people of God are. To some degree, interpreters' considerations fall into two extremes: Jews and Gentiles are two distinct peoples of God in the Church, on one hand; and, Gentiles replaced the Jews before the sight of God on the other. But the text shows how both peoples are under the mercies of God, and that is what makes them be elected not necessarily to salvation, but to fulfill the purposes of God for His glory to be proclaimed throughout the whole world – an election to service, if I may say.

As it seems to be clear at the outset, this first section is committed not to theologically support the doctrine of predestination and election. God's enduring plan since the Old Testament is the focus of this section.

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[4]Thomas McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2015), 21: "analytic theology is theology that is attuned to and committed to the 'goals and ambitions' of analytic philosophy: a commitment to truth wherever it may be found, clarity of expression, and rigor of argumentation." Having been trained in this new theological tradition, I highly favor "commitment to truth wherever it may be found" than the two. This is evident in the *Paradox*.

[5]C.K. Barret, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1957), 186.

[6]Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, vol.25: Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 376.

Literary Contextual Analysis

Immediate Context of Romans 9

The immediate context of this chapter is patterned to the main theme stated in Romans 1:16-17, "...to the Jew first and also to the Greek."[7] Paul, although in deep anguish because of Israel's rejection of the gospel of Christ, emphasized first how the gospel is much related to the Jews in 9:1-5. In the opening of the epistle in 1:1-4, he introduced Christ's relation to David, to the prophets, and to the Holy Scriptures, which would probably mean that the gospel could not be properly understood apart from Israel.[8] "Then what advantage has the Jew?" as a question raised in 3:1, is answered in some detail in these first verses of Romans 9.

Paul started his discourse with extreme solemnity and anguish. He sympathized with his people through these words: Ἀλήθειαν λέγω ἐν χριστῷ οὐ ψεύδομαι συμμαρτυρούσης μοι τῆς συνειδήσεώς μου ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ. The clauses "I speak the truth" and "I am not lying" (negatively);[9] plus "in Christ" and "in the Holy Spirit" show his deep sincerity about what he really feels.[10] He was not just trying to persuade his readers that he was falsely accused of indifference to his people in preaching the gospel of mercy to the Gentiles. In fact, he stated some reasons and argued about the election of Israel, which is somehow a thesis to be synthesized by an upcoming antithesis, i.e., the election of the Gentiles and their place in the entire salvation history. The synthesis is a substantial point of this first section. It is obviously centered on God's *eleos*. Then the proceeding sections will further supplement the synthesis with the antithesis.

There are four relative clauses of Israel's privileges to highlight the predicament of their unbelief to the gospel: (1) "[t]hey are Israelites," (2) "to them belong the adoption... and the promises," (3) "to them belong the patriarchs," (4) "from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah."[11] Further, there are also these seven classic prerogatives Paul apparently had in mind directly from the Old Testament: (1) *firstborn son* (Exodus 4:22); (2) the *glorious presence* of God (Exodus 15:6, 11); (3) the *covenants* with Abraham (Genesis 15:18), Isaac (Genesis 26:3-5), Moses (Exodus 24:7-8); (4) the giving of the *(Torah) instruction* (Exodus 20:1); (5) the awesome worship of Yahweh in the *Temple* (Exodus 25-31); (6) the *promises* made to Abraham (Genesis 12:2), Isaac (Genesis 26:3-5), Jacob (Genesis 28:13-14); and (7) the

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[7]Cranfield, *Romans*,.214.

[8]Cranfield, *Romans*, 214.

[9]Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 556.

[10]Cranfield, Romans, 217-18.

[11]Cranfield, Romans, 220-22; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 560. See also Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the New Testament Greek* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 249. The relative clauses emphasize connectivity that stands together among the clauses that is with theological significance.

patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob themselves.[12] These are the "septet" privileges, which are strong cases that the divine promise of old is very much related to the Jews, plus the fact that from them came the natural descent of the Christ (v. 5). Therefore, to preach a gospel that casts them out undermines God's *eleos* that would make it appear that God's faithfulness is compromised. Hence, a strong appeal is presupposed to arise.[13] It led Paul to explain further, starting in verse 6 onwards.

In the following set of verses (vv. 6-13),[14] Paul's initial response to this matter on how he would relate the divine promise of old to God's mercy is to make distinctions between ἐξ ἰσραήλ (those from Israel) and ἰσραήλ (Israel), and between Abraham's σπέρμα and his τέκνα.[15] But this argument is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that those who are "Israel within Israel" (i.e., the Jews who received the gospel by faith) are the only ones in the scope of God's mercy. Cranfield comments in a straightforward way that this is very wrong.[16] The critical concept of election and those who receive the gospel by faith just becomes the focus, i.e., the inner circle that the promises of God are all throughout fulfilled through the covenant people of God in the New Testament, or the so-called "the righteous remnant." It seems that this could be one accurate reading, but prone to misinterpretation of over-emphasizing the inner circle of God's elect that demarcates those who are outside.

The succeeding verses that talk about God choosing Isaac, and eventually, Jacob over Esau (vv. 7-13), should actually be read in this context of *choosing within the already chosen*. Although the descendants by Isaac were chosen and not the ones by Ishmael, it is to be carefully noted that the narrative account in Genesis 21:13, 17-21 explicitly shows God's mercy to Ishmael.[17] Then, since the case of Isaac and Ishmael is less conclusive because they had the same father but different mothers, Paul moved to the more intense election of Jacob against Esau, wherein the two had the same parents. The election of Jacob does not convey the message of deprivation of God's

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[12]Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1993), 545-48; James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 503-504; John Zeisler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: Trinity Press International, 1989), 236-38.

[13]Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004),.249. Witherington maintains the message that Israel has stumbled, but not to the extent of being permanently lost.

[14]Scholars subdivided Romans 9 differently but C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans 9-16, vol. 2* (WBC; Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark Ltd., 1981); James Dunn, Romans IX-XVI, vol. 38B (WBC ; Dallas, Texas: WordBooks Publishers, 1988); Fitzmyer, *Romans*; and Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) interconnected verses 6-13 with verse 14 and its following verses. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*; and Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) divided it from sections, but dependence from one section to another is evident. This is one reason that I inevitably discuss the 'immediate context' at such length.

[15]Cranfield, *Romans*, pp.227-28; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, pp.558-59. Witherington agrees that the term "Israel" does not apply to some Jews in the flow of thought of chapter 9, but the consideration of its usage is distinct in 11:26, p.250.

[16]Cranfield, *Romans*, 228-32.

[17]Cranfield, *Romans*,.228-29.

mercy on Esau if taken into the context of the Old Testament, such as in Deuteronomy 23:7.[18]

I say that not being chosen to play a positive role in God's special purpose does not mean exclusion from God's mercy.[19] Ishmael and Esau are still within the embrace of His mercy. However, it is necessary to recognize the *single but wide* scope of the *eleos* to avoid a misconception of having two exclusive peoples of God, Jews and Christians, as patterned from Ishmael and Isaac or Esau and Jacob. The misconception undermines God's *eleos* because of the exclusive expressions of His mercy that might eventually be misconstrued for partiality.

Wider Literary Context: Romans 9-11

The whole chapter is just a part of the series discussions on chapters 9-11 regarding man's unbelief (Israel, which would eventually be a warning to the Gentiles in 11:17-24) and God's faithfulness and mercy in fulfilling His entire plan. There is a tendency to read the text of this thesis in an 'unPauline' sense and just assert doctrinal biases if it is to be taken out from this wider literary context, e.g., replacement theology that the Church replaced Israel.[20]

Considering these three chapters as a whole section and their connection to the chapters prior and subsequent to it, some might say that it is just an inserted excursus of Paul's deep emotional involvement in the matter of the Jews' destiny.[21] But a more diligent look suggests that it is an integral amplification of the main theme, again, stated in Romans 1:16-17. Moreover, this whole section is considered by Joseph Fitzmyer to be apologetic, not polemic. It deals not with Judaizers, just as in Galatians, but with Jews and their relation to the gospel.[22] It seems that Paul is apologetically explaining some misconceptions that might have arisen regarding the discussed justification in Romans 1-8, and this is its connection to this section prior to it.

Leon Morris also argues that the keyword of these three whole chapters is the verb "to have mercy" (ελεειν) as it relates to the sovereignty of God ever since the old covenant and not just the concept of Christ in his saving activity.[23] It should also be stressed that the use of Ιουδαίου compared to Ισραήλ is greatly lesser. This might mean that Paul, in this section, may have redefined 'Israel' to harmonize the divine

[18]Cranfield, *Romans*, 229-31.

[19]Cranfield, *Romans*, 229; Dunn, Romans IX-XVI, vol. 38B, 568-69. For a lengthy discussion on the New Testament against anti-Semitism, see also James D.G. Dunn, *Jews and Christians: The Parting of Ways AD 70-135* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 177-211.

[20]Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 253-56.

[21]Cranfield, *Romans*, 214.

[22]Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 541.

[23]Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 345; See also Cranfield, *Romans*, 215.

promise of old with the gospel of mercy.[24] So the immediate context discussed above should not be isolated from this wider section because it shows the coherence of the argument in terms of the discussion of the *eleos* in (1) God's enduring faithfulness to the Jews; and (2) the election of Israel that is seemingly brought light to a new understanding, i.e. the righteous remnant and the Gentiles who are grafted into Christ (cf. Romans 11:23), *but never the replacement of Israel by the Church*.

Book Context

Though Romans 9-11 stands independently with the fact that it has its own central theme, it should not be overlooked that it is a discourse that arose complementary to the gospel Paul exclaimed in Romans 1-8. In fact, he might have been preparing for this discussion all along, considering 3:1-9 and 21-31 because obvious objections would arise.[25] The previous statements before Romans 9-11 declare the certainty of God's purpose. But since the very reliability of God appears to be in question with regard to some Jews' exclusion because of their rejection of the gospel, Paul's explanation concerning His promises and His sovereign mercy has become urgent. I would like to reiterate that some views are: (1) just an excursion of Paul's feelings; (2) a theological assertion (specifically, of predestination); and (3) an inner contradiction. But as I have made it overt in the foregoing contextual analysis, I do not concede to any of these. It is very obvious that the transition is a part of the theme development in Romans as an urgent address to both Jews and Gentiles.[26]

It is thus reasonable to say that the inclusion of this entire section (9-11) makes a fuller and profounder sense of the gospel to the Jews and to the Gentiles. In contrast to chapters 1-8 only, the extended discussion until chapter 11 gives a more satisfactory theological basis for the upcoming moral exhortations in 12-15.[27] The moral exhortations should then be understood as not only being addressed to an idiosyncratic people but for the Church of Jews and Gentiles, grafted onto Christ.

An Itinerary toward the Synthesis

Romans 9 initiates an elucidatory thesis (i.e., the election of "Israel") against the misconception of the readers, Jews and Gentiles alike, regarding God's plan. Paul starts with something sentimental in chapter 9. How could this be, wherein he almost had a climactic finish in the previous chapter? It is because though there is the definiteness that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus

[24]Dunn, *Jews and Christians*, pp.183-87; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 574.; Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 345. Romans 11:26 is in distinct usage of the word "Israel" that may be pertaining even to non-Christian Jews just as Witherington commented. It is a bit extensive to be included in this thesis using the specific exegesis pivoting on Romans 9:14.

[25]Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 539.

[26]Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 540.

[27]Cranfield, *Romans*, 215.

(8:39), Paul's message, since the beginning of the epistle, threatens most of the Jews to be cut away from God because of their unbelief. The transition is reasonable because there is a need to explain what becomes of the everlasting covenant of God with His people. Romans 9 tells about the placing of Israel in God's plan of election, not apart from His mercy. Indeed, the gospel stands in continuity with the Old Testament.

Paul's sometimes confusing but clever rhetoric might have led his readers to be persuaded right away.[28] Jews would never be comfortable saying that God is unjust. Furthermore, Paul's use of Scripture regarding the sovereignty of God made his argument even more credible. His interpretation of history regarding the Pharaoh that they know in Scripture (v.17; cf. Exodus) is as clear as history itself. However, this time, there is the transference of imagery from Pharaoh to Israel, who, like the Pharaoh, rejected God's words of deliverance for His people.[29]

Another image that was used by Paul was the potter and the clay. C. H. Dodd considers this as the weakest point in the epistle because a man is not a pot, and obstinate objections arise in his mind.[30] But the argument is not weak at all. In fact, 'the potter and the clay' was an imagery (not just of the Jews but also of ancient Egypt and some neighboring nations) where the writer of Genesis 2:7 might have gotten the idea of man being fashioned apart from his own will. Thus, the analogy is strong that the mercy of God cannot be subject to anything outside His own free grace, not even to the human will.[31]

The analogy about Pharaoh suggests that it does not mean that since the response of Israel is outside the will of God, it is outside the purpose of His mercy. Paul

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[28]In order for the reader to understand fully how Paul communicated in the passage of this thesis, the way of his style in persuading should be understood. It can possibly be said that Paul has a habit of discussing without worrying about false implications that might arise in the future. The presence of a number of some ουν's in Romans (3:1, 9; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1, 12, 15; 7:7, 13; 8:12, 31; 9:14; 11:1, 11; 12:1) testify to that. He is much concerned with the present discourse. Apparently, he is not much concerned with what the readers (e.g., modern, particularly what brought about the Holocaust) might end up thinking. He also sometimes distracts from his main argument that presents an unparalleled number of OT texts (e.g., vv.27-28 are problematic, even in textual criticism). Last, he seems unaware of generalizing election and predestination of Israel that somehow results in various extreme doctrines by some readers. In fact, Paul is concerned with nations and not with individuals. Reading our minds into his writing is a violation of *eisegesis* and irresponsible anachronism.

In spite of these things that have been said about Paul's way of rhetoric (with seeming lapses sometimes), it is evident that he is capable of bringing the readers into his side of the argument. His usual hypothetical questions, in the question-and-answer style of the diatribe starting with Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν ἐπιμενοῦμεν; (cf. Rom 3:5; 6:1; 7:7), would definitely bring the readers to agree with him to a strong objection (μὴ γένοιτο.) that has to be taken seriously. With this rhetorical device he started the section's thought flow.

Intentionally or unintentionally, an anacoluthon can be observed along the flow of the text. Verse 24 is debated among commentators of Romans if it should go with vv.14-23 or vv.25-29. It is considered to be as really attributed to Paul – 'the Pauline anacoluthon'. An 'anacoluthon' is a "grammatical phenomenon whereby the author lost track of his or her syntax" or simply a "broken or irregular syntactical construction."

[29]C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 186-87.

[30]As quoted by Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 188.

[31]Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 565.

mentioned that some are made for honor while some for dishonor (v.21). The response of those who rejected the gospel may be an ignoble one, but it is within God's mercy and not outside of it.[32] Fitzmyer, though in agreement with this, considered not just the message of mercy but yoked it with the message of God's sovereignty and suggests that it is the very intention of God.[33]

It is inconclusive that other scholars who stressed God's mercy did not deal with God's sovereignty, for indeed, they dealt with it considerably. However, they seemed to settle with justifying God. It seems that Fitzmyer is right in saying that in the context, Paul "does not try to argue the question of theodicy; he simply rejects it."[34] I suppose His mercy is not to be reconciled with issues of theodicy but to His sovereignty. Though it can be understood in light of justifying God, it is more appropriate to be understood in the light of His ultimate supremacy. God does not need to be justified in terms of His merciful character. As clay, Israel could never question God why, in their unbelief, He turned to the Gentiles. Besides, it is not contrary to God's direction of history. Their call and indocility were foreseen.[35]

On Some Theological Assertions and an Exegetical Verdict

This section of Romans affects Christian theology in a way that if faithful Biblical exegesis were compromised, areas of Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and even Christology would be distorted. A superficial look at the passage of Romans 9 would suggest a strong case for the doctrine of predestination of individuals or even of double predestination. However, the crux of the matter is about God's mercy on *all* peoples by an *enduring* divine plan in continuity of the Old and the New Testaments and not about the final destination of individuals, albeit it leads there.

The misconception about Israel, as it should be understood in the context, would divide the church into two chosen peoples of God – the Jews and the Church. Christians are not even encouraged to make Jews out of themselves, such as the trend of Messianic Christianity, due to having extreme reverence for the Jews as God's special people. There is only one Church with Christ as the head – a union of the redeemed Jews and Gentiles (again, those who are grafted onto Christ). Additionally, to think that the Church replaced the Jews leads to anti-Semitism. It is a misconception that triggered the gruesome violence of the holocaust.

Most of all, we should not overlook important notions of Christology. Just as Israel was the firstborn of God (Exodus 4:22) in the Old Covenant, Jesus Christ was then declared the firstborn among many brethren (8:29) just before the discussion of

[32]Cranfield, *Romans*, 227, 238-241; Dunn, *Romans* IX-XVI, vol. 38B, 564-67; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 568-70; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 602-03.

[33]Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 565.

[34]Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 565.

[35]Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 565. This is an obvious theological assertion by Fitzmyer himself, but I acknowledge that this is a strong argument, but not in the direction of any position that undermines God's *eleos*.

Romans 9-11. Therefore, we are grafted onto Christ and not to Israel. So for Paul, God's *eleos* is realized in the progression of history and shown ultimately in the Lord Jesus Christ.

I stand on the idea that there could be a special affinity to Israel as the community under promise while discussing the supreme electing process of God. However, there is also a possibility that the use of 'the Jews' that became lesser tells much about the discourse; while the term 'Israel' no longer has the same connotation in this contextual issue. Israel seems to be redefined in chapter 9, just as noted in the immediate literary context above. Further, most scholars referred to in the first section consider that being outside of the elect does not necessarily mean that they are outside God's mercy. They are still within God's embrace, and He will still carry out His plan through a good or a bad vessel. It seems then that there should be a better understanding of what it is to be the 'elect'. It should be noted that the message of predestination in this context deals with election to service and not to eternal destination (though again, it somehow leads there). It is "a discussion of corporate election," as Witherington strongly stresses, "in the midst of which there are individual rejection by some and selection for historical purposes of others."[36]

Therefore, in view of God's mercy: (1) He **drafted** His preordained plan of salvation in anticipation of the unfaithfulness of man, (2) He **crafted** "Israel" as the special people with a mission eventually fulfilled in Jesus Christ to be further supplemented in the next section; (3) He **grafted** onto Christ believers of the gospel as God's eschatological people – Jews and Gentiles alike as the Church.

In summary, Cranfield notes:

...Ishmael as well as Isaac, Esau as well as Jacob, Pharaoh as well as Moses, the vessels of wrath as well as the vessels of mercy, that is the mass of unbelieving Jews (and unbelieving Gentiles too) as well as the believing Church of Jews and Gentiles, stand within – and not without – the embrace of the divine mercy.[37]

To further understand the Church as God's eschatological people, we turn to Wright's Climax of the Covenant.

Concise Highlight of the Climax

Wright started the Climax by laying out the standpoint of Pauline theology: "the twin heads of Jewish theology, viz., monotheism and election, God and Israel."[38] He says that these two doctrines of the Jewish faith were redefined by means of Christ and the Spirit. The redefinition coincides with an eschatological direction when fully examined. These eschatological implications necessitate the right understanding about

[36]Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 246.
[37]Cranfield, *Romans*, 227.
[38]Wright, *Climax*, 1.

the people of God "irrespective of racial background."[39] Though it is asserted that these twin heads of Jewish theology are a necessary standpoint for reading the Climax, I deal with election rather than monotheism in this section.

Paul is in the struggle of making a broader category for the phenomena of the Christ event to better understand certain irreconcilable concepts about the "new view" of the people of God.[40] A narrow category is the traditional view of the election of Israel. But in the Christ event, as entailed in the reading of Romans 9-11, this traditional view proves to be very unproductive, if not abhorrent. "The new," Wright says, "is in some sort of continuity with the old, as well as some sort of discontinuity."[41]

One important idea that should also be highlighted before analyzing the text of Romans 9 is Paul's view of Israel in relation to Adam and the Messiah. Wright's assertion that "[w]herever one starts, one will encounter the key issues soon enough"[42] proves to be true in the emergence of understanding this new view of God's people. He says that the purposes of God for the whole humankind "have devolved on to, and will be fulfilled in, Israel in particular" as they shall become His true humanity.[43] Further, he says that:

What God intended for Adam will be given to the seed of Abraham. They will inherit the second Eden, the restored primeval glory. If there is a 'last Adam' in the relevant Jewish literature, he is not an individual, whether messianic or otherwise. He is the whole eschatological people of God.[44]

But to address the tendency of false assumption by the Jews, "the privileges of Israel, particularly those of the fulfillment of the law and of being children of God," Wright retorts, "have been transferred to Christ and thence to those 'in Christ.'" Thereby making "Christ, and his people, form the true humanity, which Israel was called to be, but by the law alone, could not be."[45]

This is the concise highlight from the Climax in relation to Romans 9 as to how I intend to further consider God's mercy in relation to (1) God's enduring covenant, not just to the Jews but to all peoples; and (2) His purpose (not conclusive) of reconciling the world to Him in Christ.

Eleos as the Nature of the Climax

Let me now suggest ways of reading and bits of theological insights that can also be observed with Wright's writing. All these points support my suggestion in this essay in arguing that God's mercy is the nature of the climax of God's covenant.

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[39]Wright, *Climax*, 2-3.
[40]Wright, *Climax*, 4-7.
[41]Wright, *Climax*, 14.
[42]Wright, *Climax*, 18.
[43]Wright, *Climax*, 20.
[44]Wright, *Climax*, 20-21.
[45]Wright, *Climax*, 36.

Continuity

To include the section (9-11) as not just a disruption, or a theological excursus, or an emotional digression could make, as Cranfield pointed out, a "profounder" and "fuller" sense of exhortation to both Jews and Gentiles.[46] In *Romans: Paul for Everyone*, Wright emphasizes that Paul:

> …wants to do two things which people still have a hard time putting together. He wants to affirm, passionately, that God really did choose the Jews and equip them to be his people for the world. And he wants to affirm, equally passionately, that Jesus of Nazareth really was and is Israel's Messiah. Indeed, the second depends on the first: *unless you believe in God's unique call to Israel, you miss the point of believing in a Messiah altogether.*[47]

This reading is just possible when one reads chapters 1-8 and 9-11 seriously in their continuity. Wright notes that the failure to see its inherent continuity with the preceding chapters could lead to various absurd doctrines. These doctrines do not go well in accordance with seeing the faithfulness of God in His covenant.[48] If 1-8 is simply read as a salvation theme distinct from 9-11 as a doctrine to argue the cases of election and predestination, the error in reading will most likely be committed. With this error in reading, the affirmations above of the first (i.e., God choosing the Jews) can just be disregarded which will inevitably make the second (i.e., Jesus is the Messiah) unfounded.

Romans 1-8 talk about Israel as the privileged people being in the "place where sin became concrete and concentrated." As Israel was cast away, so was the Messiah, "so that the world might be brought into the family of God" by being raised to a new life.[49] The connection of these first eight chapters to the next three chapters intensifies God's merciful character to reconcile the world to Him in Christ, because it gives much awareness of the failure of Israel to be the people chosen by God for this purpose.

Having established the kind of reading I am proposing for a coherent understanding of Romans, I go to another point. If continuous reading of the chapters is necessary for a *wider context*, I would like to point out an important reading *within the chapter* itself.

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[46]Cranfield, *Romans*, 215.

[47]N.T. Wright, Romans, *Part 2: Paul for Everyone* (Great Britain: SPCK Publishing, 2004), 3. Italics mine.

[48]Wright, *Climax*,232-33.

[49]Wright, *Climax*, 246.

Inclusivity

Douglas Moo's literary analyses of the passage show that the rich mercies of God are very evident to both Jews and Gentiles. Most importantly, there is no injustice in God in being merciful to all peoples.

Here is a parallelism that responds to the challenge in v.14:[50]

	14	Is there injustice on God's part?
(A)	15	(By no means!) For He says to Moses…
	16	So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.
(B)	17	(By no means!) For the scripture says to Pharaoh…
	18	So then he has mercy on whomsoever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomsoever he chooses.

Additionally, a chiasm following the verses above is structured as:[51]

(A)	24	God calls Jews
	(B)	24 God calls Gentiles
	(B)'	25-26 confirmation of God's call of the Gentiles in the OT
(A)'	27-29	OT confirmation of God's call of the Jews

Both these literary analyses convey that Romans 9 should be read as inclusive to all peoples. In the parallelism, with the context of the chapter (and indeed the whole section of 9-11), a worldwide purpose is clearly expressed in v.17 as it says, "for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." It can be seen that God, in His mercy, is not unjust as He decides for the wider efficacy of His covenant. In fact, the hardening of Pharaoh (that is, at the same time, under God's sovereignty as discussed) is still under the mercy of God for the purpose of broadening the relationship that the Jews thought was just entitled to them.

This is also the purpose of the chiasm. Paul's purpose was to challenge the assumption about the apparent exclusivity of Israel as the people of God. Whereby both the Jews and the Gentiles have an affirmation of their calling in the prime statements of the chiasm. Moreover, it highlights the calling of the Gentiles in the literary structure. In the argument of Wright, he says, "Israel is transformed from being an ethnic people into a worldwide family," and this family now includes the Gentiles.[52]

Let me also include here that it is interesting that the "shedding of blood" language in the cross of Christ cannot be exactly attributed to the custom of the Jews. In their practice, there is a "spilling of blood" on the altar. It is very likely that the blood being

[50]Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 594.
[51]Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 611 (directly lifted).
[52]Wright, *Climax*, 240.

shed is more of a Gentile idea that happens on a battlefield.[53] It seems to suggest then that the work of Christ on the cross should be looked at on a wider scope of efficacy and not just indigenized to the Jews.

Nevertheless, it is still important to emphasize that the mercy of God is not loosely inclusive, on one hand. There is a "boundary-marker" still. At the beginning of the Climax, Wright says that "the boundary-marker must be faith in Christ, and those whose behavior or affirmations show that they do not have such faith are to be regarded as outside."54 But on the other hand, the mercy of God surely could not be repulsive. That is, Paul was addressing a potential flaw of making Christianity the possession of the Gentiles that might, in turn, also demarcate the Jews. Wright says it is "because the gospel stands athwart all ethnic claims, the church cannot erect a new racial boundary."55 It is, by the way, one of the main purposes of writing to the Romans, as pointed out in the Climax.56

Sovereignty

One thing that is not spelled out much in the Climax but lies in every underpinning of its pages is the assumption of God's sovereignty. I suppose it is highly related to the covenant. In both the mercy of God and His covenant faithfulness, God is sovereign. In the former, God's sovereignty is assumed. In the latter, it is to be realized in the unfolding of the covenant, as "Israel's God will act in history to vindicate his own name by installing his people 'at his right hand', ruling over the nations of the world."57 The vindication does not just concern God's name but also His people.

Furthermore, God's sovereignty made the "role traditionally assigned to Israel" devolve on "to Jesus Christ" that "Paul now regarded him, not Israel, as God's true humanity."58 Thereby making "the privileges of Israel, particularly those of the fulfillment of the law and of being children of God" transferred to Christ and those who are in Christ.59 No wonder Paul's climactic finish in chapter 8 was followed up by something suddenly sentimental in chapter 9 (just as mentioned above) because it seemed that the transference connotes replacement, which is surely never the case despite God's sovereign will.

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[53]This is an insight by David Moffitt when he sat in the lecture of Oliver Crisp in one of the classes in the University of St. Andrews on October 25, 2016. This idea needs further research, but initially helpful in this argument of the inclusion of the Gentiles. Moreover, the slaughtering of the sacrifice may seem foreign to Jewish understanding. In fact, even the word "atonement" could also be a term that can be scrutinized if it is within the Jewish context. There is a certain practice of the killing of an animal and blood shedding particularly in Leviticus 9 though. However, just as Moffit emphasized, the killing is simply a prelude to the spilling of the blood on the altar. This case can be further investigated but not for the purpose of this essay.

[54]Wright, *Climax*, 3.

[55]Wright, *Climax*, 253.

[56]Wright, *Climax*, 252-254.

[57]Wright, *Climax*, 24.

[58]Wright, *Climax*, 26.

[59]Wright, *Climax*, 36.

Having this consideration of the new humanity, what I am suggesting above about the reconceptualization of "Israel" is still relevant, but needs to be seen in this new light. "Israel's disobedience," Wright notes, "is already actually part of the covenant plan, part of God's intention from the beginning."[60] Paul even saw it as a transference of imagery from Pharaoh to Israel. In their failure, Wright says, "In the Messiah are fulfilled the creator's *paradoxical purposes* for Israel and hence for the world."[61] Then, through this Messiah, "Gentiles are thereby being brought into the covenant family."[62] It is only God, in His sovereignty, who can bring about this new reality!

Theodicy

In my exegetical effort above, which favors Fitzmyer's position, it would seem that the assumption of God's sovereignty dismissed the discussion of evil. The *Climax*, however, does not deal straightforwardly with the issue of theodicy as it is conventionally dealt with. Rather, it had an oblique approach by *not making evil a constituent to justify God's goodness, but by situating how it was addressed in the cross*. In the covenant faithfulness of God to Abraham, in Jesus, Wright says that God

> …sees that the only way to rescuing his world at all is to call a people, and to enter into a covenant with them, so that through them he will deal with evil. But the means of dealing with evil is to concentrate it in one place and condemn – execute – it there. The full force of this condemnation is not intended to fall on this people in general, but on their representative, the Messiah.[63]

This is also where I stand regarding evil. It is by God's mercy that He willed this concentration of evil on the cross, where God condemned it, and not on Israel. Because of its concentration in Christ rather than on Israel, all peoples became recipients of His atoning work, and all gained the privilege of embodying His purpose in the world.

Wright posits that eschatological implications should be explored, and it is necessary for its analysis of the covenant. Eschatology is not simply a future state but the future being in the now through the Church. Thus, evil is not just dealt with at the cross of Christ. Those who are grafted onto Christ embody the church moving on towards the future. As this happens, it is this Church that confronts evil by the values of the Kingdom. This future manifestation shows that in God's mercy, the Church is the people reconciled to Him who are challenged to bear the pain of the world and bring healing to it. Wright urges,

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[60]Wright, *Climax*, 240.

[61]Wright, *Climax*, 241. Italics mine.

[62]Wright, *Climax*, 240.

[63]Wright, *Climax*, 239. It is interesting that reading the *Climax of the Covenant* is a good introduction to all later works of N.T. Wright. Many insights from this scholarly work resemble his popular book on N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* (USA: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016).

> God's covenant purpose was to choose a people in and through whom the world would be healed. The purpose, reaching its climax in the Messiah, is now to be worked out through his people.[64]

This is the climax. This is God's *eleos*. The latter is the substructure of the discourse that leads to and intensifies the former.

Conclusion

Romans 9-11 need not be considered a disruptive piece of the puzzle. If there is one major issue that this essay challenges, it is the discontinuity of its reading that in turn leads to obnoxious doctrines that undermine the merciful character of God. A cohesive understanding of Romans 1-11 can be gained by looking at the covenant-faithfulness of God that was manifested in Jesus. The initial remark of Wright at the preface of his book is that,

> …covenant theology is one of the main clues, usually neglected for understanding Paul… what he says about Jesus and about the Law reflects his belief that the covenant purposes of Israel's God had reached their climactic moment in the events of Jesus' death and resurrection.[65]

I agree with Wright's comment that "theology is all about the great wholes, the worldviews which determine and dominate the day-to-day handling of varied issues."[66] Therefore, we need to look at all the Christian themes not as isolated ideas. Rather, we should allow these ideas to converge so that we may convey the Christian message more profoundly.

I tried to do the same in this essay. I pointed out how the *eleos* of God establishes the relationship of God's covenant-faithfulness and His purpose of reconciliation. My proposal, which is also suggested by the *Climax*, of a continuous reading makes the exhortation of God's covenantal work of reconciliation be seen as His merciful act to both Jews and Gentiles. It has also been made clear that chapter 9 envisages the inclusion of the Gentiles in His covenant, but by His mercy alone, as they are grafted onto Christ, the "firstborn within a large family" (Romans 8:29). Moreover, in His sovereignty and wisdom of condemning evil, God has shown mercy so that the world may be reconciled to Him in Christ because God wants nothing to do with evil.

Now, when we think about evil, even in the geopolitical conditions of our time, it seems that again and again we are tempted to ask the question with Israel (Joshua 5:13-14): "Are you one of us, or one of our adversaries?" Then we will be surprised to hear the answer, "Neither…" And learn to submit and say, "What do you command

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[64]Wright, *Climax*, 256.
[65]Wright, *Climax*, xi.
[66]Wright, *Climax*, 3.

your servant, my lord?" May we rightly discern God's will as He gives us the Spirit to guide us "into all the truth" (John 16:13).

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He has degrees in Theology from the Asian Seminary of Christian Ministries, Philosophy from the University of the Philippines Diliman, and currently pursuing his PhD in Philippine Studies at the same university.

He did postgraduate work in Analytic Theology at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland and finished in 2017. He is the author of Paradox, a compilation of his essays at St. Andrews (plus excerpts from the writings of N.T. Wright, Melba Padilla Maggay and the late Evelyn Miranda-Feliciano), published in partnership with the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC) where he is also a Fellow.

He is a member of Scholars at the Peripheries, an online research group hosted and based at the University of St. Andrews, Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics.

He convened Training Assistance and Holistic Itinerant Partnerships (TAHIP) Inc., an itinerant teaching ministry. Recently, he joined the cohort of Religion and Public Life in the Philippines, a mentoring program funded by the British Academy and hosted by the Ateneo de Manila University and the University of Leeds.

B was the Senior Pastor of Lighthouse Christian Community Antipolo before fully committing to Christian scholarship. He also became the Pastor for Christian Education at Diliman Bible Church until he decided to work as a university professor. He is currently assisting Lighthouse in its pastoral ministry. Most of all, he enjoys a young family life with his wife, Kim Vanessa, and their two children, Ella Cassandra and Imago Abelard.

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RESPONSE
God's Eleos in the Climax

Asami Segundo

Now, let me tell you who I am. I am an Igorot, an Ikallahan-Kalanguya to be more precise, hailing from our ancestral land in South Nueva Vizcaya. I am a descendant of people who resisted colonization and who fought for their rights to their land. I am also an Indigenous Rights advocate, using my voice and skills to help the people in power understand the special rights of Indigenous Peoples as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and in the Philippine context, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997—helping to ensure these policies are implemented in the local indigenous communities.

With this context in place, allow me to begin my response through a simple summary.

Summary of the Paper

Bragas' paper is structured around an exegetical study of Romans 9, highlighting God's mercy as a core attribute of His character and covenantal relationship with humanity. The author critiques several theological positions, including the two-covenant theory, replacement theology, and extreme Calvinism, arguing that these views undermine the inclusive and merciful nature of God's covenant.

Key Points and Arguments

1. Exegetical Study of Romans 9:
   - Pastor B provides a thorough examination of Romans 9, emphasizing the need to read this chapter within the broader context of the entire Epistle to the Romans. He argues that isolating Romans 9 leads to misunderstandings, particularly regarding predestination and election.
   - The author posits that God's mercy is central to His covenant and is extended to both Jews and Gentiles, contrary to interpretations that suggest exclusivity or replacement.
2. Critique of Theological Positions:
   - The paper critiques the two-covenant theory, which suggests separate covenants for Jews and Gentiles, and replacement theology, which argues that the Church has replaced Israel as God's chosen people.

- Bragas also opposes extreme Calvinism, particularly the idea of double predestination, which he believes misrepresents the nature of God's mercy.

3. Integration with Wright's Climax of the Covenant:
   - The author aligns his arguments with N.T. Wright's reinterpretation of Jewish theology through Christ, emphasizing continuity and inclusivity.
   - Wright's framework helps to highlight how God's covenantal promises are fulfilled in Christ and extended to all peoples, aligning with Bragas' focus on divine mercy.

Indigenous Perspective

I need to be honest with you... As I was reading Pastor B's paper, it took me some time to be able to connect this to what I'm doing and the Indigenous Rights movement.

In the presentations this morning, we have heard the term Indigenous Peoples repeatedly used. Yet do we really understand what Indigenous Peoples mean?

In 1986–87, the United Nations commissioned the Special Rapporteur José Martínez Cobo to conduct research and develop a definition of Indigenous Peoples. In his report, he included a "working definition":

> Indigenous communities, peoples, and nations are those that, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form, at present, non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal systems.
>
> Indigenous peoples are descendants of the original people or occupants of lands before these lands were taken over or conquered by others. Many indigenous peoples have maintained their traditional cultures and identities (e.g., way of dressing, language, and the cultivation of land). Therefore, they have a strong and deep connection with their ancestral territories, cultures, and identities.

These Indigenous Peoples, who in this circle we may consider as belonging to "Gentiles," the "unreached," "the tribes," or "the mission field." They have suffered from injustices for centuries, from removal from their land, to massacre, to discrimination, to war crimes, among others. Unfortunately, in many cases, the Scriptures were weaponized to justify this oppression. And also, for centuries, Indigenous Peoples have resisted.

Fifty years ago, the resistance escalated the League of Nations, a precursor of the United Nations. For decades, Indigenous Peoples have been advocating and fighting

for the recognition of their rights–their rights to land, rights to self-determination, rights to cultural identity, among others.

And by rights to their land, we mean the recognition of the States of the rightful ownership of the Indigenous Peoples of the land where they have been living on since time immemorial. When we say land rights, we mean the rightful recognition of the IPs to own and manage their natural resources according to their values and cultures. Last week, while being toured around their community, a Balinese friend said, "Our people have existed way before this government. We have inscriptions dated to the 14th century that we have been here in this land. Why is this young government telling us now that it's theirs?" Indigenous Peoples are people of the land. People whose identity is deeply rooted in the land, not just because of religion, but because they have seen since time immemorial that the land owns them rather than the other way around. Reminds me of when God told Adam, "For you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

For centuries, imperialistic States have denied these inherent rights to Indigenous Peoples. In 1997, the Philippines made history by being the first Asian nation to recognize these rights of Indigenous Peoples through the ratification of RA8371 or the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act. After years of negotiation led by Indigenous Peoples and our allies, we were able to find a champion who could speak for them. For Senator Juan Flavier, one of its principal sponsors in Congress, the IPRA was "primarily a social justice measure legislated with the perspective of ensuring protection for a group of people who have long been denied their rightful place in history" (PANLIPI 2007, 15). RA 8371 was enacted to rectify historical injustices committed against ICCs/IPs in the Philippines.

Why am I discussing this, and how is this related to Pastor B's presentation? One word: Equality. Equality brought about by the Inclusivity or Universality of God's Mercy through Jesus Christ. God's mercy is non-discriminatory–whether on race, gender, or whatever social construct we think of to separate ourselves from others. When we talk about the universality of God's mercy through Christ, justice and rectification of historical injustices should always come to mind.

For centuries, what we Indigenous Peoples have been shouting and asking for is equality and justice for all the injustices we have suffered. And that universality of God's mercy is not seen and experienced by the people on the ground, by the ethnos. How do we illuminate the universality of God's mercy when we still allow oppression and injustice to prevail in our society? When we still choose to say and do nothing in the name of neutrality? I see no God's mercy in that.

Some people may say, well, you have UNDRIP and IPRA. What else do you want? It is not enough. Human rights violations are still being committed in the name of beautiful and "it" concepts such as conservation, climate action, green economy, and many more. Worst, in Christian circles, IPs are expected to shed their cultural identity in the name of salvation or being part of God's chosen people. If "election is irrespective of racial background," why do we still force IPs to be integrated in the modern world and leave their ancestral lands? We see no God's mercy in that.

Being "God's chosen people" should not be used to wield injustice in the world, whether as Jews or as Christians. Just like what Pastor B said, being "God's chosen people," we should be agents of justice, love, and mercy. God's mercy is inclusive; it is non-discriminatory. I hope to see this in our churches as we become more aware of the social injustices in our society and choose to leave the neutral ground.

I would like to end my response with a reflection I gained from my own experience of oppression. I have learned that God weeps with the oppressed. And if we claim that we are God's ambassadors, our ladder is leaning on the wrong wall if we continue to aim for neutrality in a world where injustice prevails.

Asami Segundo is an Indigenous youth leader from the Ikalahan-Kalanguya ICCA—territory of life in the Northern Philippines. She is a licensed forester and a skilled Geographic Information Systems (GIS) specialist. She was crucial in supporting participatory community mapping of Indigenous territories and territories of life in her region. Her work includes conducting capacity building for Indigenous communities in forest management and community development.

As a forester, Asami has contributed to the modernization efforts of the Philippines' Department of Environment and Natural Resources, particularly through the implementation of the Lawin Forest and Biodiversity Protection System under the USAID B+WISER Program.

To strengthen her community, Asami founded the Ikalahan Youth Organization for Sustainable Development (IKAYO), which focuses on strengthening advocacy skills among Ikalahan youth and facilitating knowledge transfer from elders to younger generations.

Internationally, Asami is involved in the Indigenous Peoples' rights movements, with a particular focus on climate issues. She is a founding member of the International Indigenous Youth Forum on Climate Change, working to ensure Indigenous youths' perspectives are included in global discussions on climate policy, particularly in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

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THE HOUSE OF EL

Revelation E. Velunta

Introduction

While doing his rounds, Jesus finds St. Peter at the pearly gates, looking worn out and very, very tired. “Rocky,” he says to his friend, “why don’t you take a break. I’ll handle the processing for you.” “Thanks, Jesse,” Peter replies with glee and leaves with his rooster. Jesus takes over, and as he looked down the long line of people being processed, he noticed an old man who looked very, very familiar. Jesus felt he knew the old man. Eventually, he was face-to-face with the old man. Jesus asks, “Sir, what did you do when you were back on earth?” “I was a carpenter,” the old man replied. The reply got Jesus very excited. “What made your life very special then?” he continued. “I had a very special son,” was the reply. A carpenter who had a special son? This got Jesus more excited! “What can you tell me about your son?” Jesus drew closer as he asked. “Nails and wood!” the carpenter answered. Nails and wood? Jesus was beyond ecstatic. He blurts out, “Father?” The old man responds, very surprised, “Pinocchio?”

Diversity is a gift. Difference is a fundamental fact of life. God created everyone and everything differently. No two people are exactly alike. Neither are two fingerprints exactly alike, nor are two readers of this essay. The same goes with experiences. Plurality is God’s gift.

Father and son, nails and wood do not always point to Jesus. They can also point to Pinocchio.

All our relationships are founded on our differences. Unity is grounded in difference! Love comes alive because we care for people different from us! If we thought, spoke, prayed, and did everything the same way, we would not be here today. Ian, my younger son, when he was six, agreeing with my point about the gift of diversity, quipped: “You’re right, Tatay! Because if everyone looked like you, the world would be a creepy place.”

There is always more than one way of doing anything. There is always more than one way of reading any text. Interpretation is particular and perspectival. Good news is always relative. When David killed Goliath, it was good news to the Israelites, bad news to the Philistines, and tragic news to Goliath’s mother!

Forcing a Single Truth upon a Plural World

Difference has never been the world's problem. Our collective problems, woes, and pains arise when we force a single truth upon a plural world. We have a name for this: imperialism.

Imperialism is forcing a single truth upon a plural world.

And it is primarily a textual project. The Bible remains imperialism's most effective text. Biblical interpretation in many Asian countries continues to privilege the centers of power within, behind, and in front of the text. Biblical Studies, particularly in the Philippines, remain a stronghold of colonial scholarship, especially among churches and their formation centers. Denominations refuse to become autonomous and continue to depend on their mother institutions in the United States, Europe, or elsewhere in the First World. Church buildings and institutions are named after benevolent foreign church leaders and missionaries.

Many seminaries continue to depend more heavily on foreign teachers (who are usually paid in US dollars or Euros by foreign boards) than natives (who are usually paid in the local currency and, oftentimes, significantly below the living wage). Libraries are filled with books written by European and American scholars and continue to receive donations of old throw-away books from the First World. Traditional historical-critical methods remain the key reading paradigm. Establishing what the Bible meant in the past is the required, the correct, and the first step toward discerning what it means for today.

Fr. Carlos Abesamis, one of the founders of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), remarked that nothing is the matter with foreigners doing foreign theology (for themselves). The issue is that Filipino theology is a photocopy of Euro-American theology.[1] It is not uncommon to hear the work of many Third World and minority scholars described as "interesting," while the work of a lot of European American, mostly male, scholars is described as "scholarly." Kwok Pui-lan, in many of our conversations, has repeatedly asked: "Why do we accept the work of less than 1% of the one-third of the male population, the European American third, as normative for all?"

But the reality is this: no two interpretations are exactly alike. Those of us here who are students of biblical writings know that, right now, there are over 5,800 manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek. No two are exactly alike. There are over 24,000 manuscripts of the New Testament in other ancient languages. And no two are exactly alike. Hermeneutics is plural.

[1]Carlos Abesamis, *What is Inside the Wooden Bowl?* (Quezon City: Socio-Pastoral Institute, 1997), 23, 33.

What I am proposing is another "Canaanite" reading[2] that I am offering as a contribution to the developing archive of resistance and liberation discourses from the Third World and Fourth World, a reading aimed to disrupt and challenge the hegemony of Western discourses, especially in plural Asia. These discourses are so normative and pervasive that most people, including Filipinos, do not know that the American occupation of the Philippines sent over one million Filipinos to heaven.[3] Most people, including Filipinos, do not know that the occupation forces called the natives niggers, injuns, heathens, pagans, tail-less brown monkeys, and Canaanites.[4]

R.S. Sugirtharajah rightly argues that historical-critical methods were not only colonial in the sense that they displaced the norms and practices of our indigenous reading methods, but also in that they were used to justify the superiority of Christian texts and to undermine the sacred writings of others. These methods are colonial because they insist that correct readings are mediated through the "proper" use of historical-critical tools alone. He laments, "Look at the opening of George Strecker's 'The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary' (1988): 'No proper exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount can ignore the research of more than two hundred years of historical-critical research into the New Testament.'"[5]

Kwok Pui-lan, in another conversation, has argued that in theological education, a large part of the curriculum has been the study of the lives and thoughts of white, male, Euro-American theologians, to the exclusion of many other voices. More importantly, the theologies done by these people are considered normative, which set the standards and parameters of what "theology" should be.

Musa Dube reminds us that when it comes to the connection of the Bible, its readers, and its institutions to Western imperialism, there is no call for special pleading.[6] Laura Donaldson asks: "What civilization invented the most brutal system of conquest and exploitation the world has ever known? Christian. Who made slavery the basis for capitalist expansion? Christians. What religion has been the most responsible for the genocide of aboriginal peoples? Christianity. In my view, the Christian church has a much more substantial record of pure evil than any final good."[7]

Canaan Banana posits that the Bible is an important book of the church and that it includes liberating messages; nevertheless, there remains the sense in which, unless one embraces the Christian concept of God, one is not fully a person of God.[8] Mary John Mananzan, in many of her lectures, has pointed out that the Bible, in spite of all

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[2]For one of the most comprehensive collections of "Canaanite Readings" please see *Semeia* 75: *Postcolonialism and Scriptural Reading*, edited by Laura Donaldson (Society of Biblical Literature, 1996) and James Treat, *Native and Christian* (Routledge, 1996).

[3]Read E. San Juan, *An African American Soldier in the Philippine Revolution*. http://clogic.eserver.org/2009/SanJuan.pdf, accessed October 15, 2015.

[4]Jim Zwick, *Confronting Imperialism: Essays on Mark Twain and the Anti-Imperialist League* (Infinity Publishing, 2007).

[5]Laura Donaldson, *Semeia* 75.

[6]Musa Dube, 14.

[7]Laura Donaldson, 7.

[8]Musa Dube, 15.

the reinterpretations, remains a book written from a patriarchal, dominator, imperial perspective, and thus must be used to inform and not define life and its struggles.

Robert Allen Warrior's essay, "Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,"[9] argues that the liberationist picture of Yahweh is incomplete. In the conquest narratives, Yahweh the liberator becomes Yahweh the conqueror. Warrior rightly points out that the obvious characters in the Exodus and Conquest narratives for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the Promised Land. He also argues "that the Canaanites should be the center of theological reflection and political action. They are the last remaining ignored voice in the text, except perhaps for the land itself." The conquest stories, for Warrior, with all their violence and injustice, must be taken seriously by those who believe in the God of the Old Testament. Unfortunately, biblical critics rarely mention these texts, and when they do, Warrior points out, they express little concern for the indigenes and their rights as human beings and as nations. Especially ignored are the passages where Yahweh tells the Israelites to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population. He then notes that oppressive narratives of conquest, anti-Semitism, sexism, heterosexism, imperialism, and racism remain in the canonized text.

Reading the Bible as Canaanites

Warrior, who turned Hebrew Bible scholarship on its ear, argues that there might be something wrong with the Christian god, something requiring conversion and repentance. He notes that in the Matthean narrative[10] the "little bitch" does not become a follower of Jesus. She seeks him out because he has something she needs. She receives what she came for and walks away, never to be mentioned again. She changes Jesus. Maybe she went back to her people and fought against the colonizing Romans in her own way with her own gods. The importance of her story is not whether she followed Jesus but that, without her, Jesus would have remained a narrow-minded bigot who viewed indigenous people as inhuman.

Warrior is part of the Osage Nation, a people constructed as "Canaanite." As a member of a colonized and occupied people, so am I. This Canaanite reading presupposes the following statements of fact:

The Bible is an ancient Palestinian library that was written over two thousand years ago in Ancient Hebrew and Koine Greek.

1. Like many ancient libraries, the Bible reflects the theologies, ideologies, and biases of the ruling classes.
2. It was not written for you or for me or for anyone who believes it was written for them.

[9]Warrior, in Treat's *Native and Christian*.
[10]Matthew 15: 21-28

3. It has been co-opted by the empire for over 1700 years to colonize, occupy, subjugate, and erase peoples, nations, and cultures.[11]
4. It has been translated and continues to be translated to read like the text is talking to us.
5. It remains, to this day, the primary source of the empire's dominant "software" that perpetuate a monotheism that is essentially patriarchal and frequently misogynistic.[12]

Historians tell us that the Bible was put together or compiled over one thousand years. Its latest materials are about two thousand years old; its oldest are over three thousand. Take Paul's Letter to Philemon. It is a personal letter from Paul to Philemon. Paul and Philemon are both dead. What we have is a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy of a two-thousand-year-old letter in Koine Greek. Paul did not write that letter to us. Take Paul's letter to the Ephesians where he says, "wives submit to your husbands." Paul was talking to wives in the church in Ephesus 2000 years ago. He is not talking to any other wives— neither then nor now.

We do love reading texts that were not written for us! We do this all the time— our spouse's cellphone messages (or our children's), literary classics, and, yes, Scriptures. I have argued that most people read Scripture as a window to the past (historical methods), as a story (literary methods), and as mirrors (cultural studies).

When texts are read as windows to the past, we are basically listening to the dead; hearing echoes.[13] We might not admit it, but most of our cherished values come from the dead, from departed loved ones— the works of favorite authors and composers who died before we were even born. Then there's tradition. The narratives, beliefs, and behaviors of a particular family, community, and people that have been handed down from one generation to the next.

When we read texts as a story, we assume that the story "always happens . . ." that the text has a life all its own . . . that there is meaning in how the story elements of plot, characters, and setting interact. This is why we name our children after characters in books, in movies, and in songs. This is also probably why so many celebrities win in our elections. We vote for the "characters" they play instead of the real, flesh-and-blood people behind these characters.

Finally, when we read texts as mirrors, we presuppose resonance. What we read strikes a chord deep inside us: as individuals, as a community, and as a people. Thus,

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[11]Joel Baden, Professor of Hebrew Bible, has his one semester course on Hebrew Bible (at Yale Divinity School) on YouTube. The course focuses on how people use and misuse the text. For a very short summary, refer to this video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS7LgbMr1m4.

[12]Allah Mohl, "Monotheism: Its Influence on Patriarchy and Misogyny," *The Journal of Psychohistory*; New York Vol. 43, Iss. 1, (Summer 2015): 2-20.

[13]This is the problem with both the formal and dynamic equivalency theories of translations. The ancient texts are translated to sound like these are written for the modern reader. No. These were not. Translations of ancient texts should provide echoes.

these are "readings as"—as people of color, as LGBT, as children, as Indigenous Communities, etc.

Mitri Raheb calls scripture "the primary software" of the dominant Christian imperial culture.[14] The Biblical "past," "story," and "mirror" become privileged locations, for eternity. There is no past more important. No story more salvific. No mirror more reflective.

How many theologies and ideologies are grounded in the "Exodus" and "Christ" events? And the theology of chosen-ness? Even biblical archeology is constructed to fit the biblical narrative: the age of the patriarchs, exodus/conquest, the United Kingdom, the divided kingdom, etc. Sunday sermons need to follow the lectionary reading for that day, and homilies that do not have the proper exegesis are not considered proper sermons. Unfortunately, those privileged locations (past, story, and mirror) also identify the enemy, the excluded, the not-chosen, the Canaanites. The missions, whether Spanish or American, Roman Catholic or Protestant, were designed to civilize the native "Canaanites."[15]

Mindanao was constructed as "The Land of Promise," echoing "The Promised Land" because "Israel" (the Colonizers), as God's Chosen People, was ordained to wipe out the "Canaanites" (the Colonized) in the land. And wipe out the Canaanites they did. This was tragically true in the Americas, in Africa, in many parts of Asia, and in other occupied territories (including Palestine today).[16]

The linchpin of the imperial "software" is monotheism. More specifically, the male, white, Christian God of Western imperialism. Filipinos were introduced early to this God with the capital "G" who looked a lot like Santa Claus with a frown, and his equally male, white, blue-eyed "Christian" representative, Jesus Christ, in Sunday School. This 500-year-old "software" continues to dominate our liturgies, our theologies, our hermeneutics, our pedagogy, and our life as churches in the Philippines. This 500-year-old "software" continues to define "God," "truth," "right," and most everything of value for most of us.

To this day, when people say "the Bible says," it usually means monotheistic, monologic, and monolithic affirmations that the Bible does not really say. The Bible, since it is a library from antiquity, is polytheistic, dialogical, and diverse. The Bible, since it is a library from antiquity, is a showcase of different contents, a literary collection reflective of varied contexts, and an anthology of contesting voices. The Bible is 66 books if you are Protestant; 73 if you are Roman Catholic; 79 if you are Greek or Russian Orthodox; 81 if you are Orthodox; and 24 if you are Jewish. Maybe it is time we stop using the Bible as a prop and start reading it!

[14]Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (Orbis: 2014).

[15]The work of Renato Constantino, Reynaldo Ileto, and Ambeth Ocampo are required reading on this particular topic.

[16]Refer to Dube's, Donaldson's, Raheb's, and Warrior's works cited earlier.

The House of El

"When the Most High [Elyon] gave to the nations their inheritance,
when he separated humankind,
he fixed the bounds of the peoples
according to the number of the gods [sons of Elohim].
For the Lord's [Yahweh] portion is his people,
Jacob his allotted heritage." Deuteronomy 32: 8-917

When Ian was around 4 or 5, he started doing his own Bible verses. Ian's collection was borrowed by my father-in-law when he was pastor at the Church Among the Palms. Unfortunately, the collection has been misplaced. One of Ian's verses went, "God sent the flood to wash away bad people so that the bad people can go to heaven where God will teach them how to be good." I want to believe that Ian got that from me – coming up with apocryphal verses. My father said, when I was about the same age, I had my own version of Genesis 1:1. In the beginning, God and Mama Mary created the heavens and the earth. We are animists. Like the Ancient Canaanites, the Ancient Israelites, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Incas, the Aztecs, the Native American Nations, the Igorots, the Lumads, and other IPs, and everyone who believes that the world breathes. Animism is a term coined in 1871 by British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor. He used it to describe belief among the earliest peoples and communities that all things, both living and inanimate, are inhabited by breath or spirit (or ruach, pneuma, or anima).18

This is why we talk to our dearly departed; to flowers and plants; to cats and dogs; to trees and rocks; to rivers and oceans; and to Mother Earth. This is also why we say "tabi, tabi po" to respectfully request passage when we explore shared places and sacred spaces.

We are also polytheists. Like the Ancient Canaanites, the Ancient Israelites, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Incas, the Aztecs, the Native American Nations, the Igorots, the Lumads, and other IPs, and everyone who believed that the gods and ancestors were family.19 This is why the Gods of the Egyptians were Egyptian. And the Gods of the Israelites were Israelite (who rested on the Sabbath and who forbade shellfish but not slavery).

This is why we love to talk about Greek gods and goddesses; why we pray to Bathala, to Kabunian, to Mebuyan, and to Lakapati; why we affirm Sophia, the Goddess of Wisdom; and Barbelo, the Mother-Father deity of the Gnostics. This is why we get headaches trying to explain how a male God can create everyone and everything in the midst of all the diversity and plurality we experience and celebrate

[17]From the New Revised Standard Version. Words in brackets are the actual Hebrew words used.
[18]Mohl, "Monotheism and Its Influence," 2.
[19]Paula Fredriksen, Paul: The Pagan's Apostle (Yale University Press, 2017).

every single day. How one is three and three is one. And when our rationalizations run out, we tell everyone it's a divine mystery.

Scholarship in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, allied social sciences, and archeology[20] in the past 50 years provides building blocks to the alternative software we badly need. Contrary to the imperial discourse that monotheism is the highest form of religion and that the Ancient Israelites "invented" it, there is no evidence in the Bible for monotheism. Polytheism? Yes. Henotheism? Yes. Monolatry? Yes. No evidence in recent archeology as well.

In other words, the Ancient Israelites and Ancient Judahites were like everybody else. Pluralists. Polytheists. Don't forget that the early Christian communities, the Marcionites, the Gnostics, and even Paul, believed in the existence of other gods.

Moreover, those foundational myths that we have privileged for millennia as proof of "God's action in human history" are exactly that: foundational myths of particular tribes and peoples and their particular Gods. They are not historical events. The Patriarchs. Moses. The Exodus. The Conquest of Canaan. The United Kingdom of David and Solomon. All these are myths. Like the creation and flood myths of other ancient peoples and civilizations. Like the resurrection myths of Early Christianity. Like our ancient myths and legends.

Studies of the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age have shown that the Ancient Israelites were descendants of the Ancient Canaanites. They are not the "Israelites" and the "Canaanites" who are narrative characters in the biblical text. What does this mean for us? We need to realize that the Bible is literature. Pluri-form. Multi-vocal. The Bible is fiction. It is not history. It is an archeological tel.

Finally— and we all know this already— the suffix "im" in Hebrew makes a singular noun into a plural one. Cherubim. Seraphim. Nevi'im. Ketuvim. Genesis 1:1 should read, "In the beginning, the Gods (elohim) created the heavens and the earth." Thus, the subsequent verses where the Gods say, "let us" and "one of us" make sense (1:26, 3:22). "God" is used 35 times in Genesis 1. And "God" is plural in all those 35 times.

"El" is the god in the Priestly and Elohist traditions. "Yahweh" is the god in the Yahwist and Deuteronomistic traditions. The Moses and Elijah traditions show us the later, post-exilic conflation of these two divinities. Elijah has been traditionally translated as "God is Yahweh." It is actually, "El is Yahweh." In Deuteronomy 32:8-9, Yahweh is one of El's 70 children.[21] In Exodus 6:2-3, Yahweh tells Moses that he appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El.

Students of the Bible who can read Hebrew can discover right away how monotheistic translators and interpreters have dealt with the polytheistic texts:

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[20]Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Bible (Open Yale Course Series), Yale University Press, 2012; Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random House, 2004); Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story who Changed the Bible and Why* (HarperOne, 2009); Israel Finkelstein, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Sacred Texts* (Free Press, 2002); and Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible* (Simon and Schuster, 2019).

[21]From the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ugaritic texts.

1. El Shaddai. Literally, "EI, the one of the mountain," but the common English translation is "God Almighty." In Canaanite myth, EI is said to live on a mountain. EI Shaddai occurs in Gen 17:1, 28:3, 35:11, 43:14, 48:3, 49:25; Ex 6:3.
2. El Elyon. Literally, "El, most high," but translated as "God most High." Mentioned only in Gen 14:18-22 and Ps 78:35, but Elyon alone occurs frequently.
3. EI Olam. "The Everlasting El" but translated as "The Everlasting God." Gen 21:33. This title can be compared to the Ugaritic titles for EI as "El, the Eternal One."
4. EI Ro'i. "El who sees," translated as "A God of Seeing." Gen 16:13.
5. El Bethel. "El, of the House of El," translated as "The God of the House of God" Gen 31:13, 35:7.
6. EI, the god of: Abraham/Isaac/Israel or Jacob/my father Abraham, etc. Gen 26:24, 28:13, 32:9, 33:20, 43:23, 46:1,3; Ex 3:15, as noted earlier.
7. Yahweh as "Baal." Although identified explicitly as EI (e.g., in Ex 6:3), Yahweh also has a number of traits in common with Baal. Like Baal, he is called "rider on the clouds" (Ps 68:4) and there are allusions to a battle with sea/river in Ex 15, Ps 114, and Isa 51:9-11. Thus, Yahweh is a composite of features of EI and Baal. This new deity required a new name and it was fitting that the new God be introduced at the time of the Exodus, which sees the formation of a new people about to make the transition from the semi-nomadic tent dwelling existence of the patriarchs (whose God EI also dwelled in a tent) to the settled urban way of life in Canaan (the Canaanite Baal lived in a house).[22]

El was the head of the Ancient Canaanite pantheon. One of the descendants of the Canaanites, after the collapse of the Bronze Age, worshipped El. And they were called ISRAEL. Meaning, El rules. And El always ruled with Asherah.

In 1967, Raphael Patai was the first historian to mention that the ancient Israelites worshiped both Yahweh and Asherah. The theory has gained new prominence due primarily to the research of Francesca Stavrakopoulou, who started her work at Oxford and is now a senior lecturer in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Exeter.23

Archeological work in the Levant led by Israel Finkelstein (explored in his 2001 book, The Bible Unearthed) supports the work of Patai and Stavrakopoulou: Yahweh and Asherah were worshipped as a pair. The Temple in Tel Arad, West of the Dead Sea, discovered by Yohanan Aharoni in 1962, has altars for Yahweh and Asherah in the Holy of Holies. Moreover, several thousand figurines of Asherah have been found in Israelite and Judahite homes. Gravesites include engraved prayers dedicated to the

[22]Christine Hayes,4 *Introduction to the Bible* (see earlier citation) for this detailed list.

[23]God's Wife Edited Out of the Bible—Almost by Jennifer Viegas at https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna42147912, accessed 26 May 2023.

divine pair. There are, of course, 40 references to Asherah in the Hebrew Bible! One of these is in 1 Kings 18:18-19, where Elijah faces 450 prophets of Baal. Most of us know this story. But we have been taught not to see the part where it reads… "400 prophets of Asherah."

"In the beginning, God and Mama Mary…" I was onto something when I was five.

To this day, when people say "the Bible says," it usually means monotheistic, monologic, and monolithic affirmations that the Bible does not really say. The Bible, since it is a library from antiquity, is polytheistic, dialogical, and diverse. The Bible, since it is a library from antiquity, is a showcase of different contents, a literary collection reflective of varied contexts, and an anthology of contesting voices. Maybe it is time we stop using the Bible as a prop and start reading it! The Bible is 66 books if you are Protestant; 73 if you are Roman Catholic; 79 if you are Greek or Russian Orthodox; 81 if you are Orthodox; and 24 if you are Jewish.

The Bible has been used as a sword for centuries. It has also been used as a plowshare; not as a spear but as a pruning hook; life-giving instead of death-dealing; a Filipino Jeepney instead of a US Military Jeep.

Revelation Enriquez Velunta is Professor of New Testament and Cultural Studies at Union Theological Seminary, Philippines. He directs the seminary's Master of Theology Program and Partnership Initiatives with the Council for World Mission (Theological Education for an Economy of Life, Peace Studies, and Training in Mission).

He has taught at the School on Intersectional Ecotheology and Ecojustice Witness (SIEEW in Zambia), Global Institute of Theology at Pacific Theological College (Fiji), Lutheran Theological Seminary (Hong Kong), Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary (Taiwan), Vanderbilt University (USA), Teologiska Hogskolan Stockholm (Sweden), Philippine Women's University, Philippine Christian University (Manila and Dasmarinas campuses), and Southern Christian College. He has also served as Lecturer in Scripture for the Obispo Maximo's Continuing Ministerial Formation program of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente.

Velunta studied at Union Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Vanderbilt University. He is part of the International Scholars Program of the Society of Biblical Literature. Many of his works are available on Amazon and via his blog at https://jeepney.blogspot.com/. Velunta has served as Pastor of the Cainta UCCP Disciples and as Student Chaplain at the NCCP Ecumenical Ministry at the Church of the Risen Lord at UP Diliman. He is also a Certified Public Accountant.

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RESPONSE
The Concept of the House of El

Delia Ayabo

The Hebrew word "*bayit*" conveys a literal meaning as it translates to "house." However, its meaning extends beyond just a physical building, shelter, or dwelling place where people live; it also includes broader connotations related to "families, clans, tribes, and ruling dynasties." Accordingly, the concept of a "House of El" carries a profound significance in various religious traditions, cultural beliefs, and practices, representing divine names and houses of worship (e.g., Bethel, Gen 12:8).

The term "El,' in some traditions—particularly in ancient Semitic religions, is identified as a divine being or deity, sometimes a name or title for 'god.' El was a chief deity and the head of a pantheon of gods.[1] It denotes a divine being worshipped and adored as the chief god by indigenous people. It also highlights the various attributes and titles of God, such as El Shaddai (God Almighty), El Elyon (God Most High), and Isra-El (he who struggles with God, root to be *srr*, to have dominion, i.e., proves himself ruler), emphasizing power and transcendence. When Jacob's name changed to Israel, it was closely connected to the beginning of a nation that came from his lineage. Regardless of the specific name or title used, the crux of living in constant connection with the One Supreme Being (Creator) remains a fundamental tenet of teaching.

The "House of El" plays a crucial role in how people live out their lives, upholding the principle of unity in diversity and inclusivity. A house can serve as a potent symbol of unity and inclusivity, highlighting the interconnectedness among members of diverse belief systems like animists and polytheists. Yet, even animists, who dwell in homes, project a holistic image of life. Animists strive to create homes that embody a sense of interconnectedness with the spirit world, living and non-living things, the dead, and the environment. This underscores the bond between the family, the land and environment, and the gods and goddesses. Polytheistic religions have been prevalent across diverse cultures, each with its own pantheon of deities. The complexities of religious beliefs and practices, particularly the worship of both El and Asherah in ancient Canaanite culture, highlight the interconnectedness of deities within polytheistic cultures.

Therefore, regarding a polytheistic approach to reading and interpreting the Bible, it is important to acknowledge the potential influences of surrounding polytheistic

[1]Mark S. Smith, "El," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 384-385.

cultures. However, it is crucial to exercise caution with interpretations that are highly hypothetical and speculative, deviating from the monotheistic contexts.

The Relationship between the Bible and the Empire

Understanding the multifaceted relationship between the Bible and empire requires a meticulous examination of the intricacies of historical, cultural, and social contexts. Throughout history, the Bible has wielded narratives that influence the power dynamics of various empires, such as the Babylonian and Roman empires. Here are some points to consider:

Interpretive Diversity: This acknowledges the diverse and rich tapestry of biblical backgrounds within and across texts. Without a doubt, God created each person and thing differently. As a result, diverse individuals may have varying approaches to understanding and interpreting the biblical texts.

Legitimization of Ideologies: Ideologies are highly influential and instrumental in shaping cultural practices and beliefs. Imperial powers may have been influenced by nuanced perspectives from the Bible to justify and support conquest and supremacy. In various instances, biblical texts are utilized to bolster policies and moral convictions, posing a threat and infringement on rights.

Political Supremacy: The Bible presents complex views on political supremacy from the Old Testament to the New Testament, highlighting how political leaders, superpowers, and the ruling class continue to dominate and consolidate power and influence.

Moreover, when theology is co-opted by ideology, it can be used to justify and perpetuate existing power hierarchies. It can serve as an instrument for preserving the status quo, legitimizing violence that serves the interests and advantages of the dominant classes. Theology must chart a new path of resisting any form of injustice and oppression without being swayed by accusations and the exclusion of one group to favor another.

The Eyes of Looking at the Bible

The discipline of interpreting the Bible should be inclusive, requiring an eye that brings the ancient texts into a dialogue with history and with our present realities.

.Historical Eye (Reading 'Behind the texts'): This eye examines the Bible in its historical context. As Dr. Velunta stated, "the task of the interpreter is to recover meaning from behind the text to the historical setting from which it came." This approach attempts to discover the historical truths and accuracy behind the texts by investigating historical origins. This includes determining the intended purpose of the author, dates, and archaeological discoveries that shaped the writing of the texts to uncover what the texts meant.

Literary-Structural Eye (Reading 'In the texts'): The Bible can be viewed through a literary and structural eye by focusing on the literary style, language, and genres in

the texts. Exploring the literary-structural aspects can unveil the hidden meanings of biblical accounts since the Bible is rich in stories, metaphors, poetry, and more.

`Social-Political-Economic-Cultural-Religious-Womanist Eye (Reading 'In front of texts'): This approach includes studying the social, political, cultural, and religious conditions within which the texts were composed. It can highlight how womanist and liberationist perspectives interpret the Bible. Those who analyze the Bible from a social-political standpoint draw parallels between the stories in front of texts and contemporary struggles for justice, equity, peace, and liberation. Those who view the Bible from a socio-cultural perspective examine how the narratives have been influenced by the diverse cultures surrounding the texts. Consequently, it advocates for social transformation and supports the most vulnerable members of society.

Whether one views the Bible as a timeless truth (as opposed to a mythological view) or approaches it from a different perspective, the Bible can be seen as historically accurate and incredibly powerful in shaping individuals, societies, and cultures throughout history. It is considered the Word of God that transcends to all people, serving as a source of light and life rather than a harbinger of death.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need to consider all angles: "Behind the texts, In the texts, and In front of the texts" to bridge the gap from the ancient texts to the contemporary contexts. This approach introduces a new dimension of interpretation in diverse contexts to explore every possibility of inclusive hermeneutics.

Understanding the Bible from an Indigenous (Canaanite) Perspective

This reading offers a unique perspective on interpreting the Bible from a Canaanite point of view. The Canaanites are depicted as the indigenous people whom the Israelites were commanded to conquer and dispossess of their land. Not only were they indigenous, but they were also a colonized and occupied people, portrayed as opponents of the Israelites.

The concept of Canaan is rooted in the biblical narrative of the covenant made by God to Abraham and his descendants. God promised Abraham a land, marking the beginning of the Israelite community. This community played essential roles crucial to fulfilling the entire history of the divine promise. Their identity and history, shaped by cultural, social, and political trends, establish the consciousness necessary to reinterpret the concept of the land. The promise of the land, from this perspective, was never merely political but rather spiritual, oriented toward redemption and salvation.

From a contemporary Canaanite viewpoint, light is shed on the consequences of colonization on the land. Canaan is depicted as having endured waves of colonization by various powerful nations, highlighting narratives of colonization and cultural hegemony.

Colonial Disposition: The Bible depicts the Israelite conquest of Canaan as a story of divine command to possess the Promised Land. This promise holds a significant role in the beliefs of many Jews, often interpreted as their rightful possession. Consequently, in the eyes of the Israelites, Canaan is a divine promise meant for them to claim and own. Many Jews and Christians assert that the covenant God made with Abraham and

the divine promise of land undeniably forms the basis for Israel's divine guarantee of Canaan (Gen 12:7, 13, 15; 17:8). However, the Abrahamic covenant regarding land continues to be a topic of debate. From a colonial perspective, it entails notions of territorial control and acquisition that have contributed to the displacement and dispossession of indigenous communities, such as the Canaanites and the Palestinians.

Cultural Hegemony: Throughout history, conquest has often been pursued as a means to establish cultural hegemony, where the cultural practices and beliefs of the colonizing power are promoted as superior to those of the indigenous populations. The concept of hegemony, whether it be Western hegemony, illustrates the influence of a more powerful group's culture over others. In the Philippines, while Western hegemony has brought both positive and negative consequences, it has significantly impacted aspects of culture, religion, and education. Hegemony itself is not inherently wrong, but the power dynamics it creates lead to injustice, exploitation, and domination at the expense of the marginalized and inferior group, which is unacceptable. In patriarchal societies, patriarchal culture exerts dominance over women and its subordinates. Preserving cultural identity can be achieved by upholding cultural and theological beliefs and practices without the influence and interference of the dominant group or countries.

Despite the challenges represented by opposing views, there are still existing narratives and impacts that offer a silver lining. The best exposition of any biblical account for a Canaanite audience involves taking every story seriously and recognizing diversity of perspective within religious and cultural contexts. Biblical narratives about Canaan can serve as a foundation for peace and reconciliation. Scholars and interpreters of the Bible continue to inspire reflection, fostering dialogue and a shared commitment to create a space where swords can be turned into ploughshares, and where inclusivity guides the building of a house or a dwelling place.

Rev. Delia Annaway Ayabo is a clergywoman of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines and professor of Old Testament at St. Andrew's Theological Seminary, Quezon City, Philippines. With a profound passion for biblical scholarship, she dedicated herself to teaching and mentoring future leaders, scholars, and ministers in theological education. Her academic journey started at Pines City Colleges, Baguio City, Philippines, where she earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing. She pursued her theological studies at the International Graduate School of Leadership (IGSL), Quezon City, Philippines, where she obtained a Master of Theology degree with a specialization in the Old Testament.

After completing her theological education, Delia answered the call to ordained ministry and was ordained a deacon in 2016 and a priest in 2018 in the Episcopal Diocese of Central Philippines (EDCP).

Her ministry is characterized by an unwavering commitment to meeting the diverse needs of students and church members.

Beyond her academic pursuits, Delia currently serves as a Field Education Director at St. Andrew's Theological Seminary guiding students in their field placements in various ministry settings. She is also the Priest-in-Charge of St. Margaret Episcopal Church, Sitio Payong, Antipolo City, Rizal Province. She has been instrumental in fostering a vibrant faith congregation and making an impact on the lives of those she serves.

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RECONCILING THE *SHOAH* AND THE *NAKBA*
Theologies in the Making and Toward the Unmaking (through Peacemaking) of the Israel-Hamas War

Aldrin Peñamora

Editor's Note: Unlike the other works in this journal, this work did not exist as a written article, but as an oral presentation. With the permission of the presenter, the editing staff has converted the presentation into written form, while still maintaining the style of an oral presentation. Care was given to ensure that this article correlates well to the presentation and the intent of Dr. Peñamora, and that the citations are accurate. Regarding citations, however, it must be noted that it cannot be verified the exact source being referenced.

Good morning to everyone. I really appreciate STEP for organizing this event because the Israel-Palestine or, as we often say, the Israel-Hamas war, really affects all of us. I also thank our presenters for those excellent presentations.

I've entitled my presentation "Reconciling the *Shoah* and the *Nakba*: Theologies in the Making and Toward the Unmaking (through Peacemaking) of the Israel-Hamas War." Of course, the *Shoah* is the Hebrew word for the holocaust, or similar to the *Nakba*, it means catastrophe, and I think Dr. Joefrey[1] tried to explain the underpinnings or theological underpinnings of this conflict. This is also what I will be doing, and I really appreciate the approach that Dr. Joefrey did to trace the biblical narratives and their relevance to the war. What I'm doing in this presentation is to highlight certain theologies that have been used, biblically-based, of course, as the proponents believe, both from the Jewish and the Christian perspective. Those interpretations—hermeneutical moves—have really contributed to the war as we now know it. It seems to be interminable. It's difficult to untangle.

But when I was preparing this presentation as a theologian and as a peacemaker—as a peace advocate—it is always a philosophy or an approach for us to try to find one of the roots, because there are many roots. It's multi-causal. It's a complex situation, but at least you try to disentangle it by identifying one or two or some if you can; and one of the roots is the use of theology in this war. One thing that helped me is that I have been very active in the peacemaking process in the Mindanao conflict.

The war in Mindanao may be a microcosm—it may be just a simple, a small sampling, of what's happening in Gaza and in the West Bank, and of course, the other countries, Lebanon and Syria. It helped me get an idea of what's happening from a

[1]Refers to Joefrey M. Almazan and his article in this journal, "On Divine Narratives and Earthly Power Conflicts: The Role of Biblical History in Shaping the Contemporary Israeli-Palestinian Conflict." Other mentions of "Joefrey" also refer to the same person and paper.

Christian perspective. In the Mindanao conflict, we can identify how the Bible was used to justify what we could say was the colonization of Mindanao by Christians, especially in the earlier times. Okay, so this is part one. I entitled it "Loving the People of God—Judeo-centric Theologies." As I said, we'll be going through some history and see how theology has been used to validate, to justify, or to legitimize the current conflict.

I first want to highlight the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which is a very short declaration. Actually, it's a letter by Lord Balfour to one of the leaders of the Zionist movement, and he said,

> "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country."[2]

So maybe you've heard this several times—"What's the cause of the October 7 attack?" Some would say, well, it's the *Nakba* of 1948. Some would say to go back to 1917, the Balfour Declaration. And this is where my research really started—what were the conditions that allowed for the Balfour declaration to be actualized? And as we would see, there are really theological beliefs and doctrines that have undergirded this declaration. But I don't want to be one-sided also because on my part in our peacebuilding work within Mindanao, as I said, one way to disentangle a conflict is to know that your tradition has a part in the conflict. So we would ask in Mindanao, "Were Christians or how were Christians involved in the making of the conflict?" That's one side of it. Then the other side would be, "What is the participation or the role of the Muslims in this conflict?" Of course, I couldn't speak for the Muslims, but I could speak for our tradition as an evangelical, as a Christian. And this is what I'm doing right now.

But we must also see what the Balfour Declaration said that they are supporting—that is, the British government—they are supporting the establishment of a territorial place or a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. And as already highlighted by our previous speakers, actually, when they were doing this declaration, they weren't even thinking of the Palestinian people. They were just thinking of the Jewish people needing a home in Palestine. But the Hamas charter responds to this. "In the face of the Jews' usurpation of Palestine, it is compulsory that the banner of *Jihad* be raised."[3] "Arab countries surrounding Israel are asked to open their borders before the fighters

[2]Balfour Declaration, Paragraph 2. This short letter is available online at https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-balfour-declaration

[3]*The Covenant of the Hamas*, Article 15. Available online at https://irp.fas.org/world/para/docs/880818a.htm

from among the Arab and Islamic nations."[4] So they're calling for *Jihad* and asking the other countries, Arab countries, to join the *Jihad* against Israel. Hamas expresses its identity: "The Islamic Resistance Movement considers itself to be the spearhead of the circle of struggle with world Zionism."[5] So maybe, like what Dr. Joefrey said, he is not asking you to take sides, but rather to understand deeply the roots of the conflict. And as I said, this is a very complex conflict that it won't do to just simply say, "I'm for Israel," or "I'm for Palestine," because people are being killed daily. It's not enough to just say I am for one side without really knowing how to do conflict resolution, peacemaking, together with the other side, since conflicts "take two to tango," as they say. One of the foundations of the theological underpinnings of the Israel-Palestinian or Hamas war came from actually a long time ago—the 17th century with the English Puritans.

The Puritans, as they are known, are the branch of the Anglican church or Church of England that sought to purify the church of England after the Reformation. So you have Oliver Cromwell, for example, and there are two groups, the Puritans and the Separatists. The Separatists are those who went out of the Church of England. Many of them went to the United States to live in the colonies of the New World, such as New England. But the Puritans stayed in the Church of England to try and purify it from Catholic sentiment, tradition, or liturgies, and things like that. They were the group most responsible for the emergence of Jewish restorationism in the 17th century via their theologian, Thomas Brightman. Restorationism is the idea that Jews need to have their own home in Palestine. Antisemitism was prevalent even during the time of the Reformation, with Martin Luther writing against the Jews, if you remember. So it was really all over Europe during that time. What Thomas Brightman is doing is inculcating what we would call "philosemitism," the love of the Jews. This is really a breakthrough during this time. Restorationism occurred through the theological advocacy of Thomas Brightman and others too. This is also a matter of national identity for England because they saw themselves as a chosen nation called to help God's elect. So they have two levels of election. Chosen by God and the elect are the Jews and the chosen people, England, who they believe were called to help the Jews get back to their land.

What precipitated this was a literal reading or a literal hermeneutic of the scriptures, especially the prophetic texts, as we would see. For example, in Genesis 12:3 "I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse." For the Restorationists, they would think of this as, "If we don't help the Jews, if we don't favor them, if we don't help them get back to their promised land, Palestine, we will be cursed." Imagine that—if they don't help the Jews, they will be cursed because they were applying Genesis 12:3 with that kind of understanding. Thus, the treatment of Jews became a barometer for God's blessings or curses upon the nation. And as I

[4] *The Covenant of the Hamas*, Article 28.
[5] *The Covenant of the Hamas*, Article 32.

mentioned, this is crucial for the formation of the national identity of England. And later on, actually right now, it's crucial for the national identity of the United States.

That is why we see the United States supporting Israel. It's because of that national identity saying that they need to support Zionism. If not, the curses of God will be upon them. So the Puritan view of the last days, and this has to do with the Millennium, because Restorationist theology is a Millennialist theology. The Puritan view of the last days was what we call Judeo-centric—centered on the Jewish people. In eschatology, what are some of the key features of this theology? The original form of the apostolic church will be restored, and the Millennium will be inaugurated in Jerusalem. Now that's very important because the Millennium will not happen anywhere else but in Jerusalem. and the Jews will convert to Christianity again. You will see that there's a change later on because secular Zionism doesn't talk about conversion to Christianity. In fact, secular Zionism doesn't even talk about faith. But for the Puritans, what was important is that the Jews need to convert to Christianity, which is a mark of the last days, which in turn will bring about the Millennium. So that's very important to know—the Jews will play a central role in the evangelization of Gentiles, and England will facilitate the return of the Jews to Palestine. Here you can see the national identity of England tied with the national identity of Israel, and both tied to the land. And conversion needs to happen for the Millennium to be actualized. So this is a millennialist, or postmillennialist, perspective for the early Puritans. It's still postmillennialist, but later on, it will be premillennial, and dispensationalism will also be part of it. Especially in the United States, it's Dispensational theology that supports Christian Zionism.

Some reasons for Puritan support for Jews, and this is according to historian Cecil Roth, relate to sympathy for biblical Hebraic ideals because we have Christians who have similarities with the Hebraic ideals of the Old Testament. This includes sympathy and guilt for the sufferings of Jews, especially at the hands of the Catholics. Remember, this is still the 17th century, so the history of Protestantism was still young. The Restorationists felt guilt for what the Jews suffered, and that fueled their belief that they needed to support the Jews. Of course, as I mentioned before, the hope for the fulfillment of biblical prophecies and an emphasis on the literal reading and fulfillment of prophecies. We call this a historicist reading of scripture.

> What is a historicist reading of the scripture? Take Isaiah 16:9:10: "Surely the islands look to me in the lead are the ships of Tarshish bringing your children from afar with their silver and gold to the honor of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor. Foreigners will rebuild your walls and their kings will serve you, though in anger I struck you. In favor, I will show you compassion."

Of course, this is Isaiah talking about the exiles to Babylon. But for the English Restorationist, this passage is a prophecy of God's assignment or assigned role to England, "the islands." They see it as England prophesied to help the Jews go back

to their land, bringing their children from afar. Foreigners will rebuild their walls. As understood by the Restorationists, this talked about their own role. God called them to help the Jews, especially the British—England. England was a superpower during this time, and they saw themselves as the foremost Protestant nation to bring this about. Later on, it will be the United States.

There are two English Judeo-centric eschatologies. The first one is Historicist Postmillennialism. Again, as I mentioned, conversion is crucial since conversion of the Jews will need to be restored to their original position in God's plan. Gentiles can never attain [to] that position. Now, with Dispensationalism, God has two plans. Plans for the church, and plans for the Jews.

In Postmillennialism, God has a different plan for the Jews because the Jews will remain the elect of God. For the Gentiles, there's no Supersessionism—here, the church cannot attain to the level of the Jews. That's why when the Restorationists are looking at the Jews, they see themselves as secondary in terms of their position vis-à-vis or in relation to God. They're secondary; the Jews are always primary. They, the Jews, are really the special people of God. So the Jews will be converted to Christianity before their restoration in Palestine. This is in Ezekiel 37 about the valley of the dry bones. They need to be converted first, and then the Millennium will happen.

The thing with Restorationism and the Historicist approach is that they look at concrete historical events to see if God is already preparing—if the Millennium is already near. So when they saw the 30 Years' War, the wars of religion in Europe, many Christians were fighting against each other. They see it as a prelude to the Millennium. It's in Revelation 16. The nations will war against the beast, against the Antichrist. They see it as historical. For them, it's not a typological or an analogical reading. They want to see prophecies happening right before their eyes. It's happening in history. So when the Protestant Christians and Jews have victory over Roman Catholics and the Ottoman Turks, they believe this will lead to the full restoration of the Jews. They would see the others as the Gog and Magog in Revelation, of course, also in Ezekiel, and this will lead to the full restoration. The Jews will convert, and the Jews will have their own and will be in their own land.

Have you heard in the past someone say something like, "Well, the Millennium will happen at the date of Y2K (2000 AD), and it will be the end of days." That's a product of the historical reading of scriptural prophecy. I don't know how you read prophecies, but for the historicist, it is literal, and they would look for signs.

There's also Premillennial Historicism. Edward Bickersteth was an Evangelical, and these are some of the features of this perspective. Instead of a gradual unfolding of the kingdom, Premillennialists believed in Christ's sudden return, as opposed to Postmillennialism, where there will be a gradual conversion which would lead to the return of Christ after that. For Premillennialism, there will be a sudden return of Christ because only the return of Christ can usher in the Millennium. So Jesus's visible return is linked with Jewish conversion and restoration to the land as part of the restoration of all things, as mentioned in Acts 3:20. So again, it is important for the Restorationists to see the conversion of the Jews, and later on, they would even send missionaries to

the Jews. The English would do this because they wanted the Jews to be converted so that the Millennium would happen. It's really theological in approach. Evangelizing the Jews became a top priority for Evangelicals in England. There's the "Jew Bill" of 1753. The Jew Bill gave, or it was supposed to give, civil rights, political rights, and economic rights to the Jews in England. But it didn't pass Parliament. Why? Because they believed that if they would allow the Jews to be part of English society with their rights, they would no longer go to Palestine. They will stay—sitting pretty with the English. England was very rich, and no one wanted to go to Palestine during that time because the Ottoman Empire was poor. So the English rejected the bill because they felt the Jews would not go back to Palestine, and thus would not usher in the Millennium. This is how even the law was influenced by theology.

According to Richard W. Cogley, "The purpose of Armageddon was to purge Europe and the Middle East of these contrived religions (Catholicism and Islam) in order to set the stage for the millennial restoration of the apostolic church in Jerusalem."[6] Remember now, this was Protestants speaking. For Millennialists and Restorationists, the purpose of Armageddon, from the Protestant view, was to purge Europe and the Middle East of Catholicism and Islam. This was the time of growth for Protestantism. England was waging war against Catholics, and Islam had just exited Granada but was still occupying many places in Europe during the time. So it was a war of civilizations, as Samuel Huntington said—Catholics, Protestants, Islam, Jews. Jews were at the lowest rung because they were the ones who really had no power. Napoleon was really wreaking havoc in his war against all of Europe. Many Protestants saw it as the coming of an Antichrist. They saw it as, again, the Millennium coming. Therefore, they felt the need to further the pressure for the Jews to go back to their homeland. But let me just have an interlude here, for the American Judeo-centrism that I have discussed was from the English side, which was really prominent up to 1948. After 1948, the English Judeo-centrism will fade away, and it will be Americans who will take over with Premillennial Dispensationalism.

Many Puritans came to America and brought with them the same Restorationist and Judeo-centric assumptions led by John Winthrop. They arrived in America, and they proclaimed America to be "a city on a hill," (Matthew 5:14) a nation like England with a special destiny given by God. So similar to English Judeo-centrism was a key element in the shaping of America's national identity. The national identity of America was shaped by Judeo-centric assumptions, which were solidified through America's revolution against England, because they saw England as an oppressor. So they broke away through the American Revolutionary War, and because of that, they saw themselves as now the carrier of the torch. It will no longer be England that will carry on as the harbinger or bringer of the Millennium, or that will help the Jews, but

[6]Richard W. Cogley, "The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Restoration of Israel in the "Judeo-centric" Strand of Puritan Millenarianism," Church History. Vol. 72, Issue 2 (2003).

it will be America because of that revolution. Later, American dispensationalism will take the torch from England in supporting the Jewish people.

I will not discuss Dispensationalism after the *Nakba*, but I want to lay the groundwork for that because it will be similar. It will be highly similar to what happened to the British. As Dr. Joefrey discussed, these are some of the beginnings of Christian Zionism. By the 1800s, the Puritans were fading away. It was already Evangelicalism that was riding the height of the wave of the religious scene in England, and Evangelical theology was, of course, influenced by Puritan restorationism and the German Pietist emphasis. This is a newcomer here—the German Pietists. The emphasis on evangelizing the Jews really came from German Pietists. That movement was so powerful as they were thinking we need to evangelize Jews, although they didn't have the Restorationist assumption. They didn't need the Jews to go back to Palestine. This was an English Puritan perspective. So, there was a wedding between those two perspectives—evangelizing the Jews from German Pietists and the Restorationist movement from the Puritans. In 1835, Charles Simeon had this to say at the London Jew Society, in his 1835 sermon on Jeremiah 33:7-9:

> "God shall glorify himself in Israel in a manner in which he has not yet glorified himself . . . God intends to glorify his people . . . Jehovah declares that his honour, and his own happiness, so to speak, is connected with the restoration of Israel... an event which compasses no less than the salvation of the whole world . . . Therefore, am I a friend of the Jews, whose restoration to God shall be the redemption of the whole world."[7]

That's how they view the restoration of the Jews. When the Jews are restored, it will lead to the restoration of the world because they saw the Jews as the primary agent of evangelization—that they will evangelize the Gentiles and bring the Gentiles into the Millennium. They are the key to the Christian aspiration for people to become Christians. It's not Christians; it is the Jews who will do that in the last days. Evangelization of the Jews was prioritized in the return to Palestine, even though this would mean the waning of the British Empire.

There's this contrast between this idea and colonization in terms of the British motivation. Well, I'm sure there's a part involving colonization in terms of economics, politics, and things like that, but a huge part of what they were doing to the Jews was really theological. They were willing to be the second fiddle, to play second place, so long as the Jews would be restored, because they know that the restoration of the Jews would lead to their own salvation—their own redemption. So prophecy, not colonialism, was a primary motive for people like Simeon, Shaftesbury, and others earlier. In the presentation of Dr. Joefrey, he mentioned about the Jews going out of

[7]Charles Simeon, "Outline no. 1069 on Jeremiah 31:7–9," in *Horae Homileticae Vol. 9 (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1832)*,215.

Europe, and that was indeed true because when the Czar of Russia, Alexander II, was assassinated, it led to a mass persecution of the Jews in Russia. Due to this event, thousands, hundreds of thousands, of Jews had to emigrate. They needed to leave Russia. Most of them were going to the United States. So remember, Palestine was not yet Jewish. That would not be the case until 1948.

The exodus of the Jewish people out of Russia, and then the Turks, the Ottoman Empire, losing its power led to Restorationists, again with their historical reading, saying, "Well, God is really now accomplishing his purpose." Imagine, most of the Jews in Europe were in Russia. Now they're going out of Russia. This excited the English. The English Restorationist was saying, "God is really bringing the Jews to the promised land, and the Millennium will soon happen. These are exciting times for the English people."

[Year] Eighteen eighty one (1881) was when Czar Alexander II was assassinated. [Year] Nineteen seventeen 1917 would be the Balfour Declaration. So if you look at that timeline, it's just a small step from how they are looking at things then, and the future declaration. The Jewish nationalist identity began to be forged during this time of persecution in Russia and other places in Europe. Generally, the Jews had been content to be assimilated into the culture of other nations, but again, with the rise of Zionism, they began to have the vision or the promise of having their own land. William Hechler from England advocated for Jewish restoration to Palestine. And this is also very crucial in this theological history, because William Hechler was supposed to be Evangelical. He advocated for the return of the Jews to Palestine without conversion. That was new. That was revolutionary because from the Puritans up to the Evangelicals Shaftesbury and Simeon, they were emphasizing conversion, and then they would be restored to the promised land; and then Jesus will return. But for Hechler, he advocated that there's no need for them to be restored to Christianity. We can work for the restoration to their land because of what's happening to them. They're being persecuted after all—so it was a pragmatic approach.

The link breaks here. Jewish conversion and return to Palestine didn't need to be linked intrinsically. The chain was broken through William Hechler. And it was William Hechler who became instrumental for Theodore Herzl, who was mentioned by Dr. Joefrey earlier as the father of modern Jewish Zionism. He was the one who introduced Herzl to all the important personalities in Europe who would support Zionism. Herzl didn't have any idea what to do to reach the goal. But it was Hechler who had the belief that Christians need to support the vision of Zionism.

In 1901, Herzl met the leader of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Abdul Hamid II, to discuss obtaining Jewish land in Palestine through buying the land and negotiations. Can you imagine the head of the Ottoman Empire with the Muslims in Palestine, and here comes Herzl the Jew, leader of the Zionist movement saying, "We're going to buy your land in Palestine so that we Jewish people can have our home." During that time, Turkey was in massive debt. And Herzl said, "We will help you pay your debts." Of course, the Sultan didn't accept that offer because, as he said, "Well, it doesn't belong to me. It belongs to the people and the Muslim community." The Sultan would not

accept the offer to allow the Jews to settle in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration was later written, and the promise toward the 1948 state establishment of the state of Israel was already in place after 1917.

So that was how Millennialist and Restorationist theologies were part of the shaping of the conflict. But there's another one, and this is what we call Holocaust theology that developed after the Holocaust. The Holocaust could be seen as starting with the Nazi-led *Kristallnacht* (November 9-10, 1938) and continuing up through the end of World War II in Europe (1945). According to Mark H. Ellis, "The Holocaust is the formative event for the Jewish community of today . . . To delve into the Holocaust world is to be surrounded with the agony of a people on the threshold of annihilation."[8]

After the Second World War, the Israel state was not yet established. That would happen in 1948. The war ended in 1945, but what happened in the Holocaust, the destruction of the Jews? Six million Jews were annihilated in World War II. 6 million European Jews! It became formative for them, and it became the main impetus for them to have a national state, a state of their own. According to Dan Cohn Sherbok, Jewish theologian, the Holocaust produced a crisis in Jewish theology as it became problematic to reconcile the belief in a good and merciful God with the horrors Jews experienced in the Shoah or Holocaust. Arthur Cohen calls it the Tremendum, emphasizing its never-to-be-equaled enormity.9

I'd like to highlight this idea of how the Holocaust is shaping even what Professor Myra10 mentioned about Benjamin Netanyahu's declarations, and part of the Neoconservative establishment in Israel, because they saw the Holocaust as a catastrophe never to be equaled in the history of humankind. They think that having a land of their own justifies even oppressing other people because of what happened to them. It's like no other suffering can be interpreted without bringing in the Holocaust idea—Tremendum. It means that all human sufferings had their greatest expression in the Holocaust. All suffer, even Moltmann's crucified god. I don't know how many of you are fans of the recently deceased Jürgen Moltmann, but he wrote in The Crucified God about the experience of human suffering. Moltmann interpreted it from the Christian perspective, but Holocaust theologians said one cannot do that. You cannot interpret human suffering through the cross because first you must interpret it through what happened to the Jews in the Holocaust.11 Only then can you apply the Christian perspective. That's how important the Holocaust is for Holocaust theologians. So Holocaust theology is any sustained theological reflection for which the slaughter of six million Jews functions as a criterion, whether the Shoah displaces or merely

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[8]Mark H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Challenge of the 21st Century 3rd ed.* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 13.

[9]Arthur A. Cohen. *The Tremendum : a Theological iInterpretation of the Holocaust (New York: Continuum, 1993)*.

[10]Refers to Myra G. Patrocenio, and her response presentation in this journal, "Response: On Divine Narratives and Earthly Power Conflicts."

[11]Alice Eckardt, Arthur Roy Eckardt, *Long Night's Journey into Day: Life and Faith after the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1982).

qualifies traditional theological criteria and norms such as Scripture, tradition, reason, and religious experience."[12]

From a Christian viewpoint, Holocaust theology examines and critiques Christian doctrines and practices that may have contributed to the *Shoah*, hoping that through such examination, the apostate church can experience forgiveness, redemption, and even renewal of its purpose and mission. So Holocaust theologians view the church as apostate during the time of the Shoah because most of those who participated in the destruction of the Jews were Christians. Germany was Protestant. The evangelicals in Germany were saluting Hitler. I mean, we're all Christian, but the Catholics, Evangelicals, Protestants, you name it, were mostly supporting the Nazi final solution of murdering the Jews. And because of that, Holocaust theologians felt that the church failed in its mission during that important event in human history.

Now, if previous generations of Judeo-centric Christians felt sympathy and even guilt for the suffering of Jews, the Holocaust undoubtedly deepened those sentiments. If, previously, the Puritans were identifying with the sufferings of the Jews, how much more after the Holocaust? Can you imagine the guilt that the Christian world has experienced after World War II? Have you been to any of the Holocaust memorials? Those of you who have, the Holocaust memorial is a testament to that guilt. It says to Christians, we need to be better. But the dark side of this is that they didn't see other sufferings, like what's happening to the Palestinians. According to Emil Fackenheim, "Christians after the Holocaust . . . Must be Zionist on behalf not only of Jews but also of Christianity itself. Jews after the Holocaust... must be Zionist on behalf not only of themselves but also of the whole post-Holocaust world."[13]

Johann Baptist Metz, the great political theologian, stated that "We Christians can never again go back behind Auschwitz: to go beyond Auschwitz, if we see clearly, is impossible for us by ourselves. It is possible only together with the victims of Auschwitz."[14]

That is how even Christian theologians are viewing the Holocaust. Again, this theology reiterates the Judaism in Puritan Theology. However, in Holocaust theological discourse, Jews attain that privileged status not through conversion but by taking on the role of eternal victims, with Christians having the role of eternal victimizers for their complicity in the Shoah.

This is what's difficult with memorials. Every year there's a memorial. There's the president of the United States who would give a speech before the Jews on International Holocaust Memorial Day. No one will speak about Palestine because it would be only about the Jews. But this kind of memorializing, as one theologian wrote, makes the Jews eternal victims even though they're no longer victims nowadays. They are

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[12]Stephen R. Haynes, *Jews and the Christian Imagination: Reluctant Witnesses* (London: Pelgrave Macmillan, 1995), ch. 6.

[13]Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 303.

[14]Metz, Johann Baptist, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*, trans. Mann, Peter (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 19.

frozen in eternity as an eternal victim because of the Holocaust, without looking at the reality of what's happening now. Jewish-Christian solidarity is therefore defined by this victim/victimizer relationship and memorialized or reinforced in Holocaust memorials like Yad Vashem, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and others.

Holocaust theology has correctly affected the solidarity between Christians and Jews. However, it is a solidarity that became exclusionary. It has excluded other narratives, making the Palestinian narrative all but invisible. So remembering the *Shoah* has required forgetting or suppressing the memory of the Palestinian *Nakba*, as exemplified by the 2011 *Nakba* law. This law says that you cannot memorialize the *Nakba* in Israel. If you remember it, you will be penalized because the *Nakba* is at the same time the establishment of the Jewish state. So that day must not be a day of mourning. It must be a day of celebration.

Remembering the *Nakba* is actually what the organization *Zochrot* has been doing. *Zochrot* memorializes the *Nakba*, and it is composed of Jews, not Palestinians. These are Jewish activists. Ironically, in Israel, the Jewish cry of "Never Again" in the Holocaust is now accompanied by the insistence that the Palestinians should not remember their own catastrophe. So the solidarity born out of the *Shoah* has required an uncritical support for the state of Israel, which echoes Restorationist and Millennialist theologies.

For Christian Holocaust theologians, the state of Israel is a sign of God's active presence in history after being absent during the Holocaust. But with the state of Israel, they see God as present. It is a sign of God's redemptive plan where the Holocaust and the Israel state are interpreted through the lens of the cross and resurrection. Franklin Littell wrote, "The way from Auschwitz to a united Jerusalem is the way from death to resurrection."[15] So it is also an assurance that there will not be another *Shoah* for the Jewish people.

Irving Greenberg is a really interesting American Jewish theologian because for Greenberg, after the Shoah, he said powerlessness is immoral if the Jews are to survive. He then advocated for the empowerment of the Jewish people. According to him, the answer to the Holocaust, the sign of deliverance, the redemption out of nothingness, is the state of Israel. This provides support, theological support, for the state of Israel.16 This seems to make it ironclad. It is so solid. And while he warned that power must not lead to creating other victims, ultimately, for him, Jewish power is paramount. Martin Jaffee asked,

> "Is it possible for Jews to relinquish their privileged role in the ritual of Holocaust confession in such a way as to free Christians . . . to say what they must without simultaneously rupturing their desire to stand in solidarity with the Jewish people? Is it possible for Christians . . . to imagine a Christian testimony about the

[15]Franklin H. Littell, "Christendom, Holocaust and Israel: The Importance for Christians of Recent Major Events in Jewish History," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10 (1973): 489.

[16]Mark H. Ellis.

> question of Palestine that at the same time acknowledges the church's complicity in the annihilation of Jews? Finally, must the historical culpability of the Christian before the Jew silence the authentic testimony of Christian conscience in the world on behalf of Palestinian Arabs?"[17]

So Martin Jaffee is saying for Christians to acknowledge both the Holocaust and the *Nakba*. Can we be in solidarity with the suffering of the Jews and also with the suffering of the Palestinian people?

Now let me just be quick on this on three peace theologies for Israel-Palestine. Which, for me, is a peace advocate? Three issues that I have found when looking at how theologies influence the war: Number one is the issue of land. A theology of land is really necessary. Of course, it needs to be tied up with a covenant. The idea is covenant fidelity because land belongs to God. It is constitutive of man's being and calling. We know it in Genesis 1 and 2. Land, *Adamah*, was given to Adam, man, as a steward. Israel's possession of land was a grace-filled gift from God to fulfill God's unilateral promise to Abraham.[18] In Deuteronomy 9:4-6, Yahweh stated that 'Even though you are stiff-necked, you disobey, I am giving you this land out of my promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.' It was not out of their being righteous. But then there's a conditional covenant at Sinai which cannot be disregarded in favor of an unconditional reading of the Abrahamic covenant. If the Abrahamic covenant is read as unconditional, we cannot disregard the conditional covenant in the Sinai tradition. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 says that keeping the land depends on covenant fidelity, particularly keeping the Torah. And interestingly, for Walter Brueggemann, conditionality of the Sinai covenant hinges on obedience in matters of economic justice, especially toward the aliens and oppressed, rejecting the notion of a chosen people that excludes those who are outside the covenant.[19] So when Leviticus 19:33-34 says "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien for you are aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God" what Brueggemann is saying is that chosen-ness doesn't mean that you oppress those who were not part of that original covenant. Walterstorff had a similar view related to the promised land, and his view is also really important because he looked at how God's promise of land shifted in territory. There was no single territory you could pinpoint that you could say this is the promised land, because it shifted throughout history, even in the Genesis narrative.[20] So if the Israelites would say nowadays that we need to expand our borders

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[17]Martin S. Jaffee, "The Victim-Community in Myth and History: Holocaust Ritual, the Question of Palestine, and the Rhetoric of Christian Witness," *Journal of Ecumencial Studies*, Vol. 28 #2 (1991).

[18]Juan Alfaro, "The Land—Stewardship," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* Vol. 8 #2 (1978).

[19]Walter Brueggemann, "Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Theology Today*, Vol. 73 #1 (2016), 36-45.

[20]Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, "Nation and Covenant in Palestine: II," *The Reformed Journal*, September 1981.

because this is part of the biblical promise, one cannot do that because there's no such definite boundary in the biblical material.

A friend of mine, a Palestinian Christian named Salim Munayer, leads *Musalaha*, a ministry in Palestine. *Musalah* means reconciliation, and they are seeking to bring peace between Palestinians and Jews. They're doing this by bringing Palestinians and Jews to the desert. This is what Munayer calls neutral ground because for him, in his theology, the desert is very crucial in the finding of a people's identity, like what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness. Jesus also faced temptation in the wilderness. John the Baptist grew and ministered in the wilderness. David went to the desert to hide from Saul. So what Munayer is doing in this ministry is to bring them into the desert, far from West Bank, from Gaza, from Jerusalem, just to be with fellow human beings and hope that they will find each other as neighbors. With that, I thank you for your attention.

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RESPONSE
Reconciling the *Shoah* and the *Nakba*

Wella Hoyle-De Rosas

Introduction

Our topic, *"The Bible and Israel: Contents, Context, Contests,"* holds significant relevance, particularly for theological communities, church members, and the broader society. As a pastor and a teacher, I approach this discussion from both a pastoral perspective and through the lens of feminist ethics and contextualization.

The ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine gained renewed global attention last year, 2023, amplified by social media, which fueled calls for action regarding war and mass displacement. However, this crisis has deep historical roots. Dr. Peñamora's presentation provides a critical historical perspective on the evolution of this conflict.

The presenter offered a comprehensive examination of the theological and historical foundations that have influenced the Israel-Hamas War (IHW). The discussion will touch on theological perspectives, such as historic premillennialism and post-millennialism—complex frameworks that require revisiting to grasp their implications on contemporary realities.

I have identified three key insights from the presentation:

1. The Messianic Complex of Being the Chosen and the Elect (Content)

The 1917 Balfour Declaration, influenced by England's Puritan movement, played a crucial role in shaping policies toward Jews and the Promised Land. The belief that the English nation had a divine mandate to facilitate the Jews' return to Israel significantly impacted Christian Zionism. References such as Esther 4:14 and Genesis 12:3 provided theological justification for this movement, which became entangled with political motives.

The early rise of Christian Zionism demonstrates how theology and politics merged to shape the narrative of *"A land without a people for a people without a land,"* ultimately leading to the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948. However, the prolonged occupation in the West Bank, Gaza, and other Palestinian territories is no longer about restoration or redemption but rather a political occupation veiled in theological discourse. Religion continues to influence the motivations and actions of various actors in this conflict, often justifying acts of injustice and reinforcing religious superiority.

From a biblical and theological standpoint, I find it troubling when the Bible is read through the lens of the colonizer—where self-appointed redeemers and restorers use scripture to legitimize land appropriation and displacement. This raises critical questions:

- From what perspective are we interpreting the Bible?
- Whose voices are amplified, and whose are marginalized in our readings?

I believe the Bible should be read and interpreted from the perspective of the suffering and the oppressed. Viewing it solely as a historical document can be problematic. Instead, we should ask: *Is biblical history meant to be replicated exactly as recorded, or should we extract lessons from it to prevent further injustices?* While historical context is essential in biblical interpretation, it must also guide us toward justice, reconciliation, and progress.

Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests a rhetorical approach to scripture—one that challenges dominant narratives and seeks justice for the marginalized.

2. Land and Identity Are Deeply Interconnected (Context)

Land is central to the identity of a people, both in biblical times and today. For Israelites, *nachala* (inheritance) is a gift from a gracious God, yet one that comes with responsibilities.

Dr. Peñamora's presentation highlights the theological responsibility toward non-Jews, referencing passages such as Ezekiel 47:22-23 and Joshua 23:16. This raises the question: *How should land be stewarded in ways that promote justice rather than exclusion?*

I found the concept of the *"Desert Encounter"* particularly compelling. Figures like Moses and Elijah experienced suffering and fled to the wilderness for discernment. However, while discernment is often encouraged among the oppressed, I argue that the burden of discernment should also be placed on those perpetuating suffering. Too often, the responsibility to reflect on God's will is assigned to victims, while oppressors remain unchallenged.

From a feminist perspective, those who have endured suffering should cultivate empathy and solidarity with others experiencing oppression. This *desert theology* invites those who have suffered to become caregivers and advocates for justice.

The *Musalaha* initiative's *"Desert Encounter"* program serves as a practical example of how neutral spaces can foster dialogue and transformation between conflicting parties. However, critical questions remain:

- How long must people seek a neutral space?
- Where can such a space truly exist—physically or ideologically?

As a faith community, we must grapple with these questions and actively seek avenues for reconciliation, healing, and justice.

3. The Story of Suffering Must Be Heard (Contest and Challenge)

Integrating the memories of the Holocaust and the *Nakba* into Eucharistic theology is a profound and necessary step. It challenges dominant narratives and calls for a theology rooted in justice and inclusion. Acknowledging both tragedies validates the suffering of those affected and affirms the presence of historical violence and injustice.

The Eucharist, at its core, is a remembrance of Christ's love, particularly for the oppressed and vulnerable. We recall his ministry among the suffering, his advocacy for justice, and his ultimate sacrifice. However, remembering suffering is not about romanticizing pain or framing it as divinely ordained. Rather, it compels us to work toward ending oppression and injustice that cause suffering.

By honoring these collective struggles, we are called to action—to transform oppressive systems and end cycles of suffering.

Conclusion

Dr. Peñamora's presentation provides a thorough and insightful exploration of the theological and historical dimensions of the Israel-Hamas War. It presents a balanced perspective, addressing both the roots of the conflict and the theological imperatives for peace and justice.

My stance is clear: The ongoing crisis in Israel and Palestine is not just a theological issue but also a cultural and political one. As a faith community, we must take a stand alongside the oppressed.

For contextualization: When reflecting on this issue, I am reminded of the struggles faced by marginalized groups in our own communities:

- Indigenous peoples are displaced from their ancestral lands due to political and economic interests.
- Fishermen are losing access to vital waters due to commercial exploitation.
- Farmers are longing for land to cultivate in order to sustain their families.

As Christians, our approach to scripture should always lead us to recognize and uplift the voices of the marginalized, the oppressed, and the suffering. Our faith calls us to stand in solidarity with them and actively participate in the struggle for justice and liberation.

Rev. Wella Hoyle De Rosas is an ordained minister from the Bohol Conference of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP). She is an alumna of Silliman University Divinity School and has served several UCCP churches in Bohol from 2011 to 2015. She also served as the chaplain for students and campus ministry at Silliman University from 2018 to 2022, providing guidance and support to students and fostering an inclusive and nurturing environment for their spiritual growth.

Currently, Rev. De Rosas is part of the Faculty Development Program of Silliman University Divinity School (SUDS) in the field of Christian Social Ethics.

Her commitment to ethics and social justice allows her to empower and educate learners and communities.

She stands as a dedicated minister and teacher, using her theological education and experiences to make a positive impact on the lives of others. Her unwavering faith, commitment to education, and passion for the social gospel continue to shape her ministry and academic endeavors as she strives to promote justice, compassion, and inclusivity within her community and beyond.