

# Reading the Bible after the destruction of Gaza

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## *The Word of God cannot be used to justify wars and occupations*

I have been teaching the Bible in Palestine/Israel for twenty-five years, mostly to Arabic-speaking Catholic seminarians, religious men and women, and teachers of religion. I have also taught the Bible to Jews in Israel in Hebrew, to rabbinical students, tour guides, and ordinary people eager to deepen their education. It is a mission for which I am particularly grateful and which still fills me with enthusiasm and excitement. However, it is a mission that sometimes also fills me with fear and trembling. While I am very grateful to live in a time when the Church is more aware, more sensitive, and more cautious about how the Bible should be used in Christian teaching—deeply repentant for how it has been used as a weapon against Judaism and Jews—I know that there is still much work to be done with regard to those who suffer the consequences of distorted biblical readings.

The most pressing question for me, in the midst of a conflict that pits Israel against Palestine in a bloody war that has left Gaza in ruins and reduced its population to starvation, is: How should I approach God's plan of love for humanity in the Bible, a plan that includes the election of Israel, the gift of land, and the annihilation of the peoples who inhabit that land? How can I read the word that Christians acclaim as the Word of God, "Only in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall not leave alive anything that breathes; but you shall utterly destroy them: the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded you" (Deuteronomy 20:16-17). Would it not be better to put the Bible away in a closet and find other resources for developing spiritual life, moral behavior, and religious leadership? Or, at the very least, should the most problematic parts of the Bible not be censored? It can be, and has been, a dangerous book, not only for many in the Middle East today but also for many others throughout long centuries of history.

On January 7, 1937, David Ben Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency in British Mandate Palestine (a shadow government that foreshadowed the establishment of the State of Israel), spoke before the Peel Commission, which was trying to resolve the issues of the British Mandate in Palestine, embroiled in conflict between Jews and Arabs. Challenging the very concept of the "British Mandate for Palestine," established after World War I, Ben Gurion declared: "On behalf of the Jews, I say that the Bible is our Mandate, the Bible that was written by us, in our language, in Hebrew, right here in this country. This is our Mandate. Our right is as old as the Jewish people" (<https://www.scribd.com/document/287215993/Ben-Gurion-Testimony-to-Peel-Commission>). In 1958, ten years after the establishment of the State of Israel, Ben Gurion, then prime minister, inaugurated the first World Bible Contest in Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, he established a regular Bible study circle, in which he participated assiduously. The group began its work with Ben Gurion's favorite biblical book, Joshua, which he considered to be absolutely factual. For him, it was the historical model for the conquest of the Land of the Bible by the People of the Bible, then as now.

Ben Gurion was not a religious Jew, and his belief in God was overshadowed by his belief in the "Jewish" nation, a concept that derived from his avid reading of the Bible. He also explicitly rejected the religious traditions of the Jewish people that had developed over the centuries in the rabbinical writings collected in the Talmud. As a "Jewish" nationalist, he saw the Bible as the ultimate and eternal literary and spiritual summit of the Jews in their land, while he considered the rabbinical writings, the Talmud, to be a secondary collection, created in exile and destined to fade away with time. Ben-Gurion's biblicism (a secular reading of the Bible used as a treasure trove of nationalist terminology and mythology) was decisive in the early history of Zionist activity in Palestine. Although harshly criticized by religious Jewish intellectuals in Israel such as Martin Buber and Yeshayahu Leibowitz—both deeply aware of the disturbing moral issues raised by Israel's military conquests, the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Israeli territories, and the entrenched discrimination against Arab citizens in the State of Israel—Ben Gurion's version of Zionism dominated.

The current Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is an heir to Ben Gurion's legacy of using the Bible to legitimize and further consolidate the occupation. At the start of the war in Gaza on October 28, 2023, Netanyahu described Israeli soldiers as

"eager to repay the murderers for the horrific acts perpetrated against our children, our women, our parents, and our friends. They are committed to eradicating this evil from the world, for our existence and, I would add, for the good of all humanity. The entire people and its leaders embrace them and believe in them. 'Remember what Amalek did to you.'" His quotation from Deuteronomy 25:17 was a chilling reminder of how the Bible can be used to promote war and hatred. Amalek, described in Exodus 17, is the archetypal enemy of the Israelites, and they are commanded to exterminate him and his descendants. Netanyahu, his allies, the Israeli settler movement, and those who commit acts of violence against Palestinians continually draw on biblical language to justify their acts of death and destruction.

There is nothing new about the ideological abuse of sacred texts. "Mobilizing" an idea of God and sacred narratives that speak of God adds authority to man-made ideologies of domination and exclusion. This causes the Bible to be frowned upon among those who struggle for freedom, equality, and brotherhood. However, for Christians, the Bible provides the words to speak about God, the human person, and the relationship between the two. It provides a vocabulary, a grammar, a syntax, according to which Christians can seek to speak about God. The biblical narrative outlines a history of origins, current events, and hope that places believers in a long history of humanity in which they can find meaning, vocation, and a mission in a world seeking redemption. Yet, like all treasures, appropriating it also involves risks.

In 1994, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, published a fundamental tool for readers of the Bible during this period of conflict in Palestine/Israel, *Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible* (Michel Sabbah, *Reading the Bible Today in the Land of the Bible*, Jerusalem, Latin Patriarchate, 1993). The preface to his pastoral letter is a verse that constitutes a Christian hermeneutical key to reading the Bible: "He is our peace, who has made the two one, breaking down the dividing wall, abolishing in his flesh the enmity [...] to create in himself one new man, making peace, and to reconcile both to God" (Ephesians 2:14-16). In this letter, Sabbah asks a poignant question to those who read the Bible in Palestine today: "Must we be victims of our own history of salvation, which seems to privilege the Jewish people and condemn us? Is this really God's will, to which we should bow inexorably, without appeal and without discussion, and which would ask us to leave everything in favor of another people?" (n. 7c).

Addressing those who have rejected the Bible because of the way it is read to justify occupation and discrimination, Sabbah says: "By rejecting the word of God, dear faithful, you make yourselves accomplices and victims of those you accuse, and, having already been stripped of your land, you allow yourselves to be stripped also of your Holy Scripture and of the light it contains to help you emerge from darkness and overcome every difficulty" (n. 56). Towards the end of the letter, Sabbah concludes: "Reading and living the Bible today in the land of the Bible is a grace and a challenge. A grace, because every day we walk with Jesus himself on the same roads he walked with his disciples, as a companion and friend. A challenge because today, in this land of conflict, we experience sufferings that are at the heart of our conversation with the Lord. And the Lord, who makes our hearts burn when He speaks to us (cf. Luke 24:32) along our pilgrim journey, 'opens our hearts to the understanding of the Scriptures' and helps us to discern, in the understanding of our history, the will of the Father" (n. 64).

Christians must be aware that concepts such as "chosen people" and "promised land" have very concrete existential and moral consequences for the peoples of the Middle East and are not merely speculative and theological exercises. In line with these concerns, the Holy See has emphasized the importance of international law, rather than biblical discourse, in understanding the conflict in Palestine/Israel. Christians are invited to understand the Jewish religious connection to the land of Israel "which is rooted in biblical tradition, without having to adopt a particular religious interpretation of that relationship. As far as the existence of the State of Israel and its political choices are concerned, they must be viewed from a perspective that is not religious in itself but refers to the common principles of international law" (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *Aids for a Correct Presentation of Jews and Judaism in the Preaching and Catechesis of the Catholic Church*, 1985, VI, 1).

Ultimately, the Bible read with faith, love, and charity reveals itself as the living Word of God. In Palestine/Israel today, the Bible is used to legitimize and justify wars, occupation, and discrimination. Alongside the Bible, the Qur'an, the sacred scripture of Muslims, is "mobilized" in political struggles over the fate of the Holy Land and who should govern it. However, *Dei verbum*, the dogmatic constitution of the Second Vatican Council on divine revelation, emphasizes that "sacred Scripture [must] be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written" (n. 12). Discerning this Spirit, also according to the authentic interpretation entrusted to the magisterium (n. 10), is therefore an essential part of reading the Bible. In essence, the Bible read as the Word of God teaches equality, justice, and peace, values that are in harmony with the God we learn to know through the Church's reading of the Bible.