



**MITRI RAHEB**

# **DECOLONIZING PALESTINE**

**The Land,**  

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**The People,**  

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**The Bible**

## **Settler Colonialism, Palestine, and the Bible**

To best explain the prevailing situation in Palestine, people refer to it as a “conflict”: a conflict between two parties, even if they are not equal, a conflict over land and resources, a conflict over holy places deeply connected to identity, or even a conflict between colonizer and colonized. This is the prevailing paradigm used in the media, in academia, and in popular debate. This paradigm is dominant today in describing the current situation as a conflict between Israel and Hamas. Based on this assumption, the international community tries to solve the “conflict,” or at least to manage it, yet with no success. Flawed assumptions have led to the deteriorating situation and disastrous outcome to which we are witnesses today.

The framework of “conflict” is misleading to say the least. Even the description of the situation as occupation is inaccurate because, despite Palestine’s history, the situation over the past one hundred years cannot be described as occupation. There is a dire need for a new framework and a paradigm shift. This chapter argues that the situation prevailing in Palestine since the Balfour Declaration is one of settler colonialism.

### **Settler Colonialism**

Settler colonialism is a distinct form of colonization that, while existing in practice for centuries, has received increased attention in anthropology and indigenous studies scholarship following the Cold War. Contrary to postcolonial contexts, settler colonialism describes contexts where colonization constitutes an ongoing reality rather than a singular event in the past. Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini contributed foundational scholarship in the field that now spans multiple publications underlining the global reach of settler colonialism from Australia to Canada, from the United States to South Africa, from Fiji to Palestine.

The concept of settler colonialism was formulated by Patrick Wolfe in his groundbreaking monograph, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event*, published in 1998. Wolfe set the theoretical framework for the discipline of settler colonial studies.<sup>1</sup> It was followed in 2010 by another comprehensive work by Lorenzo Veracini entitled *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, which emphasized the present global dimension of settler colonialism.<sup>2</sup> The first two decades of the twenty-first century saw a growing interest in this field manifested by multiple publications underlining the global reach of settler colonialism, which stretches from Australia to Canada, from the United States to South Africa, and from Fiji to Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

The permanent settlement of colonists in an occupied land is the main feature that distinguishes settler colonialism from classical or neocolonialism. The settler colonialists establish and enforce state sovereignty and juridical control over the indigenous land, ultimately aiming to eliminate the native people. The natives become extraneous while the settlers are cast as natives through different political mechanisms, ideological constructs, and social narratives. The indigenous land is described as *terra nullius*, empty or barren land that is just waiting to be discovered, thus becoming the private property of the settlers. The native people are depicted with racist constructs as savage, violent terrorists, while the settlers are portrayed as the civilized and brave pioneers. To defend the settled property from the savage, a police state is created and is granted extraordinary power over the native people, including power over their civil affairs.

While settler colonialism theory was first used for contexts like Australia, New Zealand, and North America, several major writers have published works recently applying settler colonialism to the State of Israel, among them Lorenzo Veracini, Magid Shihadeh, Steven Salaita, Shira Robinson, Elia Zureik, Nadim Rouhana, Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, Nahla Abdo, and, most recently, Rashid Khalidi in

his comprehensive work, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*.<sup>4</sup> The majority of Palestinian scholars who applied the paradigm of settler colonialism to Israel were Palestinians from inside the Green Line.<sup>5</sup> However, none of the scholars were trained in theology, nor did they attempt to examine the interplay between settler colonialism and theology. Settler colonialism as a discipline was absent from theological discourse until Finnish Old Testament scholar Pekka Pitkänen's recent study of the books of the Pentateuch and Joshua, referencing the Israeli–Palestinian context.<sup>6</sup> Pitkänen convincingly showed how the first six books of the Old Testament include all of the important features of settler colonialism. In the next section, I apply the settler colonial theory to Israel–Palestine by looking at the historical development of the Jewish settler colonial project from the British Empire to the current Trump era, and the role played by Christian theology in this history.

### **The Theopolitics of Settler Colonialism: The Case of Israel**

Christian theology has played a role in almost all settler colonial projects, including North America, South Africa, and Australia. In his book *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide*, George Tinker, a Native American Lutheran theologian, argued,

Europe's colonial conquest of the Americas was largely fought on two separate but symbiotically related fronts. One front was relatively open and explicit; it involved the political and military strategy that drove peoples from their land to make room for the more "civilized" conqueror and worked to deprive Indian peoples of any continuing self-governance or self-determination. The second front, which was just as decisive in the conquest if more subtle and less explicitly apparent, was the religious strategy pursued by missionaries of all denominations...In this conquest, as in the European conquest of Indian peoples, theology becomes a crucial ingredient, and missionaries become an important strategic phalanx.<sup>7</sup>

What is true for the Americas is true for Palestine. Palestine is not an exception; yet Palestine continues to be the exception. While no one would dare today to cite the Bible to justify settler colonialism in Australia or North America, many Christians and Jews have been doing exactly this for nearly two hundred years, continuing to do so this very day in Palestine. Furthermore, the interplay between the settler colonial project in Palestine and biblical interpretation has never been static, undergoing several adjustments amid changing contexts. Here, I highlight five key stages of the relationship between the Jewish Israeli settler colonial project and the Bible.

### *First Stage: Seeding the Seeds*

A renewed interest in Jews and Judaism developed as a result of the religious revival in Europe and the “Second Great Awakening” in the United States during the nineteenth century. The rapid social and political changes of that time made people feel that the second coming of Christ was drawing near. Yet, three developments were a prerequisite for that to happen: the triumph of Protestantism through mission, the defeat of Islam represented by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the conversion of the Jews to Christianity. John Nelson Darby (1800–82), an Anglo-Irish Bible teacher, connected the conversion of the Jews with the restoration of what he called “the Kingdom of Israel” that he saw prophesied in the Bible. His convictions were referenced in the Scofield Reference Bible that became a popular version in that era.

Originally a theological construct, Darby’s “the Kingdom of Israel” started to take shape in real politics after the occupation of Palestine by Ibrahim Pasha in 1831. Ibrahim’s father, Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769–1849), an Ottoman Albanian, seized power over Egypt after the withdrawal of Napoleon. His dream was to create a modern state based on a European model that would cover the area between the Nile and the Euphrates. Toward that goal, his son Ibrahim Pasha occupied large parts of Syria, including Palestine. During his reign, a British consulate opened and ground was broken for Christ Church, a

Zionist Anglican congregation for Jewish converts in Jerusalem, both at Jaffa Gate. This occupation of Palestine by Ibrahim Pasha presented a threat not only to the Ottoman rulers but also to Europeans whose interests in the Middle East were crucial. In order to ensure control of trade routes and resources in 1840, Britain and Austria decided to come to the aid of the Ottomans against Ibrahim Pasha and were successful in pushing him back from Syria and Palestine. A decade later, in the context of the Crimean War (1853–56) in which France and Russia fought for control of the holy sites, an evangelical Christian, the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, wanted to know who would obtain the rights over the Holy Land: Palestine and Syria.

Evangelical Christians initially concentrated on the “restoration” of the Jewish people to what was regarded as their ancient homeland: Palestine. Situating the intruders as natives belonging to the colonized land is another feature of settler colonialism. Sending British Jews to Palestine not only served British imperial interests, but it would, in the unspoken hope of British politicians, solve the Jewish question at home. With shrinking space for Jews in Europe, the Zionist movement gradually adopted this particular Christian view of history and its use of biblical prophecy to escape Europe, thereby translating Zionism into a “real political” agenda. In his 1896 publication, *Der Juden Staat*, Theodor Herzl adopted this Anglo-European plan. He argued for a Jewish nation-state as an outpost of Western civilization. Within this state, British Jews could be the managers and Eastern European Jews would provide the cheap labor to develop Palestine.<sup>8</sup> His settler colonial intentions were made crystal clear in his diary in 1895:

We must expropriate gently the private property on the estates assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries, while denying it employment in our own country. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the

removal of the poor must be carried out discreetly and circumspectly.<sup>9</sup>

The outcome of the First World War gave the movement its worked-for breakthrough. On November 2, 1917, the First Earl of Balfour, Arthur James Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, wrote to his colleague in Parliament and the prominent British Jewish banker, Baron Walter Rothschild (1868–1937):

I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet: 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 objective, 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.<sup>10</sup>

The timing of this English Cabinet decision was not by chance. The British army, stationed in Egypt, was ready to storm southern Palestine. On November 22, just a few weeks after the Balfour Declaration, Jerusalem was occupied by the commander in chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, Sir Edmund Allenby. The “biblical promise” of “land” now became the imperial promise of Palestine to the European Jews. The native inhabitants, Christians and Muslims who made up 95 percent of the population, were portrayed negatively as “non-Jewish communities” who might have “civil and religious rights” but no national rights or sovereignty over the land. Distinguishing between civil and religious rights and recognition of national or sovereign governance constitutes another important feature of settler colonialism.

The Balfour Declaration paved the way for Britain's Mandate over Palestine in 1920, with the goal of preparing Palestine for takeover by

European Jews. The British Mandate government facilitated the immigration and settlement of European Jews in Palestine, especially after 1933. Palestinian intellectuals like the editor of the *al-Karmel* newspaper, Najib Nassar, the Jerusalemite Ruhi al-Khaldi, and the anthropologist and medical doctor Tawfiq Canaan, to name a few, understood very early on the settler colonial nature of the Zionist movement.<sup>11</sup> The resulting, long political strike in 1936 was a Palestinian revolt against the settler colonial policies of the British Mandate government.

### *Second Stage: Taking the Land*

On May 15, 1948, Britain withdrew its forces from Palestine. The European Jews who had been “mapping” the land for two decades were prepared to take over, and, on that very same day, they declared the State of Israel, a declaration that resulted in an attack by Arab forces. The Arab-Israeli War of 1948 gave a major push to the settler colonial project, as 77 percent of historic Palestine was occupied by Israeli troops and Jewish terror organizations, becoming the State of Israel. A total of 452 Palestinian villages were destroyed, and over 750,000 Palestinians were driven out of their homes, becoming instantly displaced refugees.

Eliminating the indigenous population, conquering their land, and destroying their villages to make the land *terra nullius* are defining features of settler colonialism. Palestinians underwent a forced migration, compelled to leave their land and start an indefinite reality as refugees stranded in camps and in the diaspora. This defeat was coined in the Palestinian collective memory as the *Nakba*, “the catastrophe.” The *Nakba* created favorable conditions for Israel to proceed with its settler colonial project through the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Palestinian population, the confiscation of their properties through absentee laws, and putting the remaining land under military control.

The Palestinian *Nakba* occurred in the context of two important developments related to World War II; developments that proved crucial for the future of the Israeli settler colonial project. First, in 1944, US President Roosevelt signed a G.I. bill, declaring Jews (and Irish and Italian Catholics) to be White and eligible for compensation. Native and African Americans were excluded. While for decades Jews in Europe had been considered different and inferior to White Europeans, American Jews were now part of the White race.<sup>12</sup> Second, following the US entry into WWII, the phrase “Judeo-Christian tradition”<sup>13</sup> became popular in American culture. Citing K. Healan Gaston, James Loeffler notes that,

As Americans tried to make sense of their country’s role in repelling the Nazi assault on Western civilization, the intertwining of religion and democracy provided a helpful means for Jewish and Christian clergy and politicians to signal their shared commitment to anti-fascism. But its heyday would really arrive only at the war’s end as the rhetoric morphed easily into the new vocabulary of Cold War politics. Anti-communist liberals found in the phrase a convenient shorthand “for religious pluralism in general, identifying unbounded diversity and unfettered freedom of belief as the keynotes of democratic life.”<sup>14</sup>

However, the creation of a new state with an ancient biblical name caused considerable confusion. Huge efforts were exerted by the State of Israel and Jewish organizations to brand this new State of Israel a “biblical entity,” with Jewish migration to Palestine a miraculous “return to their ancient home.” A prime example of this targeted branding was naming the ship that carried Jewish immigrants to Palestine in 1947 as *Exodus*. Leon Uris’s best-selling novel of 1958, *Exodus*, told the story of those immigrants. The book was then made into a Hollywood movie in 1960. The film was undeniably Zionist propaganda, and it had an enormous influence on how Americans and Europeans started to perceive, or better, misperceive the situation in Palestine.

Yet, for a settler colonial project to succeed, it needed continuous political support and military supplies from the “motherland.” This was provided first by France and, starting in the early 1960s, by the United States. The new geostrategic, political, military, and economic alliance between the two countries was coined as a “special relationship” based on “common values.”

### *Third Stage: Expanding the Boundaries*

The outcome of the 1967 war was a turning point in the Israeli settler colonial project. Within six days, Israel was able to occupy the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, and the Golan Heights. While Israel was able to conquer the geography with ease, this time it could not rid itself of the demographic element. The Palestinians had learned their lesson from 1948, and a majority remained steadfast in their homes. This presented, and still presents, a major challenge to the settler colonial project’s aims to control both geography and demography.

The religious connotations of the conflict were many. The name Israel chose for the war, “Six-Day,” had biblical connotations by comparing the war with the six days of creation before the day of rest. The victory was branded by many as little “David” — meaning the State of Israel — defeating the monster “Goliath” — meaning the Arab world. Moreover, the conquest of East Jerusalem became the theme of the Israeli song “Jerusalem, City of Gold,” which was the hit of 1967 and perpetuated the image of two thousand years of longing for the city. The song portrays the myth of Israel returning to a barren land, to dry fountains, and to the “Temple mountain.” The picture of Israeli soldiers standing by the Western Wall became the iconic “religious” image of the war. Features of settler colonialism are present in these images. For then-Israeli defense minister, Moshe Dayan, this was nothing less than the reenactment of the Joshua conquest.

The victory boosted Jewish religious nationalism and triggered a settler colonial movement in the West Bank, termed ancient “Judea and Samaria,” a title that was not so much a geographic description

as it was a religious designation to the settler colonial claim. A process of “Judaization” of the newly conquered territories soon started. Settlers began to build Jewish settlements on every attainable hill, especially those with a biblical connection. A new leadership model emerged in Israel, the “rabbi-politician” replacing the more secular politician.<sup>15</sup> An attitude of triumphalism spread into all sectors of Israeli society. The appetite of Jewish archeologists after 1967 was such that many of them started to promote the idea of a greater Israel in line with the “Kingdom of David.” In this post-1967 discourse, and consistent with settler colonial discourse, native Palestinian populations were seen as the Canaanites whose land had to be occupied by Israel. Also consistent with settler colonial discourse, Jewish settler groups even called openly for the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, arguing on the basis of biblical passages that propagated the extermination of the Canaanites and other native groups of ancient Palestine.<sup>16</sup> This shift from secular to religious Judaism mirrored the political shift by Israel from alliance mainly with France to reliance on the United States. Subsequently, in 1977, there was a change in the Israeli government when the more religious and right-wing Likud party replaced the Labor party, the secular Zionist party.

The 1967 war also triggered post-Holocaust theology, a blend of liberal Christian Zionism that attempted “to revive liberal Protestant support for the Jewish State.”<sup>17</sup> They supported the settler colonial project by propagating the “territorial dimension of Judaism.”<sup>18</sup> This genre of Christian theology rendered the native people of the land, the Palestinians, utterly invisible, theologically erased as if the land were unpopulated: *terra nullius*. Once a unity between God, people, and land is constituted for the settler colonies, the native people are seen as aliens who do not belong to their indigenous land.

Palestinian intellectuals addressed the nature of Israel as a settler colonial project at an early stage. Organizations like the Palestine Research Center and the Institute for Palestine Studies were actively researching and publishing issues highlighting the racist and colonial

nature of the Israeli state, not only against the Palestinian population but also against Arab and Black Jews. Fayez Sayegh, the director of the Palestine Research Center, published a booklet in 1965 with the title *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* that listed several features of the “Zionist settler-state.”<sup>19</sup> Addressing the UN General Assembly in 1975, Sayegh alluded to an important feature of the Israel settler colonial state that he coined as “pumping-in” Jewish migrants while “pumping-out” the native Palestinians.<sup>20</sup> Backed by support from the Soviet Union as well as African, Arab, and Muslim countries, Sayegh’s words led the General Assembly of the United Nations to adopt Resolution 3379, determining “Zionism as a form of racism and racial discrimination.”<sup>21</sup> Living in the United States through the 1967 War and at the height of the civil rights movement, Palestinian intellectual Edward Said—a Protestant Palestinian Christian like Sayegh—detected a form of racism against everything that was Arab or Muslim in the American media. His 1968 essay, “The Arab Portrayed,” became the blueprint for Said’s 1978 publication, *Orientalism*. A year later, he published “Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims.”<sup>22</sup> The racism against Arabs and blind support for the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the American media were identified by Said as mutually reliant narratives.

#### *Fourth Stage: Negotiating a Compromise*

In December 1987 the first Intifada or Palestinian uprising broke out. The pictures of Israeli tanks on one side and Palestinian kids on the other were screened on televisions worldwide, making Palestinians and their oppression under an Israeli military occupation plainly visible. It was difficult to ignore the Palestinian tragedy. Just two years later, the world watched the images of the Berlin Wall coming down as a symbol of a slowly dismantled Soviet Union. One of the last acts of the Soviet Union was to cosponsor, with the United States, the Madrid Conference in autumn 1991. With the end of the Cold War, the United States became the dominant global power, exercising tremendous influence over Israel.

Under the Bush administration, Secretary of State James Baker introduced the “land for peace” formula by which Israel would give up the 1967 occupied territories in exchange for a peace treaty with the Palestinians and neighboring Arab countries. With this aim in mind, the Bush administration conditioned the soft loans given to Israel, stating that the funds were not to be used for settlement expansion. According to this rationale, peace could be achieved through political compromise that required an end to the expansion of the Jewish settler colonial project. The Madrid Conference paved the way for secret negotiations between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli government. PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres signed the Oslo Accords on the lawn of the White House on September 9, 1993.

As part of the accords, the PLO recognized the State of Israel in exchange for Israel recognizing the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. For the PLO, weakened and isolated as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the US invasion of Iraq, the accords were a rescue rope that allowed the leadership to resettle in the West Bank and Gaza. However, just as the African National Congress in South Africa negotiated with the de Klerk government to end Apartheid and give Black South Africans their political rights without dismantling the structure of the settler colonial project, leaving the majority of Black South Africans to continue to live in Bantustans without access to economic power, the Oslo Accords gave the PLO the right to interim Palestinian self-rule in limited areas of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with the hope of a permanent solution within five years, without changing the structure of the Jewish settler colonial project. Postponing issues related to Jerusalem, settlements, borders, water, and refugees indicated that Israel was not ready or able to end its settler colonial project.

For Native Americans in the United States, treaties were violated and often used to buy time to further the settler colonial project. This was the case in Palestine, where the State of Israel used the pretext of negotiations to preempt the outcome, enhancing its settler colonial

project in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. There were 110,000 Jewish settlers in 1993, and that number has now grown to over 800,000. East Jerusalem has been Judaized, the resources of the West Bank are exploited for the settler community, and no refugees have been allowed to return. Throughout this stage, Israel has continued to act as a de facto settler colonial state with the Palestinian government nothing more than a subcontractor for this state.

The Oslo Accords triggered a plethora of Palestinian Christian writing in which the spirit of the era was focused on justice, peace, or reconciliation. Other responses came from postcolonial biblical scholars, most of them living, like the Palestinians, on the margin. Robert Allen Warrior, himself a Native American, read the biblical story through the eyes of the Canaanites.<sup>23</sup> Born in Hong Kong, theologian Kwok Pui-Lan struggled with the question “Can I believe in a God who killed the Canaanites and who seems not to have listened to the cry of the Palestinians now for some forty years?”<sup>24</sup> In 1997, Michael Prior clearly demonstrated “how the biblical account has been used to justify the conquest of land in different regions and at different periods, focusing on the Spanish and Portuguese colonization and settlement of Latin America, the white settlement in southern Africa, and the Zionist conquest and settlement in Palestine.”<sup>25</sup>

Jewish theological voices also started to be heard critiquing the policies of the State of Israel. Marc Ellis was, perhaps, the most vocal among them.<sup>26</sup> The focus of theological writings during the earlier years of this era was on Israeli occupation as something temporary rather than a structure of settler colonialism. However, in recent years, several scholars like Nur Masalha, Fernando Segovia, Mitri Raheb, Santiago Slabodsky, and others have begun to write about the land issue using a decolonial, postcolonial, or cultural-critical approach.<sup>27</sup> Steven Salaita has furthered this work in his groundbreaking comparative analysis of Native American and Palestinian literature, showing how settler colonial societies

weaponize biblical stories as national histories to justify their colonial projects.<sup>28</sup>

### *Fifth Stage: Sealing the Settler Colonial Project*

In recent years, we have witnessed a certain pattern repeating itself in Israeli politics. This pattern has occurred within a context of change shaped by the election of President Trump in the United States, the rise of populism and Christian Zionism worldwide, the reelection of Netanyahu, the weakening of Arab countries, the dividing of Palestinian territory with political divisions (West Bank versus Gaza), and the increase of an Israel-friendlier Gulf region.<sup>29</sup> The first significant move in this era was made by President Trump in December 2017, when he recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, followed by the opening of the US Embassy in the city six months later.<sup>30</sup> In July 2018, the Israel Knesset passed the so-called Nation-State Bill that defined Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people.<sup>31</sup> The next move came from President Trump in March 2019, when he recognized Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights.<sup>32</sup> In all of these moves, the pattern has been to legalize what is not legal, thus transforming a de facto status into a de jure one. East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights are occupied territories according to international law although they are effectively under Israeli control.<sup>33</sup> Palestinians inside Israel, for example, comprise over 20 percent of the population and have been de facto second-class citizens; the new Nation-State Law made them legally second-class citizens.

While these moves were motivated by real political calculations by a president in need of Jewish votes and support from his evangelical base, President Trump was aware that settler colonialism is deeply entrenched in American culture, especially through the ideology of Manifest Destiny. When the United States looks in the mirror, it does not see itself, but rather, Israel. And when it looks at Israel, it sees itself: both are settler nations who occupied the lands of native peoples and pushed those people into small reservations. In his

speech at the Israel Knesset, Vice President Pence affirmed the bond between the two:

During his historic visit to Jerusalem, President Trump declared that the bond between us, in his words, is “woven together in the hearts of our people,” and the people of the United States have always held a special affection and admiration for the people of the Book. In the story of the Jews, we’ve always seen the story of America. It is the story of an exodus, a journey from persecution to freedom, a story that shows the power of faith and the promise of hope. My country’s very first settlers also saw themselves as pilgrims, sent by Providence, to build a new Promised Land. The songs and stories of the people of Israel were their anthems, and they faithfully taught them to their children, and do to this day...And down through the generations, the American people became fierce advocates of the Jewish people’s aspiration to return to the land of your forefathers, to claim your own new birth of freedom in your beloved homeland.<sup>34</sup>

In all of this, the role of the Christian Zionist and the Jewish Zionist must not be underestimated. The influence of Zionists was patently obvious at the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem. It is no accident that those present at the opening ceremony were either Christian Zionists, like the two evangelical pastors John Hagee and Robert Jeffress; right-wing Israeli politicians such as Netanyahu and his political allies; or Jewish-Americans who support Israeli colonization of the West Bank, like Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, the American Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, Trump’s special envoy Jason Greenblatt, and the casino mogul Sheldon Adelson.

Two Christian Zionist pastors were given an active role in the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem and delivered two prayers. Robert Jeffress, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas and a televangelist, opened his prayer by saying,

Heavenly Father, we come before you, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thanking you for bringing us to this momentous occasion in the life of your people and in the history of our world. Four thousand years ago, you said to your servant Abraham that you would make him the father of a great nation, a nation through whom the whole world would be blessed, and now as we look back, we see how Israel has been that blessing to the entire world.<sup>35</sup>

What is remarkable about this prayer is its selectivity. It highlights the genealogical line from Abraham to Jacob, through Isaac, to the State of Israel of the twenty-first century. In other words, for Jeffress, the Jews of Israel today are the direct descendants of the Patriarchs. In the pastor's view, Abraham is not only the Patriarch of the Hebrew Bible and the father of a great nation, but this nation is clearly modern Israel. Vice President Pence was one of the main advocates of the embassy relocation. The former vice president, a baptized Catholic, considers himself a born-again evangelical Christian and belongs to a movement known as Christian Zionism.<sup>36</sup> Pence referred to the Bible, and specifically to King David, to explain the move of the US Embassy. In his speech at the Israeli Knesset, he said,

The Jewish people's unbreakable bond to this sacred city reaches back more than 3,000 years. It was here in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah, that Abraham offered his son Isaac, and was credited with righteousness for his faith in God. It was here in Jerusalem, that King David consecrated the capital of the Kingdom of Israel. And since its rebirth, the modern State of Israel has called this city the seat of its government. Jerusalem is Israel's capital.<sup>37</sup>

In this passage of his speech, Pence reiterates Israeli propaganda that Jerusalem was consecrated the capital of "Israel" by King David three thousand years ago and should, therefore, be the "eternal capital" of the State of Israel today. Again, Pence's speech demonstrates how biblical stories are seen as a history directly connected to the present day. King David was evoked to give the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem a biblical foundation in the

full knowledge that the move was a violation of international law. For these Christian Zionists, when the message of the Bible as they understand it collides with international law, the Bible or divine rights take precedence over human rights. It should be no wonder that John Hagee, at the embassy opening, referred to the United Nations as the axis of evil. In his prayer, he continued,

Shout it from the housetops that Israel lives; let every Islamic terrorist hear this message, Israel lives; let it be heard in the halls of the United Nations, Israel lives; let it echo down the marble halls of the presidential palace in Iran, Israel lives; let it be known to all men that Israel lives; because he that keepeth Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.<sup>38</sup>

The United Nations, with its international laws, treaties, and conventions, has now become part of the axis of evil. This fits well with Christian Zionist rhetoric and its stance toward international agency. For Hagee and Christian Zionism, God stands clearly and unapologetically on the side of Israel (and its settler colonial influence, the United States) and against international law.

The Peace for Prosperity Conference, held by the Trump administration in Bahrain on June 26, 2019, continued the clear connection of US Zionist biblical interpretation and Israeli settler colonial activity.<sup>39</sup> The name chosen for the conference implies that the prosperity of Palestinians is America's intention if Palestinians would only walk with the Trump administration, alluding to the so-called prosperity gospel. Just as the prosperity gospel was used to exploit the poor, so this conference attempted to exploit Palestinian rights and resources. While Jared Kushner was introducing his fifty-billion-dollar plan "in support of the Palestinians," his colleague Jason Greenblatt was cutting all funding to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) for Palestinian refugees.<sup>40</sup> While Kushner spoke about transforming the health care system in the West Bank and Gaza, Greenblatt cut all American funding to Palestinian hospitals in Jerusalem.

The plan was deceptive, talking about 50 billion dollars in support of Palestine while half of the amount will actually go to neighboring countries: Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and, significantly, Israel. Since the funds would be managed by international corporations, another 20 percent would be deducted as management fees. All told, less than 20 billion dollars would be invested over 10 years, an amount that is less than the actual cost of the Israeli occupation, estimated at 6.9 billion dollars per year.<sup>41</sup> The funds to neighboring countries aim to upgrade their ports and airports, while Palestinians are not even given a promise of their own port or airport. The plan promises to double the potable water supply to Palestinians at a time when Israel confiscates 82 percent of the West Bank water resources, meaning that at least two-thirds of water aquifers in the West Bank would remain under Israeli control.<sup>42</sup> The plan promises to construct a new power plant in Gaza so that, within ten years, the population in Gaza would have sixteen hours of daily electricity. Yet, who can guarantee that Israel will not destroy this power plant like the one they destroyed in 2014?<sup>43</sup> That power plant was paid for by private American and Palestinian investors and had been supplying Gaza with electricity twenty-four hours per day, every day.

Kushner's plan promised to leverage investment into the Palestinian tourism industry. Yet, the most important hub for the Palestinian tourism industry is East Jerusalem. If Jerusalem is off the table, what remains are the crumbs. Furthermore, if Jewish settlers continue to occupy important archeological sites like Qumran, Herodium, and the Dead Sea, then even less remains for the Palestinians. The plan promises to "upgrade border crossings" (a euphemism for checkpoints), to "reduce trade barriers," and to "reduce the complications of transport and travel." Barriers and checkpoints would not be removed, only upgraded. Palestinians would still be living under the thumb of Israeli soldiers who control their movements. The promise to build "special access roads at major crossing points" would further entrench the two-road system in the West Bank, one for Jewish Israeli colonizers and the other for the

native Palestinians, and enshrine the already-existing apartheid system.<sup>44</sup>

The map attached to the plan shows that Israel would annex the most fertile Palestinian land, including the Jordan Valley and the western slopes of the Jerusalem–Hebron mountains, which constitute the food basket for the West Bank. The map shows that Palestinian cities would become permanent enclaves or Bantustans with no territorial continuity, connected only via underground tunnels or bridges.<sup>45</sup> While the plan promises prosperity, it does exactly the opposite: exploitation.

In a different connection to scripture, the plan reminds me of the story of the temptation of Jesus. In the gospel account, the devil took Jesus “to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me’” (Matthew 4:8–9). The plan promises prosperity for the Palestinians while denying them justice, colonizing their land, exploiting their natural resources, and robbing them of dignity and freedom.

On September 15, 2020, Trump signed the so-called Abraham Accords with the foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and the Israeli prime minister. Biblical language was utilized here as well. The Accords started by recognizing

that the Arab and Jewish peoples are descendants of a common ancestor, Abraham, and inspired, in that spirit, to foster in the Middle East a reality in which Muslims, Jews, Christians and peoples of all faiths, denominations, beliefs and nationalities live in, and are committed to, a spirit of coexistence, mutual understanding and mutual respect.<sup>46</sup>

This same metaphor was used by Vice President Pence in his address to the Knesset on January 22, 2018.

The winds of change can already be witnessed across the Middle East. Longstanding enemies are becoming partners. Old foes are finding new grounds for cooperation. And the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael are coming together in common cause as never before. Last year in Saudi Arabia, President Trump addressed an unprecedented gathering of leaders from more than fifty nations at the Arab-Islamic American Summit. He challenged the people of this region to work ever closer together, to recognize shared opportunities, and to confront shared challenges.<sup>47</sup>

Pence reiterated in his speech a common belief that Arabs and Muslims are the descendants of Ishmael. Ishmael is Abraham's son, yet he is still the son of a slave and the one excluded from the promise. In this biblical language, Ishmael remains inferior to Isaac. Isaac's supremacy over Ishmael is taken at face value and has been used repeatedly by White supremacists to subjugate Black people, African Americans, First Nations, Arabs, Muslims, and the Palestinians.

Analysis of the Abraham Accords clearly shows that the goal had little to do with securing peace among the parties of the accord. Israel was never even at war with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, or Morocco. Unofficial relations between Israel and Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Morocco go back to the early 1970s.

The Abraham Accords had a different function: to leverage Israel as a broker with the Trump administration so that Arab monarchs could obtain what they wanted from the United States but were unable to get directly. For Israel, the accord with the United Arab Emirates meant tightening the ring on Iran, getting closer to its borders, and, thereby, threatening it. At the same time, the accords were intended to isolate and bypass the Palestinian people by normalizing Israeli relations with some Arab countries. The Trump–Netanyahu “deal” within the accords was to grant the request of each Arab state ready to sign a peace agreement with Israel.

The Abraham Accords were widely celebrated as a breakthrough and the beginning of a new chapter in Israeli-Arab relations. Yet, the Abraham Accords must be seen within the larger Middle Eastern geopolitical context. Via the accords, Israel was able to draw closer to three vibrant waterways of the region: the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Gibraltar, and the Strait of Tiran. With Trump planning to repatriate American troops from the Middle East, Israel was selected to continue US policing by proxy, securing oil transportation routes.

The culmination of the Trump policy was the so-called “Deal of the Century,” which envisioned the annexation of the rest of Palestinian prime land and resources in the West Bank. The annexation plan aimed to change the status of the West Bank from occupied territory to being under full Israeli sovereignty. With the backing of President Trump and his team of Jewish American settler supporters (particularly Friedman, the American Ambassador to Israel, and Greenblatt, Trump’s special envoy), Israel felt that the time had come to fulfill a long-standing dream of Greater Israel, thus sealing the settler colonial project. For several reasons, Israel decided not to proceed legally with its annexation plan of the West Bank, but rather to continue with a silent and de facto annexation. This decision has created a de facto system of apartheid on both sides of the Green Line. Although the Biden administration continues to express opposition to the Jewish settlement project, Israel is currently allowed to proceed with settlement and is provided political impunity by its settler colonialist ally, the United States.

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<sup>3</sup>F. Bateman and L. Pilkington, eds., *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity and Culture* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave

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<sup>5</sup>Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, “Tracing Settler Colonialism: A Genealogy of a Paradigm in the Sociology of Knowledge Production in Israel,” *Politics & Society* 50, no. 1 (2022): 44–83.

<sup>6</sup>Pekka Pitkänen, “Pentateuch–Joshua: A Settler-Colonial Document of a Supplanting Society,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 3 (2014): 245–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.842626>; see also Pekka Pitkänen, “Settler Colonialism in Ancient Israel,” [https://www.academia.edu/31712835/Settler\\_Colonialism\\_in\\_Ancient\\_Israel](https://www.academia.edu/31712835/Settler_Colonialism_in_Ancient_Israel); Pekka Pitkänen, “Reading Genesis–Joshua as a Unified Document from an Early Date: A Settler Colonial Perspective,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, February 3, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107914564822>; Pekka Pitkänen, “Ancient Israel and Settler Colonialism,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 4, no. 1 (2014): 64–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2013.812944>.

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<sup>19</sup>Fayez Abdullah Sayegh, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine* (Beirut: Research Center, Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965).

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<sup>32</sup>“Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel,” <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-golan-heights-part-state-israel/>,  
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<sup>34</sup>“Full Transcript of Pence’s Knesset Speech—The Jerusalem Post,” January 23, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Full-transcript-of-Pences-Knesset-speech-539476>.

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