

FOREWORD

By Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II and Phyllis Bennis

In a recent article, the Israeli daily *Jerusalem Post* quoted Prime Minister Naftali Bennett welcoming a group of international visitors. “Your love for Israel is legendary,” he said. “Your passion for Israel is an uncompromising statement of support for the Jewish state, for its people, and for our destiny. Your devotion to Israel is not only a blessing for us, but it has helped us sustain our situation during the most trying times, including wars. You rejoice in Israel’s many triumphs, and you stand with us side-by-side when we most need it.”

One might have reasonably assumed Bennett was welcoming Jewish visitors, appreciating their expected support for Israel. But these were Christians, coming to Israel from around the world to celebrate their support for Israel as an exclusive Jewish state. At a time when Israel’s 2018 Nation-State Law asserts that only Jews, no one else in the State of Israel including the 20 percent of Israeli citizens who are Palestinians, have the right of self-determination in their own country, international support is weakening. At a time when Israeli violations of international law and human rights are leading to more and more public criticism from around the world, the uncompromising Christian support for Israel’s exclusive Jewish identity is important indeed. No wonder Prime Minister Bennett was so effusive in his thanks.

Don Wagner’s remarkable memoir tracks his own history and his own transition as he moved from life as a young, conservative white evangelical Christian in rural upstate New York to become a committed activist for Palestinian rights. All the while he interrogates and challenges the theological origins and the political consequences of Christian Zionism for Palestinians in the occupied territory, inside Israel, and in far-flung exile.

Wagner’s transformation didn’t happen all at once. He came to oppose the Vietnam War as a seminary student, and to understand the primacy of racism in US society while working as an assistant pastor in a Black church.

He began to grasp the reality of colonialism while meeting with Palestinians living—and dying—under Israeli occupation, and those facing dispossession and massacres in the refugee camps of Lebanon and beyond. Over time, he examined, confronted, and finally came to staunchly oppose what he eventually recognized as Christian zionism.

Wagner describes the movement's importance in helping the Jewish campaign to colonize pre-state Israel, in what was then Palestine. "In the Christian West," he writes, "Christian Zionists were invaluable as they provided Christian theological images and language for the Zionists that adopted the settler colonial goals of replacing the local population. When it came time for Zionism to market their ideas in the churches, or the British Parliament and the United States, they borrowed from the Christian Zionist narratives, such as 'God gave the entirety of Palestine to the Jewish people.' There was no place for the Palestinian Arab population. Again, the Zionist lobby borrowed from Christian Zionists, claiming the Palestinians were the 'Canaanites' or the Philistines of the Bible and had to be destroyed just as the Israelites did in the Book of Joshua."

But despite that history, until three or four decades ago, the existence of Christian zionism as a movement in the United States would have been surprising to most people. Its influence beyond theological discussions within various evangelical denominations, and behind the scenes within the Jewish zionist movement, was minimal. But as Wagner notes, that began to change during the Reagan administration of the 1980s, and the movement today counts millions of adherents and often determinative influence in the Republican Party. According to Ron Dermer, former Israeli ambassador to the US, "the backbone of Israel's support in the United States is the evangelical Christians."

Just for comparison sake, there are about 82 million evangelical Protestants in the United States, about a quarter of the US population. Eighty percent of evangelicals believe that "the creation of Israel in 1948 was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy that would bring about Christ's return." Jews, on the other hand, make up only about 7.5 million people in the United States. And while Jews have historically been the main backers of Israel, these days fewer and fewer US Jews, especially young Jews, support Israel. In fact, as Dermer noted with some dismay, American Jews are found "disproportionately among [Israel's] critics."

What dismayed Ambassador Dermer, however, is bringing new hope to supporters of human rights, international law, and equality for all across the Middle East, and specifically in Israel-Palestine. The rise of organizations like

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Jewish Voice for Peace, which joins human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the leading Israeli human rights group B'tselem, in calling out Israeli apartheid and standing clearly against zionism and colonialism, provides a powerful challenge to Christian zionism.

Certainly it will take more work—education, mobilization, advocacy, and more—to successfully confront that movement. We come to Don Wagner's story from disparate vantage points—that of a Christian pastor and bishop with decades of mobilizing for social justice even before cofounding the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival in 2017, and that of a secular Jew steeped in internationalism and organizing for Palestinian rights. Rev. Barber has collaborated for years with local and national Jewish communities across the United States, whose Jewish activists, leaders, and rabbis have shared with him their own diverse critiques of the Israeli government's long-standing oppression of Palestinians. Phyllis Bennis works with Jewish organizations as well as Muslim, Christian, and of course a wide range of secular groups committed to justice and Palestinian rights, with years of learning and writing throughout the Middle East behind her. Both of us read and engage with Israeli Jewish supporters of Palestinian rights, as well as with Palestinian analysts and civil society activists around the world.

But while we come from different starting points, we come together based on the call of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who demanded that we challenge the evil triplets of racism, poverty, and militarism. If Dr. King were alive today, he would certainly include ecological devastation as well as the toxic brew of religious [white] nationalism in the United States, which are part of the call as well. And all of that leads to the demand for international human rights, keeping the pressure on the US government to stop providing more than \$3.8 billion every year directly to the Israeli military, and to stop protecting Israel from being held accountable in the United Nations or the International Criminal Court for its violations of international law.

Referencing research regarding Jewish settlement in Palestine as a colonial project, Wagner quotes the founder of modern zionism, Theodore Herzl saying, "If I wish to substitute a new building for an old one, I must demolish before I construct." That understanding continues today, as the modern government of Israel maintains a policy of dispossessing the indigenous Palestinian population and replacing them with Jewish settlers. And support for that explicit policy of dispossession-replacement comes most powerfully

from organizations like CUFI, Christians United for Israel. CUFI's leader, Rev. John Hagee, spoke in May 2021 at the height of Israel's assault on Gaza. He reminded his followers that God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people, and that the Jews are "the apple of God's eye." He also warned that if the United States did not continue to support Israel, God would not support the United States.

Rev. Barber, as a Christian theologian deeply rooted in the ancient Jewish prophets' critique of and challenge to violence, poverty, and injustice, recognizes that such acts are unacceptable. We share a commitment to opposing such actions, regardless of whether they are committed by state authorities or by the privileged against the marginalized. And as Rev. Barber recognizes, there is nothing antisemitic about such a challenge to injustice—rather, challenging exactly those acts of injustice is in fact an obligation of all religions, and indeed a requirement of prophetic authority.

As long as leaders of CUFI and similar organizations continue to distort Biblical references to win support for Israel's dispossession, occupation, and apartheid, and as long as they wield the fear of God's wrath to gain their followers' embrace of unlimited US military and political support for Israel, the movement for Palestinian rights will have to work even harder. Don Wagner's compelling story will help make that happen. We are grateful to him for sharing and glad for the chance to introduce this important story.

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