

Good morning and Thank you, Dr. Hanna, for this introduction. It's a pleasure to be here with you all and for me it's really great to see the Bible College putting this great conference together. Not only did I teach at the Bible College a long time ago, I studied there for one year before I went to Germany so there is a long history of interaction with the Bible College. It's also great to see so many friends here. I wanted Rev. Naim to speak before me because I feel that he's one of my teachers and now I have to speak before him. Since he will talk about Sabeel I will talk more about a theology in the Palestinian context.

And what I'm going to present to you today is actually new. You may have to get a bit used to it because it's a new way of thinking. It might push the envelope for you a bit. I'm glad that there are no tomatoes on the tables so that no one will throw them at me. But this is really the outcome of my theological work in the last 5 years especially, trying really to read the Bible with Palestinian Christian eyes. I think the difference between this approach and many other approaches, even my previous approaches is that I think that until recently we all, even as Palestinians theologians, we were dancing on the rhythm of European theology of the 19th Century, trying to react here, to react there, to change here and there, but the assumptions, the systems of thinking, was still 19th Century Europe. Here I feel, and maybe for the first time, we start really again with the context. So, I'm saying this to warn you a bit, and hopefully you can

And let me start with 3 assumptions which are important for you to understand the whole concept that I'm going to present to you today. The first is: the Bible could not have been written anywhere else but in Palestine. This is, for me, an assumption. It could not have been written in Egypt, it could not have been written in Persia, it could not have been written in Rome, although maybe some small parts, but it IS connected to this land. So, this is the first assumption. And the second assumption is that the Palestinian people and part of the Jewish people are the continuation of the peoples of the land. It's not Israel, according to what I am going to present to you. You will see why. Actually, Israel represents Rome of the Bible, not the people of the land. And this is not only because I'm a Palestinian. I'm sure if we were to do a DNA test between David, who was a Bethlehemite, and Jesus, born in Bethlehem, and Mitri, born just across the street from where Jesus was born, I'm sure the DNA will show that there is a trace. While, if you put King David, Jesus and Netanyahu, you will get nothing, because Netanyahu comes from an East European tribe who converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages. I said that I would be pushing a bit the envelope but so far you are surviving. I'm glad for that. And being born just across the street from where Jesus was born, I always loved to say that most probably one of my grand, grand, grand, grandmas used to babysit for Jesus. So that's the second assumption that actually if we want to understand what the people mentioned in the Bible were dealing with, we have to listen to the Palestinian voice. Not because of the DNA, but because of this experience that I will talk about shortly. And sometimes I think that especially Evangelicals don't take that seriously. Actually, the Palestinian Christians are the only ones in the world that, when they speak about their forefathers, they mean their actual forefathers, and also the forefathers in the faith. For us they are the same. Think about it.

And the third assumption that I would like to make is that I will not talk about the daily life, the facts on the ground, as in the title, but I will talk about the bigger picture. So for me, if you really want to understand the bigger picture, this is how I try to understand it.

I have 7 points so that you can follow me. These are the 7 pillars for a theology, a Christian theology in the Palestinian context. We start with the first point: the land. What is so special about this land? Actually, what is special in this land, if you look at the geopolitical picture, and by the way, you will see a lot corresponding with Gary Burge's lecture. I think that there will be a very interesting dialogue going on, but it's a totally different starting point, and maybe ending point. We have to talk about it later. So, what is really special about this land? We think that this land, let's call it Israel-Palestine, we think that this land is in the center of the universe, right? This is why in Jerusalem there is this center of the world. In ancient maps, Jerusalem is always in the center. But actually this is nothing but a myth. Geopolitically speaking, this land is nothing but a land on the periphery. Always. This land is surrounded by 5 regional powers. They change a bit, but really not much for the last 3,000 years. You have Persia, today's Iran. If you think you can get rid of Iran, this will continue to be a regional power. Then you have either a Babylonia or an Assyria. One of them. You can't have a strong Iraq and a strong Syria at the same time. Usually one is strong and one is weak, but they are the second super power. The third super power is Phrygia or what we call Turkey. Turkey is the 3rd super power in this region. We cannot change that. There are 80 million people. And then you have Europe, Greece, Rome. These will continue to be a major power surrounding Palestine. And then you have Egypt in the south. This is the geopolitical picture of the region. And in the middle, but really not in the center, but at the periphery, you will have Israel-Palestine. If you look carefully you will see that the land was a little divided.

So, what is special about this geopolitical setting of Israel-Palestine? Actually, every time the regional super powers wanted to have fun, they call it war, they wouldn't fight their wars on their territory but they come to this country to have all of their wars. And so, it is not by chance that Armageddon is located here because this country is nothing but a battlefield for regional super powers, up to this moment. It will not change, by the way. If you think we can change it, I'm afraid we cannot change it. And this is why, if you look carefully, you will see that this is a land on the periphery. And all regional powers try to have influence in our country. Now, this is a land on the periphery. This is the first point. And the second point is: what does that mean for the peoples of the land? You know, it's not fun to live on a battlefield. For those of you who were at our center on Monday for the dance theater, I'm not sure if all of you got really what the dance is all about. It was showing Palestinians trying to build up their normal life—getting in love, getting married, dancing, going about their normal business. And every time their normal life is interrupted by something: shooting, this and that. And I'm really not sure if you can put yourself in the shoes of a Palestinian. You try to build up, like our Prime Minister said yesterday, you try to build up your country. You try to build institutions, you try to create hope and then the next war starts and you have nothing to do with the war. It's all of these big guys around you that are playing, and suddenly you find yourself on that battlefield, and you are the ball that the regional powers are playing with. Can you feel all of these hits that the people of this land are getting over and over and over and over again. It's very tough to live on this battlefield under the influence of all these super powers that actually determine your life. You are basically nothing compared to all of these super powers. So, that is the reality of the peoples of the land. Again, they

aren't Israel. This experience I'm talking about, it's only the Palestinians who understand this, because Israel represents Rome.

This third point, God. Where is God in all of this? You know, God is very visible in Egypt. You go there and see the pyramids. He is strong, visible, you see him. You go to Iran, God is visible. You go to Rome, God is visible. You go to Athens, God is visible. He's strong; he's there. But God in this country is totally hidden. You cannot see him. He didn't leave even any trace. Even his temple was destroyed; his people pushed into exile, totally invisible, totally weak. So, what is the most important question if you live as people in this land? The most important question, and you hear it everyday coming out of the mouths of the Palestinian people: God, where are you? You see these walls being erected around the little town of Bethlehem? You are doing nothing. God, where are you? You see all of these settlements taking our land? What are you doing about it? Silence. You see that our people are crushed under this military occupation and you do nothing! You don't even move a finger. Where are you? And actually, the entire Bible from chapter one of Genesis to Revelation 22 is just dealing with this question, where are you. Not, where is God, but God, where are you? It's this struggle with God. God, why are you so invisible? Why are so weak? Why don't you do something about it. In that sense, the topic of this conference is to the point, "Christ at the Checkpoint." Where is God? And, you know, the biggest revelation of the Bible, what was it? The biggest revelation was that God was in exile. God was there when the temple was destroyed. In the middle of defeat our forefathers were able to see God. He was there where no one would have expected him to be. He wasn't in Egypt and he wasn't in Iran and he wasn't in Italy and he wasn't in Athens. He was there, on the battlefield. And this is why it's exactly right that the life of Jesus ends where? On the cross. This is where God belongs. He was there, in the ultimate defeat where people thought, "it's over." There was God. And actually, believe it or not, God was able to do it. He was able to defeat the geopolitical setting because, you know, Bethlehem, without Jesus, would be the most boring little town that no one would really know about. Jerusalem, without God, is nothing. I mean go, look at the archeology. Without God, Jerusalem would be 4 homes, poor people, nothing. But because God revealed himself in this land, this is how he was able to transform the whole geopolitical setting. And this is why Jerusalem became the center. You know, without God, we would be living just on a battlefield but because God came here, he transformed the battlefield into a holy land. It's a huge transformation. And I'm not talking about theory; I'm talking about how people feel. Who would live on a battlefield?

The fourth point: the neighbor. If you live in this part of the world and if it's really true that this land is on the periphery, then, and you are always under the influence of all of these super powers, what happens is that your neighbor will become the enemy. Why? Because he comes representing a super power and you are representing another super power and you start hating each other because you represent these super powers. This is what is happening today with Fatah and Hamas. Hamas being under the influence of 2 of the super powers in the north, Iran and Syria, Fatah being under the influence of Egypt in the south—divided country. Your neighbor becomes the enemy. We have even families where they have 2 kids, one is Fatah, one is Hamas. They become enemies. And this is why the second important question in the entire Bible is, "Where is your neighbor? Who is your neighbor? Where is your brother?" And actually, the entire Bible is trying to

answer this question and the answer is, “Your enemy is your neighbor.” It’s a new look at the geopolitics. He’s not your enemy. Maybe he represents another super power, but actually, he is your potential neighbor and it’s actually a new look at the whole situation. So, I come to the fifth point: I’m running out of time. The third important question that the Bible deals with, and this is the fifth point. The third important question is liberation, how do we liberate ourselves? If we are always living under occupation, and believe me, for the last 3,000 years, tell me when Palestine was not under occupation. I don’t know any era when Palestine was not under occupation. It was always occupied. So, what’s the way to liberation? And in the Bible there are 5 answers. Gary [Burge] talked about 3 the other evening, but I will show them from a Palestinian perspective. The first answer is that if we really want to be liberated, we have to abide by the law, the sharia. We connect the Pharisees with some groups in Israel today, but actually, the continuation of the Pharisees are the Islamic brotherhood. This is their model; they want a country governed by sharia. Only, and only if we abide by God’s law will we be liberated. Good luck. Unfortunately, there are many evangelicals who are so naïve that they are calling for this sharia. The second is obvious: they hit; we hit back. So we take revolt and that is basically what jihad and other groups are calling for. The third is accommodation: we cannot beat them so we play the game with them. The fourth is sub-contracting. This is what in the Bible the tax collectors were doing. Many Palestinians are sub-contractors for Israeli companies. And the fifth answer is, you know what? With this geopolitical setting we cannot change it. It’s only the Messiah. So let’s wait for the Messiah. So, actually, the people are divided about how to liberate this country. And Jesus comes, and what is his answer? He doesn’t give a sixth answer. Very interesting. There is no sixth answer from Jesus. What does he do? He calls a community where you have people with the background of Pharisees. You have people who were zealots, people who were tax collectors. All of these groups become part of a new community, because all of these other answers are divisive. And Jesus came to make the community whole, not to give a sixth divisive answer. So creating a community.

The sixth point: the kingdom. Gary talked about it. In the Old Testament they wanted to have a state like all the others. You look at these 5 super powers and you say, “we want one too.” And it’s true, the first question the disciples ask Jesus after the resurrection is what? Lord, when are you going to restore the kingdom? As if this kingdom was ever functional. Tell me any state in this region that really functions. I mean the Bible tells us that it was all failure, total failure and the disciples, after 3 years with Jesus, don’t have any other question except this. It’s a disaster. And what is the answer of Jesus? “You will receive power when you receive the Holy Spirit and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the world.” What was Jesus doing? He was creating a kingdom. The vision you are thinking about is only this tiny state. Come on. It’s smaller than Delaware. Is this the vision you are thinking about? Let me show you the vision I have in mind. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria. Now remember, Judea and Samaria were divided. Why? Because in the Middle East, all the boundaries are set by the super powers. Up to this moment, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, all are set by the super powers. They dictate the boundaries, and Jesus was telling people to think of this world as a land without boundaries, and, you know what? You are going to all of these 5 super powers and you

are going to proclaim another kingdom, much more powerful than any of them. You talk about vision. This is where vision starts.

And the last thing is: the spirit. In the Old Testament, it should not happen through might or power, but through my spirit. What Jesus actually came to do is to give this country a new spirit, different than what all other super powers are trying to give us. And I feel that what is at stake in this land is the spirit. What kind of spirit are we going to have in this country? What kind of spirit? What kind of culture is going to prevail? Right now it doesn't look very good, but it's all about this spirit.

So, understand that it was really our forefathers who wrote the Bible. It was our forefathers to whom the revelation was given, and, believe it or not, the Bible, if you live it as a Palestinian and read it as a Palestinian, you think it has been written just yesterday because it deals, not with some spiritual issues up there. It deals with the real issues of this region and it gives a very interesting answer. Unfortunately, 2,000 years later, Jerusalem doesn't know what makes for peace.