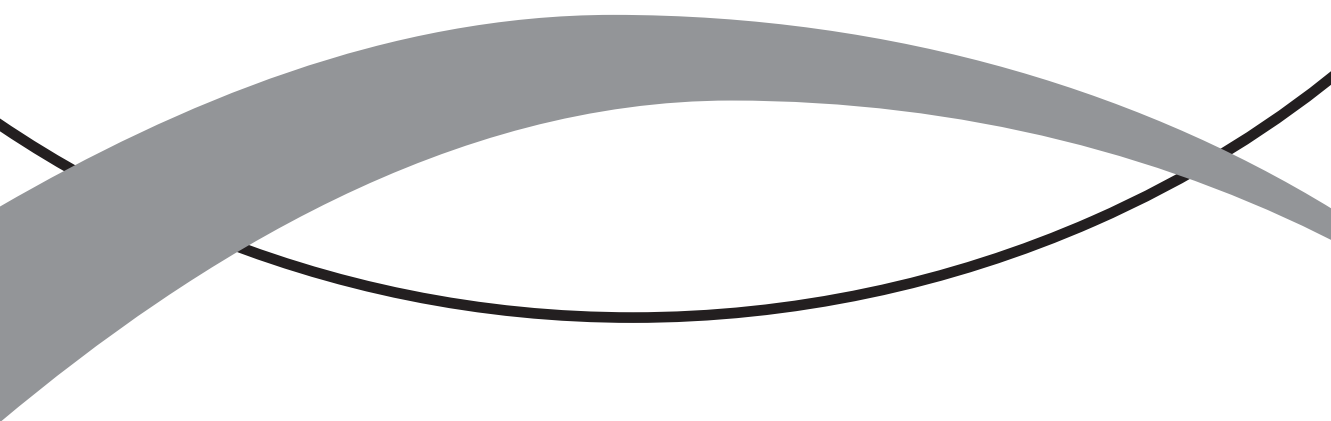


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**UNITING CHURCH ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE MIDDLE EAST**

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Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

<i>AssMin</i>	Assembly Minutes
<i>BOU</i>	Basis of Union
<i>CS</i>	Covenanting Statement
<i>RP</i>	Revised Preamble
<i>UCMC</i>	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
<i>UCAConst</i>	Uniting Church Constitution
<i>UCAREgs2025</i>	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
<i>UIW2</i>	Uniting in Worship 2

Institutions and Organisations

<i>UCA</i>	Uniting Church in Australia
<i>UAICC</i>	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
<i>WCC</i>	World Council of Churches
<i>ASC</i>	Assembly Standing Committee

This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

<i>UCS</i>	Uniting Church Studies
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David, Goliath and the Gospel: Metaphors in Conflict

Clive Pearson

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to situate the statements on the enduring Middle East crisis inside current scholarship to do with the region. It assumes the need for a deeper historical and geopolitical understanding. It draws upon podcasts to provide an historical appreciation of the importance of Gaza through time. It seeks to explain the emergence of the state of Israel as a consequence of late nineteenth century thinking on Zionism and evangelical understandings of the restoration of Israel. The current situation in the whole region can only be understood in the light of the fall of the Ottoman empire and post-World War 1 reconfigurations of territory. The present plight of the Palestinians was seeded in the establishment of Israel and the dislocation of its people during the *Nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948. In the late twentieth century a number of 'new historians' arose in Israel to challenge the received Israeli understanding that its people were like David facing an Arabic Goliath. That metaphor has become inverted. The article mediates Palestinian experience and the emergence of a liberation theology raising afresh the question of how should the gospel be understood in a time of genocide. Munther Isaac presented the image and idea of Christ in the rubble; the Israelis have made use of an AI system to assist in the selection of bombing sites called 'the gospel'.

In the aftermath of the Hamas' raid of 7 October 2023 the Uniting Church has sought to make its position clear on the 'worsening conflict' in the Middle East. It has done so through public statements, resolutions and articles on Palestine and Israel. The basis on which these have been made is "our Christian faith and in our commitments to justice, human rights and dignity" in a context of an "unfolding humanitarian crisis." The most recent advocacy of the church has been directed towards the need for ceasefires, humanitarian aid, the end of occupation, the release of all hostages, respect for international law, the rejection of anti-Semitism and racism, the ending of weapon exports, and the pursuit of a "just and lasting peace for all in Palestine and Israel."

The purpose of this "discerning" has been to "render a transparent resource for Uniting Church members, partners, media and members of the public who wish to understand our position and advocacy."¹

This resourcing has come with calls to 'take action' that lend themselves to local witness and worship.² The present response is built upon previous statements reaching back to 2008.³ These things have their

¹ Uniting Church in Australia, 'Statements, Articles and Resources on Palestine and Israel', 5 August 2025, <https://uniting.church/palestine-and-israel/>

² These practical actions include displaying banners, writing to the government, making use of a FAQ resource in order to engage with others, and making use of the President's liturgical lament for Gaza.

³ Uniting Church, Assembly: "Jews and Judaism: A Statement by the UCA," (2009); Assembly Standing Committee, 'Statement on Palestine and Israel, (2008); 'Statement on Palestine', (2015).

urgency and their place. They reflect the sense of Palestine presenting a *kairos* moment ⁴ to the world-wide churches. It is not surprising that the Uniting Church has adopted the World Council of Church's 2025 statement, *A Call to End Apartheid, Occupation and Impunity in Palestine and Israel*.

The intention behind this bibliographical essay is to consider how the Uniting Church's positions sit within a number of currents within contemporary scholarship to do with the Middle East. For that purpose it is interdisciplinary with a particular focus on historical and theological studies. The essay is constructed on the grounds that the church needs to have a broader grasp of why this geopolitical series of problems has become so enduring. It must necessarily engage with competing religious understandings, the emergence of a Palestinian liberation theology, and the impact of Israel's 'new historians'. It examines claims to do with who is the "David" and who is the "Goliath." It invites consideration of how religious rhetoric is used and what might be meant by references to the 'gospel'. This essay should also be read in a way that complements the other articles that deal with the consequences of the Armenian genocide, growing up in war-torn Lebanon, and being a pilgrim in Israel on 7 October.

Podcasting History

The most readily accessible accounts that have relevance and bearing on the regional conflict in the Middle East is via well-researched podcasts. The Empire: World History podcast with the eminent historian, William Dalrymple, and Anita Anand has repeatedly made use of specialist guests from leading universities to explore Gaza through time, the rise of Zionism, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982) and the emergence of Hezbollah.⁵ To these can be added other series on the Armenian genocide, the fall of the Ottoman empire, the manoeuvring of European diplomacy, and the wars between Israel and Arab nations. The Rest is History podcast with Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook has covered the Iranian revolution beginning with the disillusionment and then the overthrow of the Shah.⁶

Of particular interest is the 11-part series Dalrymple and Anand oversaw on Gaza. Writing in *The Guardian* Dalrymple noted that it is a "place about which we have traditionally learned remarkably little." Its history, he believes, is "something we obviously badly need to know in order to grasp current events."⁷ Without such a narrative we succumb to what the Palestinian poet of the West Bank, Mahmoud Darwish, described as "the ambush of a new past."⁸ His verse echoes the lament of Jean-Pierre Filiu: "The Gaza I knew, whose length and breadth. I've travelled, has ceased to exist."⁹

The podcast series set about the task of exploring the intersection of time and this particularity of place. The intention behind the podcast was essentially two-fold. In the first instance Dalrymple and Anand were

⁴ In 2009 Palestinian Christians released the *Kairos Palestine Document*. <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/kairos-palestine-document>

⁵ William Dalrymple and Anita Anand, "The Deep History of Gaza," Episodes 291-301; "Israel's 1982 Invasion of Lebanon," Episode 352. <https://empirepoduk.com>

⁶ Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook, "Revolution in Iran," 19 January, 2026. Episodes 636-639. <https://therestishistory.com/episodes>

⁷ William Dalrymple, " 'One of the Oldest Urban Centres on the Planet': Gaza's Rich History in Ruins," *The Guardian*, 17 October 2025.

⁸ Mahmoud Darwish, "To Our Land," *The Butterfly's Burden*, translated by Fady Joudah, (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2007).

⁹ Jean-Pierre Filiu, *A Historian in Gaza*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2025).

committed to taking a “deep dive” into Gaza’s past, “one of the oldest urban centres on the earth.” They wished to look past the “hellscape” that Gaza has become and the present perspective of its being “little more than a huge refugee camp on a recently settled portion of desert.”¹⁰ Their series captured the first intimations of the Palestinians under the name of Pelesets (of Ghazzati) and then the Palashtu, dating from the 15th and 8th centuries BC respectively. It described a history in which the city had often been an “incredibly rich and prosperous port” with trade in spices, sweet wine, perfumes – and later, cotton and citrus fruits. Dalrymple and Anand set aside time to consider the “golden period” Gaza’s experienced in the early Christian period (fifth and sixth centuries). It was a noted intellectual centre and a site for the first monasteries in Palestine. They also described how the city and its hinterland has been “one of the most fought-over and contested spaces” because of its strategic location. It was subject to invasion and conquest from the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, the Byzantines, Umayyads, Mamluks, and the Ottomans into which can be inserted the Crusades.

The second intention of this podcast series was dedicated to how the “catastrophe” of 1948 (*al-Nakba*) arose as a consequence of two world wars. It mapped the ways in which the British army sought to take Gaza from the Ottomans in 1917 and how that then gave way to the British Mandate and the increasing tensions between Zionist settlers and Palestinian Arabs. To what extent was Arab revolt of 1936-1939 a response to the repressive tactics of the British? The latter episodes then focussed upon the end of the mandate, the conflicting responses to the UN partition plan, the war of 1948, the establishment of the state of Israel and the impact on Gaza following the mass displacement of 700,000 Palestinians. Its population almost doubled overnight.

This series did not stand on its own. In one earlier episode Dalrymple and Anand had paid specific attention to the Sykes-Picot agreement: in 1916 the British and the French set forth the parameters by which they would carve upon the Middle East following the defeat of the Ottomans. This agreement along with the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which expressed the support of the British for ‘a national home for the Jewish people’ in Palestine set in place the framework in which the subsequent crises would play out.¹¹

Implicating Empires

The current “terrible moment” (Dalrymple) invariably draws attention to the legacy of the British mandate and the various responses of the United States since it became the first country to recognize officially the state of Israel in 1948.¹² Those positions did not arise out of nowhere. At one level it is an obvious response to the persistence of anti-Semitism in Europe and then the Holocaust – but that is only part of the story. So much also depended on the case that was being made for a Christian Zionism. Donald Lewis has noted how the seeds of such were to be found in arguments made on behalf of the restoration of Israel during the

¹⁰ William Dalrymple, “One of the Oldest Centres on the Planet,” *The Guardian*, 17 October 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/17/one-of-the-oldest-urban-centres-on-the-planet-gazas-rich-history-in-ruins>

¹¹ Andrew Thomas, “What was the Sykes-Picot Agreement and why does it still affect the Middle East today?,” *The Conversation*, 14 February 2025. <https://theconversation.com/what-was-the-sykes-picot-agreement-and-why-does-it-still-affect-the-middle-east-today-246332>; Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: The Origin of the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (New York: Random House, 2010); Bernard Regan, *The Balfour Declaration: Empire, the Mandate and Resistance in Palestine* (London: Verso, 2018)

¹² See Daniel E. Zoughbie, *Kicking the Hornet’s Nest: US Foreign Policy in the Middle East from Truman to Trump*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2025).

Reformation.¹³ Of more immediate causative significance, though, was the Christian Zionism of certain evangelical groups in the mid- to late-nineteenth century: it has access to the political elites of time through the likes of the Earl of Shaftesbury. The Christian faith is heavily implicated in what has come to pass.

In his study on *Lobbying for Zionism* (2025) Ilan Pappé examines how an “aggressive” lobby arose on both sides of the Atlantic. It took on a more substantial form from 1948 onwards. It is not a monolithic movement. It comprises “groupings of ideas, individuals and organisations.” Pappé identifies how the lobby seeks to cultivate political elites: it has been operative in campaign funding in the United States and the distribution of what he argues is propaganda. Through his research Pappé has shown how the lobby makes use of smear campaigns and the blacklisting of those who do not support Israel and who campaign on behalf of the dispossession of Palestinian lands and civil rights. Those who speak out against what they see as the excesses of Israeli policy, and the way in which Zionist thinking justifies the further settler appropriation of lands, are liable to be dismissed as anti-Semitic.¹⁴

The Cost of Shifting Geopolitics

These podcasts – and numerous others – provide a primer for the ongoing Middle East crisis. They provide an umbrella under which more detailed monographs can assist the Uniting Church in its prayers of intercession, expressions of solidarity and a basic desire to be better informed. That is an aspiration insofar as, generally speaking, the complexities of the recurring sequence of troubles is far removed from the matters of restructure that haunt the church.

The podcasts invite a broader reading, initially, of how various empires are implicated in the present. The legacies wrought by the fall of the Ottoman empire, for example, cannot be underestimated. Its defeat in the First World War led to the establishment of new nations and the determining of frontiers. In his comprehensive study of the great war in the Middle East Eugene Rogan describes how European imperialism replaced four centuries of a multinational empire ruled by the Muslim Turks. The fall of the Ottomans indirectly then laid the foundations for the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict – “more than any other legacy” suggests Rogan.¹⁵

Like Rogan, Kim Ghattas has been a guest on the Empire podcast – in her case, reporting on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the birth of Hezbollah. Ghattas is more widely known for her much-acclaimed *Black Wave* in which she makes use of an empathetic story-telling approach through real-life characters. The framework is one of “perspectivity” which allows her to examine complex problems through the intimate interconnections among diverse experiences and points of view. The focus of her particular work here is on the impact on the Middle East brought about by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia that is contested through proxy wars. Ghattas is not writing about Palestine and Gaza *per se*: her narrative

¹³ Donald M. Lewis, *A Short History of Christian Zionism: From the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2021).

¹⁴ Ilan Pappé, *Lobbying for Zionism on Both Sides of the Atlantic*, (London: Oneworld, 2025).

¹⁵ Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 405.

begins in Lebanon. She is seeking to answer her opening question, “what happened to us?” across the region from 1979 onwards.¹⁶

“The New Historians”

Seeking to interpret afresh the received understandings of the national myths of Israel have been a number of scholars described as “the new historians.” This term was first put to use by Benny Morris in 1988. Their number includes the prolific Pappé as well as Avi Shlaim and Simha Flapan.¹⁷ They do not constitute a movement as such, but they do share important ground with regards to sources for their work. Each of them was able to make use of access to official government papers from multiple archives having been declassified after the *Nakba*. These new historians all inverted the metaphor of David and Goliath which had come to prominence during the 1948 war. Back then Israel saw itself as David facing the Arab Goliath. In their work Palestine is David, Israel becomes Goliath on account of its military hardware and logistics.

Shlaim laid out a set of their findings over and against the Zionist position (which he described as “one of the most successful public relations exercises of the twentieth century”). This “varnished position of the past” Shlaim reckoned to be “selective, simplistic and self-serving.”¹⁸ The received understanding which the “new historians” have contested had persisted unchallenged for four decades: it is still widely held – and, as Shlaim suggests, “goes roughly as follows.”¹⁹

The passage of the United Nations’ partition resolution (29 November 1947) called for the establishment of two states – one Jewish, the other Arab. The Palestinians, their Arab neighbours and the Arab League rejected the plan. Towards the end of their mandate the British sought to frustrate the establishment of the Jewish state, but to no avail. The ending of the mandate and the proclamation of the state of Israel led to the invasion of Arab states intent on “strangling the Jewish state at birth.” The ensuing conflict was likened to a battle between “a Jewish David and an Arab Goliath”. Israel won seemingly against the odds: during the war itself thousands of Palestinians fled to neighbouring Arab states. The Israeli leaders then sought peaceful co-existence but Arabic intransigence made that impossible. This “deadlock” was only partially broken when President Anwar Sadat of Egypt made his unprecedented visit to Jerusalem in 1977.²⁰

In “a nutshell” the revisionist position was one in which the British had actually sought to prevent the emergence of a Palestinian state. The Jews outnumbered the Arab forces both in terms of soldiery and weapons. For the most part, Palestinians did not choose to leave: they were forced out. The Arab opposition was no ‘monolith’: their rulers were too divided. The quest for a political settlement was frustrated more by

¹⁶ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty Year Rivalry That Unravelling Culture, Religion and the Collective Memory in the Middle East*, (London: 2020)

¹⁷ Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Ilan Pappé, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1947-1951* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988); Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); Avi Shlaim, *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Avi Shlaim, “The War of the Israeli Historians,” *Annales*, 59:1, January-February 2004, 161.

¹⁹ Shlaim, “The War of the Israeli Historians,” 161.

²⁰ Shahin Berenji, ‘Sadat and the Road to Jerusalem: Bold Gestures and Risk Acceptance in the Search for Peace’, *International Security* 45:1 (Summer 2020), 127-163.

the Israelis than the Arabs.²¹ It should come as no surprise that Shlaim discerned that Israelis were likely to be perceived as ‘conquerors’ by the Palestinians

These first writings of the new historians have been followed by other publications – both by them and by others. It should come as no surprise that these revisionist arguments have been frequently disputed by more right-wing historians in Israel. The familiar criticism of this alternative reading of history has been its selective use of the declassified archival material, the neglect of Arab sources that might suggest a contrary interpretation, and the failure to take seriously the anti-Semitism to be found in Islam. It is said the new historians pay insufficient attention to the need for security. Their work has not been contained to the academy, though. It has received widespread attention: it has inserted itself into the country’s public and political domain.²²

For members of the Uniting Church the most accessible of these new historians is Pappé. His many books are readily available in bookshops throughout the country. One of those in his corpus which is especially relevant at present is his *Ten Myths about Israel* first published in 2017. The edition currently available in Australian bookshops was actually released in 2024 with a new preface written in the wake of October 7, the first year of the Israeli campaign against Hamas and the 35,000 then dead in Gaza.²³ The specific myths that he addressed gathered around claims like: i). Palestine was an empty land; Palestinians voluntarily left their homeland in 1948: ii). The Jews were a people without a land; Zionism is Judaism; Zionism is not colonialism: iii). Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East; the war of 1967 was a war of ‘no choice’; iv). Various ‘mythologies’ surrounding the Oslo Process and those to do with the Gaza Strip itself, which, elsewhere, Pappé describes as an ‘invention of the Israelis in 1948, faced with a seemingly intractable refugee problem’;²⁴ v). The two-state solution is the only way ahead.

The preface to this second edition is especially instructive. It was published under the heading of “Decontextualizing and Dehistoricizing Gaza.” It was marked by a distinction being made between context and pretext. The former referred to the Hamas al-Aqsa Flood on 7 October 2023 with its “atrocities and war crimes” and “the brutal Israeli retaliation.” The pretext was mediated through the accompanying comment made by António Guterres, the UN General Secretary: “these actions did not take place in a vacuum.” The tragedy of this “terrible moment” cannot be separated from “fifty-six years of occupation”²⁵ In this preface Pappé argues that Israel and its allies have “dehistoricized” these events – that is, they forget this history – in order to “pursue genocidal policies in the Gaza strip” and, in the case of the United States, reassert its presence in the region. Pappé also insists on how matters of context should extend behind the *Nakba* through to the mid-nineteenth century, when

evangelical Christianity turned the idea of “the return of the Jews” into a religious, millennial imperative and advocated the establishment of a Jewish state, the return of the Messiah, and the end of time.²⁶

²¹ Shlaim, ‘The War of Israeli Historians’, 162-163.

²² On the complexity of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ histories and their impact on Israel’s ‘*habitus*’ – ‘everything we have learnt from other people since birth, but which has become so deeply habituated that even to ourselves it feels not learned but innate’, see: Alon Helled, *Israel’s National Historiography: Between Generations, Identity and State*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024).

²³ Ilan Pappé, *Ten Myths about Israel* (London: Verso, 2024).

²⁴ Ilan Pappé, *A Very Short History of Gaza* (London: Oneworld, 2026), 92.

²⁵ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, ix-x.

²⁶ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xi.

This extension of context enables Pappé to fuse an “obscure theological vision” into a “political project” that led to the “famous, or infamous, 1917 Balfour Declaration.” Pappé is thus in a position to further the trajectory through a “cultural and intellectual Zionism” into a “settler colonial one intent on Judaizing historical Palestine regardless of the presence of a distinct indigenous population.”²⁷

Into this mix Pappé inserted his reading of “the forced relocation” of Palestinians in 1948 as an “ethnic cleansing” and the conviction that subsequent resistance is “terroristic.”²⁸ This preface is designed to situate the current conflict inside a longer history, and, more narrowly, within “the siege of nearly two decades that followed Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005.”²⁹ The purpose of the Preface is not to vindicate the Hamas attack; Pappé considers that the attack may well have provoked Hamas’ own demise. His intention is to understand why it happened and set that purpose within the context of his ten myths – with a proviso. Will the Hamas attack lead to yet another myth through the way in which it led to comparisons with the Holocaust and the Palestinian liberation movement being likened to an extension of Nazism?³⁰

It is not surprising that the new historians are more highly regarded in the west than in Israel itself. They provide a narrative which readily supports the Assembly’s endorsement of the World Council of Church’s statement on Palestine and the Kairos 2 document. Some care, nevertheless, needs to be exercised. The research of the new historians has become a part of the Israeli historiography, but not without some critique and pushback. It is also a mistake to think that they possess a common mind across the board. They do not. Morris is especially critical of Pappé, a former Israeli politician, on two grounds – historical method and whether or not Israel is pursuing genocide in Gaza.

On matters of method Morris has described his fellow revisionist “as one the world’s sloppiest historians.” For Morris the problem lies in Pappé being a “proud postmodernist” who rejects the idea of there being an “historical truth.” There are, instead, “only a collection of narratives” that reflect the number of participants in any event: each is legitimate and serves a political end. Morris takes issue with how Pappé “often omits and ignores significant evidence,” he is selective and does not seek to access a wider spread of archival sources. According to Morris, Pappé’s work “is politics by other means.”³¹

Pappé and Morris are also at odds over the question of genocide. Pappé has not been averse to making use of the language of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Back in 2010 he referred to an “incremental genocide” that represented a continuation of the ethnic cleansing of 1948.³² In his most recent work he describes how modern Gaza has been reduced to ruins “after a genocide perpetrated before our eyes.”³³ Morris has been more circumspect. It is his belief that Israel has not committed genocide, nor is it doing so now in Gaza.

²⁷ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xi.

²⁸ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xi.

²⁹ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xii.

³⁰ Pappé, *Ten Myths*, xiii-xiv.

³¹ Benny Morris, “The Liar as Hero,” *The New Republic*, 17 March, 2011. <https://newrepublic.com/article/85344/ilan-pappe-sloppy-dishonest-historian>; Shahd Dibas suggests that Pappé’s work is better described as an example of “critical activist scholarship.” See Shahd Dibas, “Review of Ilan Pappé, *A Very Short History of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*,” *Journal of the Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 25:1 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.3366/hjps.2026.037>

³² Ilan Pappé, “Genocide in Gaza,” in William A. Cook, (ed), *The Plight of the Palestinians* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 201-205.

³³ Ilan Pappé, *A Very Short History of Gaza* (London: Oneworld, 2026), 136.

That is despite the willingness of some politicians invoking the biblical text to destroy the Amalekites. Morris asserts that genocides are “a top-down affair ... determined by a government or ruling party.” That is not to deny or excuse how Israel has committed “probably many ... war crimes.” It is also possible that genocide “may yet occur.” There is the possibility of a “trigger”. Morris notes that it was President Trump, who was the first national leader to have called for the removal of the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip. None of this qualified response is intended to excuse how often religious leaders in Israel have called for the “flattening of West Bank towns” in the wake of what Morris describes as “terrorist attacks on Jews.” It is a trajectory of thought that is consistent with “occupiers routinely treat[ing] the occupied as less than human” and indulging in a “blanket demonization.”³⁴

A Reckoning

The work of the new historians has provoked a counter-narrative within Israel that is consistent with what has emerged in diaspora. The most prominent of these Jewish voices has come out of New York. Peter Beinart’s YouTube and “notebook” postings are widely available on-line, as is his best-selling monograph easily accessible in Australian bookshops on *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza*.³⁵ It was reviewed by Jenna Price in *The Sydney Morning Herald*.³⁶ Fundamental to Beinart’s position is the imperative of American Jews to come to a “reckoning” with Israel’s conduct in Gaza. He repeatedly inverts the David and Goliath myth. Unlike Morris, Beinart is not afraid to use the language of genocide. Himself a liberal Jew, Beinart argues for the need for his co-religionist to leave behind the rhetoric and self-understanding of a permanent Jewish victimhood. He does not condone the attacks of 7 October, but is conscious of how that has enabled a sense of “false innocence.” The narrative of victimhood set within the longer legacy of anti-Semitism has justified the American Jewish community to ignore Palestinian suffering. It is a position that has cost him long-time friendships. Beinart favours a single democratic state with real rights for Israelis and Palestinians.

The Poetics of Testimony

The contemporary emphasis on decolonization in the Uniting Church necessarily raises questions of historiography. From the Palestinian perspective it is insufficient to begin with the events of 7 October. In her *A Short History of the Gaza Strip* Anne Irfan explores the question of what “led to this fateful day unfolding.” She proceeds with her task mindful of how to delve into history beyond that day can run risk of justifying either the Hamas attacks or Israel’s “genocidal war” on Gaza.³⁷ It must nevertheless be done in order to understand what is now happening. *A Short History* begins with the catastrophe of 1948 and ends with the rise of Hamas and its electoral victory in 2006. Hamas did not secure a majority, but they were able to benefit from the loss of confidence in the Oslo peace accords of the previous decade, its stands

³⁴ See, Benny Morris, “Israel Is Not Committing Genocide in Gaza. But It May Be on the Way There,” *Haaretz*, 02 February, 2025. <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2025-01-30/ty-article-opinion/.premium/its-either-two-states-or-genocide/00000194-b831-d5a7-ab9d-ffb9b2450000>

³⁵ Peter Beinart, *Being Jewish After the Destruction of Gaza: A Reckoning* (New York: Knopf, 2025).

³⁶ Jenna Price, “This book is so powerful, it’s hard to resist the urge to cry,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 February, 2025. <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/this-book-is-so-powerful-it-s-hard-to-resist-the-urge-to-cry-20250206-p5la1h.html>

³⁷ Anne Irfan, *A Short History of the Gaza Strip*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2025), 18.

on corruption and lawlessness, and disaffection with its rival, Fatah. In Irfan's opinion "[f]ew events in 21st-century Palestine would prove more consequential" than this electoral result that allowed Hamas to form the government in its capacity as the largest party.³⁸ Irfan ends with an epilogue that testifies to the resilience of an "old man," a survivor of the *Nakba* who, as a child, was forced from his village. Now, in a shelter in Khan Younis, he declares himself to be "still a refugee," and though "they talk of taking Palestine as if we are nothing. But we are still here. We are still Palestinians."³⁹

The personal, anecdotal way in which Irfan ends is not uncommon in Palestinian writing. It is to be found even more strongly in Filiu's autobiographical account of his return to Gaza in early 2025. He describes the challenges of finding fresh water, enough food, medical care, shelter, and the need to move from one city to another. It can be seen as an immersive form of recording history through being an eyewitness. The theologian, Rebecca Chopp, (in a very different kind of context), would describe this practice as a "poetics of testimony". It is a bearing witness.

In his history of *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* Rashid Khalidi effects a different kind of personal link to anti-Semitism in Europe and the origins of modern Zionism.⁴⁰ The case was first made in 1896 in a pamphlet by Theodore Herzl for a Jewish state with "sovereign rights" to control immigration. Herzl anticipated the acquisition of land and property achieved "gently," "discreetly and circumspectly." He imagined that the dispossessed should be found employment in "the transit countries while denying employment in our own country."⁴¹ Khalidi's great-great-great uncle was Yusuf Diya, a Muslim intellectual and former mayor of Jerusalem, sent a letter of response to Herzl via a rabbi in Paris. Diya described Herzl as a "true Jewish patriot" and expressed his respect for the Jews who are "our cousins" through Abraham. He then proceeded to remind Herzl of the "brutal force of circumstances that had to be taken into account." Palestine was part of the Ottoman empire. It already had its own indigenous population. Herzl's scheme would most likely undermine the co-existence of Muslims, Jews and Christians living side by side in the land. It may unsettle the security of Jews in the Ottoman empire. It was "pure folly". Diya concluded, "in the name of God, let Palestine be left alone." Herzl replied in what is now known to be the first exchange between the political case being made for a Zionist state and "a cogent Palestinian objection to its embryonic plans for Palestine." Herzl simply failed to address the substance of Diya's concerns. He anticipated that Jewish immigration would benefit the indigenous people whose wealth and well-being would "increase by bringing in our own".

Biblical 'Software'

The decolonizing temper of the times inexorably draws attention to the emergence of a Palestinian liberation theology. Its current expression is to be found in the anthology on *Theology after Gaza* reviewed elsewhere in this edition of the journal.⁴² The origins of this particular expression of a liberation study were in biblical studies read through Palestinian eyes hosted by Naim Ateek. His monograph on *Justice and Only Justice*

³⁸ Irfan, *A Short History of the Gaza Strip*, 150-154.

³⁹ Irfan, *A Short History of the Gaza Strip*, 207.

⁴⁰ Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance*, (London: Profile Books, 2024).

⁴¹ Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine*, 4

⁴² Mitri Raheb and Graham McGeoch, *Theology after Gaza: A Global Anthology*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2025).

is widely regarded as the foundational text of a Palestinian liberation theology. It laid out a number of core principles, namely: i). Christ was a Palestinian Jew who lived under Roman occupation; ii). justice comes before peace and only then can reconciliation be achieved; iii). inclusivity of the other arises out of a Christ-like lens and should be contrasted with theologies and ideologies that are exclusivist; and iv). the commitment is to a revolutionary non-violence. Ateek's pioneering work was published in 1989; it marked the beginning of a prolific career that has run through to now.⁴³ In more recent times the key thinkers have become Munther Isaac and Mitri Raheb. They are supported by a cadre of emerging activist theologians.⁴⁴

For the Uniting Church to express solidarity with the situation in Gaza, and on the West Bank, some familiarity with a Palestinian liberation theology is desirable. It is tempting to move immediately to the desperate situation in Gaza and the plight of those who have lost homes, family members and the basic infrastructure of life. How should these things be interpreted through a theological lens? This core question cannot be left unaddressed, but, maybe, first, there is an equally pressing demand to address the key matter of land. It presents itself in several forms. How has the land been used in the service of as a settler colonialism to the exclusion of Palestinian rights? What are the implications of the restoration of Israel in the salvation history of the Christian faith for the indigenous peoples of the land? Raheb warns of how easily a conservative turn to Old Testament prophets and End Times scenarios is inclined to support the continuing expansion of settlements. That tendency is often reinforced by the way in which "Christian Pilgrims visit Palestine[and] only want to reinvent the holy land of the Bible."⁴⁵

The Zionist appropriation of biblical texts is most likely to attract immediate attention. In his *Decolonizing Palestine* Raheb provides biblical examples of Israeli politicians justifying settlement which can lead to indigenous Palestinians being seen as "aliens" and "strangers" in their own land. The book of Joshua in particular has been co-opted into this "tunnel vision."⁴⁶ They become the equivalent of Philistines or "accursed Canaanites," while Arabs are the descendants of Ishmael.⁴⁷ The stakes are very high: Raheb concludes that "[l]and theology has been a theological tool for Palestinian dispossession and oppression."⁴⁸ His warning should be heeded: the "hardware" of military occupation of Palestine comes with "software" readings of biblical concepts to do with land, election and chosen-ness.⁴⁹

In its most raw form is the practice of drawing upon scriptural texts like those to do with extermination of the Amalekites and applying them to the current context: the Palestinians become the Amalekites. The two critical texts are Deuteronomy 25: 17-19 and 1 Samuel 15:1-3. Each of them creates a "typology of memory": they both remind Israel to "remember what Amalek did to you" in the course of the exodus of Egypt. In keeping with Deuteronomy, once settled in the land promised to them, Israel is commanded by God to "blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." In 1 Samuel, Samuel instructs Saul to honour

⁴³ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989); and, more recently, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice and the Palestine-Israeli Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017); *Call and Commitment: A Journey of Faith from Nakba to Palestinian Liberation Theology*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023).

⁴⁴ For example, John Munayer and Samuel Munayer (eds), *The Cross and the Olive Tree: Cultivating Palestinian Theology Amid Gaza* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2025).

⁴⁵ Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2023), 53.

⁴⁶ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 63.

⁴⁷ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 97.

⁴⁸ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 80.

⁴⁹ Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 97.

that command: “go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” It so happens that Saul spares the king and what is valuable to him, but “all that was despised and worthless” was “utterly destroyed” (1 Samuel 15:9). In the wake of 7 October this call to “remember Amalek” was readily ripped out of context, including by President Benjamin Netanyahu himself in an address given to troops. Was he citing the Deuteronomy reading or 1 Samuel? Was the relevant directed only at Hamas, or, as some critics claimed, did Netanyahu include civilians as well, hence did his citing of the Amalekite possess an intent of genocide?

⁵⁰ In a sense the specifics of this controversy do not matter as to which version is deployed. On the ABC Religion Report, Siobhan Martin and Andrew West reported that this cry to “remember Amalek” has been used by many top politicians, soldiers in the field and become embedded in mainstream popular culture.⁵¹

There is here a deep hermeneutical concern: is it right to equate biblical Israel with the secular state of today? What is to be made of a history where the word Israel was equated with the Northern Kingdom and yet used again to describe a political entity in the twenty first century, though that kingdom had disappeared in the 8th century BC? Raheb notes that the theological concept continued referring to “the people of God.”⁵² It only came to possess a geonational reference again in the twentieth century when the state of Israel displaced the land of Palestine.

Raheb also probes the practice of hermeneutic retrieval. Why are some biblical texts and themes to do with biblical Israel recovered for the sake of politics today? It is legitimate to ask what should be made of biblical figures, for instance, who intervened on behalf of the exploited. Raheb reads Matthew 5:5 in the light of Psalm 37: “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the land (rather than the earth)”?

‘Christ in the Rubble’

It is, most likely, that a Palestinian theology is currently best known and represented by the vivid icon that adorned the cover of Isaac’s *Christ in the Rubble*. The image is of the infant Christ wrapped in a keffiyeh laid in the rubble: it was a message that was “heard by millions around the world.”⁵³ Isaac reflected on how “it also spoke to the hearts of our people” and allowed them to “reclaim their God-given honour and dignity.”⁵⁴ The image itself with its evocative nature combining the Christmas story, the innocence of a newborn in

⁵⁰ Noah Lanyard, “The Dangerous History Behind Netanyahu’s Amalek Rhetoric,” *Mother Jones*, 3 November, 2023. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2023/11/benjamin-netanyahu-amalek-israel-palestine-gaza-saul-samuel-old-testament/>; Leila Fadel, ‘Netanyahu’s Reference to Violent Biblical Passages Raises Alarm Among Critics’, *NPR Radio*, 7 November, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics>; Yosef Silver, “Amalek & Netanyahu’s Call For Mass Murder,” *Mid-East Journal*, 26 February 2024. <https://www.mideastjournal.org/post/amalek-netanyahu>

⁵¹ Siobhan Martin and Andrew West, “What Is the Biblical Story of Amalek? And Why Is It Being Used in South Africa’s ICJ Case Against Israel?,” *ABC Radio*, 31 January, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-31/biblical-story-amalek-south-africa-icj-genocide-case-israel/103403552>

⁵² Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine*, 62.

⁵³ Isaac also discusses how the image generated criticism: why was the infant Jesus not wrapped in a Jewish flag in order to symbolize God’s solidarity with Jewish children killed as well; wrapped in a keffiyeh was this icon not a “manifestation of terrorism”? See Munther Isacc, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and the Genocide in Gaza* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2025), 208-9.

⁵⁴ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 205.

face of so much complicity,⁵⁵ and the stark evidence of destruction resonated strongly and led to multiple representations – for example, in *Time* magazine, the art of Kelly Lattamore.⁵⁶

This icon shifts the attention away from how narratives of David and Goliath are put to use. It alters the direction away from land and invites fellow Christians elsewhere to consider how they understand the gospel. It furnishes an alternative to the momentum that lies behind the Christian Zionist appropriation of themes to do with the restoration of Israel, hence the fulfilment of God's salvific plan. Isaac's use of the icon is extraordinarily timely: in a rather confronting manner, the A1 system through which the Israeli military reviews surveillance and determines target sites in Gaza is known as "Habspra," "the gospel."⁵⁷

The image of Christ in the rubble demands a response to a lament full of questions: "where is God when we suffer? How do we explain his silence?"⁵⁸ Isaac cites the work of Raheb to the effect that "the God of this land does not repel brutal armies, but rather shares one fate with his people ... He walks with us in our pain."

God is under the rubble in Gaza. He is with the frightened and the refugees. He is in the operating room. This is our consolation. He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death.⁵⁹

The pastoral and theological strength embedded in the concept of God in the rubble negotiate its way through the mystery of the cross⁶⁰ and the "comfort" of the resurrection.⁶¹

In a rather haunting, ironic way, the image of Christ in the rubble resonates with the work of the Jewish philosopher, John Roth, writing in the wake of the Holocaust. There is a scene in Elie Wiesel's novel, *Night*, where fellow Jews in a concentration camp are left standing in front of a child hanging on the gallows, not yet dead. One cries out "where is God?" to which comes the reply that God is that child. Roth drew upon psalms of lament to construct a theodicy of protest around questions like "how long?" and "where are you?". It was a theodicy formed in an act of genocide.⁶² Might Christ in the rubble constitute an equivalent?

Situating Solidarity

There is, of course, a broad spectrum of ethical and theological themes that a public theology in Australia should insert into its expression of solidarity. Isaac intimates a number of those in his *Christ in the Rubble*.

⁵⁵ Isaac describes how a member of the US Congress determined that 'there are no innocent Gazans'. Ibid., 118

⁵⁶ Kelly Lattamore, 'Christ in the Rubble', *Patheos*, 24 December 2023. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithontheedge/2023/12/christ-in-the-rubble-by-kelly-lattamore/> It is not surprising that the image has been subject to some pushback. See, for example, Teresa Piriola and Julie McCrossin, "'Baby Jesus in the Rubble' Handle With Care", *Light of Torah*, 10 January 2024. <https://www.lightoftorah.net/post/baby-jesus-in-the-rubble-handle-with-care>

⁵⁷ Harry Davies, Bethan McKernan, and Dan Sabbagh, "'The Gospel': How Israel Uses A1 to Select Bombing Targets in Gaza," 4 August, 2024. <https://youarewithinthethenorms.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/The-Gospel-how-Israel-uses-AI-to-select-bombing-targets-in-Gaza-Israel-The-Guardian.pdf>; Joseph Gedeon and Maggie Miller, "Israel Under Pressure to Justify Its Use of A1 in Gaza," *Politico*, 3 March, 2024. <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/03/03/israel-ai-warfare-gaza-00144491>

⁵⁸ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 199.

⁵⁹ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 199-200.

⁶⁰ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 200-201; 213-215.

⁶¹ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble*, 200-201; 216-218.

⁶² J. Todd Billings, "John K. Roth, the Psalms of Lament and the Place of Theological Reflection on the Problem of Human Suffering," *The Other Journal*, 2 (2003), 1-5.

The most notable involve the call for repentance⁶³ rather than a “call for “dialogue” or “reconciliation”,”⁶⁴ to which can be added the recognition of a God-bestowed human dignity on the Palestinian people.⁶⁵ This emphasis on intrinsic worth and value is made in the face of western “hypocrisy” and “double standards”⁶⁶ (and the racism and demonization of people by the Israeli state government). On the basis of a theory of the just war the principle of proportionate response should be invoked, given the asymmetries of power and the long-lasting nature of the *Nakba*. It is incumbent upon the ecumenical church to make a strong stand against the naming of AI systems that abuse the idea of the gospel.

For the Uniting Church to address this *kairos* moment is a daunting task. The humanitarian crisis, the importance of justice, peace and dignity are matters of life and death and thus cannot be side-stepped. It constitutes, at the same time, entry into a seemingly enduring complex of problems with deep historical roots and in which conservative evangelical and imperial expressions of the Christian faith are implicated.

The expressions of concern and solidarity that the church has already made would benefit greatly from the composition and distribution of appropriate educational and liturgical resources. The metaphors of David, Goliath and the gospel might even serve as the medium through which the particular issue before us now is set inside the geopolitics of the wider region.

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⁶³ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble* 171-174.

⁶⁴ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble* 170.

⁶⁵ Isaac repeatedly describes the taunt of Palestinians being called “animals” and “terrorists.” In the counter-protest on Bondi beach in Sydney the cry that “they’re terrorists” was clearly discernible. Isaac describes how “many in the Western world, and certainly their leaders, do not see Palestinians as equals. We are less human, it seems, less deserving of human rights and dignity” (*Christ in the Rubble* 117). Again: ‘This war has confirmed to us that the world does not see us as equal. ... We are not humans in their eyes. But in God’s eyes ... no one can tell us we are not!’ *Christ in the Rubble*, 180).

⁶⁶ Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble* 103.



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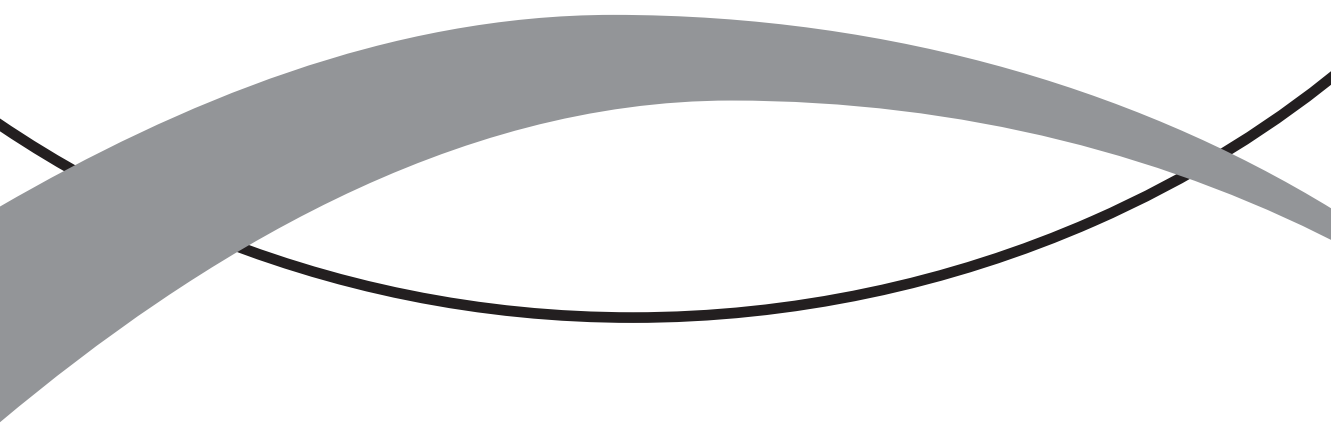
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