

A Biblical Critique of Israeli Apartheid in Palestine

On 28 August 1963 Martin Luther King, co-lead a civil-rights march of 250,000 people in Washington DC against racism and segregation. In what has become probably the most well-known and widely quoted speech in history, King shared his dream of a diverse but united multi-ethnic nation:

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by their character. When we let freedom ring, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual, “Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”¹

The origins of institutional racism can be traced back to the European colonization of the Americas and Africa and to the slave trade. With the abolition of slavery, institutional racism evolved into American segregation, German Antisemitism and South African Apartheid.

¹ Martin Luther King, “I have a dream” <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety?t=1631530554402>

The word “Apartheid” is a South African word derived from the root ‘*apart*’ meaning ‘separate’ and ‘*heid*’ meaning ‘hood’ and translated as "aparthood". It describes a system of institutionalised racial segregation that existed in South Africa from 1948 until the early 1990s.

The 1998 Rome Statute to the International Criminal Court and 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid define apartheid as a crime against humanity consisting of three elements:

1. An intent to maintain domination by one racial group over another.
2. A context of systematic oppression by one racial group over another.
3. Inhumane acts.²

In 1973 the UN defined apartheid as,

“inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over another racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”³

Although later revoked under pressure from the United States and Israel, in 1975, the UN specifically applied this definition to Israel, describing the ethnic exclusivism

²Visualising Palestine “The Crime of Apartheid” www.visualizingpalestine.org

³The UN International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (1973)
<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/intlinst.htm>

intrinsic to Zionism as, ‘*a form of racism and racial discrimination.*’⁴ Numerous human rights organisations have recently designated Israel to be an apartheid state – including B’Tselem, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

The Afrikaans word “Apartheid” is translated “Hafrada” in Hebrew. Ironically, the Israeli government uses the word to describe the Separation Wall which weaves its way through the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the route of which is purposely designed to maximise the amount of land to be annexed while minimising the number of Palestinians still living on it.

The Hafrada Wall based on segregation by ethnicity epitomises the two policies at the heart of the Israeli version of apartheid, - the subjugation of Palestinians and the sequestration of Palestinian land. This policy is achieved in numerous ways described by Jeff Halper, the Israeli anthropologist, as a “Matrix of Control”.⁵

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What does the Bible say about apartheid? How has the Bible been used to justify apartheid? How can we refute

⁴Resolution of the UN General Assembly on the report of the Third Committee (A/10320) 3379 (XXX). *Elimination of all forms of racial discrimination.* <http://domino.un.org/unispal.nsf>

⁵ Jeff Halper, *Decolonizing Israel, Liberating Palestine: Zionism, Settler Colonialism, and the Case for One Democratic State* (London, Pluto, 2021)

apartheid from the Bible? These are questions we will address in this presentation.

Refuting any theological justification for apartheid (as well as Christian Zionism) is not difficult. Let me illustrate.

Imagine the theology of apartheid is like a can of clear lemonade or Sprite. It represents the demand for racial purity, a ban on mixed marriages, and fixed national boundaries based on ethnicity. What happens when you add some Coke to Sprite? It changes colour. How much Coke do you need to change the colour of Sprite? Very little. Once you have added even a small amount of Coke you cannot ever go back to pure clear Sprite. In the same way, just one mixed marriage is enough to confound any notion of racial purity. And in like manner, just one Bible verse that challenges apartheid will adulterate its theology. Here are a few examples:

1. The Ethnic Diversity of God's People

The ambiguous nature of Israel's claims to be a democracy as well as a Jewish state was dispelled with the passing of the controversial "Nation-state" law in 2018 which defined Israel as the state exclusively for the Jewish people.

Surprisingly perhaps, the Old Testament knows nothing of this contemporary form of segregation. Instead, Israel as a nation was never narrowly restricted to those who were the physical descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. Israel

as a nation always incorporated people of other races and this extended not just to their identity and right of residence but also to their inheritance of the land and right to worship God in the Temple.

In the Old Testament there are numerous examples of Gentiles who came to believe in the one true God and were accepted within the people of God, Israel.

“But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day.” (Joshua 6:25)

“But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16)

Both Rahab and Ruth were Gentiles yet they even feature in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:5.

2. An Inclusive People (Israel)

This is further reinforced when God explicitly refers to people in the surrounding nations who worship him as being citizens of Zion – or Israel.

For example, in Psalm 87, King David looked forward to the day when other races - Egyptian (Rahab) Persian

(Babylon), Palestinian (Philistia), Lebanese (Tyre) and African (Cush) would share the same identity and privileges as the Israelites:

“I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me—Philistia too, and Tyre, along with Cush—

and will say, “This one was born in Zion.” Indeed, of Zion it will be said, “This one and that one were born in her, and the Most High himself will establish her.”

The Lord will write in the register of the peoples: “This one was born in Zion.” (Psalm 87:4-6)

Note the phrase “This one was born in Zion.” What do you normally get when you are born somewhere? Citizen rights. Now why would the Lord God have to repeat himself three times in three verses? Perhaps because the Lord’s people did not want to share Zion. And observe the only criterion for citizenship God lays down is faith. God welcomes all ‘those who acknowledge me’. In the beautiful story of Esther, after God rescues his people from the hands of their enemies, what happened?

“In every province and in every city to which the edict of the king came, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating. And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them.” (Esther 8:17)

3. An Inclusive Inheritance (Land)

As if to emphasize that ‘citizenship’ means much more than a new passport, God instructs the Israelites to share his land.

“You are to allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who have settled among you and who have children. You are to consider them as native-born Israelites; along with you they are to be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe the alien settles, there you are to give him his inheritance,” declares the Sovereign LORD.” (Ezekiel 47:22-23)

Notice again, the Lord has to say the same thing three times in two consecutive sentences. Why? Presumably because the returning exiles did not want to share their inheritance. God makes it crystal clear, that Gentiles who acknowledge him have the same rights as ‘native born Israelites’. An inclusive Israel. An inclusive land.

4. An Inclusive Temple (Worship)

Through his prophet Isaiah, the Lord God is also quite explicit in insisting that Gentiles may enter his Temple.

“Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.... And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these

I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” (Isaiah 56:3, 6-7)

Think about it: If the Lord insists that foreigners should not say “*The Lord will surely exclude me from his people*”, why on earth would they think it? Simple. Because the Lord’s people must have been doing the excluding – presumably on the same supremacist grounds advocated by segregationist Zionists today. The people of God in scripture were always defined on the basis of faith not race and we must resist any attempt to make exclusive what God has made inclusive. The New Testament is even more explicit.

5. Segregation Rebuked

The Apostle Paul develops this theme in his letter to the Galatians. In chapter 2, he shares a painful example of segregation and its destructive impact.

“When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles.

But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision

group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? "We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:11-15, 21)

So in the early Church segregation based on race or ethnicity was rebuked.

6. Ethnic Barriers Removed

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul shows how ethnic identities are transformed by the Christian gospel.

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:15-18, 29)

Here Paul explicitly denies the claim that the 'seed' of Abraham are the Jewish people by ethnicity or genealogy. There are no grounds for ethno-supremacism. Abraham's inheritance is for all who believe in the one true God, irrespective of ethnicity. Ethnic divisions are transformed

because God's ultimate purpose is to create one new humanity.

7. One New Humanity

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are given a glorious insight into how Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus Christ have been brought into a new 'citizenship' that transcends former ethnic barriers and religious divisions.

"His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."
(Ephesians 2:11-16).

There is continuity between the believers under the Old Hebrew Covenant who looked forward to the coming of Jesus Christ and believers under the New Covenant who look forward to his return. When Jesus died on the cross, he broke down the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles.

The Bible therefore provides no justification for racial exclusivity giving any race preferential or elevated status within God's kingdom. God's intention has always been to create for himself one new people, drawn from every race and nation, under one head – the Lord Jesus Christ.

To summarise, the Hebrew and Christian scriptures insist that membership of the people of God was always on the basis of faith not race. God's intention was to create:

An Inclusive Israel sharing an inclusive inheritance of the land, worshipping God in an inclusive temple. Among the people of God segregation was rebuked, ethnic barriers removed because God's vision is to create one new humanity of every language, tribe and nation.

Conclusions

The use of the Bible to normalise segregation was never undertaken in isolation, but was invariably attempted, retrospectively, by European colonialists to justify their subjugation of dependent people and the sequestration of foreign lands. In this regard, apartheid was and remains not about maintaining racial purity as about maintaining racial supremacy.

It is sobering to realise that the segregationist policies designed to preserve European 'racial purity' in the USA, also inspired Fascism in Germany and Apartheid in South Africa to do the same.

Largely with the complicity of the institutional churches, supremacism has led to the blasphemous justification of slavery, of segregation, Fascism, Apartheid and as we see in Gaza, leads to genocide and ethnic cleansing. If we really care about justice, peace and reconciliation, it is time to challenge apartheid in Palestine as well, peacefully and non-violently.

Twenty years ago, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said,

*“The end of apartheid stands as one of the crowning accomplishments of the last century, but we would not have succeeded without the help of international pressure... If apartheid ended, so can the occupation, but the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined. The current divestment effort is the first, though certainly not the only, necessary move in that direction.”*⁶

In September 2023, the Anglican Church of Southern Africa adopted a ground-breaking resolution declaring Israel to be an apartheid state.⁷

Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s successor, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba wrote,

“As people of faith who are distressed by the pain of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza - and who long for security and a just peace for both Palestine and Israel - we can no longer ignore the realities on the ground,”

“Our hearts ache for our Christian brothers and sisters in Palestine, whose numbers include Anglicans but are rapidly declining. People of all faiths in South Africa have both a deep understanding of what it is to live under oppression,”

⁶ Desmond Tutu, “An international campaign : Build moral pressure to end the occupation” *International Herald Tribune* (June 14, 2002) <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/14/opinion/IHT-an-international-campaign-build-moral-pressure-to-end-the.html>

⁷ <https://anglicanchurchsa.org/psc-resolution-declaring-israel-an-apartheid-state/>

“When black South Africans who have lived under apartheid visit Israel, the parallels to apartheid are impossible to ignore. If we stand by and keep quiet, we will be complicit in the continuing oppression of the Palestinians,”⁸

We began with the dream of Martin Luther King. What is your dream? Your vision of the future? What kind of world do you want for your children and grandchildren?

In the Book of Revelation, there is a glorious heavenly vision of a restored humanity ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse yet standing together not segregated, one in heart, soul and mind.

“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9-10)

Notice that tiny little word “from” in verse 9? The multitude which no one can count is *from* every nation, *from* every tribe, *from* every people and *from* every language. They are not segregated; they are not separated. They are not distinguished by these things. They are all standing together, all wearing the same white clothes, all singing the same song, united in joyful adoration. If that is what heaven will be like, surely people of faith should be aligning themselves with where we are headed, offering to unbelievers, by our example, a foretaste of heaven.

⁸ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/anglican-church-south-africa-classify-israel-apartheid-state>

Sabeel-Kairos UK

A Christian Response to Israeli Apartheid

The following statement was endorsed by the Trustees of Sabeel-Kairos UK with the support of Sabeel Jerusalem and Kairos Palestine and was published at the annual Sabeel-Kairos UK conference on 24th September 2021.

‘Having considered a Christian response to Israeli apartheid, we affirm that all people are created equally in the image of God; we commend the B’TSelem and Human Rights Watch documents designating Israel as an apartheid state; we repudiate all forms of racism and discrimination; and we recommit ourselves to working for justice, peace and reconciliation in Israel/Palestine.’