

REVIEW

Mark Braverman

*A Wall in Jerusalem: Hope, Healing, and the
Struggle for Justice in Israel and Palestine*

(New York, Boston, Nashville: Jericho Books, 2013),
paperback, 276 pp.

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Mark Braverman, a frequent speaker in American churches about Judaism, Christianity, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, describes this book as “my testimony as a Jew, ... written ... in deep sadness—sadness over how my people have fallen into sin” (p. 20). That sin, he claims, is “seeing the State of Israel as a prize awarded to us [Jews] as a privileged, exclusive group” (p. 55).

Braverman contends that Zionist Jews have been enabled by a “new theology about Jews, Judaism, and the role of ‘the land’ that has dominated Christian beliefs and attitudes since World War II [and] has come to support a program of conquest and dispossession” (pp. 15-16; cf. p. 79). He wants to rouse American churches to take action, including “divesting church investments from companies profiting from the occupation of Palestinian lands” (p. 145).

A brief review precludes detailing the highly selective outline of Israeli history that Braverman presents. Suffice it to say that such events as the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire after World War I; the duplicitous, contradictory agreements European powers made with Arab communities; the shifting of large populations of peoples after the World War II; and the way that regional conflicts were fanned for strategic advantage during the Cold War are absent from Braverman's presentation. His attention is single-mindedly fixed on the image of Jewish invaders and Palestinian victims. By quoting like-

minded thinkers he posits highly debatable parallels between the genuine plight of Palestinians and the American civil rights movement and South African apartheid (chap. 7-8).

No one can deny that the present circumstances of Palestinians are intolerable. But their painful predicament is the result of a unique and bewildering swirl of local, regional, and international forces contending for over a century. It seems inescapable that the current deadlock cannot be overcome unless all contributing factors are addressed. Seen from this wider perspective, Braverman's assertion that "It is the faithful action of the global church that will be critical in ending the system that is destroying Israeli society, has hijacked the Jewish faith, continues to fuel global conflict, and has produced one of the most systematic and long-standing violations of human rights in the world today" (p. 228) seems woefully inadequate.

Because he is appealing to "American Christians" (p. 58), as a theologian I will note three particularly troubling theological moves that Braverman makes. First, he fairly enough claims that Christians developed a "new theology" toward Jews because of the Shoah, but Braverman also asserts that "just as powerful was the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and then the Israeli victory in the 1967 war ... that changed the way Christians began to regard the Jewish people" (p. 5). Lumping the wide variety of theological efforts to reform perennial Christian anti-Judaism into a single "new theology" and alleging that "it" was inspired by and made possible the existence of the State of Israel is factually wrong. Yes, some Christians have adopted a fundamentalistic stance that gives divine validation to Israeli governmental policies. However, such ways of reading biblical land promises go back at least to the nineteenth century, long before the foundation of the modern State of Israel. For other Christians, the existence of the State of Israel played little or no role in the reform of teaching about Jews and Judaism. In debates during [the](#)

Second Vatican Council (1962-65) over a draft text¹ of what became the benchmark declaration *Nostra Aetate*, not a single voice argued that a statement about Jews should be made because of the existence of the State of Israel. In fact, the Arab-Israeli conflict (as it was then called) nearly derailed the development of the document. Consequently, its authors took pains to distance their work from contemporary geopolitical disputes by stating that the Council was “moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love” (*Nostra Aetate*, 4). The existence of the State of Israel did not generate any “new theology” about Jews in the Catholic community. A similar conclusion can be reached for most of the earliest Christian reflections about relations with Jews in the wake of the Shoah.

Furthermore, by tarring all Christian efforts toward rapprochement with Jews as requiring the “unconditional endorsement of the Jewish national homeland project” (p. 18), Braverman ignores contrary views such as those expressed by the Vatican in 1985: “The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in reference to the common principles of international law” (*Notes*,² VI, 25). This means that the official Catholic position rejects attributing to God any political option—whether a fundamentalist “God gave the Land to Jews” or Braverman’s argument that Jesus expects faithful Christians to prophetically speak truth to Israeli power. Again, some Protestant churches and theologians have offered statements that parallel the Catholic view.

Second, Christian readers ought to question Braverman’s reduction of both Judaism and Christianity to reform programs for social justice, essentially wiping away their respective, distinctive features. Regarding Christianity, Braverman holds that “resistance to empire was a fundamental component of Jesus’

¹ <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/na-debate> (accessed May 28, 2014)

² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html (accessed May 28, 2014)

message” (p. 70). Indeed, Braverman pays little heed to the meaning of Jesus for Christianity other than he led “a movement to free his people from the political domination of Rome and the spiritual peril represented by that tyranny” (p. 86). While it is unsurprising for a Jewish writer to say, as Braverman did in [an online interview](#),³ that “I don’t get into all that messianic Christology,” Christians ought to be wary of arguments in which “the necessary struggle for human justice and freedom in the economic and political sense constitutes the whole essence of salvation” (in words of a [1984 Vatican instruction](#)⁴).

Braverman offers a polemical view of “establishment” Judaism at the time of Jesus, which—lacking any caveats or distinctions—quietly elides into a characterization of Judaism generally: “[T]he problem [with Judaism] is territoriality, grasping power, dispossession, us and them, particularity vs. universalism, exclusivity vs. inclusiveness” (p. 89). He then links this highly negative view of Judaism with the Israeli policies he condemns, as if the latter were simply organic outgrowths of the former. In contrast, the universality of the message of Jesus and the prophets for Braverman means that:

In the Christian vision of the Kingdom of God, both the land and the people lose their specificity and exclusivity. Temple—gone. God dwelling in one place—over. The notion of a territory as a clause in the covenant disappears. And, significantly, Jesus’ kingdom takes the next step: it jettisons the *am kadosh*, or “special people,” concept. The special privilege of one family / tribe / nation separated from the rest of humanity is eclipsed (p. 97).

³ <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/06/palestinians-interview-braverman.html> (accessed May 28, 2014)

⁴ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html (accessed May 28, 2014)

As Braverman argues, the affirmation of any religious distinctiveness in post-Jesus (Rabbinic) Judaism is tantamount to a misanthropic tribalism. His description of biblical Judaism orients it totally “away from the particular to embrace the universal,” as in his interpretation of Christian Pentecost (p. 83).

Many of these themes chillingly resonate with the patristic origins of the “teaching of contempt” that pervaded Christianity for centuries. To take just one example that conveniently combines several ideas:

And that same Providence which of old gave the law, and has now given the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not wishing the Jewish state to continue longer, has destroyed their city and their temple: it has abolished the worship which was offered to God in that temple by the sacrifice of victims, and other ceremonies which He had prescribed. And as it has destroyed these things, not wishing that they should longer continue, in like manner it has extended day by day the Christian religion, so that it is now preached everywhere [i.e., universally] with boldness ... (Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 7:26).

Braverman may not have replaced Judaism with Christianity as classic supersessionism did, but his homogenization of “stripped down” versions of both traditions produces a similar judgment: Judaism fails to live up to Christian standards. This can further be seen in Braverman’s “jettisoning” of *am kadosh*—of Judaism’s self-understanding of being chosen to be a holy people. Christians should think long and hard before embracing this move, which would also have enormous theological consequences for Christianity.

I would agree with Braverman's rejection of “exceptionalist doctrines that pervert the words of Scripture into supporting oppression and land-taking” (p. 143), but the real problem is an uncritical reading of the Bible, which leads to what one of the authors Braverman cites calls “a distorted doctrine of

chosenness” (p. 79). Braverman never discusses what an undistorted doctrine of chosenness might be, thereby leaving readers with only the eradication of a core Jewish theological belief.

Third, I would raise cautions regarding Braverman’s use of prophetic language. Braverman sees himself as having a prophetic mission:

I realized that I had been given a voice to speak, and an ear to hear. It was a voice that could speak to American Christians who were waking up to the plight of the Palestinians, who were beginning to see the problems with the storybook narrative of the Jewish state they had been fed for so long. It was a voice to encourage these same Christians to examine the theology that had served to stifle the questions that inevitably arose about the God-given right of the Jews to rule over the other peoples of the land (pp. 58-59).

I do not wish to question the sincerity of Braverman’s words. However, his limited presentation of biblical prophecy as essentially “speaking truth to power” likely derives from a felt need to provide an antithesis to those who invoke biblical prophecy to support Israel.

As the International Council of Christians and Jews recently cautioned, appeals to the prophetic writings are basically attempts to claim God’s endorsement of the judgments being expressed. This inevitably sanctifies and absolutizes opposed political positions, making it difficult to reach any compromise or acquiescence to anything less than ideal solutions. (I recommend ICCJ’s [“As Long as You Believe in a Living God, You Must Have Hope”](#)⁵ for further reading.)

⁵ http://www.iccj.org/redaktion/upload_pdf/201305102052530.ICCJ-Pentecost-2013.pdf (accessed May 28, 2014)

That Braverman praises some Palestinians for an “unwillingness to compromise on core issues, coupled with the willingness to step outside the strictures of the institutional church” (p. 229) is evidence of the rigidity and polarization that occurs when one wraps their rhetoric in a cloak of divine approbation.

I have to wonder what Braverman's vision of the ideal future would be. “We are now approaching a consensus ... [that] the two-state solution is dead,” he writes (p. 231). He would appear to favor “a single state in which Jews, as a shrinking minority, will share power with non-Jews” (ibid.). Is that the “prophetic” end to which he is driving his Christian audiences? If so, that should be made explicit so their response to his appeals can be fully informed.

To further illustrate the problem, Braverman favorably quotes a writer who argues that “‘BDS may be the only non-violent tool capable of moving Israel beyond its patterns of militarized brutality.’ BDS refers to the 2005 Palestinian civil-society call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions” (pp. 205-206). Given the prophetic ethos of the book, is this judgment about a particular political strategy to be understood as a prophetic utterance? Are Christians who are also distressed by the statelessness of Palestinians to be condemned as unfaithful or shackled to a “Constantinian” religiosity if they disagree with BDS as a constructive tactic (pp. 189-190)? Can compromises not also be “prophetic” or must prophets always be “uncompromising”? Who decides which actions are the really “prophetic” ones? To go even further, will critics of Braverman’s book be judged as complicit in Palestinian suffering for disputing its “prophetic” arguments and conclusions? This would be, after all, the flip side to the accusation of “antisemitism” that some defenders of the State of Israel facilely deploy. My point is that appealing to prophecy to argue one’s positions is a risky business.

Braverman’s simplistic approach to narrow religious aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be of little avail in promot-

ing lasting reconciliation and justice. The current deadlock cannot be overcome unless *all* contributing factors are addressed. This demands that the self-understanding of all groups be respected and the use by anyone of hostile stereotypes be rejected.