

Whose side does Jesus take?

On Israel-Palestine

Jonny Rashid

In 2022, I wrote a book called *Jesus Takes a Side*, and since that time, I have deepened the conviction that I wrote about in the book—namely, that God sides with the oppressed. God not only sides with the oppressed; God becomes one with them. Birthed to a lowly teenager on the outskirts of town, away from the metropole, Jesus incarnates into the world in the literal flesh of oppressed people. God’s alignment with oppressed people is categorically clear in scripture and also in the witness of the church. This simple thesis can be used to adjudicate many political conflicts in our polarized time. If this formulation is true, then indeed when it comes to matters of class, race, gender, and ability, it is clear that God sides with the poor, the nonwhite, the nonmale, and the disabled.

After October 7, 2023, I wrote a column about offering empathy to both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some who likely had not read my book beyond the title asked me why I wasn’t taking a side in this conflict. Instinctually, and as a matter of my heritage, my heart is with the Arabs and with Palestinians. And by many measures, it is true that the Palestinians are oppressed by Israeli occupation and Western backing. My natural allegiance toward this particular group is based on their material reality as well as my own heritage. But as I will outline below, both groups are categorically oppressed, challenging the thesis of my own book, at least applied simplistically.

My history

I came of age in an Egyptian-American household in the early 2000s. The most formative event for me and my peace theology was the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. What followed the attacks was the synchronicity of beating war drums and a thirst for vengeance. As an American, I sympathized deeply with the pain we all experienced after the attacks. I may be Egyptian, but I’m also an American, and attacks like that feel deeply personal. That the attackers were Arabs and came from Arab nations made matters worse. Not only was I saddened and burdened

by the attacks themselves as an American, but the people around me were suspicious of my family and myself because of our heritage. No amount of American flags, lapel pins, and bumper stickers could cover up our brown skin and Arab heritage.

As the war drums beat louder, and the United States invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq, my heart was tugged in another way. I was watching the country that I call home wage wars, with varying degrees of “justice,” on countries filled with people who looked like me and my family. My heart was broken and my body enraged. My own Arab body was deeply disturbed to witness these events. It felt personal, and I took it that way. My empathy for the Arabs whose lives were being destroyed by US weapons was “natural.” I empathized, not just because of my burgeoning Christian pacifism but also because I was an Arab too.

Loving my neighbor, as it were, was easy enough to do. As an Arab, during the War on Terror, I found it easy to empathize with Palestinians in their struggle for freedom and self-determination. It seemed like a foregone conclusion to me. The United States was funding Israel, and it felt like the same hammer crushing Iraqis was also crushing Palestinians. However, it turned out that was not an easy conclusion for many Israelis and Jewish people to draw. I want to stretch my own empathy here by focusing on the historic plight of Jewish people. I don’t do this to detract from or contradict the oppression of Palestinians—both historically and today—but to hold my own experience of oppression while understanding that of my siblings.

Jewish history of oppression

For many Jews, it was as easy to sympathize with Jewish people looking for refuge after centuries of bigotry and violence against them in Europe as it was for me to empathize with my Arab counterparts. Any Arab resistance to their presence in the Middle East simply felt like the same experience as before. Looking for safety from oppression is exactly why many Jewish people feel the need to support Israel and take measures to protect it. I am embarrassed to say that was not a conclusion that was readily apparent to me before I listened to my Jewish peers.

In the midst of this struggle between oppressed groups—in many ways pitted against each other by forces greater than they are—I think outsiders in particular should feel mutual empathy and conflict. Although my own biases and proclivities lead me to a natural affinity to Palestinians, it is incumbent on me to demonstrate empathy to all oppressed groups, and

by any definition, Jewish people are very much oppressed. Jewish people have been systemically oppressed in Europe, at the hands of Christians, for thousands of years. Rome conquered Judea in 63 BCE. The occupation of Judea is the context in which all of Jesus's anti-imperial messages are birthed. The tensions between Rome and Jews culminated in the Great Jewish Revolt, where Rome destroyed the Second Temple. It was an



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apocalyptic event for Jewish people in the region. For Christians, we remember it as the subject of the Olivet Discourses in the Synoptic Gospels. That

event, in 70 CE, is indeed the end of the world for Jewish folks. By the 130s, the Bar Kochba Revolt was the final attempt by Jews to reclaim Judea, but Romans killed, enslaved, or exiled those living in Judea, and the Jewish diaspora began again.¹ The diasporic Jews ended up back in what was then Babylon, specifically in Iraq, under the Sasanian Empire.²

After Constantine converted Rome, the killer of Jesus, to Christianity, a new narrative formed to burden Jews with the death of Jesus. Christian antisemitism is rooted fundamentally in the Christianization of Rome. Pogroms and attempts at extermination followed, especially surrounding Holy Week. European antisemitism would be completely relentless following this change. The Crusades are among the bloodiest examples of this antisemitism. Ten thousand Jews were slaughtered by French and German forces in the Rhineland in 1096. Jews were local and were targeted more than Muslims (who were distant).³ Jews were targeted in England in the late 1100s and during the Black Death in the mid-1300s. They were accused of killing Christian children, rumors termed "blood libels." Jews were even blamed for the Black Death, and nearly 510 Jewish communities were destroyed.⁴ In 1492, the monarchs of Spain expelled all Jews from the country, and they moved to North Africa, Italy, Turkey, Greece, the Netherlands, Syria, and the Land of Israel. By the 1500s, many Jews lived in what is now Israel-Palestine, and then the Ottoman Empire.⁵ In

1 Danya Ruttenberg, "The Antisemitism Post (tm)," *Life Is a Sacred Text*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.lifeisasacredtext.com/the-antisemitism-post/>

2 Danya Ruttenberg, "The Big Big Mega History Text History Post," *Life Is A Sacred Text*, October 2, 2023, <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/the-big-big-mega-history-text-history>.

3 Ruttenberg, "Big Big Mega History."

4 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

5 Ruttenberg, "Big Big Mega History."

the late 1700s and early 1800s, Jews began to assimilate into European German culture and, through the Reformation movement, became a part of secular life in Europe. But in Europe overall, Jews had to mark themselves with a distinct star or badge until the nineteenth century.⁶

Jewish stereotypes

The oppressive circumstances described above created stereotypes about Jewish people, including the idea that they were greedy. The fact is that they could not own land in a lot of Europe, they had to pay taxes, and so they were forced into poverty and needed income to survive. Because usury is forbidden in Christianity—and in Catholicism specifically—Jews ended up fulfilling the roles of bankers (a question of moral application of the commandments against usury for Christians). Jewish banking was just a matter of material circumstances. Jews lent money, collected rent, and ran businesses from their oppressed urban neighborhoods (ghettos). The moneylenders were not a majority of Jews, yet Christians accused Jews of being greedy cheaters, likening them to the money changers in the Gospels that Jesus threw out of the Temple.⁷ The polemic that existed between Jews and Christian Jews in the New Testament, in particular, was used to further activate antisemitism. The polemic was not, strictly speaking, antisemitic at the time of composition largely because it was a conversation contained within the Jewish community, but it became antisemitic when Christianity grew and collected power and weaponized that polemic against Jews. For European Christians, Jews became the crucifixion of Jesus, greedy bankers, and scapegoats for even things like diseases and epidemics. (Sympathetic American readers should be able to see parallels to stereotypes about other minorities in the United States.)

Matters got worse when pressure against the Russian Czar was growing, and his secret service created the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. This propagandistic text blamed Jews for international problems, claiming they secretly controlled the world's economy and media.⁸ Meanwhile, Jews in Russia and Ukraine continued to face extermination and deportation.

This treatment and stereotyping of Jews led to the German pogroms. Ninety-one Jews were killed during Kristallnacht, and thirty thousand Jews were incarcerated in concentration camps. This led to the Final Solu-

6 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

7 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

8 Ruttenberg, "Antisemitism Post."

tion and the Holocaust, which included the killing of 90 percent of Polish Jews and two-thirds of the Jewish population. To give us a frame of reference about Jewish extermination and displacement, in 1939, there were 9.5 million Jews living in Europe. By the end of World War II, after six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, that number shrank to 3.8 million. By 1960, the European Jewish population declined to 3.2 million; by 1990, it was 2 million; and today, it is just 1.4 million. Europe used to be home to 57 percent of Jews, and now it is home to merely 10 percent of them. This drastic population reduction is directly related to oppression, displacement, and extermination. And Jews have been oppressed and displaced not only in Europe but also in their diasporic locations.

All of the stereotypes about Jews still exist and cause harm, and they are largely ignored. Whether it is the Jewish characterization of goblins in *Harry Potter*, who serve as bankers in J. K. Rowling's story, or the idea that pro-Israel lobbyists are more powerful than their counterparts, Jews are still stereotyped as monied, greedy, and controlling.

Palestinian history of oppression

It is within this long context of oppression that I must meet my Jewish siblings. Theirs, much like my own, is a history of hatred, oppression, and violence. I deeply sympathize with a desire for safety, for a place to call home, for a place to raise our children and to live in peace. I can understand why, despite the variety of political circumstances that led to its creation, many Jews support the state of Israel and want to defend it. I can also understand why they would support measures to keep them safe, including the current war in Gaza. So I empathize with the need for safety and for the desire to protect that safety when it feels threatened. (It is also for this reason that I empathize with Palestinian resistance.)

Unfortunately, Israel's leaders aren't just looking for a homeland and safety, and because they have the backing of Western military power and strength, they have power over Palestinians. The war in Gaza is about more than just protecting Jewish people; it is about exterminating Gazans and Gaza. We know this because of the rhetoric of Benjamin Netanyahu's government and also because of their policies that have led to over forty thousand deaths of Palestinians. Moreover, we know this because of the history of oppression of Palestinians in that region.

Between 1947 and 1949, 750,000 Palestinians became refugees, as Israeli forces took nearly 78 percent of Palestinian land. They destroyed over five hundred villages and cities and killed 15,000 Palestinians. Thirty

to forty thousand Palestinians were internally displaced, and Israel forbade them from returning home.

Some argue that the nation of Israel was founded not merely to protect Jewish people but rather on a principle of Jewish supremacy and nationalism. While I think the merits of this abstract argument can be debated, what cannot be is the massive support from the West that Israel receives, garnering it the oppressor in the conflict between these two genuinely and historically oppressed groups. Palestinians continued to be expelled into Gaza and the West Bank. In 1967, during the Arab-Israeli War, Israel began occupying all the remaining Palestinian territories (East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip). And they still occupy them today. The UN's partition plan gave Israel 55 percent of Palestine, but today it occupies 85 percent. Palestinians live in conditions that have been described as apartheid. They have a forced minority status. There are nearly eight million Palestinian refugees that cannot return to their original homes.⁹

I will not defend the often extreme and antisemitic rhetoric heard in the Middle East and even in Palestine. Sometimes the thirst for extermination exists in Palestinian rhetoric as well. The distinguishing factor is rooted in the power to oppress and use force. We can decry the violence on both sides, but the reason Israel is scrutinized as the oppressor is primarily because of the support the United States offers it. This is not a uniquely Israeli problem; it is one centered on American militarism and foreign interest.

While many Jewish people want safety and a homeland, the US interest, especially when framed with Christian Zionist support, shows us that the matters at hand are about Western interests, in particular, not Jewish livelihood of safety. But the pain of oppressed people can be exploited for the benefit of an oppressor promising them protection. That is what I believe is happening with the Western support of Israel.

A shared history of oppression

The violence on both sides does not make the region safe for either Palestinians or Israelis. It is in the interest of both Palestinians and Israelis to live peaceably with one another. So while I empathize with resistance on

9 "The Nakba did not start or end in 1948," *Al Jazeera*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/5/23/the-nakba-did-not-start-or-end-in-1948>.

both sides, and even the hostility toward the other, I do not think it is the ultimate posture we should take, even as victims of oppression.

If the oppressed act like the oppressor once they gain political power, they repeat the cycle of violence and oppression. A group of people who were victims of pogroms and genocides in Europe and displacement all over the world should empathize with Palestinians going through the same thing right now instead of perpetrating the same evil on them.

The shared history of oppression of both Jews and Palestinians should act as a uniting force. It should create solidarity, neighborly love, resistance to the same things happening again, and resistance to perpetrating them on one another.

It is essential that we begin this pursuit of cooperation by listening to and learning from one another. As an Arab, I continue to long to learn from the history of Jewish oppression because I also want my own history of oppression to be understood. I often think this empathy, in the heat of war and hostility, is forgotten—understandably, I am in a privileged position to be able to pause and consider. And with deep histories of pain on both sides, with an endless cycle of violence and counterviolence, such a pause for consideration seems impossible.

That is all the more reason to stop the war now before a side declares victory. We need to create more space for mutual understanding and healing, and that cannot happen if a US-backed war for domination continues.

We want to cooperate with other oppressed groups and stand in solidarity against oppression everywhere. This is true in my example of Israel-Palestine, but it is also true across all oppressed groups, both in small and large contexts. Rather than competing for power among one another, we can share power and build unity. Learning of the history of oppression that binds us together helps us see the mutual desires we all have for liberation. Violence and counterviolence do the opposite. It keeps us from seeing one another, and that is why it is a valuable tool for those in power to stay in power. But another way is possible.

About the author

Jonny Rashid is pastor of West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship and the author of *Jesus Takes a Side* (Herald Press, 2022).