

Leeds Messianic Fellowship: A Response to the British Methodist Report on Palestine and Israel

Written by Joseph Weissman

Preamble:

The Leeds Messianic Fellowship (<http://www.lmf.org.uk>) is a place of worship for Messianic Jews and sympathetic Gentile Christians who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. As a Messianic fellowship, we are not party political. Instead, we are for both Jew and Arab. We regularly pray for peace and justice for Palestinians as well as Israelis.

However, as a Messianic fellowship we are especially concerned about how Jews and Israel are and should be represented in contemporary Christian debate. This is why we are compelled to comment on the recent Methodist Report on Palestine and Israel.

We thank the Methodist Church for its interest and concern in the conflict, and for the willingness of its laymen and clergy alike to discuss the facts in greater detail. The Methodist Church commendably recognises that Israelis and Palestinians alike suffer from the conflict. Nevertheless, there is also much to be concerned about in their recent report.

In this response, we do not seek to define Methodist Church policy or tell the church what policies they should adopt. Rather we seek to outline issues which are of immediate concern to many Jews.

Again, Leeds Messianic Fellowship is not concerned with attributing blame to the Methodist Church, and seeks to encourage the Methodist Church in its efforts to further God's kingdom. Rather, the following is a series of comments on the Methodist Church report, its content, and the context in which it was produced.

The initial report is available online:

<http://www.methodistconference.org.uk/assets/downloads/confrep-14-justice-for-palestine-israel-170510.pdf> (Accessed 01/11/2010).

What follows is our response to the aforementioned report:

- 1) Leeds Messianic Fellowship (henceforth referred to as LMF) notes that the Israel/Palestine Working Group invited to bring a statement to the Methodist Conference 2010 listed Stephen Leah, Revd Nichola Jones and Revd Martyn Atkins as consultants. Point 4 of the paper inviting the Working Group to prepare their statement reads: *“Requests have been received that the group should be “balanced” and contain members who are not in agreement with Conference statements. This is not believed to be a constructive approach given the remit of the group.”*

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/coun-0980-israel-palestine-110909.pdf>

(accessed 30/10/2010)

LMF believes that the decision not to include members who disagree with Conference statements, along with the clear rejection of requests for the group to be “balanced,” must have severely undermined the capacity for the working group to present a fair and accurate portrayal of the current situation in Palestine/Israel.

- 2) The Introduction to the Report (Section 2) states: *“For this report, the key hindrance to security and a lasting peace for all in the region is the Occupation of Palestinian territory by the State of Israel, now in its fifth decade.”*

This sentence assumes there is only one key hindrance to security and a lasting peace. Thus, LMF notes that the paper fails to take into account that there are *many* key hindrances to security and a lasting peace in the region, such as the continuing commitment of groups such as Hamas to commit acts of terrorism. Furthermore, LMF notes the continued rejectionism of successive Palestinian Authority governments and Arab League councils, by which Israel has offered peace with land and it has been repeatedly rejected.

If these concerns were mentioned alongside concerns about Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, the report would have been fairer and more accurate. LMF observes that the approach taken by the Working Group is consistent with its original decision to refuse to be “balanced” concerning these issues.

- 3) Section 2.6 states: *“The detailed description of the nature of the Occupation, combined with the moving testimonies of individuals who have been affected by it, provides a crucial focus for our response”*

LMF notes that the moving testimonies contained within the report are mostly narrated by Palestinian Arabs, by Christian visitors to the Holy Land sympathetic principally to the plight of Palestinians, and by Israeli Jews opposed to Israeli government policies towards Palestinian Arabs. There is only one story from an Israeli Jewish victim of Palestinian terrorism, which appears towards the end of the report.

We would not wish to dismiss the validity of their testimony nor undermine their powerful stories in any way, but we note that a wider spectrum of Israeli and Palestinian society could and should have been represented in this report, and that more Israeli Jewish concerns could have been highlighted alongside Palestinian Arab concerns. For instance, there is no witness from an Israeli Jewish Christian as there are from British or Palestinian Arab Christians. Indeed, most of the testimonies focus upon a response to the Israeli Occupation, as consistent with the focus of this report.

- 4) LMF commends Section 3.4 of the report, which states: *“Particularly relevant for reflection on Israel/Palestine is a theology of supersessionism, whereby some have believed that the Church has succeeded the Jewish people as the New Israel and inherited all the promises previously made by God. Not only would this view seem to invalidate completely any claim on the land by the Jewish community but there is also a recognition that sometimes this doctrine has led to a perverse tradition within Christianity of anti-Judaism and possibly even anti-Semitism and has sometimes resulted in the charge of ‘Christ-killer’ being the justification for pogrom, murder, discrimination and Holocaust against the Jewish people throughout Europe. No post-Holocaust Christian theology can fail to deal with this ugly legacy especially given the foundational connection between the Shoah and the creation of the modern State of Israel.”*

LMF notes however that some of these themes may still appear in a modified form in modern Christian attitudes towards Jewish communities and the modern State of Israel, where one third of world Jewry currently resides.

- 5) LMF notes that the practical need for a state of Israel as a refuge for Jews from anti-Semitism, and the pragmatic nature of Zionism in the 19th and 20th centuries, are commendably acknowledged in Section 4.2.2 and Section 4.3.3 of the Report.
- 6) LMF notes that Section 3.7 of the report recommends that Methodists should show ‘solidarity’ with Palestinian Christians. This idea is also found in Section 7.3. Inexplicably however, the report does not recommend Methodists to show solidarity with Israeli Christians or Messianic Jews.

Whilst there is a call to ‘affirm the presence of Christians in Palestine and Israel’, Methodists are encouraged to be ‘particularly mindful of the Palestinian Christian community.’ Methodists are not asked to be particularly mindful of Israeli believers in Christ, or indeed Jewish members of the Methodist Church, whose opinions surely matter when considering important questions about Israel.

- 7) LMF notes that Section 3.9 of the report encourages Methodists to ‘hear’ the ‘the liberation perspectives offered by the Sabeel Centre as well as the call for justice and peace in the Kairos Document’. LMF notes that Reverend Nichola Jones, a key contributor to the report, is a member of Friends of Sabeel UK.

LMF voices its concern about the attitude of Sabeel towards Israel, and particularly the attitude of some of the patrons of Friends of Sabeel UK towards Israel who have variously voiced support for acts of terrorism against Israel, dismissed the annual national observation of Holocaust Memorial Day, and called for a full boycott of Israel.

(For more see: <http://hurryupharry.org/2009/02/17/trojan-horse-theology/>, Accessed 1/11/2010).

LMF notes that the Friends of Sabeel UK itself recommends a full boycott of Israel in its Summer 2009 Newsletter:

<http://www.friendsofsabeel.org.uk/newsletters/Summer2009.pdf>

(Accessed 1/11/2010)

LMF voices its concern about the rhetoric of Sabeel’s head and founder Naim Ateek, in the light of various statements he has made regarding Israel. LMF notes that in Rev Ateek’s Christmas message in 2000, he stated:

At this Christmas time, when we remember the message of peace and love that came down from God to earth in the birth of Jesus Christ, our celebrations are marred by the destructive powers of the modern day "Herods" who are represented in the Israeli government.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naim_Ateek#Use_of_Crucifixion_Imagery

(Accessed 1/11/2010)

In Rev Ateek’s Easter message in 2001, he stated:

In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. It only takes people of insight to see the hundreds of thousands of crosses throughout the land, Palestinian men, women, and children being crucified. Palestine has become one huge golgotha. The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily. Palestine has become the place of the skull.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naim_Ateek#Use_of_Crucifixion_Imagery
(Accessed 1/11/2010)

This imagery is sadly reminiscent the terrible history of Christian anti-Semitism that Naim Ateek himself acknowledges elsewhere.

In the history of Christian anti-Semitism, the Jews were often accused of being a nation Christ-killers. For Ateek, Israel as a nation is perpetually crucifying the Palestinian, who becomes Christ in his suffering. Indeed, for Ateek, the act of crucifying the innocent victim is the image that should be most associated with Israel.

In a similar vein, the idea of Israel acting as King Herod to murder the infant Christ is sadly reminiscent of the blood libel myth, in which Jews were accused of using the blood of Christian children to make matzah bread.

In the history of Christian anti-Semitism, Jews were presented as a large, Christ-killing community, spilling the blood of holy children. For Ateek, Israel is represented by “modern-day Herods”, presumably also seeking to spill the blood of innocent children.

For these reasons, LMF voices its concern with Naim Ateek’s presentation of Israel, given that many of the world’s Jews have close spiritual or emotional links with Israel, live in Israel or have family in Israel, and given that many people in practice do associate Jews with Israel.

For these reasons, LMF voices its concern with the decision of the Methodist Church report to recommend the liberation perspectives of Sabeel.

- 8) LMF notes that the report twice describes the designated terrorist group Hamas as the “Islamic resistance movement of Hamas,” in Sections 4.6.2 and 5.2.14 of the report. Disappointingly, Hamas’ violent and genocidal intentions towards Jews are not mentioned at all in the report. LMF thus reproduces an excerpt from Article 8 of the Hamas charter:

The Islamic Resistance Movement is one of the links in the chain of the struggle against the Zionist invaders. It goes back to 1939, to the emergence of the martyr Izz al-Din al Kissam and his brethren the fighters, members of Moslem Brotherhood. It goes on to reach out and become one with another chain that includes the struggle of the Palestinians and Moslem Brotherhood in the 1948 war and the Jihad operations of the Moslem Brotherhood in 1968 and after.

Moreover, if the links have been distant from each other and if obstacles, placed by those who are the lackeys of Zionism in the way of the fighters obstructed the continuation of the struggle, the Islamic Resistance Movement aspires to the realisation of Allah's promise, no matter how long that should take. The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him salvation, has said:

"The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him. Only the Gharkad tree, (evidently a certain kind of tree) would not do that because it is one of the trees of the Jews." (related by al-Bukhari and Moslem).

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp (Accessed: 01/11/2010)

- 9) LMF notes that Section 5.2.7 the report unfairly characterises the security concerns of Israelis as the "Israeli obsession with security." Such trivial language is surely not conducive towards a lasting peace tangible to both Palestinians and Israelis.

- 10) LMF notes that the report calls for boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israeli goods emanating from settlements in Section 6.3 and Section 7.4.1.

Section 7.4.1 states:

The Conference notes the call of the WCC in 2009 for an 'international boycott of settlement produce and services' and calls on the Methodist people to support and engage with this boycott of Israeli goods emanating from illegal settlements (some Methodists would advocate a total boycott of Israeli goods until the Occupation ends).

LMF voices its concern that the Report only accounts for Methodists who choose to boycott Israeli settlement goods or choose boycott Israel totally, but declines to mention Methodists who would not wish to boycott Israel at all.

LMF notes that not all Methodists support the settlement boycott: <http://www.thisiscornwall.co.uk/news/Methodists-quiet-boycott-Israeli-products/article-2738873-detail/article.html> (Accessed 01/10/2010).

Indeed some Methodists have established a Friends of Israel group in direct response to the call for a boycott of settlement goods: <http://www.thejc.com/node/36328> (Accessed 01/11/2010).

LMF voices its concern as to why these anti-boycott opinions were not taken into account when compiling the report, during the year in which the working group had to prepare the report before bringing it to Conference.

LMF further notes that Dr Stephen Leah, the seconder of the motion to present the report to conference, has previously stated:

I am a Methodist preacher I'm also the chair of the York PSC. I personally would like to have divestment going a little bit further into the full boycott of Israel, but I know how much I can get away with in the churches sometimes. [...] Churches are paranoid about being critical of Israel sometimes, they want to be balanced all the time, we must put pressure on church leaders.

<http://www.icahd.org/icahd/ukdev/eng/articles.asp?menu=6&submenu=2&site=UK&article=428> (Accessed 01/11/2010).

LMF observes that Dr Leah's complaint about churches wanting to be "balanced all the time" is consistent with the initial paper presented by the Working Group in which balance was explicitly discouraged.

LMF thus encourages the Methodist Church to review the role of Dr Leah in contributing to current Methodist policy on boycotts, divestment and sanctions used towards Israel, and urges the Church to take great care when delegating overseers of such reports in the future.

- 11) LMF notes that the report voices its opposition to Israel's security fence in Section 7.4.1, describing the security fence as a "wall" without giving any context as to why the barrier was constructed. LMF notes that the Israeli government constructed the security fence primarily in order to discourage terror attacks against Israeli civilians.

- 12) Section 7.4.6 of the Report calls Methodists to support Amos Trust's Just Peace for Palestine initiative (7.4.6). LMF notes that the head of said initiative, Mr Ben White, has previously written:

"I do not consider myself an anti-Semite, yet I can also understand why some are."

<http://www.counterpunch.org/white0617.html> (last accessed 01/11/2010).

Since the report was published, Mr White has offered vocal support for the Methodist resolution, whilst writing of students opposed to anti-Israel boycotts:

"A popular tactic by Israel's defenders – particularly on campus – is to urge 'dialogue' and 'moderation', the same patronising words heard from preservers of the status quo in the segregated Deep South and apartheid South Africa."

<http://www.varsity.co.uk/comment/2621> (accessed 01/11/2010)

In the light of these comments, LMF calls the Methodist Church to review its relationship with the Amos Trust's A Just Peace For Palestine initiative, in order to ensure the Methodist Church remains committed to dialogue and understanding with all parties.

- 13) Resolution 14/5 resolves that the Methodist Faith & Order Committee should review Christian Zionism, whereas Resolution 14/6 resolves that the Church should promote the controversial Kairos Palestine document.

LMF calls on the Faith & Order Committee to engage in critical reviews of both Christian Zionist and Christian anti-Zionist resources – including the Kairos Palestine document itself.

- 14) LMF acknowledges the response of the Board of Deputies of British Jews to the report, available to read here:

<http://www.boardofdeputies.org.uk/file/JusticeForPalestineAndIsraelResponse.pdf>
(accessed 01/11/2010)

- 15) LMF notes that Methodist minister Rev Angela Shier-Jones has written, in response to continued debate:

“I invite those Methodists who think that we are antisemitic to use our Church procedures to request a report on the state of Israel and the evils of antisemitism.”

<http://the-kneeler.blogspot.com/2010/10/antisemitism-redefined.html>

(accessed 01/11/2010)

Whilst we do not think that the Methodists are anti-Semitic on the basis of the report, we nevertheless remain concerned about the content of the report, and its possible contribution to creating an environment in which theological anti-Semitism may thrive. Therefore, in the light of Rev Shier-Jones’ comment, LMF requests that the Methodist Church should produce a report on the state of Israel and the evils of anti-Semitism.

- 16) LMF cautiously recommends the following books and websites for the edification of Methodists and those whom they seek to comfort and advise. We hope that Methodists will also consider these resources alongside those recommended in Appendix A of the original report:

Diprose, R. E., 2004. *Israel and the Church: The Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology*. Colorado Springs: Biblica.

Horner, B. E., 2007. *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must be Challenged*. United States of America: B& H Publishing Group.

Julius, A., 2010. *Trials of the Diaspora: A history of anti-semitism in England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, C., 2009. *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism: Resources for Christians*. United Kingdom: Kings Divinity Press.

Wilkerson, P., 2007. *For Zion’s Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Derby*. United Kingdom: Paternoster.

Yousef, M. H., 2010. *Son of Hamas: A Gripping Account of Terror, Betrayal, Political Intrigue, and Unthinkable Choices*. USA: SaltRiver.

<http://www.frrme.org> Foundation For Relief & Reconciliation in the Middle East, run by Canon Andrew White with a special focus on Iraq and Israel/Palestine.

<http://www.musalaha.org/> Musalaha is a ministry of reconciliation between Palestinian Arab Christians and Israeli Messianic Jews.

<http://www.childrenofpeace.org.uk/> Children of Peace is a non-partisan charity dedicated to building friendship, trust and reconciliation between Israeli and Palestinian children, aged 4 - 17, and their communities.

Epilogue:

Our prayer is for peace and justice to prevail for both Palestinians and Israelis. We believe that our interjection into the current Methodist debate concerning the Middle East is both positive and constructive, and pray that it will be of great use to Methodists considering these questions.

We invite you to share this document with all concerned and faithful Methodists, and to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6).

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May those who love you be secure."