

Response to Alain Epp Weaver, “Theological Cartography and the Arboreal Imagination in Israel-Palestine”

Amahl Bishara, Tufts University

Alain Epp Weaver’s paper “Theological Cartography and the Arboreal Imagination in Israel-Palestine” offers an innovative argument that arboreal metaphors – so often utilized to produce exclusivist visions of territory in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and elsewhere – can be refocused to produce “cartographies of mutuality.” He draws upon Elias Chacour’s moving theological analysis of the concept of the elect, in which Chacour argues that Jews and Gentiles are both incorporated into the elect, and together constitute the proper residents of the Holy Land, because of God’s promise to the “foreigner” that he should also be grafted into the people of Israel. This novel interpretation came to Chacour in the shadow of his father’s fig tree, which had been grafted together with multiple varieties of figs in the traditional Palestinian agricultural technique of *tarkeeb*. As someone with great interest in Palestinian Christian texts and ethnographic experience in the Israel and the West Bank, but little background in religion, I think I can be most constructive by asking a series of questions primarily about the social location of Chacour’s argument.

As Weaver shows, Chacour’s argument productively takes us away from metaphors of rootedness, which often presume and promote an ahistorical, naturalized relationship to the land (Malkki 1992). Instead, Chacour calls our attention to branches, and perhaps even, if one were to be imaginatively optimistic, to the great variety of fruits that such a grafted tree could bear. This is shared space in the sun, above the earth, rather than below it. Yet it still embarks from the idea of biblical narrative of Jews as the elect with rights to the Holy Land, and it assigns to

Palestinians the status of the “foreigner.” While this is a progressive vision of the elect, it still implicitly accepts the naturalness of a people’s relationship to land.

What also strikes me is that it is clear that Chacour’s ability to arrive at this explanation itself comes from something other than a novel intellectual approach to the text. Chacour’s writing draws its power from its integration of scriptural analysis and embodied experience. In some cases, these experiences are ones to which any Christian visiting the Holy Land can relate, like standing on the Mount of Beatitudes imagining Jesus preaching to ancient crowds against the backdrop of the blue Sea of Galilee (Chacour 1984:143). Yet, the grafting metaphor comes not from a pilgrim’s visual experience of the land, but rather from a deep practical knowledge of old – though certainly not unchanging<sup>1</sup> – ways of how to live on this land. It is in part this knowledge that helps Chacour to interpret the biblical metaphor of grafting so carefully. This is not the kind of knowledge that comes from being a foreigner.

Likewise, the young priest’s attentiveness to this traditional agricultural practice seems to be heightened by loss. When he arrives at this new interpretation, he has returned for a visit to the village of his birth, from which his family was expelled in 1948, and from which they have been forbidden from returning. While most of the village’s agricultural lands were in ruin, this fig tree, a favorite hiding place of his youth, has remained “firmly rooted and still green with life” (Chacour 1984:136). Thus, there remains a kind of dissonance in *Blood Brothers*, between his ascription of Palestinians as the foreigners in his scriptural interpretation, and his obviously intimate knowledge of and affective connection to the land as exhibited in the story of how he comes to this interpretation. I would be interested in understanding how Weaver sees these two positions as rhetorically coming together. What does it mean that Chacour says that Palestinians

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, I have seen *tarkeeb* of grape vines occur using an electric drill.

are scripturally “foreign” but also suggests that they are something more like “native” (and displaced) in terms of their contemporary history and experience?

If Chacour’s analysis emerged from a practical knowledge of the land, it also seems that Chacour’s writing seeks to serve a practical purpose. The main text of the first edition of *Blood Brothers* is followed by a list of further reading in Middle Eastern politics (Chacour 1984:224). The publicity quote on the cover is from a United Press International correspondent based in Israel. The second edition, published in 2003, has an introduction written by former Secretary of State James Baker III. All of this indicates that this text is meant to contribute to discussions about policy and peace making.

I would like to know more about this orientation of the text as an object in a complex political field. Specifically, how do Elias Chacour’s books, and those of other Christian Palestinian leaders, circulate? Who are their audiences? For whom will Chacour’s line of argument be politically or theologically effective? It seems like Palestinian Christian approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can take at least two approaches. They can center upon scriptural history and prophecy, and they can also revolve around values of justice that Jesus preached. These are not mutually exclusive possibilities, as Chacour’s text itself exhibits. What are the rhetorical benefits of either approach for Christians abroad? If this is as much a practical intervention into discourse about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it is a biblical exegesis, where does each approach leave Palestinian Muslims? If these texts are oriented towards outside audiences, we might also ask, what do narratives of reconciliation mean when they are voiced by the less powerful party in a conflict for a foreign audience?

I am also curious about the social location of these arguments in Palestinian Christian society. If this text emerged from a practical experience on the land, in what ways does it shape

new kinds of action on that land? Does Chacour publish similar work in Arabic as well as English? How and when do these theological arguments become part of Palestinian Christian activism, like the attempt to plant saplings in Bir'im on Tu B'Shvat?

And finally, a broader question: Does Chacour's interpretation, and his story of arriving at this interpretation, suggest that for Palestinian Christians familiar with the Holy Land as a lived space, the Bible is animated by a kind of local knowledge? Perhaps for an observant Palestinian Christian, its strength comes not only from their belief in its universal truth, but also from its status as a story told about familiar places and ways of tending to those places.

#### Works Cited

- Chacour, Elias  
1984 *Blood Brothers*. Tarrytown, NY: Chosen Books.
- Malkki, Liisa  
1992 *National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees*. *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1):24-44.