



View of Jerusalem from the church of Dominus flevit ('the Lord wept'; compare Luke 19.41) on Mount Olive

The Wall has been **broken down**

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Light
of Christian Faith and International Law

If you have an eye for the fate of the Palestinians, come and stand on our side and help us. We need people who work practically on justice and righteousness. If this however means that you become one-sided and against my Jewish brothers and sisters, then please go away. We don't need that kind of friendship. We need a common friend and not yet another enemy.

(Elias Chacour, Palestinian archbishop in Galilee)

Kairos Palestine Netherlands | Friends of Sabeel Netherlands



Foreword

"The wall has been broken down," Paul (or one of his pupils) writes in the Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph. 2.14). The "wall of hostility" which separated Jewish people from non-Jewish people has been broken down by Jesus Christ, through God's unconditional and universal love which goes out to all men and women, irrespective of their ethnic origin, race, sex or social position.

Time and again such a wall has been rebuilt as in our own days there is once again a high wall of separation in the Holy Land, a wall that divides Israelis from Palestinians and even Palestinians from Palestinians. That wall is a means and a symbol of fear, hostility and violence.

"The wall has been broken down", that proclamation by Paul is also a mission and a promise regarding all walls that keep people apart, walls which often go straight through our own hearts.

Towards the end of 2009, Palestinian Christians published their Kairos-document: *A Moment of Truth. A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of the Palestinian suffering*. In that document they call on Christians and churches worldwide to look critically at their theological views on the Middle East conflict. Many of these views conceal the suffering of the Palestinians and obstruct a critical attitude towards the Israeli politics of occupation.

Kairos Palestine Netherlands and Friends of Sabeel Netherlands answer this call by presenting this brochure and, in this way, giving an impulse to rethink theologically and politically the Middle East conflict. Our conviction that 'the wall has been broken down' and that universal love and justice are the starting point of all ethics and

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all politics, lead us in this brochure to the conclusion that human rights and international law should also serve for Christians and all churches as the primary, normative framework for their political actions.

This brochure, written by the Reverend Henri Veldhuis (Culemborg, the Netherlands), doesn't pretend to express the theological and political views of Friends of Sabeel Netherlands and Kairos Palestine Netherlands in all respects; for that our supporters are too diverse. The author is primarily responsible for the choice of words, the tone and the line of reasoning. But on the most essential points the author does clearly express the perspective from which Friends of Sabeel Netherlands and Kairos Palestine Netherlands dedicate themselves to more justice and peace in the Middle East. We hope this brochure will contribute in many churches and in other Christian circles, for instance in political parties, to a renewed theological and political discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The English translation of this brochure is published on the occasion of the farewell of Meta Floor as staff member of Sabeel Jerusalem. Meta Floor, who has worked there since 2007 on behalf of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands, has contributed much to the awareness in the Netherlands - especially among Dutch Christians - of the difficult situation, the hope and resilience of the Palestinian people. We owe the publication of this brochure to a large extent to the continuing influence in the Netherlands of Meta's inspiring work.

The boards of Kairos Palestine Netherlands and Friends of Sabeel Netherlands

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Cover photo: Wall and watchtower in Bethlehem

(photograph by Paul Buford/Stop the Wall)



1 Introduction

Although the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians concerns a small country we still call the Holy Land, worldwide it has become a focal point of political and religious controversy. In that controversy notions and facts are often handled in an emotional and ideological way. Terms like 'Israel', 'Palestinians', 'the chosen people', 'Holocaust' and others are, as a result of all that has happened, quite explosive. In many cases it is therefore difficult to engage in an open discussion about differences of opinion.

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In discussions in Christian circles moreover, the way we read the Bible and the central place of Jesus in it, plays an important part. And finally, there is also the important question how we see the relationship between faith on the one hand and human rights and international law on the other.

In this brochure we have tried to go into all these points in a clear and concise manner. Theological and political conclusions will be drawn and choices will be made, but with the honest intention to base these on a sensible analysis of terms, concepts and facts. And all this will be done in the hope that space will be created for discussions with those who think differently. In the Middle East and in our own context what we need to create in the first place is room for an open discussion - not from a neutral position but freely contributing our own opinions in order to examine them and, if necessary, adjust them. That dialogue we need to have, if possible, in the first place with those directly concerned, Jews and Palestinians, and especially with those who are suffering most from that conflict.

In the following chapters we will first give ample attention to the crucial terms 'Israel', 'Palestinians', 'the chosen people' and 'the promise of the land', and to their biblical and theological meaning.

Next, the role of human rights and international law will be considered. After that, more light may be thrown on the Middle East conflict from a theological as well as an international-legal perspective. Finally we consider the task and possibilities of Christians and churches to contribute to solving this conflict.

2 The name 'Israel'

Central to the Middle East conflict are two names: 'Israel' and 'Palestinians'. In this chapter and the next we will look carefully how different viewpoints affect what we hear when those names are used.

The name 'Israel' has got its multiple meaning from biblical stories and political history. We will explore the most important aspects in which the religious meaning will take a central place.

In the Bible the name 'Israel' was first given by God himself to the patriarch Jacob. It means 'He who battles with God', and was given him after his struggle with God near the river Jabbok (Gen. 32.29). The name 'Israel' later designated the people who descended

In this way 'Israel' became the name of a community of faith.

from his twelve sons, of which Abraham is the first patriarch, Isaac the second and Jacob the third. In this way 'Israel' became the name of a *community of faith* that lives by the covenant that God made with Abraham.

The identifying sign of that community is circumcision. The name 'Israel', however, is not strictly connected with blood relationship because, for instance, Abraham's non-Jewish slaves were also circumcised (Gen. 17.12); and Esau, Jacob's brother, was not an 'Israelite'.

Genesis and Exodus tell us how the family of Jacob/Israel became a people while in Egypt. After their liberation from Egypt, in the emptiness of the desert, they were confirmed as 'God's people' by the revelation of the Torah and the establishment of the covenant near Mount Sinai. After that, the Israelite tribes settled in the land of Canaan among other peoples.

Led by her kings, of which David was the most important, 'Israel' also became the name of the land where the people of Israel lived and of the kingdom over which Israel's king reigned. But apart from

all these additional meanings, Israel remained primarily the name of a *community of faith* that lives according to the covenant that God made with it. That this community of faith is not strictly bound by blood relationships becomes clear from the fact that the Moabite woman Ruth could become part of Israel and the great-grandmother of David by her choice for the God of Israel.

After king Solomon Israel split into the northern kingdom of the ten tribes that kept the name 'Israel' and the southern kingdom of the two tribes called 'Judea'. The northern kingdom disappeared, to a large extent, into the mists of history after being conquered by the Assyrians. The Judeans took over the name 'Israel' after the Babylonian captivity.

Considering all these events, it becomes clear, once again, that Israel primarily refers to 'the people of God' as a *community of faith* and not as an ethnic-national entity (compare Ezek. 47.21-23). In stories in the Bible, the name 'Israel' as an ethnic and nationalistic label repeatedly gained the upper hand, which was consistently condemned by the prophets, who then called on Israel to be, once again, and in the first place, 'the people of God'.

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With the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, the Jews lost their religious and political centre. But the name 'Israel' remained for the Jewish people the name of their community of faith and their ethnic unity, as well as the name of 'the promised land'. Apart from that, already before AD 70 the Jews were dispersed for centuries over many flourishing Jewish communities in the Middle East.

In 1948 the Jewish state is founded and her first government chooses the name 'Israel', a name full of old meanings which touch deep

feelings and create high expectations. So, since 1948, 'Israel' stands for:

- 1 Israel as a community of faith
- 2 Israel as the Jewish people, a national-ethnic and cultural unity
- 3 Israel as a territory
- 4 Israel as a modern state

It is not surprising that the name 'Israel', so much charged with emotions, continues to create confusion. It is important therefore, in discussions about 'Israel', to state clearly which meaning we are referring to, about which Israel we are speaking. This applies even more when we speak about 'being critical towards Israel' or about 'solidarity with Israel'.

So far, in this text, it has emerged again and again that the core meaning of 'Israel' lies in Israel as a community of faith, as the people of the covenant that lives by the commandments and the

promises of the God of Abraham and Moses. That doesn't mean that the name 'Israel' becomes spiritualised, because we are talking about real men and women and about a real people.

The core religious meaning which takes priority over 'Israel' as a national-ethnic and cultural naming, will therefore have to come first in the theological considerations in the following paragraphs. As we will see, we will follow herein the line of the apostle Paul.

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3 The name 'Palestinians'

Just like the Jews, the Palestinians are also culturally, historically and ethnically very diverse. Sometimes Palestinians are bothered by the fact that their name derives from 'the Philistines', the seafaring people who were, according to the Bible, the archenemies of Israel in the 12th and 11th century BC. Present day Palestinians, however, descend neither ethnically nor historically from the biblical Philistines.

From the 5th century BC the name 'Palestine' was used by some antique writers for the region east of the Mediterranean and on both sides of the river Jordan. 'Palestine' became the name of an official province for the first time in 135 AD, after the suppression by the Romans of the Jewish insurgence lead by Simon bar Kokhba.

After World War I, 'Palestine' became the name of the British Mandate, where Arab Muslims and Christians as well as local and immigrant Jews lived. But, after the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 with its preceding and following conflicts and wars, the terms 'Palestinians', 'Palestinian' and 'Palestine' have been used more and more for the Arab inhabitants and the Palestinian territories. Many Israelis avoid these terms however. Since they don't want to recognize the Palestinians as a people, they systematically call them 'Arabs'.

Because of terror attacks by Palestinians, many associate the terms 'Palestinian' and 'Palestinians' with 'terrorism'. In this context we tend to forget that the founding of the state of Israel was also preceded by attacks by Jewish terror groups, such as the attack on the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946 and the massacre at Deir Yassin in April 1948.

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Since then the Israeli army has violated international law many times by using violence against Palestinian civilians. If we call the violence by Palestinians 'terror', we have to call it 'state terrorism' in the case of Israel. That state terrorism has, over the years, made many more victims than the Palestinian terrorism.

Finally, what is most important still has to be said: We know the Palestinians as inhabitants of Palestine, now partly Israel, where they would so love to live as an independent people in freedom and safety. They feel a strong bond with the Holy Land where many of their families have lived for centuries. Like all other people, they long for their own place under the sun - in the land from which they have been expelled or where they are still being oppressed by Zionist Jews.

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Palestinian civilians fleeing from the Israeli army in 1948 (see chapter 10). Men between 15 and 50 were made prisoner of war.

4 The chosen people

Based on the Bible, Israel is often called 'the chosen people' (compare Deut. 7.6). But this being chosen, which started with Abraham's mission, did not apply to one particular *ethnic* people. On the contrary, God asked Abraham to *leave behind* his family, his people and his country and go to a land that God would show him (Gen. 12.1).

God himself created a new people that would grow from the *faith* of Abraham, faith and trust - so he hoped - which would be handed down by parents to their children, but

God himself had created a new people that would grow from the faith of Abraham.

which need not be based on a blood relationship. As a matter of course, this new people took on the characteristics of family, people, land and state, but these are secondary to the commandments and promises of the covenant that God entered into with Abraham and his descendants. He himself would remain the creator of the new Israel across ethnic borders and along other lines than those of blood relationship; in this way Abraham could become a blessing to all people (compare Gen. 12.3, Is. 2.1-5 and Ps. 87).

When the Israelites commit injustices and are unfaithful to God, he remains faithful, calling on them to turn around and once again comply with the commandments and promises of the covenant, a covenant to which they may always return. Never, therefore, can Israel, as the 'chosen people', assume a superior status towards other peoples.

When God finally revealed his love in Jesus Christ, he continued on the same road he had taken with Israel. From that road the gospel could spread across the world. And so Jesus addressed his own people first, because how can other nations come to faith if he is not heard in Israel itself, in God's own and first experimental garden?

"To the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1.16, 2.9), but that Jesus goes beyond ethnic borders becomes clear from his contacts with Romans and other non-Jews who appealed to him.

And then, after Easter and Whitsun, the gospel of Jesus Christ went out to all nations, mainly through the hard work of the apostle Paul.

Then there was no longer any difference between Jew and Greek.

There was no longer any difference between Jew and Greek, man and woman, master and slave (Gal. 3.28), because God loves them all alike. Jewish-Christian congregations took shape as new forms of God's covenant. And *together*, Paul said, Christians from the Jews and Christians from the non-Jewish nations, form "the Israel of God" (Gal 6.16), one for whom, as before, it is not acceptable to assume a superior status.

assume a superior status.

5 The promise of the land

Many Jews and Christians believe that the Jews (whether they are religious or not) have a right to all of the Holy Land, because God promised it to them. Such political claims, however, are difficult to base on the Bible. Characteristic of 'being chosen' in the Bible is that it always has a purpose: being chosen to serve God and one's fellow men and women. Israel was chosen to be a people dedicated to God (Deut. 7.6). To make this possible, God promised them a land ('ha'aretz': 'the land', but also 'the earth') where Israel could live according to the law and the justice of the Torah. This land is, therefore, not a permanent property but a gift of the Lord, who gave it to live there in a just and peaceful way (compare Deut. 30.15-20). It was a gift to which certain conditions were attached. When Israel turns away from God and his commandments, it will be driven again from that land (compare 1 Kings 9.6-9). From this perspective the great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel look at Israel's and Judah's exile.

Just as Israel isn't primarily an ethnic people through blood relationship, in the same way the land isn't a property that Israel can appropriate on ethnic grounds. The God of Israel isn't a God of 'blood and soil'. He himself created a people of the Torah and promised a land where it could live by that Torah. Moreover, the borders of that land are described in quite varying ways in the Bible. Those borders are and were much disputed, but the promise actually means that 'the promised land' is where people live by the Torah. No nationalistic claims can be laid on it.

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The hope and expectation that 'God's people' will grow because other people will join Israel, can be found, for example, in Is. 2.1-5, 14.1 and Psalm 87. God's people, then, become a multi-ethnic group not held by ethnic bonds but by their common bond with God.

This breakthrough to 'ha'aretz' as the *whole* earth takes place in the New Testament through God's universal love in Jesus. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth", Jesus says (Matt. 5.5; compare Matt. 28.18-20 and Eph. 6.2-3). Since God's love is for all people, his people can spread from Israel across the whole earth, and

in this way the promise of the land can encompass the whole earth. Paul already saw this universal scope in the promise to Abraham, when he wrote in Rom. 4.13 that Abraham and his descendants were promised that they "would inherit the *world*". This universalization of the promise of the land is not a spiritualization either, because it concerns real people on this real earth. Moreover, this universal-

ization means that *all* people have been granted a place on this earth where they can live in safety, freedom and peace.

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6 Paul and Israel

When Christians form an opinion about Israel, the thoughts of the apostle Paul play an important role. Rightly so because, mainly thanks to Paul, the gospel of Jesus did not remain locked up inside the religious and ethnic borders of Judaism and could become a blessing to all nations. Paul was originally a strict Jew who, as a Pharisee, tried to live consistently according to the countless rules of the Bible and of oral tradition. He detested Jews who had become followers of Jesus, because they attributed to him a godlike status and placed the temple and the Jewish laws into perspective. But then, through an extraordinary manifestation of Christ, Paul experienced a conversion which changed his life dramatically. He knew Christ's love and grace, a love through which every man or woman may realize him- or herself unconditionally and profoundly accepted and loved.

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Through that basic experience of God's unconditional love and forgiveness, Paul came to view faith in a fundamentally different way. Because *such* love must be intended for everyone, Jew and non-Jew, and because such love also annuls the distinction between man and woman, master and slave (compare Gal. 3.28).

Dedication to such love should, moreover, not be impeded by having to live according to Jewish laws on circumcision, the Sabbath and kosher food. Important ethical rules for living a just life on the basis of God's love are certainly needed. But even if we live according to those rules, we do *not ourselves* lay the foundation of our worth to God and to each other.

In Paul's day non-Jews could only join Judaism if they were circumcised as 'proselytes' and promised to live according to Jewish laws (these conditions still apply among orthodox Jews). Paul's decision to abolish these preconditions led to great tension with the other apostles. But finally they agreed (compare Gal. 2.9), and Paul was accepted as the apostle of the non-Jewish nations.

In his letter to the congregation in Rome, Paul wonders, full of sorrow, why so few Jews have come to believe in Jesus (Rom. 9). He explains that you are not really 'a child of God' - and neither really 'a child of Abraham' - by physical descent. You are not God's child because you have been born to Jewish parents but only through faith, by being dedicated to faith, as Abraham was. Without that faith, Abraham's descendants are only 'children of the flesh' (Rom. 9.8). You may belong to Israel as an ethnic people but not to Israel as a community of faith within the framework of God's covenant. And even if you do live according to the rules of the Torah, you may be only 'a child of the flesh'. Because you don't become God's child by diligently living according to laws and rules, but by trust in God's love and promise.

So God's people do not automatically grow along ethnic lines and blood relationships. Esau too was a son of Isaac, but only Jacob became a patriarch. Israel's true history is a road of faith which finally leads past the crossroads of Jesus Christ. Paul does not see any future for Israel and the other nations apart from Christ. God began the road of his covenant with Abraham and his descendants and therefore it can be said: "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1.16, 2.9). But that *does not* mean that a Jew is *more important* than a Greek. At the crossroads of Christ,

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the road of the covenant branches off to all nations on earth, beyond the ethnic and religious borders of Judaism.

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Although most Jews had not converted to faith in Jesus, non-Jewish Christians should not think, according to Paul, that God had renounced the Jewish people; his promise to Israel *still holds*, and he continues to try and speak to them. Paul is confident that his own people will come to faith in Jesus. A 'fullness' (a large number such as God foresees) of non-Jews will, according to Paul, come to believe in Jesus, but eventually also a 'fullness' of Jews. And those two fullnesses, the fullness of Christian-Jews and that of non-Jewish Christians, will form together the 'all Israel' that will be saved (compare Rom. 11.12, 25-26 and Gal. 6.16). That is the new Israel that will spread, from the Jewish Israel, across the whole earth.

Paul was the apostle who preached God's universal love and justice as the foundation of all faith, religion, ethics and politics. In that way he laid the foundation for a culture which eventually formulated the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. It may be called a 'miracle from God' indeed, that these human rights, which go beyond all differences in ethnicity, race and sex, have been accepted worldwide as a political and moral framework; "the wall has been broken down" (Eph. 2.14). Israel and Palestinians, Jews, Christians and Muslims, as well as all people worldwide can be called to account on that universal human rights.

7 Theology after the Holocaust

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This theological premise apparently forms an important root of much anti-Semitism and of the persecution of the Jews.

Regarding Paul himself, that isn't a just reproach. First, the renewed Israel of Christians out of Jews and non-Jews was to him not

a replacement of the old Israel but rather the positive-critical *fulfilment* of it. In the new Israel, all God's intentions for Abraham and his descendants have come to complete fulfilment and become a blessing to all people. The turning point of that fulfilment is the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ. From that point onwards the covenant with Israel has, without any preconditions, become accessible to all people.

On top of that, Paul assumed that Jesus would soon return and this would lead to a complete breakthrough of God's Kingdom. He could not have known that there would be a long history of polarization between Jews and Christians. He did see the risk of non-Jewish Christians putting themselves above the Jews, but he expected a swift conversion of his people to belief in Jesus. That didn't happen. The number of Christian-Jews remained very small, and the church more and more took a position of power towards the Jewish people, with, as a result, a long history of anti-Semitism and persecution.

Christian theology often became replacement theology, according to which the church no longer understood herself as a continuation and fulfilment of Israel, but as a replacement. In that model, no theological meaning could any longer be attributed to the Jewish people, other than to regard it as an enemy of God. This view of the

Jews, mixed with xenophobia, led repeatedly to persecutions of Jews - with the Holocaust as an absolute lowest point.

We are living many centuries after Paul and not long after the Holocaust. What does that imply when we speak of the Jewish people? How can we be released from a long history of replacement theology and anti-Semitism and, at the same time, hold on to Paul's central thought that God's love and justice have been fully revealed in Jesus, on Israel's road, but also as a universal gift and task for all people?

After World War II and the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, a feeling of guilt was not yet the dominant mood in many churches. There was mainly great enthusiasm for the heroic acts of that small Israel which had the strength, after the Holocaust, to found a state in the Promised Land. Many Christians saw this as a fulfilment of biblical prophecies and therefore also as proof of the reliability of the Bible and of their own faith. Within the churches there was a great lack of knowledge about the Arab world and about the far-reaching consequences for the Palestinians of the foundation of the state of Israel. Israeli politicians have always known that much Christian support of their country is, in fact, Christian self-confirmation, and that they can use it for their own good.

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From the seventies onwards, the sense of guilt about the Holocaust and their own history of anti-Semitism grew in many churches. This led to a process of rethinking their own faith and theology, and much more attention being paid to the significance of the Jewish faith.

How can we Christians, in this new situation, engage in a constructive dialogue with Judaism and the state of Israel? As non-

-Jewish Christians we are not free to speak in the same critical way as a passionate Paul spoke about his non-Christian fellow believers. Essential, however, remains the fundamental, biblical distinction between Israel as a community of faith and Israel as an ethnic people (and as a state), a distinction in which Paul also followed the Old Testament prophets.

Furthermore it is not productive to remain imprisoned in feelings of guilt. A real sense of guilt requires an honest recognition of guilt towards both the victims and God, an understanding of the permanent traumatising of those victims and their surviving

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relatives and, as we take new roads, the importance of being alert to possible new forms of anti-Semitism. With this as a given, our sense of guilt should not make us incapable of speaking out against Jews when they, in other situations, commit injustices. With many

Christians this happens when, from a permanent sense of guilt and fear of being accused of anti-Semitism, they don't dare criticize Jews or Israelis, not even when the rights of the Palestinians are severely violated.

Putting an anti-Semitic past behind us can only work if we address Jews as equal religious or political partners. Christians take up a too modest position when they think that Jews have the right to put questions to *them* but not the other way round. That is an unhealthy situation in which philo-Semitic sentiments can eventually turn into a new anti-Semitism, for example when Jews don't seem to fit our Christian paradigm.

Anti-Semitism will never be tolerated in talks between equals, talks in which we can also speak freely and openly about the biblical meaning of 'Israel' and God's universal love and justice.

8 International law

That universal human rights and the international law based on them have been accepted worldwide as an ethical and political framework can hardly be overestimated. It is of great value also, that more and more Christians support this framework actively and wholeheartedly.

This, however, is not only a matter of one's own free choice, but also a duty. Civilians and governments are obliged to obey not only the laws of their own country but also the international law which has come into force by their signing of international treaties. One example is the Geneva Conventions on the rules of law during war and occupation. After World War II, international law was given an important impulse through the founding of the United Nations and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Since then, international law has become ever more important through new treaties, jurisprudence, UN resolutions, war tribunals and the founding of the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

Followers of a religion are obliged to comply with international law - along with the laws of their own land - even if their faith is the primary source of their norms and values. Christians, therefore, have every reason to contribute to upholding and enforcing international law, however inadequately the system sometimes functions.

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In a globalizing world full of conflicts, international law is the only normative framework on which states can and should call each other to account, and it is, in spite of its deficiencies, the best we now have. Therefore it is of great value, more so as it is based on universal human rights.

Moreover, human rights have - historically seen - originated to a large extent in the Judaic and Christian tradition, which is even

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more reason for Jews and Christians to support international law wholeheartedly.

Occasionally situations might occur in which, for example church leaders, on urgent religious grounds, cannot support a legal judgement based on international law. In such a situation they have the obligation to account publicly for that choice of conscience.

As much as others citizens, Christians have two normative frameworks which have constantly to be brought into harmony but which are also separate (compare the separation of church and state): on the one hand one's personal convictions about life and on the other hand national and international law. A clear understanding of this distinction can also help to distinguish a dialogue with Israel as a community of faith and a political relationship with Israel as a state.

9 The state of Israel

The founding of the state of Israel in 1948 was, for many Jews, a huge and festive miracle, but one that had disastrous consequences for the Palestinians, who, from that time onwards, talk about 'the Catastrophe' ('al-Nakba'). The land turned out to be far from empty. A series of massacres of Palestinians took place, more than 700,000 Palestinians became refugees and about 500 Palestinian villages were systematically depopulated or destroyed, all this before and after the proclamation of the state of Israel. Many Palestinian homes were used to house Holocaust survivors.

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In 1967 200,000 more refugees were added to those numbers when Israel occupied the West Bank (including East-Jerusalem) and Gaza; since then they have suffered from illegal occupation and economic blockade.

The state of Israel originated in Zionism, the political-nationalistic movement of mainly secular Jews that, like many other nationalistic movements in Europe, arose at the end of the nineteenth century. From a deep longing for safety, self-respect and national autonomy, Zionism became the dominant Jewish answer to anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews in Russia and the rest of Europe, with, at its lowest point, the Hitler-regime. But as a nationalistic reaction to ethnic persecution, Zionism itself acquired a one-sided ethnic character, and it aspired, bolstered by religious sentiments (including those of sympathizing Christians), to an ethnic Jewish state.

Especially among orthodox Jews there was and is much opposition to Zionism. They understand Israel primarily as a community of faith, as the 'people of the Torah', and they consider that the idol of 'the state' has replaced the Torah. There was yet another small but

not unimportant movement inside Jewish Zionism which opposed Zionist longing for a Jewish state. This movement, called 'Homeland-Zionism', also aspired to a homeland for the Jews, their religion and culture in Palestine, but in peaceful cooperation with the Palestinians and with no separate Jewish state.

From the start Israeli politics have been determined by this fundamental irreconcilability of democracy and ethnic preference.

The mainstream of Zionism had a modern democratic state, like other Western states, in mind, but definitely a nationalistic *Jewish* state. From the start Israeli politics have been determined by this fundamental irreconcilability between democracy and ethnic preference.

In 1947, at its founding, the state of Israel received a first internationally legal foundation through UN-resolution 181, in which a specific division of the land between Jews and Palestinians was recommended. Even as we honestly question whether that division was just, during the so-called 'war of independence' Israel occupied even more land than had been granted and expelled a large number of Palestinians to ensure that the Jewish population would make up the majority. Since then Israel has adhered to these policies of ethnic cleansing, and, in so doing, violates international law again and again.

The state of Israel has now been internationally recognised within the 1949 borders (the so-called 'green line' of the armistice). For Sabeel and Kairos that recognition is not open to discussion, but the way in which Israel has given shape to its own right to exist certainly is. Israel hasn't committed itself yet to these borders. It colonises the West Bank on a large scale and enforces an ever more severe occupation regime in the Palestinian territories which, in many respects, is contrary to international law.

Thanks to international law, Israel has the right to exist, but it systematically undermines that right by its own politics of occupation. The Palestinians are its victims, but it is also a threat to the legitimacy and safety of the state of Israel itself.

We see the same paradox in Israel's interior politics, which are constantly aimed at the numerical and political dominance of its Jewish citizens. Elections are democratic, Palestinian citizens can vote, but again and again a Jewish government comes into power which degrades Palestinians to second-rate citizens by countless laws and rules, and even opposes Israeli peace and human rights organizations. Israel may

Israel may look like a democracy from the outside, but it has no constitution, and it functions as a Jewish ethnocracy: the dominance over minorities by one - in this case Jewish - ethnic group of the population, while the supposed ethnic unity of that group in reality does not even exist. Israel's declaration of independence states that "it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex", as well as "freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture". For Israeli Palestinians, daily practice is quite different.

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The state of Israel is the result of an ethnically and religiously inspired Zionism, in response to nationalism, anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews in Europe. That from which the Jewish people wanted to free itself forever, discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, was taken, unfortunately, as the fundamental starting point for the foundation of its own state. In many and various ways, the Israeli government makes a distinction between Jews and Palestinians by which the rights of the Palestinians are seriously violated: a different

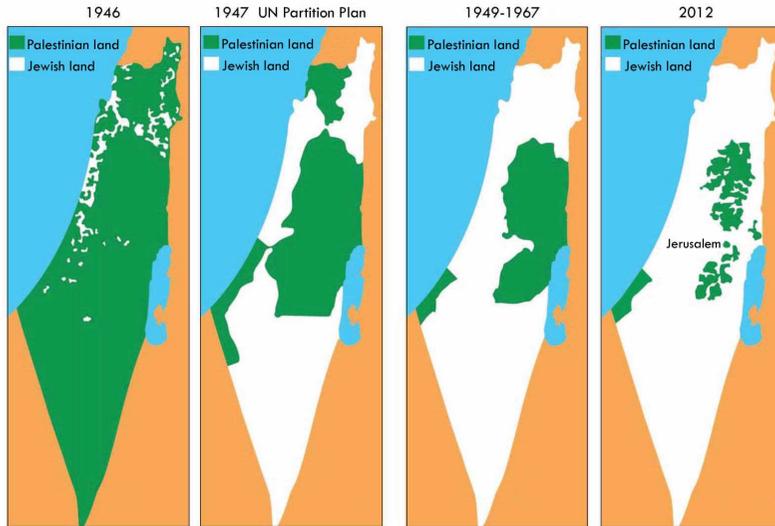
distribution of water, different legal rights (in the occupied territories Palestinians live under military law), difference in issuing building permissions, different possibilities to travel and detention without trial even of Palestinian children.

Various visitors from South Africa, among them Archbishop Desmond Tutu (patron of Sabeel) identified in Israel and in the

Considering the ethnic character of Israeli politics, with all its consequences for the Palestinians, it is not unjust to speak of Israeli 'apartheid politics'.

Palestinian territories much of their own apartheid past. Considering the ethnic character of Israeli politics, with all its consequences for the Palestinians, it is not unjust to speak of Israeli *apartheid politics*, in Israel itself as well as in the occupied Palestinian territories.

It is the duty of Christian churches and Christian political parties to stand up for law and justice, for the victims of injustice and for that reason for international law, also where Israel is concerned. It is therefore their task, also from their own convictions of faith, to urge Israel in various ways to act with more law and justice in the Middle East.



Palestinian loss of land

These maps show how much Palestinian land (green) has been lost since the UN Plan of Partition of 1947. The third map shows how much more Israel conquered than the plan of partition proposed, so that only 22 percent of the land of historical Palestine remained for the Palestinians. The last map shows how much Palestinian territory has been lost as a result of the structures of occupation: the wall, checkpoints, roads prohibited for Palestinians, closed military areas and the ever-growing number of Israeli settlements.

10 The Palestinian diaspora

The founding and expansion of the Israeli state 1947-49 came with a planned ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population. Much of that was kept secret from the outside world, but enough became known to be very worrisome. Still, most Western churches were so much influenced by their own enthusiasm about the new Israel, and by their growing feelings of guilt about the Holocaust, that - as a result - they continued to support Israel in almost everything and refused to believe that it actually happened.

Since 1948 the
Palestinians live
in the diaspora.

Since 1948 Palestinians live in the diaspora, a situation of worsening dispersal and injustice, as the Israeli occupation continues the ethnic cleansing of the initial years. All Palestinian territories are under Israeli military supervision. The Gaza-strip is an open-air prison where the

population is suffering very much from Israel's economic blockade. Furthermore, a large number of Palestinians still live in refugee camps or have emigrated.

On the West Bank the Palestinian population lives in enclaves with a restricted degree of self-government and surrounded by an extensive system of Israeli occupation: Jewish settlements, checkpoints, an Israeli road system, which Palestinians are not allowed to use, military bases and the wall of partition. Often these measures cut them off from their own land, their families, the possibilities of finding work, good public health care, etc. In short, the situation in the occupied territories is desperate.

Two well-known and distressing examples are the Christian families of Claire Anastas and Daoud Nassar. Claire lives with her family in Bethlehem. The Israeli wall, with its watchtowers and Israeli soldiers, in violation of international law, cuts straight through Bethlehem and surrounds Claire's house on all sides. As a

result Claire and her husband have lost their work (a shop and garage at their house) to a large extent.

Daoud Nassar lives with his family near Bethlehem and has been fighting for years against Israeli attempts to expel them from their land. With his international project 'Tent of Nations' Daoud has tried to oppose non-violently.

Apart from the Israeli occupation, there is also the fact that the Palestinians have hardly been able to organise good political leadership. Their leaders are often incompetent, corrupt, regularly violate the rights of their own people, cooperate too much with the Israelis and are divided among themselves, as now by the rivalry between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. The context of an Israeli occupation and detrimental international politics harmful to the Palestinians has, to a large extent, contributed to these negative developments.

It is conceivable that all these circumstances together form a breeding ground for all kinds of discontent and violence. According to international law, a population has the right to defend itself with violence in a situation of occupation, but only directed at military targets. Attacks on civilian targets are never justified, and they are fundamentally rejected by Sabeel and Kairos. Moreover, Sabeel and Kairos choose explicitly for non-violent forms of resistance only.

Attacks on civilian targets are never justified.

Naim Ateek, founder of Sabeel, wrote an article in 2005 about suicide-bombers ('Suicide-bombers. What is theologically and morally wrong with suicide bombings? A Palestinian Christian perspective'), in which he asks that attention be paid to the motives and circumstances behind such attacks, while he condemns them fundamentally on the grounds of an extensive argumentation.

11 The Palestinian Christians

After 1948 the attention of the Western churches focused on Israel, paying little attention to the Palestinians, even including Palestinian Christians. Many Western Christians still think that all Palestinians are Muslim and they don't know that there is a small but important minority of Palestinian Christians who speaks Arabic.

In 1948 Palestinian Christians made up 10-15% of the population. In some areas, as in and around Bethlehem, they had always formed the majority and provided mayors and members of the local councils. Their number has decreased since then to about 1,5 % of the population, 160,000 people in total: 110,000 in Israel, 47,000 on the West Bank and less than 3,000 in Gaza. Their presence is being threatened by the constant conflict. They feel their situation to be unbearable and hopeless. Many of them, therefore, are emigrating to Europe or the United States. At this moment about 60% of the Palestinian Christians live abroad.

Israel would like us to believe that the difficult situation of Palestinian Christians is caused by the Muslims, as is the case in some other Arab countries. Such tensions between them do occur, but the Palestinian Christians themselves stress, time and again, that

Palestinian Christians feel one with the Palestinian people and refuse to be played off against their Islamic fellow citizens.

not Muslims but Israeli politics and occupation make their lives impossible and that, as a result, tensions between them are also increasing. In general, the relationship between Palestinian Christians and Muslims is characterized by cooperation and mutual solidarity. Palestinian Christians

feel one with the Palestinian people and refuse to be played off against their Islamic fellow citizens.

It took a long time before the Palestinian Christians, divided as they are over many churches, could let their voices be heard together, in an assertive and united way, against Israeli oppression. One important impulse was given by the Reverend Naim Ateek who, in 1990, founded a Palestinian-Christian organization which, in 1993, became 'Sabeel', a name which means 'the road' as well as 'the source'. Sabeel calls itself 'an ecumenical centre for liberation-theology' and now has several branches abroad. Hearing the term 'liberation-theology' Western Christians may think of the sometime Marxist-orientated liberation theology in Latin-America. At Sabeel this Marxist orientation is out of the question. However, it does see its mission as to actualise the gospel of Jesus Christ in its present context of discrimination and occupation, and to bring its views and its situation to the attention of other Christians worldwide. In that sense Sabeel fully aims at a theology of liberation.

An important new step for Palestinian Christians was the publication in December 2009 of the Kairos document. 'Kairos' is the Greek word for 'decisive moment', and for the Palestinians that moment had arrived. Their distress is extreme, as injustice marks their life. They speak up, therefore, against the Israeli occupation which affects the human dignity of Palestinians as well as of Israelis. They call for a solution by which both they and the Israelis can live in freedom and safety. And they call on Christians worldwide to critically review their own theology.

Western churches quite often blame Palestinian Christians for holding on to a replacement theology that could be a breeding ground for anti-Semitism in an Arab context. Palestinian Christians reject this reproach. For centuries they have lived peacefully together with Jews in Palestine, not 'in place' of them. They recognise that Jews have a different relationship with God but consider 'replac-

Palestinian Christians speak up, therefore, against the Israeli occupation.

ment theology' a typically European problem now being projected onto them.

Sabeel and the authors of the Kairosdocument fundamentally have chosen for non-violent resistance.

Sabeel and the authors of the Kairos-document fundamentally have chosen for non-violent resistance against the Israeli occupation, as a right and a duty for all Palestinians. They appeal, in the first place, to their fellow Christians worldwide to support them

in various non-violent ways, if possible also by an economic boycott of Israeli companies operating in illegal Jewish settlements.

The Middle East is the cradle and the centre of Christianity, but it is in danger of disappearing there. If the Israeli politics of apartheid and occupation continue in this way, the presence of Christians in the Holy Land will be reduced to nothing more than the supervision of the most important holy places.

In the conception of Palestinian nationalism many Christian Palestinians have played a prominent role. Most Palestinian Christians are still in favour of a secular Palestinian state. The Palestinian Authority has certainly been sensitive to this. If the Christian voice disappears, it would mean a great loss to Palestinian society and to the interreligious relations in the Holy Land.

12 Conclusions and Kairos

1 The solution is simple

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is extremely complicated by the histories that lie behind it, by deep emotions and traumas, strong religious sentiments and the involvement of great political powers such as the USA and the Arab world. On the other hand, it is important to continue to see the solution of the conflict as fundamentally simple, namely in the full recognition of each other's rights on the basis of human rights and international law, and from there to invest in serious negotiations.

2 International law and anti-Semitism

It is not the task of the Christian churches to present concrete political proposals for the solution of the Middle East conflict. But it is certainly their task, out of their own faith and tradition, to stand up for international law and for the rights of both Jews and Palestinians and, especially, for those of the victims.

Our earlier biblical-theological considerations showed that, empowered by Christian faith, there is every reason to strongly support the implementation of international law to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Bible doesn't ask us to assign to Israel, as an ethnic people, a special and a higher position among other nations which surpasses international law. Moreover, an ethnic position of preference can evoke new anti-Semitism.

Christians, more than others, must remain alert to new forms of anti-Semitism. But that alertness should not make us susceptible to easy accusations from the Jewish side, as if we are being anti-Semitic

Empowered by the Christian faith, there is every reason to strongly support the implementation of international law to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

when we criticize Israel on valid grounds and speak in defence of the Palestinians.

3 Theology of fulfilment

"To the Jew first and also to the Greek"(Rom. 1.16, 2.9), that statement by Paul does not mean that Jews are more important to God

"To the Jew first and also to the Greek", that statement by Paul does not mean that Jews are more important to God than non-Jews.

than non-Jews, neither ethnically nor in the field of faith. Paul did not refer to a scale of importance. He wanted to say that God had started the history of the covenant with Abraham and his descendants and, after that, came the

church of Christians for Jews and non-Jews alike. Christians owe respect to the Jewish community of faith as 'the people of God' who came before them. With that, Judaism still keeps its theological meaning for Christians, because Christians can only understand themselves out of Christ, as the continuation and the fulfilment of the Jewish road. That fulfilment also had a critical effect, because faith was liberated from the exclusively Jewish framework and was made more profound by dedication to the unconditional and universal love of God.

4 Jewish self-understanding

Some Western churches have spoken on grounds of faith and solidarity of a special bond they feel with the people of Israel. That bond also applies to the state of Israel, because the state forms - according to these churches - an integral part of the self-understanding of the Jewish people. This way of reasoning seems modest but is disputable. Why should the self-understanding of the Jews be more important than the self-understanding of the Palestinians?

Moreover, the church then places herself in an unequal and immature position towards the Jewish people, and this helps neither of them. Of course it is vital in every dialogue that we consider first the self-understanding of the other, and then what this means to us. But someone else's self-understanding can never

Someone's else's self-understanding can never be the last criterion for our own views and our own moral judgments.

be the last criterion for our own views and our own moral judgments; just as we are not bound to acknowledge the self-understanding of extremist Muslims or Jewish settlers. In an honest dialogue, the other can only respect us if we stand and speak for ourselves.

For Christians and churches there can only be the question of a special bond, when it is based on shared faith and shared Scriptures. With the people of Israel as a community of faith we have a special bond because we both read the Old Testament (the Tanakh) and are both - if we read correctly - held to account on that. With Palestinian Christians, the religious bond goes even further, because we share the whole Bible, the Old and New Testaments, and we are united in Jesus Christ who is, to us, the centre of the Scriptures.

5 The inter-religious dialogue

Generally it is recognized that in the Middle East, as well as worldwide, inter-religious dialogue has been of great importance and is becoming even more important because of globalization. In that fact lies the possibility of connecting with those Muslims who oppose exclusive Islamic claims to the Holy Land. Unlike fundamentalists, they do not consider Palestine as Islamic heritage, and believe that they, like the followers of other religions, should not be allowed to claim any land for themselves, because the whole earth belongs to God. Such dialogue-directed Muslims also think that, in the light of

globalization, religions should practice a connecting, non-nationalistic view of differences between people.

Unfortunately the inter-religious dialogue among Jews, Christians and Muslims is difficult to get started. Perhaps such a dialogue has better chance of success if we focus not on similarities and differences at the level of faith, but rather on the question if, together, we can devote ourselves, out of our own spiritual sources, to universal human rights and international law. Within that framework we can hear and question each other as equal partners, and we can mutually account for ourselves.

6 What can and what should we do?

When the awareness breaks through about what is really going on in Israel and the Palestinian territories, the question that is often asked is: "What can and what should we do?" For churches and their members, it is essential that they first deal with their own post-war history, on what position they have taken in the past towards Israel and the Palestinians. Many churches fully supported Israel out of

enthusiasm and feelings of guilt.

Alarming information about the fate of the Palestinians wasn't really taken to heart, and even the voice of Palestinian Christians was heard hardly or not at all. In this way many Western churches became co-responsible for the Nakba and

Many Western churches became co-responsible for the Nakba and still are.

still are. If that co-responsibility for the Nakba isn't first acknowledged, the Palestinians won't feel understood.

If we want to devote ourselves to peace in the Middle East, we won't help that peace by a 'pro-Palestinians & anti-Jews' attitude or the other way round. This is about universal justice, peace, safety and dignity for *all* people, irrespective of which group they belong to. That universal justice and peace is the living heart of the Bible and

of universal human rights. Dedicating ourselves to the rights of the Palestinians also means, that we wish Israel well too, because Israeli occupation-politics are also destroying the soul of the Jewish people. That is why, for example, it is so important that especially *Israeli* peace and human rights organizations are strongly supported from abroad. Furthermore there are countless possibilities to contribute to peace in the Middle East, too many to name here. We limit ourselves here to the main points from the above-mentioned Kairos-document.



Daoud Nassar, who opposes the expropriation of his land in a non-violent way and stands up for law and reconciliation (see chapter 10; photograph: Sigismund von Dobschütz).

7 Kairos

The title of the Kairos-document is decisive: it wants us to concentrate on the urgency of the situation of the Palestinians. In many churches and political parties, that urgency is felt far too little. 'Kairos' is *now*: the hour of truth, the decisive moment to act, because the need is extremely high. The publication of the Kairos-document at the end of 2009 is already a few years ago, but 'Kairos' doesn't imply a moment in time that just passes by, but an urgent situation which has become even more urgent and requires action *now*.

"Come and see!", is the first appeal with which the Kairos-document speaks to us.

"Come and see!" is the first appeal with which the Kairos-document speaks to us. Come and visit Israel and the Palestinian territories to see, hear and experience what is happening there. Or actually try to make genuine *contact* in other ways,

so that an attitude of detachment is no longer possible.

Secondly the Kairos-document asks all churches to critically reconsider their own theology about Israel and the other nations. This brochure wishes to contribute to this reconsideration.

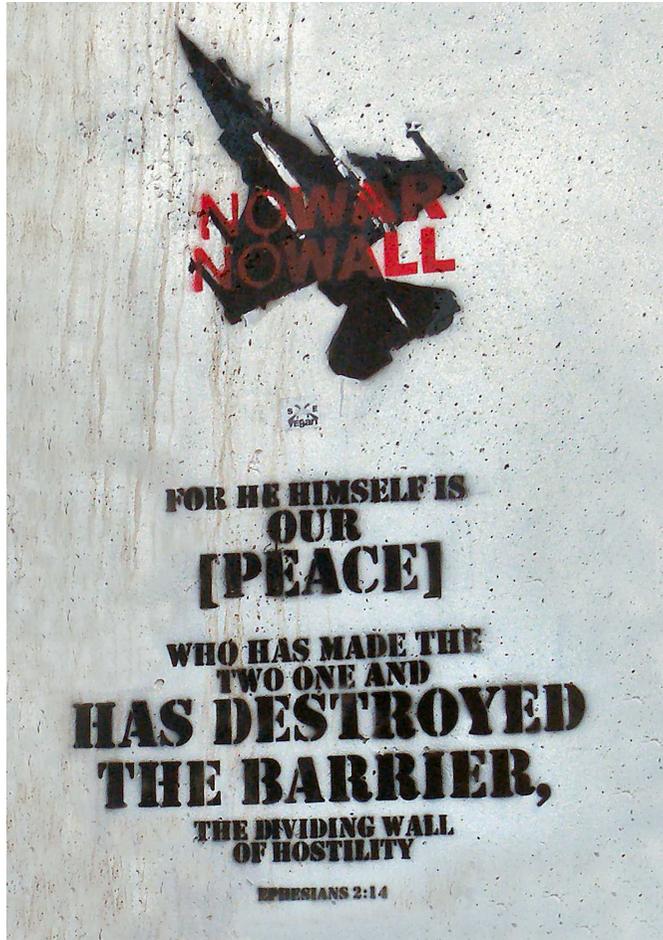
Thirdly the Kairos-document strongly urges validation and a much stronger application of human rights and international law in the Middle East.

And fourthly the churches are being asked to support economic measures that put more pressure on the Israeli government. BDS is in this context a much-used abbreviation: 'Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions'. BDS is a method of non-violent resistance that proved effective against apartheid in South-Africa and was, at that time, supported by a number of Western churches. BDS is controversial in the churches, but every church can decide for itself to what extent it wants to apply it. At least the subject - considering the desperate situation of the Palestinians - should be open to discussion.

8 The wall has been broken down

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems desperate and hopeless. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to hope for a new future of justice and peace, because the insight that "the wall has been broken down" (Eph. 2.4) is now firmly embedded, worldwide, in people's hearts by the gospel of Jesus Christ. That understanding has even found expression in a worldwide framework of human rights and international law. It finds expression in a statue next to the main building of the UN which bears this prophetic text: "He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall

beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Is. 2.4).



Eph. 2.14 on the Israeli wall of partition in Bethlehem

Questions for discussion

Below you will find some questions for discussion, for example as a start in a discussion-group of church or political party.

- 1 Do you feel a bond with Israel? In what way? Which of the four meanings of 'Israel' is most important to you (see chapter 2)?
- 2 Have Jews more rights to live in the Holy Land than Palestinians? Why? Why not?
- 3 Did you know that there are also Palestinian Christians apart from Palestinian Muslims? Were you aware of their difficult situation? Why have they been forgotten for so long?
- 4 In what specific ways can we contribute to more justice and peace in Israel and Palestine? Also by a boycott of Israeli products from the occupied territories?