

Shoah versus Nakba: Some Antiquated New Theological Paradigms



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Abstract

The Post-*Shoah* theological paradigms proposed by Marvin Sweeney and Gershom Ratheiser are too similar to the old paradigms they rightly denounce to offer any significant advances. They merely justify the present status quo in Israel/Palestine.

Keywords: Shoah, Nakba, Priestly Document, holiness, Zionism

Shoah versus Nakba: Algunos nuevos anticuados paradigmas teológicos

Resumen

Los paradigmas teológicos post-*Shoah*, propuestos por Marvin Sweeney y Gershom Ratheiser, son demasiado similares a los viejos paradigmas que ellos, con justa razón, denuncian como para ofrecer algún tipo de desarrollo significativo. Estos paradigmas, meramente, justifican el presente status quo en Israel/Palestina.

Palabras clave: Shoah, Nakba, Documento P, santidad, sionismo

Post-*Shoah* theology has found a place in the catalogue of new exegetical methods (Mandolfo, 2007). At long last, the decade of Nazi atrocities and the centuries of mistreatment of European Jews are brought to bear on Christian biblical theologies which turned the Hebrew Scriptures into an “Old” Testament. The *Shoah* revealed the moral and theological bankruptcy of supersessionist models that denied theological legitimacy to Judaism and

to Jews and contributed to the attempted murder of the entirety of European Jewry (Berkovits, 1973; Paulikowski, 1994; Michael, 2008).

There is no question here of downplaying the mistreatment of Jews nor the urgent need to give up supersessionism. Monstrous as it was, the evil of the *Shoah* did not freeze time. The *Shoah* was followed by another catastrophe, the *Nakba*, the inescapable outcome of British promises. Against the Ottomans, London promised Paris a share of the Levant (Sykes-Picot). Against the French, London promised the Sharif of Mecca an Arab Empire (McMahon-Hussein letters), and a State to the Zionists (Balfour Declaration) against the Germans (Laurens, 2008).

Contrary to the God of Israel who assorted land promises with such untenable conditions that he could go back on his pledges at no cost to his reputation, the British could not escape the contradictions of their politics in the Levant. In the wake of the independence of Indian dominions, Palestine lost its strategic value to the British Empire. Combined pressure from the USA and the USSR led London to save itself the mounting costs of dealing with the consequences of its promises. The Mandate was terminated without any plan acceptable to any the parties that had been pitted against one another for a half-century.

When diplomacy fails, brutal force breaks the deadlock. The ensuing displacement of many Palestinians was a foregone conclusion. The events that followed the foundation of the State need no discussion here (Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 2007). The past cannot be changed, but do we need to repeat it?

Instead of dwelling on it, the focus here is on constructions that claim to be able correct the errors of the past with Post-*Shoah* theologies.

Sweeney's New Paradigms for Post-*Shoah* Theology

Sweeney's charge against Christian supersessionism targets the Wellhausenian historical-theological axiom that privileged pre-exilic prophecy as the spiritual core of the Old Testament. Projecting back its separation from the Roman Catholic Church onto Israel's past, Protestantism saw itself as the heir of the original purity of the prophetic message supposedly lost when Judaism degenerated into a ritualistic religion read in light of Medieval Catholicism. The anti-Semite presuppositions of such a scheme are obvious and Sweeney rightly asks for its rejection on moral grounds to make room for new presuppositions.

To be sure, Sweeney's denunciation comes twenty years after the system of Pentateuchal sources associated with Wellhausen's work was rejected in Europe, albeit on different grounds. This belated charge does not render the argument irrelevant. Sweeney (1998: 145) notes that the unified model is now replaced by an increasing number of epistemological approaches. Each approach reflects the concerns of a group and perspective that previously stood outside the "normal" social paradigms and was not considered eligible to engage in "legitimate" theological discourse. To illustrate how new paradigms for Old Testament theology

should work, Sweeney selects two biblical figures that he presents in novel ways. First, Sweeney chooses Amos and rejects the old Protestant notion that Amos represents the demand for worldwide justice. No, Sweeney (1998: 157) explains that Amos' oracles against the nations are the partisan demand of a Judean nationalistic prophet who calls for justice for his people (only). Amos seeks the liberation of the Kingdom of Judah from the grip of the Kingdom of Israel. In light of the theology and message of Amos, this partisan view should be considered theologically legitimate: Amos spoke from the interests of an "individual Judean who was part of a living nation with its own political, economic, and religious interests, perspectives, and identity." During Amos' days—notoriously difficult to date—as during the *Shoah*, prophets "recognized the responsibility to speak up when evil manifests itself in the world". Partisanship saves Sweeney from applying justice to any other historical situation, for instance whenever the Kingdom of Judah could have oppressed Edom (2 Sam 8:13; 1 Kgs 11:15) or the State of Israel its neighbours. Is not the concept of "partisan justice" something of an oxymoron (Frankel, 1989)?

Sweeney then turns to the Book of Esther. Against Christian interpreters who view Esther as theologically questionable, it should be recognized that Esther does not advocate wanton killing or revenge but the fundamental right of self-defence (1998: 158-159). Moving from the general to the particular, Sweeney mentions Jewish troops who, as part of the British Army, fought the Nazis in North Africa, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian involved in a failed plot to murder Hitler.¹ Like Bonhoeffer, these troops were resisting the evil of Nazism. As they furnished the core of the Israel Defence Forces, Sweeney (1998: 159) argues that reconceived paradigms of Old Testament theology imply a change of attitude towards the modern State of Israel and its army. Post-*Shoah* theology should resist many Christian circles' antagonism to modern Zionism, which Sweeney ascribes to a monolithic view of Judaism solely as a religious and victimized entity when in fact Judaism is a combination of religious and national identities (Sweeney, 1998: 147).

Stressing that both Amos and Esther transmit a divine requirement for justice and that Christians and Jews are obligated to bring it about, Sweeney (1998: 160) concludes with a saying from Rabbi Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself alone, what am I?"

Shoah Blinkers

In the context of the horrors of the *Shoah*, the first part of Rabbi Hillel's quote supports the legitimate right of self-defence for Jews who were victimized for centuries in Europe. The second part of the quote, however, sounds a more problematic note decades after the *Shoah*. Few would contest that every

¹ Sweeney does not mention the several hundred British soldiers killed in Palestine by Zionist terrorists while the British army was exhausting its last forces in the protracted war against Nazi Germany (Zadka, 1995).

conscientious human has the responsibility to speak up when evil manifests itself in the world. This begs the question on how wide the world is. Making no universalistic demand for worldwide justice, Sweeney's Amos limits the scope of his message to injustices suffered by the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah and to the Jewish population of the modern State of Israel.

What if, God forbids, these inhabitants were to become the oppressors rather than the victims of their neighbours? One of the fathers of post-*Shoah* theology insists that in a post-*Shoah* context it is our moral imperative to side with the victims, even against God if necessary (Fackenheim, 1990: 32). Though Fackenheim refers to victims of the *Shoah*, the moral imperative may well require that Jews speak out, even against themselves if necessary, and even more against Israelis should these become the victimizers. Sweeney has a ready counter: prophetic responsibility does not apply when Jews oppress others in order to restore "Judean independence and rule over the northern tribes of Israel as it had once existed under David and Solomon" (Sweeney, 1998: 157). Violence and oppression of others are legitimate in a national struggle of liberation as well as for the restoration of the Davidic Empire. As Christian theologians did for centuries, Sweeney's paradigms confuse history with ideology when it fits the interests of one's nation. Sweeney refers to the empire of David and Solomon as a historical fact and asks theologians to consider its subjection of the northern tribes (and supposedly anyone living between Egypt and the Euphrates?) as legitimate while considering Israel's subsequent subjection of Judah illegitimate. Amos' liberation theology is brought to the defence of an empire whose historical existence needs no discussion. Liberation theology is yoked to colonial theology. Amos is a liberation theologian when Judah is oppressed: David and Solomon are righteous colonizers when Judah has the upper hand. In modern terms, Zionist settlers become liberators of *Eretz-Israel*, which is unjustly occupied by a Palestinian population. The second part of Rabbi Hillel's quote "If I am only for myself alone, what am I?" does not apply.

While his call for Christian theology to confront the element of evil within itself (Sweeney, 1998: 146) is well taken, on a historical level, Sweeney's depiction of Christian theology as hostile to Zionism is simply wrong. Zionism is but a product of Christian imperialism which now survives through post-1967 settler expansionism (Ram, 1999; Shafir, 1999; Masalha, 2000; Maoz, 2006), although links between Zionism and colonialism are traced back to Herzl himself (Quigley, 2005: 1-13). Colonialism is also important for understanding the support Zionism has received in the West (Davidson, 2001). Until the *Intifada*, the bulk of the antagonism towards Zionism, and consequently the State of Israel, stemmed from Jewish rather than from Christian circles, especially since secular Zionism was violently opposed to traditional Judaism (Rabkin, 2004: 62-63). Sweeney uses Wellhausen's supersessionism and the Christian view of Judaism as a victimized religious entity as a straw man argument. The real issue is the slow erosion of the unconditional support granted by most Christian circles to the modern State of Israel. The *Intifada* turned the icon of stone-throwing David on its head and dressed Goliath in Israeli Army clothes, questioning the legitimacy of Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories. Christian antagonism to modern Zionism derives more from Israel's policies in the Occupied Territories than from a monolithic view of Judaism as

a religious and victimised entity. The first *Intifada* was to Zionism what Prague and Budapest were to Communism: it revealed the limits of the ideology.

The first footnote of Sweeney's article indicates that the article is based upon the author's installation lecture at the School of Theology of Claremont, January 23, 1996, four months after the signature of the second Oslo Accords by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yassir Arafat, which marked the second step towards a comprehensive peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians. With the Oslo negotiations as backdrop to his academic installation, Professor Sweeney stakes the *Shoah* against the first *Intifada* that had ended three years before the lecture was delivered. Against the immediate background of the Oslo Accords, the Esther paradigm justifies the use of sophisticated weapons against stone-throwing mobs in the name of the right to self-defence. The Amos paradigm goes further by justifying continued occupation and settlement of the territories as the legitimate restoration of David's united kingdom. The article reflects the legitimate anxiety generated by anti-Oslo propaganda that depicted negotiation with the enemy as suicidal. In effect, Sweeney's article opposes the first serious attempt by Israel to make peace with the Palestinians. Twenty years after the publication of Sweeney's article, similar arguments are being used to defend continued occupation, the routine elimination of "suspects" without trial, ever-increasing settlements, and hundreds of check-points inside the territories in spite of the construction of the security fence.

The denunciation of Nazi atrocities decades after the act has become part of a gyrosopic mechanism of survival that helps scholars select safe grounds to tread (Zinn, 1990: 32). *Al Tigu Li Bashoah* (Don't touch my Shoah), a post-Zionist film by Asher Tlalim, aptly describes the agenda of post-*Shoah* theology. Christian guilt is mobilised to prevent Christians from criticizing Israel. The convicted murderer is disqualified from reporting a crime. Reversing the inter-generational guilt principle found in Ezek 18:2, the persecution of Jews in Europe exonerate the crimes of their grand-children. Sweeney's onslaught against criticisms of the policies of the modern State of Israel is not unique.

Ratheiser's Ethics of *Shalom*

Ratheiser's book *Mitzvoth Ethics and the Jewish Bible* (2007) operates from a totally different epistemological basis than Sweeney's article. To replace Christian Old Testament theology, Ratheiser argues for the exclusivity of the Jewish community in interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures as expressions of God's normative will in the Jewish Bible and Israel's particular role in God's actions. Whereas Sweeney recognizes the rise of a plurality of communities engaged in the interpretive process, Ratheiser offers to replace Christian Old Testament theology with a Jewish approach, "an Ethic of *Shalom*".

Ratheiser selects Joshua as one of the paradigms found in the Hebrew Bible. To "serve as valid visualization" of the intrinsic link between his and later Jewish generations (Ratheiser, 2007: 354), Joshua should not be viewed as a spiritual giant. Rather, Joshua is "the exemplar warrior," the practitioner of "liberating

justice and holiness,” the “ideal army leader,” “ideal war strategist,” and “just ruler” (Ratheiser, 2007: 266-267). Full of compassion for the sufferings of his covenant vassals, the God of Israel identifies with the suffering of the ancient Jews and loses perfection for the sake of his chosen people. He changes. His graciousness is his limitation (Ratheiser, 2007: 266-267).

In spite of major differences in approach, Ratheiser’s ethics have an air of *déjà vu*. To Sweeney’s “partisan justice” corresponds Ratheiser’s YHWH who is impervious to the sufferings of others besides Israel at the cost of losing divine perfection. Whereas Sweeney’s Esther supports self-defence and colonialism, Ratheiser’s Joshua demonstrates the sacred and cultic character of the ban applied to the Canaanites. To suggest that the extermination of men, women and children in the Book of Joshua cannot be holy is the mistake of ethically oriented biblical scholars who evaluate ancient Jewish norms on the basis of twentieth-century ethical values (Ratheiser, 2007: 304-315).

In a review of Ratheiser’s book, Walter Brueggemann (2008) notes that it is not a particularly Jewish reading and that, like every reading, Christian or Jewish, it holds the potential of a contemporary tilt toward the interests of the reading community, the very problem with Christian “confessional” reading to which Ratheiser objects so strenuously in the first part of his book. Had Ratheiser selected Jeremiah rather than Joshua as an example, the outcome would be very different. The selection of Joshua is not innocent. “The choice of Joshua is made with reference to important contemporary Jewish concerns as it serves the theory of conquest and the ideology of land possession” (Brueggemann, 2008: 4).

Again, contextualization is revealing. Ratheiser’s volume is based on a Groningen doctoral dissertation dated 2004. The final stages of the writing of the thesis coincide with the debates over the legality of the security fence built by Israel at the UN General Assembly, the International Court of Justice and the Israeli Supreme Court. Echoes of these discussions are found in the book under the equation of Israel’s stability with security (Ratheiser, 2007: 354), the definition of *shalom* as the restoration of Israel’s purity and holiness by holy war and the ban of the Canaanites (Ratheiser, 2007: 304-315). On the conceptual level, Ratheiser’s ethics are prefigured in the work of Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1868–1922) who redefined the biblical and rabbinic concept of בטחון “trust in God” in the sense of military security in the modern Israeli language (Rabkin, 2004: 63-66).

Bi-partisan Paradigms of Old Testament Theology for the Post-Nakba Period

To justify his ethics of violent *shalom*, Ratheiser (2007: 292) claims that “Virtually every strand of biblical literature” testifies that YHWH “is depicted as warrior both at the beginning of Israel’s history” and in later periods. If “Israel’s history” begins with the book of Joshua, this is certainly correct. This focus on Israel’s so-called history, however, marks a clear break with Judaism, which always displayed a marked aversion to history (Yerushalmi, 1982). If it is

hard to argue against the truism that “[t]he study of warfare in the OT proves that יהוה-י-יהוה is a God of war” (Ratheiser, 2007: 291), there is a lot more in the Hebrew Scriptures than warfare. Sweeney’s new paradigms and Ratheiser’s *Mitzvoth* ethics look away from the Torah and its coherent narrative extending from Genesis 1 to Exodus, Deuteronomy or even as far as Joshua. This narrative, the so-called Priestly Document, was identified as far back as 1869 without any of Wellhausen’s presuppositions, thanks to clear internal criteria: a very distinctive language, a propensity for numbers and formulae, strikingly different theological concepts and a consistent chronology (Nöldeke, 1869: 94-95; Lohfink, 1994a: 145; Guillaume, 2009). Whether the Priestly Document was an independent narrative or a redactional layer is a side issue.

Genesis 1 constitutes the introduction of the Priestly narrative and steers the theme of the entire composition. Contrary to the Septuagint, which states in Gen 2:2 that God finished his work in six days, in the Hebrew text, creation lasts *seven* days, which sets the Sabbath rather than humanity as the crown of creation. The Sabbath is the only creation Elohim blesses *and* sanctifies. The Sabbath is the sole creation whose sanctity receives direct divine sanction. The exclusivity of sabbatical holiness is sustained throughout the Torah and even throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. All other categories of holiness, in particular holy places and ‘sanctuaries’ are cases of self-sanctification devoid of divine sanction. Sabbatical holiness is so systematically exclusive that Jacob Milgrom, a scholar who cannot be accused of hostility towards Judaism or the modern State of Israel, admits, “Never in Scripture do we find that God sanctifies space” (2000: 1962). Holy days effectively exclude holy places. The paraphernalia of the sanctuary erected in the wilderness stands outside geography and must not be mapped.

The Priestly narrative has no place for holy war. The Priestly narrative excludes every form of violence, except the slaughter of animals for food. The priestly version of the Flood narrative attributes the cause of the flood to the violence that filled the land (Gen 6:11), not to the lust of Nephilim (Gen 6:1-8). The denunciation of violence extends to the religious sphere. After the flood, Elohim concedes the right to kill animals for food purposes only (Gen 9:3-6). This restriction was “corrected” with the insertion of seven pairs of clean animals in the ark (Gen 7:2-3) so that Noah could offer them as holocausts (Gen 8:20-21). The clean/unclean distinction contradicts the “very good” of creation that is not stained in the Priestly narrative by a story of the fall in Genesis 2-4. Noah’s holocaust defeats the logic of the Priestly Document where Elohim relinquishes violence through an unconditional *berit* rather than by the pleasing odour of burning meat. For this reason, the Passover is a meal rather than a sacrifice. The lamb must be eaten entirely without any waste (Exod 12) because the violence entailed by its killing is tolerated solely if it serves to feed humans. Neither Elohim nor YHWH need feeding.

Then, the Priestly Document tackles ethnic violence. Ishmael receives the sign of the unconditional and eternal *berit* on the same day as Abraham, a year before Isaac (Gen 17:23). Every attempt to exclude Ishmael, in particular his literary murder by referring to Isaac as Abraham’s “only son” (Gen 22:2), is foiled by the intervention of an angel. Ishmael duly inherits tenure rights and Ishmael is

present with Isaac for Abraham's burial (Gen 25:9) and Ishmael is gathered to his people, presumably in Machpelah, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (compare Gen 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33). Genesis clearly includes Ishmael among YHWH's covenantal partners. Hence, if YHWH deeply identifies with the sufferings of his covenantal partners (Ratheiser, 2007: 266-267), the loss of perfection involved in the process does not lead to making YHWH insensitive to the sufferings of Arabs. Partisanship can in no way exclude Ishmael's seed from the covenant. German Protestant translations have only recently dropped the word "nur" that was traditionally added in Gen 21:12 for לֶךְ זָרַע in order to explain that Abraham's seed would *only* be named through Isaac. The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this limitation of the eternal and unconditional covenant established through the sign of circumcision are well known.

The Priestly Document adds economic violence to the list of abhorrent behaviour by attributing the cause of the Exodus to the brutality (פֶּרֶק) of the enslavement of the sons of Israel (Exod. 1:13-14) rather than to slavery itself. The Torah's non-violent strand continues with the description of the fertile land of Canaan. Theological violence is presented as the reason for the death of the entire Exodus generation in the wilderness. Since the land of Canaan is fertile as well as empty, because it eats its inhabitants, the scouts' report is slanderous and the people's call to return to Egypt is their undoing (Numbers 14). The giants of Num. 13:32 are clearly secondary as they presuppose a Canaan full of mighty inhabitants rather than an empty land. Consistent with its notion of an empty Canaan, the Priestly Document has the next generation cross the Jordan after the death of Moses. No army is needed to settle an empty land. The first concern after crossing the Jordan is to celebrate the Passover and *Massot* festivals (Josh 4:19; 5:9-12). Eleazar then endows each male with a portion of land (Josh 14:1) which completes the process begun in Genesis 1.28 with the peaceful domestication of the land (כִּבְשׁ Josh 18:1; Knauf, 2000: 113-115). In the Priestly Document's coherent presentation of the origins of Israel, violence is the one and only original sin (Lohfink, 1994b). Ratheiser's (2007: 292) contention that "Virtually every strand of biblical literature" testifies to YHWH's depiction as a warrior is simply wrong. No amount of partisanship will succeed in erasing Priestly texts from the Torah. For this reason, the marginalisation of Priestly texts in favour of prophetic passages is strangely reminiscent of the Wellhausen bias rightly denounced by Sweeney and Ratheiser.

Partisanship versus Universalism

Contrary to Priestly universalism that takes into account the legitimate needs of various groups in order to enable their peaceful coexistence, Sweeney's paradigms and Ratheiser's ethics isolate the priestly paradigm to justify its elimination. To avoid the mistake of the ethically oriented scholars who evaluate ancient Jewish norms on the basis of twentieth-century ethical values (Ratheiser, 2007: 304), the book of Joshua should be read in light of King Meshah's stele erected in the ninth-century BCE. There, the king of Moab claimed to have justified the slaughter of thousands of Israelites to Kemosh for the sake of his living nation. If YHWH's war is holy, if legitimacy derives from the ideology of the sacred text

claimed by a living nation according to its perceived interests, Kemosh's war is as holy as Joshua's and so is the *jihad* of the living Muslim *Umma*. Ratheiser's *Mitzvoth*-ethics are indeed "non-confessional" (2007: 155) and Palestinians of any confession may use Joshua as exemplar of their struggle of liberation against their Israeli foes and justify the elimination of the State of Israel. Yet, the political and human consequences of colonial enterprises are well known. Either the newcomers marginalize indigenous populations as Europeans did in North America, in parts of South America, in Australia and in New Zealand, or the indigenous population ends up prevailing after protracted resistance (Lustick, 2008: 62-63).

Conclusion

Although their methods and approaches are completely different, Sweeney and Ratheiser's work share a legitimate concern for the safety and the future of the modern state of Israel. References to the *Shoah* seek to silence the opposition to Zionism with a veneer of scriptural justification. The anti-Semitism of earlier scholarship serves as a springboard to justify theological Zionism. The novelty of Sweeney's paradigm is in its recycling of old colonial justifications deemed legitimate only when Israel is the colonizer.

To be sure, efforts to reach a lasting peace settlement in the Middle East must take into account the religious energy inherent in the cultures that are party to the conflict. Peace is not reached solely between leaders but also between nations and cultures (Rosenak, 2008: 94). This is where theology and ethics have a role to play. *Shalom*, either as "peace" or as "compensation" and restitution to re-establish wholeness, requires balancing the violent strands in the three monotheist Scriptures. The beauty of Scripture is that it contains its own antidote. Countering the evils of one brand of partisanship with the evils of another brand hardly provides a viable solution. Amos' partisanship justifies the present *status quo*. Abraham's non-partisan paradigm challenges the *status quo*. At the heart of the Torah, the Abraham paradigm fosters a partnership between post-Wellhausen Christian theology that has given up its anti-Semitic traits and the long tradition of Jewish anti-Zionism. The Litmus test of post-*Shoah* theology is whether it remains a strategy to silence the Palestinian question or if it dares to go beyond 1945 and embrace the inevitable consequences of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The *Shoah* will never erase the *Nakba*.

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