

**A LIVING STONE: SELECTED ESSAYS AND ADDRESSES BY MICHAEL PRIOR CM** edited with an introduction by Duncan Macpherson, *Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust*, 2006. pp. 309. £25 hbk. ISBN (978)-0-9552088-0-5

In a commentary published in *The Tablet* shortly after his untimely, accidental death, Michael Prior CM condemned Zionism and associated it with other political ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, Communism, and perhaps most notably apartheid (p. 298). In his prolific and stringent career as biblical scholar and activist, Prior dedicated himself to the cause of the Palestinian people of the Holy Land—the Living Stones. Zionism, as Prior presents it, was from its beginning (Theodor Herzl, *Der Judenstaat*, 1896) a secular, anti-religious ideology, which only much later was politically repositioned to strategically co-opt the religious right particularly in the United States. It may require steadfast courage to speak out even in the most academic circles, much less in *The Tablet*, against the practices of Zionist Israel, but Prior was adamant to the end that to be anti-Zionist is to make an ideological critique which must not in turn be mistakenly equated with being anti-Semitic.

In a 1989 *New Blackfriars* piece on ‘The Living Stones: a Retreat with Palestinian Christians’, Prior told the story of Palestinian Christians in Palestine-Israel, who in their own words described the *intifata* in terms of Resurrection:

The uprising is a new spirituality among the people of the Land, saying ‘No’ to all kinds of oppression. Not saying ‘No’ to a Jew because he is a Jew. This uprising is not racist. The people are saying ‘No’ to a structure in their own land which is not of their choice, and, like the Resurrection, they are trying to bring about a new life, a new hope (p. 117).

In his 1997 Cambridge Lattey Lecture, Prior spelled out his complaint with the land tradition of the Old Testament and particularly the Torah:

Not only did these traditions—of promises of land to Abraham and his descendants, and the consummation of the promise through the military achievements narrated in the Books of Joshua and Judges—have the capacity to infuse exploitative tendencies in their readers, but my research was confirming how in practice that biblical paradigm had fuelled every form of militant colonialism emanating out of Europe. The traditions of Deuteronomy had provided intellectual and moral authority for the Iberian devastation of ‘Latin America’ in the late medieval period, for the Afrikaner exploitation of non-whites in southern Africa right up to this decade, and was continuing to do so today for Zionists in their ongoing expropriation of the Arabs of Palestine (p. 162).

As Prior pointed out in a 2002 *New Blackfriars* essay, Pius X, who met with Herzl in 1904, refused to support the Zionist programme, not for a love of Jews or in defense of Palestinian Christians, but out of concern for the Christian holy places. At the Second Vatican Council, the Church took a more open and welcoming stance to Judaism with the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965. Paul VI, in a 1975 address, both recognized the right of Jews to a sovereign state and appealed to Israeli Jews on behalf of the rights of the suffering Palestinian people. John Paul II likewise recognized the rights of both Jews and Palestinians and made clear that full diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel were ‘dependent on a solution to the Palestinian Question and the international

status of Jerusalem' (p. 261). Full diplomatic recognition did follow in 1993, but in Prior's estimation, 'The absence in the Fundamental Agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel of any reference to Palestinian Arabs, or to the injustice done them on the establishment of the State of Israel and since, is quite scandalous' (p. 263).

In sum, Michael Prior (1942–2004) was a biblical scholar and prophet who had learned to read the Bible 'through the eyes of the Canaanites'—most especially the modern day Living Stones of the Palestinian people who are being dispossessed in their own land. He would have us take no part in the divine legitimization, in the name of the Exodus or the land tradition of the Old Testament, of colonialist oppression as practiced throughout the world over the centuries and most recently in Israel-Palestine. As a Vincentian priest of the Province of Ireland, England and Scotland, Prior embodied the charism of the Congregation of the Mission in its advocacy for the poor. As a New Testament scholar with particular credentials in the Pastoral Epistles and as Professor of Bible and Theology and member of faculty for almost thirty years at St. Mary's College, Strawberry Hill, Prior was an engaged academic, a liberation theologian and human rights activist, and co-founder and chair of the Living Stones Trust. Clearly also, as described by his colleague and friend Duncan Macpherson, Prior was a jovial and dear man who will long live in the memory of his students, colleagues, confreres, and friends.

This commemorative volume of selected essays and addresses has been edited by Duncan Macpherson, a deacon of the Archdiocese of Westminster, and published by the Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust. I first became aware of Macpherson's fine work on behalf of the Living Stones through his extraordinary historical and theological discussion of the Palestinian issue in his book on preaching pilgrimage in the Holy Land—*The Pilgrim Preacher: Palestine, Pilgrimage and Preaching* (Melisende, 2004). Macpherson admits that Prior, being more prophet than politician, left it to others to spell out the difficult political, pastoral, and scholarly responses to the intractable hermeneutical, historical, and political problems posed by the land traditions of the Bible. As seen in Macpherson's *Pilgrim Preacher* and in several papers on the Palestinian predicament presented at conferences in the United States of the Academy of Homiletics, Macpherson is one such person, hammering out a viable response in Christian preaching to the challenge of the Living Stones. The Bible, in its land tradition, is part of the problem, but the Bible also, in its Gospel message, is part of the solution—provided that people such as Macpherson and ourselves take up Michael Prior's challenge.

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