

# THE SORDID TRUTH ABOUT THE ‘PALESTINIAN JESUS’

**By:** David Parsons, ICEJ Vice President and Senior Spokesman, July 11, 2019

When Linda Sarsour tweeted out that Jesus was a Palestinian last weekend, some might have thought it was an innocent mistake. But given that this same canard has stirred similar backlashes over recent months, thanks to Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) and others, chances are Sarsour knew just how mischievous her words were. Based on his Twitter response, Yair Netanyahu certainly thought so!

Indeed, there is nothing innocent about the ‘Palestinian Jesus’. It has ignoble origins, mean-spirited motivations and fraudulent ends.

The fabrication of a Palestinian Jesus has been a core part of the lexicon of Palestinian nationalism since at least the 1960s, as evidenced by news archive photos of a press conference held by PLO chief Yasser Arafat in Amman in June 1970. Over his shoulder hangs a poster of a gaunt, near-naked Palestinian nailed to a Star of David. The message is clear: the Palestinians are suffering at the hands of the Jews, just like Jesus did.

The Palestinians borrowed this hateful equation from several unseemly sources. First, it draws on classic Christian anti-Semitic motifs imported to the Middle East from Europe in modern times by church clerics and others. Islam has its own embedded anti-Semitic slurs, but the first blood libel against the Jews in the region came courtesy of Italian clergymen serving in Damascus in 1840. Even among British Mandate authorities stationed in Jerusalem in the 1930s, it was a commonly heard refrain that “the Jews killed Jesus... and they would do it again.”



Yasser Arafat

Nazi propagandists also exported their anti-Semitic imagery and ideology into the Middle East, both before the war and afterwards, when many received refuge in Cairo and Damascus. Some of the vilest Nazi antisemitic cartoons, especially those utilizing the symbol of the Cross, have been copied like stencils by Arab cartoonists for decades. The Palestinian Jesus is also modeled on the Nazi fiction of an Aryan Jesus: that the pure, noble Christ could never have sprung from the corrupt, evil Jews, but rather was of Roman or Germanic ancestry.

A third source is the Liberation theology which flourished in Latin America in the last century. As Marxist elements started stirring revolutions throughout the region, many local Catholic priests began supporting the cause by portraying Christ as a revolutionary who fought Roman oppression. Although the Vatican would eventually warn that the Scriptures were being wrongly used to justify violence against oppressors, the tenants of Liberation theology were readily adopted by radical black activists in America (e.g., the “Black Jesus” of Rev. Jeremiah Wright), the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Bishop Desmond Tutu), and by the Palestinian nationalist camp.

Finally, Islamic culture has always had a penchant for openly tampering with the historic figure of Jesus. As Jerusalem Post op-ed editor Seth J. Frantzman rightly noted earlier this week, Islam acknowledges the links between Jesus and the Hebrew patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as the lawgiver Moses, kings David and Solomon, and even the tribes of Israel. But Islam also completely warps his identity in many other ways which are irreconcilable with the Bible, especially the New Testament. For instance, the Jesus of the Koran was born to Mary, but she just happens to also be Miriam, the sister of Moses. He is considered a Muslim prophet, but his claim to be the Son of God is flatly denied. In addition, the Muslim Jesus was never really crucified but ascended to heaven, from which he will return one day to eradicate Christianity and proclaim Islam as the true religion.

Thus, we find in the Palestinian Jesus a toxic melding of Marxist guerilla and Aryan hero, along with heavy doses of Christian and Islamic anti-Semitism and Supersessionism. The result has been a morbid competition among Palestinian leaders and elites as to who can come up with the sharpest quip, the cleverest analogy, the most creative, artful metaphor for equating the contemporary Palestinian plight with the sufferings of Christ.

At a press conference at the United Nations in 1983, Arafat called Jesus "the first Palestinian *fedayeen* [militiaman] who carried his sword." When Arafat triumphantly took control of Bethlehem in December 1995, he told a throng gathered in Manger Square that he was there to liberate "the birthplace of our Lord the Messiah... the city of the Palestinian Jesus!" During a visit to the Vatican a few years later, Arafat even greeted John Paul II as "the successor of Peter, the first Palestinian pope."

Arafat's successor, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, has described Jesus as "a Palestinian messenger of love, justice and peace."

Prominent PA official Saeb Erekat, has referred to Jesus as the "first Palestinian *shaheed* [martyr]."

His colleague Jibril Rajoub once exclaimed: "The greatest Palestinian in history since Jesus is Yasser Arafat."

But the real masters at gilding the Palestinian Jesus are Palestinian Christians. Even though they should know better, it seems they have lived so long within a dominant Muslim culture that they too find it acceptable to tamper with the historic identity of Jesus.

Anglican canon Naim Ateek, founder of the Sabeel Palestinian Liberation Theology Center, delivered an Easter message in 2001 in which he lamented: "It seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him... Palestine has become one huge Golgotha. The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily."

Sami Awad, an organizer of the "Christ at the Checkpoint" conference, once gave a Christmas message in which he likened Israeli troops searching for terrorists in Bethlehem with "Herod's soldiers" who slaughtered the infants of the town two millennia ago.

But it was Edward Said, the tenured Columbia professor and Arafat speechwriter, who first popularized the Palestinian Jesus and then perfected it in poetic cadence. In his 1988 BBC documentary film "My Beautiful Old House," the late Said spoke of the Palestinians having to endure "this endless Calvary... this constant crucifixion."

So to be sure, there is nothing innocent about the Palestinian Jesus. It is a vicious double-edged sword, in that it: 1) seeks to rob Jesus of his Jewish heritage as part of the Palestinian disinformation campaign to sever the Jewish link to their ancestral homeland, especially in the eyes of the Christian West, and 2) aims to stir up hostility towards the Jewish people by exploiting classic Christian anti-Semitic motifs, most notably that the collective Jews of Israel are still crucifying the real ancestors of Jesus in the land – the Palestinians.

This falsehood is extra devious in that most Palestinians are Muslims who do not even believe Jesus was ever crucified, and they also know the Jewish people are reticent to claim Jesus as one of their own – due to all the atrocities Christians committed against them in his name. Yet if there is one positive coming out of this latest tussle over the Palestinian Jesus, it is that more and more Jews are beginning to reclaim Jesus as a son of Israel. This modern-day trend started with such Jewish scholars as Martin Buber, who always spoke of Jesus as his "elder brother", and Prof. David Flusser, who viewed him as his favorite "rabbi". Now we can add the son of Israel's prime minister to that list.

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