Gary Burge: Not Sent by Heaven

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While most Evangelical Protestants are generally friendly to the Jewish people and the State of Israel, there is a small band of Evangelical pastors and professors who want to line up all Evangelicals unilaterally on the Palestinian side. The most egregious example may be Anglican vicar Stephen Sizer, whose has chummed up with the likes of Naturei Karta and Iranian President Ahmadinejad. But Gary Burge probably wields the greater influence.

As "Professor of New Testament" at Wheaton College, where he has taught since 1992, Burge has taken whole generations of Evangelical students to such places as the Bethlehem Bible College for one-sided indoctrination in the Palestinian "narrative." That is, the students are bombarded with typical Palestinian complaints about Israel. Encouragement to investigate the veracity of those complaints is lacking, let alone the history of Palestinian aggression against Israelis and the corruption and misrule of the Palestinian Authority.

Will those unfortunate students be able to cause Israel much harm? Maybe not. The harm done to impressionable young minds is another question. One wonders whether Wheaton College believes that such programs befit a respectable Christian teaching institution.

In March 2012, Burge was back at the Bethlehem Bible College to lecture at the so-called "Christ at the Checkpoint" conference. The very title of the conference betrays its misleading agenda. The idea was to underline that today if Mary and Joseph tried to visit Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus, Israeli security would stop them at a checkpoint. All this ignores, of course, the fact that they were a family of Jews committed to observance of the Jewish religion.

Today, indeed, if a young couple called Miriam and Yosef from Upper Nazareth tried to go to Bethlehem for the birth of Miriam's child, they would be turned back at the checkpoint. This is because Israel forbids its Jewish citizens from entering Area A of the Palestinian authority, lest they be killed or kidnapped.

But let us suppose that the Jewish couple managed to pass or evade the checkpoint. They would certainly be given "no room at the inn" by the Palestinians, while all the world's foreign ministries would denounce those "Jewish settlers" for their attempt to set up residence in Bethlehem. Such elementary verities, of course, surpass the mental capacity of the partisans of "Christ at the Checkpoint."

Burge's lecture is available on Internet as a video; there is also an excellent written summary by one of the participants in the conference. The official title was "Theology of the Land in the New Testament," but about a third of it was chit-chat about Burge's encounters with Jews in Israel. Recalling those encounters, Burge emphasized time and again the "fun" that he got from subjecting his Jewish counterparts to ridicule. At the end of the presentation, Burge whipped himself into a fervor about how, the next time he goes to Jerusalem, he could preach his version of Christianity in the Jewish quarter of the Old City.

Now, one might sympathize with Burge when he meets Jews who want to transfer the Dome of the Rock to some other site in order to rebuild the Temple. That is, if he has reported them correctly. There is, for instance, a Jewish group that has used ancient Jewish sources to reconstruct the implements used in Temple worship. Generally, however, such groups maintain that building the Temple itself must await the coming of the Messiah; in the meantime, one can only make such preparations for that event.

But let us consider an example that shows Burge's failure to understand either Judaism or the New Testament accounts themselves. Burge was in the Western Wall plaza and intent on taking photographs on a Sabbath, when some Jews warned him that it was forbidden.

"So I had my camera in my hand and they thought it was a good moment to come over and teach me a lesson about why you shouldn't take photos on the Sabbath. This sounded like fun, so after their sermon I asked them, well, what is really wrong theologically with using a camera on Sabbath? Honestly, debating details of Sabbath observance on the Sabbath sounded very biblical, especially one hundred yards from the Temple. So they argued that pushing the button on the shutter release was doing work. I told them climbing all these stairs all over Jerusalem was more work and on it went for about a half hour. This could have been a scene right out of the Gospel. I said I was celebrating the beauty of God's creation by taking a picture, they said I was breaking the Law. I was having a great time."

Here Burge shows a fundamental ignorance that might be forgiven the average Christian layperson, but is inexcusable in anyone who purports to be a professor of Bible. The meaning of "doing no work" in regard to the Sabbath has nothing whatever to do with physical effort. Doing no work means refraining from creation, just as God spent the seventh day without creating anything. Making a photograph, of course, is an act of creation. So the proper way to "celebrate the beauty of God's creation" on the Sabbath is precisely not to take a picture of it. Or, if Burge had been more inventive, he could have sung the hymn "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation."

Had he put away his camera and sung that well-known verse, he might have given his Jewish interlocutors an unexpected favorable impression of Christianity. Instead, he wilfully confirmed any prejudices that they had about Christian stupidity. That, for Burge, is "having a great time."

As for calling this episode "a scene right out of the Gospel," Burge showed his incomprehension in the field that he teaches. The reference is to various incidents in which Jesus was criticized for healing on the Sabbath. There has been a great deal of insightful scholarship on this topic. That includes an article of mine with David Flusser in New Testament Studies, a journal that all "professors of the New Testament" are assumed to read, as long ago as 1983. The main conclusions are the following:

First of all, both Jesus and his critics were agreed that the Sabbath should be observed scrupulously, but that it could be violated in cases of dire need. Rather, they differed on what counted as dire need. The later Jewish consensus was that only the need to save a human life could justify – and would indeed require – violating the Sabbath, if that life would be lost by not acting before the end of the Sabbath. But earlier on there were less stringent views, such as that of Jesus: his healings concerned lifelong severe handicaps, such as blindness or paralysis.

Moreover, some of the reported healings on the Sabbath do not truly violate it. For instance, when Jesus told a man to stretch out his paralysed hand and the man was able to do it, the hand was found to be healed, but neither Jesus nor the man had done anything that violated the Sabbath.

Both Jesus and his critics would have been astounded to hear of Burge's "dire need" to take a snapshot on the Sabbath, as if it ranked with healing the blind. Burge's comparison of himself with Jesus is preposterous and absurd.

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For the sake of Burge's students, I shall relate a different Christian-Jewish encounter. Many Christians in Israel could tell a similar story, but this just happened to me. It took place not far from the scenes of Burge's exploits and only a few weeks later. His students might ask themselves whether this was not a more Christian form of behavior toward Jews. Perhaps it will save them from marching down the "broad way" (Matthew 7.13) behind him.

One Friday evening, just around the beginning of the Sabbath, during a walk around a Jewish neighborhood in the dimming light, I sat down for a while in the deserted street. It was at this point that an elderly lady approached from the other side of the road and interrogated me about "Filipinas." There are many women, and some men, from the Philippines who work as carers for the aged and infirm in Israel, where they are greatly appreciated. The following conversation ensued (in Hebrew).

"Do you know a Filipina?"she asked. "There are many Filipinas," I responded.

"I need a Filipina to do something." Immediately, I understood. Observant Jews are forbidden to turn electricity on or off during the Sabbath. Some have an automatic timer that switches the whole electric system on in the evening, including lights and heating, then switches it off for the night. Maybe her whole flat was in darkness.

"I can do it," I said. "Are you not a Jew?" "I am not a Jew." "A hundred percent not?" she insisted. "A hundred percent." "Are you a Christian?" "Yes."

"Perhaps you were sent by Heaven!" she exclaimed. Reassured, she led me back across the street and up some flights of stairs. In her modest flat there was one light on, in the kitchen, where an older man – presumably her husband – was sitting.

Here was the problem. She had laid a row of little dishes of food on a hotplate, but it was unplugged. All her careful plans for the Sabbath were faced with ruin. I took up the plug and inserted it into a socket. Mission accomplished.

That single light also had to illuminate their sitting room and, more dimly, further rooms down a corridor. I asked if I could do anything else, but no.

At this point a second woman emerged from the corridor. "That's mother," said the first woman, "she's a hundred years old!" "To a hundred and twenty," I responded, wishing her a life as long as Moses. There was nothing more needed, so I retraced my steps down the stairs and left them to their simple Sabbath celebration.

Now let us imagine that she had come across Gary Burge, sitting there in the street. Sent by Heaven? Hardly. It would be another chance to have "fun" at the expense of pious Jews. "Walking up those stairs is much more work than inserting a plug," he would have admonished her. "Do it yourself." "Free yourself from the Law, learn from the Gospel." And he would have walked off, treasuring a new exploit to recount at the next "Christ at the Checkpoint." Burge playing (his understanding of) Jesus again.

To conclude, let us locate Burge in the Evangelical and the broader Christian spectrum. It is widely perceived that Evangelicals are peculiarly attached to the State of Israel, but a 2011 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has shown that the issue is not so simple.

The survey was addressed to "Evangelical Protestant Leaders" and asked three relevant questions (besides covering many other issues). Asked "Which side do you sympathize with more?" 34% answered "with Israel," 11% "with the Palestinians," 39% "with both equally" and 13% "with neither." Note, however, that this was – strictly speaking – not a theological question. The other two

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questions were unambiguously theological.

Responding to "Is the State of Israel a fulfillment of biblical prophecy?" 48% said yes and 42% said no. With regard to "God's covenant with the Jewish people," 73% said "it continues today" and 22% that it "no longer applies."

On this last question, that great majority of Evangelical Protestant leaders is aligned with what has been Roman Catholic teaching since the famous declaration Nostra Aetate of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Many of the so-called "mainline" Protestant churches have issued similar declarations in the meantime.

All those declarations, Protestant as well as Roman Catholic, draw upon decades of scholarship on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which should be familiar to any "professor of New Testament." Thus Nostra Aetate asserts: "The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: 'theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh' (Rom. 9:4-5)..." It adds that "God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues" (echoing Rom. 11.28-29) and that "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures."

Now, the declarations of both the Vatican and Protestant churches have been wary of ascribing a theological significance to the State of Israel. Rather, they often distinguish between that state, as a political institution to be evaluated like any other state, and the return of the Jews to their biblical homeland, which is interpreted positively in terms of God's faithfulness toward the Jewish people. More details can be found in an article of 1989 to which I contributed.

We may imagine that many of the 42% of Evangelical Protestant leaders who declined to endorse the State of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy did so because they make a similar distinction. After all, many of them must be among the 73% who asserted that God's covenant with the Jewish people "continues today."

Burge, however, is resolutely opposed to that majority Christian teaching. Toward the end of an interview with Hank Hanegraaff in July 2012, Burge claimed that all the promises made by God to Israel in the Old Testament are "Jewish theology" that the New Testament "turns inside out." Yes, admits Burge, Paul does envisage a continuing existence of the Jewish people, but God is now equally concerned with all peoples and God's interest has turned away from the Land of Israel.

Burge then described the State of Israel as a "highly secular" state that is "sharply disinterested in any of the covenant obligations that you have in the Old Testament," so "the strings attached to the land no longer pertain." This pejorative description is false: one need only recall the many decisions of Israel's Supreme Court in favor of non-Jewish minorities, fulfilling a frequent biblical demand. Israel's Declaration of Independence contains deliberate echoes of Judaism's covenantal commitments.

More fundamentally, Burge disregards a distinction familiar to biblical theologians: God may punish deviations from the covenant, but He never abolishes the covenant itself; His covenantal partner need only repent in order to benefit from the covenant again. But maybe Burge belongs to those Christian theologians who hold that all the day-long repentance of Jews on Yom Kippur is a waste of time because they have not acknowledged Jesus.

In that interview, Burge was practicing what is commonly called "replacement theology," that is, treating the Christian Church as the authentic continuation of Old Testament religion to the exclusion of Judaism. Curiously enough, earlier in the interview he had deprecated the

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replacement theology of early Christian writers.

So also at "Christ at the Checkpoint," he strove to distinguish his view from earlier replacement theology. What is the difference? Old-time replacement theology, he said, claimed that Judaism had been replaced permanently by Christianity. His own view is that Judaism lost its validity with the coming of Jesus Christ two thousand years ago; so Judaism is just hanging around until Jesus returns in glory and the Jews recognize him as their Messiah. Not just Jews but many Christian theologians today would regard Burge's distinction as nit-picking.

Thus Burge is far out on a theological fringe, isolated not just from fellow Evangelicals but from Protestant and Roman Catholic teaching in general. It would not be far-fetched to call Burgism a contemporary heresy. But accusations of heresy are too easily thrown around, not least by Burge's friends at Christian Zionists. So let's think it enough to call him a marginal theologian.

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