

The “Complex” Moral Urgency of Advocacy for Palestine: A Response to Dr. Mark Smith’s Fall 2024 Convocation Address

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj**Mark Lewis Taylor** 

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Abstract

Dr. Smith argues admirably for complex, non-binary thinking. In analyzing current attacks on Gaza, though, he fails to exhibit that complexity. He caricatures US pro-Palestinian movements and masks Israel’s wildly disproportionate retaliation to Hamas’s October 7 attack. Smith oversimplifies, first, with his own binary: “Israel, the United States and their supporters” versus “Hamas and its Palestinian allies” (including “Hezbollah and the Houthis”). Palestinian allies are rendered indistinct from those waging “terrible violence.” This misrepresents Palestinian allies as simply pro-Hamas, not as resisters to US-backed Israeli genocide. Smith’s binary also forecloses seeing positive roles played by Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. In a second oversimplification, Smith pleads for remembering “the suffering of all parties,” but fails to see that doing so requires our giving an asymmetrical preference to Gazans suffering genocidal assault. Third, Smith sees “some of the animus” leading to encampments for Palestine as being antisemitic. Without acknowledging any virtue to the encampments, Smith’s mention here of antisemitism reinforces reactive attacks on them as “antisemitic.” Fourth, Smith’s concluding questions chastise encampments for neglecting other struggles, for Syria, the Sudan, Blacks, and LGBTQ + persons. This neglects the ways these struggles have been, in fact, vital to Palestinian activism.

Keywords

Palestine, Israel, Gaza, genocide, moral complexity

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I have profound respect for Dr. Smith as scholar of the Hebrew scriptures and as a member of our faculty and as colleague. It goes without saying that he should be accorded both academic freedom and rights to free expression on this campus, as should we all. I learn much from him as I know many others do as well. A community of critical inquiry hears out the conflict of interpretations we all may have in our searches for truth.

I come into my Palestine advocacy in a perhaps unique way, not through the expertise that Dr. Smith exhibits in Biblical studies, archaeology in Israel, or from living and criss-crossing Palestine and Israel as he has for his work there, with family and friends there, as well. We do well to support him in this tense time, and to remember the grief of all those suffering loss and displacement in Israel on October 7, 2023, which includes the 1,219 slain in south Israel on October 7, 71 of whom were “foreign nationals” in Israel at the time. Also, 368 of the 1,219 were Israeli soldiers or security personnel, leaving the number of Israeli civilians slain by war crimes at 780. 240 persons from Israel were taken hostage, 101 remain in Gaza.¹

In my email to all faculty in October of 2023, which called for Christians to take a stand against US–Israeli genocide, some of my colleagues thought I moved “too fast past the horror” that befell Israel on October 7. Maybe. But what I have since better explained in print is how my awareness about the issues at that time were informed by my knowledge, since the late 1980s, of how quickly Israel and the US can partner in genocide.² I learned then how the US and Israel cooperated in training Guatemala’s military regime for carrying out a genocide of Maya peoples³ in the 1970s and 1980s, the heart of a civil war that took over 200,000 lives, mostly indigenous. I have been supporting Palestinian struggle in the US ever since, mindful of the sinister side of a globally-operative, US/Israeli alliance. I have made only one trip to Palestine/Israel, in 2007, but it was very significant, arguably an eminently fair, multi-perspectival, and international delegation. It was disturbingly eye-opening as Israel’s 17-year siege of Gaza was then just beginning. In addition, like many of you, perhaps, as a US citizen I am wrestling as a matter of conscience with what our tax dollars are doing in Israel.

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1. Linda Dayan and Maya Lecker, “How *Haaretz* is Counting Israel’s Dead from the October 7 Hamas Attack,” *Haaretz*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/haaretz-explains/2023-11-23/ty-article-magazine/premium/how-haaretz-is-counting-israels-dead-from-the-october-7-hamas-attack/0000018b-d42c-d423-affb-f7afe1a70000> (accessed November 8, 2024). Slightly different breakdowns of the identities of the slain are given in a collection of numerous sources that are cited on *Wikipedia*. See “7 October Hamas-Led Attack on Israel,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/7_October_Hamas-led_attack_on_Israel#:~:text=In%20total%2C%201%2C139%20people%20were,attending%20the%20Nova%20music%20festival (accessed October 22, 2024).
 2. I explained this in detail in Mark Lewis Taylor, “Israel and Genocide: Not Only in Gaza,” *NACLA Report*, North American Council on Latin America, March 25, 2024, <https://nacla.org/israel-and-genocide-not-only-in-gaza> (accessed October 16, 2024).
 3. “The Guatemalan Genocide,” *USCShoa Foundation*, <https://sfi.usc.edu/collections/guatemalan> (accessed October 22, 2024).

The Genocidal Condition in Palestine

I must start by describing the destruction of a people. I begin this way because Dr. Smith and I may not agree on what is occurring on the ground in Gaza or on the scope and intensity of it. Disagreement here will impact whether we marshal moral or theological criticisms of Israel's onslaught against Gaza, and how we do so.

My portrait of the situation begins with the Gaza Ministry of Health's reports of over 43,000 Gazans dead, the majority civilians.⁴ US doctors interviewing health workers throughout Gaza report the figure could easily be 92,000, noting also that everyone in Gaza, even international and health aid workers, are sick.⁵ The *Lancet* medical journal finds it not implausible that the death toll of those already killed could be 186,000.⁶ Yes, there are other high death tolls across the globe. All these must be remembered and grieved. But as the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* emphasized in August,

what stands out the most between the rest of the wars of the twenty-first century and the war in the Gaza Strip is the [small] size of the territory where the fighting is taking place, and the inability of the uninvolved civilians to flee the battles The fronts in the largest wars of this century—in Syria, Iraq and Ukraine—were stretched out over thousands of kilometers and the carnage took place in hundreds of different locations.

Israel's destruction of the first 1% of Gaza's population, according to University of London professor in war and armed conflict studies, Michael Spagat, is "unprecedented."⁷

Consider the crowded conditions in Gaza. Gaza is a strip of land that is 25 miles long by 5 miles wide. It contained 2.3 million people when Israel started bombing. If that 25-mile strip were located here in our nation's most densely populated state, New Jersey, that space would be equivalent to the distance from Princeton to Metuchen. The whole strip could easily fit inside less than half of Middlesex County. But for that

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4. OCHA, "Reported Impact Since 7 October 2023," Office of Communication for Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Territories, <https://www.ochaopt.org/> (accessed October 10, 2024). On the reliability of the Gaza Health Ministry's statistics on deaths in Gaza as used by OCHA above, see the *Lancet* medical journal essay, "No Evidence of Inflated Mortality Reporting from the Gaza Ministry of Health," *The Lancet* 403 (January 6, 2024): 23–24, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(23\)02713-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(23)02713-7/fulltext) (accessed October 22, 2024).
 5. Letter to the Biden Administration, "Re American Physicians' and Nurses' Observations in Gaza since October 7, 2023," July 25, 2024, <https://www.sadaka.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Letter.pdf> (accessed October 22, 2024).
 6. "Counting the Dead in Gaza: Difficult but Essential," *The Lancet* (July 5, 2024): 237–38, <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2824%2901169-3> (accessed October 22, 2024).
 7. Nir Hasson, "The Numbers Show: Gaza War is One of the Bloodiest in the 21st Century," *Haaretz*, August 14, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-08-14/ty-article-magazine/premium/the-death-toll-in-gaza-is-bad-even-compared-to-the-wars-in-ukraine-iraq-and-myanmar/00000191-50c6-d6a2-a7dd-d1decf340000> (accessed October 16, 2024).

Gaza-sized strip in New Jersey to have the equivalent of Gaza's 2.3 million people we would have to move into that strip all of the current population of Middlesex County, all that of Mercer County, and all that of New Jersey's most populous county, Bergen, as well as those in the county of Cape May. Gaza is thus "among the most densely populated areas of the world, more crowded than Tokyo."⁸

Right now, of the 2.1 million who remain in this Gaza strip, over 90% are displaced from their homes. 84% are living under ever changing mass evacuation orders by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) and they often are in flight to Israel's specified safety-zones, only to be bombed there, told then to flee from there to somewhere else. In less than a month after October 7, Israel dropped on crowded Gaza, 25,000 tons of mostly US-made bombs, equivalent to the two nuclear bombs dropped in Japan.⁹ After six months it had dropped 70,000 tons on Gaza, more than the tonnage dropped in World War II on London, Dresden, and Hamburg combined.¹⁰ 80% of all Gaza's buildings are now destroyed.¹¹ As I write, after multiple bombardments of Jabalia Refugee camp in northern Gaza since October 7,¹² Israel is now bombing the camp again, repeatedly, in what appears to be a mop-up operation for the final removal of Gazans.¹³ At least in northern Gaza, even a Tel Aviv University academic calls for Gazans to be "sentenced" to "starvation and extermination."¹⁴

While Israel's hostages from October 7 need to be freed immediately (101 of whom are still unreleased), Palestinians in Gaza also need release from Israel's imposed 17-year siege and from their entrapment now in the tiny strip where under continual bombardment and occupation there is "no exit."¹⁵ We should consider as hostages, too, the

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8. Norman Finkelstein, *Gaza: Inquest into Its Martyrdom* (Berkeley: University of California, 2018), 3. It should be noted that at the time Finkelstein made this observation in his 2018 book, the population of Gaza was reported at only 1.8 million.
 9. Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, "Israel Hits Gaza with the Equivalent of Two Nuclear Bombs," November 2, 2023, <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5908/Israel-hits-Gaza-Strip-with-the-equivalent-of-two-nuclear-bombs> (accessed October 15, 2024).
 10. Robert A. Pape, " Hamas is Winning: Why Israel's Failing Strategy Makes Its Enemy Stronger," *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/middle-east-robert-pape?check_logged_in=1#author-info (accessed October 15, 2024).
 11. OCHA, "Humanitarian Situation Update #227 | Gaza," Office of Communication for Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Territories, October 10, 2024, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-227-gaza-strip> (accessed October 22, 2024).
 12. Ibrahim Mohammad and Mahmoud Mushtaha "'Dead Bodies Everywhere' in Jabalia Camp as Israel Besieges Northern Gaza," *+972 Magazine*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.972mag.com/jabalia-camp-northern-gaza-siege> (accessed October 20, 2024).
 13. OCHA, "Civilians in Northern Gaza Cut Off from Supplies and Services Critical for Survival," Office of Communication for Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Territories, October 13, 2024, <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/civilians-northern-gaza-cut-supplies-and-services-critical-survival> (accessed October 20, 2024).
 14. Meron Rapaport, "A Plan to Liquidate Northern Gaza is Gaining Steam," *+972 Magazine*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.972mag.com/northern-gaza-liquidation-scenario-eiland-rabi/> (accessed October 22, 2024). The quoted words from Professor Uzi Rabi of Tel Aviv University can be found here: <https://x.com/radio103fm/status/1835207918087483732/photo/1> (accessed October 20, 2024).
 15. Bill Frelick, "No Exit in Gaza: Left with No Other Options, Residents Should Have Right to Flee," Human Rights Watch, April 1, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/01/no-exit-gaza>.

more than 9,600 Palestinians currently held in Israeli prisons (especially the 4,781 held without trial), a prison system that Israel's own human rights center, B'Tselem, describes as "hell" for its intentional use of torture and sexual abuse.¹⁶

The scale of destruction in Gaza is mind-numbing. OCHA reports that every day "across the Gaza strip" Israeli "bombardment continues from air, land and sea." We need to grapple with the expansive scope of this intended, full removal of all things Gaza that Israel is seeking. Israel's operations are more than an attempt to just "destroy Hamas." As to cropland, 68% of it has been destroyed threatening the strip's food supply. The threats of famine and disease continue to intensify. Before October 7, 64% of Gazans were in poverty; now 100% are. 71% of orchards and trees have been damaged. 300 aid workers have been killed since October 7, and 986 health workers have been killed.¹⁷ At least 128 journalists have been killed in Gaza.

The very foundation of Palestinian society is being dismantled by Israel as it systematically targets Gaza's educational system:

After six months of military assault, more than 5,479 students, 261 teachers and 95 university professors have been killed in Gaza, and over 7,819 students and 756 teachers have been injured—with numbers growing each day. At least 60 per cent of educational facilities, including 13 public libraries, have been damaged or destroyed and at least 625,000 students have no access to education. Another 195 heritage sites, 227 mosques and three churches have also been damaged or destroyed, including the Central Archives of Gaza, containing 150 years of history. Israa University, the last remaining university in Gaza was demolished by the Israeli military on 17 January 2024.¹⁸

As Chris Gunness, former spokesperson for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, puts it:

In the last year, we have seen Gaza transform from the world's largest open-air prison to the world's largest concentration camp. Today, Gaza has been transformed into an industrial-scale slaughterhouse. And I use the word 'slaughter' advisedly because frankly animals in most abattoirs [animal slaughterhouses] around the world are killed more humanely than the women and children of Gaza.¹⁹

16. B'Tselem—The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, *Welcome to Hell: The Israeli Prison System as a Network of Camps*, August 6, 2024, 22, https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/publications/202408_welcome_to_hell_eng.pdf (accessed October 20, 2024).

17. All the above quotations and data in this paragraph are from OCHA, "Humanitarian Situation Update #227 | Gaza," Office of Communication for Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Territories, October 10, 2024, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-227-gaza-strip-enarhe> (accessed October 20, 2024).

18. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "UN Experts Deeply Concerned about 'Scholasticide' in Gaza," Press Release, April 18, 2024, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/un-experts-deeply-concerned-over-scholasticide-gaza> (accessed October 21, 2024).

19. By Zaheena Rasheed, Ted Regencia, Umut Uras and Edna Mohamed, "Updates: Lebanon's Hezbollah Hits Israel's Haifa; Israel Pounds Gaza," *Al Jazeera*, October 8, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/10/8/live-israel-kills-dozens-in-gaza-as-palestinians-mark-one-year-of-war?update=3232039> (accessed October 20, 2024).

All of this—this dismantlement of a whole society’s resources for enduring—is horrifically imaged in accounts that tell of the many Gazans who endure multiple amputations and often without anesthesia. But the bombs are often the first amputators, performing a ghastly dismemberment, leaving family members to collect bodily remains of their assumed family members, stored in plastic bags until the 70 kgs inside seem about right, as fill-in weight for their beloved.²⁰ All this seems to fulfil the intention and vision of Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant who, in the first week after October 7, addressed Israeli troops in South Israel, stating, “Gaza won’t return to what it was before. *We will eliminate everything.*”²¹ An online resource, *Law for Palestine*, has collected over “500 Statements” indicating genocidal intent by Israeli officials and personnel.²² A concise argument for Israel’s commission of “genocide” has been offered by the UN Special Rapporteur on Palestine, Francesca Albanese.²³

All this that I have summarized above makes up an American war. It is bought and paid for, courtesy of our US tax dollars. Just since October 7, 2023, the Brown University “Costs of War” project concluded that at least \$22.76 billion was sent to Israel in military aid, which is the largest amount sent in any single year.²⁴ This does not include other amounts, such as the \$20 billion extra amount earmarked in August 2024 for delivering sophisticated

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20. Three examples from this year: “The Fajr Massacre: Every 70 kg bag of human remains is considered a martyr,” *Mondoweiss*, August 11, 2024, <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/08/the-fajr-massacre-every-70-kg-bag-of-human-remains-is-considered-a-martyr/> (accessed November 8, 2024); “Palestinians Collect Dead Children’s Body Parts in Plastic Bags,” *The Nordic Times*, August 15, 2024, <https://nordictimes.com/world/palestinians-collect-dead-childrens-body-parts-in-plastic-bags/> (accessed November 8, 2024); and Sheren Fala Saab, “On Saturday, Gazans Collected Body Parts in Plastic Bags. Israelis Stay Unbothered,” *Haaretz*, August 12, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-08-12/ty-article-opinion/premium/on-saturday-gazans-collected-body-parts-in-plastic-bags-israel-stayed-unbothered/00000191-4802-d7c5-a3df-4f631d9a0000> (accessed November 8, 2024). Recall, also, that Gazan parents’ suffering of such dismemberment has a history; see the results of Israel’s 2014 bombing of Gaza, in Peter Beaumont, “A Father Opens a Plastic Bag, ‘This is My Son,’ he says, Killed by an Israeli Shell,” *The Guardian*, July 18, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/18/father-gathers-body-dead-son-two-plastic-bag-gaza-shelling> (accessed November 8, 2024).
 21. Paul Cunningham, “Death Toll Rises, Chaos Reigns as Invasion of Gaza is Inevitable,” RTÉ News (Raidió Teilifís Éireann). Ireland’s National Public Service Media, October 14, 2023, <https://www.rte.ie/news/analysis-and-comment/2023/10/14/110895-israel-gaza-analysis/> (accessed July 22, 2024). Emphasis added.
 22. Law for Palestine, “Law for Palestine Releases Database with 500+ Instances of Israeli Incitement to Genocide—Continuously Updated,” January 4, 2024, <https://law4palestine.org/law-for-palestine-releases-database-with-500-instances-of-israeli-incitement-to-genocide-continuously-updated/> (accessed October 16, 2024).
 23. Francesca Albanese, “Anatomy of a Genocide: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 to the Human Rights Council—Advance unedited version,” *UN Human Rights Council*, 55th Session, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/anatomy-of-a-genocide-report-of-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-the-palestinian-territory-occupied-since-1967-to-human-rights-council-advance-unedited-version-a-hrc-55/> (accessed October 16, 2024).
 24. Linda J. Bilmes, William D. Hartung, and Stephen Semler, “United States Spending on Israel’s Military Operations and Related U.S. Operations in the Region, October 7, 2023–September 30, 2024,” *Costs of War*, Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2023/2024/Costs%20of%20War_US%20Support%20Since%20Oct%20%20FINAL%20v2.pdf (accessed October 16, 2024).

weaponry in future years of US and Israeli partnership.²⁵ The figure for the past year might go even higher if one factors in Biden's making of "at least 100 arms deals with Israel since October 2023 that fell below the value that would have triggered the requirement to notify Congress of the details." The US has given to Israel over \$500 billion dollars over five decades. Because of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) agreed to in the last year of President Obama's presidency, the US pledged to give \$3.8 billion every year to Israel until 2028, totaling 38 billion dollars.²⁶ This amount followed a previous 30-billion-dollar MOU arranged by the George W. Bush administration in 2007.²⁷

Hold all this in view, as I turn now to Dr. Smith's convocation address.

Questions and Objections to Dr. Smith's Address

There are so many aspects of Dr. Smith's address that I would like to engage and perhaps debate. On many of those aspects I do not have the expertise, and on those on which I might have some expertise, I do not have the time to comment in this response. After my first hearing of his address I told Dr. Smith, "In spite of our differences, I probably agree with you about more in your speech than you know." That remains true, I think. Just some of the further issues I'd like to explore with him are these. I'd like to linger over the implications of his fascinating and most welcome combining of an Ugaritic story of King Kirta with that of Genesis 19. I'd like to dialogue toward insights for a political theology that draws from his notion of the "three bodies of God" and in relation to the influential book by Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. I'd also like to hear more about how Christian faith in this "our moment" can trust itself to this God of Hebrew scriptures who seems skilled in "the art of the deal," with results that we may applaud or not. Am I right that this god's deal-making ways spare a few righteous persons, but do not really step outside his persona as a "warrior god" who takes up "God's warfare" by "raining down on Sodom and Gomorrah" a destruction by "sulfurous fire"?²⁸ In the present moment this cannot help but recall for me the use by Israel in Gaza now, as by the US in Iraq before, of white phosphorous,²⁹ which keeps burning human skin on contact, while destroying much else besides. I'd need to talk about why this imagery of destructive fire from the sky fits so awkwardly—at least (!)—in this moment of genocidal assault in Gaza. And thinking

25. Kenisha Singh and Mike Stone, "US Approves Sale to Israel of \$20 Billion Weapons Package," *Reuters*, August 13, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-approves-sale-israel-military-equipment-worth-over-20-bln-2024-08-13/> (accessed October 16, 2024).

26. Jonathan Masters and Will Mellow, "US Aid to Israel in Four Charts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 31, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts> (accessed October 16, 2024).

27. The White House, "Fact Sheet: Memorandum of Understanding Reached with Israel," *Office of the Press Secretary*, September 14, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/14/fact-sheet-memorandum-understanding-reached-israel> (accessed October 16, 2024).

28. Mark S. Smith, "More than Human Expectation: Our God of Mercy and Justice," Princeton Theological Seminary Convocation Address, Princeton, NJ, September 4, 2024.

29. Stephen J. Lyons, "Despite Its Pledge, Israel (Again) Resorts to Using White Phosphorus Weapons," *The Defense Post*, January 2, 2024, <https://thedefensepost.com/2024/01/02/israel-white-phosphorus/> (accessed October 16, 2024).

more about the deal-making warrior God, I need to ponder with Dr. Smith where it is that he actually sees that “God does *both* justice *and* greater mercy.” How? Two cities are completely destroyed, and the mercy is that six are saved, three of them being Lot and the two daughters who had sex with their sleeping father so that they can continue the family line? I don’t demonize these characters, but two whole cities destroyed to save these three among the six? I see the cunning of the deal, but neither its justice nor “greater mercy.” Could the dialectic Dr. Smith values in his “both/and” of justice and mercy somehow be defined or clarified by his Christology? Yet there is no mention in his address of such, nothing of the figure of Jesus here, surely not like the one of whom Howard Thurman writes in his *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the Jesus who “upon the anvil of the Jewish community’s relations with Rome . . . hammered out the vital content of his concept of love for one’s enemy.”³⁰ I’m not looking for a supersessionist New Testament Christian ethic; only wanting to understand how faith, as Christian, lives in relation to this deal-making God who wields destructive power. Alas, all these questions must be saved for another time and place of collegial exchange. So, on to the specific concerns I want to make about his convocation address.

Overall, I find Dr. Smith’s address problematic because of its claims to celebrate “complexity” and “non-binary” thinking, while he himself goes on to offer some troubling oversimplifications of his own. I identify four of these.

A first oversimplification lies in Dr. Smith’s way of setting up two sides in today’s conflict and debate. On “one side” are what he refers to as “Israel, the United States and their allies.” Then on “the other side” are what he terms “ Hamas and their Palestinian allies.”³¹ This division risks portraying all of us who are “Palestinian allies”—whether in Palestine, Israel or in the US—as allied with Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and their “terrible violence.” That is an elision, one that obscures the fact that most of us are allied now with Palestine out of opposition to US-backed Israel’s “terrible violence” in Gaza, not necessarily from a commitment to Hamas and others at enmity with Israel. But Dr. Smith’s division also begs the question of whether there might be any value in Hamas’s, Hezbollah’s, or the Houthis’s past and present actions or thinking. Smith thus leaves little room for even debating, much less acknowledging, Hamas’s history of making genuine truce offers throughout its existence.³² Sober analysis is needed here, not the simple rendering of these as enemy, as “terrorists” against the “side” of US and Israel. The binary Dr. Smith uses here is too much like the demeaning rhetoric used by Israeli leaders themselves for any Palestinian group, or ally, that resists the Israeli state. In short, today’s advocacy for Gaza does not fit in either of Dr. Smith’s “two sides.”

A second oversimplification that I wish to discuss at greater length concerns Dr. Smith’s general call to emphasize the “suffering of all parties.” While seemingly even-

30. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996 [1976]), 91.

31. Smith, “More than Human Expectation.”

32. The actual historical record puts the lie to sweeping claims that Hamas is simply an evil actor. For fairer discussion, see Tariq Baconi, *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2018), 228–31; on the strengths and weaknesses of Hamas’s statecraft, see Somdeep Sen, *Decolonizing Palestine: Hamas between the Anticolonial and the Postcolonial* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 2020), 96–106.

handed, this call is not attentive to complexities that are necessary to cultivating that very even-handedness in our concrete world. First, his seemingly egalitarian call forgets that real solidarity with those suffering injustice—whether this call issues from Hebrew and Christian scriptures or from other traditions—assumes and intends justice for all while at the same time requiring an asymmetrical preference for some sufferers among the whole set of sufferers, especially for those suffering injustice at the hands of the powerful. This is why I can mourn and support the Israeli innocents who suffered on and after October 7's war crimes, while at the same time maintain my primary solidarity with the victims of Israel's genocidal retaliation. Indeed, knowing when and how to enact and hold this primary solidarity in relation to the whole field of human need, is a complex matter. This is one reason why the first section of my response began with a summary of the ongoing massive destruction in Gaza. My second point about Smith's reference to "the suffering of all parties," is that he forecloses the possibility of our making this asymmetrical preference for Gazans, by his near complete silence about the wildly disproportionate retaliation that Israel has pursued against Gaza. Complexity would demand, at least, some weighing of Israel's onslaught against Gaza since October 8, in comparison to Hamas's war crimes of October 7. Dr. Smith does mention "Palestinian innocents held in Israel's prisons" (that's been true for decades, though), and he did lament as "truly horrible" the "destruction of innocent Palestinian life in Gaza" (also true for decades).³³ But with this there is no weighing of the relative suffering borne by Palestinians and by Israelis. Any hope of redressing the sufferings of "all parties" requires foregrounding the differential modes of suffering, especially when one group has the firepower and financial backing of empire and others do not. Third, Dr. Smith gives no acknowledgment of the way the history of the Israeli state's emergence itself gives reasons for this asymmetrical preference for Gaza and Palestine. There is no attempt in Dr. Smith's address to give historical complexity to how Israel has built itself in the land of Palestine. There is a simple statement made in passing—a deceptive one, I believe—that "Both [sides] love and hold well-grounded claims to land."³⁴ No mention is made of the one side, Israel, that occupies the bulk of Palestinians' land by overwhelming force, and controls their lives on Palestinians' own land. The Israeli state is a creation of a settler colonial project launched by Britain's "Balfour Declaration" that named Palestine a "homeland" for Jews, which was then bank-rolled and militarily supported by the British empire that early on had more than 20,000 (later 80,000 to 100,000) troops and personnel in Palestine to protect and train early Jewish communities and their militias.³⁵ Those Israeli militias later developed such martial prowess they could at times whip their British trainers, bomb British headquarters and hang British officers in Palestine, before going on to displace at least 750,000

33. Smith, "More than Human Expectation."

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Britannica*, "World War I and After," October 17, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine/World-War-I-and-after> (accessed November 8, 2024).

Palestinians to establish the state that the UN recognized in 1948.³⁶ After Israel took more land in 1967, the US became the major power to equip Israel with funds and firepower for its domination of Palestinians. So, the address makes no room for a history that would reveal reasons for an intelligent preference made for the struggle of Gazans and Palestinians, as those who have lived long on the underside of imperial history.

As a third oversimplification, I note that Dr. Smith's plea for complexity does not prevent him from suggesting that "some of the animus" that characterizes university campus anger on these issues is due to "antisemitism on our campuses." In the absence of attributing any virtue to the encampments, those protest actions for Gaza are portrayed as largely antisemitic. Students on our campus are and have reason to be upset by this feature of Dr. Smith's address. Recall, that many Jewish faculty and students organized and worked in these encampments. None of us who unite for opposing Israel's policies and acts of slaughter, simply by reason of that opposition, are "antisemitic." Yes, there have been antisemitic statements and chants at some encampments. But these are rare and do not abide at the center of current pro-Palestinian criticisms of Israel. Advocates for Palestine themselves have long highlighted the need to differentiate themselves from anti-Judaism and anti-Jewish remarks and practices. Even anti-Zionism, which has a long and venerable history in the US, is not "antisemitic."³⁷ It particularly grieves me that in a convocation address that seems to be receiving something of an *imprimatur* (Latin: "let it be printed") in the seminary's main journal, *Theology Today*, there is this insinuation that the encampments have antisemitism in "some" of its animus. Again, without any account of the encampment's virtues, this negative suggestion subtly but effectively sticks the charge of "antisemitism." So, it needs to be said again that neither logically nor politically, should a critique of Israel, as such, be disparaged and dismissed as antisemitic.

Fourth and finally, Dr. Smith's oversimplifications conclude his address, in the form of rhetorical questions that I find intellectually simplistic and morally objectionable. His questions were these: "Where were the student encampments" for Syria, for Darfur in the Sudan, against apartheid in South Africa, for reparations to Blacks for US slavery, for indigenous peoples in the Americas, for LGBTQ+ rights, for climate change?

First, if Dr. Smith had visited with those working in the encampments for Palestine—like the 40–50 of our students—then he would know that advocacy for Palestine includes and is built from precisely these other sites of solidarity too. Historically, it has long been the case that advocacy for Palestine against the US's unqualified alliance with Israel, has been deeply connected to these other struggles, showing a full "intersectional" matrix, we

36. On the history of Britain in Palestine, see Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of British Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2022), 175–92, 193–211, 217–39, 413–30, 435–59; Ilan Pappé, *Lobbying for Israel on Both Sides of the Atlantic* (London: Open Books, 2024), 31–93, 156–217; and Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan, 2021), 33–54.

37. For discussion of specific Jewish anti-Zionist groups in the US, see Geoffrey Levin, *Our Palestine Question: Israel and American Jewish Dissent, 1948–1978* (New Haven: Yale, 2024), 18–55, 152–85. For a brief statement on controversies about antisemitism, see Jewish Voice for Peace, "On Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism and Dangerous Conflations," <https://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org/2023/11/09/antisemitism-dangerous/> (accessed October 22, 2024).

might say.³⁸ Sometimes these connections have been expressed well, other times not. But complexity again demands our at least acknowledging the full spectrum of justice struggle here, in which advocacy for Palestine has been sustained. Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Angela Y. Davis, James Baldwin and Suheir Hammad, now also Ta-Nehisi Coates, are just a few in whom those other struggles for racial and gender justice, for land 'n' climate justice live in vibrant relation with their advocacy for Palestine. Indeed, one of the main reasons pro-Palestinian protests evoke repression by white Christian nationalists, corporate leaders and US imperial managers, is that our call for a "free Palestine" entails a challenge to cut-throat capitalism, chauvinist religions, to white supremacy and slavery (and, by the way, also to antisemitism), to American imperial power everywhere, to the US nation's own history of settler colonial practices that parallel Israel's.³⁹ This advocacy even challenges US plans by both Trump and Biden for "normalization" in the Middle East, whereby Israel partners with select Arab states not for democracy in that region, but instead to militarize and "secure" the region for US geopolitical interests.⁴⁰ So, contrary to what Dr. Smith assumes in his questions, the long-term struggle for Palestine thrives as a movement of many advocacies. That, in fact, is the reason for its strength and for its vigorous repression by today's elite and privileged cultures.

I offer one more response to Dr. Smith's asking, "Where are the encampments" for all the other struggles. It is this: youth of conscience now, even across Europe and the US, are witnessing a "live-streamed genocide."⁴¹ An immediacy of moral demand thereby impinges upon their consciences. Vivid displays of so many instances of this "mass atrocity crime" have also been documented by numerous and reputable analysts, even by Israelis recording themselves gleefully on cell phone cameras.⁴² To emphasize Palestine, now, is especially warranted, and especially in the US, since our government is directly linked to these atrocities. The enormity of the slaughter in Gaza, together with the enormity of US military aid to enable it, more than justifies the prominence we now give to resisting US-backed Israel's genocide. Yes, we can make links from US power and money to other scenes of global violence (in the Sudan, Syria, Myanmar, Guatemala, Kurdistan and more). But the comparably greater directness of US complicity

38. For details on these persons' simultaneous contributions to Palestinian struggle and other struggles, see Keith B. Feldman, *A Shadow Over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015).

39. Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London and New York: Verso, 2016). Compare the chapters therein, "Dispossessing Indians, Making the United States" and "Racialising Indians in the U.S." (141–201), with "Dispossessing the Natives in Palestine" and "Racialising the Jewish State" (230–70).

40. Tariq Dana, "The Geopolitics of the Abraham Accords: A Critical View on Militarization," *PRISME—Pathways to Renewed and Inclusive Security in the Middle East*, Spring 2023, <https://prismeinitiative.org/blog/abraham-accords-tariq-dana/> (accessed May 13, 2024).

41. To understand the notion of "live-streamed genocide," wherein incriminating photos and videos are released by Israeli perpetrators themselves, see "Investigating War Crimes in Gaza," a documentary film directed by Richard Sanders (Doha, Qatar, and London: An Al-Jazeera Investigations Video, 2024), <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/investigations/2024/10/7/war-crimes-in-gaza-i-al-jazeera-investigations> (accessed October 20, 2024).

42. For examples, see the documentary film cited above, note 41.

in the Gaza genocide, and the vast amount of enabling funds provided to Israel, make Israel's onslaught on Gaza one that demands strong and special resistance. In fact, I would argue that a failure to foreground and resist the US in its very direct role as purveyor of violence in Gaza, will leave us unequipped to see and resist its purveying of violence elsewhere in the world.

In sum, the four areas of oversimplification in Dr. Smith's address unite to mask awareness of the violence of US-backed Israel, which is comparably greater than Hamas's defense of its Gaza territory. It is egregious that Dr. Smith paints Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran as ominous and negative forces, but treats so feebly, if at all, the "terrible violence" of US-backed Israel. I remind that it was a nearly unanimous judgment of the International Court of Justice that Israel is in manifest violation of international law and is committing "plausible genocide."⁴³ Further, on September 18, 2024, the UN General Assembly also voted 124–14 in support of a Palestinian resolution demanding that Israel end within the year its "unlawful presence" in Gaza and in the occupied West Bank.⁴⁴ This is the side on which I stand. That stance emerges from analysis of the complex conditions of suffering of *all* parties. That complexity, though, includes a special judgment against the one party, US-backed Israel, for its belligerent occupation of Palestine and its slaughter in Gaza. Such positions are *not* rooted in some false, binary thinking. They are the moral fruit of complex analysis born of historical and political analyses of European and US-backed Israel's violence in Palestine.

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43. Alexandre Skander Galand and Wim Muller, "The ICJ's Findings on Plausible Genocide in Gaza and its Implications for the International Criminal Court," *OpinioJuris*, <https://opiniojuris.org/2024/04/05/the-icjs-findings-on-plausible-genocide-in-gaza-and-its-implications-for-the-international-criminal-court/> (accessed October 21, 2024).

44. United Nations. Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, "General Assembly Overwhelmingly Adopts Historic Text Demanding Israel End Its Unlawful Presence, Policies in Occupied Palestinian Territory within One Year," Tenth Emergency Special Session, GA/12626, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/ga12626.doc.htm> (accessed October 22, 2024).