**Israel as a breeding ground for paths of liberation: Paul Gauthier and Enrique Dussel’s seminal experience in the Holy Land**

From the 1950s to the 1980s, most Latin American countries were undergoing political instability provoked by the struggle between opposing political, economic, cultural, and religious forces, each of which was trying to impose its interests on the national sphere.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a result, a number of students and intellectuals travelled to Europe to study, rather than remain in Latin America. One of them was the Argentinian Enrique Dussel (b. 1934), who would become one of the best-known voices of the Latin American liberation theology and philosophy that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For the young Dussel, however, it was not Europe but Israel that left the most profound impression on his intellectual development.[[2]](#footnote-2) He was in Israel for two months in 1958, and the following year returned for a two-year stay (1959-1960).

Dussel’s experience in Israel was shaped by his encounter with the French priest and theologian Paul Gauthier (La Flèche 1914 - Marseille 2002). Gauthier was a former theology teacher who, after a short period (1954) in which he joined Jacques Loew’s mission of *prêtres-ouvriers* in Marseille,[[3]](#footnote-3) decided to settle in Nazareth and practice his working apostolate there. For the next twelve years, and until his abrupt departure shortly after the Six Day War in 1967, Israel became Gauthier’s home.

Some years after his arrival, Gauthier was invited to the Second Vatican Council by Georges Hakim, archbishop of the Galilee. He became the precursor of the group the ‘Church of the Poor,’ which aimed to bring the issue of poverty and pastoral service horizontally to the forefront of Council topics[[4]](#footnote-4) and to distribute Gauthier’s *Jésus, l’Église et les pauvres* (written in Israel in 1963) among the participants.[[5]](#footnote-6) By the end of the 1960s, Gauthier’s message would inspire the nascent Latin American liberation theology movement, with its “preferential option for the poor.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

Indeed, in Dussel’s words: “Everything that the later theology of liberation expressed theoretically, I had already lived with Paul in Nazareth. […] The sacred experience of this “option for the poor” is essential to Christianity, and I discovered it in 1959 in Nazareth.”[[7]](#footnote-8)

For Dussel, meeting Gauthier in Nazareth was an eye-opening moment of “revelation.” For example, according to his testimony, it was Gauthier who first drew his attention to the poor and oppressed indigenous victims of the Hispanic-centered Latin American narrative he had internalized before. “It was 1959,” Dussel wrote in an autobiographical note, “before many other experiences. This was the ‘original experience’ that was the foundation for all later epistemological or hermeneutic transformation.”[[8]](#footnote-9)

Both Gauthier and Dussel lived their years in Israel embedded in a deep prophetic and messianic consciousness of *Imitation Chisti*. However, their experience was by no means limited to Nazareth and the Catholic circles.

Gauthier spent his years in Israel between two physically close but culturally and politically extremely distant worlds. On the one hand, he lived and worked with the vulnerable Arab population of Nazareth, then ruled by the military regime imposed by Israel following the War of Independence until 1966. On the other, he was in close contact with Israel’s new Jewish society, which greatly aroused his curiosity. In addition to his friendly contact with the Israeli civilian and military authorities, who would help him foster his cooperative for Arab housing, he was attracted by the *kibbutz* (Zionist agrarian collectives) lifestyle, and was especially moved by the philosophy of the Jewish pioneer Aaron David Gordon. Both the *kibbutz* and Gordon would arrive through Gauthier at Vatican II.[[9]](#footnote-10) Moreover, the “Gordonian” spirit he had absorbed in the *kibbutzim* and in the young state led him to affirm, less than a year before the Six Day War, that “Christians have the right to see in the return of the State of Israel the historical facts that could become ‘the premises of Redemption.’”[[10]](#footnote-11)

Following Gauthier’s advice, Dussel spent six months studying Hebrew at Kibbutz Ginosar on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and working side by side with kibbutz members. However, it seems that the contacts with Jews and Israeli society left a different impression on him than they did on his mentor. Throughout his unpublished diaries and letters from his years in Israel, Dussel presents a hostile attitude towards the State of Israel and contemporary Jews, whom he seemed to have seen there for the first time in his life. Back in Paris, Dussel wrote *El Humanismo Semita* (composed in 1964). The conclusion of this work can be summarized as arguing that the People of Israel failed to fulfill the Hebrew Semitic tradition of ethical monotheism they brought into the world; this tradition, Dussel wrote, demands that they liberate themselves from the need for political structures that cannot but be corrupting. “This line will be fully developed by Christian humanism. History shows us that Israel took another path.”[[11]](#footnote-12)

At the same time, in the early 1960s, in the atmosphere of the Second Vatican Council, these two Catholic thinkers formulated theologies that emerged from similar experiences they had living in the young State of Israel. Although they both placed the poor at the center of their theology, this choice led them to different conclusions. For one, for more than a decade it was the messianic gift of serving as a bridge of fraternity between Jews and Arabs; for the other, it was the living proof of the expiration of the role of Judaism in the world.

How did these thinkers’ origins— in Europe suffering the trauma of World War II, and in a conservative Catholic and politically convulsed Latin America—influence their experience in Israel? What was the place of Judaism and the Jewish state in the development of their theologies? My paper will deal with these and other questions, shedding light on an unknown chapter in modern Jewish-Christian political theology.

1. Paul W. Drake, *Between Tyranny and Anarchy: A History of Democracy in Latin America 1800-2006* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Enrique Dussel, *Hacia los Orígenes de Occidente, Meditaciones Semitas* (Mexico City: Kanankil Editorial, 2012), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. On the activities of Loew and the Mission de Marseille, see Émile Poulat, *Naissance des prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris: Casterman, 1965), 415-443. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. # Paul Gauthier*, “Consolez mon peuple”: Le Concile et L’Eglise des Pauvres* (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 1965), 277-281.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paul Gauthier, *Les pauvres, Jésus et l´église* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. José Legorreta, “Identidad y Cambio en la Iglesia Latinoamericana,” in *El Pacto de las Catacumbas: la misión de los pobres en la Iglesia*, ed. Xabier Pikaza and Jose Antunes da Silva (Navarra: Verbo Divino, 2015), 253–274. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Dussel, *Itinerario de un Militante: Historia de la Teología de la Liberación* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Docencia, 2018), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Enrique Dussel, “En Búsqueda del Sentido (Origen y desarrollo de una Filosofía de la Liberación)” *Anthropos* 180 (1998), 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Among other references, see Paul Gauthier*, “Consolez mon peuple”: Le Concile et L’Eglise des Pauvres*, p. 120; Paul Gauthier, “L’athéisme de masse” (recorded lecture at the Second Vatican Council, Second Vatican Council Archive, Leuven: Maurits Sabbe Library, KU Leuven, 28.9.1965); Gauthier, *Les pauvres, Jésus et l´église*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Paul Gauthier, “L’État d’Israël,” in *[Catholicisme hier, aujourd'hui, demain: encyclopédie](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2176278770002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,990001027590402791" \t "_blank)*[, ed. Gérard Jacquemet](https://haifa-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=972HAI_MAIN_ALMA2176278770002791&context=L&vid=HAU&lang=iw_IL&search_scope=books_and_more&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=default_tab&query=any,contains,990001027590402791" \t "_blank) (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1966), vol. 6, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Dussel, *El Humanismo Semita*, (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1969), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)