Black Christians’ competing solidarities with Israelis and Palestinians

Divergent biblical interpretations and shared histories lead to different answers to the same question: Who are “the oppressed”?

by Roger Baumann in the June 2025 issue
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In the days and weeks following October 7, 2023, my email inboxes and social media feeds prominently featured statements, media appearances, essays, calls to action, and teach-ins aiming to educate, persuade, and mobilize African American Christians

at a moment when the issue of Israel and Palestine had quickly become more fraught and polarizing globally than it has been in recent memory.

Michael Stevens, a North Carolina pastor in the Black Pentecostal Church of God in Christ denomination, lamented that “Israel is at war, and the Black church finds itself silent again.” He continued: “Unfortunately, many Black pastors and leaders have a mixed level of apathy and resistance toward Israel as well as empathy [for] the Palestinian struggle. . . . If any organization or group of people should be standing with unwavering support for Israel during these difficult days, it should be the Black church.”

In contrast, Iva Carruthers, general secretary of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (a network of progressive African American clergy, activists, and faith leaders), offered this: “The truth is that Jesus was a Palestinian Jew, Bethlehem is in Palestine, and there are many Christian Palestinians. The biblical Israel is not today’s political Israel.”

These kinds of calls—coming from Black pastors, denominations, church networks, and parachurch organizations—variously appeal to African American Christians to “stand with Israel” in its moment of vulnerability or to recognize the plight of Palestinians. And they all invoke the religious, moral, and political mantle of Black churches. However, they offer competing claims about how African American Christians should respond to the issue of Palestine and Israel as a group with an ostensible shared history, identity, and culture.

Scholars of African American religion have often talked about this distinctive yet diversified social space as “the Black church.” But the notion that there is a singular thing that we can call *the* Black church is contested, even as many African American Christians assume and profess its existence. At the same time they offer competing normative accounts of what the Black church is, where it came from, and where it should focus its attention when it comes to social and political action. The range of these positions is evidenced in divergent claims about appropriate African American Christian solidarities in Israel and Palestine.

So why do some Black churches take an interest in Palestine and Israel? And what does this tell us about the political significance of the Black church on a global level?

These are questions I pursued in six years of research on Black religious politics in the United States, Israel, and Palestine. I found that African American Christian

engagement with Palestine and Israel highlights an ongoing contest over the character and purpose of the Black church. Observing African American Christian engagement with Israel and Palestine reveals competing priorities about appropriate Black Christian identities, each of which is sustained by particular narratives and traditions and each of which leads to the development of particular transnational solidarities.

But what, specifically, within the Black church gives rise to these transnational solidarities? What traditions of Black religious politics enable and sustain African American Christian engagement with Palestine and Israel, invoking particular readings of scripture, public theologies, and modes of political engagement?

A tradition, suggests sociologist Philip Gorski, represents "a culture that is self-conscious of its past." He explains:

> To be part of a tradition is to know certain stories, read certain books, admire certain people, and care about certain things. . . . Traditions have been forged and tested through historical experience and collective debate. . . . Traditions have to be evaluated not only in relationship to historical experience but also vis-à-vis rival traditions: other accounts of how the world is and should be.

This notion of tradition is helpful in understanding how some African American Christians interpret the authority and mission of the Black church in opposite directions when it comes to forging solidarities in Israel and Palestine. In what follows, I illustrate how these competing traditions of American Black religious politics take shape in the form of divergent biblical hermeneutics, public theologies, and modes of political engagement.

Though they differ significantly in their interpretations of the Bible, their public theologies, and their modes of political engagement, these Black church leaders all concern themselves with understanding the ethical, religious, and political implications of their Christian faith in the context of the global issue of Palestine and Israel. Furthermore, they all have something to say about how African American Christians should respond to this issue that has taken on a wider significance in public debates about religious and political solidarities across lines of social difference. The African American Christians I learned from in my research all advocate for Black church solidarity with the oppressed in overlapping religious and

racial terms. But they debate the appropriate focus of those impulses, based on different traditions of interpreting and living out the history, identity, and mission of the Black church.

African American Christian Zionism

When Michael Stevens declares that the Black church "should be standing with unwavering support for Israel during these difficult days," he is speaking within a tradition of Black religious politics that supports African American Christian Zionism. Christian Zionism is best known in the United States as a conservative White evangelical cause. But what *Christianity Today* has called the "changing face of Christian Zionism" includes outreach from that base aimed at building support among non-White American Christians. African American Christian Zionist pastors like Michael Stevens emphasize a biblical hermeneutic imperative that overlaps with White Christian Zionism, connecting God's biblical promise to Abram (see Gen. 12:3) with material and political support for the state of Israel today. This translates into public theologies that encourage African American Christians, in particular, to "take a seat at the table" of political and policy conversations about America's relationship with Israel as a Jewish state, treating American foreign policy as a "biblical issue."

This tradition of Christian Zionist Black religious politics is also rooted in memories of the historic civil rights movement, which has been an impetus for Black-Jewish pro-Israel partnerships in political and philanthropic terms. Edward Branch, a Baptist pastor from Detroit who has led pro-Israel seminars and tours of Israel for Black clergy, links his support for the state of Israel to the history of Black-Jewish civil rights cooperation in the United States. "I looked into Dr. King and his relationship with the Jewish community and the words that he had to say about our Jewish brothers and sisters," he told me. "[King] became the model for [us as African Americans], so that we too could stand alongside those who stood alongside us during the movement."

For Branch, Black Americans and American Jews have long stood together—a relationship that has translated into both political support for the state of Israel and less overtly political philanthropic engagement through providing social services in Israel, especially focused on Black Ethiopian Jewish communities. For African American Christian Zionists like Branch, the history of Black-Jewish cooperation is less about politics and more about, as Branch explained to me, "how to help folks,

how to service those Jews who are in need and those who are outside of the homeland and desire to get back there."

These Black pastors emphasize a hermeneutic imperative to support the state of Israel as a "biblical issue," translating this imperative into public theologies that emphasize the unique capacity of African American Christians to engage in this kind of blessing based on parallel histories of enslavement and oppression. And this tradition appeals to more and less overtly political modes of engagement, ranging from lobbying Congress and advancing pro-Israel US foreign policy positions to interfaith collaboration on charitable and philanthropic work.

African American Christian Palestinian solidarity

When Iva Carruthers said in a webinar that "the truth is that Jesus was a Palestinian Jew, Bethlehem is in Palestine, and there are many Christian Palestinians," and that "the biblical Israel is not today's political Israel," she was countering the narrative of African American Christian Zionists with an alternative vision of Black religious politics on a global scale. Carruthers, and the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference which she leads, organized the webinar series "to illuminate how the experiences of African Americans and the prophetic tradition of the Black church in the quest for freedom and justice inform and shape responses to the identity of being Black and Christian and the ongoing struggle for peace in the Holy Land."

In the first session of that series, Carruthers explained, "To be Black and Christian is to bring a special existential and theological lens of justice, of liberation, peace, and healing to the world." She went on: "As we interrogate the [biblical] text and speak truth about the ever-deepening humanitarian crisis that is unfolding for all the peoples of these sacred lands, we do so as a people whose human dignity has been subject to centuries of racialized oppression and family destruction, who have continued the quest for freedom and enfranchisement, and who have embraced a liberative theology towards the realization of justice and peace."

Here, Carruthers captures both a hermeneutic and theological alternative to African American Christian Zionism. In terms of interpreting the Bible, there is an emphasis on "reading the Bible through the eyes of the oppressed."

Lora Hargrove, a pastor and a Proctor affiliate in Maryland, described to me how she emphasizes this interpretation in her congregation, "trying to open their eyes to the fact that you have been, for years, reading your Bible through the eyes of the

oppressor. I want to open this up to you so that you begin to read scripture through the eyes of the oppressed." This scriptural hermeneutic leads to public theologies that emphasize Black religious politics as a form of prophetic witness focused on "speaking truth to power" rather than aligning with state powers.

For Proctor member Don Williams, this meant reframing his visit to the Holy Land away from "walking where Jesus walked" to walking "where Jesus is walking today." "And that," he notes, "is with those who are undervalued, underestimated and marginalized." This kind of public theological engagement leads to grassroots political engagement, focused on clergy training, congregational curriculum development, and Black church support and mobilization of youth-led protest movements that link racial justice activism across national lines.

Palestinian solidarity and the limits of reconciliation

In another expression of African American solidarity with Palestinians shortly after October 7, Kevin and Angela Brown, pastors of the Perfecting Church—a large, predominantly Black, independent evangelical church in the New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia—issued a statement and a call to action. It read, in part, "We pray for a ceasefire and just peace that enables Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the Holy Land to co-exist as equals, extending the right of self-determination equitably to Israel and Palestine, restoring all taken from and/or denied Palestinians in their homeland, including statehood." They further urged their congregants to sign a petition directed to members of Congress calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, sponsored by Churches for Middle East Peace.

The Perfecting Church also posted a series of clips to X and YouTube from their 2023 Holy Land Conversations conference, focusing on Palestine and Israel. At that conference, Kevin Brown declared, "My hope for tonight is that we don't leave thinking that we are for or against anyone. My hope is that we leave tonight with a full view of what the kingdom of God might look like coming to that part of the world." Another post asked, "What does it look like to love your neighbor when your neighbor is your enemy?"

The leaders and members of the Perfecting Church emphasize an evangelical reading of scripture focused on reconciliation and peacebuilding. Their public theologies emphasize becoming "ambassadors of reconciliation" in places of conflict. And this leads them to reject choosing sides politically between Israelis and

Palestinians, seeking instead to “choose the cross” in order to avoid politics. Kevin Brown explained, “Much like I’ve worked on not choosing a side, I’ve worked on not getting politically involved [in Palestine].” Yet, as African Americans who see their experiences of racism mirrored in the lives of Palestinians, members of the Perfecting Church at times struggle to live out their church’s evangelical mandate to not take sides politically. Following his return from a trip to Bethlehem in the West Bank, one lay leader in the church said this to me:

> I needed help to not take sides. Because I found myself, my heart, hardening to Israel. And it was beginning to harden, and I felt it. And God awakened me to that reality. Because I saw so much of my own people’s pain. I saw such a mirror of horrendous acts—dehumanizing events that began to swell inside of me.

While members of the Perfecting Church strive to relate to and work with Palestinians and Israelis alike, their reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts are complicated by their recognition of the deeply felt experiences of racism and discrimination that link them to Palestinians.

Who are the oppressed?

Paying attention to this debate and the ways that the history, identity, and mission of the Black church are contested has the potential to shape our understanding of the scope of Black religious politics more broadly. Most public attention to the social and political significance of the Black church comes in the context of American electoral and protest politics. And Black church position-taking on Israel and Palestine certainly matters in domestic electoral and activist spaces. In activist spaces, relations between Black and Jewish racial justice activists are being tested in new ways that threaten the bonds of a durable coalition that goes back to the civil rights era. In electoral politics, Black Christian clergy organizing around calls for an immediate ceasefire and release of hostages and an end to US financial support for Israel’s war threaten a key part of the Democratic coalition.

But we can also appreciate a wider scope and significance of Black religious politics through attention to African American Christians who claim the mantle of the Black church to speak to Israel and Palestine. This is especially true if we recognize how their views on the purpose of the Black church take shape where racial, religious,

and political group identities converge through transnational connections, networks, and encounters. When the context for articulating the identity and purpose of the Black church becomes global, the meanings of racial and religious identities shift and expand as Black religious politics are taken out of more familiar territory and into wider political spaces. Rallying cries for racial justice and emancipation find new global expressions in transnational conversations about experiences of apartheid, genocide, social death, and the religious and political meaning of Black Lives Matter.

In this vision of Black religious politics, the national—even the local—is always shaped by the global. And, in turn, global movements for racial justice, economic justice, and national recognition are increasingly informed by transnational expressions of Black American religious politics. So claims that the Black church should stand in solidarity with the state of Israel or, alternatively, with Palestinians should be seen—by insiders and observers of American Black church political engagement—as part of a global conversation about the meanings of justice and liberation in overlapping religious, racial, and political terms. That global conversation is increasingly revealing that systems of oppression share common roots and branches. And with that recognition, religious movements for justice cohere more widely within a shared struggle.