

A Tembel Hat in the Streets of Nazareth: Paul Gauthier's Israeli Experience

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■ Abstract

The French priest Paul Gauthier (1914–2002) was a former theology professor who, after a short period as a *prêtre-ouvrier* (worker-priest) in Marseille, decided in 1956 to settle in Nazareth and practice his working apostolate there. For the next eleven 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 the archbishop of Galilee. There, Gauthier led the group the "Church of the Poor," which aimed to bring the issue of poverty and pastoral service to the forefront of Council discussions. Gauthier spent his years in Israel between two physically close but culturally and politically distant worlds. On the one hand, he lived and worked with the vulnerable Arab population of Nazareth. 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 lifestyle and was especially moved by the philosophy of the Zionist thinker and pioneer Aaron David Gordon. Gauthier believed that his experience in Nazareth and Israel, where he saw an interchange of many worlds, could shed light on the worker-priest apostolate and provide a model for priestly spirituality in a working-class environment, in its various aspects. This article analyzes the influence of the "Israel experience" on Paul Gauthier's thought.

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■ Introduction: Paul Gauthier, the Spiritual Father of Liberation Theology

The theologian and priest Paul Gauthier (La Flèche, 1914–Marseille, 2002) left a notable mark on the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Invited by Georges Hakim, archbishop of Galilee, Gauthier challenged the Council fathers with a message he had brought from Nazareth, where he spent eleven formative years (1956–1967). Gauthier’s message, which was widely disseminated among attendees through a text titled *Jesus, l’Église et les pauvres* (Jesus, the Church and the Poor), consisted of an urgent call for the Church to take on a more active role in the exercise of social justice, especially toward vulnerable populations in developing countries, and in the evangelization of the poor. In addition, Gauthier demanded that the Church act to restore its poor image. Gauthier worked relentlessly behind the scenes of the Council, founding an informal group called the “Church of the Poor,” which sought to ensure that the issue of poverty received priority in the Council’s various commissions.¹

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,” this doctrine placed the figures of the poor and the oppressed as the historical subjects of theology and the struggle for their liberation as the goal of religious-political action.² This concept began to permeate Latin American theology at the time of the Second Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM), a pivotal event for Latin American Catholicism that took place in Medellín, Colombia, in August 1968.³

Gauthier inspired the emergence of this new theological-political trend through at least two channels of influence. The first of these is the personal experience of one of its founders, the Argentinian Enrique Dussel (born in 1934), who in his youth had spent two years (1959–1961) as one of Gauthier’s disciples in Nazareth. In numerous autobiographical references throughout his career, even half a century and a lifetime of experiences later, Dussel would recall those years in Israel as

¹ Hilary Ragner, “An Initial Profile of the Assembly,” in *History of Vatican II* (ed. Giuseppe Alberigo; English version ed. Joseph A. Komonchak; 5 vols; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995–2006) 2:200–203.

² Juan Eduardo Bonnin, *Discurso político y discurso religioso en América Latina. Leyendo los borradores de Medellín (1968)* (Buenos Aires: Santiago Arcos, 2013) 153.

³ *Ibid.*, 129–62.

being fundamental and formative: “I founded all my works . . . on that experience.”⁴ For him, the period he spent with Gauthier in Israel was “the fullest” of his life.⁵

Everything that liberation theology expressed theoretically, I experienced in advance with Paul in Nazareth. The preferential option for the poor was his obsession, and the criticism leveled against us liberation theologians in the 1970s will crumble under the weight of the judgment of history. The sacred experience of this “option for the poor” is essential to Christianity, and I discovered it in Nazareth in 1959.⁶

The encounter between Gauthier and Dussel in Nazareth and Israel changed the latter’s system of thought: it opened his mind and allowed him to “discover” the poor and the oppressed.⁷ From that point on, Dussel would see the world “from below,”⁸ a perspective that would become the main innovation of liberation theology. As opposed to classic Catholic theology, which did not differentiate among believers from diverse social classes, liberation theology sought to foster affirmative action for the poor.⁹ One of the central exponents of liberation theology, the Brazilian Clodovis Boff (born in 1944) explained this divergence in the following words: “It must be noted that the poor in Medellín [referring to the aforementioned CELAM] were treated as a ‘subject.’ [This approach] was a novelty in relation to the assistentialist view of the past, which saw the poor reduced to an ‘object’ of care.”¹⁰

The second channel through which Gauthier’s message influenced liberation theology was his participation in Vatican II. One of the central liberation theologians, the Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez (born in 1928), identified Vatican II as one of the starting points of this new direction:

Liberation theology . . . has not been an automatic result of this situation [of the poor of Latin America becoming agents of their own destiny] and the changes it has undergone. It represents rather an attempt to accept the invitation of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council and interpret this sign of the times by reflecting on it critically in the light of God’s word.¹¹

⁴ Enrique Dussel, *Hacia los orígenes de occidente. Meditaciones semitas* (Mexico City: Kanankil, 2012) 11. All the translations from Spanish, French, Hebrew, and Portuguese in this article are the author’s.

⁵ Enrique Dussel, *Itinerario de un militante. Historia de la Teología de la Liberación* (Buenos Aires: Docencia, 2018) 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Enrique Dussel, “En búsqueda de sentido. Sobre el origen y desarrollo de una Filosofía de la Liberación,” *Anthropos* 180 (1998) 13–36, at 17.

⁹ Bonnin, *Discurso político*, 153.

¹⁰ Clodovis Boff, “A originalidade histórica de Medellín,” *Convergência* 317 (1998) 568–75, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070430002019/http://www.sedos.org/spanish/boff.html>.

¹¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973, repr. 1988) xxi.

One of the main reasons for the strong footprint that Vatican II left on liberation theology is that the Council placed a special focus on the issue of poverty and the poor. This social turn of the Church was made possible, among other things, by the intervention of Paul Gauthier and the group the “Church of the Poor.” The words with which the French cardinal Pierre Gerlier (1880–1965), archbishop of Lyon, opened the first meeting of the group on 26 October 1962, reflect its aim and spirit:

The duty of the Church in our age is to adapt itself in the most responsive way to the situation created by the suffering of so many human beings. . . . We must petition the authorities and insist that it be raised [in the Council’s program]. Everything else is in danger of remaining ineffective if this problem is not studied and dealt with. . . . The Church must be seen for what it is: the Mother of the Poor, whose first concern is to give her children bread for both body and soul, as John XXIII himself said on 11 September 1962: “The Church is and wishes to be the Church of all, and particularly the Church of the poor.”¹²

One of the sources of inspiration for the group was the experience that Gauthier and his small fraternity, *Les Compagnons et Compagnes de Jésus Charpentier* (The Companions of Jesus the Carpenter), had in Nazareth, which inspired his 1963 tractate *Jesus, l’Église et les pauvres*, Gauthier’s document that was distributed to the fathers of the Council on the initiative of Archbishop Hakim and the bishop of Tournai (Belgium), Charles-Marie Himmer.¹³ More than fifty bishops who identified with the document attended the group’s meetings.¹⁴ In addition, five hundred conciliar bishops signed the petition that came out of the group, demanding church reforms demonstrating “signs of goodwill” on the part of the bishops, such as relinquishing wealth and titles for a more humble way of life, as well as making the apostolate among poor and working-class Catholics a priority.¹⁵ Although the initiatives of the group were received coolly by the hierarchy, and were ultimately buried or forgotten,¹⁶ some echoes of the group’s message did make their way into the Council’s final documents, in the form of several, albeit marginal, references to the issue of poverty and the Church (for example, *Lumen Gentium* 8 and *Ad Gentes* 5).

The last initiative of the “Church of the Poor” was the “Pact of the Catacombs,” a secret vote of self-poverty and devotion to the poor signed by forty bishops (twenty-six of them Latin American) who gathered in the Catacombs of Domitilla, outside of Rome, on the evening of 16 November 1965, three weeks before the Council

¹² Ragner, “An Initial Profile,” 202.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁴ Rohan Curnow, “Stirrings of the Preferential Option for the Poor at Vatican II: The Work of the ‘Group of the Church of the Poor,’” *The Australasian Catholic Record* 89 (2012) 420–32, at 423.

¹⁵ Norman Tanner, “The Church in the World (Ecclesia Ad Extra),” in *History of Vatican II* (ed. Alberigo) 4:270–387, at 384.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 387; See also Giuseppe Alberigo, “Major Results, Shadows of Uncertainty,” in *History of Vatican II* (ed. Alberigo), 4: 617–40, at 620.

ended. Once back in their homelands, and strongly driven by the deep impression left by these experiences, these bishops would transform Latin America into the place in the world where the message of Paul Gauthier and the “Church of the Poor” had the greatest impact.¹⁷

Among these bishops was the Brazilian Hélder Pessôa Câmara (1909–1999), then auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro and one of the precursors of the Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (Base Ecclesial Communities), which began as local democratic social organizations of citizens in working-class neighborhoods in the spirit of the Gospel and became, in the 1970s, the breeding ground for liberation theology.¹⁸ Câmara’s notes and letters from his time at the Council reveal his proximity to Gauthier and his fraternity.¹⁹ Another prominent example is the Argentinian bishop Alberto Devoto (1918–1984), who, in the aftermath of the work accomplished by Gauthier’s group at the Council, in which Devoto recalled “having the joy of participating,”²⁰ would go on to found the “Poverty of the Church” Commission at the Medellín Episcopal Conference, which would provide the first formal articulations of the new theology.²¹

However, despite the scope of his message, the literature pertaining to the Second Vatican Council usually references the figure of Gauthier briefly, enigmatically, and with epic tones. Here is one example:

Established in Nazareth since 1958, he had founded there the Compagnons et Compagnes de Jésus Charpentier, an organization recognized by the local Melkite bishop Mons. Georges Hakim, as well as by his Patriarch Maximos IV. There, in a cave located on the slope of Schneller’s hill, he would go to pray and meditate with a group of young people. In a way, this was the movement called the “Church of the Poor” in the making, the beginning of what would later become “liberation theology.”²²

Neither this nor other sources provide details on the content of the experience from which this message emerged, even though Gauthier’s writings and speeches from the time of the Council are full of those details. In them, Gauthier repeatedly insists that Nazareth must not be thought of as an isolated Catholic holy place but as a city thriving in the modern context of the State of Israel. Nazareth and Israel

¹⁷ Agenor Brighenti, “El Pacto de las Catacumbas y la tradición eclesial liberadora,” in *El Pacto de las Catacumbas. La misión de los pobres en la Iglesia* (ed. Xabier Pikaza and José Antunes da Silva; Navarra: Verbo Divino, 2015) 213–22.

¹⁸ Paul Gauthier, “*Consolez mon peuple.*” *Le Concile et “l’Eglise des pauvres”* (Paris: Cerf, 1965) 207.

¹⁹ Pierre Sauvage, “Le rôle des évêques latino-américains dans le groupe ‘Jésus, l’Église et les pauvres’ durant le Concile Vatican II,” *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 44. 3 (2013) 560–80, at 562.

²⁰ Marta Diana, *Buscando el Reino. La opción por los pobres de los argentinos que siguieron al Concilio Vaticano II* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2013) 23.

²¹ Bonnin, *Discurso político*, 40.

²² Joan Planellas Barnosell, “Los artifices del pacto. Origen, evolución y crepúsculo del grupo llamado ‘Iglesia de los Pobres,’” in *El Pacto de las Catacumbas* (ed. Pikaza and Silva), 85.

constituted for him a complementary religious experience. This is how he explains the origins of his project in the Holy Land in *Jesus, l'Église et les pauvres*:

In order to be in communion with Jesus the laborer, this priest [Gauthier], asked his bishop and obtained permission to live and work among the little folk. He thought that Nazareth, *in the modern and very socially oriented Israel*, would be a perfect place to deepen the spiritual bases of an apostolic life in a working milieu, for the evangelization of the poor and the establishment of the Church in the world of manual labor. The Melkite Archbishop of Galilee, Mons. Georges Hakim proposed that he join his diocese. . . . Thus, was born the Fraternity of the Companions of Jesus the Carpenter.²³

In the following pages, we will dive into Gauthier's years in Israel in all their complexity, in order to shed new light on this unknown chapter of the intertwined histories of the young state of Israel, Vatican II, and liberation theology.

■ A Charismatic Figure within a Complex Reality

The lectures that Paul Gauthier gave after his return from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1952 became so popular that they were delivered again and again, accompanied by the colored slides he took during the trip, in several towns and villages near Dijon, where Gauthier worked as a theology teacher at the Grand Séminaire. Gauthier's charisma and visual sensibility attracted the attention of a cameraman, who suggested to Gauthier that they travel to the Holy Land together and make a film about the life of Jesus Christ. Gauthier, who at that point (1954) had abandoned his career as a teacher to become a worker-priest in Jacques Loew's mission of *prêtres-ouvriers* in Marseille,²⁴ saw this opportunity as an extension of the working apostolate he had chosen for himself, since, as he said, "more workers attend cinema than Mass."²⁵

They departed in November 1955 for what Gauthier thought would be a short absence but in fact turned out to be a long and life-changing experience. When work on the film had finished, he decided not to return to France but to become a worker-priest in Nazareth, while exploring the new Jewish society of Israel, which greatly aroused his curiosity. Thus, for the next eleven years, Nazareth in particular and Israel in general would become his home. While he had set out to search for traces of the life of Jesus for a film, Gauthier ended up "incarnating" him in his own life.

Gauthier first spent a couple of months in Nazareth in 1956, and after a short return to Paris, he settled in the Galilean city in 1957. Soon after his arrival, he became a recognized figure in the local landscape, inspiring the sympathy and

²³ Paul Gauthier, "Jesus, l'Église et les pauvres," in idem, *Les pauvres, Jésus et L'Église* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1963) 89 (emphasis added).

²⁴ On the activities of Jacques Loew and the Mission of Marseille, see Émile Poulat, *Naissance des prêtres-ouvriers* (Paris: Casterman, 1965) 415–43.

²⁵ Desmond O'Grady, *Eat from God's Hands: Paul Gauthier and the Church of the Poor* (London: Chapman, 1965) 30.

respect of both the Arab population of Nazareth and the Jewish authorities. Even the Israeli daily press showed an increasing interest in him. For example, an article from December 1958 reads:

The priest walks through the main street of the city. Dressed in khaki clothes and a tembel hat, he goes to his workplace. . . . When the tembel hat of Father Paul is seen in the main street of Nazareth, dozens of hands rise up to greet him. He is known in Nazareth as an affable man, capable of resolving any conflict peacefully.²⁶

Gauthier's choice of wearing khaki clothes and a tembel hat (a round brimless hat), both clear hallmarks of the Jewish pioneers, was a statement that would differentiate him from both the many Christian clergymen living and working around religious institutions in Nazareth, and the Arab population of the city, most of which opted for a more traditional clothing style.

Nazareth in the 1950s was a city mired in social crisis. The Israeli-Arab War (1948) had left Israel's Arab population in a fragile situation. Many Arabs, especially residents of rural villages, had fled or were forced to leave their homes and became refugees in the neighboring Arab countries or in large Arab towns within Israel. Nazareth took in a great share of internal refugees, provoking the emergence of a social crisis. This is how Gauthier described the situation in the document he wrote for Vatican II:

Up until 1948, it had been a village of 12,000 inhabitants, a trading center for the villages of Galilee, with its *souks* (Arab market places), its donkey markets, cobblers' shops, its carpenters. . . . Suddenly, the Judeo-Arab War [*la guerre judéo-arabe*] provoked an influx of refugees to this small and holy town, where everyone, whether Christian or Muslim, feels protected by a maternal presence. In eight days, the city had doubled its population. People crowded in everywhere: in the schools, at the Casa Nova Hospice, in shacks, in caves, in stables, in chicken coops, in pig sties, not to mention the barracks and hastily built slums. Churches and religious communities, in their generosity, do everything they can to help these refugees, and distribute donations received mostly from Belgium. But how to provide them with decent work and housing?²⁷

This crisis stood in stark contrast to the economic and social situation of the Jewish population at the time. The first decade following the establishment of the State of Israel was characterized by rapid economic development.²⁸ Gauthier even

²⁶ Shraga Har-Gil, "אבא פול מנצרת" [Father Paul from Nazareth], *Davar*, 26 December 1958, Historical Jewish Press, National Library of Israel and Tel Aviv University, www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI_heb/Print.Article.aspx?mode=image&href=DAV%2F1958%2F12%2F26&id=Ar01600&rtl=true.

²⁷ Gauthier, *Les pauvres*, 84–85.

²⁸ Yair Baumei, *A Blue and White Shadow: The Israeli Establishment's Policy and Actions among Its Arab Citizens: The Formative Years, 1958–1968* (Haifa: Pardes, 2007) 22 (Hebrew).

wrote enthusiastically on this subject in the document prepared for the Council, as a remarkable example of the redeeming aspect of labor:

[The Jews] returned to their land and founded a strong, well-equipped and well-armed nation; they received consideration and esteem. . . . Labour and the workers' union made possible the resurrection of the State of Israel, which was judged to be able to support only 500,000 inhabitants. Today it feeds almost 3,000,000, with surpluses registered in milk and egg production.²⁹

However, the truth is that the fruits of this economic development barely reached the Arab population, which became the poorest sector in the country. For example, the headline and opening from a daily Israeli newspaper from October 1958 reads:

“Nazareth workers are struggling to keep their families from going hungry”
The financial situation of most workers in Nazareth is deteriorating in view of the paucity of employment sources in the city and the driving license policy that prevents them from leaving the city to look for a job. Many of these workers are forced to work in public works projects that do not guarantee their families a minimum living wage.³⁰

Nevertheless, the economic gap between Jews and Arabs in Israel concerned Gauthier less than the disparity between the wealth and living conditions of the clergy of the numerous religious institutions established in Nazareth and those of the general population, in “a city which should shine with all the glory of the Gospel, as the home of social justice and peace.”³¹ The denunciation of this dissonance between the Christian spirit of care for the poor and the material conditions of the Church would become one of the main items on Gauthier's agenda at the Council.³²

From the time of his arrival, he dedicated all his efforts to finding a solution for the work and housing crisis he had encountered in that city. In his *Les mains que voici*. *Journal de Nazareth* (published in 1964), Gauthier describes the first steps of the enterprise that had begun in 1956:

After three months spent trying to think of diverse solutions, it seems that a workers' cooperative for building houses could provide a solution. With my friend Gurevitch, an attorney at law, we have built the legal structure, and with the approval of Mons. Hakim, we have assembled about forty workers. A committee has been elected, comprised of workers, myself among them. The project has been closely examined and will permit the idea of communal social action to spread in the people's consciousness.³³

²⁹ Gauthier, *Les pauvres*, 34–35.

³⁰ “פועלי נצרת נאבקים למניעת חרפת רעב ממשפחותיהם” [Nazareth Workers Are Struggling to Keep Their Families from Going Hungry], *Kol Ha'am*, 5 October 1958, 6, Historical Jewish Press, <https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/khm/1958/10/05/01/article/50/?srpos=10&e=-10-1958----he-20-khm-1---txIN%7ctxTI-%d7%a4%d7%95%d7%a2%d7%9c%d7%99+%d7%a0%d7%a6%d7%a8%d7%aa-----1>.

³¹ Paul Gauthier, *Les mains que voici*. *Journal de Nazareth* (Paris: Édition Universitaires, 1964) 130.

³² See, among others, Gauthier, *Les pauvres*, 57.

³³ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 131.

■ The Housing Cooperative: A Bridge between Jews and Arabs

It did not take Gauthier long to learn his way around the young state's political apparatus and to identify the different officials who would help him execute his project. Directly following the 1948 war, and up until 1966, a separate military regime was put in place to deal with the Arab population. Gauthier soon succeeded in creating personal communication channels, and he "conquered the hearts of both the military regime officials and the representatives of the various government departments in Nazareth," as was written in an article on his behalf in the Israeli press.³⁴ For example, in his *Journal de Nazareth*, Gauthier recalls a friendly visit from representatives of the Israeli government and the Histadrut (the national trade union), who had come to Nazareth to ask for Gauthier's advice on how to improve the living conditions of the Arab citizens, and who listened to what he had to say "with surprising attention and good will."³⁵ And indeed, shortly after that meeting in 1957, the Israeli civilian and military authorities gave their accord to the creation of the cooperative and promised their financial and technical support.³⁶ Thanks to Gauthier's intervention, it would be the first time the State of Israel invested money in Arab construction, financing three-fifths of the houses' cost outright and giving long-term loans for the payment of the rest, also financed in part by donations Gauthier had collected in Europe.³⁷

Gauthier was well aware of the polarities of Israeli reality and politics.³⁸ On the one hand, working and living among the marginalized Arab workers in Nazareth, Gauthier witnessed the effects of the military regime on the Arab population. Nevertheless, when describing his experience in Nazareth both in his writings³⁹ and in the interviews he gave to the Israeli press, he found it important to remark upon the "goodwill" of the Jewish leadership toward the Arab population; he saw his cooperative as not just a solution for the work and housing problem, but also as a bridge that would put an end to the suspicion and hostility between Jews and Arabs in Israel. As he says in an interview for a Hebrew newspaper from April 1959:

At Christmas [1957], the cooperative received the map with the land plot demarcated for the construction of housing. "Indeed, it was a nice Christmas present," smiles Father Gauthier. "However, despite the readiness and willingness of all the relevant ministries, especially that of the military regime, to help us realize our initiative, many [Arabs] were still reticent and suspicious. . . . Indeed, even I, ever the optimist, did not believe that things

³⁴ David Sitton, "פליטים ערבים בישראל עוברים לשיכונ קבע" [Arab Refugees in Israel Move to Permanent Housing], *Haboker*, 9 April 1959, Historical Jewish Press, <https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/hbkr/1959/04/09/01/article/41/?e=-----he-20--1--img-txIN%7ctxTI-----1>.

³⁵ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 129.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁷ O'Grady, *Eat from God's Hands*, 78.

³⁸ See, for example, Paul Gauthier, "L'État d'Israël," in *Catholicisme hier, aujourd'hui, demain. Encyclopédie* (ed. Gérard Jacquemet; 15 vols.; Paris: Letouzey, 1948–2000) 6:206–13, at 208.

³⁹ See, for example, Gauthier, *Les mains*, 131; O'Grady, *Eat from God's Hands*, 79.

would start happening at such an expedient pace. And here you are today, witnessing the magnificent two-family homes erected on this mountain. This is a good beginning for a big enterprise, but moreover, this housing will put an end to the distrust, fear and baseless naysaying among the Israeli Arabs,” Gauthier promised.⁴⁰

Throughout his life in Nazareth, Gauthier saw himself as a mediator between Jews and Arabs in Israel, helping at the local level to bring about peace between the two peoples.

■ An Apostolate of Poverty

As mentioned previously, Gauthier settled in Nazareth while in search of traces of the life of Jesus. Spiritually nourished by the religious experience of Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916), the French Catholic priest who traveled to Nazareth and the Middle East to imitate Jesus’s life of poverty and manual labor,⁴¹ Gauthier had placed these two principles as the pillars of his theology.

First of all, he made the decision to live in poverty, and he demanded the same commitment to poverty from all Catholics, directing his critique specifically at the influential clergy of Nazareth, many of whom were “tragically unwilling to apply pontifical directives on fair salaries,”⁴² despite owning large properties. For Gauthier, poverty should be a precondition for any missionary work:

Christ has pronounced this prophecy: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28 NIV). But before he spoke, here, in Nazareth, Jesus wanted to live and suffer with the little people, working at the mercy of difficult employers, in order to save humanity from sin and give it hope. How might we hear this Psalm and transmit the invitation of Christ to the damned of this earth or those crushed by the sin of the world? Should we not take the humblest place in the harsh human condition?⁴³

In Nazareth, Gauthier strictly adopted the principle of poverty as his lifestyle. He asked that his salary be food alone, but when the cooperative fellows insisted, he would only accept to be paid the bare minimum.⁴⁴ He gave up the apartment offered to him at the cooperative to a large family who had been living in an ancient cave in the Schneller Quarter in Nazareth (a piece of land under German Christian ownership) and made his residence instead in an extremely humble hut. A journalist who visited Gauthier in 1966 provided a description: “The hut, made out of bits of tin and tree branches, is almost empty of furniture. It has only two

⁴⁰ Sitton, “Arab Refugees.”

⁴¹ Charles de Foucauld, *Oeuvres spirituelles. Anthologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1958) 664; as quoted in Gisbert Greshake, “The Spiritual Charism of Nazareth,” *Communion* 31 (2004) 16–34, at 17.

⁴² Gauthier, *Les mains*, 39.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

beds and a bookcase full of philosophy books in different languages. Here lives Father Paul Gauthier.”⁴⁵

In an earlier article from 1958 another journalist wrote that the hut did not even have electricity or running water.⁴⁶ Gauthier transformed the ancient cave into a meeting and prayer space for his small group of disciples, a few young European and Latin American Catholics, members of *Les compagnons de Jesus Charpentier*. In May 1967, only a few weeks before the war, an article about Gauthier and his group had appeared in the mainstream daily newspaper *Maariv*:

Father Gauthier does not wear a cassock. He puts it on only when leading prayers, every day at six, exclusively for the disciples living with him. They walk to an ancient cave, twenty meters away from their cabin. . . . [The cave] is lit up by two small oil lamps and contains a wooden table as well as two or three ritual articles. The door to the cave was handmade by Gauthier out of wooden panels taken from the housing construction sites where he himself used to work as a builder. This is how he still views himself now, even though these days—he says apologetically—he spends most of his time writing books.⁴⁷

■ An Apostolate of Manual Labor

Indeed, despite his relatively advanced age by the time of his arrival (forty-two), his lack of training, which caused him to endure much physical pain while working, and the “oppressive” Israeli heat,⁴⁸ Gauthier spent most of his years in Israel as a manual laborer. Manual work was for him the most profound religious experience, an activity that allowed him to feel as if he were physically incarnating Jesus. His *Journal de Nazareth* is full of descriptions of the spiritual experience of labor:

As I am mixing the concrete, I see four companions carrying heavy stones. They are 150 meters lower down and must climb up three terraces of five to ten meters each. . . . I go down to where the team is. There it is, the pile of big stones. Each weighs about 50 kg. Do I just lift them? A comrade solves my dilemma: he places one on my shoulder. I may have placed it wrong, because I get tired fast. Arriving to the half-way point, I have to muster all of my strength. I think of those Jerusalem haulers burdened with loads three times heavier than this, and of the One whose back carried, along with the Cross, the sins of the world. Are not the comrades ahead of me, carrying stones heavier than mine, a living testimony of Jesus’s burden that is earthly

⁴⁵ Yoel Dar, “כומר בונה שיכונים לפליטים” [A Priest Builds Housing for Refugees], *Davar*, 5 July 1966, Historical Jewish Press, www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/Print.Article.aspx?mode=image&href=DAV%2F1966%2F07%2F05&id=Ar00402.

⁴⁶ Har-Gil, “Father Paul from Nazareth.”

⁴⁷ Tuvia Carmel, “האב גוטייה מארגן עזרה לנצרכי העולם—ממרכזו בנרצת” [Father Gauthier Organizes Help for the World’s Needy—from his Center in Nazareth], *Ma’ariv*, 22 May 1967, Historical Jewish Press, www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/Print.Article.aspx?mode=image&href=MAR%2F1967%2F05%2F22&id=Ar01000.

⁴⁸ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 30.

sin? This meditation allows me to get to the top. Undoubtedly, this is the best Way of the Cross I have been given the opportunity to experience. Is it me who carries the stones with Jesus or Jesus who carries them with me?⁴⁹

Through this experience of hard manual labor, Gauthier felt the two thousand years separating him from the father of Christianity disappear. That was, according to his own testimony, the answer he used to give to his fellow workers when asked why someone like him, who certainly had other options in life, would choose this kind of work.⁵⁰

Gauthier saw collective labor as an act of religious love. For him, the spiritual meaning of collective work is based on the idea that the individual effort is a potential relief for one's fellow workers. By taking the heaviest stone, he says, one reduces the suffering of one's comrades. Thus, for humanity to take hard work upon itself is an act of brotherly love.⁵¹ For working people, as for Jesus before them, "work is a redemptory sacrifice."⁵² That is why, Gauthier says, in an attempt to promote a working apostolate among the Catholic clergy, the task of the priest is to offer this sacrifice to others as God's gift.⁵³

Besides the physical effort that makes work a religious sacrifice, Gauthier also noted the potential of the meditative dimension of manual work. Monotonous and intellectually unchallenging, it leaves man's mind free for contemplation and prayer. In his own words:

The work of digging is considered to be the basest trade that can be accomplished by the basest of imbeciles, provided he has strong enough muscles. That leaves the mind unoccupied during work. But very quickly, the mind finds itself engaged, buried in your arms, your back, in your hands, in this earth you dig, you bring up to the surface.⁵⁴

It was during these long hours of digging that Gauthier claimed to have reached the highest religious and social insights, which would shape the theology he would write throughout his years in Israel and disseminate at Vatican II. For example, he narrates the occasion when, while digging a trench, Ps 130, *De Profundis*, appeared on his lips and revealed itself to him in a new light. Although the trench reminded him of a tomb, he suddenly understood that the abyss from which the author of the Psalm is calling God at its beginning is not the shadow of death, as it is traditionally interpreted. "No: the abyss from the bottom of which I cried out to You, Lord, is this depth of the misery of my digger brothers, the lowest of the laborers, the damned of the Earth. *De Profundis* had never taken on such a meaning."⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 34–35.

⁵¹ Ibid., 69.

⁵² Ibid., 50.

⁵³ Ibid., 50, 53.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

Consequently, the last verse of the Psalm, which is usually translated in French as: “C’est Lui qui rachètera Israël de toutes ses iniquités” (And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities; Ps 130:8 LSB), is freely translated by Gauthier as “C’est Lui qui délivrera l’humanité de ses injustices” (He will liberate humanity from its injustices).⁵⁶ In Gauthier’s contemporary scenario, wherein Israel is no longer the oppressed and the weak, humanity takes the place of the biblical Israel, and social injustices that of personal sins. Devoid of political connotations at this point, the statement expresses a religious aspiration to imitate Jesus in his carrying of the burden of the Cross, along with the burden of human suffering.

■ The Kibbutz: A Source of Sublime Wisdom

During his years in Israel, Gauthier established close relations with Jews, relations that went much further than pragmatic dealings related to his workers’ cooperative. He studied Hebrew while staying and working in kibbutzim (collective agrarian settlements) and showed interest in the kibbutznik lifestyle. He found in the kibbutz a social corrective to the unjust economic and social system dominating the modern world, which was responsible for marginalizing and oppressing the people for whom he claimed to be speaking up. As he wrote in his *Journal de Nazareth*:

Certainly, from what I have learned so far, the kibbutzim represent an extraordinary accomplishment in contemporary human society. This way of life and work breaks with ordinary custom: communal life, the suppression of salary and money, communitarian work! All this seems utopic, impossible. And yet, there are nearly three hundred exemplars of it in Israel, comprised of a total of around a hundred thousand men and women. . . . There were the kibbutzim which paved the way for the creation of Israel; they fashioned a new type of man, remarkable for his patience, his action and altruism, like Ben Gurion, and they continue to sustain the pioneer spirit in this country.⁵⁷

This statement is rather ironic, since it is well known that Ben Gurion, whom Gauthier presents here as the prototype of this remarkable Zionist “new man,” was the same politician who, as prime minister, strongly rejected and opposed every initiative attempting to abolish the military regime oppressing the Arab population,⁵⁸ a regime whose consequences Gauthier witnessed daily. This dissonance could suggest that during his years in Israel, Gauthier was much more driven by a messianic-eschatological consciousness than by a real political-historical connection with his surroundings.

Even at a time when the Catholic Church targeted atheism as one of its biggest concerns—as formulated in the conciliar declaration *Gaudium et Spes* 19, “Thus

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁸ Baumel, *A Blue and White Shadow*, 30–33; Uzi Benziman and Atallah Masour, *Subtenants* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1992) 103–14 (Hebrew).

atheism must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age⁵⁹—Gauthier did not hesitate to voice his admiration for the kibbutz in his remarks at the Council. For example, in a lecture from 28 September 1965, Gauthier warned of the dangers of a crusade against Marxism and atheism, arguing that although many kibbutzim in Israel define themselves in those terms, couples and families there live a life of faithfulness and love. From them we learn, he added, that the spirit of fraternity and solidarity exists also among humanist atheists.⁶⁰ “In the kibbutzim,” he wrote to the Council fathers, “there is no exploitation of man by man, but a certain wisdom, a more human way of life.”⁶¹ Moreover, Gauthier identified in this new Jewish structure a fulfillment of the “Christian” values presented in the New Testament and put into practice by the early Christian communities in first-century Judea:

[In the kibbutzim] the Jews had abolished the system of wages, applying more generally the ways of the monks in their monasteries, and understanding the value of work just like the first community of Jerusalem: they share their goods and their work. “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. . . . It was distributed to anyone who had need.” (Acts 4:32–35 NIV).⁶²

It is clear that his experiences working and living in the kibbutzim led Gauthier to the conclusion that Christians should learn from these Jews how to fulfill the Christian beatitudes regarding social issues.⁶³ His aspiration was for Catholic priests to learn from this new Jewish way of life, and for them to use it as inspiration for a new apostolate oriented toward the vast majority of modern-day society, which, being largely secular, would no longer accept clericalism and paternalism.⁶⁴ He thought that this experience could provide tools for worker-priests serving in working-class neighborhoods such as the Paris suburbs.⁶⁵

Hence, he made an agreement with Kibbutz Ginossar, on the northern shore of Lake Tiberias, and began bringing over groups of Christian volunteers—members of the fraternity he founded—to work in the different manufacturing and agricultural branches for a period of six months, side by side with kibbutz members “in great

⁵⁹ “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*,” Vatican, 7 December 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁶⁰ Paul Gauthier, “L’athéisme de masse” (recorded lecture presented at the Second Vatican Council, 28 September 1965; Centre for the Study of the Second Vatican Council, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, https://theo.kuleuven.be/en/research/centres/centr_vatii/centr_vatii-arch#46).

⁶¹ Gauthier, *Les pauvres*, 41.

⁶² Gauthier, *Les mains*, 39.

⁶³ Gauthier, “*Consolez mon peuple*,” 120.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 81.

friendship,”⁶⁶ while studying Hebrew in the kibbutz *ulpan* (the Israeli system for adult Hebrew learning). The success of this partnership eventually went so far as to reach the ears of Pope John XXIII, who in 1960 delivered a special greeting to the kibbutz for their hospitality toward the many Christian pilgrims who had sojourned there, as reported in the Israeli press:

Pope John XXIII delivered a personal greeting to Kibbutz Ginossar today through a special emissary, the priest Pierre [*sic*] Gauthier of Nazareth. In it, the Pope wished to thank the administration of the kibbutz for the wonderful hospitality they had extended to a group of pilgrims from a special Christian fraternity whose members advocate fulfilling the ideals of Christianity through manual labor. Dozens of pilgrims belonging to this fraternity have recently been hosted in Ginossar. These pilgrims continue to be in close contact with Kibbutz Ginossar.⁶⁷

Staying in kibbutzim also allowed Gauthier to connect with another central aspect of the Israeli experience. While Nazareth allowed him to feel close to Jesus, the kibbutzim offered him the connection with biblical nature and landscapes. The kibbutzim he visited in the Jezreel Valley, on the shores of Lake Tiberias, and in the Negev desert provided Gauthier with living proof that “the Holy Land is not a relic. It is a reality.”⁶⁸ And it was a reality that reverberated with biblical references, not only in his own mind, but also for his fellow Jewish workers. This is reflected, among other places, in a paragraph from his journal in which Gauthier narrates his day working as a shepherd in Kibbutz Mishmar HaNegev:

In the afternoon, at three o’clock, I get to lead the sheep to the desert with Moumousse [the person in charge of the flock, a former teacher from France]. In a thick cloud of dust raised by the one thousand and two hundred legs, we head away from the kibbutz. The sheep glean seeds or bits of straw along the way. After an hour or two of walking, we stop and Moumousse tells me about the topography and the archaeology of this land formerly walked by Abraham and Jacob. He takes from his bag a Hebrew Bible from which he comments on the passages referring to this area and to the flock.⁶⁹

Of course, the flock and the shepherd are central motifs in the Christian tradition, a fact that charges Gauthier’s experience with unambiguous messianic overtones:

I quote to him the passages from the Gospel about the Good Shepherd, the sheep without a shepherd. . . . He knows these texts but interprets them in a naturalistic sense. We share a piece of bread. A sheep called Kouki approaches familiarly to partake of our snack.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Gauthier, *Les pauvres*, 98.

⁶⁷ “ברכה אישית מהאפיפיור נמסרה לקיבוץ גינוסר” [A Personal Greeting from the Pope Delivered to Kibbutz Ginossar], *Davar*, 29 June 1960, Historical Jewish Press, www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/Print.Article.aspx?mode=image&href=DAV%2F1960%2F06%2F29&id=Ar00421.

⁶⁸ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 145.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

Just as the shepherd helps the lost sheep to rejoin its flock, reflects Gauthier, we too need to be prepared to receive the lost flock of Israel with love when it finally finds its way home.⁷¹ This reflection hints at hidden vestiges of the traditional Christian aspiration of converting the Jews, which Gauthier probably could not help harboring, despite feeling so comfortable among them, or perhaps because of it.⁷²

In the kibbutzim, Gauthier was exposed to a new approach to reading the Bible, different to the one his religious background had taught him. Gauthier noticed that the kibbutzniks, like most modern Jews, read the Bible as a historical book and “in a naturalistic sense.” And indeed, the Bible played a central role in the Zionist ethos. It was, for the founding fathers of the Zionist movement, not only an instrument for galvanizing the internal unity of the Jewish people and motivating them to engage with Zionism, but also a weapon in the struggle for the land itself.⁷³ The historical dimension of the Bible, emphasized in modern Israel, is what gave the Jewish people, in their own eyes, the right to the land, and the justification for the Jewish return to it.

■ Gordon and the Redeeming Nature of Work

It is not by chance that the principles we presented here—the centrality of manual work and an unmediated connection with the soil and the biblical landscapes—were the two elements that nurtured Gauthier’s religious experience in the years he spent in Israel. These were also the pillars on which rested the Jewish nationalist ethos of the Tnu‘at Ha‘avoda (the Labor Movement), a general name for the Zionist workers’ movements and parties (mainly the Socialist parties) that played a central role in the building of the State of Israel.⁷⁴ These pillars were best formulated and developed by the Zionist philosopher and pioneer Aaron David Gordon, “the theoretician” of organic Jewish nationalism.⁷⁵

Aaron David Gordon (Podolia, today in Ukraine, 1856–Degania, today in Israel, 1922) grew up in a traditional Jewish family but was attracted to secular studies and Zionist ideas. In 1904, at the age of forty-eight, he immigrated to Israel and—as a worker, a philosopher, and a writer—became a symbolic figure of the Jewish settlement at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Gordon called for the sanctification of labor through the renewal of manual Jewish labor, not only as part of the Zionist nationalist project but, most importantly, as an individual means of redemption.⁷⁶ For Gordon, physical agricultural labor was

⁷¹ Ibid., 84.

⁷² As opposed to his highly favorable opinion of the kibbutzniks, Gauthier had very low esteem for the Jewish citizens of Tel Aviv, which he called a “bastion of capitalism” and “pathetic in Christian eyes,” explicitly opposing any intention of evangelizing them (ibid., 79–80).

⁷³ Zeev Sternhell, *Nation Building or Social Reform? Nationalism and Socialism in the Israeli Labor Movement* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1995) 74 (Hebrew).

⁷⁴ Gideon Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1995), eBook, ch. 5.

⁷⁵ Sternhell, *Nation Building*, 26–27.

⁷⁶ Aaron David Gordon, “ההלום ופתרונו” [The Dream and Its Solution], in *Gordon Writings* (ed.

a means to achieve humanity's desired return to nature, and the thing that would enable the individual and the nation to reconnect with their most profound source of life.⁷⁷ He succeeded in finding in physical work the romanticism that so many young men and women who had left their lives in the diaspora in Europe to build a new world in the Land of Israel, only to be disheartened by the extremely harsh conditions prevailing in the land at the turn of the century, could not. In the face of despair, Gordon found a source of hope in manual labor as a way for Jewish people to connect with the land of their supposed ancestors. At the same time, he emphatically negated the diaspora, which, according to him, was responsible for the state of atrophy in which Jewish existence found itself in his day. In a letter from 1909, published in a compilation named *Letters of a Worker from Palestine*—that Gauthier mentions in his *Journal de Nazareth*⁷⁸—Gordon writes:

Listen, my brothers and sisters, to my dream, and remember that you too have dreamed like me. In my dream—I come to the land. . . . Remember, though, that beneath the ruins [of diaspora existence] there is a hot whispering coal, hidden from the ravages of that life, and the spirit of the land blows to revive it. . . . And I shake it off strongly, with all my might, I shake that life off myself. And I start everything from the beginning, everything from the beginning. From the A,B,C my life begins again; I do not change, I do not mend, I start everything anew. And the first thing that opens my heart to life, the likes of which I have yet to know, is work. Not work to make a living, or work as a mitzvah. But one's life work, work from which shines forth a new light, a light which I have seen, a light which is one of the deepest roots of life. And I work. . . . Hence, whenever I continue to work, to toil, to suffer—no drop of blood, no effort of my strength or of my mind is lost, because every drop of blood is a flicker of fire, and every effort of strength and mind—a spark of resurrection for my soul.⁷⁹

As seen previously with Gauthier, we have here a description of manual work as a religious experience, capable of providing redemption to the land, the people, and the individual. However, contrary to the Christian's view, for Gordon, this work has a prominent nationalistic element. Work leads to redemption only when it is performed by the Jewish people on the land to which their soul is inextricably linked. Thus, it is not only toil but also, and perhaps primarily, the ancient history of

Shmuel Hugo Bergman and Eliezer Shohat; 3 vols.; Hahistadrut Hatzionit: Tel Aviv, 1951–1954) 2:82.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 86. For an analysis of Gordon's approach to nature, and its connection to the national renaissance, see Eilon Shamir, *For the Sake of Life: The Art of Living according to Aharon David Gordon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2018) (Hebrew); Einat Ramon, *A New Life: Religion, Motherhood and Supreme Love in the Works of Aharon David Gordon* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2007) (Hebrew).

⁷⁸ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 87.

⁷⁹ Gordon, "The Dream and Its Solution," 87.

the Jewish people that links them to the land and gives them rights to it.⁸⁰ Gordon's thought had clear political content that was either missed or dismissed by Gauthier.

Another element that attracted Gauthier to Gordon is the religious, mystic tone he utilized in his writings, which in Gauthier's eyes contrasted with the secular-Marxist atmosphere he found in most of the kibbutzim he visited. Nevertheless, Gauthier was also aware of the existence of religious kibbutzim and spent in Kibbutz Yavne a Shabbat that left on him a deep impression, as reflected in his diary.⁸¹

It is not surprising then, that Paul Gauthier was deeply moved by the ideas of this Jewish thinker, of whom he had become aware when, during a visit to Kibbutz Degania—the first kibbutz in Israel, established in 1909 on the southern shore of Lake Tiberias, a region which, in Gauthier's words, “was nothing but swamps and malaria, and yet forty years later is an earthly paradise”⁸²—he had been taken to the Gordon Museum.

Like Gordon, Paul Gauthier had also moved to Israel at a relatively advanced age to experience physical toil among poor laborers. As mentioned previously, he also describes the physical effort of work as a source of religious joy and personal redemption:

Today, the work has been particularly hard. It was necessary to carry stones, to handle the shovel and the pick, to serve the concrete. The heat was overwhelming. I find myself, tonight, broken, all the painful muscles. . . . And yet a great joy has sustained me all day.⁸³

Gauthier found in Gordon's philosophy a suitable articulation of his own romantic ideas about labor. However, there is a significant difference between the two, a difference that perhaps speaks more broadly of the divergent ways in which Judaism and Christianity view the essence of religious duty. For Gordon, it is labor itself that provides human beings with the opportunity to live a life in the image of God, in the sense of “being partners with God in Creation.”⁸⁴ Gauthier agrees with Gordon that work means a partnership with God in creation, as well as redemption for humans and for the land.⁸⁵ However, Gauthier felt that, while containing some of the truth, Gordon's words “are inexact from a theological point of view.”⁸⁶ This is because, while Gordon emphatically insisted on the material and spiritual dimensions of work as being one and inseparable,⁸⁷ Gauthier insisted in presenting

⁸⁰ Gordon, “עבודתנו מעתה” [Our Work from Now On], in *Gordon Writings* (ed. Bergman and Shohat), 2:244.

⁸¹ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 134–37.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁴ Aaron David Gordon, “ערעורים והגינות” [Ruminations and Reasonings], in *The Writings of Aaron David Gordon* (ed. Joseph Aaronovitz; 5 vols. Tel Aviv: Hapoel Hatzair, 1925–1929) 5:187.

⁸⁵ Gauthier, *Les pauvres*, 34–36.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

⁸⁷ Gordon, “העבודה” [The Work], in *Gordon Writings* (Bergman and Shohat) 2:94–95. On the resemblance between Gordon's idea of work and the Hassidic concept of *Avoda BeGashmiyut*

them as two different spheres of redemption: temporal and eternal, earthly and divine:

These two orders are different and there is an atheist Marxist interpretation of work that is no more than a caricature of true redemption. However, there is also a Christian sense of work, which through Christ becomes redemptive. If the two orders are different, they are not separated. In the earthly, temporal, and material sphere, through work the human being can emerge out of misery. There is in work an accomplishment of humankind. Work allows human beings not only to provide for their daily bread, but to become more human and to participate in human solidarity by helping build the earthly city. For the Jews, this point of view is powerful and clear.

In the spiritual, eternal, celestial sphere, work allows the human being to collaborate with the Creator, who had commanded “conquer and possess the earth,” to complete creation. Work permits human beings to redeem their pain through the offer of fatigue and sorrow that comes with toil. Work permits human beings to communicate with the Carpenter of Nazareth and through him with all his brothers and the Father who “works endlessly,” as well as with the Creative Spirit. That is wonderful.⁸⁸

In the earthly sphere, the accelerated development of the State of Israel is a vivid example of the power of work to “help build the earthly city,” which can bring temporal and material redemption to those who, like the Jewish pioneers, are fully invested in it. However, there is, for Gauthier, a second, Christian dimension of work, which makes work redemptive due to its connection to the figure of Jesus and the sacrifice Jesus made for humanity. Since Zionism—and Gordon’s philosophy within it—refused to go beyond the first dimension of redemption and “communicate with the Carpenter of Nazareth,” the Zionist process of redemption cannot be complete.

Indeed, Gauthier’s reference to work as an “offer of fatigue and sorrow,” brings us back to the concept of sacrifice, which Gauthier, following the Christian tradition, placed at the center of his theology of work. It is worthwhile mentioning that Gordon, on the other hand, was entirely against the idea of sacrifice, as can be gleaned in particular from his personal letters.⁸⁹

■ The Six-Day War and Gauthier’s Radical Turn

Paul Gauthier’s religious experience in Israel lasted eleven years. During this period, although he was in daily contact with the Israeli authorities, fostering his workers’ cooperative in Nazareth, he avoided making critical statements pertaining to the national and international spheres of Israeli politics. A similar religious, apolitical

(Worldly Toil), see Abraham Shapira, *The Light of Life in “Yom Katanot”* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996) 240–46 (Hebrew).

⁸⁸ Gauthier, *Les pauvres*, 35–36.

⁸⁹ *You Are Not Alone Up There: Letters to and from A. D. Gordon* (ed. Muki Tzur; Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1998) 11 (Hebrew).

attitude motivated Gauthier, four years earlier, to send a letter to Pope Paul VI inviting him to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land (though he later found out that the pope had already secretly decided to make the pilgrimage as early as July of that year).⁹⁰ The short visit took place in January 1964, and although the Vatican took extreme care that the pope not make the slightest reference to the local and political situation, the impression on Vatican observers was that that pilgrimage marked the beginning of a thaw in the Church's rejection of Zionism.⁹¹ Gauthier's statement should be seen in light of this precedent and the atmosphere created by the debates on the *Nostra Aetate* conciliar resolution regarding the Church's stances toward Judaism and the Jewish people.

However, in June 1967, Gauthier would suddenly be confronted with a new political situation that would undermine his messianic, apolitical state of mind regarding the State of Israel. Paul Gauthier and an associate, Sister Marie-Thérèse Lazcare, spent the war mostly on the Jordanian side of Jerusalem, trying to assist the civilian population affected by the events. The French Catholic journal *Cahier du témoignage chrétien* dedicated the volume of July 1967 to the diary of Sister Marie-Thérèse, in which she recounts her experience of the war. References to the bullying and cruelty of the Israeli soldiers toward the civilian Arab population, including forced expulsions, looting, and razing houses, can be found throughout the diary, although not without emphasizing that there were humane attitudes to be found among the Israeli forces as well.⁹² In that short volume there is also an article by Paul Gauthier about the war. This paragraph reflects the spirit of the article:

When the first Israeli troops entered Jerusalem, it seemed that everything was possible, everything, that is to say, peace. These troops were as dignified, simple, and human as soldiers in an army can be. Some of the Jewish and Arab soldiers could be seen fraternizing. But two days later, everything changed: plunder and brutality were not even the worst of it, since those are part and parcel of any war. The worst was the expulsions and the destruction that left so many refugees in its wake. We lost the chance for peace. It was a huge and bitter disappointment for those who, refusing to take the side of the Jews, love the one and the other as brothers.⁹³

⁹⁰ Gauthier, "*Consolez mon peuple*," 257–58. Nevertheless, the Israeli press reported that the pope's pilgrimage, the first taken by a pope in the history of the Church, would take place, thanks to Gauthier's initiative. Adda Luzzani, "האפיפיור ילון לילה אחד בעיר העתיקה, הקרדנלים באה ושטפה יליון," [The Pope Will Spend One Night in the Old City, Cardinals Bea and Testa Will Join Him on His Journey], *Maariv*, 6 December 1963, Historical Jewish Press, www.jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/Print.Article.aspx?mode=image&href=MAR%2F1963%2F12%2F06&id=Ar00100.

⁹¹ Claude Soetens, "The Ecumenical Commitment of the Catholic Church," in *History of Vatican II* (ed. Alberigo), 3:339–44; Livia Rokach, *The Catholic Church and the Question of Palestine* (London: Saqi Books, 1987) 68–69.

⁹² Marie-Thérèse Lazcare, "Le journal de Sœur Marie-Thérèse," in *Jérusalem et le sang des pauvres, 5–8 juin 1967* (Cahier du Témoignage chrétien 47; Paris: Témoignage Chrétien, 1967) 7–29, at 15.

⁹³ Paul Gauthier, "Jérusalem, capital de l'Humanité," in *Jérusalem et le sang des pauvres*, 53–68, at 57.

From this paragraph we learn that Gauthier's position regarding the war was not unequivocally negative, and that he did not automatically support the Catholic world's hostile reaction, including Pope Paul VI's condemnation of the Israelis' use of force and the demand for an immediate solution for the Arab refugees and for the creation of an international regime to take control of Jerusalem.⁹⁴ Even after the beginning of the war, and faced with the sight of Israeli soldiers entering Jerusalem, Gauthier still believed in the Israeli pioneer spirit he so admired.

Far from denying the rights of the Jews to have a state in the land of Israel, and while acknowledging that the Jewish state emerged as a response to a monstrous injustice—the ravages of the Holocaust and World War II—Gauthier's claim was simply that “war is useless if it does not lead to a more just state of things than the one against which the parties are struggling.”⁹⁵

The way the close relationship between Gauthier and Kibbutz Ginosar came to an end sheds light on Gauthier's change of heart regarding the State of Israel. In an interview I conducted with Atallah Mansour, a Christian Arab journalist and writer who was close to Gauthier in his years in Nazareth, he told me the story of Gauthier's departure from Israel, a story not related in any of Gauthier's writings. According to this testimony, a few days after the end of the Six-Day War, Gauthier published an article in the North American press (since the article was rejected by the Israeli censorship) denouncing the abuses he had witnessed perpetrated by the victorious Israeli soldiers upon the civilian Arab population of several villages. The members of Kibbutz Ginosar felt deeply betrayed. They posted the article on the kibbutz billboard, marked with a big sign reading “our friend.” Gauthier no longer felt welcome there. A few days later he would leave the country with no personal belongings, never to return.⁹⁶ Gauthier crossed over to Jordan and spent the next few years working among the poor population and the refugees there. From the Jordanian side of the border he began to see Israel in a completely different light.

The most telling example of what I see as a radical religious as well as political transformation is a lecture he gave at the First World Conference of Christians for Palestine, in Beirut in May 1970, and which he likely reproduced in Europe later.⁹⁷ Far from the feelings of friendship and admiration Gauthier expressed in the books he published before 1967—some of which have been cited in this article—this lecture shows a completely hostile approach to the State of Israel, its authorities, and even the kibbutzim. One intimation of this change of heart can be seen in the way he retold the story of the aforementioned visit of the Israeli authorities, who had come to Gauthier seeking advice on the humanitarian situation of the Israeli Arab population. As previously stated, this encounter was described in Gauthier's

⁹⁴ Rokach, *The Catholic Church*, 71–83.

⁹⁵ Gauthier, “Jérusalem,” 57.

⁹⁶ Atallah Mansour in discussion with the author, May 2019.

⁹⁷ I found in Kibbutz Ginosar's archive a copy of this lecture sent from Belgium by a member of the Histadrut in October 1970.

diary as extremely friendly, despite Gauthier's gently questioning the priorities of the State of Israel when it came to protecting Jews above anyone else.⁹⁸ Yet, in his lecture given thirteen years after the event, Gauthier would provide his audience with a very different version of the answer he had given in that meeting to the Israeli authorities:

You act exactly like Hitler, you apply the same methods, except that you have changed the algebraic sign. Where Hitler put the minus sign, an imperative to destroy all Jews, you in turn put the plus sign, an imperative to save all Jews. But it is the product of the same basic racism: whether it's all Jews or no one but the Jews.⁹⁹

Later in the lecture, Gauthier would even allude to a resemblance between the Israeli troops and the Nazi soldiers.¹⁰⁰

The Histadrut was treated in much the same way. In 1966, only a year before the war, in his attempts to enlighten the Catholic world about the State of Israel in the entry for the French Catholic encyclopedia, he writes: "The government and the workers' union (*Histadrut*) make great efforts to build friendships with all people, especially with young nations, and willingly and generously lend them technical and social assistance."¹⁰¹ Four years later, however, in front of an anti-Israeli audience, the Histadrut would be presented as an imperialistic entity, "which became a Zionist instrument of the Jewish workers to conquer the labor market and eliminate the Arab workforce"¹⁰² and which used its relations with the new Arab neighbors only as propaganda to appease international public opinion.¹⁰³

Finally, even the kibbutzim, which, as we have seen, had elicited so much admiration from Gauthier in the past, were not spared from his contempt. This is how Gauthier recalls the invitation that Kibbutz Ginosar extended to him and his companions to come and spend a period of time in the kibbutz:

We were happy to live in a kibbutz. This communitarian way of life appeared to us like the manifest ideal both of the Gospel and of Socialism: everyone working according to their possibilities and receiving according to their necessities. There are no poor since everything is common property. *It took us time to discover that the realization of this ideal relies on injustice and is linked to capitalism.*¹⁰⁴

Gauthier continues, explaining that, when wealthy Jews purchased the land upon which the kibbutz was established from Arab landowners hailing from Egypt and

⁹⁸ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 129.

⁹⁹ Paul Gauthier, *Les exigences de la foi chrétienne devant le problème palestinien. Intervention à la première conférence mondiale des chrétiens pour la Palestine du Père Paul Gauthier à Beyrouth, le 9 mai 1970* (Geneva: Groupe d'Étude sur le Moyen-Orient, 1970) 3–18, at 5.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰¹ Gauthier, "L'État d'Israël," 208–9.

¹⁰² Gauthier, *Les exigences de la foi chrétienne*, 4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 (emphasis added).

Lebanon, there had been Palestinian peasants cultivating it who were then left without the means to make a living. This situation provoked a rivalry between the Jewish settlers and the villagers, until one night the members of the kibbutz decided to attack and destroy the Arab village, expelling the inhabitants and bombing their houses. “That is why,” he says, “while working in the kibbutz fields, we came upon the ruins of a village. The establishment of the kibbutz came at the expense of a ruined Palestinian village, first dispossessed from its lands by Zionist money, and then razed to the ground by Israeli force.”¹⁰⁵ This was the fate, Gauthier continues, of over a million Palestinians terrorized by Israeli forces and made to flee their homes to become refugees.¹⁰⁶

The identification of Zionism with capitalism and imperialism, absent from Gauthier’s writings prior to 1967 (except for a brief mention of Jewish lifestyle in the city of Tel Aviv),¹⁰⁷ converted for him the whole geopolitical conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East into a class war: the poor and oppressed against the imperialist rich. This is what, according to him, happened in the Six-Day War: “In this context, the Six-Day War of 1967 appeared to us as one battle in a global world of the exploited peoples against the rich nations, in this case, of the Arab people against Israel and the USA.”¹⁰⁸

While Gauthier’s writings contain no explicit explanation of his political shift, I wish to suggest two possible directions. The first is a religious disappointment with himself and with the Jewish people for having failed to fulfill the messianic roles he had assigned both to himself, as a bridge of peace between conflicting peoples, and to the new Israeli state, as a model of a just society that would serve as an example to the Christian world. After witnessing the postwar events, including the driving of thousands of Palestinians into exile and the demolition of their houses—actions that were later documented by prominent historians, such as Benny Morris¹⁰⁹ and Tom Segev,¹¹⁰ to name a couple—Gauthier felt he could no longer serve as a “neutral” mediator willing to spread the social message of the “model society”—a society that in his eyes no longer fit that description.

The second is the political choice of positioning himself on the left side of the political map. In doing so, he would align himself with many Catholic intellectuals who, following the Six-Day War, began to identify Israel as an outpost of capitalist imperialism.¹¹¹ In this revolutionary zeitgeist of the end of the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰⁷ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Gauthier, *Les exigences de la foi chrétienne*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001* (New York: Vintage, 2001) 327–28.

¹¹⁰ Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year That Transformed the Middle East* (trans. Jessica Cohen; New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007) 400–402.

¹¹¹ Paul Charles Merkley, *Christian Attitudes towards the State of Israel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001) 196.

1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, being anti-Israeli became part of the anti-establishment agenda of those who stand with the masses and the oppressed third world. Consequently, a wave of pro-Palestinian literature appeared in the French Christian intellectual landscape. This was the case with the widely circulated French weekly *Témoignage chrétien*, together with the monthly *Lettre* and the Protestant *Christianisme social*, which declared their support for the anti-Zionist struggle and solidarity with the Palestinians from 1968 onward.¹¹² This was likewise the political stance adopted by Latin American theologians from the 1970s and until recent years.¹¹³

■ Conclusion

Inspired by Charles de Foucauld, Gauthier had arrived in Nazareth driven by the religious fervor of *Imitatio Christi*. “In Nazareth,” Gauthier wrote, “Jesus wanted to live and suffer with the little people, to work . . . [i]n order to save humanity from its sins and give it hope.”¹¹⁴ Gauthier found those “little people” in the local Arab population. At the same time, he found himself religiously inspired by the new Jewish society. His Christian fervor, together with the personal relations he had established with contemporary Jews, the kibbutzim, and the philosophy of Aaron David Gordon on the redeeming aspect of manual labor—all these ended up furnishing Gauthier with the means to articulate the theology of work and social justice he would spread at the Second Vatican Council through his writings and his work with the “Church of the Poor.” That theology, together with Gauthier’s personal charisma, would become a source of inspiration for Latin American theologians in the creation of liberation theology by the end of the 1960s.

However, these Latin American theologians did not adopt Gauthier’s theology wholesale. As demonstrated in this article, the Zionist context that nurtured Gauthier’s theology was notably present in his writings and interventions at the Council. This aspect was completely forgotten both by scholars of Vatican II and by liberation theologians. Even Enrique Dussel—a figure who, before becoming one of the key figures in the Latin American movement, spent two years as part of Gauthier’s fraternity in Nazareth and was one of the Christian volunteers at Gauthier’s initiative of a working apostolate training in Kibbutz Ginosar—must have either missed or dismissed this dimension, as we learn from his description of those years:

The two years of my Israeli experience, as a construction carpenter in Nazareth, a fisherman on Lake Tiberias in Kibbutz Ginosar, a pilgrim to all of Palestine (from Mount Hebron in the north [*sic*] to kibbutz Ein-Gedi in the

¹¹² Martine Severgrade, *Israël vu par les catholiques français (1945–1994)* (Paris: Karthala, 2014) 143–44.

¹¹³ Paul Gallagher, “Salvation from the Jews? Israel in Latin American Liberation Theology,” *AsJT* 23 (2009) 281–96, at 289, 291.

¹¹⁴ Gauthier, *Les mains*, 36.

south), a student of Hebrew at the *ulpan* . . . for new immigrants . . . the communal life among Arab companions with priest Paul Gauthier, opened my mind, my spirit, and my flesh to projects then yet unsuspected. There was no longer just Latin America; now there were the “poor” (an obsession of Paul Gauthier’s), the oppressed, the miserable masses of my distant continent.¹¹⁵

Despite his contacts with Jewish society, Dussel lived his years in Israel as an exclusively Christian experience. No mention is made by him or other writers of the fact that, when speaking to the Catholic world, Gauthier would repeatedly put forward the Zionist state and society as an admirable social model. They do not speak of the fact that the “Gordonian” spirit that Gauthier had imbibed in the kibbutzim and in the young state led him to affirm, only 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.’”¹¹⁶

The Jewish-Zionist element in Gauthier’s theology was deliberately set aside by Catholic theologians, for political reasons, among others. Like Gauthier himself, who after June 1967 experienced an abrupt and radical religious and political transformation, the Catholic world in general, and liberation theologians in particular, would choose to forget that part of Gauthier’s experience in Israel. Similarly, despite the great interest and sympathy the Hebrew press showed toward Gauthier during his years in Israel, after the war he and his cooperative were forgotten by the Israelis—except by the elder members of Kibbutz Ginosar who knew Gauthier personally, and who, more than fifty years later, still refuse to talk about him.

While the burying of the Zionist connection to liberation theology was certainly convenient for both sides, this article is an attempt to rescue this chapter in the history of modern Jewish and Christian social theology from oblivion.

¹¹⁵ Dussel, “En búsqueda de sentido,” 17.

¹¹⁶ Gauthier, “L’État d’Israël,” 213.