

Jesus in Arabic poetry

At the death of Mahmud Darwish (1941-2008)

By Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

One of the Arab world's most beloved poets, Mahmûd Darwîsh, passed away on 9 August 2008. Darwîsh was born in a Palestinian village east of Acre into a landowning Muslim family in 1942. He



fled with his family to Lebanon during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. By the time the Darwîshes stole back into the country a year later, their village had been razed. 'We were defined, and rejected, as refugees', Darwîsh said. 'This gave me a very strong bitterness'

As a young man, Darwîsh moved to Haifa where he joined Rakah, the Israeli communist party. He was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned for leaving Haifa without a permit. He went for studies to Moscow in 1970. Three years later he became an active member the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Beirut. Israel then stripped him of his citizenship and did not allow him to enter into the land.

Darwîsh was elected to the PLO Executive Committee in 1987. In 1988, he wrote PLO's manifesto intended as the Palestinian people's *Declaration of Independence*. In 1993, after the Oslo accords, Darwîsh resigned from the PLO Executive Committee. He has consistently demanded a 'tough and fair' stand in negotiations with Israel. In 1996, he was allowed to return to the Westbank where he lived in the city of Ramallah.

Despite his criticism of both Israel and the Palestinian leadership, Darwîsh believed that peace was attainable. 'I do not despair. I am patient and am waiting for a profound revolution in the consciousness of the Israelis. The Arabs are ready to accept a strong Israel with nuclear arms - all it has to do is open the gates of its fortress and make peace.'

Darwish published more than thirty volumes of poetry and eight books of prose; he was also the editor of some literary and political magazines. He was internationally recognized for his literary accomplishments. His poems and books have been translated in more than 20 languages.

Darwish was probably the most important intellectual voice for Palestine in the past decades. As a secularist from a Muslim background, he regularly used religious imagery in his works, and some of his poems in which he used the imagery of the death and resurrection of Jesus are very moving.

A Voice from the Olive Grove

From the grove of olive trees
Came the echo –
While I on fire was crucified.

Tear me not to pieces, I say to the crows,
For maybe I shall return home
And maybe the sky will rain,
Maybe
It will put out this rapacious wood.

I shall come down one day from my cross
Who knows...
How shall I return: barefoot and naked?¹

Without any religious intention, the imagery of the crucifixion and agony of Jesus is used by Darwish to convey a sense of his own suffering and that of his Palestinian people. It is no wonder that Darwish and other Palestinian poets have used the suffering and resurrection of Jesus as a symbol for their struggle, as they felt crucified in their own land by the Jews, and as they wanted to return to their land.

¹ Mahmoud Darwish, *The Music of Human Flesh; Poems of the Palestinian Struggle* (London, 1980), p. 16. This book is a translation by Denys Johnson-Davies.

During the 20th century, Arab poets have used the figure of Jesus Christ regularly as a symbol. The Lebanese poet Khalil Jubrân (1883-1931) made Christ into an example of the ordinary man of ordinary birth who has been able through spiritual sublimation to elevate himself from the human to the divine. Jubrân, himself from Christian background, deliberately intended to ‘secularize’ Christ, to make him a symbol of inter-religious significance. This was a first step to making Jesus accessible as a poetic figure to both Christian and Muslim poets.²

Another influence on many Arab poets has been the anthropological theories of James Frazer. In *The Golden Bough* (1919-1922), Frazer described Jesus as one in a series of vegetation gods such as Tammuz and Adonis. T.S. Eliot used Frazer’s concepts and applied the motifs of fertility, sacrifice and resurrection of vegetation gods in his very influential poem *The Waste Land*, and popularized Frazer’s ideas among Arab intellectuals.³

David Pinault describes these two trends, and concludes that:

Thus, with Jubrân setting the example, and via the anthropological work of Frazer and the poetic work of Eliot, the Christ-image of sacrificial death and resurrection was made to transcend the boundaries of religious sectarianism, so to speak, and enter the world of myth. In this way – and this seems to have been particularly exciting to Arab poets from the 1950’s on – Jesus could be claimed by all men as their own, as the symbol of a spiritual process underpinning all religions and all mythologies.⁴

A third trend that influenced the usage of Jesus as a symbol, was the popularity of political engagement (*iltizâm*). *Iltizâm* was the term used for translating Jean Paul Sartre’s concept of *engagement*. This concept quickly made the romantic individualism of the *interbellum* lose its attraction. Poetry was valued mostly for its measure of engagement. The concept was embraced by

² David Pinault, ‘Images of Christ in Arabic Literature’, in *Die Welt des Islams* (Leiden, 1987), p. 114.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

various Arabic literary circles who considered themselves partisans of Marxism or Socialism.⁵

Darwîsh was one of many Palestinian poets using the image of Jesus for their message of suffering, hope, and political engagement. Since 1948, Christ often appears in Palestinian literature. Mişbâh al-‘Âbûdî was probably the first Palestinian poet to compare Jesus with a Palestinian refugee, in a *qasîdah* written in 1952:

As sure as I live, you are the new Messiah who must die,
so that he can be revived from suffering into new life.⁶

Many Arab poems that use the imagery of Jesus do follow this example: Jesus is seen as a suffering victim of Jewish violence. The Iraqi poet ‘Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayyâtî in his poem *A Song to My People* offers a fine example:

I am here, alone, upon the cross.
They devour my flesh, the men of violence of the
highways, and the monsters, and the hyenas
O maker of the flame
My beloved people
I am here, alone, upon the cross
The young assail my garden
and the elders revile
my shadow, which spreads its palms out to the stars
That it might wipe away the sorrows
from your saddened countenance
O my imprisoned people
you who lift up your brow
to the sun while it raps upon the gates
with dyed garment,
I am here, alone, driving drowsiness
from your exhausted eye
O maker of flame
My beloved people.⁷

⁵ Ibid., p. 116.

⁶ Stefan Wild, ‘Judentum, Christentum und Islam in der Palästinensischen Poesie’, in *Die Welt des Islams* XXIII-XXIV (Leiden, 1984), p. 289.

While living in Cairo in 1968, al-Bayyâtî published the following poem in his collection *Poems in Exile*. In this, he went a step further, and not only used Jesus as a powerless victim, but also as the model of the suffering political revolutionary, an illustration of the concept of *iltizâm*.

And his eyes filled with tears
and he said to me
Jesus
passed by here yesterday, Jesus
His cross: two three-limbs, green,
blossoming.
His eyes: two stars
His appearance: that of a dove.
His bearing: that of songs.
Yesterday he passed by here
and the garden flowered
and the children awoke, abounding in grace
and in the heavens
the stars of night were like bells
like crosses
drowned in my tears – the sorrows were
our way to love and oblivion;
And our green earth in her birth-pains
weakened by wounds
was dreaming of lilies and the morning
dreaming of a thousand Jesuses who will bear
their cross in the darkness of prisons
and who will be numerous
and who will give birth
to progeny who will sow God's earth with jamine
and make heroes and saints
and make revolutionaries.

⁷ ‘Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayyâtî, *Al-Majd lil-Atfâl wa al-Zaytûn* (Beirut, Dar al-‘Awdah, n.d.), pp. 27-28, as translated in Pinault, ‘Images of Christ in Arabic Literature’, p. 120.

And his eyes smiled like the morning
and the children awoke, abounding in grace.
And in the sky
there was an angel, with wings the color of green
opening in a lamp the door of night.⁸

In this poem, al-Bayyâtî uses Jesus as a *mask*, through which the poet speaks, to divest the poem of his own subjectivity. He has chosen Jesus because he serves as a symbol, as the stuff of myth, accessible to, and presumably, universally recognizable to all his readers. In *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (1975), M.M. Badawi commented on al-Bayyâtî's poetic usage of Jesus:

[He] searched for suitable artistic masks in the worlds of history, symbols and myth, through which crisis could be expressed on social as well as cosmic levels.⁹

Interesting is that the traditional Islamic apologists have attacked the Christian image of Jesus because of his suffering and humiliation – seen as an impossibility for a prophet of his stature. Modern poets such as Darwîsh identified with the secularized Jesus precisely *because* of his passion and suffering, a suffering that the poet takes on himself and accepts on behalf of his people.

The Palestinian poetess Fadwá Tûqân wrote *To the Lord Jesus at his Feast*, a poem that indicates that Jesus is seen as being able to empathize with those who are being badly treated in Jerusalem:

O Lord, Crown of Creation,
At your feast this year
the peace of Jerusalem will be crucified.
All bells keep silent, o Lord at your feast.
For 2000 years they did not keep silent – just this year.

⁸ ‘Abd al-Wahhâb al-Bayyâtî, *Ash‘âr fî al-manfâ* (Cairo, Dâr al-Kitâb al-‘Arabî, 1967), pp. 50-53, as translated in Pinault, ‘Images of Christ in Arabic Literature’, pp. 116-117.

⁹ M.M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 214.

The workers in the vineyard have harvested the fruit, Lord.
They robbed the vineyard.
O Lord, o Crown of Jerusalem.
From the wells of sadness, from the deep,
From the abyss of night, from the wailing hearts
The cries of Jerusalem rise up to you
Have mercy, Lord, and let this cup be taken away from the city¹⁰

Tawfiq Şâyigh borrows images from Jesus' passion – the crucifixion, burial in the sepulcher, having His limbs nailed to the cross - to illustrate scenes from his own private life, in particular, the agonies he endured in an unhappy love affair. However, most poets who use the image of Jesus do this in relationship to political engagement, and usually with a positive view of Jesus.

For other poets, Jesus could also be an emblem of the evil Western world. Kamâl Nâşir, who was a member of the Executive Committee of the PLO until 1973, writes in his *Song of Hate* that Jesus could better flee Israel if he chooses to identify with Western imperialist powers. Kamâl wrote this poem after a bomb exploded in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Christmas Eve.

Jesus, Son of Mary
I know you as peace-loving.
But please become angry and do so
in the night of Christmas!
Just have a look at the crimes of the West-
every misdeed is being done in the name
of the self-sacrificing Christ.
If you belong to them, Son of Mary,
then go back to their dwellings,
and don't be the leader among us anymore.
Love must be changed into wilder anger
so that anger makes the edge of the sword glow.
The teaching of the Fisherman has
brought us nothing but disaster among mankind.¹¹

¹⁰ Translated from German by the author; the German text is found in Wild, 'Judentum, Christentum und Islam in der Palästinensischen Poesie', pp, 281-282.

Stephen Wild speaks with regard to Kamâl of ‘a kind of poetic theological hatred’. Christianity’s call to peace and love does not help the Palestinians to regain their land, so hate is the highest command for the Arabs, Kamâl writes in his poetry. ‘When the poet is calling to hate, this is because of the people who are being tortured in this land. This land must regain its rights and then, after independence and freedom, come to peace and love’, Kamâl argued.¹²

For Kamâl, Jesus is the highest ideal of self-sacrifice (*fidâ*) while Muḥammad is the symbol for the unity of the Arabs. Both self-sacrifice and unity are needed for the Palestinians to return to their land. Kamâl died in 1973, killed by Israeli commandos.

The Palestinian poet Rita ‘Awaḍ describes the Palestinian *fedayeen* as the embodiment, as she says, ‘of Tammuz, and Christ, and Khidr, and Ḥusayn’.¹³ Thus she combines images of death and sacrifice from pagan, Muslim, and Christian religious traditions. She also combines *iltizâm* and the mythological use of Jesus as a vegetation-god. The most notable example of this combination is to be found in poems of Yûsuf al-Khâl. He is a Christian Lebanese poet who identifies with the sufferings of Christ in his poem *Al-Shâ‘ir* (The Poet):

I fasten my eyelids on the sun;
My eyes are now exhausted.
I am suspended, hung with nails;
I bleed, and the palms of my hands are upon the horizon.
For I am crucified,
but tomorrow I rise from my tomb.

Do you doubt? Look! –there am I, all of me
and here are the marks of my sufferings
and here is my blood

¹¹ Translated from German by the author; the German text is found in Wild, ‘Judentum, Christentum und Islam in der Palästinensischen Poesie’, pp, 292-293.

¹² Ibid., p. 292

¹³ Pinault, ‘Images of Christ in Arabic Literature’, p. 118.

and the whispering of my eyes upon the earth.

And when flowers break forth
and the fruit ripens,
I will be here;
Or when loveliness bathes in
the tranquility of the body
And the eyes become drunk for all eternity.

And when you ascend the mountain summits
even if but rarely,
you will see me there.
You will embrace me; your two hands will touch me;
You will become with me
He who created you.¹⁴

As in al-Bayyâtî's poetry, the poet takes upon himself the suffering of Christ, but there is a greater note of serenity, in the certainty of a resurrection to come. Al-Khâl is the most important representative of the *Tammuzi* school of poets, which is characterized by its poetic images of redemptive suffering and resurrection, describing a widespread need for spiritual rebirth. Issa J. Boullata says about the *Tammuzi* movement:

The restless search for personal and social happiness and salvation is at the root of the new Arabic poetry. [...] It is tragic inasmuch as the existential riddle of life finds no final solution in it. A mystical dedication to truth, resilience in struggle, a readiness for crucifixion and hope in resurrection continue to be its main themes. To read it is to feel the pulse of the modern Arab world.¹⁵

An important poet of the *Tammuzi* movement is Adonis. Even his pseudonym (his actual name is 'Ali Aḥmad Sa'îd) shows his allegiance to this movement, as Adonis is one of the fertility gods. The poet Adonis uses the imagery of Jesus, Tammuz and the Phoenix as symbols through which he conveys his ideas: He con-

¹⁴ Pinault, 'Images of Christ in Arabic Literature', pp. 121-122.

¹⁵ Issa J. Boullata, *Modern Arab Poets: 1950-1975* (London, 1982), p. xii.

siders every aspect of the Arab life to be in need of a radical change to bring the Arabs into the modern time. In 1957 he cooperated with al-Khâl in publishing the literary magazine *al-Shâ'ir*. In that year Adonis wrote his poem *Resurrection and Ashes*. This is part of that poem:

Death in our life is threshing-floors,
Fountains
Of which Christ is the banks and the Cross is a hill and a vine.
It is not wind of solitude,
Nor is the echo of tombs in his walk.
Yesterday, O Phoenix, yesterday
One died on his cross.
He was extinguished then his glow returned
He looked like a lake of cherries
A fire of light, a promise.

He was extinguished then his glow returned
From ashes and darkness
He became ablaze.
Now he has wings as many as the flowers in our country
As many as days, years and pebbles.
Like you, O Phoenix, his love overflowed,
Rose up, felt our hunger for it, so he died spreading out
His wing, embracing even the one who incinerated him.
Like you, O Phoenix, O Phoenix
Embracing the Spring and the flame.
O my bird, gentle as fatigue
O pioneer on the road.¹⁶

Finally another poem from a Tammuzi poet, the Muslim Iraqi Badr Shâkir al-Sayyâb, from his *Songs of the Rain* (1969) These lines are from the poem *Christ after Crucifixion*:

Warmth touches my heart
My blood runs into its moist earth.

¹⁶ Issa J. Boullata, *Modern Arab Poets: 1950-1975* (London, 1982), pp. 58-59.

My heart is the sun, for the sun pulses with light;
 My heart is the earth, pulsing with wheat, and blossoms,
 and pure water.
 My heart is the water, my heart is the ear of corn;
 Its death is the resurrection; it gives life to him who eats.
 ...I died by fire, darkness scorched my soil,
 yet the god endured.
 ...I died that bread might be eaten in my name,
 that they may plant me in due season.
 How many lives I shall live!
 For in each furrow of the field
 I have become a future; I have become a seedling;
 I have become a generation of men:
 In every man's heart is my blood,
 a drop of it, or more.¹⁷

The imagery evokes the vegetation myths of Tammuz; as a fertility god, Jesus can describe his heart as an ear of corn and his body as a sacrifice to the crops, ready to enrich the soil 'in due season'. The language also evokes the Christian Eucharist, commemorating Jesus' death for mankind. According to al-Sayyâb, poets must use mythology:

We live in a world in which there is no poetry. [...] What can the poet then do? He has returned to myths and tales, which have not lost their heat, because they are not part of this world. [...] He has returned to them in order to build from them worlds which defy the logic of gold and iron.¹⁸

Mahmûd Darwîsh died on 9 August 2008, while undergoing open heart surgery. His website, www.mahmouddarwish.com, speaks of Darwîsh as if he was the Phoenix himself; he had had rather major heart problems before, and he always overcame those. Not this time:

Mahmoud Darwish has quietly left us on Saturday 9 August 2008 after 67 years of a life jumping from one peak to another, rising

¹⁷ Pinault, 'Images of Christ in Arabic Literature', p. 124.

¹⁸ Pinault, 'Images of Christ in Arabic Literature', p. 124, footnote 23.

higher every time, transcending his own successes. He was a beautiful human being, able to see what no one else can see: in life, politics, and even people, expressing his visions in a language that seems to be made only for him to write with. When he decided to take on this difficult surgery we thought that he can beat death, like he did several times before... but he, it seems, with his prophetic insight, could clearly see his 'ghost coming from afar'. He wanted to surprise death rather than wait for the 'time bomb' that was his artery to explode unannounced... he went prepared, as he always is, leaving us behind to 'nurture hope'.¹⁹

Darwish has always wanted to play a role for his homeland, even in death. Therefore finally, this poem of *A Forehead and an Anger* (Damascus, 1968):

My homeland! O Eagle that sheathes its beak of flame
In my eyes
Through the wooden bars.
All that I possess in the presence of death
Is a forehead and an anger.
I have requested in my will that my heart be planted as a tree
And my forehead as a house for the skylark.
O Eagle of whose wing I am not worthy
I prefer the crown of flame.
My homeland! We were born and we have grown in your wounds
And have eaten acorns
That we may witness the flutter of your wing
O Eagle that heavily lingers in fetters for no reason
O legendary death that used to be loved
Your red beak is still in my eyes as a sword of flame.
I am not worthy of your wing
All that I possess in the presence of death
Is a forehead and an anger.²⁰

¹⁹ www.mahmouddarwish.com (11 August 2008)

²⁰ Boullata, *Modern Arab Poets: 1950-1975*, p. 96.