Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes—A Review Essay

Judith Mendelsohn Rood

Mitri Raheb—president, Dar al-Kalima (The House of the Word) University College in Bethlehem; president, Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; and senior pastor, Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem—is a well-known Palestinian Christian leader. His new book, Faith in the Face of Empire, represents an impressively integrated effort to combine secular and sacred history, structured by a robust geostrategic political analysis, intended to help Palestinian Christians understand their calling in the midst of suffering. Raheb writes as a Palestinian Christian for Palestinian Christians, but the book’s availability in English allows others to enter the conversation. Jewish readers, unfamiliar with the contemporary Christian artistic tradition of portraying Christ as a member of a particular racial, political, or ethnic community, may be offended by the image of a Palestinian Christ on the book’s cover. This picture, however, provides a good indication of Raheb’s message.

The book is divided into nine chapters, with an epilogue. Raheb states that the book’s aim is “to lay the groundwork for a genuine Palestinian Christian narrative that is politically relevant and theologically creative” (6). The volume introduces a new understanding of the biblical narrative and of the mission of Jesus, in which the Palestinian context today serves as a hermeneutical key to understanding the original context and content of the Bible. Palestinian Christians are themselves, after all, an important continuum from biblical times to the present, whose narrative sheds a unique light on the biblical story (6–7). Raheb rightly calls for a “dynamic understanding of history.” He adds, “That is why I love these words in the first Epistle of John, ‘It is right for you to have faith in the One who is from the beginning, who has existed from the beginning and is in the beginning’ (1 Jn 5:5), which tell us that with our current identity we are not at the end; we are not yet made manifest what we shall be’ (1 Jn 3:2),” which tell us that with our current identity we are not at the end; we are not yet made manifest what we shall be’ (1 Jn 3:2),” which still in process (20). He reminds us that the Bible is “not a book of history but a single . . . story. It is not interested in revealing ‘what was then’ but ‘what it meant’”—not only for the people of Palestine, but for all of us (20–21).

The first two chapters of the book are historiographical, utilizing the concept of “La Longue Durée” (9) to frame biblical and postbiblical history, both sacred and secular. Raheb explores various perspectives on how to understand the troubled history of the Middle East and the formation of Palestinian identity. In chapter 1 he identifies three developments that led to the loss of Palestinian memory and history: “ecclisial amnesia” on the part of the imperial church, which “made it impossible to recognize the anti-imperial dimension of the Bible” and led to the Bible’s “depoliticization” through the use of allegory and topology; “religious amnesia” resulting from Islamization; and “political amnesia,” which he explains as resulting from the “influx of Jewish immigrants into Palestine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” that forced “the native people of Palestine to erase their biblical memory because it was perceived as a kind of divine legitimization aimed at colonizing their land” (15). He asserts that because of “the establishment of a state with a biblical name—Israel—on their homeland, Palestinians had to disconnect from their roots” and thereby “lost their long-term memory” (15).

Raheb attacks the myth of a “Judeo-Christian tradition” and the “creative type of hardline evangelical Christian” (24) that, together with the Arab and Western powers, have shaped the dominant culture responsible for the Palestinian plight (26–27). Postcolonial theory and Edward Said’s Orientalism provide the platform for the Palestinian liberation theology’s rejection of Jewish nationalism (27–29). The rejection of the idea that “the modern state of Israel [stands] in some continuity to biblical Israel” is the basis for the Palestinian Christian resistance movement (35). This, in turn, has made it easier for some secular Palestinian nationalists to support Hamas (which, as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, has its own Nazi pedigree) as an ally, even as a horrific jihad is emptying whole regions—including Gaza—of Christians. With the rise of ISIS, West Bank Christians have begun to admit the Islamist threat to their future on the West Bank. The Hamas Charter asserts that “all Palestine is waqaf (endowed or mortmain property belonging to the Muslim ummat)—a claim that means that churches, and their considerable properties, currently owned by the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Churches in Palestine, would come under Muslim control, as they have throughout Syria and Iraq wherever ISIS has conquered.

In chapter 3 Raheb introduces his concept of the geopolitics of the Middle East, and then, in chapters 4 and 5, meshes Palestinian history and the history of empire into a framework for understanding the contemporary conflict. He endorses the 2009 Kairos Palestine document, which declares, “The military occupation of our land is a sin against God and humanity, and . . . any theology that legitimizes the occupation is far from Christian teachings” (41). Zionism, in this view, is simply “the last chapter in Western colonialism” (47).

The sixth chapter is directed specifically to a community struggling “to find a faithful response to various and recurring empires” (11). In it, Raheb exhorts his community to recognize that God is with them in their suffering. He discusses five responses to injustice: fighting back, legalism, accommodation, collaboration, and “retreat” (by which I think he means “retreat”) (73–81). He calls upon Israelis and Palestinians to recognize the failure of their respective state-building projects and turn to God, who came to defeat geopolitics and succeeded (89). He writes, “Because, without God, Palestine would have

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continued as a land at the periphery. Yet because God chose to reveal himself in this land, it became central to history” (89). Indeed, God transformed “the battlefield into holy land. . . . Because it was made sacred, people discern a calling in remaining here. They are willing to bear the unbearable, and they are capable of putting up with all the unholy wars of mankind because this is the land of the heavenly King” (91).

The seventh chapter is a meditation on Palestinian suffering and a biblical response in the face of imperialism. Here Raheb uncritically repeats the Palestinian trope that equates the Roman occupation of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee with Israeli sovereignty and policies in the West Bank and Gaza, writing that God “comes into the Middle East to defeat the geo-politics of the region” (5). The eighth chapter focuses on Jesus and his mission “to liberate his people by restoring among them a sense of community and by empowering them to become ambassadors of the new kingdom” as resistance to empire, followed by the ninth and concluding chapter “The Spirit,” with a section “Culture of Life,” which drives Raheb’s ministry in the Holy Land (5, 6, 122). In the epilogue Raheb focuses on imagination and hope as the wellsprings for “creative resistance” (120).

**Empire.** Raheb’s concept of “Empire” places his thought squarely into the anticolonialist narrative that delegitimizes Jewish nationalism as nothing but a subset of Western imperialism. He deploys the contested terminology of “occupation” throughout the book without acknowledging it as a function of the ongoing state of war between the Palestinians and Israel, a symptom of the unredeemed nature of our world. Sadly, Raheb’s ambitious study is fatally flawed by a supersessionist view of the Jewish people, who seem, in his account, to disappear into history with the coming of Christ. This is particularly unfortunate because Raheb, the most prominent Palestinian Lutheran leader, could have embedded his work in the post-Shoaah theology of Vatican II and, especially, the position of the Lutheran Church, both of which have upheld the unique ethnicity of the Jewish people, inside and outside the church.

The creation of an Aryan Christ led German evangelicals to support the expulsion of Jewish Christians from their pews in Germany during the 1930s without protest (with the notable exception of the Confessing Church, known to us primarily because of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the most prominent member of that small dissenting group). After the Shoaah, Lutherans repudiated Luther’s repugnant anti-Jewish polemics, which the Nazis used to justify the Final Solution. Raheb makes no mention of these developments in Lutheran theology in his book, but they undergird his strong argument for the continuity of the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments. My challenge to him is to take this promising dimension of his work into conversation with Messianic believers.

For the Jewish and Gentile believers living in the land, “the coming of the Messiah in Jesus . . . brought a pivotal change. Christians need no longer wait for direct divine intervention, because the intervention has already taken place” (95). Raheb describes the “transformed faithful” as ready “to engage the world, to challenge the monopoly of power, and to live the life of an already liberated people” (95).

Raheb relates that while he was struggling with Matthew 5:5, he discovered his “mistake”—that he had been reading the history of the modern conflict with “only . . . the current empire in mind.” “If we look solely at the last six decades,” he explains, “the word of Jesus doesn’t make sense at all. But Jesus had a wide angle lens, and he looked at history longue durée. . . . Jesus . . . looked at a thousand years all at once, and he saw a chain of empires. . . . Jesus wanted to tell his people that the empire would not last, that empires come and go. When empires collapse and depart, it is the poor and meek who remain” (98–99).

**Neo-Marcionism.** It is the meek who will inherit the land (96–98). Raheb’s book is for Palestinian Christians, but it speaks powerfully to Jewish believers, too. Yet Raheb does not see the importance of his insights for the redemption of the Jewish people, and for critically engaging with other Palestinian theologians. Neo-Marcionism is alive and well in the guise of Palestinian liberation theology, which posits that resistance to Israel is an act of faith (100). Palestinian evangelicals subscribing to liberation theology, most notably Naim Ateek of Sabeel, like Marcion, unapologetically call for the removal of the Old Testament and Hebraisms from the Bible because of the challenges they present for Palestinian believers. Raheb does not agree with that hermeneutical approach and provides a strong corrective to it. He begins his book by stating, “Jesus was a Middle Eastern Palestinian Jew” (1). That statement, however, also contains the root of the problem for the Jewish believer, who understands that to use the very term “Palestinian” to describe Jesus is political, not historical. Jesus was a Galilean Jew. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in a.d. 70 they used the term “Palestine” as a term designed to strip the area of its Jewish people, and for critically engaging with other Palestinian theologians. Neo-Marcionism is alive and well in the guise of Palestinian liberation theology, which posits that resistance to Israel is an act of faith (100). Palestinian evangelicals subscribing to liberation theology, most notably Naim Ateek of Sabeel, like Marcion, unapologetically call for the removal of the Old Testament and Hebraisms from the Bible because of the challenges they present for Palestinian believers. Raheb does not agree with that hermeneutical approach and provides a strong corrective to it. He begins his book by stating, “Jesus was a Middle Eastern Palestinian Jew” (1). That statement, however, also contains the root of the problem for the Jewish believer, who understands that to use the very term “Palestinian” to describe Jesus is political, not historical. Jesus was a Galilean Jew. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in a.d. 70 they used the term “Palestine” as a term designed to strip the area of its Jewish people, and for critically engaging with other Palestinian theologians. Raheb focuses on imagination and hope as the wellsprings for “creative resistance” (120).

**Christ at the Checkpoint.** On March 7, 2010, Raheb presented a paper at the “Christ at the Checkpoint” conference held at Bethlehem Bible College, which I attended. In the paper he outlined observations that in this book he fleshes out as “a theology from Bethlehem” (2, 32). On sabbatical from Biola University, I wanted to understand the pro-Palestinian evangelical discourse on the Arab-Israel conflict. The following two conferences, held in 2012 and in 2014, were much more controversial than the 2010 meeting. Messianic Jewish press coverage focused on the supersessionist theology of “fulfillment” adopted by the Christ at the Checkpoint theologians—an interpretation that they rightfully understood negates the Jewish claim to a homeland, peoplehood, and identity. This supersessionist theology—which I labeled neo-Marcionism in an article published in 2011—is primarily identified with Wheaton New Testament professor Gary Burge and Anglican Stephan Sizer, who argue that, because Israel is unjust toward Israeli Arabs and Palestinians, it has lost
divine favor and must be judged by the nations as undeserving of sovereignty over part or all of the Holy Land. Raheb’s book must be understood as one voice in the conversation at the “Christ at the Checkpoint” conferences, which have generated space for concerned believers to share their perspectives at the foot of the cross.

In December 2013 a small group of individuals from Christ at the Checkpoint met together at Palmer Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, where Evangelicals for Social Action convened a conference “Impact Holy Land” to discuss future meetings of Christ at the Checkpoint. Importantly, a number of Messianic Jews accepted the organizer’s invitation to attend the executive session at the beginning of the conference, signaling their willingness to dialogue with their Palestinian brethren. As a result, Messianic Jews have been challenged to voice compassion for Palestinian suffering. This is new, and a reason for hope.

It is in this context that a theology written from the perspective of a Palestinian Christian “living under Israeli occupation” (2) is so important—and in this case, so damming, because it shows that Raheb does not recognize that there is a place for the Jewish people in his homeland. Raheb is right: the Bible could not have been written anywhere but in the Holy Land. The peoples of that land have been entwined forever, impossible to disentangle this side of heaven. Raheb’s radical postcolonial political philosophy, however, leads to the conclusion that the very idea of a Jewish people—and a Jewish homeland—is the product of a racist ideology constructed by modern Zionists purely for political purposes. In a section entitled “New Jewish Voices” Raheb makes good use of radical Jewish criticism of Israel to make this point (32–33). This line of thought includes a corollary that Ashkenazi (European) Jews are not the literal descendants of the Judeans of biblical times, and therefore cannot claim the right to sovereignty in the Jewish homeland (33).

The modern, constructed identities of Palestinian nationalists and Israelis were shaped by their conflict with British colonialism and with each other. Where Raheb and I differ, however, is not merely how we understand ecclesiology and eschatology—but how we treat secular history. Raheb grounds his analysis of the identity of the Jewish people in the problematic thinking of Jewish Israeli Shlomo Sand, author of the controversial book The Invention of the Jewish People (London: Verso, 2009). In this book, Sand peels away layer after layer of Jewish identity and asserts that Jewish identity is a fiction. The book received positive reviews by secular Jewish critics of Israel, especially the late Tony Judt, and was eagerly read by Palestinian intellectuals. The mainstream liberal Jewish press and Israeli leftists, however, found it troubling. Sand’s basic argument relates to the often-heard belief that Ashkenazi Jews are descendants of the Khazars, a Turkish tribe that is said to have converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages. This represents an unacceptable position regarding Jewish identity, one that precludes any hope of reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians. It is impossible to reconcile when the very identity of the other is under attack.

As with Jewish identity, the issue of modern Palestinian identity is contested. Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi, in his 1998 book Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness, argued that Palestinian identity began to emerge only when the British, like the Romans, called the contested territory in southern Syria (over which they received a mandate from the League of Nations) “Palestine” after its ancient colonizers, the ancient Philistines. History shows that the Palestinian Arabs represent a heterogeneous group of Aramaic, Greek, and Arabic Jews, Christians, and Muslims who, after millennia of intermarriage and conversion, have developed a rich blend of cultures and peoples. Centuries of immigration and emigration have seen eras of depopulation and repopulation, with the introduction of Turkish, Circassian, Bosnian, and other Muslim groups.

British policy transformed identities during the Mandate era as they politicized the Ottoman millet, or organized religious communities—Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Samaritan—living in Mandate Palestine. Modern Palestinian identity was forged by a singular galvanizing event: the Nakba, an Arabic term used by Palestinians to describe “the Catastrophe” of their expulsion and dispossession in 1948 caused by the establishment of the State of Israel. The failure of the Muslim jihad against the Jews during that era led to the defeat of the Muslim political authority that the British had created to balance Zionist power. The Arab and Christian Palestinians who lost their homes and livelihoods as a result of this defeat shifted from an Islamist ideology to a secular one, building upon trends in the rest of the Arab world. Up to the mid-1980s, Palestinian identity was secular. With the failure of the secular liberation movement to defeat Israel, however, the anticolonial jihadism of the Mandate era has reigned, a fact that Raheb does not address in this book.

Raheb is correct when he writes, “The biblical story can best be understood as a response to the geo-political history of the region” (3). It is true that we need the Holy Spirit to help us overcome our historical traumas, to overcome “our victimhood, to assume responsibility, and undergo transformation from the status of objects in world history into subjects, actors, and positive contributors toward a new society” and to attain true freedom (115). Unfortunately, his support of the boycott, divestment, and sanction movement and nonviolent participation in the Palestinian resistance undermines the power of his message beyond its intended audience. Raheb fails to take into account the modern history of the Palestinian national movement and misinterprets Zionism and Israel in God’s sovereign plan. Although promising in so many ways, his theology unfortunately is not one that supports reconciliation. Palestinians must recognize Israeli identity, just as Israelis must recognize Palestinian identity before we can reconcile politically. Such should be the aim of the εκκλησία in our broken and suffering world.

Though many are opposed to the work that Mitri Raheb and I, along with many others, are doing in trying to explain ourselves to one another, I found Faith in the Face of Empire to be a valuable contribution to a necessary conversation. Two ideas that are sticking with me are that the Jewish people have also been the victims of empires and that truly the Palestinians and Israelis share a bond of suffering, patience, and endurance.

Note