

Introduction

“Peacemaking calls for courage, much more so than warfare. It calls for the courage to say yes to encounter and no to conflict; yes to dialogue and no to violence; yes to negotiations and no to hostilities; yes to respect for agreements and no to acts of provocation; yes to sincerity and no to duplicity. All of this takes courage, it takes strength and tenacity.”
—Pope Francis¹

“You must utterly destroy them (place them under the “ban”). Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. . . . Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones . . . burn their idols with fire.”
(Deuteronomy 7:2-3, 5)²

No one doubts the existence of the seemingly endemic “cycle of hatred and violence” that exists between Israel and Palestine and that needs to be broken. In the summer of 2014 it only took the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers and a subsequent retaliation killing to plunge the region into conflict again (i.e., Israel’s “Operation Protective Edge,” the bombardment and invasion of Gaza), effectively nullifying the unprecedented and laudable efforts of Pope Francis in bringing Israeli and Palestinian presidents together in an invocation for peace. No sooner had Shimon Peres and Mahmoud

1. “Pope Francis and the Presidents of Israel and Palestine Invoke Peace,” [accessed 24 September 2014]. Online: <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-and-the-presidents-of-israel-and-pale>.
2. The translation is the author’s own.

Abbas concluded their prayers, kissed each other on the cheek, and planted an olive tree as a sign of ending the “cycle of hatred and violence” than peace was uprooted by yet another outbreak of hostility and war.

This latest clash, whose roots are much deeper and causes more complex than the aforementioned murders, is just one in a series of skirmishes and wars that have plagued the people of Israel and Palestine since the dawn of Zionism and the foundation of the modern state of Israel in particular. The factors behind this conflict have been well rehearsed elsewhere and will not be repeated here.³ However, what the reader may not be aware of is how this conflict has proved doubly oppressive for Palestinian Christians.

The foundation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 is commemorated by countless Palestinians as a day of “catastrophe.” Many Palestinian Christians *also* claim that it was spiritually catastrophic, as the characters, names, events, and places of the Old Testament took on new significance for the newly formed political state and thereby caused vast portions of the text to be abandoned and unusable in their eyes. Suddenly, the text of the Old Testament to which they were devoted and from which they might find help, comfort, and resources for *rapprochement* seemed to be “against them” and, as in the case of Deuteronomy 7, seemed to justify not only their expulsion from the land but their eradication.⁴

One need not look far back into the annals of history to see evidence of this connection being made. In 1995, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir on account of the former’s efforts at *rapprochement* with Palestinians. Amir was against the famous Oslo Peace Accords of 1993 on religious grounds,

3. For an introduction to the conflict see, for example, James L. Gelvin, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War* (3d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

4. See Deut 7:2, “You must utterly destroy them [place them under the ‘ban’].”

seeing Rabin's efforts to promote them as a transgression against the command in Deuteronomy 7 not to make any treaty or covenant with the "inhabitants of the land." For Amir, Rabin was doing just that, and this had to be rectified. The "ban" in Deuteronomy 7 had to be maintained, thought Amir. So, some twenty years ago, he shot and killed Rabin.⁵

This book looks to investigate the problem: How *might* Palestinian Christians read the Old Testament in a context in which biblical texts are routinely read as an endorsement of their suffering? Before any proposals are put forward, however, the book takes extra care to guide the reader through the maze of facts and figures that are germane to the present topic. The first chapter and section (Hermeneutics) outlines the key components that influence a Palestinian Christian reading of the Old Testament. It defines Palestinian Christian identity and looks at what it is to be Palestinian, a Christian in Israel and Palestine, and a Palestinian Christian in particular. It then surveys the work of the following Palestinian Christian leaders and their respective readings of the Old Testament in light of the foundation of the State of Israel: Naim Ateek, Mitri Raheb, Naim Khoury, Yohanna Katanacho, Michel Sabbah, and Atallah Hanna. These leaders come from a variety of religious traditions (Anglican, Lutheran, Baptist, Evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox) and give the reader an appreciation of the range of opinion and the acerbity of the topic. Almost all these Palestinian Christians view the foundation of the State of Israel as a "catastrophe" for the Palestinian people politically (in the widest sense) and spiritually (including in their reading of the Old Testament). For example, Naim Ateek says: "For most Palestinian Christians, as for

5. Cf. Georg Braulik, "Die Völkervernichtung und die Rückkehr Israels ins Verheissungsland: Hermeneutische Bemerkungen zum Buch Deuteronomium," 3–38 in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature: Festschrift C. H. W. Brekelmans*, ed. Marc Vervenne and Johan Lust (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), at 3.

many other Arab Christians, their view of the Bible, especially the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, has been adversely affected by the creation of the State of Israel.”⁶ Similarly, Mitri Raheb laments:

The Bible I had heretofore considered to be “for us” had suddenly become against us. It was no longer a consoling message to me but a frightening word. My salvation and that of the world were not the issue in the Bible any longer. The issue was my land, which God had promised to Israel and in which I no longer had a right to live unless it was as a “stranger.” The God I had known since my childhood as love had suddenly become a God who confiscated land, waged “holy wars,” and destroyed whole peoples.”⁷

Kenneth Cragg sums up the problem by saying:

Arab Christianity and Christian Palestinianism in particular suffer what all other Christianities in the West, in Africa, and in far Asia can escape, namely, the ambiguity between biblical loyalty to Hebrew scriptures as part of Christian heritage and the actualities of contemporary Israel with its enmity to Palestinianism *per se*.⁸

The first chapter then outlines how Palestinian Christians are reading the Old Testament in this context and details the factors that are influencing their understanding of it.

Having sketched the basic elements of *contemporary* Palestinian Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament (PCHOT), the next section of the book (History) surveys the historical development of Palestinian Christian hermeneutics in the *past* and asks: “To what extent has Palestinian Christian hermeneutics of the Old Testament actually changed since the foundation of the state of Israel, and what have been the deciding factors that have influenced its development?”

6. Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 77.

7. Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 56.

8. Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 11.

Has the political or religious context in which Palestinian Christians have found themselves governed how they have viewed and interpreted the Old Testament?” Answers to these questions are presented over the next three chapters. Chapters 2–4 look at Palestinian Christianity and its reading of the Old Testament before 1917 (chap. 2), between 1917 and 1948 (chap. 3), and after the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 (chap. 4). The fourth chapter completes the historical survey and brings the reader back to the question of how Palestinian Christians *might* read the Old Testament in such a context.

The final section (Ideology) is perhaps the most contentious and yet important part of the book, for it seeks to prescribe a way forward for Palestinian Christians that is faithful to all the relevant sources and parties. This requires a vision that is not limited by the cataracts of one’s own perspective. It requires openness to the “other(s)” and a willingness to see things from their point of view. This is undoubtedly difficult when one’s eye is glued to a lens focused on war. However, if time is taken to adjust the way we see things, rather than cementing the lens in place we might just see a way forward. Chapter 5 gives a panoramic shot of the main non-Palestinian perspectives on how a Palestinian Christian might read the Old Testament. These include the views of Michael Prior: “Reading with the Eyes of the Canaanite,” Charles Miller: “Reading with the Eyes of Tradition,” and Gershon Nerel: “Reading with the Eyes of Jewish-Christian *fraternité*.” On the basis of the strengths and weaknesses of these perspectives the present author outlines his own proposal in Chapter 6 and tests it against an in-depth analysis of the abovementioned text of Deuteronomy 7.

The conclusion brings the entire corpus into view and summarizes each of the sections (Hermeneutics, History, and Ideology) and chapters of the book, critiques them in light of this author’s own

proposal, and then makes some final suggestions for how Palestinian Christians might read the Old Testament in the future.

Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who is the current *Custos* of the Holy Land, admitted to Reuters before the “prayer summit” between Pope Francis, Israeli President Shimon Peres, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, “No one is presumptuous enough to think peace will break out on Monday. . . .”⁹ I do not presume that this book will cause peace to “break out” in Israel and Palestine. However, I do hope it will act in a manner similar to Pope Francis’s initiative, namely, “to reopen a road that has been closed for some time; to re–create a desire, a possibility; to make people dream.”¹⁰ Rafiq Khoury argues:

[There are] two types of narratives, two types of memories: the closed ones and the creative ones; memory as prison and memory as prophecy. As a prison, memory could mummify us in a certain place and prevent us from getting out of it. According to that meaning, memory is no more a stimulant, but a paralyzing reality. It paralyzes our vitality and creativity. We ruminate on the past, but we remain unable to imagine the future. We are no more able to invent history. As a prophecy, memory is a stimulant. It helps us, on the basis of our vivid memory, to go forward and invent a new future and a new untold narrative.¹¹

I hope the reader will find in the following pages a narrative that is faithful to the realities and memories of the past and also creative and open to a new way of looking at things, a memory that sees a future with the “other.” With regard to Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament, the task starts with understanding the text (Hermeneutics), then its reception (History), and finally how its

9. William Booth, “Pope Francis hosts Israeli, Palestinian leaders at ‘prayer summit,’” *The Washington Post* (June 8, 2014), [accessed 24 September 2014]. Online: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pope-francis-hosts-israeli-palestinian-leaders-at-prayer-summit/2014/06/08/b9adc57e-ef48-11e3-bf76-447a5df6411f_story.html.

10. *Ibid.*

11. In Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014), 20.

meaning has been or can still be manipulated in an effort to “imprison” or “mummify” a particular understanding of the past and/or reality that silences or negates the memory of the “other” (Ideology). I hope this book will equip the interested reader to see beyond her or his own natural field of view and envision a future in which Palestinian Christians read the Old Testament not at odds against the “other” or in tension with what Cragg calls the “actualities of contemporary Israel with its enmity to Palestinianism *per se*,” but in concert with them: unpacking, interpreting, and writing a new “narrative” that future generations might one day read with their own eyes.¹²

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12. Cragg, *Arab Christian*, 11. For a review of relevant literature and a description of the unique way in which the present work contributes to the discussion of Palestinian Christians, see William Andrew Stalder, “Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament: Hermeneutics, History, and Ideology.” Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2012.