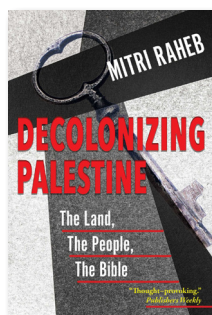


BOOK REVIEW

Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible. By Mitri Raheb. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. 184 pages. \$18.72 (paper). ISBN 1626985499.



Mitri Raheb's timely new book, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible*, confronts the existential crisis facing Palestinians in general and Palestinian Christians in particular, whose ongoing dispossession is justified, in part, by their own holy scripture. While the so-called Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often popularly perceived as a religious conflict, political analysis often foregrounds issues of geopolitics, borders, territory, and nationalism. Taking what he refers to as a “theopolitical” perspective, Raheb’s book examines the intertwining of religion and politics in service of Western-backed Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine.

Raheb’s book operates within a tradition of interpreting the Bible prophetically, i.e., from the perspective of the oppressed resisting their subjugation. Rejecting terms like conflict, war, and even occupation in favor of a settler-colonial framework, Raheb brings together settler-colonial theory and Palestinian liberation theology to develop a decolonial theology grounded in the historical, geopolitical, and geographic context of Palestine. Raheb centers Palestine as lived and experienced by Palestinians themselves, not the Palestine found on maps of the holy land printed in the front pages of bibles. For Raheb, his hometown of Bethlehem is not just a quaint nativity scene or the setting of a peaceful Christmas carol, but a land beset by walls and encroached upon by aggressive Israeli settlement expansion. By bringing together settler colonial theory and Palestinian theology, Raheb thus demystifies the orientalist geographic imaginary of Palestine. His is a geographically “grounded theology,” situated in everyday material realities and broader geopolitical contexts.

Decolonizing Palestine is a book in two-parts. Part One focuses on the biblically-backed colonization of Palestine; Part Two confronts the

“theological software” of colonization. The first chapter provides historical context for understanding the displacement of Palestinians by an ongoing process of settler-colonialism. To do so, Raheb draws upon scholars of settler colonialism in the Americas and Australia and recent extensions of this work to the Palestinian context. In doing so, the author challenges myths of Israeli and American exceptionalism by pointing out the ways in which narratives of promised lands, chosen peoples, and divine destiny were used to justify European colonization of the Americas and elsewhere. Raheb’s insights here shed light on the White supremacy underlying Christian Zionism and Israeli religious nationalism. The exclusivity of divine rights to the descendants of Isaac through Jacob (Jews and Christians), relies on seeing Arabs as undeserving, inferior others, as the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham’s son with Hagar, a slave from Africa.

Diving deeper into the theology of Zionism, Chapter 2 confronts the notion that Christian Zionists are merely a fringe group of End Times-obsessed evangelicals (30). Raheb argues that Christian Zionism is a much broader umbrella that includes a broad spectrum of supporters of Israeli-Jewish colonization of Palestine. One of the most crucial contributions Raheb makes here is his critique of liberal Christian Zionism of the post-war period. He argues that the Holocaust has been the “hermeneutical key” for European and American theology (and, I would argue, a moral touchstone for secular ethics as well). This theology emphasizes the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel as the redemption of the Jewish people, a fulfillment of God’s promise which opens the door to redemption of all humanity. In this rendering, Palestinians are merely latter-day Canaanites standing in the way of God’s promise to the chosen people. As Raheb explains in chapter 4, after the Holocaust, Christians opened their theological tent to include Jews within a “Judeo-Christian tradition” to atone for their sins of antisemitism and the Holocaust, sacrificing the rights of Palestinian Muslims and Christians in the process.

Today, broad-based support for the modern nation-state of Israel among many Western Christians is not founded upon a robust and reasoned reading of scripture, but rather upon an emotional attachment to Israel and the equation of modern-day Israel with the Israelites of the Bible. The irony here is that the Holocaust created a regime of international human rights law, but also, for Christian Zionists, placed the modern nation-state of Israel *above* that law, operating under biblical injunction to conquer and control the land and subdue or expel its inhabitants at all costs. The American Christian right embraces this “restoration” of Israeli-Jewish dominance in the Holy Land, and, crucially, views this mission as an extension of what Raheb calls

“glocal considerations,” namely “restoring” conservative Christian values to the center of American society and politics.

Impatient readers can be forgiven for feeling like the book offers more of a description of colonialism than tools for decolonization. However, the patient reader will get the reward in Chapters 3 and 4, where the analytical rubber meets the road. Recognizing the power of place names, Chapter 3 provides a grounded reading of key terms associated with the land of Palestine, typically viewed as an ancient land frozen in time and stripped of its sociopolitical context. For example, Raheb demonstrates how using the term “Temple Mount” to refer to the Haram ash-Sharif complex privileges a biblical perspective of ancient Jerusalem and not the lived reality of Palestinians (the second temple was destroyed nearly 2000 years ago, whereas the Dome of the Rock has been standing for over 1300 years).

Further, Raheb makes the case for the use of the term “Palestine” to refer to the land, as the name most consistently used to identify this area throughout history. Palestine, he argues, is a geographic term that is inclusive of diverse linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and religious identities, and is not exclusive to one religious perspective. Further, he cautions his reader not to wrongly identify Palestinians as the Canaanites or Philistines of the Bible, but also not to deny that the Canaanites, Philistines, and even ancient Israelite are not part of Palestinian cultural and hereditary ancestry. Similarly, he urges his reader to distinguish between Israel as an ancient polity, a people, and a modern nation-state, which itself needs to be distinguished from all Jewish people, a broad and diverse population who are not synonymous with the Judeans or Israelites of the Bible.

Recognizing that biblical interpretation, like place naming, is also an exercise of power, Chapter 4 focuses on “biblical reception history,” i.e., how the Bible has been received and interpreted in different contexts toward different ends over time. It is here that decolonial theology is brought to bear on the concept of “chosenness,” which, Raheb argues, must be interpreted within the contemporary context of political nationalism.

Drawing upon earlier Palestinian theological interpretations of chosenness, Raheb argues against a particularist, nationalist reading of election, and advocates for a view of chosenness as singular in its specific instantiation in the Bible, but universal in its application to other historical contexts. The notion of being chosen, he argues, is a promise that gives hope and comfort to the oppressed, that their suffering is redemptive and exemplary, not meaningless. It is the same promise that the bible gives to

the meek and oppressed, that it is they who shall inherit the land, usually translated as “the earth.”

Driving home the preceding points, the Epilogue provides a helpful overview of several critical and contested issues, including imperialism, antisemitism, the failed promises of the two-state solution peace process, apartheid, and western Churches’ complicity. Overall, the book offers a concise and critical interpretation of these key issues. As such, the book should appeal to a broad audience of laypeople, activists, and scholars, including those in religious studies, settler-colonial studies, Israel/Palestine studies, and peace and conflict studies.

Although the book is concise and readable, this is sometimes at the expense of unpacking key terms or concepts in theology that may be less familiar to lay audiences. Although the book assumes a level of biblical literacy, readers looking for a digestible overview of critical moments and key concepts in the history of the Palestinian struggle will find it here. What readers will not find, however, is a map of the region. This is unfortunate given the geographical richness of this text and its efforts to provide a counter-narrative to the Christian Zionist geographical imaginary. A timeline may have helped as well, especially to remedy any confusion caused by the somewhat inconsistent uses of different dating systems (e.g., BC, BCE). The book is also repetitive in places. Although it makes frequent reference to other colonial contexts such as the Americas, Africa, and Australia, it would be helpful to the reader to offer a few concrete examples of the use of religious rhetoric related to land promises or divine election in these contexts, with reference to the growing body of comparative settler-colonial studies.

The book’s one significant shortcoming is not one that can be addressed by the author. It makes an admirable plea to reject the narrow “linear salvation history” implied by the Judeo-Christian construct, arguing instead for a wider Abrahamic understanding of the Prophetic family tree, that extends salvation through the line of Ismael and Muhammad. The book also makes occasional reference to Islamic theological understandings of the issue of chosenness, and some reference to Jewish theology. One hopes that this first attempt at decolonizing dominant Biblical narratives from a Palestinian Christian perspective will be further fleshed out by decolonial and anti-Zionist Jewish theology and insights from Muslim perspectives. An intra-Abrahamic dialogue aimed at mutual aid, justice, and liberation, rather than

mere tolerance and understanding, would produce a uniquely Palestinian approach to interfaith engagement.

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