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Review Essay: Mitri Raheb on Christian Zionism

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In Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible, Mitri Raheb combines a concise and uncompromising historical and theological critique of Christian Zionism with a thought-provoking reinterpretation of the concept of “divine election” and “the land.” In doing so, Raheb reclaims the bible as grounding for an alternative, liberatory vision inclusive of all peoples in Palestine/Israel. The book speaks directly to Christians in Europe and the United States, challenging them to confront political theologies that distort the biblical text and mask the highly unequal power relations between modern Israel and the Palestinians. It also addresses Palestinian Christians (and Muslims), offering a new way to understand the biblical notions of am segullah (“treasured people”) and the covenant with Abraham.

Raheb’s critique of the enmeshment of Zionism and biblical interpretation contributes to an already well-established conversation. Anti-Zionist Jewish scholars have analyzed Zionism’s use of biblical themes to create a political theology justifying Israel’s creation. And, since at least the late 1980s, in response to the first Palestinian Intifada against the Israeli military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, biblical scholars and theologians have confronted head on the phenomenon of Christian Zionism. In doing so, they have uncovered its diverse origins in British colonialism, Orientalist racism, antisemitism, and Protestant Evangelical, philosemitic messianism. Raheb rehearses these accounts with due reference to relevant citations.

But Raheb does something else, as well: he expands the understanding of Christian Zionism by including a focus on post-Holocaust liberal theologians. These thinkers respond to centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and contemporary antisemitism by affirming the continuing validity of the divine covenant given to Abraham. On this view, the coming of Jesus as messiah does not cancel the choosing of ancient Israel as God’s am segullah. Indeed, the “election” of Israel remains valid throughout time. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Christians especially, these liberal theologians insist, must reaffirm God’s covenant with the Jews and see it as relevant, operative, and manifest today in the modern State of Israel. In this manner, these liberal theologians have taught Christians, especially in Europe, a type of “land theology” that serves to justify modern Israel’s creation and its corresponding mass dispossession and repression of the indigenous Palestinian population. Modern Israel, in Karl Barth’s formulation, constitutes “a new sign of God’s faithfulness to the seeds of Abraham” (p. 40).

Much scholarly attention has focused not on liberal theologians but on the emergence of an apocalyptic Christian Zionism among British Protestants and conservative Evangelicals in the United States. Raheb also discusses this phenomenon. In doing so, he shows how, in this apocalyptic perspective, modern Israel becomes a harbinger of the predicted return of the Christian messiah, who will overcome evil and inaugurate a thousand-year-long reign of tranquility and
peace once the Jews have been “ingathered” to their land. This understanding imbued British political leaders like Lord Balfour with a sense of cosmic mission and rightness: the Jews of Europe needed to return to Palestine to fulfill the divine writ, and the British were to serve as the instruments of this God-ordained process. In this view, the wishes of the indigenous Palestinian Arabs counted for nothing. Raheb takes this political theology seriously, understanding the truth of Max Weber’s observation that the powerful need and desire to believe in their own goodness. Power, no less colonial power, requires legitimizing justifications. Biblically grounded notions of “manifest destiny” and “the civilizing mission” serve to provide such justifications.

As Raheb shows, Christian Zionism has continued to resonate among Protestant Evangelicals, especially in the United States. Israeli leaders have exploited this fact, cultivating close relationships with mega-church pastors, who bring their followers on large tours to Israel. Today, the strongest non-Jewish support for Israel in the United States resides in conservative, GOP-oriented Evangelical constituencies. The Trump Administration’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, a move that broke with the international consensus opposing recognition of Israel’s annexation of the Holy City, arguably reflected the impact of Evangelical voters who had overwhelmingly backed the Trump campaign.

But, as Raheb demonstrates, Christian Zionism goes beyond the conservative Evangelical context; it includes “liberal” Christians, too. Raheb argues, on this basis, that “Christian Zionism should be defined as a Christian lobby that supports the Jewish settler colonialism of Palestinian land by using biblical/theological constructs within a metanarrative while taking loca considerations into account” (p. 31). The virtue of this definition lies in the link it establishes between ideology and action and between narrative and local context. Christian Zionism is a type of political-theological practice that embraces colonial domination in the service of a cosmic narrative. This narrative takes a variety of interpretive nuances—liberal Protestant, conservative Evangelical—depending on the national and institutional context in which it arises and takes root. Raheb’s definition allows us for the first time to see and analyze Christian Zionism as a broad and flexible ideology that informs Protestant Christianity across the board. As such, it constitutes a key contribution to the current discussion of the relationship between Zionism and modern Christian theology.

But Raheb’s book does more than offer this new and expansive definition of Christian Zionism. It also provides important revisions—what he calls a “decolonial reading of the bible”—of the concept of divine election and of what it means to inherit the land. His approach, which draws on the work of other Palestinian theologians while also offering its own new insights, addresses the challenges Palestinian Christians specifically confront in reading and accepting the authority of a text that others, including colonial governments and their own European and American co-religionists, have deployed to justify their dispossession. Raheb’s re-reading thus not only revises but also restores the text to Palestinian Christians.

Raheb contests Christian Zionist assertions emphasizing a straightforward connection between the promise of a land to the biblical people Israel and the Zionist ethnonationalist territorial claim. He offers the example of King Ahab’s false accusations against Naboth in court, his unjust stoning of Naboth, and his confiscation of Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21). The Prophet Elijah cries out against this act, declaring it a violation of God’s commandments and abuse of the justice system (the court). Raheb comments that the Zionist movement and State of Israel have acted in a similar
way against Palestinians. “Naboth’s story is taking place almost on a daily basis in the West Bank,” he states (in reference to the theft of Palestinian land by Israeli settlers), “but very few theologians dare to raise a prophetic voice and term this land colonization by name” as Elijah did against King Ahab (p. 86).

Raheb continues his re-reading of land theology in the Bible through an extended discussion of Matthew 5:5. In this passage, Jesus declares that “the meek shall inherit the earth.” Arguing that “the earth” in fact refers to “the land” (the Holy Land), Raheb says he grappled for years with this teaching. The strong “inherit” the land by trampling the meek. That had been his experience as a Palestinian. After a decade of pondering, however, Raheb realized that Christians needed to understand Jesus’ statement through a longue durée perspective: speaking at a time of Roman imperial domination, Jesus was telling his audience that empires come and go but the indigenous people of the land remain and in that sense, as they lead their faithful, humble lives devoted to the love of their God and neighbor, they would inherit the land in the fullness of time.

This, too, had been Palestinian experience: they had survived one imperial and oppressive regime after another, embracing the ethic of sumud (steadfastness) to survive and even at times thrive in their communities. Raheb might have connected this insight to the story of the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Satan offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world if he would only bend his knee to him. Jesus rejects the temptation, commanding Satan to leave him “for it is written: worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only” (Matthew 4:10). Raheb does not draw the most radical conclusion here, but it is implied in his exegesis of the meaning of “the meek”: that power over others destroys and corrupts and ultimately defies the commandment to love the Lord and to love the stranger, even the enemy. Those who inherit the land are those who follow God alone and follow this divine law.

At this point, the related question of divine election arises. Raheb’s discussion of this matter constitutes his second important exegetical contribution in his book. The question of divine election requires careful study because of its use in justifying the creation of the modern State of Israel and the ongoing confiscation of Palestinian land. Drawing on the prophets, Amos, in particular, Raheb argues that the biblical concept of election oscillates between singularity and universality. The bible unambiguously tells the story of the people Israel accepting God’s covenant, an agreement to be God’s people who will obey God’s commands and worship God alone, in exchange for protection and a land to call their own. But the bible also speaks of God establishing covenants with other people, choosing other people, too, such as the Ethiopians and Assyrians (Isaiah 19:23-25; p. 118) and “the Philistines from Caphtor and Arameans from Kir” (Amos 9:7; p. 118). Individual groups can certainly believe, therefore, that God has chosen them: Jews, Muslims, and Christians hold such ideas. But, Raheb concludes, “if there is one lesson that this text [the Bible] teaches us, it is that election is God’s business, and no one has a monopoly over it. God’s salvation surpasses all understanding, and God remains the God of surprises that all our theological systems cannot contain” (p. 119). Moreover, election occurs most frequently in the context of a people’s suffering. It is a “promise to those weak and powerless, to those who begin to despair about themselves” (p. 122). The promise of a land, the land, then, is a promise of salvation, of restoration in the face of persecution. It empowers the meek to persist and survive in the hope that someday they may again return to the land and thrive free of oppression.
With this concluding note Raheb’s *Decolonizing Palestine* reclaims the bible for Palestinian Christians and for all those committed to achieving a just resolution to the conflict with Zionism and Israel. As in any book, avenues not adequately mapped and pursued arise in Raheb’s discussion. He speaks, for example, of “minds colonized with the Bible” (p. 53) as if the text has a kind of magical efficacy of its own absent political projects that draw inspiration and justification from the text. To be clear, Raheb does connect biblical interpretation to political interest, which makes such statements about the colonizing power of the bible even more confusing.

Raheb also tends to view “the West” and Western Protestants in a much too sweeping way. For instance, his useful connecting of post-Holocaust liberal theology to Christian Zionism overlooks deep and important shifts in liberal Protestant churches toward a critical stance with respect to Israel. This shift began during the first Intifada. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s social statement of 1989 and its subsequent statements updating this first declaration provide an example of this change.

Raheb also argues that the bible cannot be used to cancel the universal principles of modern human rights. He does not, however, offer any theological grounding for these principles. The concept of human rights draw its inspiration and legitimacy from notions of natural law, not the bible. On what theological basis, then, does Raheb give human rights authority over biblical claims? He hints at one possible line of argument in his exegesis of 1 Kings 21 (the story of Ahab and Naboth): God’s law properly understood excludes false accusations, sham trials, unjust taking of life, and forcible expropriation of land. But there is much more to say about possible theological framings of human rights as conceived in international conventions.

These are minor criticisms, however, mere suggestions for qualification and expansion of arguments. Raheb’s book remains an insightful and compelling plea to critically examine political theologies that deform the bible into a weapon of war and oppression. His re-reading of key theological concepts like divine election and “the land” offer a liberating alternative that restores the bible to oppressed peoples, enabling them to see their inclusion within God’s salvific concern. As the war in Gaza, which, at this writing has claimed almost 27,000 Palestinian lives and orphaned 17,000 Palestinian children, grinds mercilessly on, *Decolonizing Palestine* offers a message of hope, reminding those whose lives have been shattered that they who endure in faith, the meek, the sumud, shall, in the fullness of time, inherit the land.

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