

Book Reviews

I Am a Palestinian Christian

By Mitri Raheb Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 164 + xi pp.

Many small pieces fit together to create the puzzle that is Palestine. One of the smaller, but certainly not insignificant, pieces of the puzzle is the Palestinian Christian community, which clearly traces its origins back to the first century. Mitri Raheb makes the comment that it is not necessary for a Palestinian Christian to go on pilgrimage because one "is already at the source itself, the point of origin" (p. 3). Pilgrimage in the sense of a physical journey is perhaps not necessary, but some sort of spiritual exploration, which is at the heart of pilgrimage, is indeed in order. Raheb performs this pilgrimage in two ways: by exploring his family's complicated denominational background and by providing a refreshing exegesis of a handful of biblical texts.

One might assume that Palestinian Christians are all members of churches such as the Syrian Orthodox, Armenian, or Jacobite, together with a few adventurous converts to eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism. The thought of a Palestinian Lutheran community is one that stretches the Western image of the Palestinian Christian community but does give a more accurate picture of the complicated Christian church in Palestine. In spite of its small and fragmented nature, the Palestinian Christian community has traditionally held an important place in the life of Palestine. Members of this community are historically progressive and urban-oriented, many earning a living as merchants and shopkeepers (p. 19). The community is also traditionally well-educated and multilingual, in large part because of the evangelistic efforts of denominations such as German Lutherans and the English-speaking Anglican Church as well as other Protestant denominations. Raheb notes that this Christian community has never enjoyed political autonomy, as it has always existed within occupied territory, ruled by Byzantines (technically Christian, although more concerned with political and cultural hegemony) and their Muslim and Ottoman successors and then by British mandate and now by Israel. The absence of autonomy is a threat to the survival of any community, especially a small community. Lack of self-government, or appropriate representation in the government, leads to a number of significant threats to the community's viability. Issues of economic, social, and political injustice are all problems with which the Palestinian Christian community has had to contend.

Emigration—or moving to new places where political, economic, and social oppression are not as devastating—is one traditional way a community seeks to preserve itself; and, Raheb notes, it also has significant biblical antecedents, which become important later in the book as he explores the Exodus. Since 1948, the size of the Palestinian Christian community has decreased significantly, in large part due to emigration to South and North America and Western Europe. The comment has been made that within a few generations there will be

no indigenous Christian community in Palestine. Raheb takes exception to this oft-repeated comment, noting that the Church is not interested in preserving sites associated with the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus Christ as museum churches. The importance of a community worshipping at the holy places is essential to the life and existence of such places (p. 4). This observation is an important reminder to Western Christians of the importance of the health of the Palestinian Christian community: Pilgrimage to the holy sites loses its soul if those sites become nothing more than museums.

The threat of emigration and the gradual disappearance of the Palestinian Christian community are at the heart of this book. The factors which make emigration appear to be the better viable course for the survival of the Christian community must be dealt with and relieved of their oppressive power. Chief among those factors is the issue of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. Raheb notes that the Christian community has for most of its life existed as a substate within Palestine. The institution of the Ottoman millet system (p. 38) is cited as an example of Christianity's historical secondary position in the Mideast, but one is given the impression that this system did in some way "work." Israeli occupation does not work. The example of Daher's vineyard (pp. 47-52) is given as a particularly powerful example of how Israeli occupation does not "work." Double standards, a selective enforcement of various religious and secular laws, abuse of water rights, and convenient interpretations of "fallow land" are all cited as ways in which the Israeli government has oppressed and mistreated non-Jewish communities. The example of Daher's vineyard points out the differences between upholding the law and justice. The two are not one: The law exists to protect a system, in this case Israeli dominance. Justice, for Raheb, can be nothing less than bringing to life the promises of the "Magnificat" (Luke 1): lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things, scattering the proud in the imagination of their hearts. Justice, Raheb notes, is anything but impartial (p. 27).

Some attention is given to the development of modern political thought in the first part of this book. The nineteenth century ruler of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, asserted that there must be a distinction between religion and state, faith and politics; this is noted as the beginning of a political change by which many groups in the Mideast hoped to have shared political power (p. 38). This, and the belief that justice was perhaps to be found best in an understanding of national unity, are factors which have been cited frequently as ideas that have not quite succeeded in bringing stability to the Mideast. The power of the religious establishment and faith are too easily understated. Movements toward national unity in the Arab world have increasingly been met by Islamist resurgence. Raheb is aware of a similar danger in the Palestinian Christian community: The course for the future must avoid both fundamentalism and secularism. Faith and politics cannot be separated. This is the first of nine points in Raheb's "Agenda for a Christian Arab Theology in the Twenty-first Century" (p. 43).

An important concept that is spoken and understood as a given, but inadequately developed in the first part of this book, is that even though three religions exist side-by-side in Palestine in an uneasy peace, there are two peoples. The alliance between Arab Muslims and Arab Christians, one is led to believe, has found its supreme contemporary political manifestation in the PLO, created in 1964. Observing the tensions between Israel and the PLO and the PLO and Islamist organizations, one must question the viability of the PLO as an accurate

and appropriate representation of Arab peoples, Christian and Muslim, within Israel. (In the two years since the publication of this book, confidence and hope in the PLO has been significantly challenged.) One must wonder if Palestinian Christian hopes for economic, political, social, and religious justice have a stable foundation in the PLO. Raheb hints at this questionable foundation by noting a lack of logic in the Mideast (p. 45) and the fact that the Arab-Christian faith can only be understood within the context of Arab Islamic culture, which has both enriched it and been enriched by it (p. 46). If the PLO does not offer a realistic hope of justice for Palestinian Christians, what other entity or structure does? Is this possible within the political state of Israel?

The greatest value of this book for a Western Christian looking at the Palestinian Christian community as an outsider is to be found in the second half, in which Raheb explores Holy Scripture through the eyes of a Palestinian Christian. Before exploring the three themes of Election, the Promise of the Land, and the Exodus, Raheb offers the foundations of a hermeneutic grounded in the conviction that Holy Scripture is not against Palestinian Christians. Key to his interpretation of the Scripture is a belief that any "statement of faith always contains an invitation" (p. 60). This belief is also colored by what is termed a "post-Auschwitz theology," which has been a dominant force in the study of Jewish-Christian relations for the past fifty years. While this "post-Auschwitz theology" has directed Western interreligious dialogue, Raheb notes it has two important weaknesses. Foremost, it is a Western theological approach, which has met with little, if any, understanding in Israel; and, second, it completely discounts the existence of Palestinian Christians, even leading to the "demonizing" of Palestinians (p. 57). Additionally, "post-Auschwitz theology" overcompensates for an historical lack of power in mid-twentieth century Europe by giving more weight to Jews, who are not an oppressed people in the Mideast (p. 58). The invitation contained within the faith expressed through Holy Scripture remains valid for Palestinian Christians.

Raheb's new exegesis of the Exodus, the central event of the Old Testament, is especially refreshing. Citing Prophet Hosea, he notes that the promises of the Exodus can be reversed and revoked if the people become unfaithful to God's covenant (p. 82). This astonishing but biblically supported concept, in addition to the belief that there is no exodus without justice (p. 84), allows one to hear the Exodus story with new ears. The Exodus as Raheb retells it becomes the story of the Palestinian Christian community's search for justice. Noting that the Exodus is both a liberation from oppression as well as a liberation to a new life (p. 90) ironically gives new meaning to Palestinian emigration, which is perhaps at odds with Raheb's intent in writing this book. The Palestinian people are indeed on a pilgrimage—for some the fulfillment of biblical promises is to be found in leaving "the source itself, the place of origin."

The book is further enriched with deeply moving chapters centering around the story of Jonah, the Good Samaritan, and loving one's enemy, all well-known texts in the Christian community. Mitri Raheb is quite obviously personally engaged not just in these anecdotal stories, but in the entire Palestinian story. This engagement makes *I Am a Palestinian Christian* deeply satisfying. It also makes the concluding chapter, "I Have a Dream," a little less startling and fanciful. Raheb dreams boldly in the last chapter of peace not just in one country, but of peace and justice and prosperity in a global community. If one is to

dream, one must dream boldly—especially if one is a member of an oppressed people.

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