

Will Stadler
***Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament:
History, Hermeneutics, and Ideology***
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Bringing to the attention of American and European Christians the plight of Palestinian Christians and evaluating the writings of Palestinian theologians and church leaders are important tasks. Too often in the West, Palestinians are presented in pejorative terms and are viewed solely as Muslims, though a portion of the overall Palestinian population is Christian (including many who may not be religious). On the other hand, there are Westerners who have become advocates for the Palestinians, sympathizing with their experience of oppression and efforts to find hope and resilience while living under Israeli military occupation. In particular, some Western Christians have been exposed to and in turn championed a distinctive Palestinian version of liberation theology. Hence, there is a need for a critical study of Palestinian Christian theologies that is attuned to the plight of Palestinians while also judicious in its assessment of them. The title of Stadler's book promises to offer just such a study but, regrettably, it largely disappoints.

The stated goal of the study is to tease out the hermeneutical elements and premises that operate in various writings of contemporary theologians "commonly identified as 'Arab Christians' who live in Israel and Palestine" (p. 4). Stadler seeks to answer this central question: "How [do] Palestinian Christians read the Old Testament in a context in which biblical texts are routinely read as an endorsement of their suffering?" (p. xix). To approach this question, the author proposes to investigate and advance what he calls "PCHOT," a Palestinian Christian Hermeneutics of the Old Testament. Stadler looks at contemporary theologians from different Christian denominations including Anglican Naim Ateek, Lutheran Mitri Raheb, Baptist Naim Khoury, Evangelical Yohanna Katanacho, Catholic Michel Sabbah (former Latin Patriarch), and Greek Orthodox Atallah Hanna (Archbishop at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher). Their differences are briefly sketched in the opening chapter, and we thus gain insight into the spectrum of theological approaches to Palestinian Christian identity after the creation of the modern nation state of Israel.

This chapter is perhaps the most valuable part of the book. Whereas, for example, Naim Khoury largely adopts the dispensationalist belief of evangelical

fundamentalism and hence gives “unconditional support for the Jewish people and Israel” (p. 47), Naim Ateek expressly develops a Palestinian theology of liberation. Christ is seen as a hermeneutical key to reading the Old Testament, allowing him to sidestep “nationalist Torah-oriented traditions” (p. 35). In another example, Mitri Raheb, trained in the German-Lutheran tradition that emphasizes the primacy of Scripture, reads the Bible as “a book about a minority” for whom persecution was an “unfortunate reality” (p. 42). He therefore places the crucifixion, as an experience of persecution, at the hermeneutical center. He also nuances Luther's Law-Gospel distinction to support an eschatological message of hope for Palestinians in the “midst of catastrophe” (p. 45). Greek Orthodox Hanna is embedded in a tradition of replacement theology and “typological interpretations of the Old Testament” (p. 72). These theological stances allow him to advance a Palestinian identity in “opposition to the modern state of Israel” (p. 67).

This helpful opening chapter stays entirely descriptive, setting up a reader's expectation that it will be followed by an in-depth, critical analysis of the different hermeneutical keys employed in these theologies. Instead, the next three chapters, while also largely descriptive, offer historical sketches of the increasingly deteriorating relations between Palestinians and the newly arriving Jews settling in the land of Israel. This history is traced from the “Dawn of Zionism” (chapter 2) to the periods of the British Mandate (chapter 3) and then following the creation of the state of Israel, with its succeeding wars and Intifadas (chapter 4). Each chapter begins with a very general historical summary that should have been placed into footnotes. More interesting and controversial aspects of these historical narratives (such as comparisons between the creation of the state of Israel and the Palestinian *Nakba*) are avoided with phrases such as “th[is] debate will not be rehearsed here” (p. 176). Surprisingly, no longer are the writings of the contemporary theologians introduced earlier central to these chapters. Instead, he quotes from numerous church and council statements. These are an altogether different genre that requires other tools for textual-political analysis. There is an interesting attempt in chapter 4 to distinguish four political phases that influenced different hermeneutical assumptions (1948-1967; 1967-1975; 1983-1987; post-1987), but the brevity with which they are treated leaves the reader wanting more.

A reader assuming that chapters 2-4 were intended as an historical interlude offered in order to enrich the investigation of the hermeneutics of contemporary Palestinian theologians will be frustrated with the final two chapters. A coherent argument is no longer discernible. Chapter 5 introduces three non-Palestinian theologians who addressed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Michael Prior, a Catholic biblical and liberation theologian in Great Britain and outspoken critic of Zionism and Israel; American Marianist priest Charles H. Miller, who advocates a reading of the Old Testament for Palestinian spirituality only within the “living tradition of the [Catholic] church” (p. 222); and Gershon Gerel, a messianic Jew and biblical tour guide with a Ph.D. from Hebrew University who accuses Palestinian theologians of “de-judaizing” the Bible (p. 336). Summarizing each of their approaches, Stadler adds what he calls a “critique” of their hermeneutics, but

those are rather short and flat. He never persuasively explains what these three men contribute to the main question of his book

Finally, in chapter 6 Stadler shifts to an entirely different topic, an extensive exegesis of Deuteronomy 7. In great detail, this chapter follows the conventions of source, literary, and rhetorical analysis, and presents verse-by-verse interpretations of prior exegetes. Stadler justifies this move because he sees in Deuteronomy 7 a key text that epitomizes the problems Palestinian Christians have with integrating the Old Testament into their theologies. Central here is his interpretation of the term *herem*, which, he says, can be translated quite broadly. Often, it has violent and triumphalist implications (ban, exclusion, rendering harmless, purification, total destruction, etc.). However, Stadler suggests that *herem* can be rendered in a more positive light as a means of “bringing two disparate communities together with the purpose of uniting them politically and religiously” (p. 315). He thus hopes to “provide a significant and substantial resource for Palestinian Christians” to re-appropriate positively the Old Testament and also to “provide a way forward for Jewish-Christian relations” (p. 342). While his intentions are laudable, it is hard to see how this specific exegetical study of the term *herem* relates back to the larger concerns of Palestinian Christians as summarized and outlined in mostly descriptive terms in the book’s previous chapters.

This overall lack of focus is perhaps the most serious weakness of *Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament*. Regrettably, the author missed many promising opportunities to make a real contribution to our understanding by failing to provide an empathetic reading *and* critical analysis of contemporary Palestinian Christian theologies.