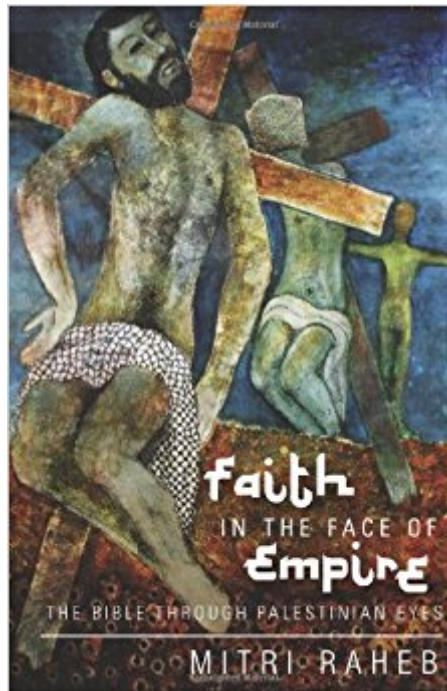




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# Faith In The Face Of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes



## Synopsis

A Palestinian Christian theologian shows how the reality of empire shapes the context of the biblical story, and the ongoing experience of Middle East conflict.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Both an accessible introduction to the subject and an eloquent reminder for those more familiar with the subject this book deserves a wide audience."--Publishers Weekly Starred

Review"VERDICT Raheb's voice is important and should be heard by decision makers in our country and abroad."--Library Journal"Simultaneously a revisionist reading of the Bible and a journey of self-discovery by a courageous Bethlehemite ">Read more

Mitri Raheb is the President of Dar al-Kalima University College in Bethlehem as well as president of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. He serves as the Senior Pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, Palestine. He is the author of several books, including *I am a Palestinian Christian* and *Bethlehem Besieged*.

Dr. Raheb writes in practical terms of the role of faith in action in forming a new future for not only Palestine, but the Middle East. His focus is on the internal map each person must develop for her/himself. The way to freedom, equality, and self determination starts inside every person. Real change comes from within, as Jesus said often. And that starts with faith. But it is not only faith, as

Dr Raheb points out, but informed faith. One needs to look soberly on the history of the region, as he does in this text, in order to understand that the only "solutions" that will last are those emanating from the region itself. Empires come and go. Their brilliant solutions for those under their domination also come and go. The people of the region will devise their own future, if left to it. But first they must search within themselves for what they truly want the future to look like. Dr. Raheb provides a roadmap to do just that. I highly recommend this book for anyone who is interested in a better, more in-depth understanding of the Middle East.

The author, a Palestinian Protestant pastor living in Bethlehem, traces the plight of people living in the area through the ages. Oppressed by the empires on whose border they exist, they somehow manage to survive. He identifies today's empire as the United States with Israel as its client state. The book is interesting because it presents a point of view different from one favoring Israel without question.

In the Epilogue to his book, *Faith in the Face of Empire*, author Mitri Raheb refers us to Jeremiah 32: Jeremiah is in prison, the city destroyed, the temple burned, and yet Jeremiah is asked to buy his cousin's field. Raheb writes: "He was able to imagine a future beyond the destruction around him. And then, Hope was deciding to invest in the area at a time when no sane person would dare. Those words describe the author himself. Raheb is a Palestinian pastor who given his gifts and talents easily could have emigrated and found a parish or academic perch elsewhere. But he stayed in his home town of Bethlehem and bought the field: under his guidance programs and institutions of mercy, well-being, and education have been established. *Faith in the Face of Empire* is a reading of *The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes* which contextualizes the Biblical narrative with a Palestinian face and speaks of how faith creatively resists the machinations of the present day empire, Israeli occupation. One can almost hear the author breathe out his own journey of faith and embodied creative resistance, a quality for which he credits his father. Resistance, he writes, is action, not reaction, and Faith is nothing less than developing the bold vision of a new reality and mobilizing the needed resources to make it happen. This book is a solid and literate resource for anyone wishing understanding to join in buying the field."

In this book aimed at a general rather than an academic audience, Dr. Mitri Raheb valiantly takes on a number of complex problematic notions including sacred historiography, constructions of race and

ethnicity in light of empire, and the failures of liberal ideology. On one hand, any one of these topics are too complex for a short book on Palestine, but on the other, all must be included in some way for the average Westerner to begin to grasp the situation from a Palestinian perspective. I would say overall that Raheb takes a good stab toward at least bringing most of the issues into focus for the reader who comes to the topic relatively uninformed on politics in Israel/Palestine. If I had to identify a central thesis of the book, it would be that the modern Israeli political movement has almost always been read as narrative counterpart to the ancient Israelite struggling to be liberated in the land of the Canaanites. Raheb argues that we can read the text differently, that it is actually the contemporary Palestinians who can be seen as being oppressed by imperial powers, much like the Israelites were in ancient times. Except for a couple of spots, I would say the book does an adequate, even-handed job of outlining many of the problems in Israel/Palestine today and even presciently provides some background for the current conflict between Hamas and the Israeli government. It's always helpful to hear about the state of things from a Palestinian perspective. However, I didn't get the idea that Raheb has a solid understanding of the connection to the State of Israel to the U.S. from an American perspective, or maybe it's that he's reticent to speak about it in too stark of terms. In the U.S., the State of Israel is often seen as a sort of a treasured Cold War museum piece or even a "Second America" in the minds of many—an idea that I would argue extends far beyond the minds of just Zionist Evangelicals. In modern Israel, Americans (maybe subconsciously) see their own history playing out before their eyes: Jews as an exceptional people with a sort of vague manifest destiny of "settling" a "vacant" land, ordered to subdue violent "savages" with technology (rifle versus bow and arrow; now Iron Dome versus Molotov cocktail), and to create a system of isolated, non-contiguous reservations for control of indigenous people, and devise an array of new treaties and proposals that will never be followed—"everything headed toward a future that is ideologically portrayed as inevitable. As for notable land thefts (where Raheb points to the West Bank), I would put those of North American and Australia up against those of the Israeli government any day. And I would argue that the previously described bit of historiography is far more "sacred" to the average American than the religious one found in the Hebrew Bible. In the U.S. we mistake Israeli culture and politics as mirror images of our own. That's going to be very difficult to change, but if empire is going to be dismantled in Palestine that's the task at hand. To focus too much the State of Israel is to misidentify the nature of which empire is actually at work and what is needed for a solution. As Raheb correctly observes, Western liberal ideology has been slow to take up the Palestinian cause,

but I think this is so for obvious reasons, at least in North America. Few people, even the most liberal in the U.S., will ever argue for similar rights for indigenous Americans to return to their land, except to perhaps set up a few casinos in the desert. It's seen here as simply too late and who really wants to, after all? Correspondingly, it would take an exceptionally liberal Israeli to argue that land taken in 1948 (for example) should be given back to Palestinians. And so maybe, sadly, it's too late in Palestine as well; I'm sure the Israeli government would have us believe so. If we in the U.S. broadly take up the cause of the Palestinians now, isn't this simply a self-indictment of many of our own historical core values? That's also going to be a tall order. I also observed that Raheb begins imperial history in the region with Assyria, whereas almost all scholars would begin the narrative with New Kingdom Egypt, a particularly surprising move if one wants to find allegiance with liberation theology which lies so heavily on the Exodus narrative. Of course Egypt brings with it a number of other problems when reading modern Palestinians as Israelites, including some complicity in the establishing structures of empire (e.g., Gn. 47:15-20) or in duplicating these structures upon their own people (e.g., I Kings 11:28). In a parallel line of thinking, I bristled when I read Raheb referring over and over to Israeli settlements, knowing all the symbolism that this image will evoke in the mind of his American readers. Palestinians would be wise to ban this word from their rhetorical vocabulary. I think the book's strongest point is that it doesn't rely heavily on post-imperial political solutions, solutions which have often failed in history and which are arguably outside of an authentic Christian theology of the Jesus tradition in any event. As Raheb observes, the Jesus of the Gospels is a-political at best (and I would say, arguably anti-political), for example, Jesus in his time travels and ministers to the Greek settlers of the Decapolis. Many expected Jesus to be a Messiah of political revolution; what they actually got was Messiah as sacrifice. Overturning cherished narratives and ways of reading is extremely difficult and maybe even impossible, but that doesn't mean one should stop trying. Perhaps one day the U.S. will tire of this particular adventure in the Middle East; most empires do eventually. This book is a good beginning (as are all the efforts made by Mitri Raheb in Bethlehem, which are outlined in the book. But both the theology and the peacemaking have a long way to go. I'm sure the author is aware of this.

My first visit to Palestine, Bethlehem, and Christmas Lutheran Church was during the Advent Season of 2007. Not only did that visit change my life, it began a search which I still hope will conclude with the longed for resolution that generations of Palestinian Christians have hoped and

prayer for. Faith in the Face of Empire has radically altered my perspective and challenged my naiveté. The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb who has often stated "I'm hopeful but not optimistic" has provided both a biblical and historical context for prayer, support, and action. This book is a quotable gold-mine! Faith is nothing less than developing the bold vision of a new reality and mobilizing the needed resources to make it happen. And another thought: For Jesus, the liberation of Palestine alone was never enough. Liberating a tiny piece of the empire was not the whole agenda. I can now say about that piece of Mid-east real estate it's not location, location, location, but perspective, perspective, perspective.

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