**Faith in the Face of Empire**

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### Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb

Father Raheb is a [Palestinian Christian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palestinian_Christian), the pastor of the [Evangelical](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelical) [Lutheran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutheran) Christmas Church in [Bethlehem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethlehem) (a member church of the [Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelical_Lutheran_Church_in_Jordan_and_the_Holy_Land), or ELCJHL), and the founder and president of the Diyar Consortium, a group of [Lutheran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutheran)-based, ecumenically-oriented institutions serving the [Bethlehem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethlehem) area. He has written *Faith in the Face of Empire. The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* ([Orbis Books](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orbis_Books), 2014) and *The Invention of History: A Century of Interplay between Theology and Politics in Palestine* (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher 2011).

1. The Context of Theology in Palestine.
2. Contextual Theology. Mitri is a “contextual theologian.” After explaining this, he will talk about the Arab Spring.
3. The Bible could not have been written anywhere else but in Palestine, because it is uniquely understandable in this region.
4. He doesn’t start with historical critical method, still less in heaven with God. Mitri starts theology with geopolitics.
5. Examination of the Map.
6. Palestine is a small country between Jordan and the Mediterranean. It is not in the center of the Middle East. Jerusalem is the “navel” of the earth in theology, but not in politics.
7. Five Regional Powers dictate the fate of Palestine.
8. Persia. President Obama wants to have an agreement with Iran because Iran is a major player.
9. Mesopotamia. Iraq and Syria together form a regional power. They are weakened today, but they will come back.
10. Turkey. It is the land of the biblical Hittites.
11. Europe. It too is an important power that affects Palestine.
12. Egypt.
13. These five powers surround Palestine, and during most of history, Palestine was an occupied country. Occupied by Egypt, then the Assyrians, then Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders, Ottoman. . . .and lastly the Israelis.
14. Most seminaries connect the modern state of Israel with the biblical Israel. Mitri says that this is a false thesis.
15. Israel is part of the occupying forces. The people of Palestine today live like the people of the Bible – they live in an occupied land.
16. Palestinians suffer from theology that is created in service of the empire. For political science, Palestine is an occupied country.
17. Why do the Israelis treat Palestine badly, when the Bible commands hospitality? The answer is that the Israeli occupation receives a “divine overcoat,” a biblical sanction.
18. USA provides the “hardware” of occupation.
19. Churches provide Israel with the “software” or ideology.
20. Mitri says that he is in the business of “software hacking,” i.e., exploring the “code” that provides the rationale for the Israeli occupation. Mitri, like Jesus, has spent his life under occupation.
21. The Theology of Occupation.
22. The Bible is a response to living under an occupation.
23. The Jews occupied Canaan, says James Cassidy. Isn’t that true?
24. Mitri responds: “We can approve of the biblical conquest if we approve of what ISIS is doing in Syria and Iran.” The five regional powers are never all strong at the same time. The Romans at the time of Jesus occupied all Palestine. Sometimes Palestine was under two occupiers, e.g., Syria and Egypt. These occupying powers “met” in a middle place: Palestine. Marcion tried to get rid of the OT; he used the name of God to try to erase history.
25. If two powers occupied for too long a time (Assyrians in Samaria or Ramallah; Egypt in Judah), the people of Palestine began to have a separate identity: Judah and Israel.
26. But the “separate identities” in Palestine (e.g., Judah and Samaria) actually belong together.
27. The Canaanites were city states, rather than a national entity (so the biblical Judges were not really an occupying empire).
28. What Does It Mean to Live under Occupation?
29. When the Israelis humiliate them, the Palestinians ask: “God, where are you?” The gods of the empire are powerful. The pyramids express it. The Roman triumphal art expresses it.
30. But the God of biblical Palestine is a “loser.” He has not won a war. He “allows” his own people to be enslaved.
31. What is revelation? It is the unique answer to the question, “God, where are you?” Revelation enabled the biblical forefathers to “spot” God in their own powerlessness.
32. Revelation.
33. God did not stop the Babylonian exile. God “packed his luggage and went into exile with his people.”
34. God did not stop the destruction of the Temple. They began to envision a Temple “not made by hands.”
35. The climax is Jesus on the cross: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” God has become a victim of the empire. But in this, “victory loses its teeth.” Our forefathers were able to hear, see, and feel this revelation of God in their powerlessness.
36. The Voices of the Palestinians. They still experience the story of the OT and the NT through the question, “My God, where are you?” It’s high time to re-think the way we do theology.
37. Mitry’s Second Theological Question: Who Is My Neighbor?
    1. My own neighbor can be a stranger. One son belongs to Hamas, the other belongs to Fatah – all due to regional constellations. Why can’t Palestinians unite? This is an ancient question. Why were the two Germanys divided? They are regional constellations, and small constellations depend on outside help.
    2. The Egyptians unite with Mahmoud Abbas against Hamas.
    3. The Syrians too unite with constellations, and they make brothers enemies.
38. The Third Theological Question: How Are We Liberated?
    1. Some of the false answers:
39. By occupation? The Amalekites were the people in the Hebron area. David controlled the Judean wilderness.
40. By the kindness of outsiders, such as Cyrus the Persian?
    1. Some of the Answers.
41. Rebellion or armed resistance. The Zealots. These might be considered “intifadas.”
    * 1. The first Jewish revolt (66-70 AD): Jewish fighters against the Romans were heroes, and the Palestinians were terrorists.
      2. The second Jewish revolt (140 AD): Bar Kochba.
42. Collaboration. If you can’t beat them, join them.
43. The tax collectors were doing the dirty work for the empire. They were subcontractors for the empire. Today Palestinians build settlements for the Israelis.
44. The Sadducees. These were the “establishment” in Jerusalem. The patriarchs and bishops in Jerusalem are always on the “thin line,” speaking for Christians – but without upsetting the State of Israel.
45. Legalism. Some people make sense of occupation by saying that we must repent and please God:
46. The Pharisees who emphasized the law of God. We must repent of our wrong-doing and commit ourselves to follow God’s law.
47. Today we see the Muslim Brotherhood. They say that the *Shariah* will liberate us. As if Kosher food and the hijab can make us holy.
48. Withdrawal. The salafist Muslims and the Jewish heredim withdraw from the world. They want to create the holy community that pleases God. So do the Christian Zionists.
49. Religious fundamentalism. It is an “answer” to how we shall be liberated.
50. As long as there is injustice, there will be armed resistance.
51. Example: Paul was originally a religious fundamentalist, who thought he was doing God a favor by killing people. Then he encounters the Galatians: in Christ, there is neither male nor female.
52. Transformation of the Empire.
    1. Is peace with the “empire” possible? Or are we doomed to keep on fighting?
53. Answers.
    * 1. Revelation. Peace can only happen when God destroys the empire. John wrote Revelation in Patmos, and could not see that peace with Rome and Babylon were possible.
      2. Prophet Jonah: The empire is “Ninevah,” and the answer is that the Ninevites can listen. They can be educated. It’s a matter of PR or education. They can learn something new. Jonah wanted to destroy the empire, but he discovered another answer. Evangelization. Transform the empire.
      3. Isaiah. He imagines the lion and the lamb lying down together. Isaiah was able to imagine a “vegetarian lion.” The empire has to be persuaded that military power is not the “jack of all trades.” Herzog says that Netanyahu is not strict enough.
54. Question (by Felipe de Jesús): Is Mitri advocating a Latin-American style liberation theology?
    1. Through non-violent *comunidades de base*? Through dialogue with the rich and oppressive families? Through analysis of the structures of oppression?
    2. Mitri: South and Central American Pentecostal churches have denied liberation theology and talked about the gospel of prosperity.
55. Toward the Future.
    1. What is moving the situation today?
       1. The Petrodollar. Saudi Arabia and Qattar have become regional powers because they have the money.
       2. The USA. It is a different kind of regional power, different from Europe.
       3. The weakening of Iraq and Syria. Today, they share the same problem as Palestine. They are occupied lands.
       4. Iran is having a resurgence.
       5. Turkey is playing a role.
    2. Analysis.
56. President Obama was so naïve, that he almost allowed Egypt to suffer the fate of Iraq and Iran.
57. Israel is an “empire by proxy,” a proxy for the USA.
58. There is a collision of regional powers. This has led to diverse and contradictory identities in Palestine. Instead of Judeans and Samarians, we have the Sunnis (Petrodollar) and the Shiites (Iran).
59. Israel wants Turkey, Iraq and Iran to be embroiled in domestic conflict, so that they will not have the strength to occupy Palestine. Syria and Iraq have been “destroyed,” and so cannot meddle.
    1. There are Ten Challenges that face the region (Kairos Document).
60. The Two Main Documents.
    * 1. *Kairos Palestine Document*, written by Palestinian church leaders from Catholics, Orthodox. KairosPalestine.org (2009). <http://Diyar.ps>.
      2. *From the Nile to the Euphrates: The Call of Faith and Citizenship*. It is a Christian response in 2014 from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq.
61. Creed.

* God created us, so we are committed to caring for creation, regardless of belief, gender, identity.
* We believe in Trinity and celebrate the diversity within the region.
* God is omnipotent and merciful. He gives life and renews it. Immigration contributes to that.
* Belief in Jesus Christ. We are committed to following his path and advancing his mission.
* In his death and resurrection, he experienced the pain of injustice and the mercy of God. We must not give in to the logic of despair and death. The sanctity of life is important where people die all the time.
* The Holy Spirit. We want to renew society and its institutions.
* Oneness of the Church. Commitment to ecumenism. Citizenship is important.
* Forgiveness of Sins. We ourselves are part of the problem, and must ask forgiveness.
* God as Judge. We shall all stand before God, and our countries should have just constitutions, good laws, and equal rights.
* Eternal Life. Our people believe in immortality, but despair of dignity before death.