

**Munther Isaac**  
*The Other Side of the Wall:  
A Palestinian Narrative of Lament and Hope*

(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), paperback, 248 pp.

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Palestinian Christians once numbered 12 percent of the population of British Mandate Palestine before 1948. Today their numbers have declined to 1.3 percent in the historic birthplace of Christianity (209). The author was born in Bethlehem and is pastor of the Christmas Evangelical Lutheran Church and Dean of Bethlehem Bible College. He is deeply committed to peaceful and respectful Christian witness in the region despite the ongoing Israeli occupation of and settlement in the West Bank and diverse forms of religious extremism in the region. His primary audience for this book is Christians from other parts of the world, especially Christian Zionists who he says ignore the plight of Palestinian Christians. He sharply criticizes their celebration of the return of Jews to national sovereignty in the Holy Land as the penultimate chapter in an eschatological drama that ends with the return of Christ. He argues that they underestimate the harm done by their one-sided advocacy to the indigenous Arab peoples of the region, the majority of whom are Muslim but which includes small, vibrant communities of Christians representing all the major traditions of Christianity.

The author structures the book autobiographically but addresses topics such as trauma, grievances, and human rights abuses of Palestinians by the Israeli government and their primary ally, the United States. The book was written during the administration of President Trump when the Americans moved their embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, suspended aid to the Palestinian Authority, attempted to normalize Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and recognized the Golan Heights (also claimed by Syria) as part of Israel's territory. The author assumes the reader already knows about the history of the region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (thus this is not the best book for students who have never visited the region or studied its history). The most interesting chapters deal with Christian Zionism and different uses of the Bible in the region. There is also one chapter addressed to the author's Jewish neighbors and one to his Muslim neighbors.

The author strongly dissociates himself from antisemitism and Islamophobia, acknowledges the horror of the Holocaust, and seeks to live at peace with both Israelis and the Muslim majority of his own people. Along the way he interprets Jewish Israelis' claims to the Holy Land as excessively particularistic and exclusive (e.g., the nation-state law enacted by the Israeli Knesset in 2018 [127-29]). Likewise, he presents Christianity (excepting Christian Zionism) as universal and inclusive. He views the Holy Land as God's Land intended to be shared by all peoples, not to be possessed only or primarily by Jews. He says his own Palestinian contextual Christian theology is anti-Zionist but not anti-Jewish. Yet he does not acknowledge strong bonds of connection between the Israelites of ancient Israel and Judah and modern Jews gathered from around the world who populate the State of Israel today. He asks, why under Israeli law can a Jew anywhere in the world apply to immigrate to the State of Israel (and perhaps settle in the West Bank), yet millions of Palestinians native to the region are refused a similar "right" of return? He tends to view the modern nation of Israel as a western solution to the problem of European antisemitism that was imposed on his ancestors and that is rationalized by Christian Zionists via a highly speculative and exclusive eschatological drama. He tends to conflate Christian Zionism with post-Holocaust Christian theology that, according to him, seeks right relations with Jews while ignoring the human rights of Palestinians. He quotes affirmatively from the Kairos Palestine Document that calls for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against the State of Israel and considers the Jewish homeland to be an "apartheid state" like South Africa in the twentieth century (221).

On the one hand, the author is convincing that he and his fellow Palestinians are traumatized and denied their right to national sovereignty after the Jewish people returned to sovereignty in their ancient homeland with the support of other nations. On the other hand, the author fails to address the fact that Palestinians and other Arab peoples have resisted the Jewish return to sovereignty not only non-violently but also with lethal force in multiple wars and acts of terrorism. The reader who knows something about the region and its modern history is left to sort out conflicting claims and grievances of two traumatized people (Palestinians and Israelis) who are both victims of an ongoing conflict that has regional and international dimensions. "The Wall" in the book title (called "the security barrier" by the Israeli government) was built in response to the violence of the Second Palestinian Uprising (2000-2005) against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Since 1967, Israeli governments under different ruling coalitions have expressed deep concern with the national security risks of returning the West Bank to full Palestinian control, especially given support by Syria, Hezbollah, and Iran for the Palestinians.

Isaac clearly presents the hardships faced by Palestinians and harshly criticizes Israelis and Christian supporters of Israel. We know, however, that in many conflicts there are seldom pure, innocent victims and evil oppressors. The binary of oppressor / oppressed obscures how we are all caught in the gravity of sinfulness and alienation from God and neighbor, and how we all have agency to contribute toward a better future. For we who live outside the region, we can make a contribution to the possibility of greater justice and peace by listening patiently to all

sides without demonizing one against the other, by giving of our resources to civil society organizations in the region that work toward mutual recognition and reconciliation, and trusting that whatever compromise to the conflict that may emerge, it will take both the Palestinian and Israeli peoples and others in the region to make reconciliation a reality.