

**Raheb, Mitri. *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible*.
Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2023**

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Introduction

Mitri Raheb's *Decolonizing Palestine* offers a powerful critique of how theology has been weaponized to sustain settler colonialism in Palestine, both in theory and practice. As a Palestinian Christian theologian, Raheb challenges traditional narratives, particularly Christian Zionism, that have justified the time of crisis and war in Palestine. His work calls for a theological paradigm shift grounded in justice and human dignity, urging seminarians and religious leaders to confront their complicity in systems of oppression.

Raheb examines how biblical narratives have been misused to support territorial claims and exclusion, showing the deep intertwining of theology and colonialism. He critiques the idea of "chosenness" and exclusive territorial claims, advocating for a theology that promotes coexistence and justice. Raheb's call is not just to critique these theological frameworks but to embrace a vision of theology that serves the marginalized and oppressed.

This book is a critical resource for those studying theology, urging readers to reflect on their role in perpetuating colonial structures and to engage with scripture in ways that transcend supremacy and violence. Raheb challenges us to decolonize both our understanding of Palestine and our theological beliefs, promoting a transformative vision of justice and peace.

Summary of the Book

In *Decolonizing Palestine*, Raheb presents a compelling critique of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, reframing it not simply as a political dispute but as a persistent settler-colonial project with deep theological roots. The book unfolds across four chapters, each addressing key aspects of settler colonialism and its intersection with biblical narratives.

The first chapter, "Settler Colonialism, Palestine, and the Bible," uncovers the ongoing settler-colonial project in Palestine. Raheb draws from theorists like Patrick Wolfe and Lorenzo Veracini to distinguish settler colonialism from other forms of colonization, showing that it goes beyond resource exploitation to systematically displace and erase indigenous identities, histories, and cultures. In this context, the land of Palestine is presented as "terra nullius" – empty land awaiting settlement. This notion is critical to the settler colonial project, as it not only seeks to occupy the land but to redefine its history, rendering Palestinians invisible or illegitimate in their own homeland. By intertwining colonial narratives with theological constructs, Raheb invites readers to examine the theological underpinnings that support such a

colonial enterprise and to rethink the impact of these narratives on Palestinian identity and self-determination (pp. 12-24).

In the second chapter, "Christian Zionism," Raheb traces the development of Christian Zionism and its significant role in securing Western support for the colonization of Palestine. He identifies the historical alignment of Christian Zionism with British imperial ambitions during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly through the Balfour Declaration and the wider colonial interests in the Middle East. The rise of American evangelicalism in the 20th century further solidified the connection between Christian Zionism and Zionist political goals. Raheb critiques the theological framework of Christian Zionism, demonstrating how it weaponizes biblical narratives, especially those related to the "Promised Land," to justify the occupation and colonization of Palestine. He argues that both liberal and evangelical Christians, often blind to the suffering and displacement of Palestinians, have become complicit in perpetuating the injustice of this theological-political alliance (pp. 26-35).

The third chapter, "The Land, the Bible, and Settler Colonialism," addresses the theological interpretations that underpin exclusivist claims to the land of Palestine. Raheb critiques how traditional biblical readings, particularly those surrounding the "Promised Land," have been used to support territorial claims that marginalize Palestinian presence and justify their displacement. He challenges these exclusivist interpretations, urging a reimagined relationship between land and people, one that is rooted in justice, coexistence, and shared responsibility. Raheb advocates for a decolonial theology that emphasizes mutual respect, reconciliation, and the dignity of all people who inhabit the land. This reimagined theology rejects exclusive ownership of the land and proposes a relational, community-oriented understanding of the land that fosters justice and peace (pp. 37-54).

In the final chapter, "Chosen People?" Raheb critiques the theological concept of biblical election, which has often been misused to justify Jewish supremacy and the marginalization of Palestinians. He challenges the interpretation of "chosenness" as a divine mandate for territorial entitlement and superiority, offering a more inclusive view as a call to serve others. Rather than a justification for domination, Raheb redefines "chosenness" as a responsibility to advocate for inclusivity, justice, and the well-being of all people. This critique directly confronts the exclusionary nationalist narratives that have been used to justify the oppression of Palestinians and the erasure of their rights. Raheb's interpretation of "chosenness," as a call to serve and promote justice offers a transformative vision of biblical theology that dismantles supremacist ideologies and fosters reconciliation and peace (pp. 55-70).

The epilogue positions the Palestinian struggle within the broader context of global decolonial movements, calling for collective action against systemic oppression. Raheb's work urges his readers to recognize the interconnectedness of struggles for justice across the world and to actively engage in dismantling the structures that perpetuate colonial violence.

Key Themes:

Settler Colonialism: Expropriation of land and demographic manipulation supported by theological justification.

Christian Zionism: Legitimization of colonialism through selective biblical interpretations aligned with Western imperialism.

Decolonial Theology: A call for a theology centered on justice, rejecting exclusivist readings of scripture.

Rethinking Election: A reinterpretation of biblical election as a call for inclusivity, promoting shared humanity (pp. 101-110).

Critical Analysis:

Raheb's interdisciplinary approach stands out as one of the book's strongest features. By weaving together theology, history, and settler-colonial theory, he offers a nuanced and multifaceted critique of the crisis and war in Palestine. His integration of scholarly research with real-life experiences lends credibility and depth to his arguments. As a Palestinian theologian from Bethlehem, Raheb's perspective is deeply personal, reflecting the lived realities of oppression and displacement, which makes his critique both authentic and compelling (p. 7). The decolonial lens he applies is transformative, urging readers to rethink traditional theological constructs and advocate for liberation and justice for marginalized communities (pp. 37-70). Additionally, the book's global relevance enhances its impact, as Raheb draws parallels between the Palestinian struggle and other anti-colonial movements, showcasing its universal applicability (pp. 75-76).

However, the book is not without its limitations. While Raheb excels in critiquing Western theological frameworks, his work could have been enriched by engaging more deeply with non-Western or indigenous theological perspectives. This omission leaves a gap in fully contextualizing the global nature of decolonial theology. Moreover, the interfaith dynamics between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are only lightly addressed, leaving readers yearning for a more thorough exploration of how these relationships can both resist and perpetuate settler colonialism. Finally, the tone of the book occasionally risks alienating readers, particularly when critiquing liberal Christian theologians. While this criticism is often justified, a more conciliatory tone might have broadened the book's accessibility.

Despite these shortcomings, *Decolonizing Palestine* is a groundbreaking contribution to decolonial theology. It challenges readers to critically engage with scripture and reflect on their own complicity in systemic oppression, making it an indispensable resource for both scholars and seminarians.

Relevance to Seminarians:

For seminarians in Indonesia and beyond, *Decolonizing Palestine* offers transformative insights into theology, colonial history, and justice. In a world fragmented by systemic inequality and oppression, no one can remain a bystander. Indonesian seminarians, living in a nation shaped by colonial legacies and ongoing struggles of marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples and interfaith minorities, will find Raheb's critiques of Western theology and colonial ideologies particularly resonant. The book challenges them to confront how scripture has been weaponized historically and globally, offering a critical lens to reassess their own theological assumptions.

Globally, seminarians are prompted to draw connections between the Palestinian story and their local contexts, where colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and exclusionary religious practices persist. Raheb's decolonial theology demonstrates how biblical narratives can be reimagined as tools for liberation rather than oppression. His reframing of biblical election as inclusive and justice-oriented presents a universal call to resist supremacist ideologies and embrace shared humanity.

Raheb's work encourages seminarians to recognize that Jerusalem is not merely a biblical abstraction or utopia but a lived, contested space. This realization mirrors the necessity of viewing theological constructs in light of contemporary struggles for justice. It underscores the urgency of challenging narratives that prioritize historical romanticism over lived realities, highlighting the need for a theology grounded in present-day struggles.

Decolonizing Palestine equips seminarians with the tools to navigate complex interfaith and intercultural dynamics, encouraging ministry that prioritizes liberation, equity, and coexistence. By connecting Raheb's insights to Indonesia's pluralistic society and extending his critique to global contexts, the book underscores the shared responsibility of religious leaders to address fragmentation and work toward a just and reconciled world.

Personal Reflections:

Reading *Decolonizing Palestine* is both sobering and transformative. While recent media coverage of the State of Israel's response to the Hamas attacks of October 2023 may prompt one to think that Raheb's focus on decolonizing Palestine is a reaction to that violence, this work builds on decades of thought and advocacy. It continues his legacy, starting with his seminal *I Am A Palestinian Christian* (1995), and extending through years of theological and institutional leadership.

Raheb challenges assumptions held by Western Christians, especially those shaped by Christian Zionism. His examination of liberal theologians' unwittingly perpetuated settler-colonial narratives is both convicting and enlightening. As Miguel De La Torre notes in his endorsement, this book decolonizes the reader's mind, showing how Western biblical interpretations have reinforced oppression.

Raheb's insistence that settler-colonial frameworks operate not only consciously but deep within the theological subconsciousness invited me into a more difficult discipline of unlearning: recognizing how cultural Zionism, imperial imagination, and racialized Christian narratives can subtly shape my own hermeneutics and ethical commitments. His naming of these contradictions does not offer easy resolutions; instead, it demands that readers inhabit them honestly, seeing in that discomfort a generative space for rethinking power, land, and belonging.

Personally, it pushed me to confront not only my understanding of the crisis and war in Palestine, but also the quieter, insidious ways I have absorbed and reproduced settler-colonial ideologies in my own context. Some of my friends have visited the Holy Land and returned with glowing accounts of its beauty – sharing pictures of Jesus' birthplace, recounting stories of walking in His footsteps, and marvelling at the landscape. Yet, their reflections often stop at the surface, focused on the historical and picturesque rather than on the lived, contested realities of the land today. It is tempting to be captivated by the sacredness of geography, but Raheb

exposes how such sentiment can mask the daily suffering of those who inhabit the land. His work urges readers to confront the realities of occupation, apartheid, and the ongoing struggle for justice. This call to see beyond the surface has prompted me to reassess not only how I view the Holy Land, but also how I read scripture and understand its relevance to contemporary struggles for dignity.

Midway through the book, Raheb recounts a poignant moment when he walked through Jerusalem with a theologian friend. For Raheb, Jerusalem was a living city, marked by weekly visits and personal memories until barriers restricted his access. For his friend, however, Jerusalem remained an abstraction, rooted primarily in biblical history rather than present-day realities (p. 37-38). I have not been to Jerusalem myself, but I have witnessed – through the testimonies of those who live there and through documented accounts – the apartheid practices and the walls that separate communities. This past July, I attended a workshop on “The Crisis in the Middle East” led by Selina Abdallah, a Palestinian sibling, who encouraged us to move beyond the language of “conflict” and recognize the deeper structures of oppression at work in the land. Raheb’s critique forced me to acknowledge how easily theological romanticism can eclipse the lived pain of others, revealing how much my own theological imagination has been shaped more by inherited narratives than by the urgent demands of justice and human dignity.

Raheb’s exploration of Matthew 5:5 – “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” – is profoundly illuminating. He reflects on how empires rise and fall, but the meek, deeply connected to the land, endure long after imperial powers have vanished (p. 50-51). This reading unsettles triumphalist interpretations of scripture and invites a reorientation toward those whose quiet resilience exposes the fragility of empire. It has reshaped my understanding of both scripture and history, challenging me to engage more critically, courageously, and compassionately with contemporary struggles for justice.

Conclusion:

Decolonizing Palestine is a seminal work that demands attention from theologians, seminarians, and activists alike. Raheb’s integration of personal narrative, historical analysis, and theological critique offers a compelling call to action. His vision for a decolonial theology rooted in justice and inclusivity makes this book an invaluable resource for those committed to transformative scholarship and ministry. By reimagining theological constructs through the lens of justice, Raheb inspires readers to engage with scripture and faith traditions in ways that affirm the dignity and humanity of all people.