



MUNTHER ISAAC

THE
OTHER
SIDE OF
THE WALL

A PALESTINIAN CHRISTIAN NARRATIVE
OF LAMENT AND HOPE



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CHAPTER ONE

AN INVITATION

It is because you are a Palestinian!”

That was the rationale used by the organizers of a major Christian mission conference in Ireland to explain why they were considering withdrawing their invitation for me to speak at their conference. Their concern was not due to any controversial things I had said or done. It was not related to my theological positions. Their hesitancy for me to participate in the conference simply had to do with who I am and where I come from. I was at fault because I am a Palestinian.

Those words have always haunted me. The ideology behind this kind of judgment has been the basis of how many Christians around the world have judged and treated me and my people. In many Christian circles, my being a Palestinian means that I am dismissed as irrelevant, or even an obstacle to God’s plan for the land of my forefathers. If I choose to believe those “truths,” I must accept that my existence and well-being are secondary in God’s plan. Such beliefs tell me that I do not belong in the land where my forefathers have lived for hundreds, if not thousands, of years because God already decided thousands of years ago who owns this land, and I simply have to accept it!



Being a Palestinian means that I am disqualified from sharing about life in Palestine in many Christian gatherings or even from leading Bible studies in Christian conferences! For many of us Palestinian Christians, these judgments have made us question whether or not God actually loves us as Palestinians. It has caused us to wonder whether God deals with different people in different ways based on their ethnicity, nationality, or religion, or whether we are somehow second-class children of God. Are we at fault because we have the wrong postal address and the wrong DNA?

On the other hand, being a Palestinian means that I am viewed as a demographic threat by the state of Israel and many of its allies. The notion of a demographic threat interprets population increases of particular minorities (usually ethnic) in a certain country as a threat to the dominant ethnic identity of that same country. Palestinians are commonly understood as a “demographic threat” not only by the Israeli government but by many American politicians and Christian groups as well. Some “Christian” groups have even offered to pay us Palestinians money to leave the land and settle somewhere else! Paul Liberman, executive director of the Alliance for Israel Advocacy (a lobbying group established by the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America), explains their policy plan as such, “If there are any Palestinian residents who wish to leave, we will provide funds for you to leave, with the hopes that over 10 years to change the demography of the West Bank towards an eventual annexation.”¹ (And that is supposedly a brother in Christ! With brothers like that, who needs enemies?)

This book is a story of my life journey, with all its struggles and hurdles, in the shadow of these dismissive views and despite them—a journey that led me not only to embrace and celebrate

my identity but also see it as part of my calling in life. It is about discovering a sense of calling to envision and work for an alternative reality. More importantly, this book illustrates my journey of discovering that the Jesus of Bethlehem, the son of this land—in his way and teachings and through the kingdom he established on this earth—has shown us the way for a new and better reality, here and now. This is a reality in which faith *can* move mountains and prepare the path for a better world.

PALESTINIAN AND ARAB

I am an Arab Palestinian Christian. For many, being a Christian and an Arab (let alone Palestinian) is an oxymoron! Many times in the past, when I introduced myself to a Western Christian, I would get the question “When did you convert?”—assuming that, as an Arab, I must have been Muslim. However, Arab Christianity is not the invention of yesterday. In fact, Arab Christianity predates Islam! The church in the East has a long and very rich history.² There were Arab Christians in the very first ecumenical council of churches in Nicaea in 325 CE. In addition, there have been many profound Arab theologians and apologists throughout the centuries—though one is very unlikely to hear or read about them in Western seminaries and Bible schools.

It is important here to distinguish between *Arab* and *Palestinian* and to make clear why I will use the terms *Palestine* and *Palestinian* to refer to my land and its people for the majority of this book. Being “Arab” has more to do with belonging to a particular culture, heritage, and language than it does with being the descendants of the ancient tribes of Arabia. Some who would be considered Arab *are* descendants of these ancient tribes; however, most are not. An Arab is “a person who speaks Arabic as a first

language and self-identifies as Arab.”³ Arab identity is defined solely by culture rather than ethnicity or religion.

A Palestinian is not an invention of recent history, though many contend (“convincingly”) with this fact. For them, the term *Arab* instead of *Palestinian* is used almost exclusively in political rhetoric surrounding Palestine/Israel to refer to previous inhabitants of the land (Palestinians). However, prominent Palestinian historian Nur Masalha describes the binary of Arab versus Jew in this context as terribly misleading considering that Palestine, until the arrival of European Zionism in the twentieth century, consisted of Arab Muslims, Arab Christians, and Arab Jews. He further elucidates that “the idea of a country is often conflated with the modern concept of ‘nation-state,’ but this was not always the case and countries existed long before nationalism or the creation of meta-narratives for the nation-state.”⁴ In short, the historical concept of Palestine existed prior to the modern-day understanding of a nation and has continued to shift and evolve throughout history.

Furthermore, Masalha contends that Palestinians have always had a sense of identity that they have related to descent from the geopolitical region identified as Palestine for the last millennia. This was prior to, yet helped shape, the modern concept of a Palestinian nationality, which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as articulated by Masalha and others, most notably Rashid Khalidi.⁵ I use the terms *Palestinian* and *Palestine* in this book as both a cultural and geopolitical identity. This Palestinian national identity rooted in the land of Palestine (most of which is now considered Israel) developed in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century yet also has origins in historic notions of Palestine as a country/people.

While I understand it is not conventional for most Christians to refer to this land as Palestine, I invite you to challenge yourself with the alternative perspective I present in this book. In referring to this land as Palestine, I am not confronting Israel in a negating way. And as I will argue at the conclusion of this book, it is my hope that Palestinians and Israelis will one day share this land. Simply put, I am articulating my existence as I have known it and as I and my people think of ourselves—we are Palestinians. I invite you to step into my shoes, and the shoes of countless Palestinian Christians, and seek to better understand my experience and my faith. I ask this of you, not because my experience needs to be at the forefront of any conversation regarding Christianity and the land, but because as siblings in Christ, our journeys and existences are inherently intertwined with one another.

CHRISTIANITY, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY OF THE LAND

Christianity in this land is as old as the Jesus movement. The first church was in Jerusalem and composed mainly of first-century Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Since then, there has always been a Christian presence in this land. Yet so often, as I already mentioned, people are surprised to know that there are Christians in Palestine. Rather, the surprise should come if we did not exist in Palestine! This is the place where it all started, after all.

The history of Christianity in this land is difficult and complex, and it is closely tied with the history of Palestine. The identity and reality of the church was shaped by the political reality and in particular by who has occupied this land, for this land has always

been occupied and invaded by foreign powers. This goes back to biblical times, as the land was ruled by the Assyrians (721 BCE), Babylonians (586 BCE), Persians (539 BCE), and Alexander the Great and the Greeks (333 BCE). In 63 BCE, Palestine was incorporated into the Roman Empire. Between 330 and 640 CE, Palestine was under the Byzantine rule, and Jerusalem and Palestine were increasingly Christianized and established as a place for Christian pilgrimage. In 638 CE, Arabs under the Caliph Umar captured Palestine from the Byzantines.

Between the years 1099 and 1187 CE, the Crusaders established the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. It was during these years, in fact, that the number of Christians in Jerusalem and Palestine declined in large measures. The Ayyubids under Salah Al Din (Saladin) ended the Crusaders era, and in 1260 CE, the Mamluks succeeded the Ayyubids. This was followed by four hundred years (1516–1917) of the brutal rule of the Ottoman Empire with its capital in Istanbul. Many Christians, especially in the last days of this empire, were forced to leave Palestine and settled mainly in Latin America. The Turkish reign ended in 1918 when Palestine was occupied by the Allied forces under British general Edmund Allenby, and Britain established the British Mandate over Palestine.

This short history detailing the reality that the people of this land have never ruled themselves is a crucial element in the shaping of the Palestinian identity. It is also important to understanding this book and the reality and even theology of Palestinian Christians. Mitri Raheb summarizes the history of the land and its people as follows:

Geopolitically, the mountainous land of Palestine is on the periphery of history. For the most part, it has been used by

the empires as a battlefield to test and transfer arms and soldiers to suit their powers. . . . The people of this land are trampled over again and again. Each time they try to take a breath, they will receive another blow that drags them through the mud: Their cities get destroyed, burned, and robbed. Their harvests are seized before their time. Their youth are forcibly captured, tortured, displaced, and killed while striving to make ends meet.⁶

Raheb then contends that it could have been only here that Jesus would launch his “kingdom”—in the land that has witnessed so many violent kingdoms and empires.

Today in the land, the Palestinian community finds itself in two realities. Some are part of the state of Israel (most live in the Galilee area), and some are governed by the Palestinian Authority, while really being under the Israeli occupation. Those who are part of Israel are the ones who survived the war in 1948 and were not expelled by the new government when the state of Israel was created. Today the total number of Palestinians in the state of Israel is about 1.8 million (20 percent of the population), and among them there are 130,000 Palestinian Christians.⁷ The situation of Palestinians in Israel is best described as second-class citizens in their own homeland. They live under a Jewish state that has just passed a law that declares, “The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people” (Nation-State Law).

The situation in the Palestinian territories, also known as the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, is more complex and challenging. Around 4.8 million Palestinians, including around 46,000 Palestinian Christians,⁸ live under the dual reality of a Palestinian government and the Israeli military occupation. In

actuality, the Israeli occupation controls every aspect of our lives: land, water, movement, borders, and family reunification, to name just a few. Terms like checkpoints, permits, settlements, and the separation wall define our reality. Injustice and inequality define life in Palestine today.

All of this means that the number of Christians in the land has declined considerably. People, especially young families, both Muslim and Christian Palestinians, are leaving the land and looking for a better life elsewhere. They are seeking opportunity, equality, and freedom, which is simply not available to them in Palestine.

GROWING UP IN BETHLEHEM

I was born in Bethlehem in 1979. When people from around the world hear that I am from Bethlehem (and after I explain that I am talking about the *real* Bethlehem, not the Bethlehem of Pennsylvania), they often respond with great excitement, “Wow, it must be great to have been born in the place where Jesus was born and to live where he lived!”

But for me and most Bethlehemites from my generation, growing up in Bethlehem was not really about growing up in the place of Jesus’ birth. As children and teenagers, we did not wake up thinking of how blessed we were to live in the land where Jesus walked! In fact, I cannot remember my parents ever taking me to visit the Church of the Nativity—the place where it is believed Jesus was born. The first time I can remember visiting the Church of the Nativity was when my aunt who lived in the United States came to visit us!

“Blessed” was not the first thing that came to mind to describe how we felt about our reality. Growing up in Bethlehem was full

of challenges. Our reality was, and still is, defined by the Israeli military occupation of our land. When I was eight years old, the first *intifada* erupted.⁹ These were years of weekly, if not daily, demonstrations, military imposed curfews,¹⁰ strikes, and street marches. Life used to stop every day at 12:30 p.m., as there was a daily strike, which meant that all shops, schools, and universities would be closed at that time of the day. The rest of the day was the time for demonstrating against the Israeli military. There were whole months when schools were closed by the Israeli military, and we instead went to “home schools” in the neighborhoods organized by our community.

Though I cannot deny that as children we enjoyed the community aspect of this enforcement, the long hours for playing because of the closure of schools, and the excitement of sneaking out during the curfews to ask for food from the neighbors or simply to play in the neighborhood—“blessed” and “lucky” were not the words we would use to describe our reality. Almost every Palestinian of my generation could point to a traumatic moment or incident in which he or she was dehumanized or harmed by the armed Israeli soldiers and settlers, whether being (or witnessing a relative or a friend) beaten, humiliated, arrested, or, worst of all, shot. I still have clear and vivid memories of the demonstrations that took place in front of our house, being slapped in the face by a soldier when I was eleven years old, and lying on the floor in fear because of shooting outside of our house.

When I was eleven years old, the first Gulf War took place following the invasion of Kuwait by the Iraqis. Typically, the Palestinian situation was inserted into the equation. (It is always complicated in this part of the world. Everything is related.) In those days, Iraq attacked Israel with missiles, and there were

fears of a chemical attack (although it was discovered later that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction). When Israeli alarm sirens sounded, even we Palestinians hid inside special insulated rooms that every household had prepared.

The peace process and the Oslo Accords offered some optimism and hope, and there was relative peace for six to seven years. There were still periods of tension, and there was, of course, the infamous Grapes of Wrath 1996 Israeli attack on South Lebanon. Overall, there was a strong sense of optimism that things would be better soon. All of this ended in the year 2000, when the second Palestinian intifada erupted. These were a very difficult, bloody, violent five years of our lives. The second intifada was marked by invasions, shootings, suicide attacks, long periods of curfews, and thousands of deaths and injuries. In 2002, we witnessed the infamous forty-day siege by the Israeli military on the Church of the Nativity.¹¹ Overall, we watched all the hopes and dreams for a peaceful resolution and an independent Palestinian state shattered and destroyed by airstrikes and tanks on the streets.

For me personally, this was a life-changing period. A lot of who I am today was shaped by walking through checkpoints, waiting for long hours in the sun at checkpoints, or even evading checkpoints! I battled hate and despair. I was angry and felt powerless. That is when I decided to leave behind my engineering degree and study theology, unsure of what I really wanted to do in life. All I knew was that I wanted to do something for my people! I was simply looking for answers like many others at the time, and the Bible is where I sought answers to the many questions I had.

Today, our land is still in the news. When you visit the Palestinian territories, you will come back with images of the ugly,

concrete separation wall and the many checkpoints with armed soldiers. This very small piece of geography is fragmented like nothing you have seen or imagined. Palestinians still do not have freedom or independence. Though we have some measures of autonomy inside our cities under the Palestinian Authority, everything outside the cities—such as land, water, and security—is fully controlled by Israel. There are, in fact, two realities on the ground in the Holy Land today—what I will refer to as “two sides of the wall.” Few examples will suffice to illustrate these two realities. Consider water consumption. According to an extensive study by *Al-Haq*, a prominent human rights organization, Israeli per capita consumption of water for domestic use is four to five times higher than that of the Palestinian population of the occupied Palestinian territory. In the West Bank, Israeli settlers consume approximately six times the amount of water used by the Palestinians.¹² The GDP per capita is another example of the two realities that exist today in the land. According the World Bank, the figure in Israel in 2018 is \$41,715, whereas in the Palestinian territories it is \$3,199.¹³ You do not have to be a genius to figure out that this is not a formula for coexistence and harmony! Injustice and inequality are the norm in the land today.

MAKING SENSE OF RELIGION

I grew up in a traditional religious society in the Middle East, and this means that religion is part of my identity and self-awareness. I was born in an Orthodox house, with Orthodox Christian heritage on both sides of my family. My mother’s ancestry is peppered with many Orthodox priests. My grandfather always took pride in being part of the guardians of faith and inheritors of the “original” church in the land.

My faith journey began when I was ten years old. It was then that I joined my siblings and attended a summer camp organized by a small, evangelical church in Bethlehem. There, I was introduced to evangelical faith in its simplicity: I was a sinner, bound for hell, and I had to accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior to be saved, and God would prepare a place for me in heaven. Being a “born again” Christian meant that I had to pray daily, read my Bible, share about my faith, and attend all church meetings. And I did all of that. This upbringing nourished in me the concept of a “personal relationship with God,” something that has remained with me and sustained me all these years. For that, I am indebted to this church.

However, belonging to that community also meant, intentionally or not, that we disengaged with our reality. I seldom heard our political or social reality addressed from the pulpit. The focus of preaching was escaping the world—not changing or shaping it. I can still remember a preacher in my church in the days of the first intifada telling us how “stupid” the world around us was: fighting for earthly Jerusalem, whereas we, on the other hand, were waiting for and going to the heavenly one. The preacher had good intentions. He wanted to comfort us with the Word of God. The problem is that the only answer he knew from the Bible about our reality was that of surrender and escape: “Nothing will change here; so thank God we are going to heaven.” Another Palestinian preacher used to quote Isaiah 57:21 whenever violence erupted: “‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked,’” referring to the evil that exists in our world.

But it was really hard to avoid the political questions, no matter how much we tried. It is almost impossible to do so in the Middle East, let alone Palestine. Politics and religion are

closely tied—you cannot talk about one without the other. Furthermore, can we really ignore our reality? And shouldn't we seek to find answers from our faith traditions in response to the pressing issues outside of the church walls? If we do not do this, the result will be a church that is very much disengaged from the world. Moreover, whether we like it or not, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while political in nature, has strong religious dimensions to it. Over the years, religion has been used in this conflict by many parties to justify acts of violence and land confiscation. Therefore, we cannot help but engage.

FAITH AND POLITICS

Today in my hometown of Bethlehem, Jewish settlers seize control of Palestinian land by force, protected by the Israeli army and motivated by their religious tradition.¹⁴ All historical Palestine, they argue, is the “land of Israel” given to their ancestors, and by extension to them, as an eternal possession. Any attempt by Palestinian families, who have lived and farmed in these lands for centuries, to prove ownership of the land by legal documents is deemed irrelevant by these Jewish groups. And in recent years, it is becoming more and more common for Israeli political leaders to evoke religion in the political discourse. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking in front of the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, concluded his speech by declaring that the state of Israel is the fulfilment of biblical prophecy:

In our time the biblical prophecies are being realized. As the prophet Amos said, they shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine. They shall till gardens and eat their fruit. And I will plant them upon their soil never to be uprooted again.¹⁵

This use of Amos's prophecy is designed to emphasize the connection between the Israel of today and the Israel of the Bible and the land itself, and it is also designed to emphasize that the state of Israel of today is God's ordained plan.

On the other hand, some Palestinian fundamentalist groups also claim the whole land as *wagf*, a holy territory devoted to Allah and therefore necessitating their action of jihad to cleanse the land from the control of the "infidels," or those of "unbelief." For groups like Hamas, Palestine is an "Arab Islamic land." It is a "blessed sacred land that has a special place in the heart of every Arab and every Muslim."¹⁶

To add to an already complex situation where religion is used to justify a political claim, many Christian groups and churches around the world have taken sides in this conflict in the name of the Bible and the God of the Bible. Those who take such stances are often called Christian Zionists. Christian Zionism comes in the form of different backgrounds and theological shapes. The tragic events of the Holocaust left the Christian world in a state of shock and shame, and churches were forced to revisit years of anti-Semitic behaviors against the Jewish people, which ultimately led to a revisiting of the place of Jewish people in Christian theology. In this new, "post-Holocaust theology," the Jewish people began to hold a distinct place in Christian theology. Many Christian theologians began talking about a two-covenant theology, in which God has two separate yet parallel plans, one for the Jewish people and one for the nations.

At the same time, many evangelical Christians around the world came to believe that God will, at the end times, restore the Jewish people and bring them to the Promised Land and that all of this will lead to the second coming of Christ. These

views became very popular when the modern state of Israel declared its independence in 1948 and even more so when Israel seized control of East Jerusalem in 1967.¹⁷ Evangelical support of Israel was evident in their lobbying and support of the American president moving the Israeli embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Many Western Christians also operate under the assumption, often unconsciously, that the whole land of Palestine and Israel today belongs to the Jewish people and that God gave it to them as an eternal possession. According to a LifeWay survey in 2017, 69 percent of American evangelicals say the Jewish people have a “historic right” to the land of Israel, and 41 percent say Jewish people have a “biblical right” to Israel but have to share it. Moreover, 80 percent agree that “God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants was for all time.”¹⁸ “What does the Bible say about all of this?”—this is a question I have struggled with for many years, given the fact that the Promised Land of the Bible happens to be my homeland! Did my God, the God of the Bible, promise our land to our enemies? Does God favor and privilege a chosen people? And what is their identity? In fact, the first research paper I ever wrote in my life was when I was fifteen years old. It was a school assignment, and the title that I chose was “Who Are God’s Chosen People?”

Reading Scripture as a child did not come without its challenges. The Hebrew Scripture is always speaking about Israel, and I naturally connected this with the modern state of Israel. I could not just skip over these parts; it is the Word of God after all! I cheered the prophets when they spoke judgment over Israel but then was disappointed when they spoke about the restoration of Israel. Simply put, I was confused. The New Testament Jesus stuff was much better.

I also had questions about our role in this conflict. Can we take part in demonstrations against the occupation? Is it ok to throw rocks at the Israeli soldiers? Does that fall under “non-violence”? (I had a friend who I went to that evangelical church with, and he used to take part in the demonstrations. He used to tell me that he would throw the rock with one hand and pray with the other that it would not harm the soldier.) We were confused.

These questions were among the reasons that I felt led to go to seminary after finishing my engineering studies. I wanted to study and know more about these issues related to the Bible and the land. I later wrote my PhD dissertation on the topic of the Promised Land.¹⁹ Today, I am a pastor in Bethlehem and a Bible teacher at Bethlehem Bible College. And questions about the promises to Abraham and God’s chosen people are questions that I always get from my congregants and students.

This book is partially about my journey of seeking answers to these pressing questions.

A WALL IN PALESTINE

The separation wall, which surrounds most Palestinian (West Bank) cities today, is a twenty-five-foot-high wall—composed mostly of electronic fences and partially of concrete walls—that restricts the movement of Palestinians to Israeli territory. The wall is 550 miles long and two-thirds completed. Ninety percent of the wall was built on West Bank territory, therefore consuming even more of the limited land given to Palestinians. The wall was proposed by the Israeli cabinet and first began to be constructed in 2002, allegedly as a way to respond to several attacks against Israelis by Palestinians and to limit Palestinians

from entering Israel without permits. However, Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem (along with countless Palestinians and Palestinian human rights organizations) argues that a key, undeclared aim of the barrier was its route, which was aimed strategically around plans for future settlements and expansion. Their summary of the wall states that “the barrier thus became a major political instrument for furthering Israeli annexationist goals.”²⁰ The wall has effectively transferred autonomy, freedom of movement, and precious land from Palestinians to Israelis and especially to settlers who live on annexed land between and next to walled-off Palestinian cities. This created a situation of fragmentation of the West Bank, where our lives today as Palestinians are mainly confined within our cities. It has also caused a rupture in Palestinian society, making life close to unbearable. The wall has contributed to a dramatic rise in Palestinian unemployment (as the opportunities inside Palestinian cities shrink and permits to travel and work in Israel are increasingly restricted) and has even caused many environmental crises. International law has condemned the existence of the separation barrier and the ideology behind it since its inception.

Though Israel continues to claim that the separation wall exists for security purposes, the facts and reality of the wall on the ground suggest otherwise. Attacks on Israeli civilians declined significantly even before 20 percent of the wall was completed. For us Palestinians, the idea that the wall exists for security is total nonsense. We all know of ways to get around the wall illegally if needed. In fact, according to Israeli figures, at least thirty thousand Palestinians work on the Israeli side on a daily basis without obtaining a permit from the military.²¹ (In

other words, every day thirty thousand people are able to cross this “security” barrier.) We know that the wall is not for the purpose of security—it is a mere land grab; it exists to further separate and control Palestinians. If Israel were genuine in its claim for the necessity of the wall, they would have built it on the internationally recognized 1967 borders. This is why the International Court of Justice stated that the wall’s construction violated international law and that “Israel cannot rely on a right self-defense or on a state of necessity in order to preclude the wrongfulness of the construction of the wall.”²²

For most visitors of the Holy Land today, the wall shields us and pushes us away. They are not aware of us. We are invisible, hidden behind the wall. And if not for the fact that the Church of the Nativity is in Bethlehem, most pilgrims visiting the Holy Land would not even be aware of our existence. Most of the pilgrims who do come to Bethlehem to visit think they are in “Israel,” not knowing that Palestinian autonomy exists or that the people here call this land Palestine. It is really as if we do not exist. And in a very similar way, there is a metaphorical wall that has long existed in the mind, heart, and theology of the Western church that has shielded them from having to engage with us. Palestinians do not exist in this theology and narrative about the land—a narrative that chose to see an empty land and a two-thousand-year gap in history. Most pilgrims come to this land having only learned one narrative about this land—they see only Israel. In this version of the story, we do not exist, or maybe we do not matter. This is how the wall works; it diminishes both our history and our present.

This book is about the other side of the wall.

THEOLOGY FROM BEHIND THE WALL

“Daddy, why did they stop us yet allow the other car to pass?”

This was the question my seven-year-old son asked me when the Israeli soldiers sent us back at the checkpoint on our way to Jerusalem, having realized that the special permits we obtained from the Israeli military to cross to Jerusalem had expired.

Try explaining the segregation system we have here to a seven-year-old boy! How do I tell him that we need a permit to cross to Jerusalem while Israeli settlers don't? Or that my ID card as a resident of the West Bank (that I must carry with me all the time) is different than that of Jerusalemite Palestinians, or Palestinians who hold an Israeli citizenship, or a Gazan (the worst of all IDs)? How do I explain to him this system of segregation that exists in the land today?

I am forty years old, and I have already witnessed so many wars and uprisings that I would need a whole book to write about them. Walls, settlements, and checkpoints are our daily experience. Conflicts and divisions define our reality. How do I understand God, let alone teach the Bible, in such a context?

A theology from behind the wall is concerned with day-to-day issues in Palestine. We are preoccupied with issues of life under occupation, injustice, nonviolence, religious extremism, and peacemaking. We talk about identity and nationality. We do not write theology in libraries; we write it at the checkpoint. We bring Christ in dialogue with the checkpoint. We simply ask, What would Jesus say or do if he were to stand in front of the wall today? What would he say or do if he were to stand at a checkpoint today for five or six meaningless hours? What would his message be to the Palestinian trying to cross it and to the Israeli soldiers stopping them? Answering these questions is one reason for writing this book. But there is more than that.

Walls are meant to divide and separate. They communicate that people are not equal and that those on the “other side” are dangerous and to be feared. They create a sense of both superiority and inferiority. They are built and justified by the powerful and dominant side. Walls lead to dehumanizing the ones on the other side. Violence—physical and verbal—and denial of rights are justified against those who are on “the other side of the wall.” If needed, theology can come to the aid to instill a sense of self-righteousness to those on the “good” side of the wall.

This book will show that walls are more than just the physical ones. Walls have long existed among communities for the purpose of dividing people into “us” versus “them” and then exploiting them. There was no physical, concrete wall in apartheid South Africa, but there was separation and division; people were not treated as equals. Similarly, Palestinian citizens of Israel are treated as second-class citizens in their own homeland; they, too, are on the “other side of the wall.” We, the Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians, have always been on the “other side of the wall,” in both the perspectives of the occupying powers and the theology of the West—long before the physical wall that exists today was built. And in the same way in which we are almost invisible on the other side of the wall for the millions of pilgrims who visit the Holy Land every year, we have been invisible when it comes to Western Christian attitudes toward our land. This book gives voice to the Palestinian community through my own personal journey in the shadow of the wall.

Theology from behind the wall is viewing God and the Bible from the perspective of the marginalized and dehumanized. It is crying out amid the noise of weapons and bulldozing and against the voices that have long proclaimed a theology of this

land that ignores and dismisses us—whether intentionally or unintentionally. By writing this book from the other side of the wall, I hope that I am able amplify the voice of my people and my church, in addition to many other communities, who are “on the other side” in their own contexts and with whom I stand in solidarity: communities who are dehumanized, discriminated against, and rejected by the actions, attitudes, and theology of the dominant and powerful.

AN INVITATION TO COME AND LISTEN

As academic dean at Bethlehem, I always receive emails from people who offer to come and teach in our college. Simply put, these offers stem from a desire to come and “educate us,” assuming that we do not have people who know theology or the Bible. I must admit that these emails are beginning to strike a fragile nerve in me. In particular, there was an email I received from someone who works for an organization in Canada that speaks about the persecution of Christians, who offered to spend his sabbatical at our college and teach a course on how to respond to persecution! I was so angry when I received this email. I could not believe it—a Canadian, on a sabbatical (which is a completely foreign concept here in Palestine as it is a luxury we simply cannot afford), offering to teach us Palestinians about persecution. I responded politely by inviting him to come and learn from us about persecution as well as about engaging with people of other faiths.

This book is my invitation for you to step into the other side of the wall and listen to our stories and perspective. It is my humble request for you to allow me to share how Palestinians experience God, read the Bible, and have been touched and

liberated by Jesus—a fellow Bethlehemite who has challenged us to see others as neighbors and love them as ourselves. It is my invitation for you to allow me to share my journey of faith in the midst of the struggles of life, including being disowned by fellow believers. This book paints a picture of our story of faith, lament, and hope. And I invite you to join and listen, on our side of the wall.

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