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## Recent Books by Palestinian Christians (Book Reviews)

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Recent Books by Palestinian Christians reviewed by Charles Veenstra, Professor of Communication, Dordt College.

Awad, Alex. *Palestinian Memories: The Story of a Palestinian Mother and Her People*. Jerusalem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2008. 387pp. ISBN 978-0978-783907.

Munayer, Salim J., ed. *Journey Through the Storm: Musalaha and the Reconciliation Process*. Jerusalem: Musalaha Ministry of Reconciliation, 2011. 275 pp. ISBN 978-965-555-549-3.

McRay, Jonathan. *You Have Heard It Said: Events of Reconciliation*. Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2011. xi+106 pp. ISBN 978-1-61097-054-9.

Ateek, Naim Stifan. *A Palestinian Christian's Cry for Reconciliation*. New York: Orbis Books, 2008. xvi+224 pp. ISBN 978-1570-757846.

Saada, Tass Abu, with Dean Merrill. *Once an Arafat Man: The True Story of How a PLO Sniper Found a New Life*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008. xvii+231. ISBN 978-1-4143-2361-9.

Several recent books provide a significant voice for Palestinian Christians who often observe that American Christians come to visit the “dead” stones in the Holy Land but ignore the “living” stones who are struggling to maintain a Christian presence there. The tiny minority of Christians in Palestine first received their voice in Elias Chacour’s *Blood Brothers* (1984) and later in *We Belong to the Land* (1990). Chacour’s voice was a lonely one until now with the publication of several important books. It is worthy to note that some of these books are not easily available outside of Palestine (Awad’s book is \$25 from Bethlehem Bible College but costs \$170.65 at Amazon.com; Munayer’s book is available only from Musahala.org although his other books are available in the U.S. at prices many times their price at Musahala.org).

Alex Awad is president of Bethlehem Bible College. His book *Palestinian Memories* serves as a good primer for anyone interested in the larger picture of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. In 1948 Awad’s father was killed when Israeli soldiers came to his neighborhood. Even though his family had not participated in any of the political events surrounding the establishment of the state of Israel at that time, the family home was taken from them making them refugees. Thereafter, his mother struggled to raise her seven children: “Her story, in its fullness, is one of love, faith, endurance and victory in the face of personal and national tragedy” in the years following the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948 (13). This deeply personal story is one that should be read by all who care about the “living stones” in Palestine.

Awad moves from his mother’s story to the larger picture of the Palestinian people from Abraham to the present, focusing on what has happened in Palestine since 1948, the year the Israelis refer to as independence but the Palestinians remember as *nakba*, catastrophe. The massacre of Palestinians in the town of Deir Yassin in 1948 created terror for many Arabs and marked the beginning of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the land they had held for generations. Maps and charts in the

book show the diminishing land of the Palestinians and the growing number of refugees. The first *intifada* (“shaking off”), which began in 1987, and the second *intifada*, which began in 2000 when Sharon visited the Temple Mount, are described in detail. The second *intifada* was followed by the Israeli incursion, dubbed “Operation Defensive Shield.” Awad devotes an entire chapter to this attack on Palestinian cities and another chapter to the reign of terror. He describes Israeli actions of targeted assassinations of Palestinians, Israeli control of water, incarceration of the Palestinian population, economic attacks, limitations on medical care, confiscation of land, destruction of homes, arrests of journalists, and finally the construction of the separation barrier. These practices, designed to limit Palestinians in nearly every aspect of their lives, and continuing today, Awad calls acts of terror.

Awad includes chapters on critical topics central to the question of reconciliation. Particularly troubling is the chapter on the role of America in its actions toward Israel and Palestine. The author is also an American citizen who loves this country but finds U.S. policy very hurtful. He claims that the disproportionate aid the U.S. gives Israel—by far more than to any other country—practically precludes movement toward resolution of the dispute. According to Awad, the lack of a balanced American foreign policy leads to desperation among the oppressed. Complicating any American efforts to be even-handed are one-sided pressures from the Christian Zionists in America toward a position which Awad shows is not supported by Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the book contains chapters that deal with peace plans and frequently asked questions. For example, he deals with the difficulty of the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees and with the indefensible acts of terrorism by either side. Awad admits, “Let me repeat: There is no moral defense for detonating a bomb in a crowded area, or any other act of violence perpetrated against civilians” (296). He also examines why Palestinians continue to resist against overwhelming odds. Especially

helpful in this book are many maps and charts, extensive documentation, and the appendices: glossary of terms, documents on relevant international law, full texts of the key peace proposals, and resources for further information and involvement.

This book is a tribute to Awad's mother and many others who have suffered from the struggle in Palestine, including his Jewish neighbors. He says, "I long for the day when, deep in my heart, I can feel the pain of my Jewish neighbors in their time of calamity as much as I feel the utter despair of my people" (183). The stories of people with real names and voices bring the issues to life in such a way that one cannot ignore the human reality of suffering when peace, justice, and mercy are missing. All of the authors of the books in this review demonstrate a strong desire for peace, justice, and reconciliation without revenge because they believe Jesus calls them to this. A call to forgiveness permeates the books mentioned here.

An organization which exists to show how reconciliation can take place is Musalaha. Two new books, *Journey Through the Storm* by Salim Munayer and *You Have Heard it Said* by Jonathan McRay, provide insight into the work of this organization. Musalaha, which means "reconciliation" in Arabic, was founded approximately twenty years ago by Salim J. Munayer, the present director and a professor at the Bethlehem Bible College. To help achieve their goals, the organization maintains a Board of Oversight with an equal number of leaders from both Palestinian Christian and Israeli Messianic Jewish communities (9). Its mission statement is clear from its website:

Musalaha is a non-profit organization that seeks to promote reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians as demonstrated in the life and teaching of Jesus. We endeavor to be an encouragement and advocate of reconciliation, first among Palestinian and Israeli believers and then beyond to our respective communities. Musalaha also aims at facilitating bridge building among different segments of Israeli and Palestinian societies according to biblical reconciliation principles. ([www.musalaha.org](http://www.musalaha.org))

The leaders of this organization hope to use the principles they have developed to apply to many situations far beyond the original impetus. Their goal is to eventually include Muslims in this listening process as well. Munayer writes, "Although the majority groups of Muslims and Jews both reject the cross, through our ability to reconcile believers, we continue to demonstrate [Christ's] act of embrace by coming together and embracing one another in reconciliation" (81).

To achieve the goal of reconciliation, Musalaha has developed a program in which participants meet in the neutral setting of a desert, meetings that last for several days. Munayer describes a four-step, introspective process that takes place at these meetings:

1. Confession: Stating the truth; acknowledging the unjust or hurtful actions of myself or my people-group toward other people or categories of people.
2. Repentance: Turning from unloving to loving actions.
3. Reconciliation: Expressing and receiving forgiveness and pursuing intimate fellowship with previous enemies.
4. Restitution: Attempting to restore that which has been damaged or destroyed and seeking justice wherever we have power to act or to influence those in authority to act. (66-67)

But reconciliation is a huge task. Christian attitudes toward war, meaningful fellowship with people after reconciliation, myths about Ishmael and much more need to be considered in approaching reconciliation. The book demonstrates how difficult it is to bring two sides together at the same table when life perspectives are different.

Munayer describes the key issues that divide. Some, including Messianic Jews, believe that the establishment of the modern state of Israel is the fulfillment of prophecy. Others use the biblical theme of justice to address the injustices suffered by the Palestinians at the hands of the Zionist movement and the state of Israel. The injustice continues today through Israel's discriminatory practices during the occupation. While admiring the positive aspects of Naim Ateek's Palestinian Liberation Theology (see my comments on Ateek's work below), Munayer warns that there is a real danger of stereotyping everyone on the other side. In other words, he says, Ateek's position risks limiting the Palestinian position to victimage. Munayer says that the assumption that God has a preference for the poor is dangerous and affects the possibilities of reconciliation in a negative way. Defining the poor as those who have suffered injustice is problematic when both sides see themselves as victims.

Perhaps because these differences are so large—even among people who profess Christ as Savior and Lord—Munayer felt compelled to add several devotionals in Section III. Using the context of Musalaha events, he explains how people can come together when they bow before the cross. In the middle of this section he writes about the events of the Arab Spring of 2011: "We have seen young people willing to die for their freedom; perhaps one day we will see them willing to die for the Messiah" (153). He concludes with these words:

I am still waiting to see what will happen, aware of the dangers, but more than cautiously optimistic. I am inspired. My hope is that the rejuvenated enthusiasm that has rushed through the Middle East, and broken the stagnation and *status quo* will also breathe new life into a stagnated peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. (154)

The last section contains testimonies from a variety of people who have participated in Musalaha events—both Jews and Palestinians.

This same approach of telling the stories of participants is continued in McRay's book. Throughout the stories, one gains significant insight into what is required for reconciliation. For example, one woman, Lisa Loden, reports on her participation: "Listening was often the first step of the journey. Listening and truly hearing the painful stories of the other required openness and a hearing of the heart" (84). Musalaha puts people together to question each other. It does not provide all the answers. Loden adds, "Musalaha's role needs to continue being catalytic rather than prescriptive" (84).

It is far easier to analyze the issues of the tensions in the Middle East detached from people with names, but that analysis is insufficient. When the stories are told, we see how very hard it is to reach reconciliation. In addition without the stories, we have little basis to desire to move forward. But Musalaha's work testifies to the possibility and reality of reconciliation. Already its principles have been used in other countries. *You Have Heard It Said* contributes several new voices to the discussion. McRay's purpose was to travel to people's homes in Israel and Palestine and gather stories from both sides. He wanted people to speak freely and openly about the process of reconciliation and explain the challenges and difficulties involved. The result is a fascinating book that clearly is not an attempt to smooth over the pain and struggle as people work hard to come together. Instead, it shows what happens when people learn to get to know the other side as human first. Having visited in a Palestinian home recently, this reviewer knows how much time is required to hear the life stories of people whose history contrasts sharply from that of the listener.

A book that deals with the same issues of justice in Palestine but from a slightly different perspective is Naim Ateek's book *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation*, which develops the analysis through the lens of liberation theology. In this book, Ateek continues the discussion of the struggle for justice and peace begun in his first book, *Justice and Only Justice* (1989). Ateek is well known for his role in the development of Sabeel (Arabic for "the way"), an "ecumenical movement within the Palestinian Christian community of the Holy Land of Israel and Palestine" (10).

Ateek writes that "The primary objective of Sabeel is to articulate a Palestinian theology of liberation that can help Palestinian Christians and their friends and supporters address the conflict from within their faith" (10). In his description of events of the struggle, he shows why violence occurred while also deploring it. One needs to examine his argument carefully as he attempts to argue that some Biblical texts have priority over others. It would be well for the reader to compare Ateek's analysis with that of Gary Burge,<sup>2</sup> in which Burge argues that the biblical promises of the land are only to those who are

faithful to the Lord. Obedience, for Burge, is the key to understanding who has rights to the land, a point Ateek seems to overlook. As indicated above, Ateek runs the risk of viewing the Palestinians only as victims and thus comes close to stereotyping both sides. Yet Ateek makes a powerful case for pacifism as Palestinian Christians argue for their rights to the land.

While liberation theology has been controversial for some time, one should not lay down this book because it goes in that direction. In the context of actual events in Palestine, Ateek's analysis clarifies liberation theology. Whether or not one agrees with Ateek's exegesis of Scripture, his book provides an excellent look at events. It forces one to think hard about pacifism and non-violence as a possible Christian response to the enormously complicated issues in Palestine. While discussing the issues in the Middle East, he weaves in Scripture passages ranging from Jonah to Samson. As do the other writers mentioned in this review, throughout his book he stresses the need for forgiveness: "In conflict resolution, whether between individuals or nations, the highest objective is to achieve reconciliation and forgiveness between the conflicting parties. When forgiveness is given and received, healing commences. This constitutes the mountaintop in peaceable relations among peoples" (183). Chapter 14, "From Justice to Forgiveness," provides several important principles which the author says are "fundamental to the overriding argument of the book" (178) for anyone who wants to move toward reconciliation in this difficult part of the world. Only through forgiveness, he argues, is peace possible.

Another voice for reconciliation is that of Tass Saada in his book *Once an Arafat Man: The True Story of How a PLO Sniper Found a New Life*. Early in his life Saada participated in violence against the Jews who were taking his land. Hatred and hardness controlled his life. But while living and studying in the United States, he was converted to Christianity. As one listens to his story, one hears his same determination moving from fighting the Jews to fighting for establishing schools for Christians in Palestine, refusing to be intimidated by any Israeli. With a new sense of hope and courage, he struggles to live obediently in a land where oppression continues day after day and year after year. He remains tough, and his school continues to grow. He concludes,

It took me forty-two years to "make the connection." My hope and prayer is that others will not have to wait that long. The forces of hatred and animosity can be dismantled through the loving touch of the One who came "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." . . . Good news indeed. (229)

Palestinian Christians are a tiny and dwindling minority in Israel and Palestine. Conditions are so difficult that many have left. To this observer peace is not something

the Israelis want. The American Christian Zionists, in their zeal for modern Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, also see no place for Palestinians there. They rarely visit their fellow Christians. They do not hear the voices of the Palestinians who desire to live side by side in peace as neighbors. If oppression continues, Palestinians will leave and Israelis will finish taking over. The voice of Palestinian Christians will then be quiet in the land.

But there is the voice of Jesus, a voice that calls for reconciliation and peace. It is a voice that cannot be silenced. It is a call that cannot be ignored.

#### Endnotes

1. See my article article, "Christian Zionism: Listening Left Behind," *Pro Rege* Vol. XXXVI, No. 4, June 2008, 29-39.
2. Gary M Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?: What Christians are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians*. Paternoster Press, 2003. I recommend this book highly.