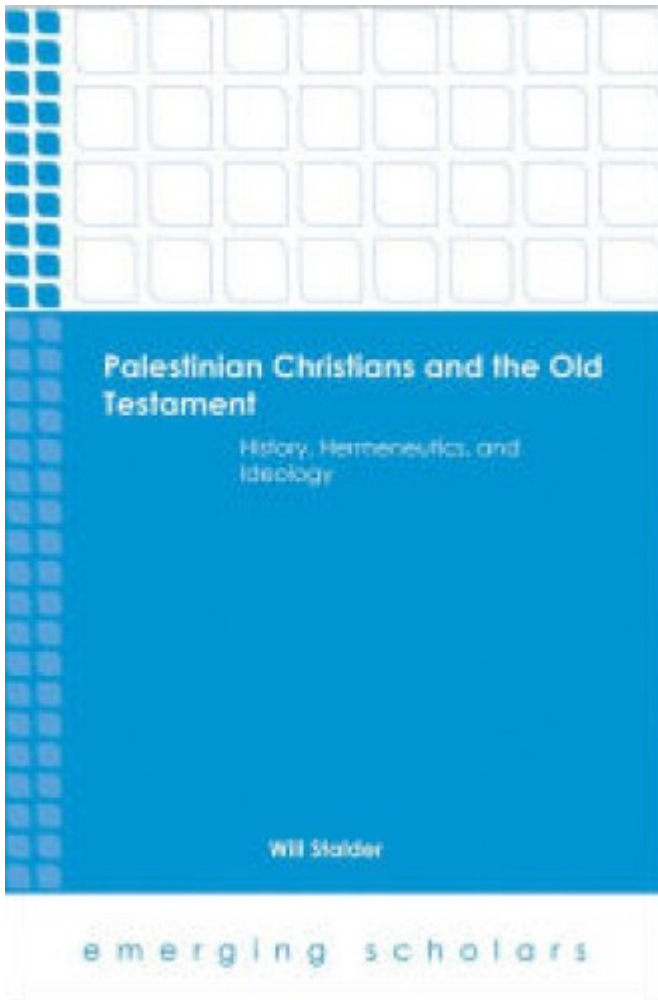


Hermeneutics in a fragile land

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament

By Will Stalder
Augsburg Fortress

Palestinian Christians almost disappear amid the seemingly endless brutalizing occupation by the state of Israel and counterviolence of the Palestinians. Will Stalder's *Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament* is a revised dissertation from

the University of Aberdeen that takes up the difficult and important question of how Palestinian Christians are to read the Old Testament when the insistent ideology of Zionism preempts the text with its claims concerning the divine promise of land to the Jews.

Stalder, a parish minister in Scotland, divides the history of interpretation by Palestinian Christians into three periods, each of which has offered possible postures of reading for the Palestinian Christian community—a community that Stalder characterizes as small, diverse, and declining. From the outset, the community was propelled by a variety of missionary initiatives in the Holy Land, notably by the Orthodox, the Church of England, and the Lutherans.

In the first period, to 1917, Palestinians very much trusted and embraced the views and practices of the missionary communities, all of which had a very high view of scripture. The missionary impetus was highly complex, given the readiness of Western powers both to challenge the Ottoman Empire and to nurture and protect independent Palestinian communities. The missionaries' accent on the "Bible alone" caused people to read the Old Testament as part of "the history of redemption," which, of course, culminated in the New Testament with claims for the gospel of Christ. In this early period the Old Testament was taken as unproblematic.

Everything changed in 1917 with the establishment of the British Mandate over Palestine and issuance of the Balfour Declaration. The period from 1917 to the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 was a time of vigorous contestation as political Zionism gained momentum and Zionist claims began to appeal intensely to the Old Testament and its divine promise of land for the Jews. Stalder concludes that in the face of Zionist pressure, "most Arab Christians during this time found more and more affinity with the Arab Muslim majority than with the mandatory power [Britain] with whom they were coreligionists."

Zionist claims were highly contested. As Anglican bishop George Francis Graham Brown declared: "The establishment of a 'National Home' [for Jews] in Palestine cannot be made to depend on the prophecies of the Old Testament."

He asserted that such claims had been "abrogated" by the declaration of the New Testament. Lutheran commentators echoed that verdict, identified such Jewish uses of the Old Testament as "abusive," and insisted that they carried no weight.

Stalder's third period begins with the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, which he characterizes as a catastrophe for Palestinian Christians. The book traces a variety of scripturally based ecumenical declarations against the claims of Zionism. This third period, which continues until now, presents very difficult questions for Palestinian Christians. On the one hand, they have compelling reasons to maintain critical distance from biblical texts used as justification for Israel's absolute monopoly of the land. On the other hand, they want to take the Old Testament seriously in order to avoid falling into Marcionism.

Having set the table in this way, Stalder turns to strategies for reading the Old Testament under current circumstances. He reviews the work of three authors. One may surely quibble with his selection of all three.

First, Michael Prior has proposed reading the Old Testament through "the eyes of the Canaanite" in order to see that biblical affirmations used by Zionists are sheer ideology and cannot rightly be claimed as authoritative for current issues. Second, Charles H. Miller, a Marianist priest, has urged that the pertinent Old Testament texts be read through "the eyes of Catholic tradition." While that is a useful suggestion, his proposal is vague and unspecified. Third, Gershon Nerel, an Israeli Christian, takes the fraternal dialogue between Jews and Christians fostered by the Vatican to be a proper venue in which Palestinian Christians should do their interpretive work. This urging surely seems like a nonstarter for Palestinians.

Stalder shows that Palestinian efforts at interpretation are imaginative and energetic and that they are continually probing for possible ways of taking the text seriously. Likely the most influential among many voices is that of Naim Ateek, who has urged that the focus should be on justice texts in the Old Testament and on the claims of Christ, with a studied distance from other texts, including the Exodus tradition, that are so readily preempted by Zionism.

Ateek would insist that the concrete context of his Christian community in the midst of Zionism should be decisive for reading the text. Thus, as an ecumenical statement in 1983 declared, "the direction was no longer from scripture to situation, but rather the other way around, from situation to scripture." The intent was "to abandon biblical interpretation in favor of asking questions of contemporary identity, presence, and witness."

There is no doubt that Ateek proposes a highly selective reading of texts, but that is so in every reading, and certainly in the reading of Zionism—or, for that matter, of U.S. capitalism. It does not tell against Ateek that he is selective in his reading.

After this very helpful historical review, Stalder offers his own proposal, informed by historical criticism, which makes clear that deeply objectionable texts are corrected or curbed in subsequent texts. He offers a long and, I think, unhelpful commentary on Deuteronomy 7 and suggests that it is modified in the later text of Deuteronomy 30. I do not find this proposal very compelling or helpful because the powerfully dangerous circumstances of Palestinians do not allow for the slow, patient work of historical criticism.

My sense is that Stalder's approach to the text in this extended example does not really join issue with the hard questions on the ground in the conflict. The failure to connect the text effectively with the conflict is parallel to his earlier review of three interpretive possibilities. In none of those possibilities does Stalder lay out the implications of a particular method or perspective. He provides only an inventory. The textual analysis issues only in a small, timid modification. We are left far short of knowing how to engage the text in a way that might let it have a genuine say in the conflict. The result is a report that remains detached; it strikes me as not deeply engaged with the interpretive issues faced by Palestinian Christians. The adjustment of a few words does not affect the large claims made by the text. Luther's distinction between the gospel and the biblical text, also asserted by Ateek, is far more helpful.

Though Stalder's positive proposal seems to me quite unconvincing, the book is of great value for mapping a vexed interpretive history. The author should not be faulted too much for the shortcomings of his proposal because the issues are so difficult. He calls attention to the reality and ongoing work of Palestinian Christians, a community under threat that has much to teach the rest of us.