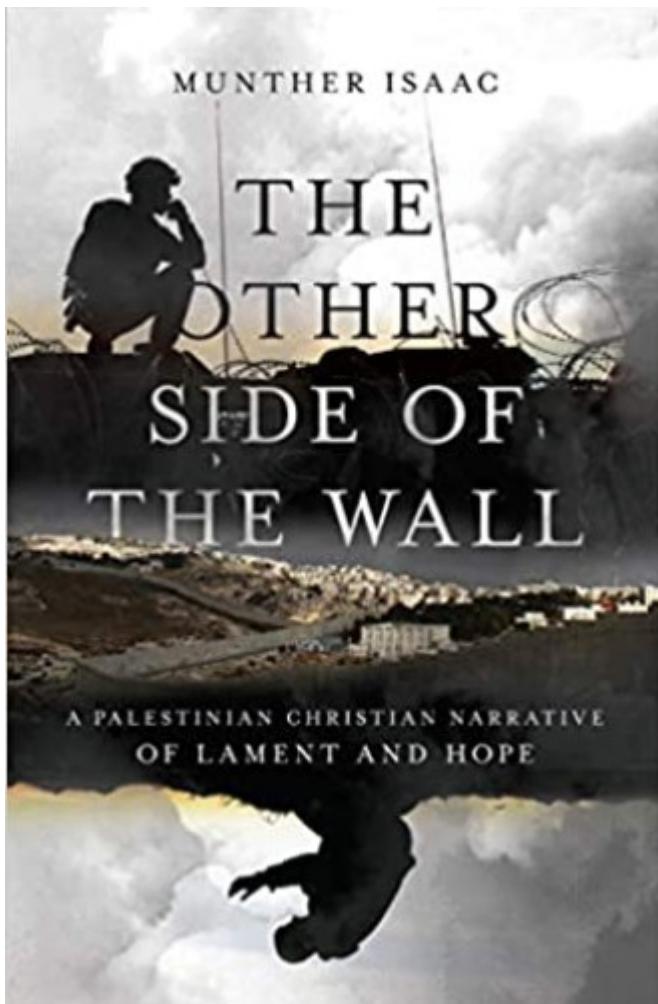


A Palestinian evangelical's supersessionism

Munther Isaac's critique of the Israeli government is perfectly fair. But why does he also need to critique Judaism?

by [John E. Phelan Jr.](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Other Side of the Wall

A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope

By Munther Isaac

InterVarsity Press

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A prominent American Jewish organization asks Christian institutions to “talk with us before you talk about us.” This is a dignity, argues Munther Isaac, that’s rarely afforded Palestinian Christians—especially by American evangelicals.

Isaac grew up in the small Palestinian evangelical community and currently serves as the academic dean at Bethlehem Bible College. While his fury toward the government of Israel is evident throughout the book, his real ire is directed toward White American evangelicals who blindly support Israel. This support, he argues, is based on flawed eschatology, right-wing politics, and a refusal to consider the suffering of the Palestinian people. Isaac vividly and painfully describes that suffering. It should be clear to any fair-minded person that the Palestinians have reason to complain of their treatment by the Israeli government. Isaac wants his evangelical readers to consider a trip to “the other side of the wall” so they might speak with Palestinians and not just about them.

Isaac attempts to address the actions of American evangelicals, however, not by way of a detailed critique of their eschatology or an analysis of the flaws of their politics. Rather, he tries to convince them that today’s Jews have no right to the land of Israel, no necessary connection with the promises of their prophets, no special covenant with God, and no hope without their inclusion in the Christian Church.

He argues that “Jesus redefined and universalized the land. He also redefined and universalized the people of God.” Citing Galatians 3:13, he writes that “Paul here affirms that Jesus is the only seed of Abraham and, by implication, the *only* legitimate recipient of the Abrahamic promises, denying in essence any other claims by any person or people group to the benefits of this covenant.” This is clearly a reference to Jews. Not only do Jews no longer have any claim on their ancient covenants, Isaac believes, they no longer have any connection with their historic family. He asserts, “I do not believe that all Jews of today are descendants of Abraham.”

Isaac is not impressed by the idea that Christians have a unique relationship with Jews. He writes,

In some circles, anti-Semitism is countered with what one might call “philo-Semitism”—the love of the Jewish people. As I read statements on how Christians should love the Jewish people, I often wonder, but shouldn’t that apply to *all people equally*?

This is rather like responding to “Black lives matter” with “All lives matter.” A particular love for the Jewish people or the Palestinian people does not preclude the love of other peoples and traditions.

Furthermore, it is impossible to deny the special, even unique relationship that Christians, including Palestinian Christians, have with the Jewish people. Christianity (much to the chagrin of the Jews) incorporated Jewish history, Jewish sacred texts and traditions, and Jewish hopes for the future. Christians are not connected in this same way with any other people.

Isaac further suggests that “we must relate to the Jews as people of *faith*.” Positively, this means recognizing the Jews as people with whom we share a text and a tradition. But I think Isaac is implying more than this. Negatively, it suggests that Jews are not a people or a nation, but merely a religion. He goes on to argue that, from a Christian standpoint, the covenants and promises made to the Jews have now been absorbed by Christianity. His reading of Romans 11 suggests that the old “olive tree” is now the Christian church and that all the covenant expectations are transferred to Christians.

This is classic supersessionism. By this means, Christians have colonized Jewish sacred texts, claimed Jewish covenants and promises as their own, and relativized the biblical concept of peoplehood to make Judaism just another religion among many and, from a Christian point of view, a passé one at that.

The problem with this interpretation of Jesus, Paul, and Christian theology isn’t just that many scholars would dispute it; it’s also that it is completely unnecessary. Isaac apparently imagines that to critique the policies of the government of Israel and the theology and politics of American evangelicals, he needs to delegitimize Judaism. But as he acknowledges, the conflict in Israel is not about theology. It’s about politics, power, economics, and law. He does not need to write the Jews out of their

own story or rob them of their own covenants in order to oppose the actions of the government of Israel, American evangelicals, or the government of the United States. To attack Israel, he needn't attack Judaism.

In his book *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, the journalist Yossi Klein Halevi suggests there are two narratives in the Holy Land. The Palestinian narrative reflects a long, bitter history of colonization by imperial powers culminating in the disaster (*Nakba*) of the foundation of the state of Israel and the occupation of Palestinian land by Israel. The Jewish narrative is a story of repeated colonizations by foreign powers resulting in the loss of sovereignty in their ancient homeland. But after years of longing and prayer, of bitter suffering and pain, the Jews have now returned to sovereignty in the land.

Halevi argues that these two narratives are contradictory—and that they are both true. For there to be peace and stability, he argues, all parties need to accept these narratives and make sacrifices to build a democratic civil society where all citizens have rights equally protected by law. Isaac appears to agree with this goal, although undoubtedly he and Halevi would have different ideas as to how this can be accomplished.

But those differences are political, not theological. The effort of either party to delegitimize the other will not produce the desired outcome.