



**MITRI RAHEB**

# **DECOLONIZING PALESTINE**

**The Land,**  

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**The People,**  

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**The Bible**

## **Toward a Decolonial Reading of the Bible**

The Bible contains books like Joshua that can be interpreted as a blueprint for settler colonialism. It also contains prophets who called for social justice. Like the bazaar in the Old City of Jerusalem, one can find many different ingredients in the Bible. There are texts that sanction colonization and texts that promote liberation. What we discover says more about us and what we are searching for as readers than about the Bible itself. For the remainder of the chapter, I offer a decolonial reading of two scriptural passages, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, to demonstrate the hermeneutic of Palestinian liberation.

### *1 Kings 21*

Ahab, King of Samaria, had a palace in Jezreel, but he was not satisfied with his large palace and coveted the vineyard of his neighbor Naboth. Ahab wanted Naboth's vineyard at any price. First, he offered Naboth a "better one," and he was also ready to pay with silver. The king acted in vain, for Naboth did not want to give away his ancestral inheritance because to keep it was something like a divine command for him. Ahab knew that, as King of Israel, he had no right to confiscate the land of an Israelite farmer; in accordance with Israelite faith, even the Israelite kings were subject to divine law. But Jezebel, the Sidonian king's daughter, thought differently and had a different understanding of royalty. She asked her husband whether he was really the King of Israel when he did nothing about Naboth's refusal. Jezebel's models were the imperial rulers who were absolute sovereigns. It was an occupier–occupied relationship where the law serves the empire and its policy of expansion.

Jezebel asked for two scoundrels to bear false witness against Naboth and claim he had cursed God and the king. The divinity of

God and security of the state represented by the king were of utmost importance. Naboth was stoned to death, and Ahab was then free to confiscate all his possessions. In this context, the Prophet Elijah intervened because an injustice had been committed, God's commandments had been violated, and the court misused.

The story of Naboth is the story of thousands of Palestinians today whose lands are confiscated to enlarge the Jewish colonies in the West Bank that exploit the water and resources of the Palestinian people. Naboth's story is taking place almost on a daily basis in the West Bank. It is a clear violation of both divine law and international law, but very few theologians dare to raise a prophetic voice and term this land colonization by name.

### *Matthew 5:5*

One of the sentences of Jesus that requires reinterpretation is Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." This text is taken from the Sermon on the Mount according to Matthew. Compared with the other beatitudes of that sermon, this one is often neglected and seldom receives attention. The phrase "Blessed are the peacemakers" is cited frequently, but we rarely hear "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." Indeed, Luke skips this verse altogether. Interestingly, Luke likes to talk about the poor, the hungry, and the thirsty, but not about the meek!

This verse must have been largely ignored initially because it was translated incorrectly. Originally the verse was taken from Psalm 37, which does not refer to "the earth" but to "the land." In fact, "the land" is repeated several times in that psalm. It should, therefore, read, "Blessed are the meek; they will inherit the land." That perhaps makes better sense. Psalm 37 does not refer to land near and far but does speak about a certain land, Palestine. When Jesus said that the meek will inherit the land, everyone at the time knew what was meant by the land. He meant the Holy Land, Palestine. When the words of Jesus were translated from Aramaic into Greek, the word that means

the land was changed to read the earth. In fact, in Arabic the word, *al-ard*, means both earth and land. Translation is interpretation, and earth replaced land.

The gospels were closely connected to a certain land, Palestine. For the early church located outside of Palestine, talking about the earth made far more sense. Why should somebody in Rome worry about who would inherit Palestine? They were concerned about their souls and maybe about their own land, but not about a distant one. Yet, one cannot understand the gospels if they are disconnected from their original context of Palestine.

I struggled with this text for many, many years. It simply did not make sense. I do not like to spiritualize things because I think Jesus always spoke about reality and refused to avoid it, which was the essence of his spirituality. For a long time, I thought that Jesus had been mistaken. One need only look around the West Bank to realize that 60 percent of it is controlled by the Israeli army and Jewish settlers. This glaring reality is one of the largest land thefts in modern history, worth hundreds of billions of dollars. The Israeli settlements that ring the West Bank make it obvious that the empire has inherited the land. Listening to the words of Jesus through Palestinian, Native American, Black South African, or Aboriginal Australian's ears does not make any more sense. He must have been mistaken! It is clear that the military occupation controls the land and its resources. Everything is controlled by the empire. The empire inherits the land, not the meek. Jesus was mistaken because the meek are crushed. Their land is being confiscated to make place for people brought in by the empire. Jesus was mistaken.

But over the last decade of struggling with this text, I have come to read it with new eyes. I discovered something more powerful than I expected. Matthew 5:5 actually speaks directly to reality in a way we would never imagine. It is necessary to use *longue durée* lenses because if the verse is read with regular lenses, we will never grasp its true meaning.<sup>51</sup> Our mistake has been to read history only with the current empire in mind. The prevailing empire has taken all of our attention. Only attending to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from a

perspective of the last sixty years, the words of Jesus do not make sense at all. But Jesus had wide-angle lenses and looked at history from a long-term perspective.

For people in the time of Jesus, the occupation began with the Romans. Jesus had a far greater understanding of the history of Palestine. He looked at a thousand years at once and saw a chain of empires. There is not a single regional empire that at some point did not occupy Palestine. The first was the Assyrian in 722 BC, which lasted for over two hundred years. The Assyrians were replaced by the Babylonians in 587, who were pushed out by the Persians in 538. The latter were forced to leave by Alexander the Great. Then there were the Romans. Two thousand years after Jesus, we can continue to recite the list of empires who ruled Palestine: the Byzantines; the Arabs; the Crusaders; the Ayyubids; the Ottomans; the British; and finally, the State of Israel. We have been trained to naively connect Israel today with the Israel of the Bible rather than with this chain of occupying empires. If we focus on the latter, the words of Jesus make perfect sense. None of those empires lasted in Palestine forever. They came and stayed for fifty, one hundred, two hundred, a maximum of four hundred years. Ultimately, they were all blown away, gone with the wind.

When occupied people face the empire, they are generally so overwhelmed by its power that they think that the empire will remain forever and has eternal power. Jesus wanted to tell his people that the empire would not last, that empires come and go. When empires collapse and depart, it is the poor and the meek who remain. Those people of the land who prosper emigrate and seek to grow richer within the centers of empire. Those who are well educated are claimed by the empire. Who remains on the land? The meek, that is, the powerless! Empires come and go, while the meek inherit the land. The wisdom of Jesus is staggering. It seems to me that we have been blinded by a theology that has failed to help us understand what Jesus was really saying.

Some might disagree, insisting that the Israeli occupation is different. They say, "Look at the settlements. How can you claim they

will be gone one day? Look at the wall. How can you say it will be dismantled?” But Israel is no different from the empires of the past. The native people of Palestine who lived at the time of Jesus and saw the military checkpoints set up by Herod the Great, such as Herodian and Masada, could never have imagined that Herod and his empire would not be there permanently. To see the “settlements” built by Herod and his sons, such as Caesarea Maritima, Caesarea Philippi, Sepphoris, Tiberias, Sebastopol, Jerusalem, and others, it would have been almost inconceivable to question the durability of the Roman Empire. Jesus was telling the Palestinian Jews that the Romans who had built those colonies would not be there forever, and Palestine would be inherited by the meek. This is a direct critique of the settler colonial practice of the Romans. This is not a cheap hope in a distant future but a decolonial teaching. Jesus wanted to release the powerless from the power of the empire. The moment he spoke those words, the empire lost its power over the people, and power was transferred where it rightly belonged, with the people.