

DETAILS



The Other Side of the Wall *A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope*

June 16, 2020 | \$18, 256 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-3199-9

“Dr. Isaac claims that he is sharing his life journey, but actually it is a journey of humanity in pursuit of dignity, justice, and peace. In a skillful and passionate manner, the author opens a wide window in the ‘wall’ so the reader will see both sides. I do hope that this timely book contributes to the bringing together of the three neighbors—Muslims, Christians, and Jews—to build bridges of just peace rather than walls of hatred.”

—Riad Kassis, director of the Langham Scholars ministry, Langham Partnership

A Palestinian Christian Narrative of Lament and Hope

Christians have lived in Palestine since the earliest days of the Jesus movement. The Palestinian church predates Islam. Yet Palestinian Christians find themselves marginalized and ostracized. In the heated tensions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the voices of Palestinian Christians are often unheard and ignored.

This book provides an opportunity to hear the realities of life on the ground from a leading Palestinian pastor and theologian. Munther Isaac gives the perspective of Palestinian Christians on the other side of the separation wall surrounding most Palestinian West Bank cities today. Isaac laments the injustices suffered by the Palestinian people but holds out hope for a just peace and ways to befriend and love his Jewish and Muslim neighbors. In contrast to the dominant religious and nationalistic ideologies and agendas for the region, he offers a theology of the land and a vision for a shared land that belongs to God, where there are no second-class citizens of any kind.

“This book is my invitation to you,” Isaac writes, “to step into the other side of the wall and listen to our stories and perspective. It is my humble request to 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. . . . 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.”

Gary M. Burge, professor of New Testament and dean of the faculty at Calvin Theological Seminary, said, “There is a wall encircling Bethlehem. It is both a reality (made of cement and nine meters high) and a symbol for the life of Palestinian Christians and Muslims: walled, occupied, segregated. In this remarkable book, Munther Isaac takes us behind that wall and offers us a glimpse into things that are generally kept from view. He tells a story that is as compelling as it is heart wrenching, a story that every Christian needs to understand to grasp one seemingly endless conflict in the Middle East.”

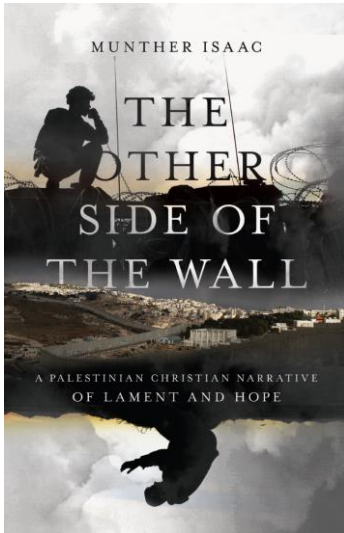


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Munther Isaac (PhD, Oxford Centre for Mission Studies) is the academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College in Palestine and director of the Christ at the Checkpoint conference. He is also pastor of Christmas Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. He is the author of *From Land to Lands, from Eden to the Renewed Earth: A Christ-Centered Biblical Theology of the Promised Land*. Follow him on Twitter: @MuntherIsaac.

“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.” (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.

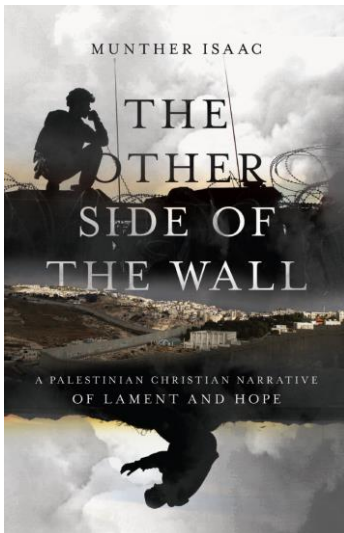


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“The distinct suffering of Palestinian Christians needs to be heard, felt, and lifted up, not least before the minds and hearts of many American evangelicals. The pain some American Christians have added to the lives of Palestinian Christians has further ravaged the dignity and value of our beloved Palestinian brothers and sisters. Munther Isaac’s clear, passionate, honest rendering of this ignored and distorted narrative of Palestinian Christians is a powerful antidote.”

—Mark Labberton, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, author of *Called*

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. 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.” 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.” 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. 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.

—Taken from chapter one, “An Invitation”