

Blaming Pro-Israel Christians for Palestinian Problems

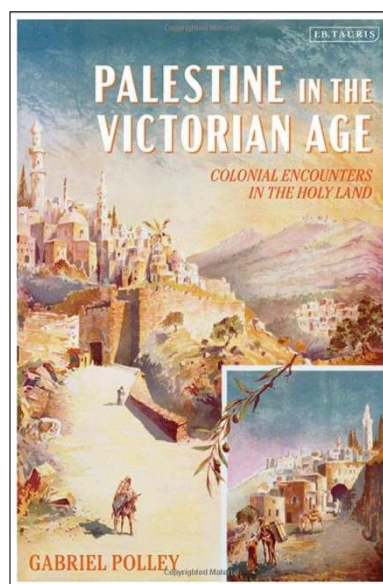
by Dexter Van Zile

Western intellectuals on the Left generally view the external history of Europe and North America as a bloody trip of displacement, genocide, and oppression. Western colonialists are somehow more evil than others. In the Middle East, this means leftist intellectuals see Israelis and Palestinians through the lenses of guilt, remorse, and self-hate, themes all three books under review richly manifest. Indeed, they embody the very worst elements of storytelling about Christian support for Israel.

Orientalist Encounters

***Palestine in the Victorian Age: Colonial Encounters in the Holy Land.* By Gabriel Polley. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2022. 254 pp. \$90 (\$29.95 paper).**

In *Palestine in the Victorian Age*, Polley, a London-based activist who received a Ph.D. in 2020 studying under Ilan Pappé at the University of Exeter, documents how Protestants from England and the United States wrote about the Holy Land during the mid-to-late-1800s. In Polley's words, these Protestants with "Holy Land on the Brain" wrote about Palestine to affirm their pre-existing ideas about the reliability of the Bible and the superiority of the Protestant faith over Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism. In so doing, he argues, they prepared the ground for the establishment of the Jewish state, which he believes dispossessed the local Arab population of their rights in the land. In Polley's account, what started out in the 1850s as a "Peaceful Crusade," paved the way for catastrophe—Israel's establishment—a century later.



Polley begins by describing the work of American Biblical scholar Edward Robinson, (1794-1863) who, in 1838, traveled to and studied the region with the help of his colleague American missionary Eli Smith. In his travels and the texts that resulted from them, Robinson exhibited disdain for Catholic and Orthodox holy sites such as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Instead, he

looked to the empty spaces and deserted villages to find archeological links to locations mentioned in the Old Testament and, thus, affirm the accuracy of the Bible. By asserting Jewish ties to the Holy Land, according to Polley, Robinson's writings legitimized the return of Jews to Palestine and the ultimate establishment of a Jewish state.

Polley claims Robinson worked to "obscure Palestine's non-Biblical history" (i.e., its Muslim history) by falsely asserting, for example, that "the sculpted lions on the Lion's Gate in the eastern wall of the Old City [show] at least that it was not originally the work of Muhammedans." He reached this conclusion about the Ottoman-era sculptures based "on the unfounded belief that all Islamic art was nonfigurative." Other travelers, Polley recounts, superimposed visions of the Second Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount when gazing at the Haram al-Sharif, thereby, in his words, predating

by over a century the post-1967 efforts of right-wing settler organizations to rouse support for the construction of a third temple in the Haram, backed by some American Evangelicals.

Polley also accuses English Protestants of using the 1856 Nablus uprising to promote anti-Muslim bigotry. He finds that writers used the uprising, precipitated by the death of a young boy at the hands of Anglican missionary Samuel Lyde, to portray Muslims in the Holy Land as preternaturally violent and hostile as the uprising resulted in the deaths of several local Christians and the ransacking of local churches. According to Polley, the response to the uprising was what

Some Christians portray Western support for Israel as a cause of anti-Christian violence in the Middle East.

he anachronistically describes as "Islamophobic" because Western commentators doubted that a missionary was guilty of murder. The author laments that Muslims had

no chance to explain themselves.

Polley's logic invokes a supposedly bad act perpetrated by a Westerner to excuse Muslim violence against religious minorities in the Middle East. Thus, he suggests that anti-Christian violence in Nablus resulted from outrage over Western advocacy for the rights of Christians, who as *dhimmi*s were subjected to mistreatment under Ottoman rule. Polley characterizes this outrage as European "imperialism of the Tanzimat." In Polley's schema, efforts to improve the status of beleaguered Christians in an environment of Muslim supremacism and privilege amounted to Western colonialism and supremacism, which justified Muslim rage.

This logic parallels that used to excuse Islamist violence against religious minorities in the modern era. Some Western and indigenous Christians, for example, portray Western support for Israel as a cause of anti-Christian violence in the Middle East. At the Christ at the Checkpoint Conference in Bethlehem in 2014, American missionary Joseph Cumming declared that Westerners must understand

that when Christians in the West are supporting an occupation which Muslims see as unjust, some Muslims ... will react against that by taking out their hostility on innocent Arab Christians.¹

¹ Dexter Van Zile, "[Bethlehem Conference Promotes Submissive Dhimmi Narrative](#)," Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA), Boston, Apr. 10, 2014.

Under this logic, asking Muslim rulers to protect or tolerate the rights of religious minorities encourages legitimate (or at least understandable) violence against said minorities.

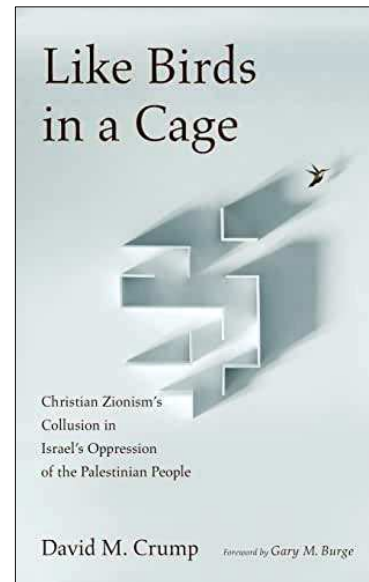
Polley, Cumming, and the authors reviewed portray Muslim violence as a variable dependent solely on Western misdeeds and not a result of Islamic doctrine or Muslim agency.

Polley suggests that problems in the Holy Land accelerated when Christian theological support for Jewish settlement in the Holy Land changed to a more practical approach geared toward serving British interests in the Levant. He focuses on Laurence Oliphant (1829-88), a former member of the British parliament. Oliphant, who served briefly as superintendent of tribal affairs for the British government in Quebec, wrote about the U.S. government's dealings with its indigenous population in an 1855 book, *Minnesota and the Far West*.² In it, he approved of policies that forced Indian tribes to assimilate into the U.S. economy and culture. To Polley's dismay, Oliphant then promoted similar policies toward Bedouins in the Levant. Rendering Oliphant more sinister, Polley portrays off-hand remarks about the beauty of Druze women as "a product of his deeply repressed sexuality."

Polley argues that the writings he surveys may not have reached wide audiences but still had a significant impact on English policy. In his view, they paved the way for the Balfour Declaration, thereby becoming "active partners" in the destruction of Palestine. Thus does Polley rehearse Edward Said's *Orientalism*,³ which came out forty-five years ago and portrays Western writings on the Middle East as a crucial component of Western imperialism.

² Cambridge University Press.

³ New York: Pantheon, 1978.



Christian Zionism's Collusion

Like Birds in a Cage: Christian Zionism's Collusion in Israel's Oppression of the Palestinian People. By David M. Crump. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2021. \$38, paper.

In *Like Birds in a Cage*, Crump portrays Christian Zionist support for Israel as the source of everything that has gone wrong in the Holy Land and the Middle East ever since Israel's establishment,

Like other American Protestant authors of his type, Crump directs Western self-hatred onto the Jewish state. A retired New Testament professor at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, he offers a profoundly distorted view of events in the Holy Land. His views are based on tours organized by the Israeli Committee against Home Demolitions (ICAHD) and Breaking the Silence, two anti-Zionist groups hostile to the Jewish state's efforts to defend itself against Palestinian terrorism. Having visited eastern Jerusalem and Hebron and conducted interviews with a Palestinian photojournalist from the Aida refugee camp who was shot in the face by an Israeli soldier in 2013, Crump found all the material he

needed to accuse American Evangelicals of “helping to finance political Zionism’s flagrant imitation of Nazi Germany.”

Crump refers here to a supposed Israeli “land theft” in the West Bank, equating a territorial dispute with the Palestinians, which Israelis have tried to end with numerous peace offers, with Nazi invasions and mass murders. He also accuses Theodore Herzl of embracing “an organic, tribal nationalism” centered “around the mystical union of ‘blood and soil,’” which had a “kinship to the National Socialist party and Nazi Germany’s Third Reich.” Crump even asserts that

both political Zionism and Nazism were drinking from the same well, inspired by the same Romantic movement that encouraged mythical, nationalistic dreams for restoring the ancient union of *blood and soil* throughout Europe. (Italics in original.)

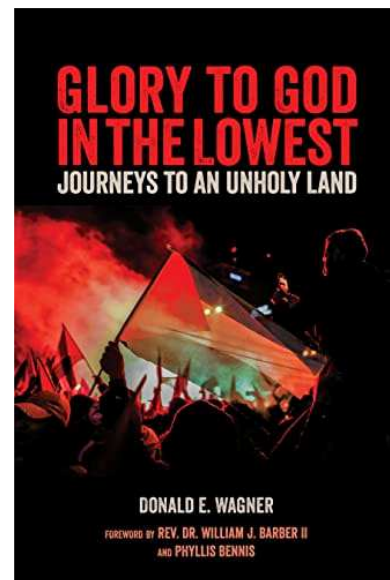
For Crump, Israel exists not for Jewish survival but as

the final expression of European settler colonialism intent on bringing Western civilization and culture to the Oriental world by replacing an indigenous population with European settlement, just as white settlers replaced Native Americans.

The fact that approximately 20 percent of Israel’s population is comprised of Arab Muslims, who exercise rights not enjoyed by Muslims anywhere else in the region, appears to be lost on Crump, as is the fact that about half of Israel’s Jewish population are Sephardim, not of European background.

For Crump, vilifying Evangelical supporters of the Jewish state matters infinitely more than educating his readers about the

Holy Land. His book aspires to establish its author as a prophet railing against the sins of his co-religionists.⁴ His shocking and counterfactual comparison between Zionists, struggling to maintain the existence of the Jewish people, and Nazis, intent on their genocide, reveals a troubling animus toward Jewish survival that renders his book an obscene curiosity unworthy of further scrutiny, much less any audience.



Journeys to an Unholy Land

Glory to God in the Lowest: Journeys to an Unholy Land. By Donald E. Wagner. Northampton, Mass.: Interlink Publishing Group, 2022. 304 pp. \$17.59, paper.

Wagner’s *Glory to God in the Lowest* betrays a similar hostility toward Israel. Wagner, a former pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), acquired notoriety for equating Israelis in Judea and Samaria in his

⁴ See, also, Dexter Van Zile, “Crump Text Indicates Anti-Zionist Torch Being Passed from Mainliners to Evangelicals,” CAMERA, Mar. 2, 2022.

2003 book to a “killer-vine” strangling rose-bushes.⁵ Now, in an autobiographical account, he ascribes his decades-long career as a hostile and aggrieved anti-Zionist to the Sabra and Shatila massacres perpetrated by Christian Phalangists in Lebanon in 1982. Given the horror of the attack and its aftermath, it is reasonable that Wagner would be offended by what he saw in Lebanon, but sadly enough, he makes little effort to understand the context of this attack—which was preceded by massacres of Christians perpetrated by the Palestine Liberation Organization in Damour several years previously. Strikingly, Wagner never makes much of an effort to address the misdeeds perpetrated by the Palestinians for whom he has advocated for so long, nor does he acknowledge that his enmity toward Israel is rooted in a Maronite-perpetrated massacre. It was Phalangists who perpetrated this massacre, not Israelis, a fact he acknowledges.

Wagner expresses palpable rage at Israel’s defenders, whom he blames for derailing his career at North Park University in Chicago, where he served as head of the school’s now-defunct Center for Middle East Studies. Wagner levels great invective at Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, a scholar associated with the Jewish United Fund in Chicago. Poupko earned Wagner’s ire by assailing anti-Israel commentators such as Palestinian Christian Naim Ateek as “antisemites who hate Israel” at a conference Wagner organized in 2005.

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Wagner leaves out a lot of detail in this vignette. In a memorable talk (which this writer witnessed), Poupko condemned Ateek for using

the story of Jesus’s crucifixion as a lens through which to view Israel’s actions during its decades-long conflict with the Palestinians. Poupko declared, among other things, that the use of such imagery “perpetuates the worst elements of the Christian teachings of contempt for Judaism and for Jews.”⁶ If Wagner has a specific response to Poupko’s criticism, which was subsequently echoed by other writers,⁷ he does not offer it in *Glory to God in the Lowest*.

Wagner offers a potential clue to his motives early on in his book when, after the introduction, he describes himself as “a sojourner in the land of the Algonquin, Miami, Potawam, and Ojibwe nations.” By the convoluted logic that he and other privileged Americans use to smear the Jewish state, he himself is a settler living on land stolen from its indigenous population. The inclusion of such a “land acknowledgement” regarding territorial claims in North America has surprising relevance to a book about the Middle East.

In addition to establishing his moral and intellectual superiority over his Israel-supporting rivals in American Protestantism, a land acknowledgement indicates Wagner seeks to expunge his sins by assailing the legitimacy of the Jewish state in a

⁵ Don Wagner, *Dying in the Land of Promise: Palestine and Palestinian Christianity from Pentecost to 2000* (London: Melisende, 2003), p. 247.

⁶ Dexter Van Zile, “[Background: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center](#),” CAMERA, Feb. 12, 2008.

⁷ See, for example, Amy Jill-Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007), p. 184.

bastardized form of substitutionary atonement. This is common behavior among progressive Christians in the United States. All too often, Israel serves as the ram in the thicket upon which privileged pacifists project their guilt for belonging to a civilization they regard as the dominant—if not unique—source of suffering in the world in the modern era. These Christians thrust Israel into the fire of moral judgment in their stead. For them, Israel replaces Jesus Christ as the sacrificial lamb of atonement.

Conclusion

In Polley's view, the writing of Westerners in the mid-1800s—and not the actions of Arab leaders—remain decisive in determining the circumstances under which people live in the Holy Land. Polley, thereby, removes responsibility for the welfare of

Arabs in the Holy Land out of their own hands and places it, ironically, into the hands of white men dead for more than a century. Talk about ethnocentrism.

Wagner and Crump similarly deprive Arabs in the Holy Land of their agency, placing the blame for the suffering endured not on irresponsible leaders, but on Israel-supporting Christians in the United States. If Crump and Wagner truly wished to help the Palestinians, they would encourage them to accept Israel and get on with building a future for themselves. But that would require absenting themselves from a drama-laden conflict they have long stoked.

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