Faith in the Face of Empire is written primarily for a Western Christian lay readership by one of Palestine’s most internationally well-known theologians. Raheb’s new work is interesting not only as a case study in biblical reception but also because of its engagement with broader debates in the field of biblical studies. Raheb’s book is remarkable in that it communicates the immediacy of “empire” as a political reality for him as a Palestinian reader today, while remaining in dialogue—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—with current topics of interest in biblical studies, including empire studies, postcolonial criticism, first-century Judaism, and the historical Jesus. While not a strictly academic work, because of its engagement with scholarship, and the fact that it may itself be viewed as a case study in reception history, it is an especially engaging piece of writing.

In brief, the book runs as follows. Chapter 1, “History and the Biblical Story,” raises questions about historiography and the “authors” of Palestinian history. In chapter 2, “A Prelude to a Palestinian Narrative,” Raheb introduces contemporary shifting perspectives on Palestine and related developments within theology and biblical studies. Chapter 3, “The Geo-politics of the Middle East,” offers a very brief introduction to Middle East politics, focusing on Israel-Palestine. Chapter 4, “Palestine,” examines how the geography of Palestine has affected its political situation over the centuries. In chapter 5, “The Empire,” Raheb builds an argument that the state of Israel today functions as “empire,”
through means such as the building of settlements, state terror, and forced exile. Chapter 6, “The People of Palestine,” introduces aspects of the Palestinian struggle and resistance. Chapter 7, “God,” presents faith as a means of challenging empire. In chapter 8, “Jesus,” Raheb presents his vision of the politics of Jesus. Finally, in chapter 9, “Spirit,” Raheb looks to the future and discusses issues, including the empowerment of women, creative methods of nonviolent resistance, and maintaining hope. The book concludes with a brief epilogue on “Imagination and Hope.”

Theology, the land of Palestine, and empire are the central themes of Raheb’s project. On numerous occasions Raheb draws the reader’s attention back to the list of empires that have ruled over the region in the past three millennia, emphasizing empire as the context not only of Palestine in the time of Jesus but of the whole history of Palestine up until today, with Israel as the present occupying power. The manner in which Raheb repeatedly affirms the “sacredness” of Palestine is notable, considering that his work is in some ways an implicit response to Christian Zionist claims about the “sacredness” of Israel and the resulting political implications of such a claim for Palestinians. Raheb states, for example, “Palestine without God would have been but a corridor for invading armies and the most suitable and logical spot for regional battles…. Without him, Palestine would have been a mere battlefield, and the most hopeless place on earth. But because of the Divine, the battlefield became holy ground” (91, emphasis added). Although Raheb is silent on the “sacredness” of Israel, he does not seek to explicitly fault the claims of Christian Zionists, in the vein of, say, Stephen Sizer. Raheb’s claims about the sacredness of Palestine, however, could be interpreted as a conscious (I would suggest) attempt to implicitly counterbalance popular Christian Zionist notions about the special national status of Israel.

Biblical stories are also for Raheb integrally interconnected with the history of the people of the land under empire. Besides suggesting that the land may function as a “fifth” gospel (97) (an idea in some respects not dissimilar from what we might find in Kenneth Bailey’s work), Raheb states, “It is with these [biblical] stories that our forefathers were able to face the empires in which they found themselves for a millennium. These stories generated so much power that they enabled the people of Palestine to survive against almost impossible odds and often to thrive in spite of those empires” (21). As well as these texts “enabl[ing] the people of Palestine to survive,” Raheb notes that religious narratives have served and continue to serve to justify empire in Palestine, as well as to “resist” it. Pointing to the importance of “ideological and theological framework[s]” for the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Crusaders, and the Muslim Empire, Raheb argues that “Israel is no exception. From day one, theology has provided the narrative glue that keeps Israeli society together” (65). Principally, however, Raheb seems to regard theology as a vital factor in resistance to empire, foregrounding its function as a discourse
that can question the morality of the empire (85) and provide “the necessary motivation to go against empire even if doing so means sacrificing one’s life” (86). Here Raheb’s argumentation is reminiscent of much recent theological writing on empire and the New Testament and the arguments furthered in another recent Palestinian volume released by the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, Challenging Empire: God, Faithfulness and Resistance.¹

Raheb’s presentation of Jesus and his contemporaries is particularly interesting and, in my estimation, the section of his book that will both find most appeal among sympathetic readers and will also cause the most upset among critics. On a couple of occasions Raheb reframes dominant debates about first-century Judaism that are prominent in New Testament studies. Raheb argues, for example, that Israeli settlers honor the so-called “Jewish freedom fighters” of the first century at the Herodian, while “Palestinian fighters who stand in the same tradition are labelled by the Israelis as terrorists” (76). Raheb also draws parallels between the Pharisees, who “were concerned with orthodoxy and gave a great deal of authority to tradition,” with Hamas, who promote Islamic law as the “solution to the Palestinian problem.” On this point, Raheb notes that adherence to religious laws is “highly attractive to an occupied people” (the Pharisees under the Romans, contemporary Palestinians under the Israeli state). He states, “it is an appealing and human response to people who feel crushed by the empire, whose dignity has been tested, whose rights have been violated, and who, deep down, feel that God might have forgotten about them” (78). Raheb’s explicit comparison of contemporary Palestinians living under occupation with first-century Jews living under Roman imperialism is especially interesting when considered in the context of recent debates in New Testament scholarship. With even the most mainstream and prolific scholars (N. T. Wright, for example) discussing Roman oppression of first-century Jews and positioning the New Testament writings as a challenge to Roman rule, Raheb uses these analogies in a manner that positions the Palestinians on the “right side” of history. It would be interesting to see whether such an analogy is met with sympathy or outrage by biblical scholars.

Raheb interacts with various debates from the fields of biblical studies and theology throughout this work, at times noting how they speak to the Palestinian issue, at times lamenting their neglect of it. Early on Raheb claims, for example, that, “[n]o one wants to mix biblical studies with modern questions arising from the current conflict” (11), and later that “after almost half a century of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, Western theologians have been unable to see that the empire is at work in Israel itself,” even in the case of “the most articulate postcolonial biblical interpreters” (93). That said, Raheb

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¹ Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maureen Tobin, Challenging Empire: God, Faithfulness and Resistance (Jerusalem: Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, 2012)
discusses the contributions of a number of Western authors on related issues. Raheb notes, for instance, the writings of evangelical theologians Don Wagner, Gary Burge, and Stephen Sizer; he notes the contributions of Richard A. Horsley, Warren Carter, and Walter Brueggemann to the study of empire and its relation to the Bible (a clear influence on Raheb’s work); and he notes the work of the Jewish theologian Marc Ellis. Raheb’s complaint about a lack of engagement from Western biblical studies is perhaps well illustrated, however, by his apparent scraping of the barrel for a brief quotation from Kwok Pui-lan, and a quote from the preface to the 2002 edition of Walter Brueggemann’s *The Land*, which Raheb describes overall as “a typical book about biblical theology in which one cannot find any mention of the peoples of the land or of their identities” (34).

Having mentioned various North American and British biblical scholars and theologians who have addressed issues relating to Israel and Palestine, Raheb makes some mention of the work of Keith W. Whitelam but does not engage with his work at any length; this seems like an opportunity missed by Raheb, considering his evident interest in historiographical questions relating to the history of Palestine. It is curious that, despite an awareness of Whitelam’s work, Raheb suggests elsewhere that what he calls “ancient “sacred historiography” has little political relevance for Palestinians today” (11). Was not the fundamental argument of Whitelam’s *The Invention of Ancient Israel* that so-called “biblical history” is of paramount importance to, as Whitelam put it, “the erasing of Palestinian history”?

On one level, Raheb’s book is a polemical piece intended to provoke discussion and draw attention to the Palestinian problem. On another level, Raheb’s work is both a fascinating case study in reception history and a notable contribution to debates on postcolonial interpretation of the Bible. This book should therefore be of special interest to scholars of Jewish-Christian relations, of postcolonial biblical interpretation, and of the reception of the Bible.