

*Christian Perspectives on the Holy Land*

A  
LAND  
FULL  
OF  
GOD

*Edited by Mae Elise Cannon*

*Foreword by Daniel Roth & Aziz Abu Sarah*

“I’m Jewish”  
Judith Mendelsohn Rood, PhD  
Professor of History and Middle East Studies  
Biola University  
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I’m Jewish. Both of my parents are Jews, as were their parents, and theirs before them back into the obscurity of a forgotten past. I was raised in the conservative synagogue, where my parents were members of the “Tree of Life” in Pittsburgh and “B’nai Brith” and “Adas Israel” in Washington DC, where I was Bat Mitzvahed in 1971 and confirmed in 1974. This is the same synagogue that President Obama spoke at earlier this year, where he talked about his relationship to the Jewish people. Today the congregation’s position on Israel and the Middle East is much like the one I had, forty years ago, when I left as a Pro-Palestinian renegade, never to return.

I first went to Israel on a United Synagogue Youth Pilgrimage that year—1974— as a reward for my continued Hebrew studies. Adas Israel had a big impact on me—I preferred Hebrew school to my public schools because the level of scholarship was so much higher. I loved studying Hebrew—one of my earliest memories is of studying the Hebrew text of Exodus as an eight year old. I remember praying as a young girl, asking God to help me understand the meaning of the words I was reading. I did not mean translation—what the Hebrew words meant in Hebrew—but what the words really meant. The Bible was always my favorite book—so complex and profound, mysterious and ancient, somehow just beyond my understanding. It spoke to me of marvelous things, holy things, about which I knew I knew nothing. It was MY book, my heritage, THE book of my people’s history. It was beautiful, savage, tragic, perplexing—and filled with yearning and hope. It was about a distant place, my homeland, where my people were once free. I daydreamed about life in the desert as a nomad, sleeping in tents under skies filled with stars.

During those years of elementary school, the Arab-Israel Conflict dominated the news. Also as an eight year old, I read Marguerite Henry’s wonderful children’s book, *King of the Wind*. I was one of those horse-crazy girls and I loved the story, set in Morocco. The book was lavishly illustrated. One of the plates pictured an old man with flowing white beard standing atop a minaret, blowing a shofar! The illustrator’s confusion of Muslims and Jews was innocent and sweet, and I, not knowing the facts, thought Arabs and Muslims were Jews! I

wanted to understand, then, from the very earliest years of my life as a student of the world, why did Arabs and Jews hate one another?

In Hebrew School, the rabbi would sometimes assemble all of the classes to teach us about Israel and her Arab neighbors. He'd put up a map of the Middle East and point to the little Jewish state and show us all of the surrounding countries threatening Israel. The first war I experienced with understanding was the Yom Kippur War, a war that outraged my elders because it was secretly launched while Jews were in synagogue on our holiest day! I also remember at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services that the worship was overshadowed by fundraising for Israel. My friends, bored and tired from standing up and praying for hours at a time, would escape into little cliques to talk and fool around, thinking about anything BUT God. I thought we ought to be taking the Torah seriously, and was confused about why God didn't punish everyone for not obeying Him. I began to test Him, to see if he'd punish me if I sinned. I then learned Jews no longer believe in sin, just good works. I was troubled by this discovery, and pondered its meaning deeply in my heart.

My Bat Mitzvah was tremendously important to me. My grandmother, my father's mother, was given the honor of being the first woman in my synagogue to have an *aliyah*—to go up on the *bimah*, the raised platform in front of the *abaron ha-kodesh*—the ark—to bless the Torah. I then read the *haftarah*—girls didn't get to read the *maftir*, or portion from the *Chumash*—the Pentateuch—in those days. My portion was from Samuel, and dealt with the Amalekites. My Bat Mitzvah was on the Shabbat before Purim. My reading was the backstory, telling us the roots of our archenemy Haman, the prototype of all of my people's enemies. The Amalekites were evil because they attacked the rear of the column of Hebrews fleeing Egypt in the desert. Our people's enemies were merciless—attacking the weak and the helpless. In the story, his descendants are cursed for all time. They are the family of Haman. On Purim, every time this villain's name is mentioned in the Scroll of Esther, the *Megillah*—the “Telling”—we grind a “*gregor*” (a “noisemaker”) to drown out the sound of his name. May his name be blotted out, erased forever. The Jews, one day, will triumph over our enemies. This should be the hope and prayer of all of us, for the men of violence are the scourge of our times, too. Purim is a lot of fun—all the kids dress up in costumes and parade around the sanctuary and then eat treats and party at the special *oneg*, when everyone shares the joy of the Sabbath meal together. Jews laugh through their tears. Somehow the

laughter and the tears have hidden God, as Jews decided it was up to them to try to live in this world of endless enmity in our own strength.

I noticed my friends weren't too interested in any of these issues. I discovered that I was different—shy and studious and definitely not cool. I tried to hang out with my friends but I didn't really understand them. They were interested in worldly things, while I was interested in spiritual things. I liked my teachers, but as I was growing up many of them betrayed my trust. I began to doubt authority. And I began to believe that God had removed Himself from history, leaving humanity alone to rely on our own resources. I later discovered, much later, that this is exactly what the rabbis had decided after the destruction of the Second Temple. God proposed, it was up to us to dispose.

This idea began to take a strong hold on my mind because my father and his family had escaped from the Holocaust—just barely. I've told that story elsewhere. The key point in our education was to assure Jewish survival—both from destruction and assimilation. But the idea that God had abandoned us was powerful, and led me to leave the synagogue in 1975, after I went to Israel, because the idea that the only real point to life was the survival of the Jewish people was not enough for me. For the first time. I felt that my rabbis and the Jewish leadership had led us astray. I was angry at the state of confusion among the Jewish people about law—no one could even agree whether or not we could eat peas during Pesach. It seemed no one could agree upon anything, except supporting Israel and achieving social justice through our own efforts, and ensuring Jewish survival; above all else, God was irrelevant to *Tikkun Olam*—the repair of the world. Everyone seemed hypocritical to me. I felt betrayed. And, most of all, I wondered why God had allowed the enmity between my people and the Arabs—my cousins—to spill each other's blood.

I learned about the Palestinians during my first visit to Israel, and I could not understand why my family's tragedy led to the suffering of the Arabs there. Or how they, my noble cousins, could justify murdering school children to terrify the innocent? I met the survivors of the Ma'alot massacre at the hands of Palestinian terrorists. Were they the Amalekites?

Why weren't we—Arabs and Jews—united against the Christians, the Jews' enemy since time immemorial? Weren't the Arabs Semites like us, hated by the Christians? Shouldn't we build up the Middle East together, and turn the world back to God?

In college, I ploughed the library for any books I could find on the Arabs and discovered Islam, read through the eyes of many European Jewish scholars who'd asked the same questions. The Arabs didn't accuse the Jews of killing God—only the Christians did that. While Christians were slaughtering Jews during the Crusades, Jewish warriors were fighting with Muslims against them. One even because the commander of a Muslim army! To me, this was astounding! I read books that are now dismissed as “Orientalist” because they were written by Westerners about Islam, it was said, in order to control it. For that reason, no one reads them today, least of all, Muslims. These scholars had not encountered Salafist Islam in the way that we have; instead, their scholarship focused on philosophy and literature, art and architecture, poetry and knowledge. This was the House of Wisdom, and I wanted to enter it.

I decided to go to Hebrew University for my sophomore year. I loved studying Hebrew and ME history and politics there, from 1977-8. I studied the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and fell in love with a quiet Palestinian student working on his PhD on the transfer policies of the founders of Israel. I went to the first *Yom al-Ard*—Day of the Land demonstration in March, 1978.. In the 1970s my friends were all secular and hoping to achieve peace between equals as we fought for freedom and equality—and it seemed possible, if only the superpowers would allow the Israelis and Palestinians to work it out. We were pragmatists. My Palestinian friends, when asked, told me they would stay in Israel, as long as there was a Palestinian state to which the refugees could return. My friends understood the freedoms they enjoyed in Israel and hated the Arab regimes that had betrayed them. I understood Palestinian identity, because it mirrored my own, shaped by hatred and injustice, and a longing for dignity and honor.

I returned to the US to write my thesis on Ibn Khaldun, a fourteenth century Maliki judge from Andalusia who'd served as a political advisor and diplomat, who'd been imprisoned as a political enemy and who'd been captured and interrogated by the great warrior Tamerlane in Damascus. Ibn Khaldun is best known for the translation of the introduction to his great history of the world, the *Muqaddimab*—this summer the eleventh book on Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's Year of Books Club. In it the Sunni philosopher of history systematically analyzes the rise and fall of states, focusing upon the phenomenon of religion to inspire the *esprit de corps* that motivates desert warriors to attack the civilized world to set up caliphates. My study of Ibn Khaldun awakened in me an understanding of the role of

philosophy in the religion in the Middle East, a topic, I would later discover, that was not being studied at the best programs on the Modern Middle East—like the ones I enrolled in at Georgetown University and the University of Chicago. There the focus was secular—culture and society, politics and economics.

What had moved me most about Ibn Khaldun's Aristotelian understanding of Sunni Islam was its strong proclamation of faith in the God of Israel! In college, I was unaware of the development of Quranic hermeneutics and, especially, I did not understand the importance of Salafism and the importance of the Saudi Arabian *da'wah*—the Muslim missionary movement. All I knew was that the Quran interpreted biblical history—Jewish history—and pointed the way to obedience, thereby guaranteeing the believer admission into heaven through works. My texts did not include essays on gender. No mention of the hijab or Female Genital Mutilation. Instead, they were historical accounts of the Muslim philosophers who created a fragile, ephemeral world where Jews, Christians, and Muslims studied God and free will, creation and the cosmos. In this world I resonated with Ibn Khaldun's idea that law establishes justice, and that without Divine Law, society will cannibalize itself as it descends into depravity. I dwelled on these ideas, tempting as they are, but eventually realized that men are too depraved, too treacherous to establish just laws without humility before our Creator, especially when they declare that they are the arbitrators of divinity. My suspicion of authority kept me from becoming a Muslim.

No one had been paying attention to the Iranians in those days—the Shiites had no power, but they had the Shah, and he'd been a friend to the US and Israel. Now that the Shah was disgraced and abandoned, the Islamic world teetered on the edge of a new, volatile age. I would never go to my dream cities of Isfahan and Shiraz, now that they were enemy territory, and my country was named "The Great Satan" and Israel "The Little Satan" by the Westoxified anti-imperialist revolutionary regime. For the rest of my life, Iran would solidify terrorism into its global policy, inexorably expanding its power into the Arab world, despite the enormous and tragically misguided sacrifices of my country to prevent it. Today, as the ancient Christians of the Middle East have lost favor as the Arabist regimes that used to protect them crumbled under Iranian pressure, it seems that the judgment of the ages has come. Now these Christians are being scattered, and are returning to first things. Their Muslim neighbors, horrified by the excesses of the anti-Shiite militias, are also turning back to the God of Abraham and Ishmael. No one prepared for this. Back in the '80s no one

thought about what would happen if we armed the Salafists to fight the Communists. Now we do.

I had decided to pursue my studies of the Middle East. I took an internship at the Egypt Desk at the State Department, where, among other things, I read dozens of letters from Copts begging for help to escape from the fanaticism of their Muslim compatriots. I admit I had little sympathy for these Christians. I had a low view of Christianity, and my hopes for a Muslim-Jewish détente led me to disregard the very real issues brewing just below the surface of Sadat's Egypt. I thought that since Muslims believed in God, they were capable of creating a virtuous society. I did not understand the depth of popular Egyptian antagonism to the West, even though I recognized the deceits of the Nazi-allied Palestinian anti-Zionist jihad, a struggle which Middle East Christians had embraced as they sought acceptance and safety in the dream-palaces of Arab nationalism.

I had rejected Conservative Judaism (also known as *Masorti* Judaism), because it accepts both the Torah and Talmud as authoritative. I could never live under rabbinic law—I was a feminist, after all. I was living “outside the camp” but never lost my strong Jewish identity—an identity that tied me to my people and my God. My love of the Jewish prayer book—the *Siddur*—and the *Tanakh*, by which I mean the Hebrew Scriptures in their entirety—allowed me and my husband to create our family's little egalitarian house synagogue, much later in my life. But all through college into grad school I didn't know anyone like me, who believed in God, and who was mortified by our rebellion from Him. I did not know how to bridge the gap, and my belief spiraled into a state of spiritual depression. I could find no meaning for my life, for my survival. When so many millions perished, and were perishing still, what justification could there be for my useless presence in this world? I'd read all of the existentialists and philosophers and I could not think myself out of the pit that I'd dug for myself. I didn't know it was a commandment to be joyous despite the tears.

And then God began to answer my prayers. Long before, while I was in Israel, I'd gone with a friend to Galilee, where we read the New Testament. I knew that this was a Jewish book, and that Jesus was a rabbi. I thought to myself that if I'd lived in Israel during his time, I probably would have become a follower and then betray him along with all the rest. All of the centuries of Christian anti-Semitism kept me from ever considering Him as the

true Messiah of Israel, and I certainly was not equipped to understand him as the Son of God. I stayed outside the camp, alone.

Now, at the University of Chicago, seven years after leaving the synagogue, I met a group of Jewish Christians who shared their faith in Yeshu'a with me, and, after a brief battle, I surrendered myself to Him as my Lord and God. Everything that I'd read now came into focus. I understood profound truths as the biblical story became clear to me, and even today, as I continue to study, new depths of understanding come, strengthening my faith, enabling me to keep moving forward, knowing that the arc of history is towards justice and mercy.. What was important then was that I understood the outlines of the whole story, even the parts that remain unwritten. At first, I worried that my self-identity as a Jewish woman would become meaningless if I accepted Jesus. But God has redeemed that identity and has given me my voice as a Jewish woman.

When my parents named me after my paternal great-grandmother, Jenny Moses, they decided to call me Judith. They probably didn't understand the power—and the problems—that come with that name. It is the same name as Judah—a Judean. The root of the word is praise, and the name means s/he who praises Yahweh. My name means “Jew” or “Jewess.” In Arabic, too. Everywhere I go, I'm the Jew, who praises God. I couldn't get around it. The Lord is with me, I am His witness.

So, in the miraculous way that God arranged my life, I went to Jerusalem to study at the Islamic Court archives as a Jewish Christian. The congregational Messianic Jewish movement was still in its infancy then. The Christian world was utterly gentile, a foreign faith, a faith that needed translation. There was no indigenous, Hebrew speaking church (although there were Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Baptists with Jewish congregants). Israeli congregations were heavily expat. American Messianic congregations lacked authenticity for me.

I was still outside the camp, but I found that there were others who were beginning to build communities of believers, and, as we raised our family, we began to see the fruits of the spirit as more and more Jews like me, raised in Conservative and Orthodox homes, began to fellowship together with others drawn to the God of Israel. People who loved the Bible and for that reason still loved the Jews. People like the ones during the Holocaust era who did



the right thing because they read the Bible and knew that faith was meaningless without good works. I began to see myself as a bridge between the Church and the Jewish people. I sought out other evangelicals interested in the Middle East. I was not received well. I discovered the depth of evangelical animosity towards Israel. Very few Christian intellectuals whom I encountered during this period of my life believed that God has a purpose and a plan for Israel. They believed that the Church had replaced Israel, and that, being unjust, Israel will be judged and exiled, the land restored to its rightful inhabitants, the Palestinian Christians, as the Christians claimed, or the Muslims, as the Muslims claimed.

Over the past several years, I've written about these developments, and I don't want to write about that here. What I want to write about is my Jewish identity, because for years I was focused on Palestinian identity, defending the Palestinian right to self-determination. Forty years ago such a position was derided as left-wing nonsense. Today even most Conservative Jews believe as I did, but now it's too late. The secular Palestinian nationalism of the 70s and 80s has been overthrown by Islamist jihadism, which rejects me as a Jew, as a Christian, as a woman. The past forty years of warfare has created an apocalypticism amongst my people, amongst Muslims, and amongst Christians, with the result that religions are viewed as extremist—feared and hated for creating fear and hatred. Without God, religion only divides, creating perpetual enmity. Only the God of love can break the power of hate.

And now, I am returning to the texts that have empowered me all of my life—not as an individual, but as a member of my community. The Messianic Jewish community is maturing. Praying in community for the sake of the world, as a Jewish follower of Yeshua, as a member of the *Ekklesia*, the “called out ones”—the Church, not in my head, not in my house, but aloud, with others, in the presence of the Lord among us, together. Without the Jewish presence in the Church, there will be no Church. Ephesians 3:6 makes this crystal clear.

In the years of my engagement with Palestinian evangelicals, I have never felt accepted for who I am: a Zionist Jew. I have recognized that I could become a useful weapon against Israel, but have carefully guarded my words and my actions to prevent that. I have found conditional acceptance as a Jewish Christian, so long as my strong Jewish voice does not assert privilege. Jesus does not ask that we reject our identity: He redeems it. My people has a homeland. It is a strategic land bridge, the site of endless warfare. History has shaped it,

and many peoples have sought God there, claiming Him—and the Land, *Eretz Yisrael*—for themselves, in His name. They are part of my story, which is also the story of the Church. I am in that great cloud of witnesses, along with all of the others who've accepted Yeshua as Lord, from all tongues, tribes, nations. Only when Israel recognizes the legitimacy of God's work in history among non-Jews will peace come for the Jewish people. Only when the Church accepts Israel as a legitimate nation will peace come. Like Jacob and Esau, Israel and the Arabs will one day recognize the Lord in one another, and embrace.

Without the Jewish presence in the Church, the people Israel cannot be redeemed. Without those who have sought to follow the God of Israel there, the Jewish people cannot fulfill its destiny to serve humanity. Barrels of ink have been spilled writing about Jewish nationalism and Zionism, the conflict, the ways to solve it, justifying it, perpetuating it. Only the presence of the Lord among us will empower us to love our enemies and break the power of Satan over the region.

We must accept one another on God's terms, not our own. Unconditionally. In this time of jihad, we must fight the good fight together, in the name of the Merciful, the Compassionate. In Him we have the power to forgive, and the desire to love. We must recognize the humanity of our enemies, and love them as we have been commanded to by He who possesses real wisdom.

To my Palestinian brothers, who've told me that I would not be welcomed to live among them in their state, I say, without the presence of Jews, your state will perpetuate the evils that have destroyed you. I accept your identity as a fact of history. You must recognize mine as a witness to the dependability of God's promises. You must share the gospel with your enemies—the Jewish people—in order, to redeem them from hatred. We, together, must show Muslims the power of our faith in the God of Israel. Until we do that, we bring shame to the name of our Lord in the eyes of His enemies.

Many Muslims have realized that the Allah of the Salafists is not the Allah of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob. Let us begin there. Let us testify to them: We must together worship Him in Christ, praying for forgiveness, for mercy, for a good future together, under God.

