

Roger Baumann, *Black Visions of the Holy Land: African American Christian Engagement with Israel and Palestine*. Columbia Series on Religion and Politics, New York: Columbia University Press 2024. Hardcover ISBN 978-0-231-19844-8. Paperback ISBN 978-0-231-19845-5. eIsbn 978-0-231-55263-9. Pp. xii + 314

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This book, based on a Ph.D. thesis at Yale University, is founded on extensive fieldwork and interaction, over an extended period, with African American Christian people and organisations concerned, in diverse ways and on quite divergent theological bases, with Israel and Palestine. Baumann reflects quite self-consciously on the complexity of his engagement, as a “white” researcher (whose surname is not uncommon among Ashkenazi Jews), with people whose identity and religiosity are in many ways shaped by the legacy of slavery, segregation, the civil rights movement, and enduring racism and inequality in the United States. That he won their trust is quite evident from the candid conversations recounted, and the resulting book is one that can therefore be read with confidence. The insights it offers, and the vista it opens, into a diverse and dynamic, but nevertheless in many ways quite distinct, culture will benefit those with less exposure to American society and the complex interrelations of religion, economic power and interests, and local and global politics.

Baumann divides his subjects broadly into those churches, organisations, and leaders sympathetic to Christian Zionism, and those sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle for justice. He concludes, at the end of his study, that the boundaries between the two are not entirely impermeable, and that there is some engagement and even overlap between the two. Nevertheless, the categories reflect accurately the ideologies of the organisations studied, and the theological vision and ideological principles on which they are founded, and which distinguish them very clearly.

Denominations and their leadership sympathetic to Christian Zionism are seen to be linked to, and influenced by such organisations as Christians United for Israel (CUFI) and the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ), the latter an Israeli founded interfaith initiative, the former rooted in the predominantly white evangelical churches closely linked with socially and economically conservative

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political movements in the United States. This is not to suggest that these African American churches and their leaders share all the values of the religious right, or that they have been manipulated or coerced into positions on Israel without their own agency or despite their theological principles – and Baumann is scrupulously careful not to suggest this. The legacy of slavery has encouraged black Americans to identify with Israel in slavery in Egypt, and to view the exodus not only as emancipation but also as repatriation. The claims of the modern state of Israel therefore naturally resonate with the experience and religiosity of many African Americans, so that towering figures of the civil rights movement as Martin Luther King Jr were slow to see the other side of Zionism, as were white American theologians such as the German immigrant Reinhard Niebuhr. The role of some prominent Jews in the civil rights movement is frequently cited, sometimes as having incurred an obligation on black Americans to subscribe to the Zionist project. The questions would have been worth asking, how representative of American Jewry were those who supported the civil rights movement, were they Zionist, and how representative of contemporary American Jews are those who are Zionist, and are they at all committed to justice for black Americans? More disturbing questions, of which Baumann is clearly aware, but circumspect, concern the influence of the “Israel lobby”. An investigative journalist would not be baselessly cynical to ask more probing questions about the role of the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and of sponsorship drawn from the very considerable financial resources it controls or to which it has access, in enabling some church leaders not merely to undertake frequent trips to Israel – whether pilgrimages, solidarity visits to illegal settlements and, somewhat touchingly, to Ethiopian Jews marginalised in Israeli society, or sight-seeing tours – but also to adopt lifestyles far beyond the means of their organisations, and even further beyond the means of their members.

In turning to African American churches and leaders whose concern and activism for social justice includes the Palestinians, Baumann focuses largely on the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference (SDPC) and its affiliates. While awareness is shown that church leaders are no longer as prominent as they once were in the civic life of African American communities, the tradition of the civil rights movement remains strong. Concerns surrounding enduring racism in white North American culture, and its impact on education and employment opportunities, policing and the criminal justice system, in immigration policy, international relations and in politics generally inform perceptions of the situation in

Palestine and Israel. It is the continuing struggle for justice, rather than the historical event of emancipation, that informs reading of Scripture, and understanding of events in the world today. It is accordingly with Palestinian communities, and especially with evangelical Christians, that links are sought, and to whom support is offered – all with considerably fewer resources than are available to AIPAC-linked Christian Zionist organisations.

The book does not discuss African-American members of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, or the several Protestant churches which operate in the United States. Baumann's focus is on churches formed in African American communities, culturally rooted in those communities, and led by pastors drawn from those communities. A study which included African American members of these denominations, and leaders of African American heritage in those denominations, and similarly of (Latin American) Hispanic members and leaders in the denominations of European origin, might make for interesting comparison.

The period of the research straddled the Obama and first Trump administrations in the United States. The evolving political landscape is reflected, and its implications for attitudes to Palestine and Israel among African American Christians noted. Baumann illuminates ways in which not only developments in global politics have been and continue to be influential, but also how they are experienced and interpreted through the lives of people of colour in the United States as continuing discrimination and inequality are exacerbated not only by the social and economic policies of federal and state governments, but also by increasing, often lethal, violence by police and private security personnel in the United States, to which black and Hispanic people were disproportionately vulnerable, and for which perpetrators have seldom been called to account. As the initial euphoria of the Obama presidency, and the loyalty which a president of African heritage inspired, gave way to the realisation that nothing had changed in the social and economic circumstances of the disadvantaged, or in the power dynamics controlled by financial vested interests, insights into the plight of the Palestinians, and the impunity exercised by Israeli politicians and armed forces, have mutated; a process which continues beyond the period of study, as the second Trump administration intensifies the racist policies of its predecessors, and implements them with greater violence. The war in Gaza, which began as the book was in production, and accompanying incremental ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, have changed both the reality on the ground, and awareness thereof among increasing numbers of people around the world. That the

context in which the book was written is evolving quite rapidly in no way invalidates, or even dates, the fruits of this research. On the contrary, appreciating the complex dynamics of religious and political life in marginalised and oppressed communities over the preceding decades will be key to understanding the changes currently taking place, the outcome of which cannot yet be foreseen.

Baumann is to be commended for having undertaken this research, and presenting it in this format.