

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHURCH OF THE ARABS

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I studied ten years in the United States at some of the best institutions. Even though I took several classes in theology and church history, I was never taught about Arab Christians and their contributions to the global church.¹ The failure to address the presence and contributions of Arab Christians is intensified in light of false assumptions related to equating the term Arab with the label Muslim as well as characterizing the Arab–Israeli conflict as a religious conflict between the Judeo–Christian faith and Islam.² Some people view Arabs only through the lens of Arabic stereotypes shown in mass media. Following some Arab Americans, Qumsieh coins this distortion in a noticeable sarcasm calling it ‘the Three B Syndrome’.

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¹ The label ‘Christian Arabs’ points out that there are Christians among Arabs. It is an ethnic label that dismisses the myth that all Arabs are Muslims. On the other hand, the label ‘Arab Christians’ is a religious label. Further details are found in Tarek Mitri, ‘Who are the Christians of the Arab World?’, *International Review of Mission* 89 (2000), pp. 12-13.

² It is unfortunate that people use the misleading label ‘Judeo-Christian’ faith. Christianity and Judaism have many disagreements. Admittedly, Christianity accepts the Old Testament but the latter is not equivalent to Judaism.

He points out that Arabs are mainly stereotyped as bombers, billionaires, and belly dancers.³

I hope to dismiss these myths by providing a chronological sketch of Arabs who followed Yahweh from the times of the Old Testament until today. The data is enormous, which makes the peril of reductionism unavoidable, and the label ‘Arab’ might mean different things at different times in different discourses. Nevertheless, there is still merit in seeing the big picture and in using the label Arab, which entails common linguistic, cultural, and historical grounds. At the cost of oversimplification, I will divide my presentation into four periods: Arabs in the Old Testament, Arabs from Christ to Muhammad, Arabs from Muhammad to Germanos, and Arabs from Germanos to the Arab Spring. My main focus will be on Arab followers of Yahweh, i.e. Arabs in the Old Testament, Arab Christians in the New Testament, and throughout history.

Arabs in the Old Testament Period

The label Arab appears in extra biblical texts in the ninth century BCE.⁴ In 867 BCE, an Assyrian king, King Shalmaneser III, defeated an Arab leader called Jundub and his 1000 camels at the battle of Qarqar.⁵ Rosmarin affirms that Arabs have appeared in several ancient Assyrian writings in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.⁶ In addition, Arabs can be found in the Bible, confirming their antiquity. The label Arab appears several times in the Old Testament itself (1 Kgs 10.15; 2 Chron. 9.14; 17.11; 21.16; 22.1; 26.7; Neh. 2.19; 4.7; 6.1; Isa. 13.20; 21.13 (twice); Jer. 3.2; 25.24 (twice); Ezek. 27.21).⁷ It also appears in Deuterocanonical books such as: 1 Mac. 5.39; 11.15,

³ Mazin Qumsieh, ‘100 Years of Anti-Arab and Anti-Muslim Stereotyping’. See <http://www.ibiblio.org/prism/jan98/anti_arab.html> (accessed March 26, 2012).

⁴ For further details see Israel Eph’al, *The Ancient Arabs: Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent 9th–5th Centuries B.C.* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), pp. 1-3. See also Jan Retso, *Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), p. 105.

⁵ The Arabic term Jundub or Jundubu means grasshopper.

⁶ Trude Weiss Rosmarin, ‘Aribi und Arabien in den Babylonisch-Assyrischen Quellen,’ *Journal of the Society of Oriental Research* 16 (1932), pp. 1-37.

⁷ Yohanna Katanacho, ‘Al Mstlh ‘rb fi al ‘hd al qdym’ [The Label Arab in the Old Testament], *Middle East Association for Theological Education Journal* 5 (2010), pp. 1-11.

17, 39; 12.31; 2 Mac. 5.8; 12.10, 11. Admittedly, its denotations and connotations might have been different at different times; however, we cannot deny that Arabs existed before Islam and even before Christianity. The Anchor Bible Dictionary asserts this understanding, giving different labels that denote certain Arab groups in ancient times.⁸ Eph'al also provides a well-documented study testifying to the same argument.⁹ In a recent study, Maalouf stresses the antiquity of Arabs, pointing out several Arab persons in the Bible.¹⁰

Montgomery further affirms that studying the existence of Arabs is not confined to the label 'Arab'.¹¹ Several Arab figures and tribes appear in ancient writings (1 Mac. 5.4, 25; 9.35-36; 9.66-67; 11.17, 39; 12.31; 2 Mac. 5.8). In addition, Kitchen insists that Queen Sheba who interacted with King Solomon is an Arab (1 Kgs 10.1-13).¹² Other Old Testament scholars point out the testimony of the appendix in the Septuagint concerning Job's wife. It says,

This man is described in the Syriac [Aramaic] book as living in the land of Ausis on the borders of Idumea and Arabia: and his name before was Jobab; and having taken an Arabian wife he begot a son whose name was Ennon. And he himself was the son of his father Zare, one of the sons of Esau, and of his mother Bosorrha, so that he was the fifth from Abraam.¹³

The locale of his dwelling and of his friends – Eliphaz king of the Teimanites, Baldad king of the Shuhaites, and Sophar king of the Minaeans – as well as his Arab wife, strengthened the belief that Job himself was an Arab. Others argue that the last two chapters in the book of Proverbs are written by Arabs.¹⁴ In short, we have to accept that even though more work needs to be done in order to

⁸ Robert Smith, 'Arabia', in D.N. Freedman and G.A. Herion (eds.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), I, pp. 324-27.

⁹ Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs*, pp. 60-63.

¹⁰ Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), pp. 17-42.

¹¹ James Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1934), pp. 37-53.

¹² Kenneth Kitchen, 'Sheba and Arabia', in Lowell Handy (ed.), *The Age of Solomon: Scholarship at the Turn of the Millennium* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 126-53.

¹³ Sir Lancelot C.L. Brenton, *The Septuagint Version: Greek and English* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 698.

¹⁴ Tony Maalouf, 'Ishmael in Biblical History' (PhD, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1998), pp. 143-53.

clarify the identity or contributions of Arabs in the Old Testament, it is clear that Arabs existed before the New Testament era and were used by God to spread His Kingdom.

Arab Christians from Christ to Muhammad

The term ‘Arab’ or one of its cognates occurs three times in the New Testament (Act 2.11; Gal. 1.17; 4.25). We also know that 2 Cor. 11.32 (cf. Act 9.24-25) mentions Aretas IV, a Nabatean Arab who ruled from 9 BCE to 40 CE.¹⁵ He is the father-in-law of Herod Antipas who left his Arab wife, desiring the wife of his brother Philip. This led Aretas to wage war against Herod Antipas and later defeat him. Put differently, John the Baptist, a Jewish prophet, lost his head defending the rights of an Arab woman. This good interaction between Arabs and Jews is further confirmed by the legendary correspondence between King Abgar and Christ. In his well-known Church History, Eusebius presents King Abgar’s letter to Christ. Abgar writes:

I have heard of Thee, and of Thy healing; that Thou dost not use medicines or roots, but by Thy word openest (the eyes) of the blind, makest the lame to walk, cleanseest the lepers, makest the deaf to hear; how by Thy word (also) Thou healest (sick) spirits and those who are tormented with lunatic demons, and how, again, Thou raisest the dead to life ... Wherefore I write to Thee, and pray that thou wilt come to me ... and heal all the ill that I suffer, according to the faith I have in Thee ... I possess but one small city, but it is beautiful, and large enough for us two to live in peace.¹⁶

Inspired by this tradition, Shahid argues that ‘Arabs were one of the first groups in the Orient, and indeed in the world, to adopt Christianity’.¹⁷ He has written several books presenting Arab Chris-

¹⁵ David Graf, ‘Aretas’, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, I, pp. 373-76. There are other Arab Kings also named Aretas.

¹⁶ Further details can be found in Abgar V, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abgar_V> (accessed March 26, 2012). See also *Historia Ecclesiastica* I, xiii; Eusebius, *Church History*, Book I, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250101.htm>> (accessed March 26, 2012).

¹⁷ Irfan Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), p. 154.

tians before Islam.¹⁸ Based on his writings, we can divide the period between Christ and Muhammad into Arabs in the Roman period (63 BCE–305 CE) and Arabs in the Byzantine period (4th–7th Centuries). Shahid points out that Arabs lived in Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and other places.¹⁹ Sadly, however, many overlooked their influence and contributions because historians did not use the label ‘Arab’. Instead, they employed different terms such as Herodians, Nabataeans, Idumaeans, Itureans, Osroeni, Palmyrenes, Saracens, and Scenitae.

Indeed, many Arabs supported Christianity and became Christians themselves. They continued the tradition that started on Pentecost when Arabic was employed to lift up the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2.11). The following list of leaders should demonstrate the veracity of my argument. Eusebius informs us of the exchange of letters between Christ and King Abgar VIII.²⁰ Another Arab Christian King (also called Abgar) ruled Edessa around 200 CE. He was the first ruler in history to adopt Christianity. He proclaimed Christianity the official religion of his state.²¹ In his state, the Syriac Peshitta was translated from the Greek and Hebrew. Later, Edessa became the mother of the Syrian Christian Church and the rival of the Greek Antioch.²² In the third century, Philip the Arab (204–249 CE) was the first Christian Roman Emperor.²³ On one occasion, Bishop Babylos required that the Arab Emperor confesses his sins before joining the Easter service. The Emperor was humble enough to repent. We also encounter in the third century Cosman and Damian. They were the Arab twins who offered free medical care and were known for performing medical miracles by the power of

¹⁸ Irfan Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs; Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2006); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2006); *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2009).

¹⁹ Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs*, pp. 4–5. It might be interesting to note that Herod was an Idumean on his father’s side and an Arab on his mother’s side.

²⁰ Some argue that Abgar I (4 BCE–50 CE) was the first Christian among the Abgarids. Shahid says, ‘Eusebius relates the apocryphal story of the exchange of letters between Christ and Abgar (4 BCE to CE 50) and the mission of Thaddaeus, one of the Seventy, who succeeds in healing Abgar and converting him together with many of the Edessenes’. See Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs*, p. 102.

²¹ Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs*, p. 155.

²² Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs*, p. 156.

²³ Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs*, pp. 65–93.

God. In the fourth century, the Arab Queen Mavia defended orthodox Christianity, fighting the Roman Emperor Valens who accepted the Arian heresy. Her bishop, Moses, the bishop of the Arabs was known as a miracle-worker and a fighter against Arianism. Further, in the same century many Arab Bedouins in Palestine believed in Jesus through the ministry of St Hilarion (291-371 CE).²⁴

It might surprise some of us to know that Arab Christians participated in formulating the ecumenical creeds. At the Council of Nicea (325 CE), we find Pamphilus and Theotimus the Tanukhids, Petrus of Ayla, and Marinus of Palmyra. At the Council of Constantinople (381 CE), we find five bishops who represented the province of Arabia. At the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), we find seventeen Arab Christian leaders; among them is Youhanna from Edessa, Youhanna from Palestine, and Youhanna bishop of the Bedouins.²⁵ Their presence reflects the spread of Christianity among Arabs before Islam. Shahid confirms this point by explaining the Christian roots of three major Arab Christian tribes: the Lakhmids in the fourth century, the Salihids in the fifth century, and the Ghassanids in the sixth century.²⁶

Arab Christians from Muhammad to Germanos (7th–16th century)

Muhammad the prophet of Islam (570-632 CE) brought a new era to Arabs. He founded the religion of Islam and was followed by the Umayyad and then the Abbasside Caliphates. During this period Arab Christians ‘began to compose theological works in Syriac and Arabic to counter the religious challenges of Islam’.²⁷ Interestingly, John of Damascus (655-749 CE) might be considered the ‘first classical systematic theologian’.²⁸ John of Damascus, or Youhanna b.

²⁴ Nicola Zeida, *Al Masibit wa Alarab* [Christianity and Arabs] (Damascus: Cadmus, 2000), p. 121.

²⁵ Zeida, *Al Masibit wa Alarab*, p. 150.

²⁶ Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, p. xvi.

²⁷ Sidney Griffith, *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), p. vii. See also Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity among Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979).

²⁸ Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The Heresy of the Ishmaelites* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 52. In the work of John of Damascus known as the *Fountain of*

Mansour b. Sargun (يوحنا بن منصور بن سرجون), is one of the major Arab theologians who responded to Islam in its early stages. He considered Islam as a Christian heresy arguing that some Arab clergymen translated apocryphal Bibles into Arabic and their works stand behind the distorted similarities between the Quran and the New Testament. John of Damascus not only engages Islam but also discusses free will and predestination, icons, and other theological concerns. Theodore Abu Qurrah (ثيودور أبي قرّة) is one of the primary vehicles for the transmission of Youhanna b. Sargun's thoughts into the Melkite church. Other well-known Arab theologians include 'Ammar Al-Basri (عمار البصري), Habib Ibn Hidmah Abu Ra'itah Al-takriti (حبيب ابو رائطة التكريتي), Severus ibn al-Muqaffa' (ساويروس ابن المقفع).²⁹ In short, Arab Christians produced many theological works. *Summa Theologiae Arabica* is one example of such works.³⁰ To illustrate the depth of its arguments, I will give one example that relates to the incarnation of our Lord.

The pertinent document states that the incarnation of our Lord has at least four sides.³¹ First, God wants to honor us through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He dealt with us like a great king who chose a daughter for his son in order to transform her family into his household and to make them inheritors. Through the incarnation of God, humanity is honored. Second, incarnation is the means of revealing the Trinity and the one divinity. God dealt with us like a man who is able to speak and listen but because he is communicating with a deaf person, he uses signs. In other words, anthropomorphisms are an expression of his mercy and kindness. Similarly, the incarnation expresses God's mercy and plan to speak at a level

Knowledge, he presents philosophical concerns. Then he talks about the orthodox faith and its relevance to knowledge of truth. Last, the pertinent work mentions the different heresies. Islam is considered one of the heresies.

²⁹ See the outstanding work of Mark Beaumont, *Christology in Dialogue with Muslims* (London: Regnum, 2005). See also Mark Swanson, "Folly to the Hunafa": The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy', in Emmanouela Grypeous, Mark Swanson, and David Thomas (eds.), *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 237-56; Kenneth Gragg, *The Arab Christian* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991).

³⁰ For further details see Sidney Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (Burlington: Ashgate, 1992), IX, pp. 123-41.

³¹ The following explanation is based on my interpretation of the Arabic texts of chapters six, seven, and eight of *Summa Theologiae Arabica* as found in Joshua Blau, *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2002), pp. 73-82.

in which we can understand. Third, the incarnation is an expression of liberty and its means. God wants to liberate us from the curse of failing to obey the law. This liberty is like a man who committed himself to work long hours. He worked part of the hours and was not able to continue. His master came and worked on his behalf and then paid him the full wages. This is exactly what Jesus Christ has done for us. Fourth, the incarnation is the means to nourish in our hearts the assurance of life after death and the victorious resurrection. In the resurrection of the incarnated Christ is the proof of our resurrection. Furthermore, the story of our victory is like the story of a man who has sheep. His sheep were attacked by a wolf. The man slaughtered one of the sheep and wore its wool.³² Then he was in the midst of the sheep. When the wolf came the disguised man attacked it. The wolf thought that the sheep were becoming so strong. So he decided to escape. In other words, Jesus became a sheep and conquered the wolf by his incarnation. The devil defeated the human race in paradise but lost the battle before the incarnated Christ.

In addition to theological works, historians point out that many Arab Christians lost their lives as they were defending their faith. In his dissertation, David Vila points out that many Arab Christians were martyred.³³ He discusses the powerful stories of Rawh Al-Shareef Al-Qurayshi (روح الشريف القريشي), Abd al Masih an Najrani al Ghassani (عبد المسيح النجراني الغساني), and Michael of Mar Saba (ميخائيل من مار سابا). Vila rightly points out that many Arab Christians worked on creating an apologetic of affinity instead of an apologetic of distinction. He explains that Byzantine Christians looked down at the Arabic culture and at Islam. On the other hand, Arab Christians rejected Islam but highlighted the common cultural and linguistic grounds with Arab Muslims. They were further faithful in sharing Christ respectfully and courageously. The story of Abd Al Masih should make this clear.

³² Admittedly, this part of the story presents theological problems but the main point of the story is still valid.

³³ David Vila, 'Christian Martyrs in the First Abbasid Century and the Development of an Apologetic against Islam' (PhD, Saint Louis University, 1999).

Abd al Masih was a Christian from Najran.³⁴ He became an invader with the Islamic army. He joined them in their prayers and fought against their enemies. One day, he entered a church and heard a priest reading from Scriptures, 'whoever loves a mother or a father or a brother or anything more than me is not worthy of me' (cf. Mt. 10.37 and Lk. 14.26). Abd al Masih was convicted and started crying. The priest helped him to repent and Abd al Masih sold his weapons and gave the money to the church. Later, he became a monk in Jerusalem and also in Sinai. When he went to Ramlah, the capital of Palestine in the ninth century, in order to pay some taxes, he declared to many Muslims that he had left Islam and become a Christian. Later, he was caught and brought before the governor of Ramlah who told him to recant from his faith for he was a man of great honor. Like some followers of Christ who come from a Muslim background, Abd Al Masih was under the threat of death. He answered the governor saying that life from Christ is better than life from him. The governor put him in jail for three days then asked him to accept Islam. But Abd Al Masih refused and consequently he was beheaded. Arab followers of Christ continue in the footsteps of this faithful martyr. They built good relationships with many moderate Muslims and do not recant before some violent extremists.

Later, the crusaders tried to liberate the Holy Land and its Christians from Islam. They waged several major wars from 1096 to 1215 CE.³⁵ Interestingly, during this period many local Arab Christians suffered. Their Christian expressions and Arab identity were undesirable to the crusaders who in the name of God were killing their Muslim neighbors as well as many Arab Christians. Gladly, the exclusive violent worldview of the crusaders faded and was replaced by a peaceful and sacrificial approach. The Catholic Church in Palestine has been very active during the 18th–21st centuries. Its followers have been pioneers in advocating education, relief, peace, inter-religious dialogue, inter-denominational interaction, and justice.³⁶ It

³⁴ The story of Abd Al Masih is found in Sidney Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (Burlington: Ashgate, 1992), pp. 331–74. I focused on the Arabic text that is available on pp. 361–70.

³⁵ Further details are found in Samih Ghnadry, *Al Mahd Al-Arabi* [The Arabic Cradle] (Nazareth: Ghnadry, 2009), pp. 363–419.

³⁶ For further details, see Michael Prior and William Taylor (eds.), *Christians in the Holy Land* (London: World of Islam, 1994). It is, however, worth mentioning

is fitting now to look at the fourth period, i.e. from Germanos to the Arab Spring.

Arab Christians from Germanos to the Arab Spring

While Martin Luther and Calvin were changing the Western World, Germanos was Hellenizing the Middle Eastern church. Germanos was a Greek who went to Egypt and became fluent in Arabic. Then he served the Orthodox Church in Palestine and Syria. He was able to collect tax monies and increase his power. He was further able to deceive the Arab Patriarch Attallah and guarantee his support. The old Arab Patriarch resigned and named Germanos as his successor in 1534.³⁷ During 45 years in which he was the Patriarch, Germanos succeeded in Hellenizing the church by replacing every deceased Arabic bishop with a Greek one. Since that time the Arab Orthodox in the Middle East struggled with ethnocracy and Hellenization.

Hourani writes about this period, dividing it into the Ottoman age (sixteenth-eighteenth century), the age of the European empires (1800–1939), and the age of nation-states.³⁸ During the Ottoman age, the *Millet* system dominated; it is a system for confessional communities. Put differently, Christian communities have their legal courts for personal matters, and they collect the taxes for the Turks. The *Millet* system facilitated the growth of an identity centered on religion and consequently the emergence of the protectorate *Millet* system. Many European Christians acted as protectors of local Middle Eastern Christians. This expedited the growth of Catholic and Protestant missionary work. At the same time it paved the way for the Arab renaissance as well as the dominance of European imperial powers.

Eventually, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and European imperial powers occupied the Middle East. European empires dominated from 1800 to the beginning of the twentieth century. During this

that the relationship between the Catholic Church and Evangelicals in Israel/Palestine is marked with exclusion and animosity. Both sides need to take courageous steps towards honoring each other.

³⁷ Randa Muryba, 'The Struggle between Greek Clergymen and the Orthodox Community in Palestine during the First Half of the Twentieth Century' (MA, Beir Zeit University, 1999), p. 14.

³⁸ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1991), pp. 207-458.

period, the state of Israel was established. Many western Christians supported Zionism in the name of the Bible, and one of the results was hurting Arab followers of Christ, especially in Palestine. In short, due to wars associated with the establishment of Israel and its preservation by military force, Palestinian Christians became oppressed refugees.³⁹ They, along with other Arab Christians, thought that nationalism was the answer to their problems.

Arab Nationalism developed and several Arab states were declared. During the period of nationalism, Christians were co-citizens, and many of them were prominent leaders of nationalist movements. However, nationalism failed to develop in the right way and was hindered by several dictators who abused their powers. People started looking for alternatives such as communism or radical Islam. Radical Islam dominated over several minds, and people started breaking the barrier of fear and challenging the dictators who ruled the Arab world.

In short, the Arab Spring emerged. It was sparked by the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia. On December 17, 2010, Bouazizi protested against the harassment of municipal officials. He set himself on fire and consequently died. His death sparked the Tunisian evolution and its domino effect that led to many other revolutions in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria, and other places. One of the consequences of the Arab Spring is the growing influence of radical Islamic voices and the growing persecution of Christians. Several Christians from Iraq became refugees. Churches in Egypt were attacked. Some Christians were transformed from citizens to refugees; others lost their security and are extremely concerned. At the same time, some decided to hope in God and empower the prophetic role of the church.⁴⁰ The Evangelical church in Cairo is a good illustration. They not only participated in nonviolent demonstrations singing hymns, but they also opened their church as a temporary hospital for the injured demonstrators. In short, the church can choose to adopt the victim mentality and live in fear or

³⁹ For further see Alex Awad, *Palestinian Memoires: The Story of a Palestinian Mother and Her People* (Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2008); Yohanna Katanacho, *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry* (Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2012).

⁴⁰ The Palestinian Kairos document is a vivid example in which we see a prominent prophetic Arab Christian voice. For further details, see Katanacho, *The Land of Christ*, pp. 143-71.

be clothed with love and courage in order to be prophetic light and salt. They can be a voice of love in the midst of hatred and a voice of peace in the midst of trouble.

Concluding Remarks

Against common western perceptions, we have shown in this paper that Arabs followed Yahweh in the Old Testament. Furthermore, Arab Christianity preceded Islam, and Arab Christians were some of the earliest Christians who were faithful in loving God with all their minds and hearts. They participated in shaping the theology of the global church and defended orthodoxy, sacrificing their lives to win the smile of Christ. This rich history is a great encouragement for all Arab followers of Christ. It provides a framework in which our Arabic culture and history are related to the triune God.

It is also interesting to notice that Arab Christians were pioneers in theological thinking and sharing Christ at the cost of martyrdom. Their rich history is part of the tradition of the church of the Arabs as well as the global church. It has the potential of empowering the church of the Arabs and enriching the global church. Allow me to unpack this idea through the following points.

First, we cannot be responsible theologians or missiologists without a proper understanding of contextual rootedness. Unfortunately, many missionaries overlooked the history of Arab followers of Yahweh. Consequently, Arab followers of Christ who adopted the missionaries' perspective lost their identity and vision. Because they overlooked studying how the grace of God was working in their ancestors, they did not present Christian Arab heroes and heroines who can be models of faith and faithfulness. Instead, they adopted a western perception of the Gospel that enlarged the gap between the church of the Arabs and their Arab neighbors. Furthermore, the new emerging Evangelical Arab churches looked down upon other Christian traditions that had produced many Arab martyrs and theologians. In other words, highlighting the contextual rootedness of the church of the Arabs has the potential to contribute to the unity of Arab followers of Yahweh.

Second, overlooking the contextual rootedness led most missionaries to present a Gospel that lacked contextual relevance. It would be wiser to learn from the history of the Arab church and

their response to Islam, violence, heresy, and church divisions. Many western missionaries came to present the gospel as a message or, more specifically, information, but the church of the Arabs has been presenting for centuries a community of Christians as a gospel. They presented an apologetic of affinity looking at Muslims not only through a doctrinal lens but also as fellow human beings who are their neighbors and fellow citizens. They wanted not only to bring about personal peace but also social peace so that both Muslims and Christians can live with honor in the same country.

Third, the church of the Arabs has many good models of interaction with the God of Israel. Queen Sheba would be one example of a fruitful interreligious dialogue that led to honoring the God of Israel. She would be a good way of presenting a contextual gospel.⁴¹ Like many Muslims who read Sura 1.6 asking God for guidance, Queen Sheba is an Arab truth seeker. She heard about the Israelite King Solomon: his wisdom, faith, power, and great reputation. Solomon affirmed the uniqueness and superiority of his God. As a result, Queen Sheba decided to probe the news by taking a trip to Jerusalem and visiting King Solomon, talking to him in person. She travelled at least 1400 miles from Yemen to Jerusalem. Although the trip might have been dangerous, she insisted on testing Solomon and on making sure that the information she received was correct and not one-sided. She was indeed a truth seeker who invested every effort to verify the news, hearing from the original sources and asking difficult questions. Queen Sheba was further a truth celebrator. Her openness to be fair and courageous transformed any confusion, doubt, or fear from the Other into an exciting adventure. When she discovered truth elements in the faith, culture, and life of Solomon, she accepted them. This is not only a form of Old Testament evangelism in which Queen Sheba was perhaps converted, but it is also a genuine openness to value truth with joy regardless of its source, for all truth is God's truth. In her celebration, she said: 'Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal

⁴¹ For another example of a contextual presentation of the Gospel, see my discussion on Hagar and Sarah in Yohanna Katanacho, 'Hagar: A Victim of Injustice', in Stephen Smith and Wendy Whitworth (eds.), *No Going Back: Letters to Pope Benedict XVI on the Holocaust, Jewish-Christian Relations & Israel* (London: Quill, 2009), pp. 96-100.

love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness' (1 Kgs 10.9, NIV). Indeed, a truth celebrator is committed to celebrate love, justice, and righteousness wherever they are found.

Last, studying the history of the church of the Arabs should help to change the perception of many westerners. It will challenge them to view Arabic culture in a different light. It will help them to distinguish between Arabism and Islam. It will empower them to love all the Arabs in light of the fact that the church of the Arabs is full of love towards their Arab Muslim neighbors and is full of commitment to pursue justice nonviolently.