

## **Tawfiq Canaan**

### **An Introduction by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb**

Autobiographies give a unique, eyewitness account of historical events experienced by one particular person, an account of a life with all its ups and downs, struggles and failures, successes and setbacks. They invite us to look at history not from a distant bird's eye view, but through the eyes of one person in their own personal reality. However, autobiographies are not written at the time of the actual events and they constitute a rear-view mirror through a time lapse.

Tawfiq Canaan started to write his autobiography in English in a pharmaceutical diary dated 1956, just a few months after his retirement in May 1955. Although still in good health, he must have had the feeling that time was slowly running out, that life was slowly but surely fading away, and that he had a story to share with his family, friends, and the visitors who were always eager to hear from him about socio-economic and political events. It must have taken him only a few months to write his memoirs. By late 1956, he had switched to documenting current affairs related to the dismissal of Glubb Pasha by the newly crowned King Hussein of Jordan on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1956, and reports on the Suez-Canal crises. This last chapter of his memoirs was less biographical and was therefore excluded from this publication. The last date in the manuscript was 1957, which means that Canaan must have felt that documenting current affairs was not his goal or worthy of his time.

Canaan recounts a very rich life and offers fresh insights into the family story of someone who played an important role in the cultural life of his country. He recalls the socio-economic and political history of Palestine through the unique prism of his access to different strata in Palestinian society, something few others could replicate.

Canaan's autobiography spans a period of seven decades of Palestinian history from the late Ottoman to the early Jordanian period: a condensed history of the whole country of Palestine. Through his words, we live the history of a whole nation, we feel the tectonic shift that took place in Palestine as one empire replaced another, and as Jewish immigrants replaced the displaced Palestinians. The personal element in this autobiography is incomparable with historical and political analyses.

Tawfiq was a PK, a pastor's kid. This fact determined his life's path from an early stage. His father Bishara was the first native Arab "Lutheran" pastor in Palestine. Tawfiq was a product

of Protestant education, first at the primary school run by his father in Beit Jala, then at the Syrian Orphanage run by Schneller, and later at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut (later to become the American University of Beirut) where he obtained his medical degree. He worked as a medical doctor at three Protestant institutions: he started his career at the Deaconesses hospital of Kaiserwerth; then he directed the Leper Home owned by the Moravian Church; and ended his medical career at the Augusta Victoria Hospital run by the Lutheran World Federation. Throughout his life, Canaan remained one of the leading lay figures of the Palestinian Lutheran church. In this sense, Canaan's autobiography gives deep insights into the history of the Protestant missions in Palestine, and the organization of the Lutheran church and ministries.

The connection to the German Protestant mission created strong ties with Germany. Tawfiq took a German woman as his wife, and worked side by side with German doctors, religious leaders, and ethnographers. Germany was the destination where most of Canaan's family obtained their education. Canaan's brother Hans studied engineering in Germany and his sister Badra trained as a kindergarten teacher at the Froebel Institute in Dresden. Canaan's daughter Yasma attended the Paulinen Stift in Friedrichshafen and Nada, his other daughter, studied domestic science in Stuttgart. Canaan's son Theo also studied in Germany.

To be a Protestant was to act as a cultural broker. Jezewski defined culture broking as "the act of bridging, linking or mediating between groups of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change".<sup>i</sup> (The term was coined in the mid-1900s by anthropologists who wrote about native people whose role in their society was as a cultural intermediary, usually with the western world.)<sup>ii</sup> Tawfiq Canaan's articles and books documenting and explaining the customs of Palestinian peasants to European audiences were all written in either German or English.

Canaan describes the life of an (upper) middle class Palestinian milieu where members were multi-lingual. Canaan mastered three languages: Arabic as his mother tongue, German as his second language, English his third, in addition to French. A love of music and playing an instrument was another important feature of this Protestant community. Canaan composed about 100 short musical pieces, many of which were played in the YMCA concerts under the name Taucani (= Tau[fik] can[aa]n i). Unfortunately, all his compositions were lost with the loss of his house during the 1948 War. Canaan moved in social circles with doctors, mayors, and leading religious and intellectual figures. Women's education was an important feature of

this upper middle class. Tawfiq's mother was educated in Talitha Kumi school; his sisters and daughters had the freedom to travel abroad alone to further their studies. Tawfiq's sister, Badra, as well as his wife, were politically active against the British colonization.

Canaan's account of inter-communal relations conveys the tension and competition between the Protestants on the one hand, and the Catholics and Orthodox communities on the other. At the same time, one senses an ecumenical spirit that runs throughout the memoirs. The same is true of interfaith relations. The autobiography describes the segregated milieu in which Christians and Muslims lived during the late Ottoman period. This was a direct result of the Millet system imposed by the Ottomans, but Tawfiq must have felt a connection with the civil war on Mount Lebanon in 1860 when his grandparents had to flee the massacre conducted by the Druze. It is clear that by WWI things had started to change and there was a sense of a growing bond between the followers of the two religions. Canaan describes the interfaith atmosphere thus:

“I never belonged to any political party officially. My first political work, if it can be called that, was to bring the Christians, who were the minority, closer to the Muslims. This was very difficult. The first thing to do was to get to know several important and influential Muslims. I made regular visits to them, at their feasts, and on happy and sorrowful occasions. These visits gave me two advantages: first, I got to know, love, and respect them, and second, they saw in me a real friend. Slowly, the circle of Muslim friends grew. I began to take other Christians with me on my visits and often invited members of both religions to my house. We never discussed religious matters in such meetings.”

These interfaith relations were somehow connected to social class. Canaan writes: “Our family life changed slowly. First, our circle of friends - especially among the higher classes – increased and we had nearly daily visits. Our friends were: Hussein Salim Hussein (the mayor of Jerusalem), Faidi el-Alamy (a member of the Ottoman parliament), Ali Hasna, Abder-Razzak Kleibo (both in the Government), Nakhlé Zreiq (the Arab head teacher of the English College), Rev. S. B. Haddad, Director Schneller, Propst Jeremias, the Consul General Dr. Gmelin, Dr Biskin, Theo Fast, etc..”

Canaan's description of the relations between Palestinian Arabs and Palestinian Jews is interesting. Canaan writes: “We had a friendly relationship with the Jews living in the Holy Land at the time of the Turks. I had many good friends among them. They lived in peace with

the peasants and employed many Arabs in their colonies. All these conditions changed radically when the Zionist movement began.”

When Canaan married in 1912 to Margot Eilender, it was natural that it was attended by Arabs, Europeans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Even more interesting, when Canaan decided to marry, he sought the advice of a trusted Jewish woman before even sharing the news with his mother.

“When I had established a practice in Jerusalem and my income was good, I began to think about finding a suitable partner for my life. My ideal was to find a healthy girl who had a good education and an agreeable character. As I did not mix much in general society, I knew only a few. Therefore, I made a list of girls and began to study them secretly. One by one, I removed them from the list until only three remained. Two were Protestant and one was a Catholic. One of the Protestants had to be eliminated as she was still young, in my opinion. I took the two other names to Miss A. Landau, an elderly Jewish friend of mine. She knew both of them and immediately said that Miss Margot Eilender was a fine young lady who would be very suitable for me. I asked Miss Landau to introduce me to her and she said: ‘Miss Eilender comes twice a week for an Esperanto class. Come and study this language and I will then ask you to take her home’. In this way, we got to know each other better.”

Canaan’s autobiography is a fascinating exploration of hybrid identity.<sup>iii</sup> The Canaan family roots were in Kfarshima on Mount Lebanon, yet Canaan, born in Beit Jala in Palestine, voluntarily chose Palestine as his destiny and fought for its cause. He served with the Ottoman army as a medical doctor while secretly hoping that the British would replace the Ottomans. After the British declared the Mandate over Palestine, Canaan went on to oppose their policies that gave preferential treatment to Jewish settler immigrants. The rapidly changing context in late Ottoman Palestine, through the British Mandate period and the Nakba, ending with the West Bank becoming part of Jordan, required Canaan to adopt a dynamic identity that shifted and evolved over the years. In this sense, Canaan’s autobiography is a story of Palestinian resilience in the face of all odds and challenges.

The development of Canaan’s national identity is clearly evident. A love of nature inspired by Canaan’s early years is demonstrated in his love of the land, its archaeological sites, fauna, and flora. Weekly hikes were an important component of Protestant upbringing as taught by

Schneller at the Syrian Orphanage. As a child, Canaan used to accompany his father on excursions to natural and historical sites where his father would explain the history and tradition to him and his siblings. "Such tours planted in me the love of country and the fellah." Through the life of Canaan, we can trace the development of the Palestinian national identity.<sup>iv</sup> The first stage was seeded in the late Ottoman period and developed within the elite and educated classes, often overlapping with notions of Ottomanism and Arabism. Canaan writes: "During the Turkish regime, no parties were allowed and no one could talk about politics. After the English came, the Arabs became anti-Zionist and anti-British. It is very curious how sentiment changed completely from 1910 to 1920. Before the First World War, all the Arabs loved the British and wanted them to come and free the Arabs from the heavy yoke of the Turks. At the beginning of the War - despite the fact that my wife was German and my whole family had been educated in Germany - we prayed for the victory of the British. The British did not come as liberators, but as conquerors who wanted to rule and not to free the country." This last sentence indicates the second stage in the development of the Palestinian national identity: the realization of the eminent threat of British rule in enabling a settler colonial project had the effect of mobilizing all of Palestinian society. It is in this context of an emerging national identity in the 1930s that Canaan starts to draft political pamphlets. Canaan's most important political writings are the two pamphlets, *The Arab Palestine Cause* and *Conflict in the Land of Peace*, both printed during 1936. The first was published in the early days of the strike, while the second was towards the end of the general strike that started the "Great Revolt". Both papers, printed at the Syrian Orphanage press, targeted the British public and were intended to promote the goals of the Arab national movement. Canaan used these pamphlets to criticize the preferential treatment of the Jews by the British Mandate and the international community. He advocated for equal citizenship for Arabs and Jews with Christians, Jews, and Muslims in a bi-national state based on a parliamentary system of government.

In 1937 following the announcement of the Peel Partition Plan, Canaan wrote a six-page memorandum on the Palestine conflict addressed to the former Scottish chaplain of the Presbyterian St. Andrews Church in Jerusalem, Rev. William Ross, in which Canaan argued against partition.

About his political writing, Canaan wrote: "I felt I had to do something for my country. The best thing was to open the eyes of the world to the injustices committed by the Mandate. I gave

lectures, and wrote pamphlets and books about the Arab cause. Some of my pamphlets were published four times and were translated into French and Arabic. My pamphlet *The Palestine Arab Cause* was reprinted by a member of the British Parliament under his name (with my permission), changing the title to *Palestine Arab Cause*. My booklet *Conflict in Land of Peace* was explosive with the Jews. But what were my endeavours and those of many other Arabs in comparison with global Jewish propaganda? The testimony of top Arabs and just Europeans was lost in the sea of Zionist propaganda. I gave testimony before the UN Commission and proved that Jewish propaganda about how the health of the Arabs had improved, mortality had fallen, and standards raised due to immigration was not true. The Newman school of languages arranged for two lectures: one by a Jew to explain the Zionist view and the other by an Arab. I was chosen to represent the Arabs and read a paper called “Zionist Ambitions and Palestine Crises”. The hall was full and many Jews were present. The High Commissioner Sir. A. Wauchope once invited me to hear my opinion about the political situation.”

As a Palestinian Arab Christian, a well-educated intellectual with a credible career, and well-connected to the Palestinian and international elites, Canaan felt he was predestined to advocate on behalf of his people to the international community. He counted on international goodwill, openness to “truth”, and a genuine quest for peace in the hope that this might bring about real change and ensure that the “land of peace” would avoid becoming a “land of strike, turmoil, and mourning”.

Canaan describes the third stage in the development of the Palestinian identity following the Nakba in 1948. The Nakba not only meant the loss of 77 percent of Palestinian land and the displacement of close to a million Palestinian people, but was experienced first-hand by Canaan.

“The date of the withdrawal was set for 15 May, 1948. For nearly one year before this date, there was only a nominal government. People began to leave the country, mostly the better off. In March and April 1948, most physicians left Jerusalem. This was a great shame and I, the eldest doctor, decided not leave. My wife and I had no children with us as the girls were married and Theo lived in Beirut. Our house was in the firing zone so we decided to move and the Greek Orthodox Convent gave us a furnished room. We carried a few things from home, hoping that we could return soon. Our house was completely lost with all our furniture, my beloved library, and several unpublished articles. One of them was a book on the Palestinian Arab woman.”

“A few days after we moved to the Greek Convent, our house caught fire. When I saw that, my heart bled. I couldn’t believe it and went to Franciscan convent where the custodian led me to see how the whole ceiling and upper story were in flames. Thus, I had lost my house, furniture, car, and even a good sum of money that I had left behind. I was upset for a few hours, but then I got over it and slowly put it behind me. Although I took only 15 Palestinian pounds with me when I left my house, the Almighty helped me and I never had to ask for help.” With the loss of his house, Canaan also lost his written work. “I lost all my material on folklore that had not yet been published. I began to collect Arabic proverbs again and was able to amass several thousand. My greatest loss was an unpublished book about the Palestinian Arab woman in which I brought together a lot of unpublished and new material.”

For Canaan, politics was first and foremost to care for the polis, the community. Politics was not so much a form of rigid nationalism but a love for the country, its landscape, history, culture, and people. It was a commitment to the community. After his graduation from medical school, Canaan was offered a job in Beirut which he turned down: “I felt it was my duty to work in the community where father and mother had done such excellent work. Palestine and its people drew me strongly to them. My life belonged to my country, my community, and my family.” It was this dedication to the community that kept Canaan in Jerusalem during the Nakba when most of the younger doctors left. Throughout his life, Canaan felt that he had been called to help the underserved, the sick, the lepers, the poor, the refugees, and the peasants.

Canaan provides important information about socio-economic developments and cultural life in Palestine over seven decades. He describes the conditions prevailing in the country under Turkish rule. “Conditions were primitive. No asphalted roads existed in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Transjordan. Roads suitable for carriages were few in the Holy Land. Those that existed connected Jerusalem with Nablus, Ein Karim, Jericho, Hebron, and Jaffa. In the summer, terrible clouds of dust rose from the streets, while in the winter, the roads were muddy. These terrible conditions increased during WWI when trucks used the roads.”

“To reach any city, inhabitants had to use a donkey or a horse. Most peasants living near to the main cities came in on foot and in the early morning, groups of peasant women carrying baskets full of vegetables or fruits on their heads could be seen coming to the cities.”

Canaan describes how people traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho or to Beirut, how much time it took, and the forms of transportation used. It is fascinating to read about the huge changes in transportation over seven decades through a personal lens. Canaan wrote: "It is interesting to note the changes I underwent over the years: I began my practice on foot. When the work increased, I bought a donkey, and later I had one, then two horses. After the First World War, I had a carriage and then a car. In 1948 when the Arab-Jewish War broke out, I lost my car along with my house and furniture. I started to do my visits on foot again." Canaan's memoirs chart the opportunities and socio-economic development that existed at that time in the Jerusalem-Bethlehem region and beyond, all of it lost in the Nakba.

Canaan's autobiography is a treasure for researchers working on the historical development of the health sector in Palestine. It describes the Christian mission hospitals, Jewish hospitals, and community health projects at times of war. His contribution to research on popular medicine, the treatment of malaria, and the eradication of leprosy in Palestine cannot be emphasized enough. Further research is needed to shed light on Canaan's role in this field.

In Palestine, Canaan is well known primarily as an ethnographer. His writings that document Palestinian customs, popular medicine, and religious superstitions attracted the attention of Palestinian researchers. His interest in this field is related to his Christian background. He understood like no other person that the Bible is a "Palestinian product", that Palestine is the Holy Land, the land of the Bible, the land of Jesus, and that its people, especially in the countryside, continue to practice biblical culture. Many biblical customs were still practiced in Palestine in the early twentieth century.

Canaan probably developed his interest in social customs from his father, who began working on this topic before his premature death. This interest was also related to the realization that around the turn of the century, Palestine was undergoing rapid transformation. Many of the customs that were already lost in the cities survived in the villages and among Palestinian peasants, but were under threat from the modernization taking place in Palestine around WWI. Canaan saw a window of opportunity to document as many of these customs and traditions as possible for future generations. In this way, Canaan believed, he could contribute to a better understanding of the Bible and contribute to biblical research. "The impulse to study



Palestinian folklore was historical and biblical. I found that through a better understanding of folklore, one could understand much better the customs, superstitions, and wisdom of the Bible.”

This focus was mirrored in a few of the German theologians with whom Canaan worked, especially Gustav Dalman, Friedrich Jeremias, Albrecht Alt, and Hans Wilhelm Herzberg. All four were German theologians who lived in Jerusalem between 1910 and 1930, and who served consecutively as the German Propst and head of the German Protestant church. All of them were involved in the German Archeological Institute, founded in 1900. Many of Canaan’s articles were published in the journal of the German Society for the Exploration of Palestine (established in 1878). This interest in Palestine was not only a German one but was evident, albeit with a different approach, among American, French, and Jewish archeologists. It was this latter group that established the Palestine Oriental Society in 1920 in which Canaan became a member in the first year of its inception. He published articles in the first issue of the journal, and in almost every subsequent issue. In 1925 he was elected Vice President of the Society and a member of the editorial advisory board. As much as Canaan’s contribution to Palestinian ethnography was celebrated, it was exactly this contribution that was most misunderstood. Canaan was accused of being influenced by orientalism in his repeated references to the Bible. This may be true to some extent as Canaan remains a child of his time. However, if we analyse Canaan’s context, we quickly realize that this connection between the world of the Bible and the customs of Palestinian peasants was actually an act of intellectual resistance. Canaan understood that conflict over land is fought not only politically and militarily, but also in its narrative. In the context of rising Christian Zionism that weaponized the Bible to facilitate Jewish settler colonialism, Canaan resisted this Zionist narrative by underlining the natural connection between the Bible and Palestinian peasants. It was as if he wanted to emphasize that these Palestinian peasants were the heirs of the Bible and the land rather than the European Jewish immigrants. There is a dire need to reread Canaan’s writing taking the “**Sitz im Leben**” of his writings into account.

In Palestine, Canaan’s ethnographic role was rediscovered, especially in the 1970s when the study of Palestinian folklore emerged and the Journal for Heritage and Society (*Majalat atturath wal mujtama*) was launched. Renewed interest in Canaan was evident in the late nineties, triggered by the permanent exhibition of the Canaan amulet collection at Bir Zeit University. Dar al-Kalima’s international conference on “Palestinian Identity in relation to

Time and Space” in Bethlehem in 2013 was an important milestone in setting the stage for interest in Canaan based on newly discovered material. It was at this conference that Dr. Fauzi Mantoura, Tawfiq Canaan’s grandson, announced the discovery of two handwritten manuscripts by Canaan: his autobiography written in English and a collection of **children folk** written in German. Dr. Mantoura was gracious enough to give us the two manuscripts and the rights to publish them, thus making them available to the general public.

Canaan was one of the most productive intellectuals of Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century. He published over 130 articles, five books, and several pamphlets covering the health sector, folklore, and political developments. Most of these pieces were never studied in depth and provide a rich resource for future researchers. Our hope is that this publication will stir such a desire and will inspire the next generation to follow in Canaan’s footsteps.

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<sup>i</sup> Jezewski, M.A., & Sotnik, P. (2001). *The rehabilitation service provider as culture broker: Providing culturally competent services to foreign born persons*. Buffalo, NY: Center for International Rehabilitation Research Information and Exchange.

<sup>ii</sup> Margaret Connell Szasz, *Between Indians and White Worlds: The Cultural Broker* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

<sup>iii</sup> Keri E. Iyall Smith and Patricia Leavy, eds., *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*, Illustrated Edition (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> Here I follow Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).