

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

The Untold Story of Palestinian
Christians

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and

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FOREWORD

Between Two Fires, ten years later...

The flames of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict are out, but the heat is the same.

Since 2002, when *Between Two Fires* was written, nothing has changed in terms of the elements of the conflict. We still witness waves of mutual violence, and the separation wall speaks of distrust and fear. Political leaders are stubborn or bewildered or frustrated. Israeli settlements on Palestinian land are expanding, and Palestinian Christians are leaving. Hamas rules Gaza with an iron fist, and its Islamist system provides fertile soil for more militant Islamic Jihadist and Salafi groups that have established themselves in this congested strip of land on the Mediterranean.

On Sunday, October 6, 2007, Rami Ayyad, manager of the Palestinian Bible Society bookstore, was kidnapped and brutally martyred. To this day, his murderers are free, and justice is starving. Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier kidnapped by Hamas on June 25, 2006, is still in captivity, and thousands of Palestinians are held in Israeli prisons and detention camps.

In the midst of this, the Palestinian Church is growing wider and stronger. Many have come to faith in Jesus Christ, and a new generation of younger leaders is emerging. Palestinian churches and organizations have abandoned a minority survival mindset and embraced a mindset of active positive belonging, which converts challenges into opportunities.

Relationships have been built with the Palestinian Authority and with many local communities. Several new projects

and centers have been established, and new churches are firmly planted.

We are not waiting for favorable conditions to minister the gospel; instead, we minister the gospel, in spite of conditions, to bring life to both Palestinians and Israelis. And we pursue fellowship with messianic Jewish believers in spite of the wide political and land-theology gaps.

Between Two Fires prompted many to pray and link with their Palestinian Christian family, and what we see today in the Palestinian Church is a fruit of this and many other efforts. I pray that new readers will want to pray and connect.

It has worked, and it still works. The story on these pages was relevant in 2002 and is still...even more!

Labib Madanat

The United Bible Societies

INTRODUCTION

A word is worth a thousand pictures.

Say the word “Bogart” to anyone over fifty and you conjure images of Rick’s American Café in exotic Casablanca. Or a Canadian adventurer pulling a wannabe wooden warship through steamy, slug-infested shallows. You see steel-helmeted, Camel-smoking GIs, no-nonsense gangsters, pragmatic private investigators and a jewel-encrusted falcon hidden under a coat of black enamel.

Say the word “Holocaust,” and boxcars roll into view, packed with parents and children, businessmen, barbers, artists and musicians. Electrified gates secure concentration camps bristling with razor wire. Helmeted guards pace and push and shout. Iron oven doors swing open to reveal charred human bones. Tiled

shower rooms facilitate ethnic cleansing. Striped uniforms hang from breathing skeletons. Mind-numbing mass graves swallow families and villages. Mountains of gold fillings and wedding rings glitter. And empty eyes stare through fences at Allied cameras.

Such is the power and depth of a single word. But not all words conjure accurate pictures.

Say the word “Palestinian,” for example, and you will probably envision Yasser Arafat in olive-green, gazing out from under a black and white checkered kaffiyeh. Boys throwing stones at tanks and soldiers. Flaming flags and effigies. Bloody hands proudly exhibited from a second story window. Snipers and suicide bombers.

But these images depict only a tiny segment of the millions of people who call themselves Palestinians.

Say “evangelical Palestinian Christian,” and you may get no image at all. Trying to discuss evangelical Palestinian Christians with a Westerner is like trying to talk to a Nubian about snowmen. Neither has ever heard of one, never seen one, and really can’t imagine what one might be like.

It is difficult, if not impossible, for an American Christian to visualize a Palestinian Arab on his knees, praising the name of Jesus. Or a Palestinian Arab reading the Bible to her children. Or Palestinian churches with altars and worship music and sermons, childcare, Sunday school, and fellowship meals.

The pages that follow, therefore, are filled with word-pictures, a week’s worth of snapshots of evangelical Palestinian Christians—born-again men and women who love Jesus Christ and live among Muslims and historical Christians in the

West Bank and Gaza Strip. Believers who pay dearly for their faith.

As it happens, it was the week of May 7-12, 2002. But it might describe just about any week since then. Sadly, little has changed, except the political landscape and the number of Christians remaining in the Holy Land.

Few books examine the Palestinian side of the Middle East conflict. Fewer still consider the perspective of traditional Arab Christians in the historical churches of Palestine. And to my knowledge, no author has ever walked a mile in the shoes of evangelical Palestinian Christians—the minority of minorities.

To correct this omission, *Between Two Fires* provides a forum for these brothers and sisters to tell their story in their own words and share with us in the West the commission God has set before them.

The focus of the book will be Palestinian, unabashedly one-sided. It will not attempt to balance the Palestinian perspective with the view from the Israeli side, since thousands of books, countless motion pictures, and a growing number of heartbreaking memorials powerfully and thoroughly depict the history, theology, culture, viewpoint, and suffering of the Jewish people.

Frankly, we had hoped even to completely avoid the political and nationalist issues. But they are inseparable from the woof and warp of the Middle East and will prove useful for Western Christians to understand the motives, struggles, and hearts of our Palestinian brethren.

In the absence of journalistic parity, then, the reader might be tempted to take sides. If so, remember that neither the

Israelis nor the Palestinians are always right. Both have inexcusably violated—and continue to violate—the laws of God and man. The Lord has called us to love and understand them, not to judge between them.

Besides, for the Christian believer, there is only one side:

“Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’ ‘Neither,’ he replied, ‘but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.’”¹

Today, Jericho is part of the West Bank, and both the Israelis and the Palestinians

¹ Joshua 5:13-14

still ask of God: “Are you for us or for our enemies?”

Not surprisingly, God’s answer is the same today as it was fourteen centuries before Christ. As one preacher paraphrased the Lord’s response: “I have not come to take *sides*; I have come to take *over*.”

God is on neither side. His plan is to bring both Israelis and Palestinians—Jew, Muslim, tribal Christian, and atheist—over to his side.

It is important to remember that living in the Holy Land does not make one holy any more than living in the desert made John the Baptist a camel. Most of those living in Israel and in Palestine are secular and in desperate need of salvation.

God has, however, preserved a remnant. Jewish believers are his instruments in Israel, as Arab believers

are in Palestine. Both are members of God's family, our brothers and sisters. And both are entitled to our understanding, acceptance, love, prayers, and support.

If you are a lover of Israel, by all means continue to love Israel. Your Palestinian brethren encourage you to do so. They ask only that you open your arms just a little wider to embrace them as well.

TUESDAY, MAY 7, 2002

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.²

Jack Kincaid—Ron Brackin and I boarded the Continental jetliner in Newark at 10:50 last night. There was plenty of room to stretch out and sleep, since few tourists visit Israel these days. Most of our traveling companions were Jews or Arabs on their way home.

I too felt that I was returning home. I had been to the Holy Land many times, fulfilling a dream that began before Israel even existed.

² *The Torah* (Leviticus 19:33-34)

My mother was a wonderful godly woman who knew her Bible and made sure her family did too. One thing she taught us was to love Jewish people.

“God said he would bless those who bless Israel,” she reminded us again and again. “So you must always be kind to Jews.” Understandably, I grew up longing to visit Israel.

During one visit, I joined an intercessory tour led by a messianic Jew named Reuven Doren, author of the best-selling book, *One New Man*.

In Samaria (West Bank), we approached a high hill or *tel*, where we were to spend time in prayer and intercession. A fine new road led up to a beautiful Jewish settlement, complete with its own grocery store, schools, and community swimming pool.

The road passed through a small Palestinian village—really little more

than ten shacks with outdoor plumbing and, in some cases, outdoor cooking. I had never seen such wretched poverty. I learned that the land had been taken away from these families by the Israeli government to build the settlement, the road into it, and a security zone around it.

I saw and heard things I did not want to see and hear. And when I did, I was afraid to give them honest consideration because they threatened my long-held beliefs and opinions.

In the weeks after the tour, I found myself listening more attentively when evangelical Palestinian Christians reproved me for closing my ears to them.

“We’re not the enemy,” they said. “We’re your brothers. We’re hurting, and you won’t listen, because you’re so blinded by your end-time theology.”

They were right. My eschatology was whitewashing the injustices that were all around me. I also became aware that I subtly had begun to take responsibility for Israel's destiny, instead of trusting God to work things out his way, in his time.

I didn't want to see Israel as a secular state or Palestinians as people. I was more comfortable picturing Jesus walking Israel's streets and fields and visualizing all Palestinians as terrorists. I desperately wanted all Jews to wear white kippahs and all Arabs to wear black kaffiyehs. I needed everything to be clear and simple. I wanted it to be easy to choose sides.

But the regional issues are far too complex for that. Besides, I had already chosen sides when I became a Christian. I chose God's side. God loves Jews *and* Arabs, including the terrorists on both

sides—the Irgun and Stern Gang, Hamas, Tanzim, Salafis, and Islamic Jihad. And my choice required that I pray for and support my brothers and sisters in Israel *and* in Palestine.

Most of us in the West, however, have no idea that there even *are* evangelical Christian believers in the West Bank and Gaza who love Jesus Christ with all their hearts and sacrifice everything they have for his sake.

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That's when I felt God leading me to write a book. But I needed help, and the Lord sent Ron Brackin.

Ron's credentials include Washington broadcast journalist, congressional press secretary, a decade of fundraising for major international Christian ministries, work with the persecuted church

worldwide, a pile of articles, and several books. Most important, he has a passion for the work God is doing in the Middle East.

It took only one phone call. He was interested and available.

We arrived at 4:15 this afternoon at Ben Gurion International Airport in Tel Aviv, rented a car, and drove up Rte.1 to Jerusalem. It's was Ron's first time in Israel, and he was one big eye and ear. He had been in the Middle East only once before but, like Moses, had gotten no closer to Israel than Mount Nebo in what is today Amman, Jordan. The first thing he learned is that one always travels *up* to Jerusalem, whether north, south, east, or west of the city.

To me, every visit is like returning to an old and cherished friend. At the same time, it's like meeting someone I've wanted to meet all my life.

In May, Israel is still green and lush, before the sun toasts the grass like coconut. The big green road signs read like a Bible Land glossary in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. I wanted to stop and show Ron the sites, but we had very little time and a lot to do. He would have to come as a tourist another and hopefully safer time.

Despite rush hour traffic, we were in sight of the City of Gold within an hour. By statute, all the buildings in Jerusalem are required to be made of Jerusalem stone, a unique native rock that gives off a warm aura in the afternoon sun and makes the city appear to have been caressed by King Midas.

We pulled up in front of the Hyatt Regency on Lehi Street, a block from the offices of International Media Services (IMS), a production company I had launched to turn New Testament books

into fifty-two part, Arabic language videos which we distribute throughout the Middle East and North Africa. IMS is located right on the so-called “green” or “truce” line that marks the divisions of historic Palestine after the 1948 war. The line has been repositioned several times and appears on today’s tourist maps as a trail of dashes separating Israel from the West Bank and Gaza Strip and dividing Jerusalem into Jewish West and Arab East.

On the front wall outside the hotel entrance hung several tour banners, but they were mostly for show. There were virtually no tourists in Israel now, and the hotel was all but empty. Its reputation once focused on its accommodations; now it is known as the hotel where Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze’evi was assassinated. Four members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of

Palestine (PFLP) were convicted and given sentences ranging from one hundred twenty-five years for the leader to thirty years for the man who had planned the attack.

Ron and I settled into our rooms before meeting Len Johansson for dinner.

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Pashas is a typical Arab restaurant in East Jerusalem. Despite the poverty of the Palestinian half of the city, the restaurants are second to none, as is their classic Arab fare—from the array of to-die-for breads, falafel, and a dozen other spreads to the lamb, chicken, and shish-kebob, finished off with thick, sweet Arab coffee, ripe watermelon, and, for those so inclined, an apple-scented *nargila* or water pipe.

The division between East and West Jerusalem is a snapshot of what has come to be known over the past half century as the “Middle East crisis.” Two sides of the city, two sides of the story, two distinct peoples with the same roots.

The area, known by some as “Palestine” and referred to by others as “the occupied territories” is made up of two isolated areas that have undergone several iterations since the United Nations and Great Britain carved out an independent state for Israel in 1947.

The Gaza Strip is a tiny piece of real estate on the shores of the Mediterranean, its southern tip bordering Egypt. The West Bank—biblical Judea and Samaria—lies in central-eastern Israel and runs roughly from the southern tip of the Dead Sea to a point about halfway between Haifa and Tel Aviv.

At dinner, we discussed the current situation, known as the Al Aqsa, Intifada and some of the history leading up to it.

Intifada is an Arabic word meaning *uprising* or *a shaking off*. This is the second such uprising since the 1967 Six-Day War. The first intifada began in 1987 and continued until 1992.

The spark that touched off the latest intifada was ignited the morning of September 28, 2000, when Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, protected by a cordon of security guards and a thousand Israeli border police and special forces, crossed the plaza of the Western Wall and began to ascend the ramp to the Temple Mount.

This site is particularly sacred to both Jews and Muslims. To the former, it is *Har Habayit*, the Temple Mount; to the latter, it is *Haram esh-Sharif*, the Noble Sanctuary. Both religions believe it to be

the biblical Mount Moriah upon which Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Jews, however, revere it as the probable site of the Holy of Holies of the Second Temple, while Muslims honor it as *masjid al-aqsa*, the “furthestmost sanctuary,” from which Muhammad ascended to heaven.

Prime Minister Sharon is also symbolic for both sides.

To the Jews, he is a war hero, wounded in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, liberator of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War, and general of Israeli Defense Forces in Lebanon.

He is also revered as the engineer of a circle of Jewish settlements surrounding the Holy City.

His strategy,” explained Charles Sennott, former Middle East bureau chief of *The Boston Globe*, “was to first plunk down trailer homes, then move in

soldiers to protect the first pioneers, and then develop self-standing communities where only Israeli citizens lived. These would be surrounded by more military barricades, which would require the seizure of additional land.

“The Israeli policy of supporting the construction of new Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza was not born simply out of a need for more housing for Jews. There was plenty of open land to the west of Jerusalem and vast reserves in the Negev and the Galilee that Israel was not bothering to develop. This was a policy designed to establish an Israeli foothold on what the settlement movement saw as land God promised to Jews. It was a policy carried out in the belief that once Jews were living there, it would be difficult,

perhaps impossible, to make them move.”³

Sharon is symbolic to Palestinians as well, albeit a symbol of injustice and oppression. And his presence at Islam’s third holiest site was viewed by religious Muslims as a desecration.

As Sharon ascended to the Mount, a hail of rocks beat down from hundreds of *shebab*, or Palestinian youths, on the platform above. The Israelis responded with tear gas and “rubber” bullets—steel pellets coated with hard plastic.

Fortunately, no one was killed that day. But death and mourning were not far behind.

Soon Palestinian suicide bombers began to terrorize Israeli civilians on the streets, in restaurants, and riding public transportation. Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) retaliated with retributive

³ Charles M. Sennott, *The Body and the Blood* (Public Affairs, a member of the Perseus Books Group, New York, 2001), pp. 121-122

incursions into Palestine that terrorized Arab neighborhoods.

The roots of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, however, extend much deeper than September, 2000.