

# *MennoLetter from Jerusalem*

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*A Middle East View by Mennonite Church Liaison,  
Glenn Edward Witmer*

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*“The present sufferings of the Palestinian people which we, as Israelis and Jews, oppose and fight against, have no connection with what happened 2000 years ago.”*

—Uri Avnery

*“Help me, Lord, as a powerless Palestinian Christian,  
to experience and share with the world the sacrificial love and forgiveness  
I receive every day through your death on the cross.”*

—Bishop Munib Younan, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Jerusalem

*“This Middle East study program offers incredible variety and intensity  
in a fascinating and unique part of the world.”*

—Dr. Linford Stutzman, Eastern Mennonite University, Virginia

~MY VOICE ...

## *Fully Human—Fully Divine!*

*Understanding Jesus’ humanity can make his divinity seem even more profound.*

**H**oly week is the time to focus on the suffering and death of our Messiah. For two recent days of on-site teaching with a group of international Bible students, we traced the steps of Jesus and his followers during those momentous days in Jerusalem that we especially recall at this time of the year. “It’s incredible to grasp just where we are!” said one... We had started in Bethphage near Bethany, just over the Mount of Olives from the site of the impressive massive architecture of the Temple that Jesus would have seen from astride his donkey. We paused to pray by the rocks in Gethsemane where the disciples fell asleep! From the site of the Upper Room—now covered by a Crusader-period building—we moved toward the locale of the hall of judgment in Herod’s Palace, then followed the narrow streets to Caiaphas’ house, pausing to read the haunting Psalm 88 while huddled together in the dungeon below. And from there we processed to Golgotha, the tomb...

A retired minister once declined my invitation to visit to the Holy Land by saying, “I don’t need to walk that land to know who Jesus is. He is within me—no geography or archaeology could replace that!” Of course he is right! But only half right, and it’s the other half that makes so much difference. The Church Fathers found it expedient to confirm for us that Jesus is both divine *and* human—fully so! Understanding one nature helps us understand the other—the ignominy of the passion story leads us triumphantly to the glory of the resurrection! *We walk it!*

In two weeks, a new group of 28 persons from 11 Ontario congregations will arrive for a tour. As always, we will make a point of visiting the main holy sites, chat with a rabbi on Jewish spirituality, join a synagogue service, have a Sabbath meal in congregants’ homes. We’ll spend a couple of days in Palestinian homes, getting to know the families, accompany them to their place of worship. Around Jerusalem, through the Jordan Valley, across Galilee... the Bible accounts become real for us, close, relevant in new ways. *Jesus was a man.* He lived *a life*—one of difficult times, experiencing hunger, rejection, loss of friends, challenges from authorities. He knew of what he spoke when he taught us... But he also left humanity behind; we know he arose! —GEW

## ~OTHER VOICES...

BY Uri Avnery

*“The writers of the gospels were bursting with hatred of the Jews.  
That is not surprising, either. They were Jews themselves...”*

### *A Letter to President Arafat on Christian Anti-Semitism: “I Do Not Intend to Lay Collective Blame!”*

*Jesus preached love, and the New Testament pictures him as an immensely attractive person,  
righteous, merciful, and tolerant. How terrible that so many atrocities in history  
were perpetrated by persons and institutions claiming to act in his name.*

***Shalom!*** I write these lines to protest against a statement that I cannot ignore. In the weekly Palestinian paper, *The Jerusalem Times*, there appeared a report that you have viewed the controversial film of Mel Gibson, *“The Passion of the Christ.”* Afterwards your advisor stated that you found the film “moving and historical,” adding that “the Palestinians are still daily being exposed to the kind of pain Jesus was exposed to during his crucifixion.” If the statement were not in a Palestinian paper, I would have believed it was invented by Ariel Sharon’s propaganda machine. It is hard to imagine a sentence more capable of hurting the Palestinian cause.

I abhor cruelty, also in films, and this film is full of cruel scenes, claiming to depict the New Testament on screen. As an Arab and a Muslim, you are not obliged to be aware of the terrible impact that the description of the crucifixion has had on the life of Jews over almost two thousand years of persecutions, pogroms, and torture by the Spanish inquisition, large-scale expulsions, mass and individual murders, up to the Holocaust in which six million Jews perished. All these were caused, directly or indirectly—or at least made possible—by this narrative. The New Testament is sacred to its believers. But like our Bible (the so-called *Old Testament*), it is not a history text. Religious truth and historical truth are not one and the same. The descriptions of the crucifixion in the four gospels were written down many decades after the event, and the writers wrote what they wrote under the influence of the circumstances of their time.

***Let’s take, for instance, the image of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.*** The Romans described him as an unscrupulous, corrupt, and cruel procurator. In the New Testament, he is pictured as a humane person, almost a philosopher, who did not want to execute Jesus but gave in to the Jews. In Gibson’s film, he is an attractive figure, who is compelled by the disgusting Jews—disgusting even physically—to act against his conscience. Why this description? Simple: when the text was written, the Christians were already trying to convert the Roman world to their creed. It was convenient for them, therefore, to blame the Jews and exonerate the Romans, reversing the realities of the times. The Jews then, like the Palestinians now, were an occupied people, and the Romans were the occupiers. Crucifixion was a usual Roman punishment, a kind of ‘targeted elimination’ of that time (but after a trial!).

The writers of the gospels were bursting with hatred of the Jews. That is not surprising, either. They were Jews themselves, as were Jesus and all the people around him. But they belonged to a dissident sect, which was considered by the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem as heretical. The Christian Jews were cruelly persecuted. As usual in such fratricidal struggles, this one, too, aroused burning hatred. This hatred found its expression in the description of the crucifixion. *The Gospel According to Matthew* (chap. 27) puts it this way: “Pilate said to (the Jewish crowd assembled in front of his office): ‘What then shall I do with Jesus, who is called Christ?’ They all said to him: ‘Let him be crucified!’ Then the governor said: ‘Why, what has he

done?’ But they cried all the more, saying: ‘Let him be crucified!’ When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying: ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just Person. You see to it!’ And all the people answered and said: ‘His blood be on us and on our children’.”

Obviously, this is not a historical description. An entire people, or a great multitude, does not talk like one single person. The words “His blood be on our children” are unreasonable and were put there in order to justify taking revenge on generations to come. And indeed, many generations of rabble-rousers used these words in order to incite against the god-killers. Adolf Hitler, of course, was no Christian fanatic. Quite the contrary, some of his followers tried to bring back pagan Germanic rites. But Hitler and the perpetrators of the Holocaust learned the New Testament in school, and no one can say how much of the text they unconsciously absorbed. And many simple fundamentalists accepted the Holocaust or took part in it because of this.

***I do not intend to lay the collective blame on the entire Christian world throughout the centuries.*** Far from it. Many of the greatest humanists throughout history were Christians, some of them very devout. Not only the perpetrators of the Holocaust were Christians; so were the Righteous Ones, those who saved Jews. Christian monasteries in many places took in Jews and saved their lives. Jesus preached love, and the New Testament pictures him as an immensely attractive person, righteous, merciful, and tolerant. How terrible that so many atrocities in history were perpetrated by persons and institutions claiming to act in his name.

Mr. President, as an Arab and a Muslim you are proud of the fact that for more than a thousand years the Muslim world was a model of tolerance, toward both Jews and Christians. The Muslim world has never known mass expulsions and pogroms that were a regular feature in Christendom, not to mention the terrible Holocaust. The blood-bond between Muslims and Jews runs through history. One of the darkest chapters in the history of this country, which we both love, is the story of the crusades. Even before they reached the Holy Land, the Crusaders committed genocide against the Jews of Germany. When they breached the walls of Jerusalem, they killed the entire population of the city, men and women, old people and babes in arms. One of them proudly described how they waded in blood up to their knees—the blood of Muslims and Jews, butchered together, their last prayers intertwined on their way to heaven.

***The present sufferings of the Palestinian people which we, as Israelis and Jews, oppose and fight against, have no connection with what happened 2000 years ago.*** If there is any connection at all, it is the other way round. Without modern Christian anti-Semitism, the Zionist movement would not have been born at all. The founder of the Zionist movement, Theodor Herzl, stated his belief that the founding of a Jewish State was the only way of saving European Jews. Anti-Semitism *was* and *is* the force that drives the Jews to Palestine. Without anti-Semitism, the Zionist vision would have remained an abstract idea. Anti-Semitism was and remains the most dangerous enemy of the Palestinian people. There is truth in the saying that Palestinians are “the victims of the victims.” On top of all the moral reasons, this is an additional argument against a statement about the crucifixion that can be construed by anti-Semites as an encouragement for their cause.

When peace comes, we shall all meet in Jerusalem—Jews, Christians, and Muslims. I know that you dream of it, as do I. Let us hope that we shall both see it with our own eyes.

—article distributed by Jewish Voice for Peace

***“Given the damage he’s done to Christian-Jewish relations, I wouldn’t want to be Mel Gibson on Judgment Day,”*** said one writer in an Israeli paper. *The Passion of the Christ*, accused of anti-Semitism, has opened in some Middle East countries—Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, but not in Israel. The company which has the Israeli distribution rights, “decided this was not the appropriate time to screen it,” a spokeswoman said. The film also just opened in France, as commentators warned it could add to a recent wave of anti-Semitic feeling in the country.

*“It brings the students into the Biblical story,  
face to face with extremists and peacemakers on both sides of the Wall.”*

### *Middle East Cross-Cultural Semester for Virginia Students*

A group of 29 students from Eastern Mennonite University of Harrisonburg, Virginia, is just concluding a semester of study in the Middle East by working and studying in Nazareth Village this week. This follows a long journey since January that took them from Egypt, through Jordan, with extended time in the West Bank, Jerusalem, and a kibbutz in the Galilee. EMU has been bringing students for this study semester continuously for 30 years, through the turmoil, believing that the benefits far outweigh perceived risks of travel in the Middle East.

The Jerusalem program included one week that was coordinated by Mennonite Church Israel Liaison, Glenn Edward Witmer, focusing on Jewish Spirituality and Jesus. “This study program offers incredible variety and intensity in a fascinating and unique part of the world. It brings the students into the Biblical story, face to face with extremists and peacemakers on both sides of the Wall, into the world of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and gives opportunities for new encounters with Jesus of Nazareth,” says Prof. Linford Stutzman, who with his wife Janet is leading the program.

“I appreciate the link between intellectual and experiential learning,” history student Paul Yoder says. Matt Yoder adds, “Going around and seeing the places of the Bible adds a whole new element to understanding Scripture.” “I find the experience invaluable,” says Mareen Gingerich. “Studying in the Middle East brings together the variety of the worlds of faith with the complexity of contemporary issues.”

Next month there will be a 30<sup>th</sup>-anniversary tour by previous EMU participants in the Cross-Cultural Semesters, with Prof. Calvin and Marie Shenk leading a group of 20 alumni on a two-week tour of the Holy Land. [*There will be a report on their activities in the June issue of ML.*]

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*In a survey of US evangelicals after the attack on Sheik Ahmed Yassin,  
89% of respondents supported the killing of the Hamas leader!*

BY Bill Broadway, Washington Post

### *The Evangelical-Israeli Connection*

*“Many Protestants have parted ways with Jews on Israeli policies, pressing for  
Palestinian rights, calling for withdrawal of settlements from the West Bank and Gaza  
and condemning retaliatory attacks after suicide bombings.”*

The much-publicized controversy over Mel Gibson’s “*The Passion of the Christ*” might give the impression that Jews and evangelical Christians have little in common, theologically or otherwise. Nothing could be further from the truth. While some evangelical and Jewish leaders sparred publicly for months over the film’s depiction of Jesus’ last hours, especially its potential to incite anti-Semitism, thousands of evangelicals were donating millions of dollars to support the state of Israel and its people. And Jews, most notably the Israeli government, welcomed their contributions.

“We get 2,000 to 2,500 pieces of mail a day, most of them with checks,” said Yechiel Eckstein, an Orthodox rabbi and president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, founded 21 years ago to foster better relations between the two religions. Since then Eckstein has broadened the organization’s mission and in the last decade has collected more than \$100 million in financial support for Israel, often used for helping Diaspora Jews move to Israel’s settlements.

Evangelical support for Israel dates to the 19th century, when Christian Zionists called for the return of Jewish exiles to Palestine to fulfill biblical prophecies. If the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 seemed the answer to the Christian Zionists' prayers—not to mention those of the Jewish people—the extraordinary victory of Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War seemed to them a sure sign of divine will. Current evangelical leaders such as the Rev. Jerry Falwell began lobbying for greater political support of Israel from the US government and urging financial support from the rapidly growing evangelical movement.

The 1977 election of Likud Party leader Menachem Begin as prime minister marked a new era in evangelical-Israeli relations. Begin was so pleased with Falwell's pro-Israel activities that in 1979 he gave the evangelical leader a Lear jet. Today, the connection is even stronger. In January, the Israeli parliament created a Christian Allies Caucus to coordinate activities with its Christian friends. Two months ago Israeli Tourism Minister Benny Elon honored Pat Robertson at the National Association of Broadcasters Convention in Charlotte. He praised Robertson's leadership of a movement that has "saved Israel's tourism from bankruptcy" by promoting pilgrimages to the Holy Land despite US government travel warnings.

Sondra Oster Baras, an Orthodox Jew from Cleveland who heads the Christian Friends of Israel Jerusalem office, said this group funds programs in a third of the 150 Jewish settlements in Gaza and on the West Bank. The organization also assists thousands of Christian tourists, helping them plan trips to biblical sites. "These are deeply religious people who read the Bible, take it literally, and enjoy seeing the Bible coming alive," Baras said. "They are very connected to prophecy and understand events happening today in fulfillment of prophecy." She said none of the Christian support organizations she knows in Israel allow workers to evangelize, despite the fact that they are the most ardent believers in end-time prophecies predicating the second coming of Jesus on the return of Jews to Israel. Jews accept financial and political support from evangelicals because evangelicals are about the only friends Israel has left, some leaders said.

On such issues as civil rights, prayer in schools, and abortion, American Jews have found solidarity with mainline Protestants, including Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, and members of the United Church of Christ. But many Protestants have parted ways with Jews on Israeli policies, pressing for Palestinian rights, calling for withdrawal of settlements from the West Bank and Gaza and condemning retaliatory attacks after suicide bombings.

Some evangelicals, meanwhile, have been very supportive of Israel's policies, especially military actions against radical Palestinian groups. In an online survey of US evangelicals after the recent attack on Sheik Ahmed Yassin in Gaza, 89 percent of the respondents supported the killing of the Hamas leader, compared with the 61 percent of Israelis who supported the attack, in a survey by the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv*.

—distributed by the Churches for Middle East Peace

### ***Natural Gas, Oil Found in Dead Sea***

Whenever I take study groups to the Dead Sea area, I explain that ancient residents of the area used to find treasure there—blobs of tarry *bitumim* would often dislodge from the bottom and float to the top of the water. Sharp-eyed entrepreneurs would rush out in wooden boats to scoop it up—it could fetch a high price from Egyptian buyers who needed it for embalming mummies.

Now, a new treasure trove looms: Ginko Oil Exploration announced that it has found traces of oil in a seven-meter-thick patch of natural gas at its drilling site south of Ein Gedi. The location of the gas and oil is at a depth of 363 meters. However, the drilling will be extended to some 800 meters, where company executives hope to find more gas and oil, as the current amount is not large enough to be commercially viable. Ginko has started negotiations with an unnamed foreign oil concern to assess the size of the field, the amount of gas or oil that may be there, and the cost of extracting it.

*“I raise my face toward the blue skies and ask,  
Does the Holy Land need a wall?”*

## *No More Walls, Only Bridges: A Prayer from Jerusalem in Holy Week*

**O** Lord, I am standing today in front of a twenty-five foot, eight-meter high concrete wall in Abu Dis, on the Mount of Olives. As I look at it, I see how small I am and how powerless I am. I raise my face toward the blue skies and ask, “Does the Holy Land need a wall?”

When you, Lord, were crucified on the cross in Jerusalem, weren't you disturbed by the sins of animosity that were well-established in the hearts of human beings?

At the peak of your suffering on that Friday, when an earthquake took place at the time of your death, the only thing you tore away was the wall dividing people from God and each other.

We thank you, our Crucified Lord, that your death on the cross gave us hope, showing us that no walls are needed, either between you and us or between us and our neighbors. Instead, we need to find the humanity of others and accept it. So I pray,

“Lord, forgive us because we are building walls.”

“Lord, forgive us for the walls of hate and animosity which we so easily create.”

“Lord, forgive us for being deaf to your Holy Word, and help us to remember that you came to reconcile us to yourself, taking down all barriers.”

“Lord, forgive us for misusing your precious and sacrificial blood by reaching out only to our friends and dear ones, and not to our enemies.”

Lord, I feel powerless, angry, and discouraged in front of this concrete, grey barrier of separation. Do not let hatred penetrate my heart. Do not allow fear to paralyze me in all my difficulties, in my powerlessness. I pray that the walls may disappear and that . . .

. . . animosity will be exchanged for neighborliness,  
. . . hatred will be exchanged for love,  
. . . death will be exchanged for life,  
. . . despair will be exchanged for hope, and  
. . . war will be exchanged for reconciliation.

Help me, Lord, as a powerless Palestinian Christian, to experience and share with the world the sacrificial love and forgiveness I receive every day through your death on the cross.

*In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

—Bishop Munib Younan, Evangelical Redeemer Lutheran Church in Jerusalem

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## *Rare Roman Wooden Anchor Found in Dead Sea*

Archeologists throughout the world are excited about the discovery of a Roman-period wooden ship anchor in Israel. Found by Dr. Gideon Hadas while taking a leisurely stroll along the shores of the Dead Sea, the wooden anchor is estimated to date back to circa 300 BCE. The wooden anchor is the only one of its time period to have survived in such a well preserved condition. Although lead anchors have been discovered along the Mediterranean coast in the past, the high salt levels in the Dead Sea appear to have uniquely preserved this wooden specimen.

Dr. Hadas, a professional archeologist, assumes that the anchor once belonged to a vessel that anchored near the shore—possibly seeking shelter from strong southerly winds. He plans to perform a series of scientific and chemical tests to establish the wooden anchor's complete history. Following the conclusion of the study, the anchor will be exhibited to the public.

*A small but growing number of Israelis are refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza.*

## *Netanyahu's Nephew Exempted from Military Service*

**A court rejected their claim that they were conscientious objectors....and found the five were 'political activists trying to change government policy through undemocratic means.'**

The Israeli army has decided to exempt the country's highest profile conscientious objector, the nephew of hawkish ex-prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, from military service, Israel Radio reported. Yonatan Ben-Artzi had been pressing for conscientious objector status since August 2002, and had served a total of 196 days in a military prison. A military committee ruled that he should be ruled unfit for service but did not recognize him as a pacifist. An Israeli military spokeswoman would not comment on the report.

A small but growing number of Israelis are refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza, and others are seeking exemptions from army service. Ben-Artzi, whose politically right-wing uncle is now Israel's finance minister, expressed satisfaction with the conclusion of his case, though his main claim was not accepted. "I'm very happy, very content this is coming to an end," he said. Mr. Ben-Artzi said he had pursued a "personal truth" in his battle to be released from military service, saying he believed in dialogue rather than in military confrontation.

His case is one of six the army has ruled on this year. In January, five Israeli men were sentenced to one-year prison terms for refusing to serve after a court rejected their claim that they were conscientious objectors. The court found the five were 'political activists trying to change government policy through undemocratic means.' Since 1995, 27 people have received exemption from military service after the Conscience Committee ruled they were pacifists, the military prosecutor said. A total of 307 appealed to the committee during that time, he said.

Israeli men are liable for three years' army service from age 18. Women serve 21 months. Afterward most men and some women continue with yearly reserve duty, but in recent years, the numbers of Israelis who do serve have been dropping as more seek and receive exemptions. Several hundred Israeli reservists have been sent to military prison for refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and hundreds of other objectors have been quietly reassigned to duties inside Israel by their units.

## *Upswing Continues in Tourism to Israel*

The dramatic upswing in tourism to Israel continued as nearly 90,000 tourists visited Israel throughout the month of February 2004. This upsurge in tourists traveling to the Holy Land is an astounding 61% increase over February 2003, and a remarkable 40% increase over February 2002. These figures were released by Israel's Tourism Department. In the first two months of 2004, more than 180,000 tourists visited Israel. That's 44% more than in January-February 2003, and 36% more than in January-February 2002. According to the statistics, more than 160,000 tourists arrived by air, 44% more than in January-February 2003. During February 2004 alone, upwards of 70,000 tourists flew to Israel, 62% more than in February 2003, and an impressive 40% more than in February 2002.

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