



MennoLetter from Jerusalem

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

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**“I feel a slight knock in the plane as a result of releasing the bomb,  
and a second later it passes—and that’s all.”**

—Israeli air force commander on fighting after the Gaza disengagement

***“It will focus on the real places where Jesus walked...where pilgrims  
can touch the experience—where they can touch the Bible.”***

—Israeli tourism ministry spokesperson on a new evangelical theme park in Galilee

*~ MY VOICE ...*

BY Glenn Edward Witmer

## *Searching for [a Prince of] Peace*

The special Christmas scene painted in oils by Bethlehem artist, Zaki Baboun, that some of you know about shows Joseph with a pregnant Mary halting the donkey on the road, confused about how to enter Bethlehem in front of the almost 30-foot [9-meter] wall of concrete blocking their path. Another version of this is in cartoon form—two wise men wait on their camels while another digs a passageway underneath the Israeli security barrier.

It’s for real! On Palestinian Independence Day, of all things—and when the news stories in the international press were writing about the new Gaza-Egypt crossing being inaugurated at Rafah—the Israeli government finally opened the Bethlehem entry checkpoint for use, after a year and a half of slow preparation. Rev. Mitri Raheb of Christmas Lutheran Church in the city sent his Advent message to international friends:

“The eyes of the world focus once again on Bethlehem as the Advent season begins; we encourage our brothers and sisters worldwide, as they meditate on Christ’s birth here 2000 years ago, to be mindful of what is going on in Bethlehem. Psalm 24 was the reading for the first Sunday in Advent: *Gates, lift up your heads; open wide, eternal doors, here is the King of Glory!*”

“The mention of gates and eternal doors strikes us in Bethlehem as a chilling reminder of the events of the past few weeks. As the psalmist calls us to open wide the gates and doors to welcome Christ, our King, the Israeli Government has shut the gates and doors to our town and opened what they call a ‘terminal’—an early Christmas present to Bethlehem that seeks to keep locals in and foreigners out.”

Methodist Liaison worker and resident of the West Bank city, Sandra Olewine added: “Across town that day all I heard from shop keepers, falafel stand owners, and hotel workers alike was, ‘No one will want to come to Bethlehem now. No tourist group is going to want to wait two hours to have their bags checked and searched when leaving our town. Just when tourists were beginning to come back, they do this to us!’” Then Sandra went to the terminal.

“There were a series of glassed booths awaiting us, seemingly empty,” she observed. After raising our voices a bit and asking where we were supposed to go, a sleeping soldier awoke in the first booth and told us to come to him. He seemed dismayed that we were there. ‘Who sent you here? Do you know where you are?’ When I explained that I knew where I was and not lost, he then asked, ‘What is in Bethlehem to see?’”

What indeed! Just what were the wise men looking for? *Perhaps a Prince of Peace!* —GEW

## ~ OTHER VOICES...

BY Stephen Farrell

*“It’s like the Berlin wall... It is not necessary. It introduces misery.”*

### ***“O Walled-Off Town of Bethlehem, ...How Still We See Thee Lie”***

**Wall makes town a prison, local tourism suffering again.**

Already broke and hemorrhaging, a Christian population reduced to desperation by five years of *intifada*/uprising, the birthplace of Christ was sealed off from Jerusalem last month—just in time for Christmas—by a nine-meter [30-foot] wall and huge iron gate resembling a nuclear shelter. The wall and sentry posts are the latest stretch of the controversial 680 km./420-mile barrier that Israel is building through Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank. Israel regards it as the linchpin of the strategy by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of separation of Israelis from the Palestinians, pointing to its success in stemming the flow of suicide bombers and gunmen into Israel.

But on the ground, Bethlehem’s 40,000 Palestinians are walled off from Jerusalem, two of the most popular destinations for visitors to the Holy Land. “Bethlehem has become a big prison for its citizens,” said Victor Batarseh, its new mayor. Dr. Batarseh, who has had to borrow from banks to pay municipal workers’ salaries for the past two months, said the barrier would further harm the tourist and pilgrim industry, which accounts for 80 per cent of the town’s income.

“In the past four years, tourism was nil owing to the second *intifada*,” he said. “Three or four months ago it started to revive, but hotels have now called me saying tourists are cutting short their stays because it is taking them two or three hours to get out.”

Coach parties entering Bethlehem have to show their passports only on the bus, but when leaving they must pass through a turnstile-and-passageway terminal while the coach and larger bags are searched elsewhere. Only a limited number of Palestinians will be allowed through and will use a different line from foreign visitors.

“Bethlehem is a quiet area now but do not misunderstand the situation,” Lieutenant-Colonel Feigel said. “In 2004, half of the Israeli fatalities caused by suicide attacks came from Bethlehem.” The first tourists to pass through the barrier voiced dismay. “It’s like the Berlin wall,” said Maria Dubiel, from Poland. “We are from Eastern Europe and we know this kind of wall. We had such a wall between capitalism and communism. It is not necessary. It introduces misery.”

—from *The Australian*

BY Meron Benvenisti

### ***War by Remote Control***

**A youth “identifies the enemy” while sitting in front of a TV screen.**

As opposed to the expectations of many, the disengagement in Gaza has not brought about real progress toward peace, but undoubtedly caused a revolutionary change in the way war is conducted. The violence of body touching body and eye meeting eye, the friction saturated with hatred at the checkpoints and in the alleyways, and the sight of spilled blood—the intimate violence of conflicted communities—is changing in front of our eyes. It has become a push-button war, shooting via TV screens, robots and computers, and by long-range artillery.

There’s no more need to occupy territory and fill it with soldiers; it’s possible to position a battery of cannons and mark out ‘killing zones’ that are no less effective than the occupation

in practice, and allow sticking to the current fiction that “the occupation of Gaza is over.” Land forces are envious of the air force, and also want to fight by pushing buttons. They also want to feel like the former air force commander and current chief of staff, who said, “I feel a slight knock in the plane as a result of releasing the bomb, and a second later it passes and that’s all.” True, innocent people are killed, but on the TV screen it doesn’t look so terrible.

**“The arsenal of robots—on land and sea and in the air—  
is turning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a kind of computer game.”**

The commanders of the ground forces devised a driverless armored vehicle, which patrols under remote control command and opens fire on the order of a youth who “identifies the enemy” while sitting in front of a TV screen. Spanish TV recently broadcast a report on the arsenal of robots—on land and sea and in the air—that is turning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a kind of computer game, of course on condition that you’re on the Israeli side. And if you’re Palestinian, you should be grateful that at least you won’t have to see the occupier at the Rafah crossing into Egypt.

The occupier is also happy not to have to brush up against the Palestinian; it’s enough that a television monitor shows who enters and exits, and includes the Palestinian’s identification details. In the Prisons Authority they call it electronic handcuffs. There’s no limit to the creativity of the Israeli high-tech industries financed by the Defense Ministry, which enjoys unlimited resources, and nobody dares to criticize the waste of enormous sums of money, because after all, it saves soldiers’ lives.

Its devastating effect on the lives of the Palestinian enemy is not taken into account. On the contrary, the progressive technology is presented as being good for the occupied. In fact, Israel is insisting that the donor nations pay for the technology-rich ‘international passages’ that will replace the checkpoints and “ease conditions for the Palestinians.” After the electronic-technological disengagement from Gaza, efforts at *separation* are being directed to the West Bank. There’s a process under way of paving new bypass roads, digging tunnels and building bridges. Now it is focused on defining the boundaries of the Palestinian cantons, which will enable deployment of the technological developments developed for the canton of Gaza, which serves as a testing ground.

The clashes between the advanced technology and the primitive weaponry will end in a tie, and there will be no winners, only losers. Isn’t it a shame that the intellectual effort after the disengagement is aimed at upgrading death?

—Ha’aretz

BY Donald Macintyre

***Secret Report Launches Scathing Attack***

***The most detailed and remorselessly critical account yet produced by  
a Western international body, of Israel’s policy in East Jerusalem.”***

*E*uropean governments should consider direct intervention in an attempt to curb the systematic measures being undertaken by Israel to increase its control and population in the historically—and legally—Arab eastern sector of Jerusalem, a highly sensitive EU report concludes.

The confidential report, prepared by top diplomats representing 25 EU governments, warns that the chances of a two-state solution are being eroded by Israel’s “deliberate policy”—in breach of international law—of “completing the annexation of East Jerusalem.” It also warns that rapid expansion of Jewish settlements in and around East Jerusalem, along with use of the separation barrier to isolate East Jerusalem from the West Bank, “risk radicalizing the hitherto relatively quiescent Palestinian population of East Jerusalem.”

The report provides the most detailed and remorselessly critical account yet produced by a Western international body, of Israel’s policy in East Jerusalem, which has been occupied

since its seizure in the 1967 Six Day War. It points out that Jerusalem “is already one of the trickiest issues” on the road to a final peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians. It adds that, as a result of the measures, “prospects for a two state solution with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine are receding.”

Among the recommendations in the report, drafted in October during the British EU presidency which ends at the end of this month, the EU is urged to consider a series of steps including direct support for projects that help Palestinians to conduct legal battles against house demolitions, which it points out tripled in the city during 2004, and the persistent refusal to grant building permits to all but a small minority of Palestinians.

The document says when the separation barrier is completed, Israel will “control all access to and from East Jerusalem, cutting off its Palestinian satellite cities of Bethlehem and Ramallah, and the rest of the West Bank beyond. This will have serious economic, social and humanitarian consequences for the Palestinians. By vigorously applying policies on residency and ID status, Israel will be able finally to complete the isolation of East Jerusalem—the political commercial and infrastructural centre of Palestinian life.”

The plans will divide the West Bank from itself and from East Jerusalem, the report says. “From an economic perspective, the viability of a Palestinian state depends to a great extent on the preservation of organic links between East Jerusalem, Ramallah and Bethlehem.”

—Excerpted from *The Independent*

BY David Neff

## *Listening to the Fifth Gospel*

**The sun-baked ruins of the Holy Land have a story to tell.**

**M**y Israeli government guide was in a hurry. “Now we must go,” he said. “We have only a few minutes. We have much to see.” But I wanted to stop the fast-forward blur of ancient stones and modern resorts, freeze-frame the past, and try to enter it.

Standing in the ancient synagogue in Capernaum only steps from the lapping tides of Galilee, I refused to move. This is one of the most certain sites of Jesus’ ministry. And one of the less pilgrim-ized. Here there is no Crusader church, no darkening dome covering the sacred ground, no flickering candle glow, no redolence of incense, no local guides urgently pressing you into their service. Here there is only the sunlight and the stones. A few walls, an impressive stand of roofless columns, some stone steps and benches, bearing the marks of use and neglect since the fourth century. A bare, ruined choir where once devout men read aloud the Holy Word and fervently disputed its meaning.

Here I wanted to pause and listen to the stones, to stand and touch them, as I had once paused by that great black rock sunk into the turf in our nation’s capital and had run my fingers over the names of those who had died in the unofficial war of my youth. As I had then sought to find my soul’s connection with a fallen generation, named so simply in black granite, so now I wanted to hear the echoes of the anonymous faithful who had cried here for deliverance from the Roman oppressor.

Just beneath these fourth-century stones lie buried the remnants of an earlier place of prayer, destroyed perhaps by legionnaires in the Roman wars. It was graced with a young man’s voice of authority, which astonished the locals with its teaching. It was here that an unclean spirit announced the presence of the Holy One of God, and was condemned to silence. And it was from here that “reports of him went out into every place in the surrounding region” (Luke 4:37).

***“Scholars believe that beneath the church lies our earliest known place of Christian worship—the house of Saint Peter.”***

Next door to the sun-baked synagogue, the Franciscans built a roof over a ruin to shelter visitors and, perhaps, to encourage them to stay for more than the requisite quick look. On the

surface are the foundations and broken-off walls of a fifth-century octagonal church typical of those built to venerate earlier sacred sites. Scholars believe that beneath the church lies our earliest known place of Christian worship—the house of Saint Peter.

When Jesus left Capernaum's synagogue, he "entered into Simon's house." There he healed Simon's mother-in-law. There, after the Sabbath light had waned, he healed many others and drove the demons from the possessed. And there, on another occasion, desperate friends tore off the mud-and-palm-leaf roof to lower a paralytic to Jesus' healing and forgiving attention.

We know we are in a special place. In the ruins, archaeologists have found fishhooks, as well as early prayers to Jesus scratched in the plastered walls (the only plastered walls uncovered from first-century Capernaum). The largest room of the house appears to have been altered for public use, perhaps into a house church. There are bits of large storage jars and oil lamps, but no ordinary household pottery.

Saint Jerome called this land "the fifth gospel." Engraved upon it are the footprints of the famous folk who live in our collective memory—of fishermen, of Pharisees, of quisling tax collectors, and of a peripatetic Rabbi. And in those footprints have stepped the faithful of the centuries, making their pilgrimage to the embattled land where Jesus taught, healed, died, and was raised.

Some of the shepherds of the faithful, however, have too often closeted themselves in dim libraries, speculating about the redaction of texts and raising questions about the believability of the gospel stories. Only recently, with renewed attention to the physical remnants of first-century Palestine and the evidence of Jewish religion of that period, has the withering "quest for the historical Jesus" been abandoned, and a new flowering of "Jesus studies"—exploring culture, language, and place—begun.

—Excerpted from an article originally published in the October 22, 1990, issue of *Christianity Today*.

**BY Ilene R. Prusher**

**"It's very astute of the Israeli government to do this,  
with all the support of the Evangelical world out there."**

## ***A Theme Park for the Holy Land?***

Officials in Israel say that out of about two million people who will realize their dream of visiting the Holy Land this year, more than half will be Christian. And among those, more than half will be Evangelical. With that in mind, the Israeli ministry of tourism has gone public with a plan to build—in partnership primarily with American Evangelical churches—a sprawling Holy Land Christian Center on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, home to some of the most notable chapters in Jesus' ministry.

The center, to be built on approximately 125 acres that the Israeli government is offering free of cost, would be a Christian theme park and visitors' center, one that would be particularly attractive to Evangelicals and other Christians who want to spend more time in the places where Jesus walked. Highlights may include a Holy Bible Garden, full of plants and trees mentioned in the New Testament, and equipped with quiet sites for reflection and prayer. A Sea of Galilee Amphitheater will overlook the mouth of the Jordan River and hold 1,500-2,000 worshippers. And the park will have a Christian Experience Auditorium and a Multimedia Center. The center would also feature an online broadcast center, which would give religious leaders an opportunity to address their followers back home—broadcasting live—near the tranquil blue waters of the Sea of Galilee.

"It will focus on the real places where Jesus walked," says Ido Hartuv, a spokesman for the Israeli tourism ministry. "It's a place where pilgrims can touch the experience—they can touch the Bible." Israeli officials say they are in advanced discussions with several prominent churches that will serve as investors and builders of the \$60 million center. Tourism Minister

Abraham Hirschson said that he hoped the first of several agreements would be signed this month, and that one of the key figures at the heart of the project would be Pat Robertson, the prominent televangelist and founder of The 700 Club.

The plans to build the center—and to turn a large swath of the pastoral waterside territory from Magdala to Bethsaida, into a Galilee World Heritage Park, complete with hiking trails along paths Jesus would have walked—come at a time of seesawing in relations between Israel and various US churches. Several mainline Protestant churches are considering pulling their money out of the stocks of companies that sell military equipment to Israel in a protest against Israel's dealing with the Palestinian intifada. Churches considering an economic boycott point to the building of the West Bank barrier as well as an expansion of Israeli settlements over the Green Line, Israel's pre-1967 boundaries.

***“The Protestant world in general  
got a late start on the Bible-sites business.”***

Some of the existing churches and monasteries the shores of the Sea of Galilee, such as in Tabgha and Capernaum where Jesus lived for a time, were built as recently as the early 1900s by prominent churches in the Holy Land: some by the Greek Orthodox and others by Roman Catholics, represented by the Franciscans. But the area has not been developed for visitors, so the busloads of tourists who come to the coast north of Tiberias find it difficult to secure a place to pray and reflect, much less find a rest-stop equipped to accept hundreds of pilgrims.

“The Protestant world in general got a late start on the Bible-sites business. While the Greek Orthodox—as the successor to the Byzantine empire—and the Roman Catholics have been involved in identifying Christian sites and maintaining them for pilgrims for centuries,” says David Parsons of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem. “It's very astute of the Israeli government to do this, with all the support of the Evangelical world out there.”

—from *The Christian Science Monitor*

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*\* The first woman Rabbi to be ordained in Israel—and a board member of Rabbis for Human Rights—reflects on the theme of the upcoming World Council of Churches 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly from the point of view of the Jewish tradition.*

**BY Rabbi Naamah Kelman\***

## ***The Ways of God's Grace***

***“It reminds me of that wonderful Jewish parable about how we must act like God.”***

We look to God for the strength, wisdom, and courage to change the world. We pray to God to renew our hope and nourish our spirits so that we might be able to be partners in transforming the world. We reach to God to feel love and comfort, so that when we have failed to change our world, we might be able to try again.

We, of the three monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—share a God of compassion and justice. And these two must go together. Compassion without justice may heal us, but will not mend nor move us toward where we need to go. Justice without compassion might fix the wrong, but will not give us the ability to hold on to each other. We serve a God who can move us, heal us, inspire us, and compel us.

In the Jewish tradition, we cling to two key pillars that hold us up. They are creation and redemption. Creation is both the original act of the creation of the world, and the ongoing idea of renewal; renewal of the soul and renewal of the world. Redemption is the original act of exodus from slavery, and the ongoing hope for a redeemed world. While God is the source for these transformative powers, we must become partners with God to ensure the ongoing forces of renewal and redemption in the world.

On the Sabbath, these two forces are brought together. We are commanded to rest, not to relax, in order to find the energies to return to a new week and the world with the force of

creation and redemption. Each week, we can heal our family, community, and neighborhood. Even better, maybe we can reach out beyond our familiar frameworks and seek the other.

Has there ever been a time in human history that we did not yearn for God's grace? Do we need it as much as ever? Yes! Today the scale of events is terrifying. Global connections have turned us into a world village. But technology has unleashed healing powers and powers of destruction as never before. We cannot keep up with the amount of terrible catastrophes facing humanity. It makes us numb with fear. Yet we also feel helpless in the face of poverty, disease, violence, and corruption. God's grace fights despair!

### ***The audacity of acting like God***

The theme of the 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches next February reminds me of that wonderful Jewish parable about how we must *act like God*. Of course as soon as the Rabbis say this, they gasp at their audacity. How can we humans be like God? So they answer: Just as God visits the sick, we too must visit the sick. We learn this because God "appears before Abraham" in Genesis 18, shortly after he underwent circumcision. So the rabbis deduce that Abraham is recuperating and God has come "to call."

The Rabbis seek scriptural proof-texts that God feeds the hungry, clothes the naked (Adam and Eve in the garden), consoles the mourners, etcetera, and therefore we must walk in God's ways. These are the ways of God's grace.

Of course, the most powerful proof-text comes from Genesis 1:27. The text makes it very clear that we were created in God's image, all of us. I must treat you as if you represent God's image on earth. But no one has a monopoly on suffering, just like no one has a monopoly on holiness. We join hands as God's representatives on this glorious earth. So indeed, we start with those near us in pain and suffering, and we spread our work. Justice according to our prophets is also our mission. Care for the orphan, the widow, those most helpless in our societies. Build an equitable world.

We turn to God in prayer and in action to fill the world with God's grace. Let us renew creation every day; let us bring redemption closer in every way.

—For more on the theme of the WCC 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly, see [www.wcc-assembly.info](http://www.wcc-assembly.info)

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*The Gift of an 'Eternal Flame'*

### **Women Out of Time, Out of Place!**

*Joseph was ready to divorce her to avoid halachic legal problems and family embarrassment.*

### **No Space for Them in the Room**

*Not a wooden stable, not a house as we know it—but a cave!*

***The website version is accompanied by photo illustrations—be sure to see the beautiful sculpture of the Archangel Gabriel with Mary ... just click on the opening page icon labeled The Word on the Street.***

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