



## Visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories

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*At the beginning of March 2005 Don Horrocks (Head of Public Affairs) and David Hilborn (Head of Theology) from the Evangelical Alliance embarked on a fact-finding visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories.*

Christians are deeply divided on the Holy Land, and Evangelical Christians are more divided than most. Since it was established in the mid-1990s, the Evangelical Alliance's Theological Commission has addressed a number of controversies which have seriously threatened Evangelical unity— from the nature of hell to the Toronto Blessing, from prosperity teaching to penal substitution. Likewise, its Policy Commission has tackled difficult social issues such as GM crops and food and church-state relationships. Yet until recently the Alliance has refrained from broaching the vexed question of how Christians should regard the modern nation of Israel, and of how they should understand the status of the Palestinian people.

The reasons for this reticence are not hard to fathom. In contrast to more apparently abstract theological concerns, the Israel-Palestinian problem entails urgent, life-and-death realities: armed conflict and suicide bombings, house demolitions and poverty. For years the Middle East has commanded considerable time, energy and resourcing from the administrations of the USA, Britain, Russia, the European Union, the United Nations and others. Current international involvement in the so-called 'Road Map to Peace', and in the Israeli government's 'Disengagement Plan' to withdraw Jewish settlers from Gaza, underline that what goes on in this region affects the whole world. If it were not also clear from Northern Ireland and South Africa, the Holy Land decisively confirms that religion and politics are inter-linked. But politics as raw and blood-stained as those surrounding Israel-Palestine arouse a passion and hostility from which Evangelicals are hardly immune. As in most politico-religious disputes there are various shades of opinion, but Evangelicals basically split into two camps on this issue: 'Christian Zionism' and 'Supercessionism'.

In keeping with many Orthodox Jews, Christian Zionists maintain that God's biblical covenants with elect Israel hold good today in respect of the 'promised land'. The precise borders of this 'Biblical Israel' may be debatable, but Christian Zionists insist that it is the duty of believers to back the modern state of Israel in its control of the territory it gained at its inception in 1948 and in its subsequent conflicts with surrounding Arab states. In particular, they support retention of the key areas occupied by Israel in the pivotal 1967 war: East Jerusalem, 'Judea-Samaria' (more widely termed the 'West Bank'), and the Gaza strip. Admittedly, while most Christian Zionists are Evangelical, not all Jewish Zionists are theologically motivated. Zionism began in the Nineteenth Century as a response to successive anti-Semitic pogroms dating from the medieval period, and many of its founding figures promoted the idea of a 'safe homeland' on secular humanitarian grounds rather than from scriptural conviction. The most influential of these, Theodore Herzl, even contemplated a re-gathering of Jews in East Africa rather than the Middle East. However, when the state of Israel was founded in the wake of the Nazi holocaust, secular and religious Zionist aspirations had effectively converged on the area defined in 2 Chronicles 9:26 as 'west of the

Jordan' and south 'to the border with Egypt'. When this territorial vision was largely realised in 1967, the UN condemned Israel for its 'land grab', and for its eviction of those who had lived on that land for centuries—the Muslim and Christian peoples known collectively as Palestinians. Christian Zionists have joined conservative Jews in rejecting such criticism from the international community on the grounds that biblical prophecy cannot be trumped by secular resolutions.

By contrast, Supercessionists argue that the territorial manifestation of Israel has been superseded, or replaced, by the 'new covenant' predicted in Jeremiah 31:31–4, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This covenant, they argue, is realised in the hearts of Jewish and Gentile Christians all over the world, and should no longer be associated with a particular race, land mass or temple. Indeed, on the basis of Hebrews 8:13, they maintain that it has rendered land-specific aspirations obsolete. Also known as 'replacement theology', this outlook holds that the Church has taken over the role of Old Testament Israel. Since this Church is a worldwide body, partisan support for the modern state of Israel *qua* Israel is deemed to be unjustified. Indeed, citing the human rights abuses levelled against Israel by the UN and others, Supercessionists typically accuse Christian Zionists of letting misguided eschatological commitments override basic moral precepts, such as are taught in the Sermon on the Mount—and, for that matter, in the Law and the Prophets. In fact, they stress that prophets like Micah saw Israel's possession of land as subject to moral and spiritual criteria which she did not always meet, and whose neglect resulted her forfeiting that land (2:4–5). In response, Christian Zionists contend that Supercessionism has often gone hand-in-hand with anti-Semitism, that it unduly spiritualises God's covenant promises, that God's land-pledges to Israel are never in fact revoked, and that at various points in the New Testament (e.g. Matthew 24, Romans 9–11) the Jews maintain a distinct role in God's purposes.

Despite such disagreements, the Alliance eventually began to grasp the Middle East nettle in June 2003, when we brought together 70 key Christian leaders with a stake or significant interest in the Holy Land, for a special consultation. It is a measure of how polarised Evangelical opinion has become on this subject that many of those present on different sides that day had never previously met under the same roof, despite having often criticised one others' positions in print. The atmosphere was cordial and some mutual understanding was fostered, but the divisions remained deep-seated, and it was obvious that a lot more thinking on this issue would have to be done by the Alliance. It was with this background very much in mind that we decided to travel to the Holy Land ourselves, to see how things are developing on the ground.

Let it be said from the outset that our schedule was inevitably skewed by the fact that it was largely geared to inspecting Christian Aid supported relief work among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza strip. Some balance, however, was provided by meetings with representatives of the Church's Ministry among the Jewish People, and with the Israeli Foreign Ministry. We also had discussions with joint Israeli and Palestinian human rights organisations, and with members of the Palestinian Legislative Council. While many Alliance member churches support Tearfund rather than Christian Aid, it is a mark of how sensitive the Israel–Palestinian problem is within Evangelicalism that Tearfund and other evangelical agencies like Christian Solidarity Worldwide do not operate in the Holy Land.

Included on our itinerary were exposure to YMCA rehabilitation and educative programmes in Bethlehem for those disabled by the conflict, to the work of the Palestinian Medical Relief Society in Ramallah and the West Bank, to the refugee support programme of the Culture and Free Thought Association, and to the Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees near the Egyptian border in the Gaza strip. We were privileged to meet many Palestinian Christians, including the Christian bishops and Patriarch in Jerusalem, and a gathering of the committee of the Near East Council of Churches in Gaza City. While in Gaza, we also visited medical clinics and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights.

Our entire party, especially those who had not previously visited the Occupied Territories, were unquestionably shocked by what we saw and heard. Even the never-ending stream of media reporting could not have prepared us for what we encountered. This is undoubtedly a land of intense suffering on both sides, although the constraints of our schedule meant that we were exposed mainly to the Palestinian experience. Yet however limited our itinerary was in this regard, it became clear that a humanitarian disaster is mounting in Gaza and the West Bank. With the Palestinian birth rate set to outstrip the population of Israel within 20 years, it is impossible to see how the confinement of Palestinians within enclaves behind walls can ever pretend to offer Israel lasting peace or security. Few people on either side left us with any great optimism for the future. Rather, we encountered either entrenched antagonism or a general air of resignation to the ongoing conflict. Cynicism greeted mention of 'road maps' and so-called Israeli 'disengagement', but with ready acknowledgement that the alternative would be a vacuum which only extremist terrorist groups would fill. Our party returned with an overwhelming desire that practical gospel ethics should not be obscured by entrenched political, racial, geographical or eschatological dogma.

The needs are great, though they are perceived very differently. Most Israelis support the current building of the wall of separation between Israel and Palestine, and of the construction of highways for the sole use of Israelis travelling between towns and settlements. David Pileggi is an Italian American working with CMJ. He has lived in Jerusalem most of his adult life, having studied at the Hebrew University there as the only Christian in a class of Jews. As he and his wife Margaret hosted us for dinner at their flat, they explained that every day, their children travel to school on a bus route which has been subject to suicide bombing. More than once, they have found themselves frantic with worry that their child has been killed. The security wall has reduced such attacks by two-thirds, they said. If we were in their shoes, would we not support its construction, for all the division it symbolises and provokes? Like many Israelis, the Pileggis think deeply about their country's situation, and are not afraid to criticise its harsher actions towards the Palestinians. But they also make the point that they are free to do this, whereas many Muslims in surrounding Arab states are not similarly at liberty to protest against their leaders. More generally, however, it did seem to us that the wall will inevitably shut out of the Palestinian situation from many Israelis' minds. If the two peoples only meet at checkpoints, how can they learn to trust each other and live together? Of course, the Palestinian Legislative Authority has its own well-known catalogue of human rights abuses, and many of the Palestinians we met were under no illusion about its record.

Having said this, all the Palestinians we met – Muslim and Christian alike – felt deeply oppressed. Though no Palestinian we spoke to backed suicide bombing, and most strongly condemned it, some nevertheless suggested that this phenomenon represented the desperation of a people for whom there seemed no other solution. Of course, from a Christian point of view suicide bombing can never be justified. It also arguably spurs comparably brutal responses, such as the Israeli government's targeting of key Hamas leaders for assassination. In this strife-ridden land, one violent outrage prompts a similarly violent response.

The contrast between prosperous, fertile, westernised Israel and the arid poverty of Gaza and the West Bank is stark. The ubiquity of checkpoints, and the separation or so-called 'apartheid' wall, have fuelled in the Palestinians a strong sense of resentment and humiliation. They have developed a prisoner mentality. We met many Palestinian Christians who had not seen members of their families living elsewhere in the region for years. Bethlehem has become something of a ghost town. Close to economic collapse following its virtual encirclement by the wall, visitors to it are either unable to travel or unwilling to face the traumas of getting through checkpoints. We heard many stories of people forced to wait days at checkpoints, and even of mothers giving birth during the ordeal of negotiating the 'frontiers'.

Not long after our return home came news of three Palestinian teenagers shot dead trying to retrieve a football in a 'no-go' area near the Egyptian border. We had been in the same location only weeks earlier and were only too aware of the concerns of Palestinians who told us of children and others being shot at regularly by Israeli troops and Jewish settlers. With most schools closed, young people have little to do. Israel insists that exclusion zones are being violated—that tunnels are being dug beneath the border to transport rockets for attacks on Israeli positions and settlements. There is, in fact, good evidence of this. However, it was also disturbing to witness hundreds of homes bulldozed or dynamited by the Israeli army, many refugees living in the ruins for want of any alternative accommodation. Nor did there seem any excuse for the Israeli army's blatant razing of greenhouses on arable land, other than that they were visible from Jewish settlements, and that Israel wishes deliberately to undermine Palestinian economic sustainability.

Our visit to the Israeli Ministry for Foreign Affairs proved interesting, not least for its spokeswoman's frank admission that Israel was acting as an occupying power, that it was marginalising human rights, and that massive injustice and potential humanitarian disaster were involved. However, all this was explained by the fact that Israel was in a state of war. Given this response, it seemed difficult to accept her later assurance that the wall was a 'temporary measure' not designed to grab land—especially when we had seen for ourselves just how massive and permanent it looks. Then again, the sophistication of the Israeli government infrastructure brought home the extraordinary achievements of the Jewish people in developing a First World democracy so soon after 1948, not least in the face of such fierce hostility from neighbouring Muslim regimes. Indeed, the contrast between our visit here and our trip to the Palestinian Legislative Authority's HQ in Ramallah was stark. Despite considerable international support and funding, the PLA is still struggling to establish itself as a credible body. In its meagre parliamentary chamber, in its iconography, and in the minds of its officials, the figure of Yasser Arafat still looms large. He is revered as 'Father of the Nation', but as his own countrymen at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights later attested, he has left a legacy of corruption and factionalism which his successor, Mahmoud Abbas, will find it hard to dismantle. As we later drove through the streets of Gaza City, the diverse uniforms of the eight or nine different security forces which Arafat had sponsored at his whim presented a vivid symbol of how far the PLA still has to go.

One abiding memory we brought home with us was the plaintive cry of Palestinian Christians throughout Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank, that we should tell their Christian brothers and sisters in the West about what is happening in the Occupied Territories. Without exception, they maintained that they and their fellow Palestinians were being deprived of their historic land, liberty and sustenance. No doubt their fellow believers in Messianic Jewish and Christian Zionist congregations in Israel and elsewhere would disagree. No doubt we did not see the full picture. No doubt we have much more work and consultation to do before reaching anywhere near a fair and unbiased view of this immensely complex situation. Yet beneath all the resentment, fear and despair, it was possible to detect a genuine desire for peace in those we met—an honest hope that Palestinians and Israelis might one day live harmoniously together, as they have at various times in the past. Indeed, as well realising that we need to grapple in greater depth with the theological issues, we are left with a commitment to explore what more we can actively do to help—apart from praying passionately for the 'peace of Jerusalem'.

*This article reflects the personal observations of Don Horrocks and David Hilborn and does not necessarily represent the views of the Evangelical Alliance.*