

Nothing Holy: A Different Perspective of Israel

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FOR THE FIRST NINETEEN YEARS OF MY LIFE I defined myself as a Christian-Palestinian-Israeli-Arab. I inherited this religious-racial-political affiliation in several ways. Culturally and linguistically I am an Arab. My family's Christian Arab lineage probably descends from the Christian Arab communities that have persisted in the Middle East since before the ascent of Islam. We have lived in the part of the Middle East called Palestine geographically and the Holy Land figuratively. When the state of Israel was established in 1948, Jewish armed forces conquered two-thirds of Palestine; a large group of Palestinian Arabs stayed in their villages and towns (including my home town of Nazareth), thereby becoming Israeli citizens. This group of Palestinians, now referred to as Israeli-Arabs, composes about 17 percent of Israel's population; Christians make up the same percentage of the Arab minority. This unique and rare situation has united the peoples of Israel in a system of frictions and pressures on one side and of cooperation and understanding on the other. I have achieved a wavering balance between these complex minority/majority relationships and conflicts that has allowed me a certain degree of satisfaction and identification with each.

Then, through a rare event, I came in contact with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I was not looking for a religious commitment, but when God began to answer my prayers, I knew I had heard the truth, and my commitment followed.

Now I added a new label to my self-definition — Latter-day Saint — and it dominated all the others. The gospel motivated me to become not just the best Palestinian or the best Christian, but the best human being I could be. Because I wanted all the good I saw in the gospel, I knew that I needed to redirect my life. I committed to change habits and customs, such as giving up coffee to obey the Word of Wisdom in a society where coffee is a must at the

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end of any kind of social gathering or visit. I had to leave Israel to enjoy the blessings of baptism and full membership in the priesthood. A mission to share my knowledge with others soon followed.

Seven years later, once again a resident of Israel, I am still trying to live the gospel. Living in Israel as a Latter-day Saint remains in itself a great challenge; but I recognize added challenges. As I began to interact with Church members, I found that we did not see eye to eye on political issues. This did not bother me at first because I respected each individual's right to personal political beliefs. I was surprised, however, to find that Mormons tended to associate their political and religious beliefs. I learned that for many Latter-day Saints, the impassioned stories of biblical power struggles learned in Sunday School are resurrected in twentieth-century conflicts unfolding in living color, complete with close-up reports, on the six o'clock news. The story of David and Goliath is reborn for them as the "small" Israeli army faces the "large" armies of the Arab nations. They see the face of Esther mirrored in the images of thousands of beautiful Jewish women serving in the Israeli army, and they read the fulfillment of prophecies about Armageddon and the gathering of Israel in the last days in the victories of the Zionist movement over the cries of Jihad from Moslem leaders. I was amazed to find that such biblical images represent the entire reality of modern Israel for many Latter-day Saints.

I have heard these beliefs expressed, often in a Church forum, by Church members who have either traveled to Israel or who have lived here for an extended period of time. On one occasion, a visitor to Israel gave a fireside speech to the local Church members. His talk was politically oriented and filled with praise for Israeli military power. I have long forgotten his actual words, but I still remember the resentment I felt at that meeting. This sort of blatant partisanship and militarism was not what I had expected from a spiritual leader. After the talk, people lined up to shake his hand. A friend wanted to take me to the stand to meet him. Still shocked from what I had just heard, I did not want to exchange greetings. Thinking that my reluctance was due to shyness, however, my friend kept encouraging me. It took me a few minutes to rethink my position and to accept the leader as a Church representative while acknowledging his remarks as purely personal beliefs. I wished fervently, though, that he had made those same clear distinctions.

I felt threatened by this association between religion and politics. Ironically, I had always feared exactly these kinds of dangerous attitudes among members of the Moslem faith. I have developed my own definite views over the years, based on my experiences and strong feelings of justice and fairness. My knowledge and understanding of the history and complexities of the Israeli-Arab conflict, although limited, justify my concern with what I see as an unfair partisanship.

A few months later, as I was attending my first semester at BYU, I took a religion class from a teacher who believed his political views were God-inspired. In preparation for a class discussion, he distributed copies of an article written by a Church member. I was surprised to find that the article discussed political rather than spiritual theories. I recognized the ideas from a

political science class I had taken a few months earlier in Israel and was familiar with the pros and cons of each theory. The article's arguments were based not on any significant spiritual references, but rather on political figures, such as a former CIA agent and late American president (whose names I cannot remember) who endorsed a socio-economic outlook that I could not accept, in spite of what my instructor said.

The class discussion quickly became a heated argument between the teacher and me. Shaking with anger, he accused me of being close to blasphemy. Though I shared my testimony and commitment to the Church before the class ended, I am sure that many students in that freshman class, who did not have the intellectual maturity to deal with what they had witnessed, were unnerved by the heated discussion. But I was not ready to compromise my beliefs for arguments offered without significant proof.

Another incident that disturbed me was an article I read in the 23 October 1984 *BYU Daily Universe* proposing that a person cannot be both a good Mormon and a Democrat. This crude mixing of church and politics prompted me to write a sarcastic response that was also published in the *Daily Universe* one week later.

The Church has made it clear that it does not identify itself with political parties. Still, some members manage to express their political views in a Church forum, feeling confident of a "spiritual" ratification. For example, an audiotape popular among missionaries, entitled "The Conversion of a Jew," relates the conversion experiences of an American Jew. In addition to faith-promoting experiences, the convert relates some of his political ideas and encourages his audience to use the word "Israel" instead of Palestine, implying the exclusion of Palestinians and their political aspirations in that area. I do not know who gave him the right to use a Church-sponsored activity dedicated to sharing beliefs in Christ to promote a political view. What would have happened if among the listeners there had been an investigator who did not agree with these political views?

An even more unfortunate experience occurred to me at the Missionary Training Center at the London Temple grounds, where I was preparing to serve in the England London Mission. To keep us occupied at night, the MTC president arranged for a series of speeches and lectures by local Church members. One speaker presented a slide show about the Holy Land, which he had visited a few times. Because I had been introduced to him as the missionary from Israel, I suspect he thought that I was a Jew, an understandable mistake that people often make when meeting someone from Israel.

During his presentation, the speaker made a point of denigrating Arabs. He looked my way frequently, somehow supposing that if I were a Jew, I was also an Arab-hater. One of his slides showed an Arab woman near a house. Because the slide revealed little detail, he gave extensive commentary. He told how his guide — also a Church member — took him to this house where for a small price the poor woman allowed them to photograph her humble surroundings. This good Church member described with condescension the woman's poverty, hinting that it represented the plight of all Arabs. I won-

dered how he had missed the many lavish Arab villas through the West Bank. I could only pity such an expression of moral bankruptcy. Of course he was entitled to his own beliefs, but I felt it inappropriate that he share them in such a forum.

This kind of one-legged expertise on the Middle East that comes from a trip or two to Israel seems to prevail even among more informed but biased Church members. One such "expert," Gerald N. Lund,¹ has written a popular book entitled *One in Thine Hand* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), whose shallow understanding is an outright insult to the Palestinians. I would have hoped for more from such a learned and devout man and from Deseret Book Company than this opinionated, biased, and unrealistic presentation. I realize the author is merely expressing his own beliefs, but I wish he had not used such a thoroughly Mormon wrapping.

In typical Hollywood fashion, the story itself is unrealistic, but this is not its main defect. Let me briefly explain one or two ideas from the book that bother me.

In the story, a young American LDS man, while flying to Israel for a visit, meets and befriends a young LDS Palestinian man. Once in Jerusalem, he also meets a young Jewish woman who runs the hotel where he is staying. During the course of the book, these three characters take part in breath-taking adventures against Palestinian terrorists and the Egyptian army. As expected, the American hero and the Israeli woman fall in love, and she experiences a conversion to the Mormon faith. While seeming to offer authoritative information and analysis of the Israeli experience, in truth the book contains subtle discrepancies throughout.

The book presents three different types of Palestinians: the bad, the poor, and the good. The bad are, of course, blood-thirsty terrorists who drop into the story from nowhere to kill and torture Jewish children and give the American hero his chance to prove his chivalry and honor. Through the words of the Palestinian character, the author implies that the Palestinian Liberation Organization is composed of subhuman "terrorists at heart," who not only hate Israel but are imposing their will over the Palestinian refuge camps as well (pp. 14, 15). He ignores the fact that the Palestinians have accepted the PLO as their sole representative.

The second character type is the poor Palestinians. Like the Jews, they suffer from the atrocities of the bad Palestinians. The father of the young Palestinian, who was killed by a bomb planted on a bus, belongs to this group.

Then we have a good Palestinian, a reformed terrorist who repents and returns to live in the occupied territories in friendship and love with the Israelis. This made-to-order Palestinian has been enlightened by the Western ethics of freedom, dignity, and basic rights but somehow has managed to convince himself (perhaps after listening to some Mormon's "inspired" political beliefs)

¹ Lund received his B.A. and M.S. degrees in sociology from Brigham Young University and did postgraduate work in New Testament and Hebrew at Pepperdine University and the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. He has worked extensively in the Church Education System, most recently as dean of their Lands and Scriptures workshop tour.

that they do not apply to his people, who live under oppressing occupation, deprived of freedom and rights. I see an underlying naive assumption in Lund's characterization of someone who is bringing education to his people to teach and enlighten them while ignoring their needs for freedom and self-respect. Lund's Palestinian sees education as an alternative to the PLO (p. 16) when in fact most PLO leaders are college educated. Palestinian resistance in the West Bank is centered among its educated and students; universities in the West Bank are regularly closed for months because its students have participated in demonstrations and acts of protest against the Israeli occupation.

The Jewish personalities in Lund's book are ideal role models: strong family members, military heroes, and compassionate businessmen. But this distortion of the Palestinian experience is just an appetizer to prepare the reader for the author's true attitude toward the Palestinian nation, expressed later in the book.

The conversion story of the young Jewish woman is the book's heart. After an initial period of learning and acceptance, she begins to have concerns. Why would the Savior die for her sins? It is a troubling idea she cannot comprehend. In an act of heroism and selflessness, the Palestinian hero rescues his American and Jewish friends from the Egyptian army and in the process loses his own life. This act helps the young Jewish woman understand the meaning of Christ's sacrifice.

The Palestinian dies so the Jew might be saved. Although I appreciate the element of sacrifice involved, I am uncomfortable at the casting. Certainly the Palestinian is presented as noble person, but this "solution" eliminates him from the plot. What if he were a black, sacrificing himself for two whites? Or a woman dying to save two men? As a Palestinian, I find the author's solution unacceptable, for I see this same solution being imposed on my people. Unfortunately, some fundamentalist Christians believe that the Middle East conflict would dissolve under a God-directed sacrifice of the Palestinian nation to bring the Jews to the knowledge of the Messiah (see Halsell 1986). Lund's analogy fits disturbingly well with such ideas, as do, I fear, the beliefs of many Latter-day Saints. With this scenario only the "good" Palestinians would understand the weight of the mission "inspired" Mormons have called upon them to perform.

The Israeli-Arab conflict can, however, be interpreted differently. I see the development of the conflict from a historically deterministic perspective, which to me seems more logical. The conflict has resulted from international developments that changed the whole world and specifically influenced the history of the Middle East. The Zionist movement was one of many nationalist movements that spread throughout Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Jews, who kept themselves distinct in nations where they lived (often, granted, because they were consistently rejected and persecuted by their fellow citizens), felt they had the right to be a nation, to have a home where their dream of security, freedom, and integrity could be secured. Their yearning for the Land of Promise was a mystic part of their worship, and Palestine became the logical choice for their homeland.

As the Zionist movement gained strength among the Jews, the spark of nationalism touched the Arabs as well, who had been under Turkish rule for four hundred dark years. The two movements clashed as the Jews began emigrating to Palestine after the First World War, aided and encouraged by Great Britain, to whose commonwealth Palestine belonged. The Balfour Declaration promising a British commitment for a Jewish homeland in Palestine alarmed the Arabs, who considered it another form of Western colonialism threatening their national independence. An armed struggle between the two movements was inevitable.

The formation of the state of Israel in 1948 brought on what the Palestinians refer to as the catastrophe. As the Zionist movement achieved its goal, the Palestinian national movement developed as a separate branch of Arab nationalism. For the next twenty years, the conflict between Israel and the Arab countries became institutionalized. Then following the Six Day War in 1967, the Palestine Liberation Organization emerged as the representative of the Palestinian national movement.

In 1978, Anwar Sadat surprised the world by extending peace offerings to Israel, resulting in the withdrawal of Israeli troops and citizens from Sinai and ushering in the beginning of Arab acceptance of a peaceful resolution to the problem. In light of the recent successes of international efforts to reconcile regional conflicts, peace in this region of the world seems possible. With too few leaders of vision like Sadat, the conflict has been allowed to continue for too long. The Palestinian leaders' moves to open a dialogue between the United States government and the PLO indicates a historical maturity similar to Sadat's.

The possibility of peace would be a devastating blow to Christian eschatologists who prefer to see this conflict as God-inspired, leading eventually to Armageddon and the return of the Savior. Such kingdom watchers, whose motto might be, "Blessed be the warmongers, for they will hasten the kingdom of God," could hinder American attempts to bring a just and enduring solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I fear that many Latter-day Saints might be found among such a group.

The only theology I can relate to the conflict are the words of Christ in Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers"—who, sadly, are in the minority. The Israelis and Palestinians have been fighting for more than seventy years in one way or another, using every dark method of conventional warfare. To generalize about the situation after examining only a few separate incidents, as many Latter-day Saints do, does not show moral or political maturity. I would not be so troubled if Mormon attitudes were built on purely political considerations, though I might still question the morality of such considerations. I am used to being in the minority in my political views, even among my own family and Palestinian friends.

Some might claim that God somehow inspired the Zionist movement to bring the Jews to Palestine, an event prophesied by early Church leaders for the last days (see Young 1977, 121). Even if that assumption is correct, any survey of the historical events that followed concerning the Jews and Pales-

tinians, including the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, would only show how much unfortunate and demonic suffering the Jews have endured on one side and the Palestinians on the other. To imagine that the hand of God was behind such innocent suffering contradicts the basic tenets of Christianity. I find it difficult to believe that God has orchestrated the Jewish-Arab conflict during the last seventy years. It was political from the beginning and eventually will be settled politically. The land of Israel has been filled with so much hatred and so many atrocities from both sides that I do not feel comfortable calling it holy.

I might have been able to overlook this intermingling of politics and religion if I had not felt its damaging effect on the development and function of the Church in Israel. I do not wish to dispute the spiritual/inspirational authority of Church leaders who devote much of their attention to this land, but I feel that those leaders are influenced by general Mormon perceptions about Israel often gleaned from members who live in Israel or have some "expertise" about it. An increasing number of Palestinians have joined the Church abroad, and many have expressed to me their great resentment at this biased attitude of Church members, though most of their resentments are based on personal experiences outside Israel.

I have felt on many occasions that this one-sided attachment to the Jews in Israel indicates an ignorance of the internal structure of Israel itself. One Church member who has been a pioneer of the BYU Study Abroad program in Israel mentioned that she had lived many years in Israel before discovering the Palestinians and learning to understand them. The permanent directors of the BYU program in Israel were among the few who became aware of the need for interaction between Church members and the Palestinians and who showed genuine respect for the Palestinians. These good people took steps to initiate interaction between the Palestinians and BYU students. But the main problem remains beyond the reach of any BYU program.

I see little in the Church policies towards Israel to indicate a real consideration of the Palestinians. The Church's overzealous attachment to the Jews in Israel along with an oversimplified understanding of the situation in Israel have caused Church members to overlook the large population of Arab Christians in Israel who enjoy freedom of worship with no interference from the Jewish establishment. In addition, that same establishment has no legal or moral interest in interfering in the worship of a larger group of Christians and Moslems living in the occupied territories. Yet the Church has made no serious effort to share the gospel with this population or to build a strong relationship with them, in contrast to their many fruitless efforts with the Jews in Israel.

I found it ironic a few years ago when the Jerusalem branch had an open house for its newly renovated meeting place, "The Mormon House," that no Jewish friends attended. I am certain that Church members in Jerusalem invited many of them. At the same time, the few Palestinian friends from Bethlehem, whom the special representatives of the Church in Jerusalem have befriended, came. The friendships that members have made with the Jews have been political and businesslike, unlikely to lead to spiritual sharing. These

relationships have developed and thrived because of Church involvement with projects like the Orson Hyde Garden on the Mount of Olives and the BYU Jerusalem Center, which is itself an end-product of such relations.

For many years, planning for the Center proceeded smoothly because of close political connections between Israeli officials and Church members inside and outside Israel. Real opposition did not surface until construction of the building itself was in process during the summer of 1985, when ultra-orthodox Jews and some semi-fascist groups discovered the building and mobilized their members to protest. When they found that legally their actions came late, they tried to mobilize their political power through governmental intervention. After the initial shock from the unexpected attack on the Center, BYU officials and the Church organized to counteract the opposition with political action.

In May 1988 the Church won in the political arena, but not in the spiritual one. To continue using its BYU Center, the Church had to promise to limit its use. To ensure that the BYU Center not be used as a center for proselyting, a joint committee of BYU personnel and Israeli officials was formed to supervise any public events taking place at the Center. In addition, students attending the center must now sign an agreement committing to refrain from missionary work during their stay in Israel. This general and seemingly forward restriction has caused a kind of paranoia among the students and the local members, who fear that any uncautious statement or act might be interpreted as missionary work and thereby jeopardize the Center and the Church's relationship with the Israeli government. Consequently, the Center is becoming an "ivory tower," used mainly by young LDS American students with minimal interest in the lives of the peoples of the Middle East. They enjoy an intensive few months and a "spiritual trip" in the land they call "holy," with all the added tourist attractions.

During the past year, students have also been able to observe daily, from the elevated security of the Center's gardened terraces, their Palestinian neighbors across the street battling with stones against the Israeli soldiers. White clouds of tear gas often blur such views. These unfortunate events bring the students face to face with the realities of the conflict.

Thus, the Church's political victory has come at a cost. The Church and its friends are now indebted to the Israeli officials and Jewish personalities who helped them. The Center has become part of a political bargain; any wrong move could jeopardize its future.

In all the Church's activities and plans in Israel, I discern no real awareness of the special needs or potential of the Palestinian population. A few miles to the north and south of Jerusalem are two Arab cities with large populations of Christians and university campuses. For a small portion of the money invested in the grand Jerusalem Center, a project in either town for academic and social activities would have brought the Church close to the homes of hundreds of Christian families and would have given Mormon young people an opportunity for cultural, spiritual, and political experiences. Yet in light of metaphysical connections between politics and religious views, such a project could never have been conceived.

At one time the Church had several special representatives in Israel, older couples called on special missions to help local members and to develop friendships with Israelis. Because of the loving efforts of one of those couples, I am now a member of the Church. But these representatives have been withdrawn from Israel to ease any Jewish concern about missionary activity. In addition, two Palestinians who are not Israeli citizens have been denied permission for baptism. The first, from the Gaza Strip, was attending BYU at the time of the denial, in the fall of 1985. He later moved from Utah, and I lost contact with him. The other man lives in Bethlehem and has been in contact with Church members in Jerusalem since 1982. On his own, he has read and translated large portions of the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants into Arabic for his own study. In fall of 1988 he visited his brother in Honduras to search for work and while there received the formal missionary discussions. He intended to be baptized in Salt Lake City while visiting friends who had served as representatives of the Church in Jerusalem. His baptism was not authorized because he was returning to Bethlehem.

According to Brigham Young, the Jews "will be the last of all the seed of Abraham to have the privilege of receiving the New and Everlasting Covenant. You may hand out to them gold, you may feed and clothe them, but it is impossible to convert the Jews, until the Lord God Almighty does it" (1977, 121). I am afraid that Latter-day Saints have surrendered to the Jews more than material things by their irrational fascination with Israel and their distorted understanding of the meaning of "Chosen People."

Should the Church not pay equal attention to the other seed of Abraham, of whom there is no such gloomy prediction? My love and concern for this seed have prompted me to write these words. I hope that no one will accuse me of being anti-Jewish. I have no reason to dislike the Jews or to favor them as a nation. I believe that both feelings originate from the same notion of anti-Semitism that refuses to see the Jews as a normal nation. I live with them on a day-to-day basis, and I see them just as I see the Americans with whom I lived for three years or the British with whom I lived for two. We are all offspring of the same God; any perceptions of superiority or inferiority originate in the human mind, not in God's mind.

I feel great love and friendship for the Church members I have known in Israel, and I do not wish to criticize them. My own conversion would not have been possible without the love and support that I received from members of the Church in and outside Israel. What I wish to criticize are the attitudes towards Israel that have developed among Church members. The development of the Church in Israel has been greatly affected by the planning and construction of the BYU Center. Unfortunately, because its use is watched and restricted, the Church's future growth in Israel and among the Palestinians looks bleaker than before.

For the good of the kingdom of God on earth, I invite all Latter-day Saints to reconsider and re-evaluate their attitudes toward the peoples of this land. On numerous occasions, Spencer W. Kimball stressed the need to be ready so the Lord will open the necessary doors to build the Church and proclaim the

truth. Evidently we were never ready when it came to the Palestinian doors.

Throughout this article I have expressed the frustration and disappointment I feel every time I think of my past experiences or of the current status of the Church in Israel. It is these feelings that have prompted me to write this essay. Fortunately, recent developments in the international arena toward peaceful solutions to regional conflicts, including the Middle East, allow me to end this article on an optimistic note. The land on which the BYU Center is constructed is part of East Jerusalem, which consists of the old city and a number of Palestinian neighborhoods outside its walls. These areas were occupied after the Six Day War and later annexed by Israel, though most of its inhabitants refused to accept Israeli citizenship. The international community also refused to accept this unilateral Israeli action, considering it to contradict international law. According to Israeli law, the land was later confiscated from its Palestinian owners, who never recognized the Israeli action. Any future settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must offer a change in the status of East Jerusalem acceptable to both sides. Under these circumstances Israel could lose its sole control over the Center, and the Church might find a more friendly host in a future Palestinian entity. Recent progress by the Church in neighboring Jordan is heartening and indicates that the Church is open for all races and nationalities. Sincere reappraisal and consideration could result in a similar relationship with the Palestinians.

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