The State of the Gospel in the Land of the Bible

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A. Introduction

Today there is great interest in Israel and the Middle East. Much of this is due to the shaky and uncertain process of working towards peace between Israel and her Arab neighbours, especially the Palestinians. There is the added interest amongst Christians that the events occurring in that part of the world may be, or are, the outworking of prophecy and the signs that the return of Christ is near. It is proper for Christians to have these interests because, of all people, we should be those who seek peace. And we also should be interested in prophecy because it is part of God’s word that is to direct our faith and our living.

It is also important to consider the state of the gospel in the land of the Bible today. For peace without commitment to the gospel has, at best, benefits only for this life, but certainly none for that which is to come. Prophecy, without the gospel focus, leads only to speculation akin to fortune telling and does little to honour Christ as Saviour and King. So it is proper for us to focus our attention on the state of the gospel in the land of the Bible.

In considering this topic, we should ask, to what extent is God being honoured and Christ exalted? And what is the condition of the populace? For apart from commitment to Christ they go to an eternity of judgement. Love for God compels us to desire his honour throughout the world. Love for our neighbour stimulates us to be concerned about the eternal welfare of those around us, no less those who live in the land of the Bible.

In this article we want to consider the state of the gospel in the land of the Bible, especially among the Jewish people, but also among the
Palestinians, co-inhabitants of the land of the Bible.\(^1\) We do this so that we might dispel romantic and unbalanced views about the people who live there. We do this also so that we might support the gospel cause in that land – and do so more intelligently by our prayers, our gifts, possible visits, and the support of those seeking to spread the gospel in the land. Where our investigation reveals that which is positive we should rejoice. Where we find the gospel witness lacking or opposition to the Christian message we should be concerned. In either case we should be stimulated to look to the Lord to cause the word to have free course and be glorified in the salvation of sinners and the conforming of their lives to his pattern of behaviour as they serve the risen Lord Jesus.

B. The Land of the Bible

The area on which our attention is to focus is the land of the Bible, biblical Israel. Today this land is comprised of the modern state of Israel, along with the West Bank and Gaza.\(^2\) This is the land bounded by the Mediterranean Sea on the West and the Jordan River to the East, and stretching from Mount Hermon in the North at least to the 31\(^{st}\) parallel in the Negev, or as the modern state of Israel, to Eilat, on the Gulf of Aqaba. The land’s length is approximately 450 kms and is 135 kms at its widest point. The total area is approximately 34,000 sq. kms.\(^3\)

The Land of the Bible is often spoken of as “The Holy Land”. This is an unfortunate term because the land is no more holy than any other part of the world. This is true existentially in that exemplary godliness, piety and morality do not characterise the inhabitants. Nor is it true formally, in the sense that the land is now set apart by God for the special use of his people or for his work. It is true that this

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\(^1\) The focus on the Jewish population is due to the relatively ready access to data on Jewish Christianity and the difficulty of obtaining comparable data for Palestinian Christianity.

\(^2\) This does not include the land given to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half Manasseh on the east of the Jordan River (Num. 32:33).

\(^3\) This is just under half the area of Tasmania.

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was the land promised to God’s people in the past, but that is not the situation today. We are given direction with respect to the present status of the land when we consider the biblical view of its most celebrated feature, its capital Jerusalem. At one time this was the place where God made his name dwell.\footnote{1 Kings 9:3; Psalm 132:13.} It was towards this city that God’s people were to pray.\footnote{1 Kings 8:29-30.} But, as Jesus pointed out to the woman of Samaria, this was no longer to be the case.\footnote{John 4:19-24.} Rather, that special and holy status of Jerusalem was provisional, preliminary and temporary. The city was a representation of that which should now be the focus of attention for God’s people – the Jerusalem above where Christ dwells,\footnote{Hebrews 12:22-24.} and which is to descend to earth at the consummation.\footnote{Revelation 21:1-2.} So also the land, like Jerusalem, was also a temporary representation of the ultimate place of God’s kingdom rule – the new earth. The land of the Bible today is not the “Holy Land”.

Still this does not mean that the land is not of special interest to the Christian. God did things in this locality which he did nowhere else. God’s special and redemptive revelation of himself was in this land. Visiting this place of God’s special activity can be faith strengthening, for it gives a greater understanding of Scripture and its message when the locations and geographical features, familiar from Bible reference, are seen and experienced. The land is special - unique because of its connection with the story of the Bible. Hence much better to use the term “the Land of the Bible”.

There are other alternatives to the term “Holy Land”. But the use of the term “Israel” would, strictly speaking, not include the West Bank and Gaza, territories within the land of the Bible which were occupied by Israel in the Six-Day War of June 1967, yet never actually part of the modern state of Israel.\footnote{This statement is a general one and is not meant to be a judgement either for or against Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem after the Six-Day War.} The term “Palestine” is also inadequate. Technically this term might be applied to the whole
area of our concern. But it is more likely that the designation "Palestine" would direct our thinking primarily to the West Bank and Gaza, also designated the Territories, now partially under the control of the Palestinian Authority, who hope soon to declare the area an independent state.

My interest in the topic stems from having taken three trips to the area, the most recent being while on study leave in 1999. In the second half of that year I was able to spend four months in the land, the bulk of the time being in Jerusalem, where one cannot avoid the reality of religious expression and commitment. Now it is true that the situation in Jerusalem does not mirror that of the rest of the land. Because this city is considered holy by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, it has attracted those with particularly strong religious views, both as residents and as pilgrims. Nevertheless experiences in Jerusalem of that religiosity do serve to highlight certain features of the religious situation in the land as a whole. They give windows into the state of affairs and can reinforce certain realities, even if not all, that need to be reckoned with in evaluating the condition of religion in general and Christianity in particular in the land of the Bible today. It is in this way that personal experiences will be presented in this article.

C. The Religious Profile of the State of Israel.

In broad terms, the religious mix in Israel, as part occupant of the Land of the Bible, is presented by the following statistics. Even from these raw statistics we start to recognise the proportion of the gospel needy.

(ISraelWire-12/31) The Central Bureau of Statistics reports that Israel’s population on the eve of 2000 is 6.2 million, of which nearly 4.9 million are Jews and 1.3 million Moslems, Christians and Druze. Population growth this century is the highest ever recorded in the region’s history – from 600,000 to 9 million. The breakdown of Israel’s population is as follows: Jews – 4.9 million, Moslems 936,000; Christians – 131,000; Druze –
101,000; religion not registered – 152,000… These figures are based on a random survey conducted by the Central Bureau of Statistics for the new year.\(^{10}\)

Some comment is needed on the groups mentioned here. First the non-Jewish groups. Muslims conquered this area in the 7\(^{th}\) century and they are the forerunners of the present Muslim population in the state of Israel. Islam is the traditional, though not exclusive, religion of the Arabs. In the 1948 War of Independence many Arabs who inhabited the land, now granted to the Jews for a homeland by the United Nations, chose to stay and become citizens of the new fledgling state. The majority of this community is Muslim and constitutes 78% of the non-Jewish population.\(^ {11}\) They, along with the bulk of the Palestinian population, are Sunnites.\(^ {12}\)

To the Muslims, Jerusalem is a holy city and its north-eastern section is designated the Muslim Quarter.\(^ {13}\) It was the first city towards which Muhammad asked his followers to turn in prayer. Within the Old City, in the 35 acre\(^ {14}\) compound of Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary), known also as the Temple Mount,\(^ {15}\) is the famous Dome of the Rock. This Muslim shrine, built in the 7\(^{th}\) century by caliph Abd Al Malik Ibn Marwan, marks the spot from which Muhammad is believed to have ascended into heaven. At the southern end of the compound stands Al Aqsa, the third holiest mosque after those in Mecca and Medina.

\(^{10}\) Israel Wire, Friday, December 31, 1999.

\(^{11}\) Facts About Israel: Society (Jerusalem: Israel Information Center, 1991), p. 15

\(^{12}\) Approximately 90% of all Muslims world-wide in the 1980’s were Sunnites. The Sunnites were separated historically from the Shi’ites because they held that succession to the caliphate should be based on leadership qualities rather than heredity. Encyclopædia Britannica, 15\(^{th}\) ed., Micropædia (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1991), 11:397.

\(^{13}\) The Christian Quarter is to the north west, the Armenian Quarter the south west, and the Jewish Quarter, the south east.

\(^{14}\) The compound covers nearly 1/6th of the area of the Old City of Jerusalem.

\(^{15}\) Muslims deny that there is any hard evidence that either Solomon’s or Herod’s temples stood in this area.

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Five times each day the call to prayer echoes from the mosques across the roofs of the Old City. On Fridays, the Muslim day of prayer, streams of Muslims both from Israel and the West Bank make their way from the north through Damascus Gate, or from the east, via the Lion’s or St. Stephen’s Gate to Haram al-Sharif, many dressed in their “Friday best”. It has been estimated that, at the beginning and end of the holy month of Ramadan, up to 500,000 have packed onto Haram. Islam is a noticeable feature of the city of Jerusalem and the state of Israel. And we should not forget the heart condition of these Muslim men and women, boys and girls. They are some of those who, though living in the land of the Bible, need to be changed by the gospel that had its origin here.

The Druze are also singled out in the figures given above. The Druze are a small religious sect that has existed for about 1000 years. Their religious system, as far as it is known, consists of elements taken from Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, Neo-Platonic and Iranian thinking. The Druze are tight knit and do not accept converts from outside, nor allow intermarriage. Their religious system is kept secret even from many within their own number. One no doubt minor but noticeable peculiarity of the Druze is in the way the men dress. Those who dress traditionally are readily identifiable by their baggy black trousers with a sack between the legs. The sack is a provision for the possible safety of the Messiah, who, they believe, will one day be born, unexpectedly, of a man. A grotesque oddity or blasphemous curiosity, we might think, but it is also a reminder of the need for the gospel by this significant population in the land of the Bible.

D. Christians in the State of Israel

Traditionalism:

Of course our interest is naturally drawn to the number of the Christians in Israel. On the figures, given Christians make up only 2.2% of the population. Immediately the smallness of this figure should concern us. Obviously the spread of the gospel has been very

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16 Encyclopædia Britannica, 4:237.
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limited in its effect in Israel. Yet it is important to understand what is meant by the term "Christian" as used here. A booklet from the Israel Information Center explains the term thus:

Christians, 90 percent of whom are Arab, comprise the second largest minority group (after Muslims)....Although many denominations are represented, most community members are affiliated with either the Greek Catholic\(^\text{17}\) (42 percent), Greek Orthodox (32 percent) and Roman Catholic (16 percent) churches.\(^\text{18}\)

Of course the denominational breakdown might be more finely tuned. Among those in Israel, who take the designation "Christian" are Eastern rite churches in communion with Rome such as the Maronites,\(^\text{19}\) Syrian Catholic,\(^\text{20}\) Armenian Catholic,\(^\text{21}\) Coptic Catholic\(^\text{22}\) and Chaldean Catholic,\(^\text{23}\) and the monophysite\(^\text{24}\) churches such as the Syrian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Coptic Orthodox.\(^\text{25}\) It is true that the numbers of representatives in Israel of

\(^{17}\) The Greek Catholic church follows Eastern rites, but has been in communion with Rome since the mid-19th century. The term, Greek Catholic, is also used more widely to designate Catholic Melchites, Christians of Syria and Egypt who broke with Rome in 1054, but reunited in 1724.

\(^{18}\) Facts About Israel, p. 16.

\(^{19}\) This is an Eastern rite church, based in Lebanon, whose head, after the pope is the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East.

\(^{20}\) Historically this group stems from Syria, but their patriarch now resides in Beirut, Lebanon.

\(^{21}\) This church, whose patriarch resides in Beirut, is historically from Armenia, and has been in communion with Rome since the 18th century.

\(^{22}\) Copts are Egyptians. This church has been in communion with Rome since the mid-18th century.

\(^{23}\) This Eastern rite church, whose historical roots are in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, was originally Nestorian but united with Rome in the 16th century. Its patriarch resides in Baghdad, Iraq.

\(^{24}\) Monophysites are those who, not accepting the Chalcedonian formulation of 451 concerning the two natures of Christ, maintained that Christ has only one nature.

\(^{25}\) See "Population of the State of Israel 1995", at http://www.christsrex.org/www1/ofm/cic/CICchrist.html. While to us the differences between these denominations may appear subtle and confusing they are probably no more subtle nor confusing than the differences between the

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many of these groups are small. Yet their presence shows both the attraction of the land, and especially the city of Jerusalem, for the religious, and also the religious diversity which “Christianity” presents to the world of non-Christian Israeli society.\textsuperscript{26}

Sadly, for all the diversity, we would not expect to find the gospel presented by these churches. First, the connection of many of them with Rome points to this. As well their ritualistic observances, with images and icons, so publicly observable, are signs that the doctrines of grace are not central, if present at all, in these communions. To groups such as these belong the Christian “holy places” like the Church of the Annunciation (Nazareth), the Church of the Nativity (Bethlehem) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (Jerusalem), with all their externalism, tradition and superstition. Yet these sites, which attract multitudes of zealous pilgrims, are a hopeless charade as far as the gospel is concerned. In these sanctuaries trust is directed, superstitiously, to external objects, supposedly efficacious in the physical and spiritual welfare of the faithful.

For example, of the famous Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, Professor of New Testament at the École Biblique et Archéologique Française in Jerusalem, writes,

\begin{quote}
One expects the central shrine of Christendom to stand out in majestic isolation, but anonymous buildings cling to it like barnacles. One looks for numinous light, but it is dark and cramped. One hopes for peace, but the ear is assailed by a cacophony of warring chants. One desires holiness, only to counter a jealous possessiveness: the six groups of occupants – Latin Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, Syrians, Copts, Ethiopians – watch one another suspiciously for any
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\textsuperscript{26} Of course we should remember that the diversity apparent amongst the traditional churches of the Middle East is no more disunited and confusing than that amongst the Reformed and Presbyterian family of churches. Try explaining to a non-Christian, for example, the differences between the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Southern Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia.

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infringement of rights. The frailty of humanity is nowhere more apparent than here; it epitomizes the human condition. The empty who come to be filled will leave desolate.\textsuperscript{27}

This suspicious competition over rights and rites in the church is a shame to the name of Christ and Christianity. It is a bickering which, along with other characteristic behaviours of these traditional churches, is a hindrance to the gospel, not least of all among the Jewish people. Maoz observes:

Most people don't know how to differentiate between Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic or Protestant, evangelical or non-evangelical. Consequently when Israelis witness the shamefully bitter contests between historic churches over the control of gaudily-decorated holy sites and parade the relics, crucifixes and holy icons (so repugnant to the Jewish mind) they tend to attribute such behaviour to all who profess any kind of allegiance to Christ.\textsuperscript{28}

Last year, on a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre we could hear the cacophony of the warring liturgical chants as three Coptic priests held their service behind the sepulchre while the Greek Orthodox were worshipping in the main area in front of it. Regularly groups of pilgrims make their way through the streets along the Via Dolorosa, carrying large wooden crosses, singing as they push through the crowds, pausing to repeat prayers at the stations of the cross. But the height of superstitious futility can be seen inside the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Here lies a 2m x 1/2m slab of marble. Brass candle containers hang untidily above it. We watched as a woman, having splashed water on stone, was reverently soaking up the moisture with cloths. Others knelt to kiss


the stone or to rest their foreheads on it while they pray. Why? Because this is the Stone of Unction “commemorating the anointing of Jesus before burial.” Why the water? I suspect that, since it is believed that on this stone the body of Jesus lay, it is also thought that some miraculous efficacy is transferred by the water to the cloths and then, by this means, relayed to others. This also would explain the kissing of the stone and the prayer. The ironic futility of this situation is highlighted by the fact that “(t)he Stone of Unction…, commemorating the anointing of Jesus before burial (John 19:38-40), appeared first in the 12th century; the present one dates from 1810.”29 Jesus’ body never came near this revered slab of marble. Yet a deeper tragedy is recognised from the words of the Lord:

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (Jn. 4:23-24, NIV)

The sadness of this cultivation of superstition rather than the hope of the gospel was further illustrated for me by the following incident. The sepulchre memorial is a tall box-like structure built over the place where the tomb of Christ is believed to have been.30 It is located at the western end of the church. Not much is left of the original tomb since the rock was cut back by Emperor Constantine. Standing near this memorial, with many other visitors, we could see that something special was about to happen. A television camera and microphone boom appeared. Floodlights were turned on an approaching procession. Two large grey-uniformed guards, with red fezzes, carrying staffs, tops and ends of polished metal, led the way, striking the stone floor noisily as they approached. They stood in

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29 Murphy-O’Connor, The Holy Land, p. 52.
30 This is the archaeologically preferred site of the burial place of Jesus, though the Garden Tomb is the emotional favourite with Protestants, and, being in a well tended garden rather than a dark and often crowded church building, certainly is in a setting more conducive to contemplation of the original context of the Lord’s internment.

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front of the tomb. The thronging pilgrims and curious were kept at a respectful distance with some difficulty. Incense was brought from the main worship area and wafted in through the opening to the tomb area. Pilgrims pushed forward, held back by a guard and the frown of an Orthodox priest. A young mother, clutching a small girl in her arms was the first in the line of those who now sought to enter the tomb. Her face expressed anxiety and hope as she looked pleadingly at the guard of the opening. She crossed herself in the Eastern manner and entered. Soon she backed out of the small room, where candles are lit and prayers repeated. As she passed the guard she slipped something into his hand and moved off into the crowd. It was then that it became evident that the child of about four or five could not hold up her head. From what we saw we could only conclude that this mother had come to the sepulchre, bribed the guard for priority and prayed in this supposedly holy place hoping for a miracle of healing for her child. This was deeply saddening. It is these sorts of practices which illustrate the cruelty and futility of this superstitious and ritualistic religion which goes by the name of Christianity, but does not know the gospel. So it is evident that there is a great need for the gospel of free grace even among those who call themselves Christians, but trust in works righteousness and externalism.

Palestinian Christians in Israel

It is clear that not all of the 131,000 designated Christian by the Bureau of Statistics are “evangelical” believers. Rather the numbers in the non-traditional churches appears to be around 5,000.

The Protestant community is growing but remains small in comparison to the predominant Orthodox and Catholic churches.... The Anglican church (called the Arab Evangelical Episcopal Church) has 2,500 members. The church operates ten schools and two hospitals, in addition to a major church in Jerusalem and two smaller churches in other locations. Of the approximately 2,500 non-Anglican Protestants, half are Lutheran, a significant number belong to the Southern Baptist Convention, and the rest belong to various Protestant
confessions....

This means that the percentage of Palestinian believers in the population of Israel as a whole is less than 0.1% [i.e. 1/10th of 1%].

The Palestinian church is not without problems. For example, because of the efforts made by Muslims towards Islamization of the land, there is pressure on Palestinian Christians in general to migrate where possible. Though there was a “Christian” population of 30% in the land as a whole in 1930, by 1990 the proportion had dropped to 2.5%. On the other hand, it has been observed that the tendency to leave the country in search of a better life is less amongst the evangelical Christians.

It is extremely difficult to obtain information on the condition of the Palestinian church, both within Israel and in the Territories. This may be because of a hesitation to publish any statistics because of fear of persecution from Muslim extremists. This relationship between Jewish and Palestinian Christians, especially those within Israel, is discussed below and in this way some further insight into the condition of Israeli Palestinian believers can be seen. Nevertheless it is clear that this small group of believers in Israel need our prayers as they face alienation from the Jewish population, the ruling majority in Israel, the nation, in which they, as Palestinians, are often treated as second rate citizens, but also Islamic antagonism from certain sections of their fellow Palestinian Israelis.

Jewish Christians in Israel

Much more information is available for Jewish Christians in Israel than for Palestinian Israeli Christians, as will be reflected in the size

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of the following section. The number of Jewish-Christian believers in Israel is estimated at between 6,000 to 7,000, including spouses and children.\textsuperscript{34} These figures indicate clearly that the size of the believing Jewish church in Israel is very small, in fact approximately 0.1% [1/10\textsuperscript{th} of 1%] of the total population.\textsuperscript{35} Even if this is combined with the percentage of Palestinian believers in Israel, the total does not exceed 0.2%. The body of Christ in Israel is very small!

Few of us have access to information on the state of the Jewish-Christian church in Israel and so have difficulty in thinking or praying intelligently for our Jewish Christian brothers and sisters in that land. It is hoped that the following information will help make up in some way for this deficiency.

Jewish-Christians in Israel function as regular citizens of that 52 year-old state. Jewish Christians in Israel participate actively in the national life, not least of all in military service. Jewish-Christians do not have greater difficulty than others in finding employment, and can function, to a large extent, normally in the society, earning a livelihood and raising their families in security. There is freedom of religion in Israel and evangelism is not prohibited by law. On the other hand, the Jewish-Christians do meet with special difficulties and opposition. Those who adhere to Orthodox Judaism are a minority, but are very influential, not only socially but also politically. The Orthodox, in fact, oppose democracy and work for the time when all of Israeli life will be governed by rabbinic traditional law. While there is freedom of religion, the category of “Jewish-Christian” is not recognised officially, for Jews are not

\textsuperscript{34} Private correspondence from Baruch Maoz, Jewish Christian pastor of Grace and Truth Christian Assembly, Rishon Letzion, Israel.

\textsuperscript{35} It is true that there are non-Jewish Protestant Christian works in Israel. For example in Jerusalem there are the Anglicans, such as the somewhat charismatic Christ Church, the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, St. Andrews Church of Scotland, the Pentecostal King of Kings and the works of other denominations familiar to those in the West. Of course these congregations have a real witness. Yet these congregations often consist more of a shifting population of visitors and short term workers in the land than of a stable and growing group of Christian citizens of Israel. The Palestinian Christians in Israel will be considered below.

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supposed to believe in Jesus. Therefore “Israel has no obligation to preserve the religious liberties of a non-existent community.”

Jewish-Christians are open to attack, at times, from the aggressive minority. Congregational premises may be vandalised and congregational activities disturbed.

The active opposition of the Orthodox to the gospel was brought home when, as my wife and son were standing in a Christian bookshop just inside the Jaffa Gate of the Old City, a stone came hurtling in the door. The fear of similar attack is evidenced by the careful observation by the shop attendant, through the plate glass, of potential customers before entry is granted by use of the remote controlled door in the Bible Society store in Jaffa Road. Efforts are also made from time to time to pass legislation in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, to forbid or restrict evangelism. Though evangelism is allowed by law, local officials may use by-laws to make witnessing difficult, for instance using local litter laws to hinder the distribution of pamphlets.

Because the Gentile church has a very bad track record in the way it has related to Jewish people, Israelis are generally negative with respect to anything connected with the church and Christianity. Many Jews, especially the Orthodox, see Jewish-Christians as a threat to the very existence of the Jewish people as a distinct entity.

As a Jewish pastor explained, a response to attempts to evangelise can be, “You’re worse than the Nazis. They killed our bodies, but you are killing our souls. And, if we all become Christians, there will be no more Israel and no more promises of God for Israel.” If someone believes that you cannot be a follower of Jesus and a Jew, evangelism is seen as an instrument of destruction to Jewishness, and

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36 Maoz, “Trends”, p.71
37 On the other hand the ultra-Orthodox are also suspected of acts of vandalism against both Conservative and Reform synagogues in Israel (see the articles in The Jerusalem Report by David Horovitz, “Fire in Zion” (July 17, 2000, p. 4), and by Stuart Schoffman, “Wrong Neighbors, Wrong Jews”, (July 31, 2000, p. 48.)
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those who evangelise as destroyers of a culture and people. Furthermore the message of the gospel is a deep challenge to the Jewish people because “If Jesus is the Christ, then the rabbis were wrong to reject him and the whole course of Israel’s last 2,000 years are an awesome mistake.” 39 As Maoz notes further: “The Gospel threatens to disrupt just about every accepted norm which Jews hold dear. All this in the name of a religion that, in the mind of most Jews, has a dishonourable reputation.” 40

There are other factors that can lead to opposition to Jewish-Christians and the gospel in Israel. Jews in general recognise in their cultural psyche that they are a persecuted people and have been such for 2,000 years. Jewish community spirit is a strong force in dealing with this, and in facing the reality of attack against Israel, evidence for which appears almost daily in the news media. Jewish-Christians and their gospel can be seen as a real threat to this community unit. When the whole world is divided into “them” and “us”, Jewish-Christians can be readily seen as those who have forsaken “us” and joined “them”. Among the orthodox someone converting to Christianity still may be treated as having died, family and community ties being severed. This ostracism and exclusion from the community, when it occurs, is a heavy burden for the Jewish-Christian in Israel.

Jewish Christians meet in the following groupings. Among Hebrew speakers there are 55 groups that describe themselves as congregations, and 53 that describe themselves as house fellowships (proto-churches). There are 23 groups among the Russian speakers and 7 among the Amharic speakers. The trend with respect to the spread of the gospel amongst the Jewish people is described as slow but steady growth as a result of the growing number of believers in the country.

Yet the Jewish-Christian church has real and pressing needs from within. The Jewish-Christian church in Israel is very young, and

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40 Maoz, “Trends”, p. 75.
suffers from the lack of years of experience. The leadership in the church lacks in theological training, and this in itself leads to significant problems. There is a commitment to evangelical Protestant doctrine, but this is not well thought through nor its grounds strongly laid in Scriptural understanding. In Christology, all believe that Jesus is the Messiah spoken of in the Hebrew Scriptures. But the doctrine of the two natures is not always held, so that some have an Ebionite understanding of Christ’s natures, with Christ lesser than the Father, though in some sense divine. Others hold to a form of Arianism, where Christ is not seen as “very God of very God.” There is generally commitment to Trinitarianism, though this is not without difficulty for some.

With respect to the doctrines of sin and salvation, amongst Jewish-Christians in Israel there is generally belief in the fall, though sadly this is more in Arminian or Pelagian terms. “There is little consideration of the corruption of man’s nature by sin and of his bondage to sin.” Therefore “Regeneration strengthens man’s will toward the good and toward God, but it cannot affect man’s nature as to ensure that he will not eventually fall away.”

Salvation is undervalued in its God-ward aspect and “Jesus is portrayed as the Great Satisfier whose main purpose is to make men and women happy, at peace with themselves and the world.”

Jewish-Christians have a heart-felt commitment to the Bible as God’s written word. Theoretically it is seen as the authoritative rule of faith and life. Yet this does not necessarily affect life as it should. The Bible is not read or studied systematically, and texts are quoted out of context. Preaching also is not systematic exposition of Scripture, nor doctrinal in content. The worship and church life usually reflect charismatic thought and emphases.

Congregations tend to gather around a strong leader, more often in that position because of initiative rather than from perceived biblical qualifications. Cooperation between churches is based on how well

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41 Maoz, “Paradigms”, p. 11.
42 Maoz, “Paradigms”, p. 11.
leaders get on with each other rather than on confessional agreement. Church membership is based on attendance, so that if a person attends often enough he or she is eventually counted as a member. Baptism, except in the three Lutheran related congregations, is by immersion of those professing faith. Communion is usually celebrated once a month and that without hedging of the table. Church discipline is minimal, and a person disciplined in one fellowship may readily be accepted into another.

Sadly, though perhaps not unexpectedly, given the history of relations between the Gentile church and Jews in general, connection of the Jewish-Christian church in Israel with the wider church is weak.

Theologically, all Messianic Jews recognize that they belong to the Body of Christ universal and that their fate is intimately bound up with it. But there is among Israeli Jewish Christians an almost total rejection of its history, of its denominations and of its creeds, even as merely formal documents which have secondary authority.\footnote{Maoz, “Paradigms”, p. 20.}

While Jewish-Christians are quite willing to witness to their faith to those around them, the vision for the world wide triumph of the gospel is limited. As Maoz says,

The Israeli Jewish Christian church is insular and introspective. Its imagination has not yet been fired by the greater scope of Messiah’s kingdom. It is probably also impacted to no small extent by the chiliastic assumptions which inform it and which place Israel at the center of world events and in which other nations fade into insignificance. Taken up with the problems of its own existence, the challenges of internal growth and the need to develop local gifts, the church has not yet taken note of the many fields, white and ready for the harvest.\footnote{Maoz, “Paradigms”, p. 21.}

\textit{Vox Reformata}, 2000
So many flaws and weaknesses in the Jewish-Christian church in Israel can be identified, and should neither be overlooked nor minimised. Yet there are also positive and encouraging aspects to the life of the church in Israel. So the slow but steady emergence of an Israeli Jewish church, orthodox in doctrine yet sufficiently at one with the people so as to effectively address them, is a promising development. The church’s growing visibility and its increasingly more faithful practice of the Gospel are according its message a credibility in Israeli Jewish eyes which it has not enjoyed for almost a century.\(^{45}\)

So we may thank God for the reality of a Jewish-Christian church in Israel today. Yet we must not forget that Jewish-Christians in Israel, as brothers and sisters in Christ, need our prayers as they deal with the ongoing external and internal challenges to their life in Christ.

\textit{Judaism in Israel}

The largest religious grouping in Israel is Jewish, who, like all people, we should not forget, need to hear the gospel and submit themselves to its claims. Judaism in Israel, as elsewhere, is not uniform in belief and practice, and it can be difficult to get a grip on the grouping and diversities within Judaism in Israel. \textit{"(T)he Jewish outlook of the State is actualized by support of Torah culture,"
} it was stated in a recent High Court of Justice Ruling, \textit{"but not necessarily Torah culture of a uniform style. Torah culture consists of shades and shades of shades."}\(^{46}\) The main groupings are Orthodox, Conservative (Mesorati) and Reform or Progressive. Only about 20\% of Jewish Israelis are Orthodox.\(^{47}\) The Orthodox are those who believe that the Torah came from heaven and is unchanging. They prefer to designate

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{45}{Maoz, \textit{“Trends"}, p. 73.}
\footnotetext{46}{\textit{“The Masorti Movement Wins in The High Court"}, 29/09/00, http://www.masorati.org/winhcrt.html.}
\footnotetext{47}{Maoz, \textit{“Trends"}, p. 72.}
\end{footnotes}
themselves as haredim.\textsuperscript{48} They adhere strictly to rabbinic directives, though even within Orthodoxy itself there is not uniformity as these directives and the application of the Torah is understood differently. “There is much internecine feuding...among the Orthodox and there is nothing like any official world organization for Orthodox Judaism.”\textsuperscript{49}

The effects of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century enlightenment led to divergence from strict Orthodoxy. Conservative Judaism “advocates adherence to the halakha (Jewish religious law), while encouraging its adaptation to the exigencies of modern life.”\textsuperscript{50} Reform Judaism is to the left of centre, emphasising “the ethical aspects of Judaism and the right of individuals to choose their own religious way from among the precepts of the halakha.”\textsuperscript{51} Within Judaism there is also Reconstructionism which sees Judaism as more than a religion in the narrow sense but as a religious civilisation. Within this group there is a naturalistic understanding of God, not so much as personal as being the power that enriches Jewish life and culture. In fact one does not have to believe in God to be counted a Jew in Israel. A Jewish pastor in Jerusalem estimated that around 40\% of Jews in Israel are atheists.\textsuperscript{52} Yet, as far as many of the Jewish people of different persuasions are concerned, as a Jew you may be an atheist, or believe that Rabbi Schneerson, leader of the Lubavitch or Chabad movement and now dead, was the Messiah, but you may not be a Christian. Even though you claim to be a monotheist, believe that the Torah is the word of God, and seek to live a moral life, if you believe that Jesus is the Messiah you cannot be Jewish.

Yet our thought about Judaism in Israel is often not generated by the facts and figures but by the images of men with fur covered hats and

\textsuperscript{48} From the Hebrew of Isaiah 66:5 “those who tremble (\(\eta\alpha\xi/\rho\varepsilon\delta/\mu\)) at [the LORD’s] word.”
\textsuperscript{50} Facts About Israel, p.12.
\textsuperscript{51} Facts About Israel, p.12.
\textsuperscript{52} Official numbers for those identifying themselves with the different strands within Judaism are not readily available.
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prayer shawls which adorn both tourist brochures and Christian-roots literature. With such images it is easy for us to have a somewhat romantic view of modern Judaism in Israel, as if Jews are “almost Christians”. We can forget the spiritual reality that these images represent. This reality was brought home to me sitting at the plaza opposite the Western Wall, the so-called Wailing Wall, on a Friday evening. The shadow of the buildings of the Jewish quarter had lengthened over the plaza. The sun was setting and the Sabbath was about to begin. In front of us was the world’s only open air synagogue, divided into two, the men in the larger northern section, the women to the south, and somewhat more distant from where the Holy of Holies is believed to have stood, now covered by the Islamic memorial, the familiar golden Dome of the Rock. The men’s area was busy with the different shades of Jewish observance and dress – fur hats and light coats, large black hats and dark suits, but no ties, colourful skull caps, prayer shawls, some phylacteries bound to arms. The worshippers swayed and rocked near the wall as they read from black prayer books.

Suddenly the sound of chanting, not from the wall, flowed into the area from the south, swelling and ebbing as it echoed from the sandstone walls. Soon young men in numbers appeared at the southern entrance to the plaza. They formed up in a rough block eight to ten members wide, arms around each other’s shoulders, five or six rows. Together they shuffled across the plaza towards the Wall, chanting enthusiastically as they moved down towards and then amongst the worshippers. Girls followed and then moved off towards the women’s area. Looking at their faces we could see that these young people were teenagers or in their early twenties - happy, enthusiastic and zealous for their weekly celebration of the Sabbath. The girls were fresh-faced, well dressed in crisp, clean and modest clothing, carrying their black prayer books. Here were young people anyone would be proud to have in their youth group – decent, faithfully religious, keen. Yet viewing them the tragic reality struck home. These young people were lost.

53 The Hebrew designation “Kotel” is often used.
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Of course the tendency for the tourist is to see the practices at the Wall as merely an interesting cultural expression of no great significance. Too easily the unthinking Christian can evaluate such a scene the same way. But this expression of youthful religious zeal, as these Jewish young people made their way from synagogue to the Wall, was not merely a cultural expression. Nor is the on-going prayer at the Wall by those of all ages. These are religious expressions, and that of a religion apart from Christ, of a religion opposed to Christ and the gospel. It is scenes like these, which show the contemporary application to Paul’s words:

Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.\(^ {54} \)

This is the attitude, and the reality on which it is based, which ought to be conjured up by such a scene. The Jewish people of Israel need to be saved, and that by the only means provided, by faith in their crucified, risen and reigning Messiah, Jesus Christ.

It is also true that many amongst the Jewish population are ignorant of the gospel. This was brought home during one of a number of much-needed visits to a physiotherapist. As this skull-cap wearing Israeli practitioner worked on the bad back, a little nervously I asked what he thought of Christ and Christianity. “I really should know more I suppose. It’s really enforced ignorance,” he replied. And, at another consultation he quite gratefully took a gift of a Hebrew New Testament. Later a Russian/Jewish office girl, with whom we had made friends, willingly accepted a gift of a Russian-Hebrew New Testament. Hence it is evident that, as in our own society, it can also be ignorance, not just antipathy, that is a significant factor in the lack of acceptance of the gospel by Jewish people.

\(^ {54} \) Romans 10:1-3.

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E. Gentile-Christian Attitudes Towards Jewish Evangelism

Since the Jewish people need the gospel, what are gentile Christian attitudes with respect to the work of evangelism of the Jewish people, including those in Israel? Attitudes differ. There is a liberal view that sees Jewish evangelism as unacceptable. Sincerity is valued as being sufficient for salvation. Such people agree with Prince Charles in his belief that the monarch should be The Defender of Faith rather than The Defender of the (ie. Christian) Faith. The Jewish people are seen as having their faith and their covenant, given by God through Moses. The gentiles have their faith and their covenant, given by God through Jesus. The covenant with the Jewish people is sufficient for them. They do not need to be evangelised. In addition the shame of the Holocaust, as the pinnacle of those acts of persecution perpetrated on the Jewish people by “Christians”, supports this commitment to the non-disturbance of Jewish religious sensibilities. This theory “is finding increasing acceptance among evangelicals...” In addition there can be so much stress by some on the Jewish roots of Christianity that the eternal lostness of those outside of Christ, including the non-Christian Jew, is minimised, or ignored. Yet as others have pointed out, and as we should never forget, the greatest act of anti-Semitism is to refrain from presenting the gospel to Jewish people. Their present life may be less disturbed, but the eternal consequences can never be compensated for by the relative psychological comfort of an undisturbed belief system.

There are those who believe, rightly, that the Jewish people are to be evangelised like any other group of people. In the Middle East though, this can be linked with an underlying antagonism to the Israeli by those who work amongst Arabs and are sympathetic with their plight. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the extremely complex Israeli/Arab interactions, care must be taken not to allow this to hinder a genuine love for the lost Israeli and a desire for his or her salvation. From the opposite angle there are others, believing that the Jewish people have an ongoing place in the purposes of God.

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55 The bulk of the material for this section depends on Maoz, “Trends”.
56 Moaz, “Trends”, p. 76.

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Such people are strongly pro-Zionist and see the events of the modern Middle East as being the outworking of prophecy and indicators of the proximity of Jesus’ return. And at times such a focus can be placed on interpreting “the signs of the times” that evangelism takes a second place.

Outside of Jesus Christ, Jewish people are lost people. There is no other way to be right with God than through faith in Jesus the Messiah. Therefore it is only an extremely small minority of Jewish people in Israel who are right with God. Generally, as the body of Christ in that land, they are immature. They have needs in areas of leadership and sound instruction. They have needs with respect to personal growth in grace and in church life. Their witness to their community is genuine, developing, but severely limited. In their witness the Jewish-Christians of Israel face unique and daunting difficulties. There is the historical reputation of the church with which they are now linked, a reputation of a stance that is seen as consistently anti-Jewish. There is the present behaviour of those, in the traditional and ritualistic communions, who carry the label “Christian” but present a public face that is abhorrent to Jewish sensibilities. There is the belief that one cannot be a believer in Jesus and remain Jewish, that by becoming a Christian one ceases to be Jewish and thus threatens the continuation of the Jewish people and assists in the advance of practical genocide. The secular Israeli Jew needs our prayers, as does the religious. But above all that .01% of the Israeli population who are our Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters, who are, to a large extent, the face of Jesus Christ to that young modern nation, need our prayerful support.

F. The State of the Gospel Amongst the Palestinians

Some comment on the state of the gospel amongst the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza is necessary as they also live in the land of the Bible. Though Jewish-Christians were not present in the land from the fourth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, Palestinian Christians often claim to have an unbroken presence in the land from the time of the apostles, though this claim is not undisputed. The
figures from a survey conducted by Bethlehem University in 1989/1990\textsuperscript{57} show that at that time the Palestinian population was somewhat more than 1.8 million. Of this, those designated Christian numbered 50,352, i.e. approximately 2.7\%. More than 97\% of the population was Muslim. The Palestinian Christian religious mixture mirrors that of the variations in the Israeli Christian population. The groupings listed in the survey were Greek Orthodox, Latins (Roman Catholic), Greek Catholic, Protestants, Syriac Orthodox, Armenians, Copts, Maronites and Ethiopians. As noted previously, we would not expect the gospel to be prominent, if at all present, among the non-Protestant denominations. With the number of Protestants being recorded as 2,443, at the most the percentage of evangelical Christians in the Palestinian population was no more than 0.14\% of the Palestinian population.\textsuperscript{58} A Palestinian Christian pastor has recently estimated that the present Protestant and evangelical population is still no greater.\textsuperscript{59} It is true that there is a Palestinian interdenominational Bible school, Bethlehem Bible College, which started in 1979. This evangelically oriented institution seeks to prepare local leaders for Christian service in the Middle East. Yet this does not overcome the fact that, in percentage terms, the gospel profile amongst the Palestinians in the Territories is even smaller than that amongst Israelis.

Of course the Palestinian Christian population here has suffered from the same difficulties as the Palestinian Christians in Israel. The pressure of Islamization is even stronger and so also the attractiveness of migration. Not surprisingly relationships between Christians and Muslims in the Palestinian community are often poor. This has a negative effect on the witness of the church. As one newsletter commenting on the situation states:

\textsuperscript{57} The figures from Bernard Sabella, \textit{Socio-Economic Characteristics and Challenges to Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land}, were supplied without the full reference details.
\textsuperscript{58} Firm statistics can be difficult to obtain because fear of Islamic persecution engenders caution in publishing such.
\textsuperscript{59} From private correspondence with Dr. Salim J. Munayer. With the Palestinian population at around 3,000,000 the percentage is almost certainly smaller now than in 1989/90.
There is deep resentment between Palestinian Christians and Muslims, more noticeable among the traditional Christians. This goes so far that there is little to no trust between them and evident hostility. This has greatly impacted the witness of the local church, which means that there is minimal witness by a few born again Palestinian believers.\(^6^0\)

Also it can be observed that Muslim clerics are not passive in the face of Christian presence. Pamphlets are available on the streets of Jerusalem, proclaiming the superiority of Islam, and include “testimonies” by those who, having come from a Christian background, have converted to Islam. In a situation like this the harm that liberal Christian scholarship has done to the cause of Christ can be seen, as the words of such scholars are quoted to discredit the truthfulness of Scripture and so can be used as evidence of the folly of being a follower of Jesus. Also, while it can be said, “There is openness amongst the Muslim People to discuss matters of faith”, it has to be added that “It is still a great risk to convert from Islam to Christianity.”\(^6^1\)

Western Christians often look with uncritical favour on Israel. Palestinian Christians, including evangelicals, have experienced the reality of Israel as an occupying force in their country. A pastor’s wife recounted how her son, without her or her husband’s knowledge, had been taken by the Israeli forces, held overnight and beaten, for little or no good cause. With some autonomy for Palestinians under the Palestinian Authority, she could say gratefully, “Now mothers can sleep at night.” The pastor could tell of how young people being driven home after youth group would be stopped by soldiers and made to clean up graffiti for which they were not responsible from. Curfews for days have made life extremely difficult. It is little wonder that the pastor’s son spoke positively of Yasser Arafat and what he had achieved for the Palestinians. Another

\(^6^1\) “The Palestinians”, Window Ministries.
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pastor spoke of his disappointment when visiting the US at the many sermons he heard on prophecy and yet none on justice. For he could speak of the injustice which he believed Palestinians had suffered under Israeli occupation as he recounted how a Palestinian he knew had had his land taken illegally and yet could find no one to return it to him. This situation of the Palestinian Christian can easily be overlooked, minimised or just not known by Western Christians. Thus our Palestinian brothers and sisters can and do suffer from lack of sympathy from the wider body of Christ.

So the difficulties of our beleaguered Palestinian brothers and sisters in the West Bank and Gaza should not be forgotten as they struggle to maintain a witness for Jesus Christ in a doubly hostile world, the world of Islam and the world of military occupation.

G. Jewish and Palestinian Christians

What can be said of the relationship between believers across the Jewish/Palestinian divide? Some evaluate the relationship between Palestinian and Jewish Christians in generally positive terms:

Arab and Jewish evangelical Christians in Israel have largely managed to avoid being caught up in the whirlwind of hatred, anger and retaliation which is sweeping the Middle East....(T)he determined goodwill of both Jews and Arabs in Christ has so far superseded their personal and national interests, allowing the light of the gospel to shine in a very dark place.62

Such goodwill was illustrated by a meeting held at Bethlehem Bible College, in 1994. The Bible College, with its Palestinian Christian character, was to be the venue for a meeting, organised by Westminster Theological Seminary, between Palestinian Christians associated with the Bible College and members of a Jewish Christian Assembly. It was an interesting gathering, cross culturally. The common language was English. After a speaker delivered a sentence

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or two, it was translated first into Hebrew, then into Russian, as many from the Jewish participants were not competent in Hebrew, and finally into Arabic. The spirit was cordial, though having something of the nervousness of a gathering of strangers. At the end of the meeting a meal was shared. Photographs of different groupings of participants were taken.

But the most powerful statement of Christian unity came when the Jewish pastor said to his Palestinian brothers and sisters, "In Jesus Christ the middle wall of partition is broken down." Words of familiarity took on a greater significance. There were many reasons, both ethnic and political, why there should be a wall between these groups. Those of both broader communities had suffered at the hands of the other in the conflicts of the past 50 years. Yet the reality was that they were one in Christ – and they acknowledged this together. Here was a concrete expression of a positive relationship between Jewish and Palestinian brothers and sisters in Christ.

On the other hand some are more nuanced in their evaluation of the Jewish and Palestinian Christian relationships. Lisa Loden, an Israeli Jewish Christian, is helpful in her view of that relationship. She notes that the relationship between Jewish Christians and Palestinian Christians differs depending on where the Palestinian Christians live. The relationship with Palestinian Christians within Israel has been much more positive than that with the Palestinian Christians in the West Bank and Gaza. Up until the intifada, commencing in December, 1987, Jewish Christians were invited to preach in Arab Christian congregations in Israel. Also since the mid-1970's a small group of women, from both communities have met monthly for prayer. Numbers have averaged around 40 and have been known to have reached 60. The men, observing the actions of their women folk, followed their example, and there has been a degree of cooperation between Jewish and Palestinian evangelical Christians, notably in the north of the country. Contacts have also been made

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between the two groups through student Christian organisations at University, evangelism campaigns and the work of YWAM. "Contacts between Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians living within Israel is that of fellowship between believers and co-operation in ministry and is based in the commonality of their faith in Jesus." Yet Loden goes on to note, sadly: "Divisive issues are generally avoided. When, as in (one case)..., politicization did occur, the result was to cut off the relationships and not to deal with the issues."  

This last statement is an indication that all is not smooth sailing, even for the Christians within the borders of Israel proper, in the tense and volatile context of Israeli/Palestinian politics. The intifada strained relationships between Jewish and Palestinian Christians, as nationalistic ideals developed on both sides. So, while there are positives to be recognised in the relationship between the Jewish and Palestinian Christians in Israel, it is evident that there is need, in increasingly difficult circumstances, for ongoing development of Christian life in the wider body of Christ.

If there have been tensions between Jewish Christians and Palestinian Christians within Israel itself, it is not surprising that, especially since the intifada of 1987, any close and open contact between Jewish Christians and Palestinian Christians of the West Bank and Gaza has been very limited. Even positive contacts between Palestinian Christians from Jerusalem and others from the West Bank were halted by the intifada. Nevertheless efforts have been made to bridge the Jewish-Christian West Bank Palestinian Christian divide. Musalaha is a ministry led by Salim Munayer, a teacher at Bethlehem Bible College. This ministry encourages reconciliation between Jewish and Palestinian Christians by means of tours, camping trips and seminars on such subjects as peace, conflict resolution, and aspects of Palestinian and Jewish culture and mentality. There is also the House of Prayer on the Mount of Olives where, amongst other things, Jewish and Arab Christians meet for prayer and intercession. Bethlehem Bible College, while

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64 Loden, "Believers".
65 Musalaha is the Arabic word for "reconciliation".
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predominantly Arab in its personnel, includes a Jewish-Christian teacher on its staff. The Arab Evangelical Alliance sponsors a conference which Jewish Christians have attended. So there are positives, yet still a long way to go in developing Jewish Christian and Palestinian Christian fellowship and cooperation.

Loden sums up the state of the relationship between Palestinian and Jewish Christians:

Some of the things that have been achieved by the contacts between the two communities are: an accelerated willingness to build relationship, a growing acceptance of the differences and tensions involved, a commitment to mutual pain bearing, knowledge of one another's concerns that is translated into prayer, a recognition of the spiritual viability of the other's community, and the possibility of impacting the secular community by a demonstration of the peace that is possible in the Messiah.

Still lacking in the relationships between Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians is the ability to discuss difficult issues and to be freely challenged in their respective theological positions. Questions of eschatology, land and promise, justice and peace need to be addressed in a non-threatening atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. Beyond fellowship and discussion of differences is a longing for joint worship.

It is clear then, that these brothers and sisters in the land of the Bible, in their relationships with one another, need our prayers and support.

H. Conclusion

We commenced our discussion with the question, to what extent is God being honoured and Christ exalted? After an examination of the evidence available we have to conclude: very little. In the land of the Bible the cause of Jesus Christ is not only ignored but is strongly opposed both from the Jewish and the Islamic sides. There are many
that bear the name of Christ who, by their behaviour in his name, not only shame him but obscure the true gospel of grace. Those who truly know the gospel are extremely few in number and have great needs. Not only is there the opposition from without, but also weakness within. The evidence from the Jewish Christian church makes this clear for that group of believers. There is little reason to believe that the situation is any better amongst Palestinian believers. Furthermore, the relationship between brothers and sisters in Christ across the ethnic divide, while showing positive signs, suffers under many pressures of the wider political situation.

It is true that there is a genuine Christian witness from the small group of believers. There are those who are being turned to Christ. Yet the task is so great and those available for it are so few, and they are under such weighty disadvantages. There is much cause for lifting up in prayer our Christian brothers and sisters of the land of the Bible.

And what is the condition of the populace? There is much evidence of religion and religiosity in the land of the Bible today. This is true of the Islamic, Jewish and traditional Christian communities, even though the reality of nominalism in all these faiths should be recognised. But it has never been religion that saves, only and commitment to the Christ of the gospel can bring salvation. And for this there is little evidence. For all the religious image of the land of the Bible today, the bulk of the population, Jew and Palestinian alike, are lost, heading swiftly for a Christless eternity.

How then should we view this situation? Hopefully it will no longer be with the romantic vision of the tourist guide. We cannot but be grieved by the fact that, in this land where the great deeds of God in Jesus Christ have made the gospel a reality, this very gospel is superstitiously perverted, vehemently opposed, or sadly not known nor understood. In this God is insulted and the name of his beloved and exalted Son is dragged in the mud. In this land where the Pentecost thousands submitted in faith and repentance to the gospel of the recently crucified and glorified Jesus, now multitudes, to be
counted in their millions, are lost, ignorant of the power of this gospel. Let us pray and work “that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured” today in the land of the Bible.