



A BRIEF SUMMARY OF BAPTIST HISTORY IN THE HOLY LAND: 1911-2011

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Arab Christianity dates from the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11). Ever since that time there have been Arab believers in Jesus Christ. Their early history is remarkable. Arab Christians took very seriously the Great Commission and took the gospel throughout the Middle East, so that throughout the two thousand years since then there have been large Christian Arab communities, especially beyond the borders of the ancient Byzantine Empire. Indeed, recent scholarship indicates that the Church of the Arabs was once as sizeable as the Greek and Latin Churches of ancient Christianity, for example having some 200 bishops in Iraq alone prior to the Muslim Conquest.

Islam began to spread among the Arabs from around 600 C.E. with Jerusalem falling into Muslim control in the year 632. Christian Arabs nevertheless continued faithfully to maintain their witness despite living as a “Dhimmy community” under almost continuous Moslem rule since that time. The Islamic treatment of Christians (and Jews) varied over the centuries from some degree of tolerance to violent opposition and forced conversions. However, Christians were always been treated as second class citizens and were required to pay a special tax. Despite this, Christian scholars made a significant contribution to the golden era of Arab civilization. Christians were sometimes appointed to government positions because of their moral seriousness and dependability, and Christian scholars were prominent in the areas of science, medicine and poetry.

Between 1095 and 1291 Muslim control of the Holy Land was interrupted by the ‘Christian’ rule of the Crusaders. However, the Crusaders were Latin Christians opposed to the independence from Rome of both Greek and Arab churches. This produced hostility towards the Arab churches sometimes as great as the violent anti-Christian phases of Islamic rule. Despite this, the Arab

Christians were treated as collaborators with the enemy when Muslim forces finally defeated the Crusaders. Most churches in the Holy Land were then destroyed, their congregations being driven out of the land for many years afterwards. It was some time before the Christian Arabs felt safe to go back from the Lebanon Mountains and the Jordan desert back to the Holy Land.

Muslim rule in the Middle East underwent its own internal strife. One result of that was the emergence of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, displacing the older dominance of Egyptian rulers. From 1517 until 1917 Palestine was governed as a Turkish domain for some four hundred years. Turkish rule at times was harsh, but between periods of strife, allowed local Moslems, Christians and Jews of the Holy Land to live alongside each other in relative peace. During this time, Arab Christianity remained strong in the Holy Land and maintained its distinctive witness to the Christian faith.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the western crisis in Christianity that resulted in the European Reformation, but it was a movement that did not significantly impact the Orthodox and other Arab churches of the Middle East. However, in 1820 Protestant missionaries arrived in Lebanon and then went on to Jerusalem. The Presbyterians were the first, and were pioneers in Christian education and translating the Bible into Arabic. A generation later, Anglican workers arrived to establish their own church structures in the Holy Land.

Baptist work can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century, to the city of Safed in northern Galilee. Today Safed is a center of Jewish religion and culture, famous as the world capital of the Kabbalah movement. In biblical times it may well have been the 'city set upon a Hill' mentioned in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. A hundred years ago it was a mainly Muslim Arab community, with a small Christian element including a Scottish Presbyterian Church and school. Shukri Mosa, a young Arab man, was intrigued by the contrast between the gospel message and the apparent failure of Ottoman rule, which had become known as 'The Sick Man of Europe'. Mosa experienced for himself the practical effects of Ottoman decline in the increasing cruelty of its local rulers towards the Arab population, combined with their inability to prevent poverty, disease and a sense of despair about the future. During this period, many Christian Arabs from Syria, Lebanon and Palestine began to immigrate to Egypt first and then to the Americas.

In 1909, Mosa decided to leave Palestine himself to explore the possibility of a new life in the United States of America. He settled upon Texas as his new home, where he would travel from one farm to another, selling souvenirs from the Holy Land. One day, he visited a man called Rev. Dr. Lee Scarborough, one of the best known Baptist scholars of the era. Mosa was converted through this man of God and was baptized in 1910 by the famous Southern Baptist minister George W. Truett, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas – said to be the biggest evangelical or Baptist church in the world at the time.

Only one year later in 1911, Mosa was sent back to Palestine with the support of Illinois Baptists as a missionary to his community in Safad. God blessed his work with an early convert. On May 10th, 1911, he baptized Louis Hanna in the stream known as Wadi Al Laymun, which flows from Safad to the Jordan River. Later that year, Mosa moved to Nazareth. Nazareth proved more responsive than the people of Safad and he was able to found the first Baptist church in Palestine.

In 1917, the Ottoman Empire came to an end and was replaced in Palestine by the British Mandate, which made the situation easier for the Arab Christians. Then, in 1922, the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention adopted the Baptist work that had already begun in Palestine and Lebanon (a part then of Syria), founding their 'Near East Mission'. This included already established Baptist churches in Nazareth, Beirut (founded in 1895), Rashia and Kufur Mishki (founded in 1899). In Palestine the first American missionaries were J. Wash Watts and F.B. Pearsons, who arrived in 1923 to find the work already well established by nationals like Mosa. In 1924, a generous gift was received from Mr. and Mrs. Bottoms of Texicana, on the border of Texas and Arkansas. This enabled the Baptists to buy a small parcel of land near Mary's well in Nazareth, on which was opened in 1926 the first Baptist church building in Nazareth.

Mosa was regarded as an able preacher and a charismatic leader. His ministry in Nazareth gained respect and success after facing initial mockery and contempt. Sadly, he died in 1928 while still a young man, an event that traumatized the church he had founded. His first convert in Safad, Louis Hanna, took over as the pastor until 1937, actively supported by Mosa's widow Munira. The church in Nazareth continued to grow. The congregation grew to several hundred including a large Sunday school and women's ministry, and a 'home church' was planted in the nearby village of Cana. Baptist work grew elsewhere as well. Baptist missionaries began work in

Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, mainly among the Jews that were immigrating in increasing numbers to Palestine. The Jerusalem Baptist building was erected in 1933. In 1936, the missionary Roswell Owens was able to plant a congregation in the important new city of Haifa.

With the establishment of the Zionist movement in 1897, Jews from Europe began immigrating to Palestine. In 1917, Lord Balfour, a British government minister, promised the Jews a homeland in Palestine. As a result, Jewish immigration rapidly increased, and serious tensions were inevitable. In 1936, the Arab peoples began a protest against unrestricted Jewish immigration, leading to a six month strike and violent episodes both by Jews and Arabs around the country. The British authorities introduced various measures to counteract the violence, including a dusk-to dawn curfew, but the troubles continued until 1939 and would have worsened were it not for the outbreak of world war from 1939 until 1945.

All this adversely influenced Baptist work. The faithful missionaries continued working among Jews and Arabs but travel between the two communities became increasingly dangerous. One missionary, Leo Eddleman, used the curfew to become fluent in both Arabic and Hebrew alongside his busy ministry as pastor at the Jerusalem Baptist Church and later in Nazareth. Then in 1941, the United States entered the World War and all of the American missionaries were forced to leave the country. This badly undermined the Baptist work, which depended on staff and funds from the Southern Baptists. Nazareth Baptist School, for example, had been established only in 1935 as a service to the Arab community but was forced to shut down in 1941. The Nazareth Baptists continued to hold services under local leadership, however.

With the end of the war in 1945, Baptist missionaries were allowed to come back. New initiatives began, such as a Baptist orphanage in Nazareth, but shortly after the end of the Second World War it was time for the Jewish-Arab war. Hostilities broke out between Jews and Arabs in 1947 before Israel was founded the following year. The new orphanage served an unexpected purpose as it grew to accommodate 19 children, many from Palestinian families that were separated by the war. Yet more trials were on their way. The Jewish independence movement drove the majority of Palestinian Arabs to seek safety as refugees in the neighboring countries of Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, in addition to the two regions of historical Palestine that did not come under Israeli rule in 1948 – The West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This is the origin of the refugee camps that still exist in the West Bank and Gaza - and also in the countries around Israel.

The tragedy of the Palestinian Arabs in 1948 resulted in almost all of the Baptist work prior to 1948 wiped out inside Israel – but among the hundreds of thousands of refugees were some brave and worthy Baptists and other Evangelical believers. Some of them were from the Baptist churches in Nazareth and Haifa, and they went on to give valuable leadership to Baptist work in Lebanon and Jordan. As an example, Jeries Dallah who was baptized in the Baptist Church in Haifa became the President of the Baptist convention in Jordan before serving with the Baptist Convention of Lebanon. Fayez Sakhnini of Nazareth became pastor of the Baptist Church in Tripoli and then pastored the Baptist church in Beirut – both in Lebanon.

Meanwhile, a small percentage of Palestinians stayed in Israel after 1948. These were ‘the lucky ones’ whose villages were not confiscated or destroyed during the war of independence – or the ones that fled from one town to another within Israel. Israel’s Declaration of Independence gave them equal rights as citizens, though they remained under suspicion as potential enemies of the new state and their communities still suffer from lack of government funding and development opportunities. Nazareth was one such place that survived, and the Baptists immediately realized their responsibility to reach out to the wider community with love and care. In 1948, the Baptist Church became a food distribution center for many hundreds of Arab refugees that flocked to Nazareth from villages that were destroyed or confiscated. However, those refugees introduced a major change to the community, changing the balance from a majority Christian to a majority Muslim population, a process that now means 70% of the people of Nazareth are Muslim.

The Baptist Church suffered badly from all these trials, being reduced to only five people when a new missionary pastor arrived from the United States in 1950. Dr. Dwight Baker said of that faithful little flock: “Had it not been for the stout-hearted courage of the nationals, all would have been lost. A work that was heroically begun by Arab Baptists was just as heroically sustained by these indefatigable souls”. Under his ministry, the work was revived, souls were saved, people were renewed and the small Baptist community in Nazareth became a lively church again. The George W. Truett Orphanage had survived and the Nazareth Baptist School was reopened in 1948, producing its first graduating class in 1955.

The fifties and early sixties witnessed new growth in the Baptist work generally. In 1960, the first national pastor since the establishment of the state of Israel was installed. Rev. Fuad Sakhnini was ordained in Nazareth Baptist Church, where he still pastors today. The church started a

church planting team that founded congregations around Galilee, including in Cana of Galilee, Turaan, Eilaboun, Rama and Acre. Cana Baptist Church held its first meeting under a fig tree and then rented few homes in town until it finally built its chapel in 1960 with R. G Lee preaching in the dedication service. The Baptist church in Haifa was re-established in 1965 but struggled for a while until work was stabilized in the mid eighties under the long ministry of its present pastor, Rev. Philip Saa'd.

This growth in the Baptist witness was given a national identity in 1965, when 'The Association of Baptist Churches in Israel' (ABC) was established with three churches in Jerusalem, Nazareth and the Baptist Village – together with Baptist Centers in Cana, Turaan, Eilaboun and Acre.

In 1945, a farm near the city of Petah Tikva in central Israel was purchased by the Baptists in order to establish a Jewish Christian farming community, but the scheme was not successful. In 1955 the George W. Truett Orphanage moved there from Nazareth and a vocational school was also established, the location now being known as 'The Baptist Village'. The orphanage, and later the school, were both closed in the sixties when the remaining orphans had grown up and moved on. The Baptist Village eventually developed as a retreat and camp center to serve all believers, whether from Christian or Jewish backgrounds. Hundreds of young believers and their families have met with God through attending holiday camps there over the years. The eighties and nineties, when the program became known as 'The Potter's Wheel Camps' it was especially fruitful. Many young people found Christ or grew in their walk with God through this ministry.

In 1967, after the six day war, Israel took over the rest of historical Palestine, which included the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip. In addition, Israel conquered the Sinai Desert from Egypt (returned after the peace treaties in 1979) and the Golan Heights from Syria (still under Israeli control). This time, Israel did not grant citizenship to the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza – which resulted in the open conflict until today on the status of these areas that are occupied by Israel. In 1967 contact opened up with Baptist Churches in East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah, until then part of the Jordan Baptist Convention. In Gaza, there was a Baptist Church and Hospital that had belonged before to the Egyptian Baptist Convention. All these churches were under threat of losing their property or of facing other kinds of insecurity. The leaders of Baptist work in Israel were among the first to arrive at these churches and offer practical help and support. The Baptist Churches

from the West Bank and Gaza never joined the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel, but kept close fellowship with the Arab Baptists in Israel who have also been isolated from the entire Arab world since 1948. This fellowship was encouraging for both groups and resulted in the seventies in memorable 'revival conferences' held in Beit Jala in the West Bank that welcomed all evangelical churches from Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. The Local Baptist Church in Bethlehem and the East Jerusalem Baptist Church still witness today, despite the mass exodus of Palestinian Christians to Western countries that has been increasing since 1967. In Gaza, the Baptist Hospital was staffed by Southern Baptist doctors and nurses together with local staff for some years, but it was eventually handed over to the UN relief agency (UNRA). Gaza has remained an unstable and sometimes dangerous place over the years. In 1972, for example, Palestinian gunmen ambushed the Gaza Baptist Church van, killing Mave Pete, a Baptist missionary nurse. Later on, the Palestinian Liberation Organization claimed responsibility over the shooting, offering apologies for the incident targeted at Jewish settlers and praising the contribution of the Baptist Hospital in Gaza to the community.

WORK AMONG THE JEWISH POPULATION

Work among the Jews in Israel, now the majority in the country, was revived after the establishment of the state of Israel. The Baptist Church in Jerusalem was re-opened under the leadership of Dr. Bob Lindsey who had served there before the war and now returned in 1948, remaining there for a remarkable ministry of over forty years.

Israel is usually a safe and stable place to live for Christian believers, but not always. For example, The Jerusalem Baptist Church was attacked by arsonists in 1974 and again in 1982. Ultra-Orthodox Jews were suspected of causing the damage but were never caught. Nor can the kind of straightforward justice as people in western countries take for granted be guaranteed. The 1982 attack destroyed the Baptist building. Even though this was condemned by many politicians, the government was reluctant to allow the church to rebuild the church, suggesting they move from the city center, which was increasingly Jewish in character so that objections were raised to the presence of a Christian church. After the church leadership declined this proposal, permission to rebuild the church was granted only after a petition to Israel's Supreme Court in 1987.

Work among the Jewish people changed fundamentally with the rise in the 1970s of what has become known as 'Messianic Judaism' - Jewish followers of 'Yeshua' who distance themselves from Christian denominations in order to retain their Jewish identity and culture. Since the 1970s, therefore, Baptist work in Israel has been mainly among the Christian Arabs and the expatriots that live in the country.

CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

Baptist work has faced both challenges and opportunities for growth over the last forty years. It is now the largest representative evangelical body in Israel despite having only some twenty churches in membership. Growth has been helped not only through the church planting ministry mentioned above, but by drawing in other evangelical congregations. One example is an Independent Evangelical Church in the northern Galilee town of Kufur Yaseef. This was planted in 1940 on Brethren lines through the work of an independent missionary, Roy Witman. Witman lived in Jordan from 1927 onwards and ministered in the whole region for more than 60 years. He was responsible for discipling most of the first generation of evangelical leaders in Jordan – and many others in Palestine. What is now the Kufur Yaseef Baptist Church is among the biggest and most active Baptist churches in the country with a membership of over 80 members. More recently, a Closed Brethren Assembly and two Pentecostal churches changed their ethos and adopted Baptist church principles to join the Association of Baptist Churches. Further growth has come through the expatriate Baptist congregations that are growing in Israel, including Filipino, Spanish and International churches, including for some time a Russian church as well. Older churches have grown as well and new churches have been planted, including Shafamer (1992), New Life Baptist Church, Nazareth (1991), and Local Baptist Church, Nazareth (1996). Local Baptist Church in Nazareth is the largest Baptist church in Israel now with around 90 members and regular congregations in excess of 150 at the Nazareth Baptist School Auditorium.

Another cause for rejoicing is the story of charismatic renewal among Baptists in Israel. When it first emerged here in the seventies and eighties, it caused conflict in the churches with its tendency to polarize people according to their spiritual experiences of the movement. However, Baptists have not only learned to live with different views about it – even in the same church –

but they have learned to appreciate the positive blessings that come from renewed faith and vision as more attention has been given by all believers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

However, the Baptist work faces difficult challenges as well.

In the mid nineties, the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board (known before as SBC's Foreign Mission Board) withdrew from working with the national Baptists in Israel. They continued to work independently in the country under the banner of the Baptist Convention in Israel, with the Baptist Village facility still run by them with a changed focus of Sports ministries. Support for existing churches, projects and the Nazareth Baptist School stopped, which caused hardships and pain to the local Baptists but led also to growing maturity and faith to trust in God's purposes as well. The withdrawal of American support also created the opportunity for British Baptists to engage with the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel as well, led by a twinning relationship with the Bedfordshire Baptist Association (now combined with other areas in the Central Baptist Association) in England.

When missionaries left Gaza in the mid nineties, indigenous leaders took over and the church continued to grow. In the year 2007 the Gaza strip came under the control of the Fundamentalist Moslem group Hamas. Rami Ayyad, a young leader in the church, was murdered by Islamic militants. The remaining leaders were obliged to seek the comparative safety of the West Bank, and the church has been severely weakened as a result. That Gaza Baptist church continues to exist as a witness in Gaza City is a miracle of God's faithfulness and their courage.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Christian Arabs are almost 2% of the population of Israel, and Baptists are around just 2% of those Christian Arabs. There are 20 Baptist churches in Israel today, most of them among the Christian Arabs in the North of Israel, with a community of around 3,000 people. Yet Baptists have a vision for God's purpose here in Israel and they are working it out in a number of ways.

First, the Baptists have established with other Arab evangelicals the Evangelical Convention of Israel (in 2004) and work together to be salt and light in this country, torn still by conflict, and by political and religious fanatics.

Second, Baptists are developing partnerships with Messianic Jews in different ministries, overcoming sometimes difficult theological and political differences to proclaim together the vision of 'One New Man in Christ' to their two communities.

Third, Baptists in Israel all take pride in serving the community through the Nazareth Baptist School (NBS), now justly regarded as one of the best and highest achieving schools in Israel. NBS has more than a thousand pupils from kindergarten to 12th (school-leaving) grade, and thousands of graduates are serving the community in different professions. The school is the only evangelical school in Israel today that maintains a strong Christian ingredient in its chapel program and educational syllabus.

As Arab Baptists in Israel celebrate 100 years of witness in the Holy Land, they continue to reach out to their communities through the good news of Jesus. Churches are growing in number and the commitment, despite difficulties. The good news is proclaimed, despite a society that is suffering from continuous conflict and being squeezed by Jewish and Moslem majorities. The Arab Baptists of Israel continue today to tell the story of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us, in the same exact location where this event took place some 2000 years ago.