

FOCUS ON ISRAEL

The modern state of Israel is located in the Middle East, along the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. It forms part of a land bridge linking three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe. Israel is bordered by Lebanon in the north, Syria to the northeast, Jordan to the east, and Egypt to the southwest. With an area of 20,770 square kilometres, it is slightly smaller than the state of New Jersey.

Geography

Although small in size, Israel has varied topographical features and climates. In the north, the forested highlands of Galilee merge with fertile green valleys. Sand dunes and farmland mark the coastal plain bordering the Mediterranean shoreline. The rocky peaks of the Samaritan and Judean mountain ranges in the centre of the country descend sharply to the semi-tropical Jordan valley and the Dead Sea, the lowest place on earth. Mountainous deserts that stretch southward through the Negev end at the Gulf of Eilat, the northernmost tip of the Red Sea. The rich variety of Israel's plant and animal life is astounding. In 1948 there were 13 thousand acres of trees, but by 1978 there were 130 million acres.

A Modern Nation

The modern state of Israel, established in 1948, is a remarkable phenomenon. A nation exiled for almost two thousand years returned home under the most distressing circumstances the world has ever known. Torn and battered after the Nazi Holocaust, the population has grown from an initial 600,000 to over 6 million. Jews make up 80.1% of the population (32.1% are European/American-born; 20.8%, Israeli-born; 14.6%, African-born; and 12.6%, Asian-born). The remaining population is Muslim (14.6%), Christian (2.1%), and other (3.2%).

Israel has constructed a highly modern infrastructure and established world-renowned centres of learning. It has renewed the use of its ancient language, Hebrew, once spoken by prophets, and has adapted that language for genetics, computers, and space travel. Even though the nation has faced economic blockade and endured seven major wars, its standard of living has risen sharply. Leading the world in cancer research, developing the laser industry's state-of-the-art



computer software and military equipment, Israel is now a modern, sophisticated society.

Jerusalem

Israel's capital, Jerusalem, is unique among the cities of the world. When medieval map makers drew up their maps of the then-known world, they placed Jerusalem at the centre of the world (see Ezekiel 5:5). The Old Testament describes the region as "His land" (Leviticus 25:23; Isaiah 14:25; Ezekiel 38:16). It was at Jerusalem that the Lord chose to place His temple. It was in this very area our Saviour chose to be born, to minister, and to give Himself as the sacrifice for sin. Muslims consider Jerusalem to be one of their most holy cities as they claim Mohammed ascended into heaven from there.

However, from a human perspective, if ever there was a city inappropriately named, it is

the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem means "city of peace." Throughout history, Jerusalem has known more war, more bloodshed, and more tears than any city on earth. Jerusalem has been the most contested piece of ground in the world. It has been conquered and re-conquered by Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, and Ottomans.

In A.D. 70, the Romans ransacked the city and destroyed the second temple, leaving only the western wall (often called "the wailing wall"). So many Jews were slaughtered, it is said their blood flowed in the streets.

Later, in 1099, the Crusaders stormed into the city under the sign of the cross. Once again the streets ran with blood. The

Crusaders slaughtered more than forty thousand people and set fire to mosques and synagogues. One example of the perverted

Parliament. In recent years they have made repeated attempts to deny religious freedom to Christians. However, the church

influenced by William E. Blackstone, who founded Christian Zionism. The Blackstone Petition (or Memorial) of 1891, addressed to President Benjamin Harrison and sent to European leaders, called on them to restore Jews “to the land of which they were so cruelly despoiled by our Roman ancestors.” Signatories included prominent journalists, businessmen such as J. P. Morgan, John D. and William Rockefeller, as well as D. L. Moody, A. T. Pierson, Philip Schaff, James Cardinal Gibbons, and future president William McKinley.

The rapid growth of Messianic Judaism has been remarkable. In 1967 there was not a single Messianic Jewish congregation. Today there are fifty in Israel. In all there are about one hundred Christian congregations and house groups dotted around the country.

The Grace and Truth Christian Assembly in Rishon LeTzion, pastored by Baruch Maoz Baruch, is reformed in its theology. Founded in 1976 by a group of Israeli Christians, today it is largely made up of veteran Israelis and of newcomers from the former USSR, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. The congregation numbers over 350 and includes some non-Jewish persons and one Arab family. They maintain regular contact with an Arab congregation in Galilee. Interestingly, they have an active missionary interest and help support missionaries in Kenya and an Arab missionary working among his own people in Israel. Small annual contributions are sent to orphanages in Moldavia, Kenya, and in the

territory controlled by the Palestinian National Authority. Baruch considers himself a Jewish Christian and not a Messianic Jew, as he believes strongly that the church should not be divided along racial lines.

The HaGefen Publishing Company has recently produced Hebrew translations of books such as Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Pink’s *The Sovereignty of God*, and an abbreviated version of Calvin’s *Institutes*.

Prospects

At the present, circumstances in Israel are as tense and as serious as they have been in many years. We constantly read reports of suicide bombers and see images of Israeli tanks and soldiers moving throughout Palestinian territories. While Christian scholars may disagree over prophetic interpretations regarding Israel, they can unite on the need to pray for “the peace of Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:6). Peace comes from the preaching of Christ who has made peace by the blood of His cross. ■



religious crusade to “claim the city for Christ,” saw 969 Jewish men, women, and children herded into a synagogue and burned alive.

Christianity

Spiritually, Israel is a needy country. For many Jews a crass form of materialism has replaced the humble idealism of the early days. In fact, thousands of Israelis are leaving the country every month (over 100,000 to North America in the last few years) for a better life away from the violence and fear sparked by the Palestinian intifada. Orthodox Jews, most of whom have remained anti-Zionist, have increased to the point where they hold the balance of power in

of Christ has grown numerically over the last few years.

There had been previous missionary endeavours of which the most unusual was by Spafford, the Chicago lawyer who famously lost four daughters at sea. He didn’t just write about the “the trump of the angel,” he wanted to be in the Holy Land when it happened. So, in 1881, he and what remained of his family moved to Jerusalem and established the American Colony. Members of the colony, known as Spaffordites or Overcomers, for a while journeyed daily to the Mount of Olives in hopes of being the first to greet the returning Saviour. Spafford had been

Rev. Ron Johnstone
is the minister of
Armagh Free
Presbyterian Church,
Northern Ireland.

