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HOPE FOR THE HOLY LAND

Christianity is alive and well in the place of its birth.

BY STEFANI MCDADE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN ROLLINS



(Left): Elieser Loewenthal in the dialogue center at the Bible Society in Israel. (Below): At the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Elieser Loewenthal walks down the familiar cobblestone paths towards the Bible Society in Israel, located in the heart of Jerusalem. After setting up the bookstore, Elieser grabs a bucket of water and a sponge to wash the large storefront window of its foggy film—the residue of spit left there by angry passersby. The orthodox Jewish community does not like the presence of a Christian establishment so close to the old city, and its leaders have found many ways to make their hostility known. “Every week we clean that window,” Elieser says. And if it happens to stay clean all week, he says with a mischievous smile, “Maybe we’re doing something wrong.”

AT FIRST, THE DAILY antagonism used to bother Elieser, who has managed the bookstore since emigrating from Brazil nearly five years ago. But now he tries to turn such moments into opportunities for dialogue. When a group of Jewish boys is sent by to harass him, Elieser meets their shouts of protest with questions about faith and responds to their cursing by calmly sharing the gospel. Yet for every person led there by animosity, there are many more drawn by curiosity. Once, two Israeli soldiers walked into the store and

asked, “What’s in Isaiah 53?” A staff member replied, “Why do you want to know?” They responded, “Because we went to the synagogue and they said, ‘Never look at this chapter.’ So we want to know what it is.” And as the most compelling Old Testament evidence of Christ as Messiah, Isaiah 53 is taboo for good reason.

Moments like that are the reason Elieser orders a steady stock of solar-powered audio Bibles—In Touch Messengers—to keep in the supply closet. During the day, while helping patrons browse for books, he finds ways to share about his faith and gauges their spiritual openness. When people express an interest in learning more, Elieser invites them to join him in the “Dialogue Center”—a small room in the corner of the bookstore, where his deepest spiritual discussions take place. At the end of their first meeting, Elieser hands them a Messenger and invites them to come back and study the Scriptures with him. Sometimes they will spend the entire hour listening to the Messenger, with Elieser pausing it to answer their questions. A handful of seekers, both Jews and Muslims, have continued to return week after week. Even when they stop coming, Elieser remains confident of the seeds planted. “Faith comes by hearing the Word, and the Word doesn’t come back void,” Elieser says. “So when someone is listening, it has a lot of power.”

Elieser’s counterpart for the Arab community is Nashat

Filmon—he is the director of the Palestinian Bible Society, which serves Jerusalem, Gaza, and the West Bank. Nashat’s main ministry objective is to increase biblical literacy, particularly among cultural Christians. In fact, most Arabs from “Christian” backgrounds know less about the Bible than do many devout Muslims. Each year, Nashat organizes an event called Bible Day to give away free Bibles and Messengers and to educate Arabs on how to engage with, study, and understand the Scriptures. “We want people to be attached to the Word of God and find hope in it,” Nashat says. The four-hour event is also broadcast live on national television, thanks to the organization’s favor with the secular station. Compared to the thousand or so attendees at the physical event who are predominantly Christian, the digital audience is in the hundreds of thousands and almost entirely Muslim.

Beyond using the Messenger in an official capacity, Nashat considers it his primary tool for personal evangelism. He keeps

a stash of the devices in his car, and on long commutes, he looks out for men who might need a ride along the way. As they drive, Nashat ask his passengers questions out of a natural curiosity. Sensing his genuine interest, many will open up about their lives, and the conversations often lead into matters of the heart. That’s when Nashat has a chance to share the gospel and offer a Messenger. “Whenever I see an opportunity, I don’t lose it,” he says. “Instead of giving them a book, I give them this device.” Each time, Nashat knows the Messenger will continue God’s work long after he drives away.

Recently, Nashat was on his way to Bethlehem when he stopped to pick up an Arab man on the side of the road. After revealing that he was a Muslim, the man asked, “What do you do?”—this is the question that Nashat waits for—and Nashat told him, “I work for the Bible Society, making the Word available to the people.” The man flashed a wide smile. “I’ve been looking for you,” he said. “I have questions and I need [Continued on pg 58](#)



answers.” Nashat could tell the man had been seeking for a very long time. When they reached his stop, Nashat grabbed a Messenger from the box in his back seat. Offering it as his passenger got out of the car, he said, “This is the Word of God. Listen to it. This is where you get your answers from.”

In a Muslim area of Jerusalem, Nashat and his brother Rami also opened a Christian bookstore that offers free Bibles and Messengers in Arabic. The day-to-day operations are run chiefly by Firas, an Arab Christian in his mid-20s with kind eyes and a mature beard. Firas was born and raised in Bethlehem, which was once a vibrant city in former Palestine. Today, however, the birthplace of Christ is a struggling area of the politically disputed West Bank—and is separated from Jerusalem by a 25-foot wall.

Thanks to a special pass granted by the government, Firas is able to commute into Jerusalem every day, though the whole procedure is tiresome. Each morning, Firas takes an hour-long public bus to get to the separation wall, where the security checkpoint is stricter than an airport’s and includes bodily examinations. Each night, the process is reversed as he travels back over the border by his 10 p.m. curfew. There is one young Israeli security guard who makes it a point to hassle and provoke him, and Firas has to pray to be filled with God’s

(Clockwise from top left): A knotted tree in Gethsemane; Nashat Filmon holds a cross-stitched sign from his office; Burning candles in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.



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grace. Wherever he goes, Firas is an outsider—seen as an Arab among Jews and a Christian among Muslims. “It’s indirect persecution,” Firas says. “It’s hard to be a minority—we’re facing struggles from both sides.”

Remaining neutral in such a politically charged environment is difficult, but despite the many obstacles he faces, Firas tries to avoid mixing politics and religion—choosing instead to prioritize his identity as a Christian and remain a good witness for Christ. One thing that does grieve Firas, however, is both the Western church’s ignorance of Palestinian Christians and their lack of solidarity as brothers and sisters in Christ. “We like our voices to be heard in the West, and we like to share our stories,” Firas says, “so that they would know there is an existing Palestinian church seeking to extend the kingdom of God here in Palestine.”

Just as Arab Christians are ostracized by their culture, Messianic Jews are also mistrusted by their own people. During his evangelistic outreaches on the streets of Jerusalem, most of the Jews Elieser encounters are resistant rather than receptive to him. “It can be a little scary to go out and distribute Bibles here because they are very aggressive,” Elieser says. One of the biggest obstacles is that Jews have many misconceptions about Jesus. Indeed, some have never even

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heard His proper name. In Hebrew, the name Jesus is “Yeshua,” but throughout Israel, He is referred to as “Yesu,” which means “let his name be scratched out and forgotten.” To the Jews, not only is Jesus a persona non grata, but those who believe in Him are considered the lowest of the low.

Because of the high stakes for Jews who convert to Christianity, Elieser suspects there are many more Jews who believe in Jesus than those willing to come forward publicly. Of Jews around the world, he says, “You’re already the minority. So if you come here and you believe

in Jesus, you’re the minority of the minority.” And because it requires a long and arduous process for a Jew to openly accept Christ as Messiah, the visible fruits of Elieser’s ministry are often rare and hard won. Still, Elieser does not waver from his mission. “They’re the ones in bondage,” Elieser says. “Everyone who does not have Christ is



(Left): Sojourners and Orthodox Jews at Jerusalem’s Western Wall. (Right): The Crucifixion Altar at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

not free—so when we go out, we are the free ones.”

In Israel, becoming a Christian means joining a marginalized minority. Yet believers like Elieser choose to follow the well-worn footsteps left by Christ’s first disciples more than 2,000 years ago right here on the same cobblestone streets of Jerusalem. Just like the early church—who

endured momentary insults, hardships, and persecutions for the sake of God’s kingdom—Elieser and those laboring with him in the Holy Land are citizens of heaven with hope beyond this life. “Paul tells believers, ‘I take joy when I am cursed, when I suffer for the love of Christ’” Elieser says. “That guy knew what eternity meant.” ☉