Competing Narratives: Dordt Students Encounter the Land of Israel

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It’s 10 a.m. in Bethlehem. The air is hazy from heat and dust. Palestinian boys on bicycles skid to a stop in the middle of a narrow street, tilting their heads. In front of them a large group of Americans walks by in baseball caps and shorts, their hands grasping water bottles.

The group of mostly Dordt students wends its way through quiet neighborhoods, sunlight winking in water tanks overhead. A family stands near the end of the street, two girls twirling and laughing, kicking up dust. A teenage boy sits in a dark doorway, half in shadow, head bowed like someone in prayer. As the students walk by in groups of two and three, he looks up, his face illuminated from below by the screen of his iPhone.

This is the West Bank. This is the West Bank when it’s not in the news. It’s an ordinary Tuesday, when the calm of everyday life has not been shattered by intrusions of violence and sudden, deadly confusion. This is a place where—between hurled rocks and bombnings, checkpoint humiliations and violent military reprisals—families rise early, go to work and school, buy their groceries. In the evenings, they sit down to shared meals.

These are the words that keep coming up when students describe their two weeks in Israel last May for Dr. Benjamin Lappenga’s course, “Encountering the Land of Israel.” After arriving in Jerusalem, students soon learned “the conflict” is everywhere. To walk where Jesus walked means encountering firsthand the many complicated layers of history, political strife, and cultural accommodation that have continued to form this place in the centuries after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

“We drove all over the country, and that often meant crossing military checkpoints to get to where we needed to go,” says sophomore Anna Christians. “Several times our guide, Kamal, came with us through checkpoints that were illegal for him to pass through.” A practice tolerated among professional guides, it still rattled her: “Experiencing a small part of the fear he lives with every day as a Palestinian hit close to home.”

Even the most earnest seeker of divine encounter can’t escape the way political tensions intrude upon and shape a visit to the Holy Land. Visiting important religious sites means encountering the realities of life “behind the wall.” For tourists and pilgrims in Israel, a visit to Jacob’s well or the Church of the Nativity requires crossing the border into Palestine. That border isn’t just a line on the map. It’s literal, much of it defined by a looming cement wall, 26 feet high in some places and covered in the bright graffiti of protest.

Senior Peter Rexford says to speak about “the conflict” the way newscasters or politicians do doesn’t come close to illuminating the reality of living each day in the midst of it. “My most significant moments on the trip were those talking to Jewish and Muslim and Christian Palestinians,” says Rexford, who found himself trying to make sense of attitudes about Israel he’d grown up with and his more recent reading and interactions with real people and places. Intensely interested in both the Bible’s historical context and the conflict in the Middle East, Rexford, who began teaching himself Arabic before the trip, spent many hours talking with people he met to learn more.

In those conversations, he encountered anger, fear, grief, misunderstanding. He also saw people who, despite deep differences, were working together toward peace.

“I was humbled by the scope of the hurt we saw,” says Christians. “My problems seemed so small.” Christians says she knew little about the specifics of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians before the trip. The experience was both
overwhelming and deeply meaningful, giving her a new way to look at the world around her as she saw devout people of different faiths living their beliefs in often difficult circumstances.

Junior Caleb Mundorf, a political science major, was inspired to go on the trip after hearing the group’s Jewish tour guide, Jared Goldfarb, speak on Dordt’s campus last year. Mundorf drew immediate connections between the wall separating Jews and Palestinians and conversations about building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico.

“I only got a glimpse of the situation and can’t make any big statements about the conflict,” he says, but he did come to believe that the way to begin to understand conflict is to live with it.

“The wall means different things for those living on each side of it,” Mundorf says. For many Israelis, it means safety, security, peace. Some have lost friends and family members to suicide bombings; some have watched their windows implode with the force of a nearby blast, sending shards of glass into their living rooms.

For many Palestinians, the wall means humiliation, violence, occupation, injustice. Some live with bullet holes in their doors, or trauma from having witnessed children and adolescents shot by soldiers in the street.

Junior Courtney Van Beek says she signed up for a “Holy Land” experience but was surprised by the intensity of the political situation and how it affected the visit. The trip gave her a deeper understanding of the Bible’s stories, but it also left her with many questions and a sense of the complexity of the place and its history.

“All this and more are what Lappenga hoped would happen for his students. He wanted them to gain a better appreciation and understanding of the Bible’s historical, cultural, geographical, and theological contexts—to consider how knowing more about the land of the Bible could challenge and enrich their approach to biblical interpretation. He also wanted to help them think about contemporary politics in the Middle East.

“As a biblical scholar, I delight in sharing with students my excitement for the archeology of the Bethesda pool, the literary features of ancient scrolls, the rhetoric of biblical historiography, and imagining the prisoner Paul among the magnificent ruins of Herod’s Caesarea,” says Lappenga. But he also wanted them to be more than tourists—to connect intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually what they know from the Bible with the layers of history and political conflict that are Israel and Palestine today.

All of those things did happen. As the group visited archeological sites, their Jewish guide, Goldfarb, helped them see the significance of these places for understanding the Bible’s stories. Their Palestinian Christian guide, Kamal, helped them see the land through the eyes of his people. It was the complexity of these different perspectives, and their relationship to the conflict, that affected class members most strongly.

“It really opened my eyes,” says Van Beek, who gained a deeper sense of compassion for people caught in conflict. The students learned so much, but they...
ENCONTRERING THE LAND OF THE BIBLE

In the Holy Land, the political conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is unavoidable, and students on the trip were challenged to consider it from a variety of perspectives. However, students were challenged in other ways, too. The places and sites they visited were dizzying in scope. So were the questions they considered.

Students sloshed their way through Hezekiah’s tunnel wearing headlamps, marveling at the ancient Israelites’ ingenuity. They walked in silence through Wadi Qelt, the “valley of the shadow of death,” sweating under a midday sun and reflecting on Psalm 23. Students with a few semesters of Greek under their belts translated biblical passages while gathered in a Franciscan chapel on the Via Dolorosa.

The group encountered artifacts related to the Holocaust at Yad Vashem, discussed literary features of ancient scrolls at the Israel Museum, and stood just outside Cave 4Q at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls had been stored in airtight jars for thousands of years.

They floated in the salty waters of the Dead Sea, visited desert monasteries, and felt the fierce wind rush in across the Sea of Galilee. They sat on the seats of the amphitheater at Herod’s Caesarea, a blue Mediterranean sparkling in the distance, and listened as Lappenga lectured on the site’s biblical and historical significance.

“Every Palestinian I talked with about the wall expressed to me the conviction that the wall was built so the Israelis could forget the Palestinians and their plight,” says senior Peter Rexford. Students heard about the ways the wall and the presence of Israeli soldiers throughout the West Bank affects the day-to-day life of Palestinians. They also attended a lecture by Dr. Munther Isaac, a Palestinian Christian and theologian. Isaac says walls incubate fear—fear of the other, fear of the unknown—but they also breed a kind of forgetfulness. Many Palestinians ask, “In the shadow of a wall, can there be true peace?”

left painfully aware of how difficult it can be to live peacefully as diverse people deeply committed to different faiths and traditions.

“As nervous as saying so makes us, the Bible is political,” says Lappenga. “We recognize some tendencies in the present political experience that the Old Testament narratives talk about.” Violence fueled by competing claims on land and resources goes back as far as humans have been organizing themselves into groups. And while the Bible offers no simple prescriptions, Lappenga says we can look to it as a guide for responding to the ways conflict, violence, and injustice express themselves in our time.

Students took a boat ride across the Sea of Galilee, nestled among the hills where Jesus of Nazareth spent his childhood and began his public ministry.

Junior Courtney Van Beek and recent graduate Marta Vander Top don headscarves before entering St. George’s Monastery, a cliff-hanging complex built in the sixth century and inhabited by Eastern Orthodox monks. The monastery is located in Wadi Qelt, widely believed to be the “valley of the shadow” referenced in Psalm 23.
“Recognizing these human elements doesn’t demote the Bible, but elevates it—and shows its importance for approaching issues in our world with biblical seriousness,” Lappenga says. He adds that learning about setting and context not only helps its readers understand the Bible, it helps them grapple with what the Bible cares about—it helps make tangible use of the Christian faith.

Lappenga made sure that his students did not “miss the good stuff” by simply moving from one religious site to another, checking off one after another of the places biblically literate people usually visit.

“The places we visited are so rich in history and layers of religion,” he says. They saw and experienced places such as Masada, Bethlehem, the Mount of Olives, and the Dome of the Rock. They also saw Palestinian Christian families living peacefully in the West Bank with no control over their water supply, heard stories about violence suddenly erupting on the street, and listened to Jewish and Palestinian people give their opposing perspectives on life as they experience it today. Easy assumptions they had or were tempted to make about living in Israel today were challenged.

Mundorf was deeply affected by the experience of being young Americans going through the checkpoint into Bethlehem, swept along by the crowd of Palestinians hurrying to cross during their short window of opportunity. As Israeli soldiers shouted orders, Muslim Palestinians hurried the students through the process, in part so they wouldn’t hold up the line during the only time of the day the Palestinians were allowed to go to pray.

Students participated in a “dual narrative” tour, led by a Palestinian Christian and an Israeli settler living in Palestine. Students were impressed by the civility displayed by the two guides, who are divided by deep religious and political differences.
“It felt like we were animals being herded through,” Mundorf says. It helped him see the conflict through different eyes. “I found it hard to understand how a state like Israel, whose people have suffered so much persecution and hardship throughout history, could treat people that way,” he says. But then, when he listened to Jewish people tell their story, he found himself empathizing with them on some issues, deepening his understanding of the forces that animate the Israeli emphasis on security and safety.

Getting this dual perspective was built into the course and the trip. In addition to having both a Jewish and Palestinian guide, the students heard from a variety of people over the two weeks they were there—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim; Israeli and Palestinian.

One day they sat down with a Jewish settler, Yitzhak Sokoloff, and their Palestinian guide, Kamal, in the living room of Sokoloff’s home, located in the Jewish settlement of Efrat in the heart of the West Bank. Sitting on couches or leaning against throw pillows, the students listened as each guide thoughtfully, passionately, and respectfully shared their experiences and perspective on living in Israel.

They heard that Palestinians have no control over their water supply—the Israelis use it as a bargaining tool to get concessions; they heard about Israeli frustrations with Palestinian actions; and they began to understand the ways political power players on both sides deepen the conflict’s intractability by refusing compromise. Another day, after visiting a Jerusalem synagogue, students broke into small groups and pairs to visit the homes of Jewish families—to hear their stories, share a Shabbat meal, and ask questions.

Rexford, who grew up in a faith community that was pro-Israel, found himself feeling angry about the injustices he saw toward Palestinians, some of whom are Christians. He says it is important not to identify the modern nationstate of Israel with God’s chosen people of the Old Testament.

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— Dr. Benjamin Lappenga, theology professor
JERUSALEM THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

Jerusalem is the dramatic point of convergence for three of the world’s largest faith traditions. Students were challenged to understand the ways different groups invest this city with sacred significance, and three days of the group’s itinerary were dedicated to exploring Jerusalem’s meanings, first for Jews, then Christians, and finally Muslims.

Theology Professor Dr. Benjamin Lappenga reflects on the day spent exploring Jerusalem from a Jewish perspective, which culminated at the Southern Steps, where Jesus himself would have ascended with his family on pilgrimage to the Temple:

“Reaching the Old City from below, making our way first through Hezekiah’s tunnel, then walking through the Roman sewer system, was a symbolically-charged venture. Part of it was simply the experience of being stripped of our visions of a clean and glorious path up to Zion on the ancient streets—which of course wasn’t the experience of Jewish pilgrims, including Jesus, either. And then there’s the way our journey reflected something true about the rest of the trip: we can’t imagine away all the hustle and humanity and messiness of real life, which was true then and is still true today—and the Bible doesn’t encourage us to think that way, either. So, we trudge our way to Zion through the sewers.”

Students listen to their Jewish guide lecture on the Southern Steps, the original stones over which Jesus and his family would have walked as they approached the Temple.

giving her hope for their future and inspiration for hers. She appreciated the opportunity to interact with people of different faiths and cultures who were trying to work together toward just solutions for living together peacefully. And, as she returned home, she felt that this model could also be employed in her country.

“It’s important to form relationships before we form judgments,” Christians says. She returned believing that for communities anywhere to live together respectfully and peaceably, they must try to understand each other.

Mundorf agrees.

“Everyone has a reason for believing what they do based on their experiences and commitments and history.” He came to see that, to live together, people need information and humility, awareness and compassion. “You can’t just say ‘You’re wrong.’ You may not agree, but to find solutions you need to be willing to listen,” he says—a simple idea, but profound, and one Lappenga hoped all his students would come to see.

“You need a solid place to stand—and then compromise where possible,” says Lappenga. That’s how his students saw the Jews and Palestinians they met in Israel, living their daily lives as they try to work through their conflicts. It’s a strategy they came to believe could work anywhere—including North America.

“Coming to the realization that the Bible is political makes it a powerful resource for being effective kingdom—and world—citizens,” says Lappenga. Back in the classroom, he still hears the challenge Palestinian theologian Munther Isaac gave to the group: “Asking, ‘Do Jews have a divine right to the land?’ is to ask the wrong question. The question should be, ‘How can we as Christians advance peace between Israelis and Palestinians?’ Suddenly, then, the entire span of biblical texts—poems, stories, prophecy, Gospel, epistle, apocalypse—begins to speak with immediacy and passion into a world badly in need of ‘faith working through love.’”

SALLY JONGSMA AND ALEISA DORNBIERER-SCHAT

Students encountered Jerusalem as it is now: a place where many different cultures and faith traditions co exist—and sometimes clash. The Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine located on the Temple Mount, is a striking example of this convergence. A place of contested meanings, the world’s Jews, Christians, and Muslims invest the holy site with deep significance.

SALLY JONGSMA AND ALEISA DORNBIERER-SCHAT