

# Israel and Palestine: It's Complicated

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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[Air horn app] I'll explain that later. But isn't that annoying!

Where to begin? I guess the most appropriate statement I can make to summarize my Interfaith journey and experience in Israel and Palestine is with a mantra that we heard and used often: **It's complicated**. I can guarantee you one thing. No matter where you or anyone else is on the religious or political spectrum, when it comes to understanding the conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, we've got it right, and we've got it wrong. There simply are no easy answers in this conflict. As one of the persons in our travel group, Doug Townsdin, explained over the phone to his wife a few days into our trip, "It's better than we've been told, and it's worse than we've been told".

Our Interfaith group of fifteen included 4 Muslims, one Jew, one atheist, and the rest various shades of Christian. The genius of this trip, organized by Aliye Shimi, Executive Director of Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry (TMM), and sponsored by that organization, is that it was intentionally **dual dialogue** in nature. We had two guides, Adam, a Palestinian (and citizen of Israel - it's complicated because most are not), and Eldad, a secular Jew. Together, each presented an understanding of the complex issues from their particular perspective. On a personal level between the two of them, they actually agreed most of the time. But from an "official" Israeli or Palestinian perspective, there was often wide disagreement. One would explain something to us, and then the other, as Paul Harvey used to say on his radio broadcast, "And now for the rest of the story." There is little agreement even on what many consider to be facts. Another common mantra: **It all depends on who you ask**.

I must admit, I'm glad we didn't have a guide who was Christian. A big part of the equation, you see, involves those Christians who believe that Israel must re-capture all of Jerusalem, especially the Temple Mount, thus fulfilling a prophesy that would usher in the Second Coming of Jesus. For them, the conflict is a good thing. And yes, **fundamentalism and extreme nationalism are huge contributors to the problems everyone faces in this region of the world**.

There is no chance of understanding, however, without a much fuller knowledge of the historical events that have transpired over the past century that have led to the current situation. I think each of us on this trip came to realize just how little we did know about the varied and complex geo-political history and the interpretation of events. There's no time, unfortunately, to get into all of that this morning. And during the trip, we had to hear this information more than once to even begin to piece together this complicated puzzle. Therefore, I hope to prepare a series of lessons to present in our Adult Church School class in the near future in order to fill in some of the many gaps in our own knowledge and understanding.

So, how to summarize my experience? Over the past month or so, I've been having a conversation on WhatsApp with a new friend who lives in the country of Ghana, in the northwest portion of the continent of Africa. His name is Michael, and I still can't properly pronounce his last name. He asked me yesterday morning about my experiences on this

trip. Sharing a part of that conversation, with his permission, is how I've decided to begin a way to communicate all of this with you.

Michael: Are you working on your sermon?

Todd: Yes, I've started the sermon, but am still sleepy and my brain isn't working at full speed yet. About to eat some lunch and take a nap, and get back to the sermon later. [I thought the conversation would end there, but he asked another question.]

Michael: What do you plan to talk about?

Todd: In my sermon, I'll reflect upon how complicated the situation between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs is - that the governments of both are making things worse than they need to be, and that the people themselves are wonderful and all are God's children.

Michael: What is it that the governments are doing?

Todd: Neither side will give an inch. Both are demanding things that the other will never give. And from my perspective (and the International perspective) the Israeli government is acting in a basically oppressive apartheid manner toward the Palestinians.

Michael: Oh, that's bad. How can you relate that to modern day Christianity? [I realize only now how I avoided answering that question directly.]

Todd: The Palestinians won't recognize Israel because that would legitimize their [the Israelis] right to take over the country, which they don't think they have the right to be on "their" land. The Israelis claim that it is their land because God gave it to them. So, there is an impasse on both sides.

[Let me pause here to mention that many of us on the trip had the following reaction to much of what we were learning.]

Todd to Michael: There is a strong connection to what the early government of the USA did toward the Native Americans when they took their land, claiming God gave them the right to take it (Manifest Destiny). There is also a connection between how the white people in power treat people of color as "less than," thus justifying oppressing them. One more thing, there is also a parallel with how our government, and a majority of Americans, treat Mexicans. [I stated that because of how the Israelis consider Palestinians to be their source of cheap labor.]

Michael: So what advice would you give to us the Christians. How do we cope with being oppressed against?

Todd: No one is innocent when it comes to how we treat people different from ourselves. That's what I'm trying to fight in my ministry and in my life. We need to accept all people as children of God, and equal in the eyes of our Creator. We need to stop thinking "we are right" and "they are wrong." It's primarily an issue of just being different. We need to accept diversity, and that it is intentionally a part of God's good creation. There, that's my sermon 😊

Michael: Wow this is a beautiful sermon. God is a God of peace and unity. The basic reason why He put us here on Earth is to love. God bless you Todd.

Todd: God bless you too, Michael!! Thanks for being interested and asking me questions.

Michael: I am very interested.

How awesome a conversation was that! I think I did okay, given the fact that I was still very jet lagged and not firing on all cylinders.

Now, some of the highlights of this very educational adventure, all of which I hope to share more about with you, included a fairly thorough tour of the main attractions in the walled Old City of Jerusalem. This included a visit to the Western Wall, part of the Second Temple structure built by King Herod the Great; the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; but very unfortunately not the Temple Mount itself, with the Dome of the Rock, because only Muslims are now allowed to enter unless given special permission, which we thought we had received before leaving our trip. But one there, we were denied because they found out, among other things, that our tour included a trip to a Jewish settlement. Fortunately, the Muslim participants in our tour group took the opportunity to attend prayers there.

We had an emotionally intense tour of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum. This was particularly meaningful to the Jewish member of our group, Jesse Ulrich, who works at the Jewish Federation of Tulsa and with its Holocaust exhibit.

We visited a school for children from kindergarten through high school for both Jewish and Palestinian students, the only one like it in the country. Each are required to learn the other's language. Many see this interaction as the way to gain understanding, and the way forward in order to relieve tensions in the future.

We had a great visit with the executive director of the LGBTQ center in Jerusalem. This gathering was set up by fellow traveler, Toby Jenkins, executive director of Oklahomans for Equality.

We traveled to the mountaintop fortress of Masada and floated upon the Dead Sea.

We experienced the remarkable hospitality of a Palestinian family in their home in the biblical town of Bethany, near Jerusalem. This family had experienced a tragedy, some time ago, of having their home entered by Israeli troops who pulled out their eldest son for questioning, accusing him of throwing rocks. The boy was so badly beaten that after a time in jail he soon passed away from his injuries.

On several occasions we headed deep into the West Bank. One day began with a trip to the Zionist Jewish "settlement" of Ofra. By the way, the Jews don't call them settlements. It's complicated. Most, if not all, residents there believe in the need to be a "complete Jew," which for them means maintaining their cultural purity, thus religious and racial purity where Muslims and/or Arabs are strictly excluded. Claiming not to be racist, our host expounded upon the virtues of separate but equal. We have witnessed how well that hasn't worked in the America.

Throughout our journey we saw the massive barrier walls built around Palestinian towns and villages, and the countless checkpoints regulating their ability to move from place to place.

We enjoyed an exhibition of traditional Palestinian dance, and were invited to join in. (I was wonderful!)

In another emotional gathering, we heard from two members of an educational organization called the Parents Circle Family Forum. Our speakers included a Jewish man whose school-age sister was killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber, and sitting beside him a Palestinian woman whose husband was killed by Israeli soldiers in a traffic incident, claiming he was a terrorist. We learned she took her case to the Supreme Court in Israel, proving that the military had lied about her husband's murder. Our tour group found parallels with the many injustices people of color face with law enforcement here in this country, such as the Terrance Crutcher incident here in Tulsa, and how officers are rarely held accountable.

We also met with a businessman in the Palestinian-controlled town of Ramallah to learn about the Palestinian Authority, among many other things.

We travelled to the West Bank city of Hebron, perhaps one of the most complex and problematic situations. We learned that the Oslo Accords, which marked its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary during our trip, divided control of the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C. It's beyond complicated, and it has eventually worked in Jewish favor. Many now believe, in fact, it has contributed to the possible death of a two-state solution.

In the Jewish-controlled section of the city of Hebron one of the female members of our group almost caused an international incident. It had to do with needing to use a restroom before we entered the ancient Abraham Mosque, part of which has been taken over by the Israelis and turned into a synagogue. She is Muslim, and though not one who wears a head covering, she was wearing a hijab at that moment because we were about to enter the mosque. A heavily armed Jewish soldier, after she went in to use the restroom, which was outdoors, approached our group leader, the Palestinian one (our Jewish guide felt it was too unsafe for him to even enter the city), who said that this particular bathroom was for Jews only. A couple of other soldiers then came forward. One, who appeared to hold the highest rank, escalated the tension to a point where we weren't sure something serious was about to take place. Thankfully, it didn't. But we took pictures and video just in case.

Another emotional experience involved our visit to Aida, a Palestinian refugee camp near Bethlehem, set up after the 1947 War. And this, also, is beyond complicated. That was followed by a visit to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem itself.

I'll have to wait until another time to explain the complex story of the Tent of Nations and our time in Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Oh, by the way, we then had a remarkably fun and interesting 5 days in Istanbul, Turkey. It was a great opportunity to decompress from our experiences in Israel and Palestine. I'll share those exploits at another time, as well – I know several of you have seen photos I've posted on Facebook.

**If you were to ask: Where was and is God in all of this?, I'm afraid I still need more time to process that. Let me just say, it's complicated.**

Lastly, why the airhorn app? The longer we travelled together the better we got to know one another, and each other's ideocracies. Jesse, who I mentioned earlier (and also a tech wiz who saved me and others on countless occasions), started to use it as a response when any of us got a bit too cynical or sarcastic or just plain sassy. It went off more and more and more toward the end of our journey. And some of us downloaded this app to use on him.

I am deeply grateful to TMM for sponsoring this life-changing opportunity, and especially to Aliye Shimi. I am also thankful for you, this congregation, for allowing me the time to learn, and to participate, and to experience.

Amen.