

Introductory note from CTBI Deputy General Secretary:

The aim of the CTBI Lent Resource in 2015 is to paint a picture of the diversity of Christianity in the Middle East. In doing so it does not attempt to be critical of other religions. Whilst the material is intended for Christian only use, it has become apparent that some within the Jewish community have found the material in Weeks 2 & 6 to be problematic. We regret this. In its engagement with matters relating to Israel-Palestine CTBI in other places has always striven to present the situation in its complexity, recognising that there is more than one view of the political situation. With respect of Lent it has not been possible to do this to the satisfaction of some. We are therefore willing to include this response from the Council of Christians and Jews who represent the views of those within the Jewish Community that are unhappy with our material.

Notes for the CTBI Lent pieces from the Council of Christians and Jews

One of the difficulties for Christians with regard to Israel/Palestine is that we often feel pressure to take one “side” or the other, and that the choice we make is motivated almost exclusively by the question of justice. We would want to challenge the belief that we are only faced with a binary, zero-sum choice, that we must either choose support for Israel or justice for the Palestinians (both Muslim and Christian). We suggest that it is possible to find a language which acknowledges the fears and insecurities for Israel while acknowledging the difficulties faced by those who live with the conflict every day; it is possible to be concerned about the fate of Christians living in this region, to want peace for both peoples, and also listen to the perspectives of the Jewish community.

There are indeed problems of deep concern for Christians worldwide with regard to those living in Israel and the Palestinian territories. That their future is in peril is not only something about which we should gain greater awareness but also something about which we must strive to change. These studies on Israel and Palestine must be accompanied by a desire to speak accurately enough to the complexities of life on the ground. The reader who may be genuinely interested to become more informed about the specific challenges (and successes!) that we see today should elect to read widely and to access a variety of sources.

Week 2: Christians in Israel

There is no doubt that often when Christians speak about Israel, there are damaging effects for Jewish-Christian relations. Having said this, it is perfectly possible to criticise Israeli policies without fear of being labelled antisemitic – and no one criticises the Israeli government more than Israelis themselves. Christians and others should feel free to do so. However, we should also be aware that oversimplified narratives and blanket stereotyping can show a worrying lack of concern, or of understanding, for why such depictions are hurtful and offensive from a Jewish perspective. This can lead to a shutting down of the channels of communication, and a subsequent deterioration both of the relationship and the opportunity to achieve anything meaningful together. We should also be ready to explain sensitively our own concerns.

Most, if not all nations (both more and less developed) hold social inequalities. There will inevitably be homelessness, prostitution, exploitation and organised crime in any country. These social problems are not unique and can certainly be found in areas of the UK. Work to address these problems in Israel is regularly carried out by poorly funded Israeli NGOs, comprising mostly Jews,

with Christian and Muslim organisations; it is one of these which the notes mention – although not only Christian organisations are effectively tackling social inequality.

Although it is not made clear that Max, the central character in this week's story, is/was not actually Jewish, many readers of this study will not be aware of the non-Jewish status of many immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and the context may lead the reader to assume that Max is a Jewish convert to Christianity. Most Jewish readers would find this example deeply troubling and even offensive; conversion is usually seen as akin to embracing idolatry and results in the convert becoming lost to the community. For this reason, Christians have been regarded with suspicion for centuries.

There are many organisations, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and cross-communal, which are striving for social justice in Israel. These include the Abraham Fund which works to advance equality between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel, the Bereaved Families Forum, where Jewish and Palestinian parents and family members bereaved by the conflict, pledge to end the cycle of retribution and engage in dialogue with the other, and Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salaam, a joint Arab-Jewish community in Israel.

Christians around the world who live as a minority community are experiencing many injustices. While there are particular challenges for Palestinian citizens of Israel viewed as 'second class citizens' by some high profile politicians, life is much easier with Israeli citizenship than for those in other parts of the Middle East. When praying for Christians in Israel, we should be cautious against imposing any specific political agenda on those who are praying. We might rather pray a prayer that includes both thanksgiving for the truly inspiring work that God is doing through those Christians, Jews and Muslims working for good in Israel and supplication for the ongoing challenges and problems faced specifically by Christians and other minorities.

Week 6: Entering Jerusalem

The story of Ra'ed and Mary highlights one of the consequences of the situation on the ground in the Palestinian territories. As is stated, anyone with a Jewish grandparent can apply to live in Israel – 'make Aliyah' – although it should be noted that this is because Israel plays an essential role as a safe haven for Jews from persecution and violence. Having one Jewish grandparent was the criteria used to send anyone to the Nazi death camps and, in the light of the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, one can see how this resonates with Jewish fears today.

Not only Christians have a 'deep spiritual connection to the Land'. There have always been Jews and Muslims living in the Land together with Christians for centuries. For Jews especially, the Land has a particular significance, forming a central and recurring theme in liturgy, poetry and aspirational thought for centuries, while Jewish communities have contended with being aliens throughout the world. It is not good that any one group should be disenfranchised by another, whether Palestinians or Israelis.

One of the questions for discussion asks how one responds to the present situation faced by Palestinian Christians. What are the options for responding? There is an obvious – negative – response which the question might presuppose. However, we should also look at further options, such as visiting the Holy Land and listening and engaging with Jews and Christians and Muslims. We might want to support the many positive initiatives which both Israeli and Palestinian charities are engaged in. How can we both realistically bring hope and help to Christians and model the love of Christ to all the people of the Land?