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Looking for understanding, miracles in Israel

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

A little bit to my surprise, when Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, my friend and co-author of my latest book, returned from a family trip to Israel this past summer, he was raving about the place.

This was far from his first trip there and he said he'd never enjoyed it so much or felt so safe and at peace.

His ebullience reassured me because, prior to his going, he and I and Fr. Gar Demo, a mutual friend who is an Episcopal priest, agreed to lead a Jewish-Christian study trip to Israel in April 2012. The link will give you details if you'd like to join us.

I've been to Jerusalem and Bethlehem but never to Israel. How is that possible? Well, I was there as a child in late 1957 with my family on our way home from living for two years in India. Our next stop was Egypt, but Egypt wouldn't let travelers in if they were coming from Israel, with which it had no diplomatic relations. So we had to stay on what then was the Jordanian side of divided Jerusalem and avoid Israel.

I've longed to return but in all the years in between the closest I've come to Israel geographically is Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Modern Israel, as we all know, has been an astonishing place since it was created in 1948 and it remains at the center of a maelstrom of war and peace negotiations, all of which seem to bog down in a long, painful series of missed opportunities.

But ancient Israel is where my Christian faith began, as members of the Jesus Movement eventually parted -- often with reluctance -- from Judaism. Well, more accurately the Jesus Movement parted from the several Judaisms (plural) that were active in the First Century.

And I am convinced that we simply cannot understand our own Christian faith today if we are unable to connect it to our Jewish roots. One of the best ways to do that is to return to the geography of our origin and take a new look at the biblical narrative and how that played into the history that has piled up -- sometimes in messy heaps -- in the intervening 2,000 years.

As Jacques, Gar and I have been preparing to do pre-trip classes at our congregations about "Israel Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" for people who might wish to join our journey, I've been struck by the wild gyrations of historical events that have played out in the land of Israel.

If you start with Abraham -- spiritual father of Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- nearly 4,000 years ago, the twists and turns have been breathtaking. The puzzle has been how to understand what role God played in that history.

Was God the master puppeteer manipulating everything from the Exodus to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and events after that to the present day?

Or has God simply watched with a mixture of joy, anger, frustration and disbelief as humans have soaked the land with blood in their search for eternal meaning?

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If you are sure you have the answer to such questions, I'd frankly prefer you keep those answers to yourself. I think the only honest response to questions like that is an expression of humble ignorance.

So in that spirit, Jacques, Gar and I plan to lead people hungry for a taste of this ancient land to a modern country that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all think of as somehow sacred space. Although this is a Jewish-Christian study trip, we will not ignore Islam but will seek to understand how all these faiths understand, trust and distrust each other.

And if luck is with me, maybe I'll find the scarf my youngest sister lost in Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity on Christmas Eve in 1957. If I do, I'll have a much higher regard for the possibility of miracles.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog for The Star's Web site and a monthly column for The Presbyterian Outlook. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. E-mail him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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