A Christian EXODUS

From Iraq to Syria to Egypt, one of the world’s great religions is under siege.

BY CHRISTA CASE BRYANT
From Iraq to Syria to Egypt, Christians are under siege. How their faith sustains them – and how their decline is altering the region.
he pews at First Baptist Church of Bethlehem fill quickly as congregants stream in on a Sunday night, some with fancy purses, others with worn shoes and KFC takeout bags. Latecomers have to settle for plastic chairs in the back.

As the service gets under way, hands are in the air as worshipers sing and thank God for a recent revival that drew more than 1,300 people to hear the message of the Bible – a testament to the theme of the sermon on this night: responding to the invitation of Christ.

In a city heralded as the place where Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary, the church is something of a modern miracle. Founded in a two-bedroom apartment three decades ago by the Rev. Naim Khoury, First Baptist was bombed 14 times during the first intifada, struggled with financial difficulties, and is now facing a legal battle with the Palestinian Authority, which doesn’t recognize it as a church.

Thousands of Christians in Bethlehem have faced similar political and economic strife over the past few decades, leading many of them to flee the city where Christianity’s central figure was born in a straw-filled manger. Christians, who once made up 80 percent of the population, now represent 20 to 25 percent. But First Baptist defies the trend. Its congregation is 300 members strong – and growing.

“We fought and fought to remain and not to hide what we believe,” says Mr. Khoury, who himself survived a bullet to the shoulder from an unknown sniper while in the church parking lot five years ago. “It’s time for them to realize that we are here. There’s no way for us to close down and go somewhere else…. We proved ourselves here by the help of the Lord that we are here to stay until the Lord comes back.”
CHRISTIANS NOW MAKE UP ONLY 5 PERCENT OF THE POPULATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST, DOWN FROM 20 PERCENT A CENTURY AGO.

Khoury’s unflinching faith is something that more Christians may have to summon – not only here in the Holy Land but across the entire Middle East. Two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, Christianity is under assault more than at any time in the past century, prompting some to speculate that one of the world’s three great religions could vanish entirely from the region within a generation or two.

From Iraq, which has lost at least half of its Christians over the past decade, to Egypt, which saw the worst spate of anti-Christian violence in 700 years this summer, to Syria, where jihadis are killing Christians and burying them in mass graves, the followers of Jesus face violence and vitriol as well as declining churches and ecumenical divides. Christians now make up only 5 percent of the population of the Middle East, down from 20 percent a century ago. Many Arab Christians are upset that the West hasn’t done more to help.

Though many Muslims grew up with Christian friends and colleagues, powerful political and social forces have made such coexistence more difficult. As political Islam gains support, Christians can no longer find refuge in a shared Arab identity with their Muslim neighbors, but are instead increasingly marooned by an emphasis on religious identity. Calls for citizenship with equal rights are punctuated with stories of Islamist extremists demanding that Christians convert to Islam or pay an exorbitant tax. And many Muslims are facing persecution themselves as the Arab upheavals of 2011 continue to ripple across the region and nations try to find an equilibrium between freedom and stability.

“What happens, it is going to be very difficult to put it back together again,” says Fiona McCallum, a scholar of Middle Eastern Christians at the University of St Andrews in Scotland.

To be sure, Christians have confronted difficult times before, from the killing of Jesus’ immediate followers to the Mamluk oppression of Christians beginning in the 13th century to the rise of Islamist militant activity in Egypt in the 1970s. Warriors who came in the name of Christ have been responsible for egregious interreligious violence as well, such as during the First Crusade in 2099, when Christians took over Jerusalem and massacred nearly all the city’s residents.

Whether today proves to be yet another ebb in the flow of Christian history or something more fundamental remains uncertain. But what is evident is that both Muslims and Christians, as well as the region’s other minorities, are likely to be significantly affected by a continued deterioration.

Christians have traditionally run some of the region’s top schools, been active members of the merchant class, and brought a moderating influence to society and politics. That has led not only Christians and human rights activists to lobby for the preservation of these communities, but some Muslim leaders as well.

“The protection of the rights of Christians is a duty rather than a favor,” declared Jordan’s King Abdullah in September, speaking to delegates at a palace-sponsored conference on Arab Christian persecution. “Christians have always played a key role in building our societies and defending our nations.”

**As an evening breeze sweeps across**

the Jordanian capital of Amman, dozens of Iraqi refugees file out of the Jesuit Fathers church, touching or kissing the cross on their way out.

Among them is Mofed, an Arab Christian who recently fled the turmoil in his native country. A year ago, Mofed (who, like other refugees, would only give his first name out of fear of retribution) was running a photo shop in Baghdad. Then one day several men came into his store and gave him three options: become Muslim; pay a $70,000 per capita tax (jizya) levied on non-Muslims; or be killed, along with his family.

“You pay, or get killed,” says his wife, Nuhad. “There is no in between. If you say, ‘OK, I’ll become Muslim,’ there is no problem. That is their aim, to get you to change your religion, to be Muslim.”

Mofed and Nuhad decided to exercise a fourth option: flee their homeland, bringing their three children along with them. Their decision is emblematic of what an estimated half million Christians have done since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent brutal civil war there. During that time, Muslim extremists have attacked more than 60 Christian churches across the country. This includes the 2010 Al Qaeda-linked strike on a mass at Our Lady of Salvation Church that killed 58 worshippers.

The proliferation of jihadist groups after the fall of Saddam Hussein, coupled with the rise of political Islam, has made an already tense environment even more unbearable for the country’s Christian community, which has been part of Iraqi society for more than 1,900 years. While many Muslims have fled the turmoil in Iraq as well, Christians have been disproportionately represented, in part because of their above-average means: Four years into the war, Christians – who made up 5 percent of the population in prewar Iraq – accounted for 15 to 18 percent of registered Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries, according to the International Red Cross. Today, fewer than 500,000 Christians remain in Iraq from a prewar population of 1 million to 1.4 million.

Christians in Syria worry that the same thing could happen in their country, where civil war has led to a rise in militant groups, some affiliated with Al Qaeda. Many worshipers who once prided themselves on being part of one of the safest Christian communities in the Middle East now face kidnapping or death. Muslim militants are targeting Christian businesses as well. In recent months, jihadis have carried out assaults on the town of Maaloula, where many residents still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus.

Athraa, a young Syrian mother, fled her village on the Syrian-Iraqi border with her husband and two boys to escape the dangers.

“We are expecting what has happened in Iraq to happen in Syria as well,” she says, speaking in her modest Amman apartment, where suitcases teeter atop a run-down armoire.

Before the uprising broke out in March 2011, experts estimated that Christians represented 5 to 8 percent of Syria’s 22 million people. The Syrian patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church recently suggested that as many as 450,000 of the 2 million Syrian refugees today are Christians, though such figures vary widely and are difficult to confirm.

While Iraq and Syria have seen perhaps the worst widespread violence against Christians, some of the most concentrated anti-Christian attacks this year have taken place in Egypt.

*We are expecting what has happened in Iraq to happen in Syria....’*

– Athraa, a young mother who recently fled with her husband and two boys from Syria to Jordan, referring to violence against Christians
That’s of particular concern to Christians elsewhere in the region because Egypt’s Christian population, at about 9 million, forms the largest Christian contingent anywhere in the Middle East. The church’s demise there would be especially demoralizing.

Egypt’s Christians, which make up about 10 percent of the population, face harsh restrictions on building or renovating churches, and say they often face discrimination in schools and the workplace. Violent attacks on Christians and their houses of worship rose in the final years of the rule of Hosni Mubarak, who was ousted in the January 2011 uprising.

As Islamists expanded their power after his fall, many Christians said the threat and attacks multiplied, particularly in the wake of Mohamed Morsi’s election as president. But the violence didn’t diminish once Mr. Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were removed from power this summer by the military. Many Islamists blamed Christians for supporting the coup, and angry Morsi supporters attacked dozens of churches across Egypt in August.

Samuel Tadros, author of “Motherland Lost: The Egyptian and Coptic Quest for Modernity,” called it the worst spate of violence for Egypt’s Copts since the 14th century.

It’s not just Christians who are concerned. Sheikh Ali Gomaa, grand mufti emeritus of Egypt and one of four senior Muslim scholars to attend the Arab Christian conference in Amman this fall, condemned the attacks, church torchings, and humiliation of Christians in Egypt.

“This is a huge violation not only on the humanitarian level but on the Islamic level as well,” he said. “It is incumbent upon us to eliminate this bitterness and tension, which is victimizing our brethren in Egypt.”

Elsewhere in the Middle East, the situation is calmer but still difficult for many Christians. In Jordan, Christians make up 3 to 4 percent of the country’s 6.3 million citizens but have a parliamentary quota of 6 percent and a government that promotes interfaith dialogue. In Lebanon, the Christian population remains the region’s largest bloc in terms of percentage, with about 36 percent, and Christians are guaranteed half the seats in parliament by law.

In Gaza, fewer than 2,000 Christians remain. Muslim militants have bombed churches, killed prominent Christians, and forced others to convert to Islam. In the West Bank, Arab Christians are better off than many in parts of the region, but only an estimated 50,000 live there – about 2 percent of the population, down from 10 percent in 1920. Much of that change, however, is due to faster Muslim growth rather than an actual decrease in Christian totals.

One exception to the decline is Israel, where the Christian population has grown nearly fivefold, to 158,000, since the country’s founding in 1948. Even so, their share of the population has dropped from about 3 percent to 2 percent, and critics note that Palestinian Christian families who fled or were forced out just prior to Israel’s founding gave the country an artificially low baseline. Much of the increase was due to the immigration of Christians from the former

FEWER THAN 500,000 CHRISTIANS REMAIN IN IRAQ FROM A PREWAR POPULATION OF 1 MILLION TO 1.4 MILLION.
Soviet Union, under Israel’s expanded law of return, which welcomes those with a Jewish mother or maternal grandmother.

But there are also strong communities of Israeli Arab Christians – though they are not without their challenges. In Nazareth, for example, Islamists sought to build a mosque blocking the Church of the Annunciation. When thwarted by Israel, the Islamists settled for a banner proclaiming the Quranic verse: “And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the hereafter he will be one of the losers.”

Michael Oren, who recently stepped down as Israel’s ambassador to the United States, acknowledges that there is discrimination against Christians in Israel but says it’s personal rather than official. “Compared to what’s going on in our region, this is an oasis for Christians,” says Mr. Oren. “The Middle East is hemorrhaging Christians, and no one is doing much about it.”

Still, despite all the problems, this is not the darkest moment in history for Christians in the Middle East. Barbara Roggema, a scholar of Christian-Muslim relations at King’s College London, notes that there have been many cycles of Christian persecution and prosperity over the centuries.

Under Islamic rulers such as the Mamluk sultanate of Egypt from 1250 to 1517, Christians – particularly those who had held government posts – were victimized by violence and discrimination. The subsequent Ottoman Empire granted Christians more autonomy and allowed them to flourish in many areas, though there were horrific exceptions such as the 1915 Armenian genocide that left at least 1 million dead.

Arab Christians played a key role in the Nahda, or Arab renaissance, of the 19th century, helping to propel the Middle East forward after centuries of deterioration under the Ottomans. Christians at the time embraced the idea of an Arab identity that was based on shared language and culture rather than religion, spearheading new schools and distinguishing themselves in literary circles. They also were highly successful traders.

But European colonialism complicated the dynamic, with some Muslims resenting what they saw as Westerners’ preferential treatment of Christians. This fueled distrust and a perception that Christians are a Western import rather than an indigenous people – a stereotype that Arab Christians are still fighting today. The suspicions have only been exacerbated since the 2011 uprisings erupted across the Arab world.

Dr. Roggema sees three major differences between the problems Christians face today and those of the past: jihadist groups have access to arms on a scale unknown in history; propaganda can be more easily spread than ever before; and because of Western involvement in the Middle East, local Christian communities are more easily accused of being loyal to the West rather than to their own society.

“It is a gross historical and logical error to claim that being Christian equals being pro-Western, but it makes it easy for jihadists to accuse Middle Eastern Christians of not belonging to their own lands,” she says.

| AS MANY AS 450,000 OF THE 2 MILLION REFUGEES FLEEING SYRIA TODAY ARE CHRISTIANS. |

Two Muslim women pass by Bethlehem’s Christmas tree in Manger Square (top). The shrinking percentage of Christians in Bethlehem leaves a higher proportion of Muslims to celebrate the traditional tree lighting ceremony alongside their Christian neighbors. Iraqi boys pray for peace in Iraq and Syria during mass at the Chaldean Catholic Church in Amman, Jordan (above).
The dividends of Awwad’s Christian education underscore why many see it’s important to maintain Christian communities in the Middle East. They see the quality of their schools; their contributions as entrepreneurs, merchants, and as overwhelmingly middle- or upper-class consumers; and the religious plurality they inevitably bring as essential and enriching to Arab society. Now, as their communities shrink or become increasingly marginalized, a key question is whether such positive influences will also dwindle.

In a way, the West Bank gives some sense of what other Arab societies might look like if Christian emigration continues. In Bethlehem, for example, Christian business owners once made up about a third of the stone and marble industry, while today they account for only 2 percent, says economist Samir Hazboun, who chairs the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce. In the textile industry, they once owned about 80 percent of businesses, but the vast majority of those have closed.

They are doing better in the tourism industry. Today, 40 of Bethlehem’s 43 hotels are owned by Christians, although they are rarely full, and many souvenir shop owners also say they’re struggling. The economic challenges, often blamed on the Israeli occupation, have caused many Christians – as well as Muslims – to leave.

Some say the high quality of education offered by Christian schools unwittingly contributed to the Christian exodus – and with it the loss of an educated elite.

“The Christian schools that helped to educate Christians in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank indirectly, without intending to do it, have encouraged the diaspora of the Christians ... and they did that through giving quality education to Christians,” says Alex Awwad of the Bethlehem Bible College, citing the broader horizons, European languages, and cultural familiarity that helped them to fit into Western societies. “It was a blessing to these individuals, but it hurt the community as a whole.”

But those Christians who are left are active in society. According to the Lutheran-based Diyar Consortium in Bethlehem, nearly half of Palestinian civil institutions are Christian, and Christian institutions (including churches) are one of the largest employers after the Palestinian Authority, providing jobs for 22,000 Christians and Muslims.

“You will see that Christians have very important organizations, foundations, schools, hospitals. They lead very important and prosperous development in the city,” says Mayor Vera Baboun, who says she and her fellow Christians also retain significant influence in the Palestinian Authority, with some serving as ambassadors and government ministers. “We are part and parcel of the decisionmaking process in Palestine.”

To the extent such interactions are lost – or minimized by the persecution, segregation, or absence of Christians – experts believe it will be detrimental to society. “The narrowing of beliefs is already happening,” says Nina Shea, coauthor of “Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians.” “There’s intolerance toward the religious ‘other’ and that will continue. Even when all the non-Muslims have been driven out, this drive for conformity will continue, and sects will turn on each other.”

Amid all the persecution and violence, many Christians in the Middle East are able to survive by holding to two things – their faith and their fellowship with other Christians. Hany Sedhom, for one, has felt the support in concrete ways.

In late September, Mr. Sedhom, a husky, middle-aged Christian from the Egyptian city of Minya, was kidnapped, beaten, deprived of food and water, and threatened with death while the abductors urged his family to raise £300,000 (Egyptian; US$43,000) as a ransom. With the help of church members and Christian friends, his family was able to pay.

“The church acted as the body of Jesus. They were all praying for me,” says Sedhom, recounting how, when he returned home after two harrowing days, members of his church and a religious organization he belongs to were waiting at his house with his family to welcome him. “These were the two things that made me survive – the hand of God and the church.”

Sedhom is one of more than 80 Christians who have been kidnapped in the city of Minya alone since the 2011 uprising, with dozens tar-
pink, to Matthew 5:44, where Jesus told his disciples, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Father Gad encourages his congregation to practice that teaching in their own lives and reminds them of the good relations they enjoyed with their Muslim neighbors and friends for decades, to emphasize that the extremists who attack churches do not represent the majority. While some clerics instructed Muslims not to offer greetings to Christians for Christian holidays, Gad says he told his congregation: “Go celebrate their feasts with them.”

Many Christians believe that the centrality of forgiveness in Jesus’ teachings could, in fact, play a vital role in helping to reduce sectarian violence across the Middle East.

“Christianity can bring a role model, a founder – Jesus, and his immediate disciples – who were not warriors, who were not trying to establish political power;” says Paul Wright, an ordained Baptist minister, biblical scholar, and president of Jerusalem University College.

Khoury, from the First Baptist Church in Bethlehem, would certainly echo that sentiment. He encourages his flock to smile at the Israeli soldiers who staff the checkpoints around Bethlehem and speak kindly to them.

“I think the whole world is hungering and thirsting for someone to love them,” especially in the Middle East, says Khoury. “Whatever it is, accept it, pray for them, forgive them, don’t hold anything in your heart against them.”

Ultimately, many argue, that is the kind of faith lived that will keep Christianity vibrant in the Holy Land and beyond. It is an approach that hinges more on the quality and fidelity of their faith than on the number of adherents – not unlike the early Christians who started out as a tiny, persecuted minority 2,000 years ago.

“Unless [Christians] have ... spiritual and moral incentives, then whether they stay here or not, it doesn’t make a difference,” says Professor Awad of Bethlehem Bible College. “I think we have an understanding of God through Jesus Christ that can bless the rest of the population and help the Arab world with the struggles that they are having.”

Author Samuel Tadros calls the current spate of violence against Christians in Egypt the worst since the 14th century.
A contentious dig delves into the kingdoms of David and Solomon.

by Christa Case Bryant
The workday is just beginning in Jerusalem, 20 miles to the northeast over folded ridges and misty valleys, but the sound of clinking trowels and creaking wheelbarrows has been echoing across this hillside since dawn. Dust billows up in the morning sun as a worker sweeps away a section of the excavation, where Hebrew mingles with American accents and yarmulkes with wide-brimmed hats.

Clad in soggy T-shirts, the crew sifts through the ruins of a city that some archaeologists believe was part of the biblical realm of King David 3,000 years ago. At 8:30 a.m., Yosef Garfinkel, the codirector of the dig, arrives to survey the project, one of the most prominent and politically sensitive in a country rife with historical excavations.

He grabs diagrams and maps from a trailer and barely settles in under a canopy when a coin specialist, Yoav Farhi, approaches him expectantly. Mr. Farhi extracts a tiny white envelope from his pocket and, with dirt-encrusted fingers, pries open the stiff paper to reveal the treasure inside – a coin from the era of Alexander the Great, imprinted with the visage of the Greek goddess Athena.

"This is the dollar of the ancient world," Farhi tells a visitor. "Mid-1st century BC."

Mr. Garfinkel, a professor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, examines the coin, the size of a thick quarter. He smiles. Each discovery delights Garfinkel, but it is more than ancient currency that has drawn the world’s attention to this serene hilltop overlooking Israel’s Valley of Elah, where David felled Goliath with a sling.

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For the past 20 years, a battle has been waged with spades and scientific tracts over just how mighty David and the Israelites were. A string of David and the Israelites were. A string of archaeologists and Bible scholars, building on critical scholarship from the 1970s and ’80s, has argued that David and his son Solomon were the product of a literary tradition that at best exaggerated their rule and perhaps fabricated their existence altogether.

For some, the finds at Qeiyafa have tilted the evidence against such skeptical views of the Bible. Garfinkel says his work here bolsters the argument for a regional government at the time of David – with fortified cities, central taxation, international trade, and distinct religious traditions in the Judean hills. He says it refutes the portrayal by other scholars of an agrarian society in which David was nothing more than a “Bedouin sheikh in a tent.”

“Before us, there was no evidence of a kingdom of Judah in the 10th century [BC],” says Garfinkel. "And we have changed the picture."

But critics question his methods on the ground and his interpretations in scholarly journals. The dispute transcends the simple meaning of ancient inscriptions found at Qeiyafa, or the accuracy of carbon-dating tests on olive pits. It highlights the whole dynamic between archaeology and the Bible – whether science can, in fact, help authenticate the Scriptures.

“If you are in the trenches of what’s going on today, the battle for Qeiyafa looks very important,” says Israel Finkelstein, an archaeologist at Tel Aviv University and one of Garfinkel’s most prominent critics. “But if you are zooming out, you see that all this is another phase in a very long battle for the question of the historic-Khirbet Qeiyafa continues on page 29
In Jerusalem, the politics of digging up the past

‘You have a huge misuse of archaeology by both sides to prove their narrative is more true than others and to justify facts on the ground.’

— Eric Meyers, biblical archaeologist, Duke University

The City of David, an archaeological and tourist site outside Jerusalem’s Old City walls, has signs with Bible quotes intended to explain its relevance to biblical times.

Jerusalem — As the heart of Judaism, the setting of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, and the third holiest site in Islam, Jerusalem is home to many colliding interests — including anything involving dirt.

While the debate over the extent of King David’s realm has focused heavily on Khirbet Qeiyafa to the southwest, archaeological work in Jerusalem also offers evidence about David and the biblical record — but in an even more fraught environment. Gabriel Barkay, who has worked as an archaeologist in the city for decades, says that even moving a single “grain of dirt from one place to another is political.”

“It is a boiling caldron, the stew of which is stirred up by so many spoons,” says Dr. Barkay. He cites the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (the supreme spiritual authority for Jewish people in the country), the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, UNESCO, the city of Jerusalem, the Israel Antiquities Authority, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the Vatican.

“The Temple Mount is the soul, heart, and spirit of Jewish history ... [and of events] in Islamic periods, also in medieval periods, and up to our day,” says Barkay. “It is a focal point in the understanding of what goes on here. And the Temple Mount is a black hole in the archaeology of Jerusalem. It was never, ever excavated.”

So it’s perhaps not surprising that he fought a prolonged battle to reclaim hundreds of truckloads of dirt that he calls “saturated with the history of Jerusalem.” In 1999, Palestinians began removing the material from the Muslim-controlled Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif, and dumping it in the Kidron Valley at night.

The Palestinians said they were simply trying to build an emergency exit at a mosque. But the dirt included material that archaeologists determined was from the First and Second Temple periods, temple in Jerusalem — and some outright deny it. Meanwhile, those seeking to shore up the Jewish nation’s ties to the city have largely ignored the legacy of centuries of Muslim presence as well as that of early ethnic groups such as the Canaanites, believed by some to be the ancestors of Palestinians.

“You have a huge misuse of archaeology by both sides to prove their narrative is more true than others and to justify facts on the ground.”

One site that embodies many of the political sensitivities lies just over the towering Old City wall that encompasses the Temple Mount. Here, along a narrow ridge, some archaeologists believe King David established a smaller Jerusalem as the capital of ancient Israel.

Until relatively recently, few Jews dared to come to the area, a predominately Arab neighborhood known as Silwan. But in 1986, an organization called the Ir David Foundation began a make-over and created the City of David archaeological park, which today attracts half a million visitors a year.

Arab music filters through the air, visitors meander past the foundation of a large building that aesthetized Elah Mazar claims is David’s palace — another piece of supporting evidence for a regional kingdom with a powerful central authority (though others refute this). Thus the City of David reinforces the idea that Jews have a 3,000-year-old connection to their “eternal and undivided capital,” including East Jerusalem, which Israel recaptured in the 1967 war with its Arab neighbors.

“I think it’s quite obvious that the government and the Israeli people should want the archaeology to be discovered, especially ... in the City of David, which is the heart of the Jewish story, where every- thing really started,” says Oriya Dasberg of Ir David. “This is the way to tell the story of the nation.”

Arabs living in the area, however, have become virtually en-circled by the maze of paths, projects, and underground tunnels that cater largely to Jews. So Ir David, which also promotes Jewish settlement in predominantly Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, has drawn criticism for politicizing archaeology and minimizing Palestinian claims to the city as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

“They have a political agenda, so what?” says Barkay, whose Temple Mount Sifting Project is also funded by Ir David, noting that the group has never told him what to find or report.

But some see the intense focus on the past as detracting from the present — part of a broader misuse of archaeology, whether for political or cultural ends, or as a prop for religious faith.

“When people see this place as the City of David and not as Silwan, they’re deleting the present,” says Yonathan Mizrachi, founder of Emek Shaveh, a nonprofit that gives alternative archaeological tours of the area. If the tourism is an attempt to legitimize Jewish settlement in a sensitive area of East Jerusalem, in part by establishing a historical link, it is unnecessary, he says.

“I don’t think we need archaeology to legitimize Israel, or the need of Israel,” says Mr. Mizrachi. “You don’t need to find David’s palace or city, or Solomon’s temple, to legitimize our rights here.”

“I think people are putting too much on the shoulders of archae- ology,” he adds — in religion as well as politics. “Science should try to provide answers, but it can’t pro- vide the answers to all our questions, and it should not replace religion.... You don’t need physical proof for your beliefs.”

— Christa Case Bryant / Staff writer

Christa Case Bryant / The Christian Science Monitor
ity of the biblical text, for understanding the nature of the Bible, for understanding the cultural meaning of the Bible.”

The dispute is exacerbated by the imprecision of archaeology, a discipline that is as much art as science. What ancient potsherds reveal about the past is subject to interpretation, which is shaped by prevailing cultural views, history, religion, and politics. And perhaps nowhere in the world is the nexus of religion and politics more combustible than in the Middle East.

Indeed, in a land where the theme of building a nation in the face of hostile neighbors is every much a part of the modern narrative as the biblical one, the debate over Qeiyafa and other digs around Israel reverberates well beyond the field of archaeology.

With each flick of a shovel, with each discovery of an ancient gate, with each sensational TV documentary, new claims and counterclaims are made.
that inflame modern politics and raise an age-old question: Can science ultimately prove—or disprove—the Word that the Psalmist wrote is forever “settled in heaven?”

Israel Finkelstein’s life arc shares a certain symmetry with that of Israel. He was born in 1949, one year after the founding of the country and the same year an armistice ended Israel’s war of independence with its Arab adversaries.

The young Finkelstein grew up just east of Tel Aviv, and by age 13 he had acquired such a curiosity about archaeology that one weekend he and his friends rode their bikes out to the site of Tel Afek, an excavation close to the Jordanian-held lines. His risky expedition drew such a stern reprimand from his father, he wrote years later, that it made him regret for a time his interest in history.

But as both Israels came of age, the adolescent state won the 1967 war with its Arab neighbors in less than a week, in effect pushing the boundary of exploration to the Jordan River. That opened the way for a new generation of Israeli archaeologists. Albright sought to illuminate the biblical narrative, and solidify the modern state’s claims to the land.

True, the Zionist movement that spearheaded Israel’s establishment was largely secular. But it also drew heavily on the Bible. Founding father David Ben-Gurion pushed aside the image of bespectacled Jews poring over rabbinical teachings and championed instead the brawny heroes of the Bible, who overcame insurmountable odds to conquer Israel’s enemies. These included David and Solomon, who, according to the Bible, joined the tribes of Israel and Judah into a kingdom known as the United Monarchy.

“For Ben-Gurion, the image of a great United Monarchy with territorial expansion ... establishing a nation, establishing a big administration with monumental architecture—this was an image that played back and forth, between that David and this David, between King David and David Ben-Gurion, in a way,” says Finkelstein.

Finkelstein himself chose early on to dig at Shiloh, the ancient capital of Israel for more than 300 years before the Hebrew people built a temple in Jerusalem and enshrined it as the heart of their nation and religion. But as he spent the next 20 years exploring the mountainous lands of the West Bank with modern archaeological tools and methods, he began questioning the accepted practices and conclusions of earlier years that had been used to validate biblical stories.

Two of the most prominent proponents of these theories were William Albright, a devout son of American missionaries, and Yigael Yadin, a former Israeli military chief of staff who became one of the country’s most lionized archaeologists. Albright sought to illumine the Bible with his finds in the Holy Land, while Yadin shored up Israel’s nationalist narrative with what he believed was irrefutable proof of the mighty kingdom that prospered under David’s son Solomon. In Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer, a trio of cities mentioned by the Bible as Solomon’s chief building sites apart from Jerusalem, Yadin uncovered monumental gates whose similar styles indicated a common architect. He also found two palaces at Megiddo, which he dated to the same era.

But after the 1967 war, criticism began building of the validity of both biblical and archaeological explanations of ancient Israel. In the 1990s, historians and biblical scholars—concentrated mainly in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Sheffield, England—launched a frontal attack on the Bible as a legitimate historical source. This coincided with Finkelstein’s growing conviction that his field had long espoused biblical narratives too indiscriminately, particularly in regard to the era of David and Solomon.

In 1996, he upended the United Monarchy theory with an article in Levant, a British scholarly journal, which argued that the dating method that had been used so far, known as “high chronology,” was off by close to a century.

“The biggest question is who and what was Solomon—just a little tribal leader, or a king who had a kingdom and built enormous structures?” says Hershel Shanks, founder and editor of Biblical Archaeology Review, who has challenged Finkelstein’s conclusions. Assign-
ing key discoveries to a later period undermined the most compelling proof that Solomon was a notable potentate, since he would have lived before the time of the gates unearthed at Megiddo, Hazor, and Gezer. The result is that “you no longer have any evidence of Solomon,” says Mr. Shanks. “What you thought was a kingdom of considerable importance has now disappeared.”

But in the nearly two decades since Finkelstein introduced his “low chronology” theory (lowering the start of the period from 1000 BC to 920 BC), research has narrowed the gap between the two schools to 30 to 40 years. Thus supporters of the more traditional timeline feel reinforced by the findings being uncovered at Qeiyafa. “I think the tide is against Finkelstein’s low chronology,” says Shanks.

In Israel, nothing from the United Monarchy period has yet been found that is as grand and definitive as the towering pyramids of Egypt, or the nearly intact tomb of King Tutankhamen, with its golden burial mask and sarcophagus. And apart from the Bible, there is only one mention of Israel prior to the 9th century BC – the Merneptah Stele, an inscription from about 1205 BC, which was unearthed in Egypt.

That has given rise to difficult questions. If Israel was such a mighty kingdom under David and Solomon, why didn’t other regional leaders mention them? And why was the archaeological footprint of Jerusalem, its capital, so small?

Spades alone haven’t been able to answer the questions. “Archaeology is mute,” says Amihai Mazar, professor emeritus of archaeology and biblical history at Hebrew University.

But archaeologists are not. To a certain extent, they are storytellers, who fill in the gaps with interpretation. Many are trained in additional fields, such as history, ancient languages, or religious studies, that allow them to explore and hypothesize well beyond the bounds of artifacts and methodical measurements.

That’s especially true of the early United Monarchy period, before there were coins or seals with people’s names on them that could be used to verify dates, says Eric Meyers, a religion professor and biblical archaeologist at Duke University in Durham, N.C. “There is always an interpretive jump that is made by individuals, and you have to be wary of who’s doing it and what they’re doing with it.”

To be sure, archaeologists working in Israel have developed sophisticated techniques for piecing together ancient history, such as dating certain layers based on pottery shards or on events such as a catastrophic fire.

Picking apart the layers and cataloging the finds is a painstaking process – and carries a note of finality. Once the wheelbarrows of dusty brushes and trowels, the tent stakes and faded canopies have been carted away, and the boxes of discoveries carefully cataloged, there is little recourse if other archaeologists or experts question the findings.

“In experimental science, usually there is a way to rehearse the experiment, to redo it, to rerun it,” says Finkelstein. “In archaeology there is no rerun because we destroy our own experiment.”

One improvement in recent decades is more-precise carbon dating, which calculates the age of organic matter based on the extent of radioactive decay. But the accuracy of such techniques is still only good to within about 30 years – similar to the gap that remains between Finkelstein’s low chronology and the more conservative high chronology.

“The debate around radiocarbon dating, after we invested a lot of money and effort in [it], is whether ... it is refined enough to really resolve such a problem,” says Dr. Mazar of Hebrew University, who is widely respected by archaeologists on both sides of the debate. “And that’s a big question.”

So even after all the painstaking spade work, after all the precise measurements and GPS calibrations, archaeologists are left with only a partial narrative. How they fill in the rest of the story about people who trod the ground here 3,000 years ago is where the interpretation –

IF ‘YOU ARE ZOOMING OUT, YOU SEE THAT ALL THIS IS ANOTHER PHASE IN A VERY LONG BATTLE FOR THE QUESTION OF THE HISTORICITY OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT, FOR UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE, FOR UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURAL MEANING OF THE BIBLE.’

– Israel Finkelstein, archaeologist, Tel Aviv University

COURTESY OF ISRAEL FINKELSTEIN

KHIRBET QEIYAF  A CONTINUES NEXT PAGE
The dig at Qeiyafa is not likely to be mistaken for an “Indiana Jones” movie. There’s no one strutting around with swagger and derring-do. No one is carrying a curled-up bullwhip on the hip, though codirector Saar Ganor does have a pistol tucked in his pants. Instead, the scientists and volunteers from Israel and the United States, trowels, brushes, and shovels in hand, toil patiently among the ancient walls on the last days of an excavation that began in 2007.

And then there’s Garfinkel, passionate but unassuming, moving among the ruins in his red baseball cap. The avuncular archaeologist is more accustomed to obscurity than the spotlight. He once worked on a prehistoric dig in the Golan Heights that yielded hundreds of figurines, some of which ended up in the Louvre in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. But “nobody cared,” he says.

Qeiyafa is different, however. It taps into the legacies of one of the most revered historical figures in the Israeli mind, King David.

On a vista overlooking the Valley of Elah, Garfinkel points out the fortress walls of the ancient city in which residences abutted the outer city wall. Judean civilization, perhaps foreshadowing kibbutz life, was tightknit, he says. Then he scrambles farther down the hill to a wide gate – one of two in the city wall.

The presence of a second gate, an unusual feature for a city of that time, has led him to conclude that this is Shaaraim (“two gates” in Hebrew), which is mentioned in the Bible’s description of the aftermath of David’s battle with Goliath.

He knows well the criticisms of his conclusions. But he remains unmove by them. As he sits down on the stony ledge where the gate once stood, he says he is satisfied, after seven seasons of excavation, with the portrait he has sketched of Qeiyafa in the 10th century BC – of a small, fortified city that stood on a regional border between the Judean kingdom and larger Philistine cities.

In addition to the urban planning reminisc-
Israel wields Bible's soft power as far afield as Brazil

Israel is ramping up its outreach to the growing numbers of evangelical Christians, particularly in the Global South, in order to build popular support for state policies.

The feet of Brazilian evangelical Christian worshippers are seen during a mass baptism ceremony in the Jordan River, where according to the Bible Jesus Christ was baptized, in 2006. Israel is ramping up its outreach to the growing numbers of evangelical Christians; its most rapid growth is coming from developing countries like Brazil and Nigeria, which have not traditionally supported the Jewish state.

(Kevin Frayer/AP/File)

By Christa Case Bryant, Staff writer / February 27, 2013 at 3:04 pm EST

Jerusalem

On a crisp winter morning in Jerusalem, a group of American Christian leaders with Bibles under their arms walk the hilltop where many believe King David first established the Jewish capital some 3,000 years ago.

As they make their way along the rocky paths of the City of David, a vast archaeological dig still in process, a radio host with 70,000 listeners tweets every step of the way while an Anglican pastor with an Israeli flag on his iPhone screen says he’s “absolutely hoping” to bring a group of his own next year. Though the dig weaves through, and sometimes under, the homes of disgruntled Palestinian residents in this highly contested part of East Jerusalem, no one mentions that another people also lay claim to this holy city.
Many of these influential Christians, brought over by the Chicago branch of Israel’s Ministry of Tourism, plan to bring their many followers here – or already have. They are part of a growing band of Christians around the world who see support for Israel as a divine calling, some of whom are motivated by apocalyptic urgency.

Increasingly, Israel is not only cultivating their love of the Holy Land but also courting their political support, with some proponents calling such faith-based diplomacy the most powerful weapon in Israel’s diplomatic arsenal – though its precise capabilities and range remain to be fully proven.

“You folks here are the best offense and defense we could ever have,” Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat told an overflow crowd at the seventh annual Night to Honor Our Christian Allies, held last month at the city’s prestigious King David Hotel. “Enjoy the city of Jerusalem … and go back home as strong ambassadors of the state of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.”

While this largely evangelical movement is most well organized in the US, its most rapid growth is coming from developing countries like Brazil and Nigeria, which have not traditionally supported the Jewish state. Israel, very much conscious of the welcome support this could yield in forums like the United Nations, is tapping into the shared religious heritage of Judaism and Christianity to boost everything from tourism to Israel’s standing on the world stage.

"There is a new dynamic taking place in our world where [Christian supporters] are growing in a dramatic way, who are standing with the nation of Israel like never before,” said Jürgen Bührer, executive director of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, which has expanded to 80 branches around the world since its inception in 1980. “I believe this meeting today in Jerusalem in a way symbolizes, encapsulates, this dynamic movement that is taking place, that a new breed of Christianity is growing up which will stand with the nation of Israel no matter what."

**Growth in evangelical Protestants**

The growth in supporters from developing countries is the result of two unrelated phenomena, says David Brog, executive director of Christians United for Israel (CUFI). “You’re getting a growth of the potential base … and then you’re getting an increasing percentage of the actual base expressing support for Israel,” says Mr. Brog. “Those two phenomena are responsible for expressions of support from countries that have been fairly neutral or silent, such as Brazil, South Korea, and Nigeria.”

The growth in the potential base that Brog mentions is driven largely by the tremendous increase of evangelicals, particularly Pentecostals, around the world. Since 1970, the percentage of Pentecostals and charismatic Christians in Latin America alone has grown nearly seven-fold, from 4.4 percent of the total population to 28 percent in 2005, according to a report on global Pentecostalism by the Pew Forum for Religion & Public Life.

In Africa the percentage of such Christians more than tripled during the same
period, from less than 5 percent to 17 percent.

While the reasons for a growth in support for Israel are harder to quantify, the work of individuals like Renê Terra Nova – one of two Christian leaders honored at the recent event in Jerusalem – is certainly part of the equation. Mr. Terra Nova, the national director of ICEJ-Brazil, oversees a network of Latin American churches with an estimated 6 million followers, and has brought tens of thousands of Christians to Israel over the past two decades either on his own tours or those led by pastors under him. Some have come as many as 30 times.

Eyal Carlin, who co-launched the Israeli Ministry of Tourism’s religious tourism desk two years ago, singles out Brazil as one of their fastest-growing markets for Christian tourists, along with Indonesia and China, which saw a growth of 68 percent and 49 percent respectively from 2010 to 2012. He says the ministry has improved its use of social media and other digital platforms to attract Christians, more so than other markets, and has used roughly half of its hosting budget – some 10 million shekels ($2.7 million) last year – to target influential Christian leaders who will in turn bring their own followers.

“In general, it’s one of our objectives to bring as many church leadership or media groups to Israel as possible that influence decisionmaking in their organizations,” he says.

**Countering the boycott movement?**

It’s not that evangelicals are only now discovering their love for Israel. Many have long cherished the land of the Bible, but in quieter ways, including prayer. However, in the last decade there has been a surge of interest in harnessing that natural affinity into more overtly political channels. And Israel has taken a more active interest in cultivating pro-Israel Christian groups, in part to counter the anti-Israel boycott-divestment-sanctions (BDS) movement that has attracted some social-activist Christians.

“[Pro-Israel Christians] have always been there,” says Petra Heldt, founder of the Protestant Consultation on Israel and the Middle East and the other honoree at the recent event in Jerusalem.

“What we do have today is in Israel very much a concern about the momentum of BDS and Kairos Palestine and stuff going on in the world that culturally influences the West,” she says, referring to a 2009 document by Christian leaders that urged BDS action. “So they put more of an effort into gathering those who support Israel. It’s new for Israel to recognize such a thing, and to recognize the necessity of gathering allies of that kind.”

Just how well the support of Christian Zionists, as they are sometimes called, translates into meaningful leverage on the world stage has yet to be fully demonstrated. Brog says he hasn’t seen evidence that the base in countries such as Brazil and Nigeria has gotten big enough to have a “great ability to influence government policy.” But the US is another story, in his view.

Whereas most Jews are centered in a few key cities like New York and Los
Angeles, there are evangelical Christians in “every congressional district in between,” says CUFI’s Brog, an American Jew. “We have the numbers and geographical reach to reach every member of Congress.”

Some even go so far as to say that the newly mobilized Christian Zionist bloc rivals AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby that has long enabled America’s Jewish community to punch above its weight in Congress and the White House.

“AIPAC is a great organization … but there's no doubt there are more Bible-believing Christians than there are Jews in America,” says Josh Reinstein, the US-born director of Israel’s Knesset Christian Allies Caucus. “Already I think the Christian community is more influential than AIPAC. No Republican can get elected to Congress or to the presidency without supporting Israel and that’s because of the Christian community.”

But Dylan Williams, director of government affairs for J Street in Washington, says that while pro-Israel evangelical groups are becoming better known, they tend to come from areas of the country that are already staunchly pro-Israel and thus have a “negligible” ability to influence policy on Capitol Hill.

He also suggests that the net effect of their work can actually have a negative impact on bilateral relations.

“Rather than advancing the US-Israel relationship, the activity of a lot of evangelical Zionists has sort of driven a wedge into the bipartisan consensus on Israel … because they’ve pushed the conservative members who represent them further to the hawkish extreme,” says Mr. Williams, citing the recent example of Sen. John Cornyn (R) of Texas opposing the nomination of former Sen. Chuck Hagel for Secretary of Defense. Senator Cornyn was the first to come again against Senator Hagel’s nomination, at the request of Christian pastor John Hagee, and spearheaded a very vocal campaign to paint Hagel as too hard on Israel and too soft on Iran.

**Signs of support for Israel**

Evangelical Zionists staunchly support Israel’s right to defend itself, whether from Iran’s nuclear program, Gaza missile attacks, or another Palestinian intifada in the West Bank. They are also becoming increasingly vocal supporters of Israel’s claim to Jerusalem as its undivided and eternal capital, and thus its right to build up Jewish neighborhoods – even in Palestinian areas that Israel took over during the 1967 war with its Arab neighbors.

Washington has never recognized Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem, where Palestinians want to establish the capital of their future state, and has instead kept the US Embassy in Tel Aviv.

Christian Zionists tend to believe that God promised the whole land of Israel to the Jews, including the West Bank, and have expressed skepticism of the viability of land-for-peace formulas. But Pastor Hagee, the founder of CUFI and arguably the most influential Christian Zionists leader with a mega-church of some 20,000 members and a radio audience of more than 100 million, wrote
in a 2010 opinion piece that his organization would never try to block a peace deal. “Our involvement in the peace process will continue to be restricted to defending Israel’s right to make decisions free of international interference or pressure – including US pressure.”

For Christian leaders such as those who recently visited the City of David, however, their interest in Israel’s welfare isn’t just about politics.

“As a minister, I do feel there’s a biblical mandate to bless the children of Abraham,” says Pastor David Sagil of Chicago, minister of Jewish relations for United Pentecostal Churches International, which represents more than 4,300 Pentecostal churches around the world. “I don’t necessarily support the state of Israel in all its decisions, but I do support the nation of Israel.”

* Chelsea B. Sheasley contributed reporting from Jerusalem.*

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