

Understanding Israel

The facts about modern Israel may be difficult for American Christians to digest.

For centuries this saying was beloved among the monarchies of Europe: "The king is dead. Long live the king." Today it might apply to the Palestinian people since the death last year of President Yasser Arafat. The current president of the Palestinians, Mahmoud Abbas—who was stymied as prime minister under Arafat in his dealings with Israel—seems ready to work with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

And Sharon, who for years has held a reputation as a superhawk, is now considered a staunch foe of Israel's right wing and the darling of the country's left. Why? Because he has proposed a plan under which Israel will force all its settlers to withdraw from Gaza and a few remote areas in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria, as many Israelis like to say) in return for the Palestinians' agreeing to long-term, genuine, peaceful co-existence with Israel.

Why should Christians be concerned about all this? Because the Israeli government now acknowledges that America's evangelical and charismatic Christians have become the country's most loyal supporters. That fact—taken with the prospect of renewed talks between Israelis and Palestinians being more likely to bring lasting results than anything since the Declaration of Principles signed at the White House in 1993—means Christians need to be sure their knowledge of Israel is up to date.

Israel seems to change more rapidly than any other country. The old stereotypes about an Ashkenazi elite of European-born Jews dominating an under-educated proletariat of Sephardic Jews who immigrated from Arab countries is a thing of the

past.

Today, as Donna Rosenthal—author of *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land* (Free Press, 2004)—points out, it isn't uncommon for an ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman, an Ethiopian electrical engineer (a “black” Israeli), a ponytailed Russian immigrant and a Christian Arab to sit around the cafeteria at the Jerusalem high-tech firm where they work and argue the virtues and vices of computer chips. If “Jerusalem” and “high-tech” seem incongruous to your personal concept of “Israel,” be assured that they in fact are not. The Israelis, as Rosenthal points out, invented the Pentium and Centrino chips.

Rosenthal, who is an American Jew, has written what I believe is the best book about ordinary Israelis to be published in decades. She explains the various “tribes” of the country: the ultra-Orthodox, the secular city-dwellers, the Russians, the Ethiopians—all of whom have made the country an astonishing kaleidoscope of human variety. Many new Israelis from Russia are in fact Christians. Less than half the new immigrants know much at all about Judaism.

She points out that about a fifth of all Israelis are Arabs who by no means share the prejudices toward Israel held by so many Arab governments. Although Rosenthal is profoundly aware that American Christians often are better informed about Israel than American Jews, this fact about Israeli life may be difficult for some American evangelicals to digest—brainwashed as they are by the notion that all Israeli Jews are “good” and all Arabs, because so many Arab states oppose Israel, are “bad.”

Moreover, recent best-selling novels about the Middle East and

the end times hardly improve our understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of life in modern Israel.

That said, with anti-Semitism and hostile acts toward Jews on the rise in Europe, American evangelicals have a basic question to answer. Was the rise of modern Zionism (the yearning of Jews to return to their ancestral homeland) and the creation of Israel purely a historical fluke or was it the hand of God at work among the nations?

For those American Christians who believe Israel's restoration was truly an act of God, Rosenthal's book should be required reading. It will make it far easier for them to understand the modern state of Israel, whose destiny continues to stir controversy in the world.

And as the developing political relationship between Abbas and Sharon indicates, modern Israel (like ancient Israel) surely needs our prayers.

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