

What if Jesus Were Born Now?

The recent wave of terrorist incidents that has Israelis looking over their shoulders—both literally and figuratively—overlapping with the holiday season, got me thinking: What if Jesus were born today? As 2014 ends, Israelis have been plagued with war, increased terrorism, and an ongoing incitement of violence and worse.

Jesus was a Jew. He was born of a Jewish mother, lived what we would call today an Orthodox Jewish life, brought offerings to and worshipped at the Temple, affirmed Himself that he was not to replace the law but to fulfill it, and in doing so his lineage was traced back to the Jewish King David.

So what would happen if a young Jewish couple, dressed in clothes that are identifiable as those of Orthodox Jews, were to pass through Bethlehem today? How would they be greeted? Would they be welcomed and given a place to stay if all Bethlehem's hotels were overbooked?

First of all, on the approach to Bethlehem, they would encounter a sign telling them that as Israelis, it's illegal and unsafe for them to continue to Area A (under full control of the Palestinian Authority, of which Bethlehem is part according to the 1990s Oslo agreement).

If they proceeded anyway, whether by foot, bicycle, car or donkey—given the current state of affairs—they would likely be met with problems from the get go, including possibly being stoned, firebombed, shot at or lynched. Recent instances of Israeli Jews going into or near other Palestinian Arab communities have played this out.

Yes, the town in which an Orthodox Jewish boy was born a little more than 2,000 years ago has become hostile and inhospitable—and, in fact, dangerous—to Jews today. Yet as much as Jew hatred is common in the region here today, it's

not much more hospitable to Christians. Recently the Pope decried the situation that Christians face from throughout the Islamic Middle East as did the Vicar of Baghdad. Bethlehem is no better.

The 2002 siege of the Church of the Nativity by Palestinian Arab terrorists, desecrating the place and the faith, is a distant memory. However, the ideology and thugery behind that remains.

As a result, the town that is not just the birthplace of Jesus but arguably of Christianity, has seen a decrease in its Christian population from 70 percent just decades ago to about 30 percent today. This is not because of Israel's "occupation" or other problems blamed on Israel, but because life in Bethlehem as a Christian is hostile and inhospitable at best, and even downright dangerous.

Christians are threatened, intimidated and forced to leave. Churches have become de-licensed by the Palestinian Authority and therefore have no legal standing. It's terribly scary to think that in the birthplace of Christianity, in the coming generations it's possible for Christians to become extinct.

It's not surprising that as Christmas is approaching, remarkably Jesus is missing from Bethlehem's preparation and decoration for the holiday celebrating his birth. According to a Christian Arab friend who spends a good deal of time in Bethlehem and has trouble sharing what's really going on publicly due to threats against him, Christmas has become so devoid of Jesus there that Muslims celebrate it!

So glaring is Jesus' absence from Bethlehem this season, one ministry paid to put up a "radical" billboard celebrating Jesus. But they also had to rent a generator and full-time security people because no private companies would provide electricity to light up the sign, and for fear that someone would deface it or burn it down.

What's behind all of this? How is the situation going from bad to worse? I asked a Christian friend who had spent considerable time in Bethlehem until called in by police and told he was at risk and they couldn't protect him. He packed and left, and I drove him to my home where he couldn't be threatened.

First, he explained, the overall problem is the dominance of extremist and intolerant Islam. As a result, most Christians in Bethlehem have adopted and internalized their *dhimi* status, that of a "protected" but not equal minority. But he observed those, like him, who don't toe the party line, or who have the audacity to express their biblical support of Israel, are not protected at all.

Ultimately, it's the culture that overlays replacement theology with Palestinian-Arab liberation theology that's anti-Jewish, anti-biblical, anti-Christian and anti-God that is dictating this atmosphere. This denies the foundation of both Judaism and Christianity.

They claim that Jesus was a "Palestinian" and that the Palestinian Arabs—the majority of whom are Muslim—are the heirs of the land and God's promise to Abraham. With this, they hijack everything sacred and true about God and the Bible.

I live in a town literally across the valley from Bethlehem. I see into Bethlehem from my bedroom window. I have been curious to visit in general, and especially Christian-Arab friends who live there, to show them support. It's a 10-minute car ride, maybe less. Sadly, for a number of reasons, I have concluded that it's just not safe, or worth it.

I hear the Islamic call to prayer broadcast five times a day. I also hear church bells and every time I do I utter a silent prayer that they will never go silent. Because the day that Christianity is eradicated from Bethlehem would be bad enough,

but it will be a foreboding of worse things to come for us as Israeli Jews.

I guess it's a good thing my name isn't Joseph, and I am not looking for a place for myself and my pregnant wife to stay on a cold winter night. Things could get very ugly.

If Jesus were born in Bethlehem today, it's likely he'd not have lived to do what he did and be crucified at the hand of the Romans. The world would be a very different place. Sadly, with the rise of extremist and intolerant Islam as depicted in Bethlehem and elsewhere, the world is a very different place.

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