

# Alphabet land

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

After a six-mile bus journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, a British journalist reported that his Israeli tourist guide used the term "terrorist" 32 times. The guide also said he could not be responsible for taking his passengers around Bethlehem. When the British pilgrims reached Manger Square, they rushed in and out of the Nativity Church and were back on the bus in 30 minutes, no doubt headed for Israeli-sanctioned shops where they could purchase their olive-wood nativity figures at a safe distance from the dangers of Bethlehem.

This story was told to me by a colleague as we traveled over that same route, headed not for the Nativity Church but for Lutheran Christmas Church, where an active congregation is served by a Palestinian pastor, German-trained Mitri Raheb. The pastor was eager to tell of his church's role in the Bethlehem 2000 Project, an ambitious undertaking by the Palestinian Authority designed to "encourage millions of tourists and pilgrims to visit Bethlehem" and to "jump-start the Palestinian tourist industry."

Raheb also directs the International Center of Bethlehem, which conducts art workshops and conferences. It also houses the Dar al-Kalima ( or House of the Word) Academy for Interreligious and Intercultural Studies. Construction on the academy building has begun on a hill near the Christmas Church. Funding for the academy and for other parts of the Bethlehem 2000 Project is coming from governments and private donors.

Zoughbi Zoughbi, director of the Palestinian Conflict Resolution Center in Bethlehem, invited us to see a part of Bethlehem that tourists always miss. We went past the Daheishe refugee camp, down by Solomon's Pools, and across a narrow bridge to al-Khader Monastery; set in a small valley, the monastery provides many of the vegetables for the surrounding area. We paused on the bridge and looked down into the valley below, an oasis of green in the desert terrain.

Before breaking for lunch, I spoke with Mitri Abu Aita, minister of tourism for the Palestine Authority. He said one of his major problems is the shortage of Palestinian-

trained guides, since Israel has admitted no Palestinians into the guide system since 1967 (though recently Israel has given some Palestinians special certificates, with restrictions, to lead groups). Despite these limitations, and the tendency of church-based American tours to choose the less expensive Israeli-sponsored tours, the potential of Bethlehem's tourist industry is strong; indeed, tourism is the only major Palestinian industry available to a population which sends many of its workers daily through time-consuming military checkpoints to work in Israel.

Each year, according to Pastor Raheb, 2 million tourists visit the Holy Land. One million of these come to Bethlehem, and three-quarters of that 1 million are Christians. How long they stay in Bethlehem is at the discretion of their tour guides, almost all of whom are Israelis. The Nativity Church is often the only site the guides want their visitors to see--a decision that precludes any contact with Christians who live and worship in the town. In anticipation of an even larger number of visitors during the 1999-2000 millennium period, Bethlehem 2000 is constructing new hotels, hoping to lure visitors not just for hasty visits but to stay overnight in Palestinian-run facilities.

In visiting the emerging state of Palestine immediately after the agreement reached at Wye Plantation in Maryland, I expected to be inundated with conversations about the Wye memorandum. But the people I talked to were not greatly interested in it, regarding it as largely a way to provide Israel with even more security assurances. More on people's minds is the frustration of what Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, calls living in an "alphabet." The frustration is that "we never know which part of the alphabet we are in."

The Oslo Accords divided the occupied areas into three sectors, designated as A, B and C. The A sector is under Palestinian control; the B region is under Israeli security control, but Palestinians have domestic responsibility; and the C sector is totally controlled by the Israelis. In addition there are H-1 and H-2 zones, designated for 400 Israeli settlers and 150,000 Palestinians in Hebron.

Ashrawi received her small group of visitors in her living room in Ramallah. Her well-guarded house is across the street from a former Israeli prison, now in an A (Palestinian) sector.

"I was a prisoner in that jail for a time, and when we gained control of this city, many of us looked forward to visiting our old cells and eventually seeing the prison turned

into something positive." She laments that Arafat has retained the prison, using it to house not only criminals but also Palestinian political prisoners--the result of a U.S. and Israeli-inspired crackdown on radical groups, the treatment of which has led to widespread allegations of human rights violations.

Ashrawi became perhaps the best-known Palestinian, other than Arafat, when she served as official spokesperson and a member of the Palestinian Madrid conference delegation in 1993. That delegation was upstaged by the sudden acceptance by Arafat of the Oslo Accords, which many Palestinians now feel was a serious mistake. One official even told me that Arafat, who, like most revolutionary leaders, is better at revolutionary struggle than at governing, signed documents with little awareness of the local geography. Arafat, for his part, wanted to take what he could get in order to remove Israeli military control over major Palestinian cities, and eventually to shape a Palestinian state.

The "alphabet" state to which Ashrawi refers is not only frustrating to Palestinians but misleading to Westerners, who believe that Israel is "giving up" land that it seized from Jordan through military conquest in 1967. Ghassan Khatib, a political scientist, veteran of the Intifada, and for four years a political prisoner of the Israelis, refers to the "tiger skin" makeup of the map which resulted from Arafat's signing of the Oslo Accords. When shown in color, the unconnected areas which are autonomous and under total Palestinian control--including the major West Bank cities and most of the Gaza Strip--resemble isolated spots on a tiger's skin.

The Wye memorandum, which merely served to implement the Oslo Accords--and which had been held up by the Israelis because of what they termed Palestinian laxity in curbing radicals--calls for an additional 13 percent of formerly occupied lands to be moved to Palestinian control. To be precise, 1 percent of sector C goes to sector A; 9 percent of sector B goes to sector A; and 3 percent is designated as a "nature preserve" in a desert region which no one, except the Bedouins who already live there, will be allowed to inhabit.

When and if the Wye memorandum is implemented--and Israel has already stalled, waiting for a Palestinian "security plan to curb terror"--Israel will still maintain security control over 82 percent of the West Bank and Gaza; 21.8 percent of that area will be in the B category, with Palestinians running domestic matters and Israel handling security. And, as always, checkpoints on roads leading in or out of any Palestinian sectors remain under strict Israeli control.

To get away from the pressures of the alphabet existence, I decided to visit the town of Taybeh (et-Taiyibeh), a biblical site northeast of Ramallah, which as the crow flies is about 15 miles north of Jerusalem--and, more important, about the same distance from the village of Bethany. Taybeh is the modern name for the biblical Ephraim, which is referred to in John 11:54 as the village to which Jesus retreated to escape from the hostility he generated after raising Lazarus from the dead in Bethany.

With financial help from French churches and religious orders, a relatively new church building, a modest guest house and a school now sit on a hill in the village. Father Yusef, the Roman Catholic priest at Taybeh, calls the town the last remaining community in all of the West Bank with an all-Christian population. Other Christian towns, including Bethlehem, have been losing their Christian majorities. An Orthodox church and an ancient cemetery testify to the Christian makeup of Taybeh, which is probably better known for the beer produced and bottled by a family concern a few hundred yards down the hill from Father Yusef's church. Another appealing part of the church complex at Taybeh is an authentic "old house," at least 300 years old, across the square from the church; it has a medieval feel to it, with three interlocking dirt floors, the bottom floor designed for large animals.

We returned to Jerusalem by way of one of the new bypass roads built to provide access for Israeli West Bank settlers. Just a few days earlier, to restart the peace process the U.S. had agreed to provide \$1 billion to construct more such bypass roads--another project that does nothing for the economic future of the Palestinians and everything for the security-obsessed Israelis. Between ancient Ephraim and Jerusalem, we stopped at yet another Israeli military checkpoint, this one on the road that turns off the bypass and swings past massive Israeli settlements on the way to Arab East Jerusalem. The young soldiers who stopped us seemed bored; not much traffic comes off the bypass. But then not many people are interested in visiting the village where Jesus rested after raising Lazarus from the dead.