

because the prophets show that there will be Jews both in Jerusalem and in “the mountains of Israel” (Ezek. 38:8) at the time of the end. Furthermore, the tensions that are building up amongst the Palestinians, and also within the

international community, concerning the settlement issue will no doubt contribute to the motivation behind the nations when God “will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle” (Zech. 14:2).

Gleanings from the Land

Tony Benson

Jerusalem: a centre for Bible translation

WE LOOK forward to the Kingdom as being the time when “the law shall go forth of Zion, and the Word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Mic. 4:2). We know that only the rule of Christ and the saints can bring the whole world truly to respect God and His ways and desire to learn more of Him. In Jerusalem today, however, there is an interesting foretaste of this happy time to come.

In the prosperous Western world there is little interest in the Bible, but in the Third World, where there is so much poverty, there is a thirst for reading the Bible, as we have discovered in our preaching efforts in recent years. One difficulty is the legacy of Babel; in Africa alone there are about 900 different languages, and about 6,000 the world over. Much effort has been devoted in recent times to providing translations of the Bible in these languages, but they tend to be New Testament only and translations of translations, not translations direct from the original language.

Recognising the need, two Scandinavians, Halvor and Miriam Ronning, established in Jerusalem in 1996 the Home for Biblical Translators and Scholars (HBT), in response to the desire of Dr Napo Poidi from Togo,

possessor of a doctorate in linguistics at Sorbonne University, Paris, to be taught Biblical Hebrew in order to be able to translate the Old Testament into his native language. The Ronnings have been resident in Jerusalem since the mid-1960s, when they met and married while studying at the Hebrew University. Mr Ronning is a tour guide and Mrs Ronning a teacher in Bible studies at the Protestant Institute of Holy Land Studies.

The HBT runs six-month courses in Biblical Hebrew, augmented by visits to Biblical sites, for Third World people with an academic background and a desire to translate the Old Testament into their native language. At the end of the course, students should have sufficient knowledge of Biblical Hebrew to translate the Old Testament straight into their native language, with their exposure to the land of the Bible giving them a better understanding of Biblical background to help their translation. There is also an advanced course for return students. Students have to be sponsored by their church or government, or find private sponsorship, and must have a basic understanding of Biblical Hebrew.

The project is generally welcomed in the countries where students come from, although there is some opposition from ecclesiastical sources wishing to keep control over Bible transla-

tions. When students return and translate the Old Testament, they do of course have to gain support for publishing it, but projects have gone ahead and are continuing. The Ronnings, though devout believers in orthodox church doctrines, claim to be solely concerned with promoting Bible reading and a better understanding of its background. While our Lord remains away it can only be for good that translations of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew into native languages are spreading across the world, and they may lead more people to appreciate what the Bible really teaches.

Source: “The Bible goes native”, Mordecai Beck, *Jerusalem Report*, 17 Sept. 2007.

No room in the inn

ONE of the most enduring pictures of the birth of Jesus is that given in Luke 2:7: “And [Mary] brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn”. However, Stephen Pfann, President of the University of the Holy Land, has given a different slant on the story.

The word “inn” occurs twice in the New Testament in the AV and a different word is used each time. In Luke 10:34 the word is *pandocheion*, meaning literally ‘to receive all’. It is not



The Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem.

used anywhere else, although the related word *pandocheus* is used in verse 35, being translated ‘host’ and clearly referring to the innkeeper. There is no doubt that this was a lodging place for travellers.

In Luke 2:7, however, the word is *kataluma*, which occurs twice more, both referring to the “guestchamber” where Jesus and his disciples partook of the Passover (22:11; Mk. 14:14). This was “a large upper room” (Lk. 22:12), and such were normally used to accommodate guests. Since Joseph and Mary were both of the tribe of Judah, though residents of Nazareth, they would have had relatives in the Bethlehem area and would have gone to the family head to be put up while they registered in the census. It is likely that other members of the extended family would also have needed to go to Bethlehem to be registered, and the guestroom would have become rather crowded.

The popular idea that the birth of Jesus was imminent when Joseph and Mary arrived at Bethlehem is disproved by a careful reading of Luke 2:6: “And so it was, that, *while they were there,*

the days were accomplished that she should be delivered”. It was evidently after they had been there some time, perhaps waiting their turn to be seen by the census officials, or visiting other members of the extended family, that Mary realised that she was going to give birth.

A typical house of those times was two-story and built round a courtyard. The “guestchamber” would have been at first-floor level, and the ground floor area would have been occupied, in part at least, by storage rooms and rooms where particularly prized or vulnerable animals were kept, especially in winter. The suggestion is that, rather than having to give birth in the crowded guestchamber full of guests come to register, Mary was taken down to accommodation used for animals in bad weather but currently empty. (There are good reasons for saying that Jesus was born in October rather than the traditional December, and in October the weather is still warm and animals stay outside.)

The traditional birthplace of Jesus is a cave, over which the Church of the Nativity was built,

initially by Constantine’s mother Helena in the early fourth century A.D. I have been inclined to dismiss this as lacking in authenticity, as with so many such sites in Israel.

However, as long ago as the second century the church ‘father’ Justin Martyr said that Jesus was born in a cave, and archaeological investigations in this particular one have shown that it was in use at the time of Jesus’ birth. Apparently, in hilly areas such as Bethlehem, caves were sometimes incorporated into houses and used for animals, so the idea is not as far-fetched as it sounds.

Source: “The real first Noel”, David Smith, *Jerusalem Post Christian Edition*, Dec. 2007.

Tackling the desert

IN this feature in April 2006 I drew attention to a new initiative in Israel to develop the Negev, the arid south of the Land (p. 119). With global warming threatening to bring a spreading of deserts in some parts of the world, the way Israel is tackling the development of the Negev promises to bring benefits not only to Israel but also to other parts of the world.

Last year there was a conference in Jerusalem under the theme, “Forests to combat desertification”, organised by Nir Atzmon of the Volcani Institute, which is situated at Beit Dagan on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. It was attended by scientists, foresters and government representatives from all round the world, and considered “making efficient use of water conservation methods, including the now globally used drip irrigation system, improving soil conditions and . . . planning communities and parklands”. Participants at the conference

were taken to see a Jewish National Fund tree nursery near Beersheba where JNF staff are growing plants from all over the world to determine how suitable they are for planting in harsh desert conditions.

In order to support agriculture in the western Negev, recycled sewage water from the Tel Aviv conurbation is piped and used for irrigation. In addition, water from an extensive natural underground reservoir is being used, but as this is brackish it is only suitable for certain crops—melons, olives and some flowers—as well as for fish farms. Other actions being taken are the creation of gentler slopes into wadi beds to prevent rain water running off quickly and eroding slopes, and the creation of reservoirs to capture water diverted from wadi beds in times of rain.

These were the sorts of things seen by the delegates, and the report says, “Visiting participants from the Jerusalem conference left the Negev saying they were impressed by the ‘blooming’ of the desert, which offered hope in the uphill battle against worsening arid conditions elsewhere”. We know, of course, that this is but a foretaste of the time when Jerusalem will be the centre of a world government that will ensure that the whole world becomes a place of peace and prosperity.

A leading centre for research into issues to do with arid lands is the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev on the outskirts of Beersheba. The plural is appropriate because there is a group of institutes, including the Zuckerberg Institute for Water Research, the French Associates Institute for Drylands Agriculture and the Institute for



Picture: Tony Benson

The Ben-Gurion University of the Negev at Beersheba.

Energy and Development of Drylands Research.

The overall director of the Institutes, Professor Avigad Vonshak, says that it is necessary to live in the desert in order to understand it, and desert studies have to be multi-disciplinary. In November 2006 there was a conference at the Institutes, supported by the United Nations, entitled “Deserts and Desertification: Challenges and Opportunities”, and 300 people from thirty different nations attended. These delegates “came to learn about Israel’s success in developing solutions for desert living”.

Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, from whom the university gets its name, was a great enthusiast for developing the Negev, and he and his wife retired to Kibbutz Sede Boker, south of Beersheba. He was keen on Israel providing expertise to other nations dealing with the problem of aridity, referring to it as Israel being “a light unto the nations”, a misapplication of Isaiah 49:6, which actually speaks of the gospel of Jesus Christ going to the nations, as is shown by Paul’s use of it in Acts 13:47.

Nevertheless, the way the Jews have not only returned to their ancient land in modern times but are exporting their agricultural products and their expertise to the nations is an important sign that the time for the final fulfilment of this prophecy is near.

Sources: “Finding the positive in the ‘Negev’-tive”, Laura Rheinheimer, *International Jerusalem Post*, 25-31 May 2007, and “Making the desert bloom”, advertising supplement in the *Jerusalem Report*, date unknown.

Energy from the sun

THE idea of Israel being “a light unto the nations” seems to be a popular one in the nation, being used also by Israeli engineer Dov Raviv of the potential for Israel to be the world leader in producing energy from the sun, a use of the phrase that verges on the literal. One resource that Israel does have in its arid areas, along with many other nations, is sunlight, for about 330 days a year in some areas.

With world oil and gas prices soaring higher and higher, and growing concern that discharging large quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere will bring

catastrophic consequences due to climate change, there is much interest in generating electricity without the burning of fossil fuels: gas, coal and oil. For most of the world, generating electricity from sunlight is the most promising way of doing this, but the techniques of doing so need considerable work before they can be utilised economically.

There are two ways of harnessing sunlight to produce electricity. One is the use of photovoltaic cells, which essentially involves a chemical reaction converting energy from the sun's rays into electricity. The other is the use of mirrors to concentrate the heat of the sun in order to drive steam turbines to produce electricity. Both techniques have been around for some time but in their current state lack the ability to produce electricity in large amounts at economic prices. In both cases Israel is at the forefront of research that could enable it to provide its energy needs without the need to rely on imported oil and gas, and to reap enormous financial benefits by exporting the technology to other countries.

In the late 1980s an Israeli firm called Luz developed the second of the above techniques and managed to gain a contract to build a number of plants in a desert area of California, where they still provide electricity to about half a million households. However, the cost of construction meant that the electricity produced could not compete in price with electricity from gas- and oil-powered power stations. The rapid defeat of Iraq in the First Gulf War in 1991, and the peace that followed, ensured that oil and gas could be supplied cheaply. Investors in Luz decided that the firm had no future, and it went bankrupt.

As stated above, the situation is now very different, and a new company, called Solel, was set up in Beth-shemesh, (appropriately meaning 'house of the sun') to use and improve the technology developed by Luz. It has succeeded in getting major contracts in California and Nevada in the USA, and in Spain. A plant should have been set up in the Negev by now, but the project has become bogged down by red tape.

One problem with this technique is that it needs a big area of flat land to install the equipment (curved mirrors in long troughs) that collects and concentrates the sun's rays. Avi Brenmiller, the chief executive of Solel, claims that a square of land nine miles by nine miles would be enough for a plant to supply all Israel's electricity requirements. Much of the Negev is hilly, and much of it is used for military purposes, which makes it difficult to find a suitable site, but the benefit of Israel being able to generate all its electricity without importing fossil fuels is clear. Having all the country's electricity supplied by one plant sounds risky, yet a nine-mile-square site is obviously not as susceptible to destruction as a single power station, for undamaged parts can still function when other parts are destroyed. Regardless of what the Israeli Government does, Solel has really taken off in recent years due to its foreign orders.

Israeli scientists are now researching both techniques for generating electricity from the sun. The prestigious Weizmann Institute of Science at Rehovot, south of Tel Aviv, has a solar research centre, and the Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research ([see above](#)) has the National Solar Energy Centre.

One problem with the original photovoltaic system was that it uses silicon, which makes it very expensive for large systems, and research is taking place into the use of cheaper materials. One line of approach is to combine the two technologies, with mirrors concentrating sunlight onto photovoltaic cells.

We can see three points of particular significance in all this:

- 1 It is another example of how the little nation of Israel is developing advanced techniques that are spreading across the world.
- 2 If Israel can develop independence from fossil fuels supplied by other nations, it increases its ability to adopt an independent line, rather than caving in to pressures from other nations, and this could be significant in the fulfilment of prophecy.
- 3 It provokes thoughts about the Kingdom age. Whilst there will not then be the pollution, dependence on scarce national resources and other problems associated with our modern industrialised society, there is no reason to suppose that the mortal population should not enjoy some of the benefits associated with electricity. If Israeli scientists can devise means of producing electricity without pollution or dependence on scarce natural resources then how much more will it be possible to do this when Divine wisdom is brought to bear on the matter?

Sources: "The sunshine boys", Hanan Sher, *Jerusalem Report*, 10 Jul. 2006; "The heat is on", Sam Ser, *International Jerusalem Post*, 19-25 Jan. 2007; "Snubbing solar", Ina Friedman, *Jerusalem Report*, 1 Oct. 2007.