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Have I not commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest (Joshua 1:9).

Translating

Johnny A. Bahbah

Johnny A. Bahbah is a Palestinian Arab born and raised in Jerusalem. His family has been Christian longer than there are memories or historical records. Membership in one of the oldest Christian communities of the Holy Land is a matter of substantial pride to the family. Mr. Bahbah graduated from Frères High School (a French private school) in Jerusalem in 1979. He followed his brother to study at Brigham Young University in 1982, where he received a bachelor of science degree in travel and tourism in 1985. He then completed his master's degree in geography and began work at the Harold B. Lee Library on the BYU campus as he studied library science. He and his wife, Eija, from Finland, are the parents of three children. They live in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, where Mr. Bahbah is a librarian at Princeton University's Firestone Library.

I am a Palestinian Arab. I was born in the Old City of Jerusalem. My family has been Christian for generations stretching back hundreds of years. When I was a baby, I was baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church. When I started going to school, I attended a Catholic school, like all my brothers before me. I have four brothers and two sisters, and I am the youngest of the family.

My father was a barber and his shop was on Saladin Street, the main street outside of Jerusalem's Old City walls, opposite Herod's Gate. Because of the convenient location of the shop and also because my father and his partner spoke several languages, people from different foreign consulates used to come to my father's shop for haircuts. BYU people also came to his shop. David Galbraith was the first BYU person to have contact with my family.

In 1975, my father told Brother Galbraith that he was looking for a scholarship for my brother Bishara to study abroad. At the time, BYU was offering five privately funded scholarships to Israeli students. My father asked whether anything would prevent his son from applying to the university. Brother Galbraith told my father that he would ask. Later he informed my father that Bishara could apply if he would like to. When my brother applied, he was accepted and received one of the scholarships offered that year. While Bishara was attending BYU, he became very well known among teachers and families traveling to the Holy Land. Over the course of time, besides hearing news about Bishara and how people in Utah were trying to make him feel at home away from home, my father was impressed by what he saw from BYU people. As a natural consequence, my family and I became increasingly familiar with the traditions and the religion of the LDS Church.

My parents had taught us children to be respectful and considerate of other people's beliefs. When members of the Church were invited to our home, my father and brother refrained from smoking in their presence. My parents did not serve alcohol or any of the traditional beverages of the Middle East, such as coffee or tea.

Another brother, Michel, came to BYU in 1979. Michel had been working two jobs in Jerusalem and came to feel that his life was going nowhere. Bishara convinced Michel to apply to BYU. In time, he was accepted. After my father passed away in 1976, I took upon myself the responsibility of looking after my mother. It was in this role that I came with my mother to visit my two brothers at BYU in 1981. It was my first trip to Provo.

At the time I was working for the Anglican Church in Jerusalem. The job with the Anglican Church was strictly employment. While at BYU, I observed students younger than I was who seemed to be happy going to college. At that point I realized that I was missing something in my life. I said to myself that I needed more out of life than just working as a clerk. While in the U.S., I also visited several friends of the family. As I was listening to them, I was also closely observing their way of living in the U.S. compared to mine in Jerusalem. As a result, I came to feel that my life was empty and that I needed to make some changes. I realized that I had no long- or short-term goals set for the future. I also concluded that I should not delay making changes in my life.

The first thing I did when I went back to Jerusalem was to submit an application to BYU. At the end of 1981 I received a letter admitting me. The letter stated that I could start as early as the spring of 1982. So I did. Because I knew several friends who were having a hard time gaining acceptance to a U.S. university, I felt that I had accomplished a lot already. To me a fresh start felt good. Yet I could not tell what the future held for me.

The first year was rough. I had difficulty trying to adjust to being a full-time student after four years of working.

Although I was extremely busy with school, I was also keeping an eye on the Church. Every day, it seemed, I was learning more and more about the gospel. But there was a hitch for me.

I have learned that many people struggle when they approach conversion to the gospel. Very often the issue has little to do with religious matters, such as doctrine or ordinances. Instead, these persons struggle with a social or political question that, because of their backgrounds, attaches itself in their minds to the gospel. For me, it was mainly a political matter. I had grown up a Palestinian Arab in Jerusalem. As a result of my experience and that of family members with representatives of the Israeli government, I had no respect for the State of Israel. Right or wrong, my gospel dilemmas grew out of this background.

I knew that I would be embarrassed to become a member of the Church. If my Arab friends were to hear certain members talk about the Church and glibly connect it to the State of Israel and to the Zionist movement, these friends would automatically look at me and say, "You joined a pro-Israel and pro-Zionist church. You have sold out your people and country!" For me it was a big disappointment that many members of the LDS Church believed that the spiritual "Israel" referred to in the scriptures was the same as the current political State of Israel. One further element that kept me at a distance from the Church was the attitude of some people at BYU toward Arabs. The people were consistently negative, which turned me off. These issues became the main blocks in my coming closer to the Church. At the time I felt that I would be genuinely embarrassed to tell anyone from my country that I had joined the LDS Church. For the longest time, I had thought that Church leaders were teaching these false concepts to Church members until I took a class called "Sharing the Gospel" from Brother John Fugal. This class was the turning point in shaping my views toward Church leaders. It was an important moment.

I took this class for prospective missionaries because I knew Brother Fugal. I believed that he would not be hard on me because he knew my background. Of course, I saw in Brother Fugal's eyes that he wanted me to accept the gospel. But he never pressured me. In his class, I saw other students change during the semester. And I felt that this class brought out the best in everyone, including me.

On many occasions we saw videotapes of talks given by Church leaders, including a tape of President Spencer W. Kimball. Whenever President Kimball talked about the Holy Land he referred to it as the land of Palestine. Further, none of the leaders talked in any way that would offend my people or me. It was very impressive to me that President Kimball, whom Latter-day Saints called a prophet of God, looked and sounded like a very nice and caring human being.

For many years I had lived under occupation, which felt as if someone was sucking the air out of my lungs. I was determined not to let it happen again. I was looking hard for a Church leader from whom I could feel that politics had no place in the Church and that all human beings are equal. In the eyes of President Kimball I saw the love of Christ, and I also saw the caring of God for all the peoples of the earth, yes, even the Palestinians. As I was watching the tape of President Kimball with the rest of the class, I was able to feel that the good spirit in the class grew stronger. Surprisingly to me, I felt that I was floating in the air with nothing under me.

For about a year I did not share my thoughts or feelings about the Church with anybody. But I kept on studying and searching for guidance from God as to what to do. Something deep inside of me said repeatedly that there was something missing in my life. One of the questions that I dared keep asking myself was whether I should join the LDS Church.

During my second year, I became the head resident of the Arabic House, which was located three or four hundred feet from the Provo Temple. I moved in with four returned missionaries who were learning Arabic. I made it very clear to them from the beginning that I was not interested in the Church, and that they should not try to push their views on me. Almost every member of the LDS Church whom I knew had tried in one way or another to convert me. This time I was not going to allow it. Over time, however, one of the students became very close to me. He never pushed his views on me, and he accepted me just as I was. Eventually he became my best friend, and his name is Steve Hawkins. Steve and I talked several times about life. Only a few times in those conversations did he talk to me about the Church. Most of the time when the subject came up it was to answer one of my questions.

Both my roommates and my Arab friends in Provo kept telling me that I had grown more calm. In December of 1983, I went to Jerusalem for Christmas. While there, I realized that I had changed, but I could not pinpoint how. When I came back to BYU in January of 1984, I decided to turn to God for answers.

For two months on a daily basis I walked around the Provo temple asking God to guide me to do the right thing. I started asking God and myself whether I was supposed to join the church. For the longest time, I received no answer. Yet I kept having a feeling that something was about to change in my life. I felt confused and distressed.

I had always believed that God would be there when I needed him. I had always turned to God whenever I was going through drastic changes in my life. Then, about the middle of March, Dilworth Parkinson, an Arabic professor at BYU, approached me. He asked me whether I was interested in translating one of the talks for the upcoming LDS

general conference into Arabic.

A few days before the general conference, I received a copy of a talk to be given by Elder Neal A. Maxwell. As I started reading the talk, I discovered that I had a hard time understanding the talk in English, let alone being able to translate it into Arabic. After spending many hours, I was able to successfully finish a translation of the talk. Unfortunately, the talk was still missing something because it did not sound right to me. I started praying to God to ask his help in inspiring me to choose the right words so that it would be free of my interpretation. As I was rewriting the Arabic text, I started to feel the Spirit of God in what I was translating. When I had finished the first basic translation of the text from English into Arabic, I had read it in Arabic and it sounded grammatically correct. But it felt like a meal that had been cooked but all the spices were missing. It felt plain, uninspiring. Praying was like opening the cookbook, finding the right ingredient, and adding it to the food. After rewriting it, the text was flavored to God's taste, something that I somehow knew to be true.

Toward the end of March, after working on the translation for few days, I decided to share my thoughts about the Church with Steve. I mentioned to him that I now wanted to join the LDS Church, and that I needed him to help me make all the arrangements for the baptism. I also asked Steve to baptize me. On 1 April 1984 I announced to all my friends that I was going to be baptized on 6 April 1984. It was a shock to many friends because they had no clue about my interest in the Church. Steve was the only one who had not acted surprised at my decision; I felt as if he knew all along that it was going to happen.

At that point, I had no doubt in my mind about the gospel or about President Kimball being a prophet of God. I also knew that people could say whatever they wanted. What they say might change from time to time, but one thing that will never change is the gospel. It is true, and it will continue to be so.

When I made my decision to join the Church I felt as if a mountain had been lifted off my chest and I could breathe again. My family supported me in my decision, especially my mother. From that day on, I became involved in many translation projects for the Church, which included the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price, as well as the temple ceremonies. When I did translations for these many projects, I had to study what I was translating. Since I was not allowed to interpret, I had to depend on the Spirit of God to put the right words in my heart and mouth.

In July of 1988 I met my beautiful Finnish wife, Eija. We were sealed in the Manti Temple on 4 October 1988. We have three beautiful children, Filomen, Jessica, and Matthew. My wife is also a convert to the Church, having joined the Church in her homeland of Finland in January of 1984. Her faith in God and the Church has always been strong, and I am glad to have her strong spirit present in our home. It is perhaps unusual that Eija and I both joined the Church the same year. We were in two different countries and knew nothing about each other.

Other people, who were a big influence in my life include President Howard W. Hunter, who took the time to meet with me and listen to what I had to say. We talked about everything. Brother and Sister Robert Taylor and Brother and Sister Stan Taylor were always there for me before and after I joined the Church. When I needed support, I could always count on them. To me they are the ideal members of the LDS Church. Their love for me did not change when I joined the Church, because they already treated me like a son. The list could go on and on if I were to start listing the names of the people who had a big influence on me in finding the truth while I was at BYU. Nevertheless, the name that I must never fail to mention is that of our Lord, the Savior Jesus Christ.