

CHRIST CHURCH (ANGLICAN) IN NAZARETH: A BRIEF HISTORY WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

By Duane Alexander Miller

To understand the history of this parish one needs to understand a little bit of the background of what is now the Diocese of Jerusalem, which is one of the four dioceses of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, and which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The diocese started out as a joint venture of the Lutheran Prussian Church and the Church of England, so it was really a Protestant diocese, and not only an Anglican diocese. The Protestant diocese was founded in the 1840's, in the days of the Ottoman Empire, and



Christ Church Nazareth from the courtyard, with a tower but no steeple. Duane A. Miller ©2011

our first bishop was Michael Solomon Alexander. He was a Jewish rabbi who came to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. He became a priest, and was then consecrated to be bishop of the newly formed Protestant Diocese of Jerusalem. He arrived in Jerusalem in 1842 with his wife and

children. In those days Jerusalem was a much-neglected, unhealthy place to live. Bishop Alexander died after only three years in Jerusalem and is buried on the Mount of Olives. The main goal of his ministry was to establish a Hebrew congregation on Mount Zion—a goal that he and his co-workers saw as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Though the congregation never grew very large, they were successful in this endeavor. Christ Church in the Jaffa Gate is the fruit

of this mission, and it was the first Protestant church built in what is now Israel-Palestine.¹



Figure 1: The bell ropes, in the choir loft. Duane A. Miller ©2011

But Christ Church (Jerusalem) never belonged to the diocese—it belonged to the missionaries (who were trying to evangelize Jews) and their society—the London Jews Society (LJS), or as it is known today, the Church’s Ministry to the Jews (CMJ). Christ Church in Nazareth has the distinction of being the first church owned by what is today the Diocese of Jerusalem. This church was constructed under the direction of the diocese’s second bishop, an industrious

and vigorous man named Samuel Gobat. Bp Gobat served the diocese from 1846 through 1879 and in many ways shifted the direction of the diocese’s ministry from what Alexander had envisioned. While Gobat still welcomed Jews into the church from time to time, he asked the evangelical Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Church of England to send missionaries. In fact, he himself had been a CMS missionary in Ethiopia for some time before becoming bishop

¹ For more on Alexander’s life and ministry see Bridgeman 1943 and Crombie 2006. For a detailed history of the foundation of Christ Church in the Jaffa Gate (Jerusalem) see Crombie 2008. For an account of the difficulties faced by the early bishops see Jack 1995.

of Jerusalem—a title he cherished². The CMS missionaries were representatives of the evangelical group in the Church of England. They did not like elaborate liturgy, and they emphasized the power of the Bible as the Word of God, and the necessity for each Christian to have a lively, personal relation with God. On the other hand, the CMS missionaries, and Gobat himself, sometimes did not appreciate some of the wisdom of the ancient churches they found in the Ottoman lands—churches which had survived for centuries under the sometimes harsh rule of their Muslim masters³.



Figure 2: “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord...”
The priest greets people as they leave.
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Christians from these old churches approached Gobat on several occasions, asking for clergy and schools. Kenneth Cragg describes the birth of non-Jewish congregations:

“Samuel Gobat held himself obliged to set up a church-structure for the Arab folk--almost wholly from the (Greek) Orthodox population--when on

his view the situation required it by virtue of their adoption of his form of faith. From the 1860's, beginning in Nazareth, came the creation of Anglican 'parishes' and the ordaining of Arab clergy. The

² Gobat’s autobiography has a large section on his mission to Abyssinia, and many collected letters to and from him as records of his lengthy career in Jerusalem.

³ Anglicans and their American counterparts, the Episcopalians, from the anglo-catholic movement, which emphasized commonalities with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and sometimes looked down on their evangelical brethren, did find much to appreciate in the ancient churches. For an example of this, see the ministry of Episcopal missionary bishop, Horatio Southgate in Constantinople (Bridgeman 1962, and for a contemporary criticism of said mission see Tyler et al 1845) and the Anglo-catholic mission to the Nestorians/Assyrians (Blincoe 1998 and Rowell 1997).

Anglicans, one might say, had church congregations in spite of themselves and yet also because of themselves.” (133)



Figure 3: Stained-glass window, detail.
(Duane Miller ©2011)

While CMS was connected to the Church of England, many of the early CMS missionaries were not English. Gobat was French Swiss, and A. Klein and Johannes Zeller, who both ministered here in Nazareth, were also from the Continent. In fact, Zeller married Hanna Maria Sophie Gobat, the bishop's daughter. She was a talented artist and composed the illustrations for a book entitled *Wild Flowers of the Holy Land*, which was reprinted a number of times. Protestants established a school in Nazareth (still functioning), an orphanage (no longer functioning), and Christ Church. While Alexander was not interested in seeing the church grow among the local non-Jews, Gobat was willing to do so, especially when the Christians from the old churches (mostly Orthodox) were punished by the clergy for holding bible studies and sending their children to the Protestant schools. He said that as a pastor he had no choice but to take in these Christians who had been rejected by their own churches. This was the beginning of a shift towards what we have today in the Diocese of Jerusalem—a diocese where most of the Anglicans are descendents of people who converted to Protestantism from Orthodoxy. (The diocese today does not actively seek to recruit people from other churches.⁴)

⁴ For a perspective on how this policy has affected the church in Jordan in its ministry today see Miller 2011.

Johannes (or John) Zeller lived and ministered in Nazareth for 20 years, and then in Jerusalem for another 20 years. He was the person who was the missionary-pastor here when the church building was consecrated. A story is told that when the prince of Wales, who later became King Edward VII, visited Nazareth in 1862 that Zeller asked for and received the first gift of £10 towards the construction



Figure 4: The nave of the church as seen from the choir loft (not used) where the bell ropes are. Duane A. Miller ©2011

of the church. But note that the church never was completed, as there is no steeple (figure 1). The church was consecrated by Bishop Gobat in 1871. It was also here that the first indigenous non-Jews were ordained—Michael Qa'war and Seraphim Boutaji. For those who can read Arabic, they will see many of these names (Klein, Zeller, Qa'war...) on the two ceramic records to the right and left of the door passing from the narthex to the nave.

In 1881 the agreement between the Lutheran Prussians and the Church of England was dissolved. Since then we can more properly speak of an Anglican diocese. It was the Diocese' fourth bishop, George Francis Popham Blyth who, after disagreeing with the CMS missionaries evangelical sensibilities, decided that he must build a proper church in east Jerusalem, which is today the Cathedral Church of St George the Martyr⁵. Blyth was too anglo-catholic for the CMS missionaries

⁵ For some history of the cathedral church and accounts of what worship there today is like, see Wright 1992 and Miller 2007b. Blyth was a great admirer of the Orthodox Church, and he never called St George's a cathedral; he always considered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre the Cathedral Church of Jerusalem (Blyth 1927:17).

and there was substantial tension between them and the bishop. In addition to raising funds for and building his own cathedral church, he established his own missionary society—the Jerusalem and the East Mission (JEM).



Figure 5: Behind the communion table is this verse in stylized Arabic from Jesus' Nazareth sermon in Luke 4: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on for he has anointed me...' (Duane A. Miller ©2011)

As time went on additional churches were established, including what is today the largest church in diocese, the Church of the Redeemer in Amman, Jordan⁶. Also, the enormous original diocese was divided and subdivided into additional regional churches. In 1920 a separate Diocese of Egypt and the Sudan was formed. Eventually, in 1974, the Sudan would become its own province in the Anglican Communion

and is today much larger in terms of membership than its mother province. Today, the other three dioceses of the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East are Iran; Egypt, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa; and Cyprus and the Gulf States.

Presently, the vicar (pastor) of the parish is the Jordanian-born Emad Duaybis. He estimates that there are about 40 Anglican families in the Nazareth area. The next closest Anglican parish is in the town of Reine, which is about 20 minutes away by car. The church has provided a home for both local and foreign Christians since then, though today, aside from pilgrims and the author's family, the congregation is entirely indigenous.

⁶ See Miller 2007a for more information on the history of this church.

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