



The Bridge Report

UPDATE: THE SOUTH SUDANESE



Following is the backdrop for the unfolding story on the South Sudanese refugees living in Israel. This story began during my two week visit to Israel in June, 2008, during which I stayed with close Israeli friends in Jerusalem. They regularly attend an Israeli Church (*Keilah*), so the first Saturday (*Sabbath*), I joined them in attending The Messianic Assembly. This church was one of the first bodies of Messianic believers officially registered in Israel after 1948. The service was conducted in Hebrew by the Assistant Pastor, Victor Kalisher; the assembly consists mostly of Israelis, but also a few foreigners who have learned the language. Below, I have copied parts of the full article from the Sept. 2008 Bridge Report:

"...Right after the service started, the front door opened and twenty-some beautiful, dark-skinned men, women and children walked in and quietly sat down on the pews in the back. I turned to my friend and whispered, "They look like people from Sudan". "They are," she replied. I was mystified.

*At the finish of the service, I was introduced to the leaders of the group, **Simon** - a slender, energetic young man, the administrative leader, and **Matthew**, the pastor of the flock. I learned that they are part of the (at the time) app. 7,000 Sudanese refugees in Israel who, in the last few years have poured across the border from Egypt into Israel near *Eilat* in the *Sinai desert* in their flight from their oppressors.*

*I was curious why the Sudanese were visiting the Assembly on that particular Sabbath, so I learned that **Pastor Victor** is also **Director of the Israeli Bible Society**. Through him, the Assembly had provided them with Bibles in their own languages, and also with most needed relief aid. The Sudanese had come to thank the fellowship for their generosity. A divine appointment!*

*There was an immediate rapport between the two men and myself. **Simon** and **Matthew** care for 250-300 Christian Sudanese who congregate in the poorest section of Tel Aviv. Cont. p. 2*

REFUGEES IN ISRAEL

They invited me to attend their service on Sunday at 7:00pm, and gave me an address a distance from the bus station.



*On Sunday night, with map in hand, I found my way by bus from Jerusalem to the address in Tel Aviv. As I approached the neighborhood, I recognized the place: **The Norwegian Israeli Mission!** They had generously given the Sudanese a place to meet! I walked in and found the pews of the more formal, traditional-style Lutheran sanctuary with stain windows and pipe-organ, filled with Africans who joyfully clapped in unison and swayed to the a cappella worship songs in beautiful harmony.*



It was obvious this was not a religious exercise — the worship came from depths of the people's hearts;

and so did the moving testimonies that followed. Young and old shared how God had rescued them and carried them through unimaginable hardship. One young man, tears rolling down his cheeks, stood up and told how his wife and baby had been killed by Egyptian soldiers as they approached the Israeli border, but God had provided him with a new family — he pointed to the people in the church.



*The teaching, shared by **Matthew** and several elders, focused on encouraging stories from the Bible that demonstrated God's supernatural intervention of provision and care in times of need (Moses with the people in the desert, Joseph, Daniel, Jonah). "Trust in the Lord with all your heart," was the main theme. Their depth of faith and trust in God's goodness in face of insurmountable obstacles moved me deeply! I shared from Eph. 3:1-15 — we are one Body world-wide, and that the Kingdom of God is established in our hearts, so the same Blood that was shed for us has the same color whether our skin is black or white! I looked around: Norway, Sudan, Israel - we were one Body, part of God's Kingdom, connected by His Spirit!*

After the four hour service, Simon gave the background history of



The Sudanese refugees in Israel. Although they are from various parts of Sudan, this group is predominantly South Sudanese. Some of them were abducted as young teenagers by the Muslim government troops from Khartoum who raided their villages, killed, burned, raped; then brought some back to the North as slaves and servants of rich Arabs. Young girls were brutalized and forced into harems as sex slaves. Many fled to Egypt where they had also been used and abused.

On their flight from Egypt to Israel, nearly everybody in the group had lost family members either to the hardship in the desert, or by the gun barrels of Egyptian soldiers. "We know that God spared us and He has given us a future and a hope. He has brought us to this land so we can learn many things, that we can return strong in faith to our country and rebuild it under God."

It became late, so Simon and Matthew accompanied me on foot to reach the last bus to Jerusalem. It was a half hour walk along **Joffa Street** in a poverty-ridden, squalid, drug-infested area where the Sudanese live in



slum-lord apartments, some of them fifteen in one room; many live in the streets. Their dismal condition did not deter these two young men from believing there is a bright future for their people. **"We who are leaders, need to learn the Word of God; a Bible College here is willing to accept us, but it costs \$3,000 per person for one year, plus living expenses"**, Simon said. He shared his dream that everybody in the group would be educated, that they would be taught business and cottage industries from the Jews while in Israel, and then bring that knowledge back to their country. His fear is that the Israeli



government might suddenly deport all of them either to Sudan or Egypt. **"If that happens we will all be killed!"**

Before I left Israel, I met with Victor and his family, and we decided that I would be working through him and the Israeli Bible Society in a partnership in our efforts to helping Simon, Matthew, and their flock. Shortly after arriving back in the States, I wired the first \$2,000.00 Bridge funds to Israel. Half of it is for food, the other half to hire an English teacher to prepare the young leaders to study at the Bible College. They have a future and a hope!"



SINCE THEN — TILL JUNE 2012

Back home, I worked with a local church who generously **gave sufficient ongoing financial support for both Matthew and Simon to attend full time Bible College in Israel**, first in Nazareth, later in Nathania (Netanya). They moved close to their schools, but during the weekends, they traveled by bus back to Tel-Aviv and cared for their flock. **Simon graduated last Fall, while Matthew continued his studies and graduated just a couple of weeks ago.** Victor with the Israeli Bible Society, his church members, and members of other Israeli churches, have continually been helping the steadily increasing number of refugees with Bibles, food, and basic staples.



Since my visit in 2008, the number of refugees from Africa pouring into Israel via Egypt's Sinai desert has dra-

matically increased. Today, the count is an estimated 40,000 among a population of 7.3 million, and they keep coming! App. 10–12,000 are Sudanese (Muslim), among them app. 850 South Sudanese (Christian) and the remainder predominantly from the country of Eritrea.

The suffering of the refugees is indisputable — they have faced war, starvation, physical and mental abuse where they came from. In Egypt they have been further used and abused with more suffering to follow. In their belief that in Israel they would find a better life, some of them finally sold the little they owned to pay greedy opportunists to help bring them to the Israeli border, then to be



abandoned in the desert without food and water. They have seen family members die next to them of thirst and hardships, or shot by Egyptian soldiers. Some of the fleeing refugees have encounter a worse fate (as reported in a recent CNN investigative TV program). They are abducted by desert Bedouins, who in league with international crime cartels, cut out their various organs (heart, liver, kidneys) while the victim is still alive, and that without anesthesia! The subjects of this unimaginable cruelty are then crudely sewn up and left to die in the desert. The organs are being sold on the increasingly large international organ donor black-market to the highest bidder!

The Israeli government is uncertain how to handle the refugees, as they have a firm traditional immigration policy that requires that an individual must prove 25% Jewish ethnicity from the mother's lineage to be allowed permanent residency in the country. Israel was established in 1948 as a refuge and homeland for the Jewish people!

This indecision from the government on down, has caused the Sudanese to fall between the cracks. When they come across the borders, exhausted and traumatized, they are met by Israeli soldier who mostly treat them kindly; they receive food and water, and are detained in camps for a period of time. Later, they are transported to various population centers, often city parks, and dropped off without a work visa or medical or social services. Without sustenance, many are forced into black market and other illegal activities, resulting in rising crime in the local neighborhoods.

The issue is coming to a head, causing instability in the *Knesset* (Parliament) and unrest in the streets. In the last few days, demonstrations have been held in several Israeli cities. The refugees come under the protectorate of the UNHCR (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) as legitimate asylum seekers. Following the independence of South Sudan in July 2011, however, the South Sudanese refugee population in Israel, no longer qualify as asylum seekers, as their new government in South Sudan is warmly welcoming their

expats home. Israel was the first country South Sudan's newly elected President Kiir visited. The two countries established a mutual friendship and diplomatic relationship.

In an effort to ease the crisis, the Israeli government offered all South Sudanese in the country free airline ticket to South Sudan and €1,000.00 (app. US\$ 1,300.00) in cash if they would voluntarily leave Israel by March 1 and return to South Sudan. After that date, they would be considered illegal, thus arrested and deported without any financial support. Most declined the offer from fear their



homeland is not stable enough to accommodate them, yet,

In a phone conversation on June 12, Matthew told me that his student visa had been revoked, that five of his church members had been arrested, and that app. 300 of the 850 South Sudanese will be deported from Israel back to South Sudan by air on June 17. From a community of 250/300 South Sudanese in Tel Aviv cared for by Matthew and Simon, app. 50 church members are firmly committed Christians. Matthew is extra concerned for them.

Last month, I connected Matthew and Victor with **William Levi** (with whom we have networked for two decades in serving the South Sudanese people) who has invited Matthew to come and stay in the Christian community he has established with his people two hours South of the capital, **Juba** (<http://www.bridgeinternational.org/articles/southsudan.php>).

FROM R.K.'S CORNER

Little did I know in June 2008, when I responded to a group of South Sudanese refugees in an Israeli church in Jerusalem I visited, that God had effectuated this divine appointment for a bigger purpose — that the Gospel may be spread throughout many tribes and tongues in a free South Sudan whose new constitution is built on the Judeo-Christian faith! God transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary!

After meeting Simon and Matthew, I returned to the States and found provision for them to attend Bible College in Israel. There they were grounded in the Word of God, which they brought back and taught their fellow Sudanese in Tel Aviv.

Four years later, this flock of believing South Sudanese refugees in Israel are retuning to a free homeland. As they spread out to the various tribes to whom they belong, they will be bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to their families and communities. May each of them be a point of light, bringing love where there is hate, comfort where there is grief.

When they arrive back home, they will have many needs. **For you who desire to sow financially into the lives of these men and women, please mark your donation: South Sudanese Workers.**

... Cont from p. 5 I am also connecting Matthew with **Sabet and Suzy Kuj** (see <http://www.bridgeinternational.org/articles/southsudan.php>). They have a clinic and ministry in **Tonj**, the main city of the **Dinka Tribe** to whom both Sabet and Matthew belong, thus they speak the same language.

There will be many problems and many challenges for the people when they arrive in Juba. A positive aspect is that the government welcomes the people back, and will give each person a plot of free land in the individual tribal areas from which they come, but it will take tenacity and hard work to start from the ground up. This story continues to evolve every day. Please stand with us as we pray -

- for safe passage for those who are leaving Israel and repatriating to South Sudan.
- particularly for every believer in the church in Tel Aviv, that the Lord will lead each of them to a safe place where they will prosper, grow in faith and hope, continue to be light and salt for the Gospel to the people in their new communities, and find good fellowship with other believers.
- for Matthew and Simon as shepherds of the flock, that the Lord will guide and establish them in the places God has prepared for them.
- that 3 John 1:2 will be real in all of their lives, ***"I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, even as your soul prospers."***



13762 State Road 84, Suite 423
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33325
USA

Ragnhild K. Ulrich ("R.K.")
Executive Director

Tel 1.954.916.0521

Fax 1.954.916.8740

E-Mail:

TheBridge@BridgeInternational.org

Website:

www.BridgeInternational.org

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