

The Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies: Reflections of a Modern Pioneer

David B. Galbraith and Blair G. Van Dyke

David B. Galbraith (galbraithdb@hotmail.com) is a professor emeritus from BYU. *Blair G. Van Dyke* (blairvandyke@msn.com) teaches at the Orem Institute of Religion.

In the history of the Church in the Near East, the contributions of David B. Galbraith are on par with other Latter-day Saint pioneers in the region, such as Jacob Spori and Joseph W. Booth. David Galbraith was born in Raymond, Alberta, Canada, and spent most of his adult life focusing on the history, issues, events, and cultures of the Near East. In 1961 he moved to Israel to study Hebrew and live on a kibbutz. It was there that he met Frieda Kruger, a native of the Netherlands, whom he later married. Upon completing his bachelor's and master's degrees at Brigham Young University, the Galbraiths moved to Israel in 1969 so David could pursue doctoral studies in international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Specifically, he studied and wrote extensively about conflict resolution in Arab-Israeli relations.

In 1972, Brother Galbraith was appointed resident director of BYU's Study Abroad program in Israel. In that year he was also called to serve as the first branch president of the Church in Jerusalem. He personally oversaw the Study Abroad experience of thousands of students who came to the Holy Land through BYU. As time passed and the program grew, the First Presidency asked Brother Galbraith to oversee developments that led to the acquisition of property and the construction of the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. In 1987 he was named as the first director of the Jerusalem Center.



Blair Van Dyke and David Galbraith

Van Dyke: This interview commemorates the twenty-year anniversary of Brigham Young University Study Abroad students moving into the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies on March 8, 1987.

Brother Galbraith, please describe your relationship with President Harold B. Lee and explain the role he played in the eventual construction of the Jerusalem Center.

Galbraith: My first contact with President Lee was when he came to the Holy Land in 1972. I received correspondence indicating that he was coming. He was accompanied by Elder Gordon B. Hinckley and President Edwin Q. Cannon (president of the Swiss Mission, of which Israel was a part). Their wives (Freda Joan, Marjorie, and Janath, respectively) also accompanied them. The significance of President Lee's visit was that he was the first prophet, seer, and revelator in two thousand years to visit the Holy Land. Prior to his visit, many General Authorities had come through, but never a prophet. The small community of Saints living in that land were steeped in the prophecies of the last days, and we looked forward to the signs noted in the scriptures. We would single out these brethren who were passing through and question them about whether we were in the middle of prophecy being fulfilled. We had hoped their visits were part of those prophecies. We were perhaps a bit naive, young, and immature in the gospel, but we were excited

with every visiting member of the Twelve. Eventually, they all came through, but this visit was different—this was *the* prophet himself.

One of the first things we asked, in a simple way, was, “Can we meet on the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday) for worship services instead of Sunday?” And as we might have expected, he said no. He said there was no precedent for this, and clearly Sunday is the Lord’s day. But before he left, President Lee asked, “Would you please write a letter and address it to the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve and explain why you made that request?” President Lee continued, “I have felt in the course of our visit to this land that that question was too important to answer on the spur of the moment.” We explained to him that for investigators to come to church on a Sunday was nigh unto impossible because Sunday is a normal workday and they would have to miss work. To bring their children to Sunday School or Primary they would have to take them out of school. Also, we all had obligations on Sunday. It was a normal school day for us at the university or wherever we were engaged.

We gulped at his negative response and started wondering how we could make this work. We had been meeting on Saturdays without authorization from Church headquarters; it felt good and we felt justified. There seemed to be something very right about going to church on Saturday in Israel, especially Jerusalem, with all the Jewish families walking hand in hand to the Wailing Wall or to a nearby synagogue. There was no traffic, no bustle. It was a beautiful Sabbath day. We could learn a lot about keeping the Sabbath from our Jewish friends. There were no sports or other distracting activities. Saturday seemed perfect for our Sabbath. We recognized it was a unique request and would not be binding on anyone else in the Church.

It took a couple months to get a response to that letter, but it came back positive authorizing us to meet on Saturdays instead of Sundays and allowing the small Church community in Egypt and other Muslim lands to meet on Fridays at the same time, because they too were struggling with similar problems (Friday being the Muslim holy day). In the letter, President Lee referred us to Doctrine and Covenants 124:49, indicating that we were freed from the obligation to meet on Sunday. Even more to the point, he referred us to Romans 14, the entire chapter. That was exciting because it speaks of the Sabbath day and our dietary preferences and that we must not destroy someone’s faith over things that are not paramount to our personal righteousness. It is a nice way to look at ourselves. So we were formally authorized to worship on Saturday, and for us that authorization was a big thing.

Another request we made of President Lee involved Elder Orson Hyde. We asked, “Could we have your blessing to create a memorial to honor Orson Hyde in some way?” He authorized us to start looking. He was thinking more in terms of a statue on a tiny parcel of land. Statues don’t go well in Israel, not among the Jews and certainly not among the religious Jews. There are no statues in that country that are erected by Jews. It’s deemed by many as a form of idolatry. They have many artistic monuments in parks and squares honoring the memory of significant people but never a statue of a human being. So, the search began for land where an appropriate monument to Orson Hyde could be created. At the same time, President Lee also authorized us to search for land upon which we could build a chapel where our members could meet and call their own. You cannot even imagine with what joy and enthusiasm we began to search.

Some time after our search began, Jerusalem’s mayor, Teddy Kollek, called me and said, “Do you think your church would be interested in a five-and-a-half-acre plot of ground in the heart of the Mount of Olives to honor your Orson Hyde?” And on the basis of my assurances, he asked whether the First Presidency would receive a delegation from the mayor’s office. After I had done my homework, I assured him they would, but I wasn’t quite sure why it would take a delegation. It turned out in the end they were hoping for a considerable sum of money. It was a million-plus dollars that was finally donated, not from the tithes of the Church, but from private donations of hundreds and hundreds of people—mostly, but by no means all, Church members. Donations were gathered through the Orson Hyde Foundation, which was established by the Church for the project. It was headed by LeGrand Richards of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Looking back on President Lee and Elder Hinckley’s visit, it struck us that this was a milestone in the history of the Church in the Holy Land, and whenever this history is written, it needs to focus on the visit of these brethren.

In the course of that visit, President Lee organized the first Jerusalem Branch at a meeting of the small body of Saints held at the Garden Tomb. We had previously been meeting just as a group of Saints. The organization of the Jerusalem Branch was a very memorable occasion, and looking back with the advantage of hindsight, it was an amazing experience to have the organization of the branch established by the prophet of the Lord.

Also, President Lee endured what might have been life-threatening health problems while he was in the Holy Land. The prophet and his

party stayed on for several days and insisted on a one-day tour to Galilee. We only learned later that his back was giving him much discomfort and pain. The ride to Galilee and back was a very long trip to make in one day. We didn't realize the agony he was in because he was full of questions, stories, and good humor throughout the trip. Upon our return that night, he suffered terribly and coughed uncontrollably. When he could take it no longer, he called Elder Hinckley for a blessing. As the result of that blessing, he was miraculously restored to good health.

President Lee and Elder Hinckley had an interesting visit with the two chief rabbis of Jerusalem. It was protocol that the leaders of other churches call on the chief rabbis when they visit Israel. I had set up the meeting and noted the reluctance of the chief rabbis to meet with President Lee and Elder Hinckley. I did not fully appreciate their concerns. I thought protocol was protocol, and even though we did not see eye-to-eye on certain matters of faith, I felt the meeting was appropriate. I briefed President Lee and Elder Hinckley just prior to the visit by telling them that I had sensed discomfort on the part of the chief rabbis concerning their visit. Nevertheless, President Lee reassured everyone it would be fine. And in violation of protocol, I suppose, before hospitable greetings were even shared, one of the rabbis asked, "Does your visit signal the desire of your faith to proselytize in Israel?" The response by President Lee was inspired! He said, "We do not come in through the back door to any land but through the front door invited." I saw those two rabbis relax, and I could see them thinking to themselves, "Well, we will never invite you, and you won't come through the back door, so we can be friends." The meeting went on for a half hour, and it was delightful.

The promise that we would come through the front door only after being invited to proselytize was very significant. It guided the thinking of Church leaders and Brigham Young University administrators as they entered into legal agreements years later. This concept was first used in our application to be officially recognized as a church in Israel. Second came the promise that we would not use the Jerusalem Center for missionary purposes. In both these cases, the wording of the many legal documents were written in the same spirit of President Lee's response to those rabbis in 1972. After all these years, we are comfortable that we have made legal agreements with the Israeli government that are fair *and* did not compromise the position of the Church doctrinally regarding our missionary interests. One day we will take the gospel to the Jews throughout the world, but as President Lee stated, that will never happen in Israel until we are invited to come in

through the front door.

Van Dyke: In addition to President Lee, what other Church leaders were instrumental in the establishment of the Jerusalem Center?

Galbraith: While it is always interesting to recognize “firsts,” many General Authorities that would follow were at least as intimately involved with developments in that land as President Lee. A succession of Church Presidents, including Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, Howard W. Hunter, and Gordon B. Hinckley, all played key roles, as did Elders N. Eldon Tanner and Thomas S. Monson, BYU presidents Dallin H. Oaks and Jeffrey R. Holland, and Church Commissioner Henry B. Eyring. It would take chapters to do justice to their respective contributions toward the establishment of the Jerusalem Center. However, Elders Howard W. Hunter, James E. Faust, and Jeffrey R. Holland formed an executive committee appointed by the First Presidency to oversee the establishment of the Jerusalem Center. Ultimately, however, President Gordon B. Hinckley, who accompanied President Lee on his initial visit, was more intimately involved with recommendations, approvals, and final decisions than any other President.

More than General Authorities played an essential role. A brief overview such as this interview does a terrible injustice to the literally hundreds of individuals who go unnamed, whose contributions to the establishment of the center were critical. For example, who can ever forget the role of Robert C. Taylor, who we will speak of later, or of two former BYU vice presidents, Fred S. Schwendiman and his wife, Nonie, and Robert J. Smith and his wife, Lola? They were in charge of construction and finances, respectively. Both couples sacrificed four or more years in Israel away from family and friends. Or the resident leaders in Israel who administered the day-to-day study programs, such as D. Kelly Ogden, who, together with his wife, Marcia, and their young family, lived in Israel for over thirteen years? Or Dann W. Hone, who played a key role in curriculum development both at BYU and in Israel? Or Arthur Nelson, a noted Salt Lake attorney, who was appointed by the First Presidency to go to Jerusalem and be their legal adviser in the delicate matters regarding the final wording of the lease document? How could we tell the story of the Jerusalem Center without understanding the ongoing administrative role of James R. Kearn? These people imbued the academic offerings of the Jerusalem Center with a spiritual quality that changed countless lives. And the list goes on.

Van Dyke: Explain the significance of the Church's receiving the status of an officially recognized church in Israel in 1977. How unique is it to be recognized as a religion in Israel, and how did that allow us to move

forward to the eventual construction of the Jerusalem Center?

Galbraith: To be landowners and have banking privileges and deal in large sums of money, we felt we needed to be formally recognized by the government of Israel as a church with legal status, and we later determined that Brigham Young University should acquire that same status. The Church and university are, from a legal standpoint, two different organizations, and the Brethren in Salt Lake were very anxious to keep them separate. So we retained an attorney, Jacob Cohen, who had some experience in these things, to help the Church gain legal status. The Church legal department came out and prepared Cohen and helped him understand our intentions.

There were five old non-Jewish religions that were recognized in Israel: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Baha'i, and Anglican. They were not interested in new upstarts working into their elite group. The Baptists and others had tried and failed. Our attorney explained that we would likely never attain to the status of the original five, whose presence predated the state of Israel, unless we could also show a similar official presence existing before Israel's establishment in 1948. At the time, we felt we had to make the attempt because we could not accomplish all we wanted to do without having that status. We were excited knowing the history of the Church and knowing of the missionaries, Elder Adolf Haag and Elder John Clark, who died while serving missions in Haifa and were buried there in the 1890s. We also knew there had been a mission home in Haifa before the establishment of the state of Israel. In fact, the history indicates that a mission home was authorized to be purchased in Haifa. So we visited the Haifa land registry to find evidence that we were landowners before the state of Israel was established. We wanted to be able to show that we not only had a presence but also that there were two men buried in the Haifa cemetery that sacrificed their lives preaching the gospel.

As it turned out, the land registry could not help us. We had the dates, we had the street, we had the very building, we knew the corner as we do to this day, but they found no evidence in any of their documents that we had owned land outright. In the meantime, we were making good progress on preparing the document and other pieces of evidence we needed to become a legal entity. Recognition as a legal entity in Israel was based on a document known as the Articles of Association. The wording of this document was critical because it defined the bylaws, rules, and regulations of the organization—how it was to be governed, its purposes, and so forth. The Interior Ministry, together with the legal department, would scrutinize it and sign off

on it if it met the rigid requirements for a public and legal entity in Israel (*Amuta* in Hebrew). In the end, the Articles of Association sailed right through without complication. Although we did not acquire the status of the original five, we had met the requirements of Israeli law for modern associations. A lot of faith was exercised, and many prayers were offered pleading that we would be successful. And suddenly we were there—a legal entity with all the rights to go with it, including land ownership. We were so grateful. And with the advantage of hindsight, you can see the hand of the Lord in how all these things came together allowing the Church to be formally recognized. In the telling of the story it doesn't sound very exciting—for members of the Jerusalem Branch, however, it was a miracle. The Articles of Association were approved on June 16, 1977.

It is of interest that a few years later another Israeli attorney, Joseph Kokia, was retained to successfully guide BYU through the same political minefield in establishing its own legal status in Israel. We also retained a third attorney, a Palestinian, Fuad Schegadeh, to assist us in addressing the concerns of the Arab/Palestinian community.

Van Dyke: While official recognition was sought, you continued to move forward with the Orson Hyde Memorial. Explain how the Orson Hyde Memorial was a forerunner to the Jerusalem Center.

Galbraith: It was gratifying to Mayor Teddy Kollek, the city fathers, and the other municipal and national leaders that we had come forth with such a generous sum to offer (remember, the Orson Hyde Memorial Foundation raised about one million dollars to put toward the memorial). But the story didn't begin there. The story began with an Italian entity who owned that spot, eight acres of land on the Mount of Olives, and had applied to the city to build a medical facility on that site. The city turned them down, saying you can build your medical facility on all kinds of places in Jerusalem but not on the Mount of Olives. But they had owned that land for decades or maybe even centuries—I'm not sure. They wouldn't give it up, and they came back to the city and said, "If we are allowed to build our medical facility in the lowest, most northern corner of the site among residential homes and keep it nestled away—we will donate the remaining five and a half acres to the city." The city agreed, and they built their facility. That building is there to this day, although used for other purposes.

In the meantime, the city had this huge, incredible piece of property on the heart of the Mount of Olives, and it fit perfectly with Mayor Kollek's plan to surround the Old City of Jerusalem with parks. Mayor Kollek was determined that the Old City would stand out as a

jewel surrounded by green space—parks all around it. It would be an enormous and expensive undertaking, but the offer from the Italian property owners was a great impetus in helping the mayor realize his dream. And we became a part of it. Mayor Kollek came to the Church, and we responded with that million-dollar-plus donation. It wouldn't take a fraction of a million dollars to beautify the area that would become known as the Orson Hyde Memorial Garden. That did not cost half a million or even a quarter of a million dollars. But the rest of the money would be used to beautify Jerusalem in keeping with Mayor Kollek's dream. Keep in mind, we do not own that land or even lease it. But we entered into a contract with the city that allowed us to name it and then obligated the city to care for the gardens in perpetuity.

And that is how it happened. Our Salt Lake City landscape architects worked with Jerusalem landscape architects, and they came to a meeting of the minds. They wanted to keep part of it rustic, typical of the Mount of Olives. Over the centuries, the Mount of Olives had been almost completely denuded of olive trees, so we brought in many, many olive trees. Those trees were planted all over the site. Even a few very mature olive trees were brought in. The garden also included an amphitheater in the uppermost part that captures a magnificent view over the city of Jerusalem. It included a large plaque within that amphitheater containing portions of the Orson Hyde dedicatory prayer in Hebrew and English. And because the park runs down the steep face of the mount, a path winds its way from the northern to the southern boundaries, back and forth, back and forth, down to the bottom and exits at Gethsemane. The site was already walled by the Italian foundation that had previously owned the land, so we knew the limits of our property.

The Orson Hyde Memorial Garden had something rather unique for the city at the time—a sprinkler system. This meant that the grasses and wild flowers and blooming bushes would be green throughout most of the year. April is one of the nicest months of the year in Israel. Wildflowers bloom throughout the land. Everything is lush and green. By May, and certainly by June, most everything is dead except for the trees, bushes, and typical desert flora that survive in that arid half of the year from June to November. But with our sprinkler system, that five and a half acres was beautiful, lush, and green throughout the hot, arid desert summer.

I was so pleased that one of our first major acts in the city as a Church was to donate so much money, without strings, toward a park for the enjoyment of Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. The memorial garden was a place to ponder, a place to meditate, a place to get

away from the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem. When Christians visit the memorial, they can see from the amphitheater almost all the sites that were linked to the Savior's Jerusalem ministry.

It is a marvelous park, and in establishing it, we didn't meet any opposition like we would meet later with the Jerusalem Center. The dedicatory services were just amazing. Two thousand Latter-day Saints, six members of the Quorum of the Twelve, the prophet, President Kimball, and President N. Eldon Tanner, his counselor in the First Presidency, were in attendance along with many Arab dignitaries and Israeli leaders of government and education. It was very well attended. Loudspeakers were situated so that anyone within the five-acre garden could hear the program. The BYU students, together with many members of the visiting tours, formed an incredible choir. BYU's Clayne Robison wrote an original piece of music that was marvelous. Teddy Kollek was honored there with a beautiful piece of porcelain depicting Noah receiving the dove with the olive leaf in its beak. It was a memorable occasion.

Now, I've talked about some specifics, but you can see the hand of the Lord furthering a softening process. The Orson Hyde Memorial project allowed the Latter-day Saints to become well known, at least in limited circles. And within those circles it was known that our interests were in beautifying the city and finding ways to bring harmony among the different religions in a very positive way.

Van Dyke: Discuss Robert Taylor's role in planning and building the Jerusalem Center.

Galbraith: Following Robert Taylor's untimely death, I was asked to speak at his funeral. I used as my text the scripture found in 1 Nephi 5:2, 4, which speaks of Lehi as a visionary man. It was cast in a negative sense, but I used it in a positive way relating to Bob Taylor. He was the vision, he was the strength, he was the glue holding things together when everything would have otherwise collapsed. His initial involvement was bringing Latter-day Saint tourists to Israel. He was the head of BYU Travel Study, and he had a vision of his role—but he had even more of a vision for the role of the Church in that land. As it turned out, he played a very significant part in the building of the center. He was the go-between for presidents of Brigham Young University and the Brethren. Typically at BYU, or in the Church, we do not approach the First Presidency or members of the Quorum of the Twelve individually or collectively. But Bob had an open door, and he was welcomed and encouraged by the Brethren. He was forever assisting the Brethren in traveling to Israel and having the inevitable spiritual experiences that

go with the land. Ultimately he played a significant role in getting many members of the First Presidency, from President Lee right up to our current president, Gordon B. Hinckley, to the Holy Land.

I first met Bob when I was in Israel working on my doctorate. Initially it began with lectures to visiting tour groups and later involved directing tours. Then he made it possible for me, a financially struggling student with my wife and two children, to be a part-time BYU employee. This eventually led to full-time employment. So I got to know Bob as well as or better than most people through constant communication, telephone calls, letters, and e-mails.

Bob was a great go-between with the whole Orson Hyde project. By then Elder Howard W. Hunter had been called to represent the First Presidency in everything happening over there, and he invited Elder James E. Faust to assist him in that work. At about that point in time, Jeffrey R. Holland, president of BYU, became involved, and there was a close relationship between the four of them. The Orson Hyde Memorial Garden project brought all the principal players together, leading to the establishment of the center. It was about this time Bob Taylor started organizing Mediterranean cruises whose major port-of-call was Israel. Entire ships were filled to capacity with six hundred to eight hundred Latter-day Saints. The ships would cruise either out of Italy, Turkey, or Greece. One primary purpose of these cruises was to raise money for a future center. The Brethren were always invited to participate: different Brethren came at different times. There were over nine of those cruises over the years.

Under Robert C. Taylor's direction, the first Study Abroad program had started with Daniel H. Ludlow in 1968, and Taylor was also intimately involved in the Orson Hyde Memorial Garden, which was dedicated in 1979. So this is a very interesting period, very intense with more and more Latter-day Saints taking tours to Israel. The BYU Study Abroad program for university students kept getting progressively larger with each passing year. With all the growth, the Study Abroad program was bouncing around from one hotel in Arab East Jerusalem to another. As the program grew, we had to look for more and more space. Finally we found Ramat Rahel—a kibbutz with a hostel located on the southern tip of Jerusalem overlooking Bethlehem. Here we were able to settle down for several years—seven to be exact.

During these years there was a growing interest in Israel among Church members. In fact, President Tanner made the remark that is quite well known today: "The 1970s was the decade when the Church discovered the Holy Land, and the 1980s would be the decade when the

Holy Land discovered the Church.” It has really worked out that way.

So Bob Taylor ran the Study Abroad program and his tours and cruises from BYU. He was like a director of a concert: a master in harmonizing the work and bringing so many people together for a common cause. Robert Taylor urged consideration of a three-in-one facility that included a chapel, a BYU Study Abroad center, and a visitors’ center. He asked, “Why don’t we quit looking for a tiny plot and start looking for a much larger parcel of land that would incorporate all three of these needs?” In the end, certain Jewish circles looked upon a visitors’ center with some suspicion that we were preparing to do missionary work on a large scale among the Jews, so that was set aside. Ultimately, the Jerusalem Center concept grew out of Bob Taylor’s inspired and timely efforts working closely with the leaders of the Church. I believe he was raised up by the hand of the Lord to take a leading role, under the direction of the Brethren, in this great project.

Van Dyke: The building of a multipurpose center in Jerusalem was announced at the time of the dedication of the Orson Hyde Memorial Garden. Describe the events surrounding that important announcement.

Galbraith: On the cruise ship sailing toward Israel in 1979, with that enormous group of Latter-day Saints I described earlier, President Kimball and Elder Hunter announced that the Church, together with BYU, would build a center in Jerusalem. At that time we didn’t have the land, but we had a big table-size model of what that center could look like. It received a lot of interest and was picked up by the media—especially the *Church News*—and the die was cast.

We had been searching for sites for a building in Jerusalem for some time prior to this announcement. In fact, while President Kimball and all those other members that I noted were there for the dedication of the Orson Hyde Memorial, they were taken to the various proposed sites, saving the best one for last. It was an L-shaped piece of property close to where we are now located, but there was a ridge that blocked the site from the view of the Temple Mount and Gethsemane and the Orson Hyde Memorial. We explained to President Kimball and his party, “If we walked about two hundred yards north, there is a big open field. The view from there is spectacular, and it is what one could see from the second or third floor of our center if we build that high on the L-shaped property.” So the whole party walked out to this different site, which we had no intention of showing them, but the view of the Old City was magnificent! That is when President Tanner, tongue in cheek, said, “Well, all in favor of this sight, indicate by raising your hand.” He knew better. I don’t know what prompted him to

say that. I knew that he knew that the site absolutely was not available. However, all eyes turned to see that President Kimball was raising his hand in approval, and we all raised our hands to follow suit. No one was going to disapprove of the site President Kimball approved of. At the time I thought this was humorous because I knew the site was out of the question.

We were not surprised when all our friends in high places told us, “Forget it! There have been far more powerful and influential people than you who have sought to obtain that land for their own building projects—contractors, politicians, Muslims seeking to have it restored to them—and all have failed.”

It was an explosive piece of real estate, and we ceased to pursue it any further. But six months later, when I was visiting Salt Lake City, President Tanner asked how we were doing in acquiring that site. That was a good opportunity to speak one-on-one with him and tell him the problems we would face. To this he said, “I still feel good about it. Would you continue to focus your efforts on obtaining that site?” Of course I agreed. But it was way more than I could possibly do to run the Jerusalem Study Abroad program and deal with the Israeli government to obtain the property, so I got some help from Bob Thorn.

Bob Thorn was of Thorn Construction, a Harvard graduate, and a returned mission president. He came without personal experience in the Middle East, but he was a fast learner and a very eloquent speaker. He came to Israel without his wife or family for about a month to see just what was possible and whether we should even try to obtain this property. He ended up staying for nearly one year. We finally brought his wife, Norma, to Israel. After a number of miracles, we eventually obtained the site.

It is quite a story! And the first miracle, in my opinion, was the process of convincing the city leaders to even entertain our proposal. There were all kinds of committees such as the Beautiful Jerusalem Committee, the Beautiful Israel Committee, citizen committees, and the Jerusalem Land Authority, all committed to ensuring that special sites in Jerusalem were not turned over to ugly high-rise building projects and so forth. Additionally, there were the Muslim community and the Orthodox Jewish community that had to be convinced that the construction of a Christian edifice on the Mount of Olives was agreeable. From the beginning, our project seemed out of the question from every vantage point. Only President Kimball, President Tanner, Bob Taylor, and a select few others had the vision at that point. Because of that, we kept working. That involved countless meetings with the Jerusalem Land Authority

and the Israel Land Authority. They were government offices attached to the Ministry of Agriculture that oversaw all development in Israel and specifically in the city of Jerusalem. We were successful in impressing the Jerusalem Land Authority with our proposal of what we would like to do with the property. That favorable presentation was the crack in the door, so to speak. Without giving us a commitment, the Jerusalem Land Authority and the Israel Land Authority said, “We will work with the Interior Committee, the Planning Committee, and the Planning Commission, and we will see if we can get a positive reaction from them.”

It was just amazing how one committee after another said, “Yes, we could support a project like that.” I remember on one occasion we sat with the city engineer and his committee. We had a large detailed map of the desired site. The map included the nearby Hebrew University and other buildings in the area. The map also included the elevations of the site. We had prepared the city engineer by telling him that we had retained an architect, David Reznik, whom he knew well and highly respected. Reznik and his team were with us in this meeting and explained that we couldn’t really do what we intended to do unless we had at least five acres (the site we wanted was just over five acres). And it was such a precipitous site that we had to show how we would build eight levels into the hill and how we would keep our profile down so it would not be an eyesore on the Mount of Olives. We also had to explain how we would work the gardens into those levels and then extend them out onto the Mount of Olives so it would be like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Our presentation was convincing, and the city engineer was persuaded that it would be a beautiful place. He took a black felt pen and on the map freehanded the boundaries of the very site on which the Jerusalem Center now stands. He said, “This is the property line if you can get the zoning commission to change the zoning laws for that parcel of ground. If you can do that, we will consider your project on one condition, and that is that you demonstrate to us that what you want to build on the site is worthy of the site.” Well, no architect in the world would miss this opportunity, and David Reznik, working closely with our Salt Lake City architect, Frank Ferguson, was anxious to show that they could design a building on the Mount of Olives that Jerusalem’s city officials would be very pleased with.

But there remained huge hurdles in our path—the biggest was changing the zoning laws. There were so many details involved in changing zoning laws. These included public notices that had to be nailed to every tree and telephone pole. We published our plans in

the official gazette, the Hebrew and Arabic newspapers, and those printed in English, satisfying any and all criticism or outright objection to our project. It was just amazing that, in the end, the project passed through this phase successfully. One complaint was voiced by our soon-to-be next-door neighbor on the Mount of Olives. He was the papal representative of the Catholic Church in Israel. He naturally was concerned about the pending noise and dust that our construction would surely bring. We appeased his concerns. Also, the Beautiful Jerusalem Committee made some demands concerning the height of the building—that it not exceed zoning limitations standards. Their requests were reasonable, and we readily assured them we would work with them to remedy their concerns.

Van Dyke: At what point was the advocacy of Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, indispensable?

Galbraith: Before we ever made any presentations or petitions to the different municipal committees, the Jerusalem Land Authority asked for the mayor's recommendation concerning us and our project. He gave us his strong and positive endorsement. It carried a tremendous amount of weight that the mayor of Jerusalem—and not just the mayor but Teddy Kollek—was in favor of us building on that site. But his powerful influence was even more helpful to cut through the red tape that every Israeli contractor has to deal with. The project, on a number of occasions, was on the brink of coming to a complete standstill. From the process of getting the zoning laws changed, to obtaining the building permit, and all the way through construction—you can hardly imagine what we had to go through! And Teddy was either there in person or he had his personal representative in those meetings just to keep it moving. He knew that his personal attention was essential to our success. Such red tape is unheard of in the United States but common in Israel. The property was finally rezoned, and we received the necessary permits, and we also agreed upon a price for the lease. Ultimately, we would lease the land but not buy it outright. It seems to me that little, if any, of these arrangements would have been made successfully without the help of Teddy Kollek. Even so, our success was not based on this one man. Our lawyers, architects, Israeli politicians, academicians, and many friends and supporters helped make it possible.

Van Dyke: How did the branch members react to the announcement of the center?

Galbraith: The members of the branch were elated! They were an intimate part of this whole process, exercising faith and praying and fasting each step of the way. I remember Elder William R. Bradford

(counselor to Elder Carlos Asay, who presided over the International Mission, of which we were a part at the time) visited us and said, “You know, we pray for you in generic terms, but the prayers of the Saints in Israel are much more specific, full of faith and desired details. It is your prayers that will be heard and honored.” He said that in a district conference to all the members living in Israel at the time. And we did pray very specifically for the needs of the moment—that was true. Our members prayed constantly for the support and success of the Jerusalem Center project each step of the way. That tiny little congregation prayed their way through every specific aspect of receiving the many building permits. For example, we had to obtain permits from the fire department, from water and sewage, from electricity, and many more. Each permit was critical in its own way, and each of these steps held potentially very difficult obstacles.

At one point when we had cleared many hurdles and it seemed that everything was going smoothly, the Department of Antiquities wrote us a letter that basically said, “Oh, by the way, if in the process of excavations for a foundation you should run upon any relics or antiquities or ruins of any kind, by law you have to instantly cease and desist until the Department of Antiquities gives you permission to proceed—or not!” The point was that all excavating would have to stop while an assessment was made of the importance of the find. In reality, it could have ended all the years of effort to obtain the site. To ensure this, the department placed a man on the site every moment of the day that the bulldozers were excavating. This is because antiquities are viewed as Israel’s heritage and national treasure. The Department of Antiquities continued by writing to the effect that it is in your interest to know that the building site for the Hebrew University, just a few hundred yards from you, was peppered with tombs and antiquities. But it was built at the time when Israel’s antiquity codes were not so strict, and they built over the top of them. But things have changed, and new laws now protect those sites in the national interest of Israel.

So with all the work, all the energy, all the prayers that had already been expended, we learned that it could all be for naught if we came across one grave. And here was a five-and-a-half-acre plot on the Mount of Olives facing the Old City of Jerusalem, what were the chances of not encountering a single tomb? Against all odds, we uncovered no antiquities of any kind and not a single burial site. It was another miracle as though the hand of the Lord had preserved that entire site for us through the centuries.

Van Dyke: At what point did opposition to the Jerusalem Center

erupt?

Galbraith: It erupted when the bulldozers actually started cutting into the mountain on August 21, 1984. There had been so many opportunities for those who opposed our presence to have intervened in a very conclusive way. They could have caused us so much grief and maybe precluded our building on that site. For some reason they didn't. But once we started to excavate the mount for construction (and, for a time, there was a huge white scar on the Mount of Olives) and when all the cranes and heavy equipment moved onto the site, the opposition to our project exploded. And then we went through a miserable three and a half to four years dealing with the opposition.

Van Dyke: From your perspective, why was the opposition so fierce?

Galbraith: Those who opposed the Jerusalem Center possessed an absolute conviction that the center was way too big—larger than we could possibly need for a Study Abroad program. They were convinced that we couldn't demonstrate a need for such a huge place. We were then operating out of Ramat Rahel—a kibbutz with a tiny little hostel. And our move into this enormous center just did not add up in their minds. We had made it clear that our building would house our Study Abroad program, and they said, "You don't need this incredible space for it. What you have told us you're going to do with the building cannot be true. You must have ulterior motives and ulterior designs."

Many of the more religious Jews do not read the newspapers or watch television or listen to the radio. They have separated themselves, as much as possible, from modern life. To that extent, they were hard to communicate with. It was hard for us to reach out to them and reassure them, and it was only through the intervention of their leaders at the highest levels, including the chief rabbi of Jerusalem and politicians who were ultraorthodox, that we could even pull a meeting together to give reassurances to them about our earnest motives. But some were not interested in being reassured. They were determined to block our project and prevent us from building there.

On more than one occasion, the government of Israel almost fell over a vote of no confidence regarding our center. At that time there was a political crisis in Israel, and a government of national unity was created that encompassed the right, the left, the in-between, the religious, and the nationalists. It was a big potpourri government with so many voices that it, in certain matters, was largely ineffective. Prime Minister Shimon Peres had his turn as prime minister in those four years, and he put together a special committee to deal with the Mormon question. The committee involved eight ministers of government.

Imagine, the busiest officials in any government—the ministers, not their underlings—to deal with the Mormon question on the Mount of Olives. Four of the ministers were opposed to our project, and four were in favor of the center. They immediately went into deadlock, and in the meantime we continued to build the center.

Nearly two years later, there was a scandal involving one of the eight committee members. He was involved in some personal problems and dropped out of the government. This was a crisis in and of itself, but that left the ministerial committee with four members in favor of our project and three opposed. They proceeded to vote in favor of our presence in Jerusalem and of our building on the Mount of Olives.

Another aspect of the opposition involved the fact that we were Christians. Our opponents felt that such a magnificent parcel of land in Jerusalem should have been set aside for an imposing and magnificent Jewish edifice such as the Supreme Court building.

But when all was said and done, the fear of proselytizing was at the real heart of the opposition against us. Many Jews, not just the Orthodox, could not be reassured that we would not proselytize. The Jerusalem chief rabbi said to Elder Hunter, Elder Faust, and Jeffrey R. Holland (then president of BYU) during one of their visits: “Your young people are so beautiful, your blond girls, your students, they radiate light. You won’t have to proselytize. Our young people will beat a path to your door, and we can’t allow it.” Here we were in the middle of saying we are committed, that we will not proselytize or use the center for proselytizing purposes, and they said, “That is impossible!” So the stalemate continued.

Van Dyke: What marked the turning point in our favor from a public relations point of view? When did the opposition subsist?

Galbraith: We hired a public relations firm known as Gitam Image Promotion Systems, and that was a big help. For example, they had us bring our project (and the opposition it was receiving in Israel) to the attention of key members of the U.S. Congress. As a result, a letter was drafted and signed by 154 members of Congress from both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The letter called upon Israel to stop interfering with the Mormon building project and encouraged them to support it. The letter urged Israeli leaders to support the construction of an American institution in Jerusalem.

This letter had an incredible political impact. We enlarged it and ran center-page ads in the thirteen or so major newspapers circulating in Israel at that time. Every signature and the committee assignments that particular members of Congress held was included. Then we sent

a personal copy of this important letter to every member of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament). Gitam (the public relations firm) orchestrated this, and it made a powerful impression on most Israelis, including those opposed to our presence.

Another ripple of the story at this time was the announcement of findings from a two-year study of the “Mormon question” conducted independently by the Ministry of Justice. There had been several allegations and accusations against the Church that there had been money passed under the table and that influence had been bought by the Church in high places. We were accused of dirty dealings. However, not only did the Ministry of Justice find us innocent of all charges and accusations, but they also recommended to the government of Israel that we be allowed to proceed without hindrance.

So everything came together within about a two- or three-week period. The convincing and impressive letter from the U.S. Congress, combined with the Ministry of Justice findings in our favor, and being positively voted out of committee, and the positive report issued from the government ministerial committee, allowed us to breathe a sigh of relief. It appeared that we were on our way.

Van Dyke: Discuss the circumstances surrounding Elder James E. Faust’s declaration, “We will never say never.” He made this statement at this time did he not?

Galbraith: Yes, he did. The center was nearly completed. After working for years, we had finally obtained the blessing of the government and had all the necessary signatures from the essential ministries, only to learn there would be one last hurdle. Just when it appeared that we had overcome all the concerns of those who opposed us, and just when the minister of the interior had been told to make all the necessary preparations to turn the land over to the Mormons, we were asked once again to give a legal undertaking not to proselytize in Israel. President Holland had already issued a legal undertaking not to use the center for proselytizing purposes back in August 1985. That legal document was followed a few months later by an official letter from President Ezra Taft Benson to Mayor Kollek, wherein he stated in part: “Your efforts to keep Jerusalem as an open city and a Holy City for Jews, Moslems, and Christians is most commendable. . . . Hopefully the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies of the Brigham Young University will be a bridge of understanding that will help the efforts to make Jerusalem a city of peace. . . . I am confident that the undertaking given by President Jeffrey R. Holland . . . will be honored. We will also continue to honor, obey, and sustain the laws of the State of Israel and

the city of Jerusalem.”¹

Now, May 1988, more than two years later, the Israeli government was asking for a reaffirmation of the earlier documents relating to proselytizing and once again both from the university and the Church. Our Israeli attorneys advised us that BYU should address a second undertaking since it was requested by the government, but that it might be similar, if not identical to the previous one.

Since BYU has nothing to do with the proselytizing arm of the Church, it was easy to comply with such a request. This second undertaking signed by President Holland reads in part:

BYU undertakes on its own behalf and on behalf of its teachers, students and employees, as well as on behalf of its departments and sections, not to engage in any missionary activity in whatsoever form in Israel. “Missionary activity” means organized activity to induce or persuade any person not being a member of the community of the Mormon Church to become a member of the community of such Church, by way of preaching or teaching the tenets of the Church or otherwise.

Without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, BYU declares and undertakes that the Center will not be used for missionary activity and its teachers, students and employees shall sign an undertaking not to engage in missionary activity in Israel. Any person in breach of such undertaking shall be liable to be dismissed from the Center and/or study program and shall be liable to be sent back home.²

Our Israeli attorneys were comfortable in recommending that BYU provide a second letter; however, they were embarrassed that the Church was also being asked for another commitment from President Benson, especially since the Church was not a party to the lease agreement between Israel and Brigham Young University. But all concerned knew that the source for the request was really coming from the government’s powerful coalition partners—the Jewish religious orthodox parties.

A carefully drafted letter was issued under the signature of Elder Howard W. Hunter, who was authorized to sign it on behalf of the Church. It was short and to the point:

We, the undersigned, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints, hereinafter “the Church”, undertake that the Church will not engage in any missionary activity within the borders of Israel, as long as such activity is not allowed by the government of Israel. For this purpose, “missionary activity” means organized activity to induce or persuade a person not a member of the community of the Church to become a member of the community of that Church, by preaching or teaching the tenets of the Church or otherwise. This obligation applies

to our Church and each of its branches and departments and to every institution under its control.³

The Church document makes it clear that if the door to proselytizing in Israel were ever opened, we would welcome the opportunity. It also protects members that get into casual conversations with Israelis over religion, by insisting that “missionary activity” means “organized activity.” “Organized,” in this context, means missionary activity undertaken under the auspices of the Church, which would include a specific calling to engage in such work, followed up by visits with interested parties, distributing brochures and other Church publications with the intent to convert, and seeking personal commitments to change one’s faith.

It is of interest that the Israeli government attorneys objected to the clause in the Church letter “as long as such activity is not allowed by the government of Israel.” They argued that the clause suggests that Israeli policy may someday change and invite the Church to send its missionaries. They argued that since this will not happen, the clause should be deleted, that the Church should state clearly that it would never proselytize in Israel no matter what.

That moment was a solemn occasion. Elder Hunter and Elder Faust felt the responsibility to represent the First Presidency and the fundamental tenets of the Church when they were confronted with this prejudicial demand. I say prejudicial because such a thing had never been asked of any other Christian faith—it was obvious we were being singled out. Elder Hunter and Elder Faust would not yield to the demand, and Elder Faust vocalized the sentiment of them both when he said, “We will never say never.” And no such agreement was ever entered into by the Church.

The Israelis had our earnest guarantee that we would not proselytize without the invitation of the government of Israel. With this commitment, the Jewish people may rest assured that Latter-day Saints will keep their word. On the other hand, the wording of the document (reminiscent of President Lee’s statement in 1972) allowed the Church to abide, in principle, with the divine injunction to take the gospel to all the world

Van Dyke: The students moved into the center quickly and unannounced on March 8, 1987. Why was it expedient that the students move in at the earliest possible moment?

Galbraith: We had about seventy students at Ramat Rahel winter semester of 1987. These are the students that moved into the center

with almost no notice. The center was not done. The dormitories were nearly finished, but the offices, library, cafeteria, and other important parts of the building were unfinished. But people in high places within the government of Israel were advising us to move in. There is a law in Israel that once you take possession of a site with a roof over it you cannot be evicted. Even though we had passed through the most difficult stages, we learned that a group opposed to our presence was gathering to make one last attempt to ensure we would never take possession of the building by moving in. So we moved into the center unannounced in one day. We began very early in the morning. The newspapers picked up on our move, and the next day it was a leading story. At that point, opposition began to fade. There was nothing more they could do.

The move into the center required a great deal of cooperation between the students and the Jerusalem branch members to get the job done quickly. The seventy students joined the local members of the branch to form a long human chain. We had moving vans and buses filled with our belongings. Books, desks, supplies of every kind—all the things we had acquired over all those years at Ramat Rahel were passed hand-to-hand up the line and into the building. We moved it all within hours from the lowest part of the center to the top through the eight floors that cascaded down the Mount of Olives. I'll never forget the students finally coming into the center—it was air-conditioned—something all subsequent groups would take for granted. But the students that moved from Ramat Rahel savored it as a luxury.

There were a few surprises that first day. For example, we quickly realized that we did not have any toilet paper. Who would have ever thought of that? All those years we were building a center, not stocking a hotel. We also forgot towels. We had to rush to stores in order to meet these basic needs. Since the kitchen was not done, we could not feed our students. However, there was a hotel just below the center called the Commodore Hotel. We contracted with them to feed our students for the first few months until the cafeteria was finished. The students walked to and from the hotel at mealtimes. These inconveniences were completely outweighed by our joy in finally being in our Jerusalem Center.

I wrote an e-mail to BYU president Jeffrey R. Holland the day we moved into the center. It captures my feelings of joy at the time: "All these many months we have labored on a building of cement and stone, and as impressive and grand as this building is, it now takes on added meaning as it assumes the measure of its creation. The students breathe life into it, the breath of life, and those cold, stone corridors and lifeless rooms now take on an air of happiness. In place of the

sounds of construction, there is shouting and whispering, laughing and crying, and the very walls absorb it all, and at last they are content.”

Our students in the building served as an incentive to the contractors to get the job done. They brought on more crews and expedited the whole process. The center was finished on time and on budget. Those students in the building were part of a long series of unforgettable miracles to me.

Van Dyke: On May 18, 1988, Elders Howard W. Hunter and James E. Faust and President Jeffrey R. Holland arrived in Jerusalem to sign the long-term lease securing the property on which the Jerusalem Center was built. Discuss the events of that day.

Galbraith: It had been determined with Israel’s attorney general that the lease would be signed on Wednesday, May 18, 1988. Elders Hunter and Faust and President Holland had arrived May 14th in anticipation of the event.

Just as the Jerusalem Center representatives and the Brethren were getting ready to drive to the signing at 1:30 p.m., a phone call came in that the signing was all off. The national head of the Land Authority had apparently decided that he and his attorneys would have to give one final review of the documents before the district director could be authorized to sign. That would reportedly take about one week.

What more could happen? It was reminiscent of a previous occasion when the Brethren had come over for the signing of the Development Document with the government of Israel, which was interrupted by a terrorist incident and compounded by Israeli bureaucracy. It was as though this was the adversary’s last chance in his war against the center to make sure it did not materialize. Some of the obstacles he threw in the path were trivial and funny; others were of major import. Elders Hunter and Faust and President Holland were scheduled to leave town two days later, on May 20th, and the demands of their positions in the Church and the university would have made a weeklong delay in the signing impossible. More important, the delay constituted a serious violation of protocol because the Brethren had made special arrangements in good faith, at the invitation of the Israeli government, to sign the documents May 18th.

Our attorney, Joseph Kokia, was called, and with all the forceful persuasive powers we could muster, we described the new hitch in the developments as a crisis that absolutely had to be resolved on the spot. While Kokia was seeking a solution, Elder Faust called everyone together and offered a powerful apostolic prayer calling for divine intervention so that the lease could be signed on schedule. In the

meantime, Kokia was successful in reaching the attorney general, who promised he would personally take care of the matter. Within twenty minutes, we were advised by phone that the government's representatives were ready to sign.

Van Dyke: How did you commemorate this significant day?

Galbraith: On the way back from signing, after everything was official, we went to the Garden Tomb. That is where the whole process had started with President Lee in 1972. There, in those sacred surroundings, Elder Hunter asked Elder Faust to offer a prayer of gratitude. It was a solemn and an emotional time. We had gone through so much together, had overcome so many obstacles together, and the hand of the Lord was so evident so many times in our behalf. It was such a moving occasion to be there in the presence of those two Apostles and Jeffrey R. Holland and hear their expressions of gratitude and appreciation. We knew that our years of work and the resulting Jerusalem Center were a worthy offering to the Lord. And we knew it was acceptable to Him.

Van Dyke: You were the first president of the Jerusalem Branch in this dispensation, and you were the first director of the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. Your dreams have become a reality, and students have enjoyed that wonderful center. What are your reflections twenty years later?

Galbraith: Even in the face of the fiercest opposition, we were comforted to know that we were pursuing the will of the Lord, and that made all those difficult periods of opposition easier to cope with. Because of the Jerusalem Center, everyone in Jerusalem—and even Israel—has heard of the Mormons in a positive light. Even those opposed to us, who were determined to fight our presence to the bitter end, can now be found attending our weekly musical concert series at the center. We have become a part of the cultural calendar of Jerusalem. Where we had wished so many years ago for only a visitors' center, we now have something far better. Most important, our enemies became our friends.

It's timely that we remind our readers through this interview that twenty years have passed since students moved into the center. Let us not forget the wonderful and miraculous things that were accomplished in establishing the Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. And let us consider, with faithful anticipation, the reality that many prophetic events await the Church in this part of the Lord's vineyard. **RE**



The completed Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies.

Courtesy of Church Archives

Notes

1. Letter from President Ezra Taft Benson to Mayor Teddy Kollek, dated December 20, 1985.
2. A letter to the government of Israel from Brigham Young University and signed by Jeffrey R. Holland, president, dated May 18, 1988.
3. Issued by the Church and signed by Elder Howard W. Hunter, May 18, 1988.