

# 'Aboud – a paradise defiled

As a village in the Holy Land it had everything – water, pastures, olive groves and good Christian-Muslim relations. Then came the “Israeli Segregation Wall Plan”

**S**cattered along the ridge that separates the coastal plain of Israel-Palestine from the Jordan Valley are many small settlements. They have existed for thousands of years, some as stopping points on ancient highways, others as centres of a rural community and still others marking the presence of underground water, so important in areas where rainfall is limited and unreliable. One such settlement is the village of 'Aboud, lying about 12 miles north-west of Ramallah. With its surrounding hamlets it has a population of 2,500, earning its living from about 7,500 acres of land.

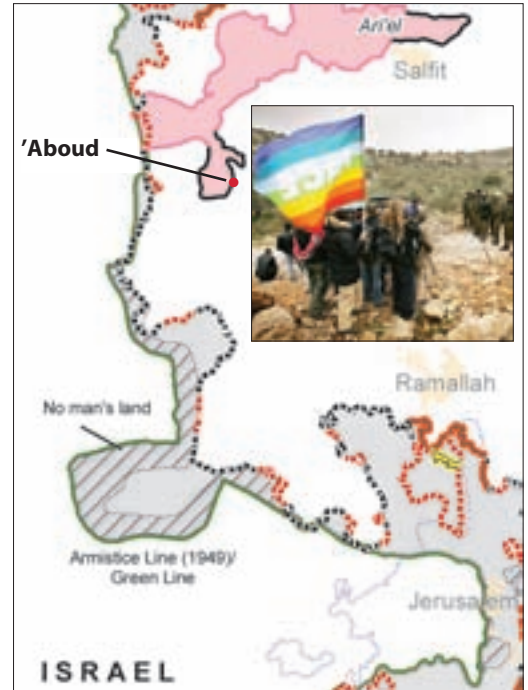
To the outsider it is no different from any other village on those hills. But the picturesque idyll does not tell the whole, remarkable story. 'Aboud sits on a large aquifer, which gives it

not only a reliable source of water all year round but the possibility of commercial farming. Furthermore, this small settlement lies on an ancient route-way running along the western edge of this dividing ridge, perhaps used by Jesus himself to avoid Samaria. This marks it out as “holy” in a land full of such sacred sites. 'Aboud is also the centre of an old Christian community and today boasts a Latin-rite parish alongside a smaller Orthodox one, both with fervent, dedicated and loyal worshippers. Perhaps most significantly of all in this land of inter-religious tension, the Christian community lives in harmony with its Muslim neighbours, who make up half the population.

With beautiful views westward to the Mediterranean, 'Aboud sits above the increasingly developed Israeli lowland, a haven of peace. That peace was brought to an end suddenly last October, not by guns or suicide bombers, but by a far more subtle form of death: enforced land acquisition without compensation and controlled movement and access to lands and families. Thus was a stable community squeezed on to less and less land, creating the competitive tension that is so destructive of mutual respect.

The killing of peaceful harmony will be the most likely result of the Israeli decision to build a section of its security wall through 'Aboud's land. Fr Firas Aridah, the Jordanian parish priest of the Church of Holy Mary Mother of Sorrows in the village, described the dreadful moment: “An Israeli military officer made a tour in 'Aboud on Sunday 2 October 2005. He informed the land owners in 'Aboud that they [Israeli forces] will start building the segregation wall on the lands of 'Aboud from the northern and western sides. He also handed them military orders to confiscate about 3,500 dönüm (1,750 acres) of the land for this act and handed out maps showing the path of the wall.”

“Why us?” the people asked. “There has been no violence here, we are miles away from the nearest centre of Palestinian violence, Ramallah, and we are four miles away from the 1967 borders. We live in peace with our two neighbouring settlements”, a reference to Beit Arye, founded in 1980, and Ofarim, founded two years later. Twenty years ago, ap-



The green line marks the 1949 West Bank armistice line. The barrier – planned, built or under construction, and related works – is shown by the other colours. Source: UNOCHA

proximately 780 acres of agricultural land belonging to the families of 'Aboud were confiscated, without compensation, for military purposes. This was the start of the first Israeli settlement, Beit Arye, on 'Aboud land, within a kilometre of 'Aboud itself. The people did not kick up a fuss since they wanted to be good neighbours, as their tradition and faiths commanded. The settlers have respected them, though contact is limited. Indeed, the good relations of the two communities might have been considered a model of peaceful living in Palestine-Israel, each being on the frontier of its respective territory.

Now, the Israeli Segregation Wall Plan is needed for “security”. That it may be a cover to gain access to the aquifer is deceitful and unworthy of any decent government, and to do this without consultation or financial compensation is to destroy the peace and reject the normal procedures of democratic government.

The result of this land grab and the building of the wall is that a peaceful, law-abiding, hard-working community will have lost to Israel nearly one third of its total land. But that's not all. The 'Aboud farmers will lose the grassland used by shepherds for sheep and goats and the olive groves that are the basic natural resource in the essential production of the community's quality olive oil. Both are central to the welfare of this rural community

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and have been so for centuries. To lose one third of their productive land can only mean loss of work. What else can they do?

Furthermore, the wall will affect access to the ancient religious sites. These are not in the first or even the second division of Holy Land sites, but they are still important to the faith of the local community. Their local saint, Saint Barbara, is honoured here in the community's most ancient and religious site dating back to the sixth century. Hindering such devotion causes much resentment, for faith is part of the daily life of both Muslims and Christians in this community.

As if that were not enough, the planned route of the wall also separates 'Aboud from some of its surrounding hamlets. This will disrupt a thriving rural community, and make the provision of services – religious, educational and social – more difficult. In addition, reducing the land available for building increases the likelihood of overcrowding.

Finally, if the aquifer is taken and results in permanent rationing, as happens already in some West Bank towns, an "us" and "them" situation – in which neighbouring settlers will enjoy unlimited water to irrigate their lawns and fill their private swimming pools – will be seen as provocation and increase the likelihood of violence unheard of in 'Aboud until now.

To the outside, wider world the security fence has been presented as the only way to contain violence. It is "peace" by separation. But as time passes it becomes clear that either this land is too small for its present population, resulting in huge differences in living standards, or Israel has unilaterally decided to force the Palestinians into enclaves that will destroy whatever quality of life they had. Neither is a way to true peace.

Behind the violence of the Palestinians lies the injustice of what has been done to them. This is the cause of the anger that now fills the hearts of the people of 'Aboud. No forum for appeal has been offered and so they are forced to draw the conclusion that they are being punished for the success of their economy and their community.

Perhaps the Israeli authorities thought 'Aboud was so small and insignificant that the Israeli Segregation Wall in this small village would not be important enough to hit the Western press. In this they underestimated the leadership of Fr Aridah. He has lobbied church officials, established a website ([www.hcsn.org/aboutyouth](http://www.hcsn.org/aboutyouth)) and encouraged the protest to be filled with the power of peaceful resistance. In that, too, 'Aboud may set us an example. Perhaps it will also encourage Israel to use more humane methods of expanding its empire. The more communities of peace are treated with violence, the more violent the country becomes. Violence may lead down a road to separation, but separation is never the way to peace. For peace to return, one must walk back up the road to dialogue and listen.

■ Timothy Wright OSB is a former abbot of Ampleforth and has just finished a three-month sabbatical course at the Tantar Ecu-  
menical Institute in Jerusalem.

## CHRISTOPHER HOWSE'S PRESSWATCH

### 'Naming remains an abiding interest even if parents do not have their offspring baptised'



The 5ft 6in star of *Top Gun*, Tom Cruise, happily announced last week not only the weight of the baby daughter to whom his fiancée, Katie Holmes, had given birth but also her length, 20in. Her name was to be Suri.

This provoked *The Sun*, under an "exclusive" label, into declaring that her parents had "blundered" with the name. "They reckon it means Princess in Hebrew," the paper explained. "But language experts say they are mistaken. It is not a Hebrew name and in Hindi it is actually a boy's name, meaning Lord Krishna." The proud parents had also mentioned that Suri meant "red rose" in Persian.

Naming remains of abiding interest to newspaper-reading parents, even if they do not take their offspring to be baptised. Among dozens of mass-market books of babies' names, *The Sun* publishes its own guide to "celebrity" baby names.

In *The Guardian* Mark Lawson thought that the main reason that the birth of Suri attracted more interest than that of Jesus Christ was prurience. Tom Cruise's "adoption of two children led to speculation that he had imposed or suffered some kind of bar to fatherhood," he wrote. "The kindest of the tabloid rationalisations was that Top Gun was firing blanks."

A complicating factor in the Cruise birth was that the actor follows the Scientologists (whom a *Sun* columnist last week called "religious freaks"). The tabloids relished details of Scientological practice, such as the hoped-for eating by Mr Cruise of the placenta.

*The Daily Mail*, like other tabloids, was fascinated that Scientology "dictates that birth should be as silent as possible". An unnamed hospital worker said that as Miss Holmes gave birth, "You couldn't hear anything coming from the room."

Before Suri saw the light of day, the top tabloid tot was a new son for Gwyneth Paltrow, the star of

*Shakespeare in Love*, and Chris Martin, the annoyingly cool singer-songwriter of Coldplay. The child was called Moses, a choice papers thought strange.

The couple's first-born two years ago was called Apple. It was a girl. *The News of the World* said, rather oddly, that they had "courted controversy" with that choice. "It conjured such a lovely picture for me," Miss Paltrow had told Oprah Winfrey on television. "You know, apples are so sweet and they're wholesome and it's biblical."

Biblical? Well, the Bible does mention apples a dozen times, six of these being the metaphorical "apple of the eye". In the Song of Songs comes: "Thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples," and less appositely, "Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love." That sounds like a line from Shakespeare *not* in love, or from a song by Coldplay.

Mention biblical apples, and most people think of Adam and Eve, even though the Authorised Version quite properly speaks of a "fruit" of the tree. Americans are even more familiar than British churchgoers with the hymn *Jesus Christ the Apple-Tree*, collected in eighteenth-century New England by Joshua Smith, a Baptist minister, who put it in his *Divine Hymns or Spiritual Songs* (1784). The words are poetic, folksy, striking and part of American culture.

As for Moses, Paul Vallely of *The Independent* used the Paltrow-Martin birth as a peg for a long piece about the prophet. He made three intelligent preliminary points. First, that the boy was born in the Mount Sinai hospital, in New York. Secondly, that Chris Martin had written a soppy love-song for Gwyneth which included the line, "Like Moses has power over sea so you've got power over me." Thirdly, that Miss Paltrow's father was Jewish.

Back in England, a *Sun* "exclusive" gave news of a St George's Day son for Shane Richie, not to be confused with Guy Ritchie, the father of Madonna's son Rocco (elder half-brother to Lourdes, 10 this year). Shane used to be in *EastEnders*. His fiancée, Christie Goddard, 28, gave birth at St John and St Elizabeth's, the Catholic hospital in north London. They're busily thinking up "a good English name", said "a pal".

■ Christopher Howse is an assistant editor of *The Daily Telegraph*.