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## The Siege of Bethlehem

by Lesley Dawson

I had to remind myself to breathe – almost to remind my heart to beat but then I remembered that I had to be absolutely silent if I wanted to evade capture.

How did I get involved? Why did I go to the market that day? I knew exactly why – my mother sent me with food for my brother who is a member of Hamas. How this happened was a mystery to us all. One week he was a quiet young man studying business at university and the next he had wrapped a kefiyah round his face and strutted up and down the street with a rifle slung over his shoulder. He wouldn't tell us anything about his movements "because of security" he said.

The day it all became more personal was a Saturday and these boys had been baiting the young Israeli soldiers on the checkpoint. They tolerated this for a while and then marched into Bethlehem with their guns at the ready. The chase led them up Hebron Road and then left at Bab Isqaq, past the deaf school and the Holy Family Hospital into the narrow streets of the suk. Playing cat and mouse with the soldiers, they made their way past the Lutherans' Christmas Church and then down the steps past the Syrian Orthodox church.

All shops were sealed up and houses locked and bolted, all lights extinguished. The boys had the advantage over the soldiers as they had been born and raised in these streets, they also knew where they were making for, the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square, which had always looked more like a military building than a religious one. Despite the objections of the priests, they barricaded themselves in and began the long wait.

After twenty -four hours the sounds of shooting had died down and my mother was concerned that my brother had no food. I must find a way to sneak into the church and take some to him. With a small back-pack over my shoulders and wearing my darkest clothes and my kefiyah hiding my face, I slid out of the back yard and crept down through the market.

I knew a back way in through the Armenian priests' living quarters that I assumed the Israelis were unaware of. I eased the door open slowly and prayed that it had been recently oiled. The last thing I needed was a creaking door to give me away. All went well and I eventually discovered my brother and his mates after creeping down the steps to the Nativity Grotto and hearing some sounds in the tunnel leading to St Jerome's Grotto. I tried the door and it opened whereupon I felt a hand over my face and a gun in my back. I was only released when Elias vouched for me.

After such a rough welcome I felt quite aggrieved, but my good humour was restored as they began to attack the food ravenously. Elias gave me messages for my mother and father and suggested I went back home via St Catherine's Catholic church. I was climbing the stairs to the church when I heard Hebrew being spoken in the courtyard, between me and freedom. Until now, this had been a great adventure but now it became much more serious. I slid under one of the nearby pews and waited. The soldiers had obviously entered the church without permission and now I heard the priest telling them to leave. They were obviously reluctant to do so, and it was some minutes before they moved off, but to me it felt like an eternity.

Into the silence came the same voice "You can come out now my son, they have gone". Emerging from behind the kneelers I saw Father Jean Manual, my English teacher from the Freres School. I gratefully made my way to the door as he placed his hand on my head "Go with God. Give my greetings to your father".