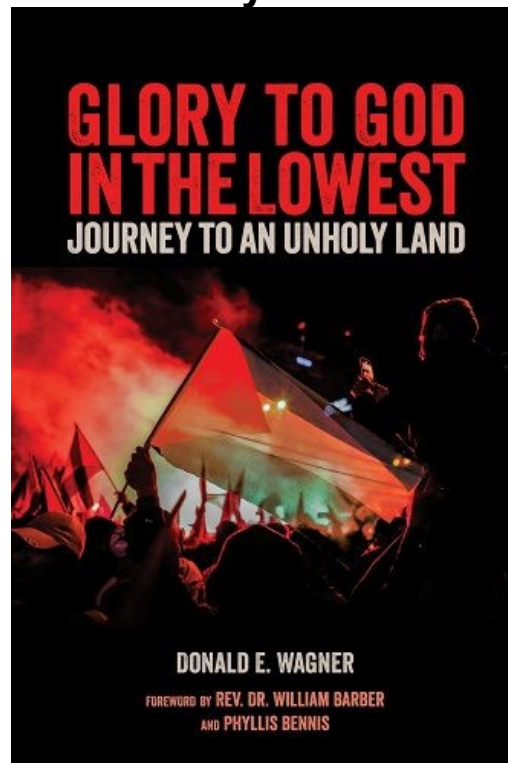


## Readers' Guide: **Glory to God in the Lowest: Journeys to an Unholy Land**



Glory to God in the Lowest: Journeys to an Unholy Land. Donald E. Wagner | Interlink Publishers. [www.interlink.org](http://www.interlink.org). 2022. \$20. Also available from Amazon, Barnes and Noble.

### **Background**

In his memoir “Glory to God in the Lowest,” Rev. Don Wagner recounts his journey from a conservative political and evangelical Christian background to the dramatic transformation he experienced in the mid-1960s. The change came during his seminary studies when he became involved in the anti-war and civil rights movements while taking a course in liberation theology. Three years later, he accepted a “call” to serve as an associate pastor at a dynamic Black congregation. There he came to wrestle with his “white privilege” and the systemic racism that dominated the Black life experience in Newark, New Jersey. Analyzing this power dynamic led him to begin questioning his unconditional embrace of Zionism and the state of Israel. The questions persisted during his first visit to Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut and Lebanon and during his meetings with Palestinians and progressive Jews in Israel and occupied Palestine. Within three years he left the pastoral ministry and spent the rest of his life pursuing justice for Palestinians and Israeli Jews, marked by a series of dramatic adventures that unfolded in rapid succession.

This reader’s guide provides questions designed to stimulate discussion and reflection on the issues raised within the memoir. Whether you are new to these

issues or a seasoned veteran, we hope the memoir will enrich your reading pleasure and strengthen your intellectual and moral curiosity as you follow the author's pursuit of peace based on justice – as elusive as it is – in what he calls “the unholy land.”

### **Forward by Bishop William Barber and Phyllis Bennis**

1. Bishop William Barber and Phyllis Bennis begin their Forward by referring to an article in an Israeli newspaper, *The Jerusalem Post*. What issues did the Prime Minister cite in his welcome to the visitors? Who were they? Why did Rev. Barber and Bennis choose this incident to introduce the memoir?
2. Bishop Barber and Phyllis Bennis are prophetic voices of justice for the poor and marginalized. Barber is an evangelical Christian and Bennis a secular Jew, yet they support Palestinian human rights as the key to a just peace in the Middle East. What “common ground” might they have that allows them to pursue this controversial issue that seems to elude most of our political and religious leaders?
3. After reading the “Spelling and Capitalization” note on page 13, why does the author spell zionism with a lowercase “z” and refer State of Israel and occupied Palestine as “the unholy land?” How does he justify these choices? To what extent do you agree?

### **Introduction**

1. Why did the author choose to begin his introduction with his experience one day after the “Sabra-Shatila Massacre”?
2. What is the difference between the literary genres of autobiography and memoir? What are the three themes the author has selected for his memoir?
3. G.K. Chesterton's poem “Gloria in Profundis” (page 21) uses a variety of images and metaphors. Which images stand out for you? What are the main points Chesterton is trying to capture in the poem?

### **Section One: Beginnings (Chapters 1-3)**

*The three opening chapters explore the author's childhood, growing up on a farm in western New York state surrounded by his loving maternal grandparents and his mother during World War II. Don's father served in Europe during the War.*

1. What were two or three values or issues that shaped the author's childhood growing up in the 1940s-50s?
2. How did the black-white racial divide of the times influence the author?
3. How would you characterize the author's religious and political orientation during his childhood and teenage years?
4. How did his white identity begin to change during his college years?

## **Section Two: Moving on Up While Downwardly Mobile (Chapters 4-7)**

*After finding his comfort zone in academia, Wagner accepted a position in a Black church instead of pursuing doctoral studies in theology. Thanks to this "beloved Black community," he became more conscious of his own racism and the systemic racism that dominated the greater Newark region.*

1. Wagner's first pastoral assignment challenged his "white privilege. What is "white privilege" and why does it persist in our institutions, government, and churches? What spiritual resources did the Black church provide that enabled the community to resist and manage their response to racism?
2. How did the city of Newark embody "systemic racism?" To what extent did this contribute to the Newark uprising of 1968? What was the Kerner Commission and what was its conclusion regarding the Newark uprising? What does the author want us to know here?
3. Is racism a problem that can be overcome or is it a permanent condition that is at best managed with self-awareness?
4. List and discuss the most important learning experiences of the author during his ministry at Elmwood Church. Was his decision to leave the church a wise one or should he have continued his ministry there?

### **Section Three: Journeys to an Unholy Land: (Chapters 8-12)**

*Within a month of assuming a new pastoral assignment, Wagner encountered an issue that changed his life. It challenged his interpretation of the Bible, his vocational direction, and his political orientation.*

1. How would you characterize the author's basic narrative concerning the Israeli-Palestinian struggle as he drove to Chicago in the fall of 1973? Describe the process that challenged the author's narrative.
2. What is the "myth of balance" and how does it apply to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle? Why does the author avoid the word "conflict" in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian issue? Do you agree or disagree?
3. How did the author's experiences in the church or church agencies (local and international) influence his awareness of the Israeli/Palestinian struggle? What factors influence your thinking about this issue?
4. What were the author's most significant take-aways from his initial trip to the Middle East? What did he learn from each country: Lebanon; Cyprus; Israel and Palestine, and Egypt?

### **Section Four: Doctor My Eyes Have Seen the Pain (Chapters 13-16)**

*These chapters take us deeper into the conflicts in the Middle East as the author encounters a series of events that have had a lasting influence on his life's work.*

1. Why did the author begin to question his "calling" to serve in the local church? Was he running away from criticism or was he experiencing a different "call?"
2. How was Wagner mentored by Palestinian friends during his transition from life as a pastor to life as an advocate for Palestinian rights?

3. How would you describe the significance of the “LaGrange Conference”? What were the most important developments?

4. What happened when Wagner led a group of travelers to Lebanon during May-June 1982? What did he experience while attempting to interpret the Lebanon War during the summer of 1982? What mistakes did he make and what did he learn as a result?

5. When the author returned to Beirut three months later, what did he encounter and what had changed in Beirut? How was justice undermined by the governments of Lebanon, France, Israel, the United States? How has justice been denied to the Palestinians as a result of various events since 1948? How might justice be restored? Is it too late?

### **Section Five: Palestine is Still the Issue (Chapters 17-19)**

*The author’s career takes several turns including more focused work with evangelical Christians followed by fifteen years as a university professor. The Palestine question played a significant role in each new position.*

1. What surprised you about the “listening trip” to the Middle East during fall of 1986? What three issues did Wagner and Dr. Bakke agree upon as the mission for a new organization (Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding)?
2. What was the “First Intifada?” Summarize its goals and describe its basic characteristics? How did the Intifada eventually change the media’s narrative of the Palestinian struggle?
3. What were some of Rev. Wagner’s accomplishments as a university professor and why was his position suddenly in jeopardy? What could he have done differently to avoid the termination of his position? How does the circumstance of his termination align with his theme of “glory to God in the lowest?”

### **Section Six: Liberating Your Mind: Zionism, Christian Zionism, and Resistance” (Chapters 20-21)**

*The penultimate chapter is more academic than the previous chapters as it offers a critical analysis of Christian zionism, Jewish political zionism, and a historical perspective on the Palestinian/Zionist political struggle. The final chapter offers some rays of hope in what has been a discouraging and often hopeless situation.*

1. How would you define Christian zionism and what was its relationship to Jewish political zionism? How would you define zionism and how does it relate to Christian zionism?

2. Read Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb's quote at the beginning of chapter 20 and consider what it means in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian struggle. What is settler colonialism and why is it essential to understanding the goals and manifestations of the zionist movement? How does this analysis help you interpret U.S., Canadian, French, and British history and many of their present social and political problems?

3. How does liberation theology provide an alternative biblical and ethical narrative and means of analysis for both Christian and Jewish political zionism? What strategies are Palestinian Christians suggesting as possible strategies to challenge Christian and Jewish zionism? What can you do now to support justice and peace in the "unholy land?"

4. Does the concluding chapter offer any hope for Palestinians and progressive Israelis as they seek justice? How would you respond to those who think they are too late and the situation is beyond hope? What do you make of the words of the Palestinian poet laureate Mahmoud Darwish, who says, "To be Palestinian means to be infected with incurable hope"? How do you define hope and what is there to be hopeful about in the "unholy land?" How are visions of Dr. Mazin Qumsiyeh, Bishop Tutu, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., models for a more hopeful and just future?

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"Glory to God in the Lowest: Journeys to an Unholy Land" is available from the publisher, Interlink Publishing Group, Inc. at 1-800-238-LINK or email sales@interlinkbooks.com. Also available from Amazon and Barnes and Noble.