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Touring the Middle East: Reaffirmation of My Biblical Knowledge and Walk

By Therese I. Poirier

Background

In November 2022, I traveled to the Middle East on a Road Scholar educational tour with 22 other retired professionals. Road Scholar supports diversity and respect of people of all backgrounds. This was a planned tour since 2020 which had to be cancelled twice due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Of all my international travels, this was by far the best. It helped to strengthen my biblical knowledge as I traveled through areas of Israel, Jordan and Egypt that are mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. In Israel, I was reaffirmed of the life of Jesus and early Judaism. The majority of Israeli citizens are Jewish and Muslims. There were two Christian periods in Israel: 1) The Byzantine period under Constantine from the 4th to 7th centuries A.D., and 2) The Crusader Period from the 11th to 13th centuries A.D. The West Bank and Gaza strip are now under Palestinian control and are predominantly Arab. Prior to 1948, Israel was known as Palestine; and in the time of Abraham it was called Canaan. In Jordan, I was able to travel a similar route as Moses in the later part of the exodus from Egypt when he viewed the promised

land. In Jordan and Egypt, which are Islamic states, I expanded my knowledge of the Islamic religion.

ISRAEL:

The tour started in Jerusalem where we spent three nights. Our Israeli tour guide was trained as an archaeologist and she is Jewish. In spite of our different beliefs, she was emotional and touched by all the Christian historic sites and she advocated for equity and respect for all people regardless of religious views. While in the Old City, we visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is the traditional site of Calvary (Golgotha), where Jesus was crucified. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built around 320 A.D. by Queen Helena, the mother of Constantine, who was the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity. Inside the Church, there is the presence of Armenian, Greek Orthodox and Catholic denominations.

Also in Jerusalem, we heard a lecture by the Director of Jerusalem's International YMCA which provided insight into the famous model of integration of Jewish, Christian, and

Muslim faiths.¹ The YMCA is a place where people of all religions can find common ground.

We then went to Mount Zion in Jerusalem where we visited "The Upper Room," which is the traditional (but unlikely) location of the last supper. We also visited the traditional spot of "King David's Tomb" in Mount Zion, knowing that it could not be the actual tomb since the Bible tells us that King David was buried in the City of David. We walked through the Jewish quarter in the Old City where we saw the impressive 2000-year-old pavement of the Roman Cardo, along with the "Broad Wall," built by King Hezekiah in the 8th century B.C. and is mentioned in Isaiah 22:10, NIV: "You counted the buildings in Jerusalem and tore down houses to strengthen the wall."

The famous gold dome in Jerusalem is called the Dome of the Rock (see photo 1). It is a Muslim shrine that was constructed 1000 years ago, and it was built on top of ancient and sacred ruins from the Jewish Temples of Solomon, Zerubbabel, and Herod. In the Bible, the area was known as



Photo 1

the “Temple Mount” and its location is Mount Moriah. It has great significance to Jews and Christians since the Bible documents that Mount Moriah is where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice. (Not far from this spot is where Jesus offered His life as a sacrifice for our sins!) Muslims claim that this area has religious significance for them since they believe it’s where Muhammad and his horse ascended into Heaven accompanied by angel Gabriel. Next to the Dome of the Rock is the Al Aqsa Mosque. Jews are not allowed to visit the Dome of the Rock, even though it was built on a sacred Jewish site.

The Western Wall (or “Wailing Wall”) is the only remnant of the 1st century Jewish Temple Mount where Jews are allowed to visit and pray. It is therefore the most sacred site for Jewish people, yet they welcome Christians to join them in prayer. It is a custom to place a personal written prayer inside the cracks of the 2000-year-old stone wall.

Outside the city walls of Jerusalem, we visited the Mount of Olives which marked the site of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The Mount of Olives is also the location of the Garden of Gethsemane. For me, this was one of the most moving sites in Israel since it is where Jesus prayed in agony, *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will”* (Matthew 26:39 NIV). A fellow traveler who was a non-practicing Jew kept asking, “How do you know if it is true?” I thought of an Old Testament passage

that foretold the coming of the Messiah (Isaiah 9:6-7) and I shared that passage with him. Please pray that he will come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

We traveled to Bethlehem in the West Bank. Bethlehem is no longer part of Israel; it has been under Palestinian control since 1995. Crossing into the West Bank, there was a 30-foot steel border wall and security guards who checked our passports. Bethlehem is predominantly Muslim; and since the Palestinian Authority forbids Jewish citizens to enter, our Jewish Israeli tour guide could not join us in Bethlehem. We visited the Church of the Nativity, which was also built by Constantine’s mother Helena and is the traditional (but likely) site of the birthplace of Jesus. The Bible tells us that Joseph needed to register for the census in Bethlehem *“because he belonged to the house and line of David”* (Luke 2:4 NIV). Bethlehem is the birthplace and hometown of King David as well as the site of Rachel’s tomb. There is a Catholic Church called St. Catherine’s that is adjacent to The Church of the Nativity. The Midnight Mass that is always broadcast on television actually comes from St. Catherine’s Church.

We then visited Yad Vashem, which is Israel’s Holocaust Memorial and was established in 1953. The name “Yad Vashem” means *“a Memorial and a Name,”* taken from Isaiah 56:5. It is the largest archival and information repository on the Holocaust in the world. I learned that most Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust were from Poland, followed by Russia. It was heart wrenching to realize that over 6 million Jews were executed (and 1.5 million were children) simply because they were Jewish. A Bible verse was imprinted on the entrance column: *“I will put my breathe into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil”* (Ezekiel 37:14). How amazing to see God’s promise

fulfilled when Israel became a nation in 1948! We noticed young Israeli women soldiers touring Yad Vashem as part of their training so that they will never forget the importance of defending their country and the Jewish people. I learned that military service is mandatory for all Jewish Israeli citizens. At the age of 18, all boys and girls must serve in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Girls must serve for 2 years, and boys must serve for 3 years. After their term is over, they may choose to serve for a longer period, and many of them do. All IDF soldiers are highly trained for combat.

We then journeyed to Masada National Park which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. The fortress was built by King Herod the Great and later became a refuge for Jewish Zealots who withstood the attacks of the Roman Legion from 70-72 A.D. Just before the Roman siege on Masada, 967 Jewish Zealots chose to commit suicide rather than become Roman prisoners. It represents the struggle between oppression and liberty. It reminded me of present-day struggles in Ukraine as nationalists will risk their lives, refusing to surrender to Russian conquests.

We saw a view of the Dead Sea (where we would swim later), and the mountains of Jordan. As we drove through the Judean desert, we saw the ancient path where the Good Samaritan traveled (Luke 10:25-37). We passed the ancient town of Jericho, surrounded by palm trees. We passed En Gedi where David hid in a cave because King Saul was trying to kill him (1 Samuel 23:29). We stopped at Qumran, the site of the caves where the invaluable Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. We passed the mountain of Gilboa where King Saul and Jonathan were killed by the Philistines (1 Samuel 31:1-3).

We spent two nights in Nazareth, the childhood home of Jesus, which is

now made up of 72% Arab Muslims and 22% Arab Christians. We visited the current Church of Annunciation that was built in 1969. It is built on the traditional site where the angel Gabriel informed Mary that she would give birth to Jesus (John 1:1; Luke 1:26-38). I was impressed with all the beautiful mosaics from many nations on the annunciation scene with their local characteristics of the Blessed Mother unique to each country. The mural of Ukraine was highlighted near the entrance (see photo 2). There were also beggars and cripples in front of the church.



Photo 2

This reminded me of the days of Jesus and the early church, when beggars and the lame were outside the Temple.

We journeyed to Capernaum, which was a 1st century fishing town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and was the headquarters of Jesus' ministry. According to Matthew 4:13, Jesus "settled in Capernaum", staying with Simon Peter. The ruins of Capernaum include the home of Simon Peter and the synagogue where Jesus preached. This was also one of the most moving parts of my trip in Israel. There were many tour groups who were sharing the Gospel, and I was able to touch the waters of the Sea of Galilee. We also passed the biblical town of Cana where Jesus changed water into wine as His first reported miracle.

We saw Mount Tabor, the traditional (but highly unlikely) location where the transfiguration of Jesus took place. However, Mount Tabor is the authentic location of the battle of Deborah and Barak against the

Canaanites (Judges 4:6-7). We visited Mount of Beatitudes on the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus gave His Sermon on the Mount which includes the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-11).

We visited the Kibbutz Degonia, the 5th oldest Kibbutz in Israel, established in 1920. Levi Eshkol, the Israeli Prime Minister from the 1960s, lived here. A Kibbutz is a form of communal living based on agriculture that integrates elements of Socialism and Zionism (Zionists support Israel as the homeland for Jewish people). The tour guide told us there are no rules nor hierarchy. Many of us questioned whether this form of living could survive today. The advantage is they offer a social safety net. Prior to 2019, members could not own personal property nor receive a salary. Since then, the Kibbutz has privatized.

JORDAN:

We left Israel and then spent three nights in Jordan. Our Jordanian tour guide was a non-practicing Catholic. We crossed into Jordan at the Israel-Jordanian border. My souvenir Menorah from Israel was confiscated at the border since they believe it would offend Muslims. The security police walked it over to Israel and returned it to them. I had to sign a paper indicating I witnessed the transfer. They held my passport until the transfer was complete. This was quite an experience! We had not been informed that a Menorah was not allowed into Jordan.

The current King Abdullah II is a descendant of the prophet Muhammed. Nearly 98% of Jordanians are Muslims. Jordan is considered the keystone of the Middle East. The country is a young one with 70% of the population less than 35 years of age. Most of the exodus from Egypt crossed into Jordan. In Old Testament times, there were three kingdoms in Jordan: Amorite, Moabite, and Edomite. We

visited the ruins of Jerash, the Pompeii of the Middle East which has Greco-Roman influence. Here we saw a temple to the god, Zeus. As we traveled the Jordanian desert, we passed the traditional location where God re-named Jacob "Israel" (Genesis 32:28).

Amman is the capital of Jordan, known in the Bible as the kingdom of Amorites. We stopped at Mount Nebo on the plains of Moab where Moses was able to view the promised land in Israel, and was buried by God in an unknown location. We were reminded that Ruth is from Moab. On our way to Petra, (ruins of a prominent ancient city in Edom) we stopped once again at the Dead Sea, which is the lowest spot on earth. It is also the saltiest water on earth: the salinity of the Dead Sea is currently 34 percent, which is over 11 times saltier than most oceans. We were able to swim (actually float) in the Dead Sea. We spent a day walking through the impressive ruins of Petra, which is recognized as a UNESCO site and was also one of the seven wonders of the world (see photo 3). Most of the ancient city was carved

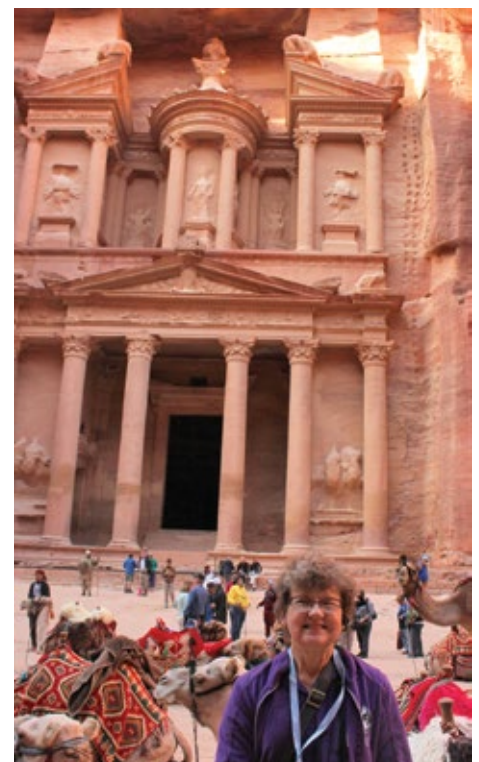


Photo 3

into the red sandstone cliffs. Petra is known in the Bible by its Hebrew name, “Sela”, in Isaiah 16:1 and 2 Kings 14:7. Petra was in the land of the Edomites, who were descendants of Jacob’s brother Esau. For centuries in Old Testament times, Petra was a major trade route to Syria. Petra seemed so secure in its impenetrable fortress of rock, but today its ruins lie uninhabited, in fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy about Edom: *“As Sodom and Gomorrah were overthrown, along with their neighboring towns,” says the Lord, “so no one will live there; no people will dwell in it.”* (Jeremiah 49:18, NIV).

EGYPT:

We then flew to Cairo where we stayed seven nights in Egypt. We were escorted by a private security guard throughout our time in Egypt where there was a high presence of security checkpoints and armed guards. We explored the Great Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx. There are three pyramids built for burial of three Pharaohs and their families.

The Sphinx is known as the “Father of Fear” – it shows the strength of the lion and the intelligence of the human (see photo 4). Ancient Egypt’s Pharaohs and Kings had many rituals



Photo 4

and they believed in many different gods. The ancient Egyptians’ attitude toward death was influenced by their belief that death is a temporary interruption, rather than cessation of life. When they died, they were mummified so that the soul would return to the body, giving it breath and life. The Egyptians believed that

an afterlife was only possible if there was a form (a body) for the soul to repossess. Household equipment and food and drink were placed on the offering tables outside the tomb’s chamber to provide for the person’s need in the after-life.

We flew to Aswan which is a winter resort in southern Egypt. We visited Aswan Dam and Lake Nasser, which is one of the world’s largest manmade lakes. We then motorboated to Philae Temple. It is dedicated to the goddess Isis (goddess of motherhood, healing and birth). The Philae Temple has served multiple religions. It passed through several hands and religions, passing back and forth between the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, from Egyptian paganism to early Christianity. The temple’s interior bears the mark of this changeable, at times violent, history. Early Christians destroyed or disfigured many of the Egyptian statues and hieroglyphs, transforming the temple into a church.

We then boarded our cruise ship for our Nile cruise. We visited the Kom Ombo and Edfu Temples. The Kom Ombo is dedicated to the god Sobek. There are also crocodile mummies there. The Edfu Temple is dedicated to the Falcon God Horus who was merged with the Greek god Apollo.

We partied on the cruise ship and dressed in our galabeyas which are loose fitting traditional Egyptian garments from the markets on the Nile River. The scenery along the Nile was very beautiful and reaffirmed the creation by God. The lecture on mummification informed us of its purpose to protect the deceased body from decay and to ensure a successful passage into the afterlife when the soul returns to the body.

We journeyed overnight to the city of Luxor which was the ancient city of Thebes, the great capital of Upper

Egypt, and the city of the god Amun-Ra. While in Luxor, we visited the Valley of Kings, located on the west bank of Luxor, Three King Ramesses tombs, and the famous tomb of King Tut. We also visited Hatshepsut Temple which is the mortuary for Queen Hatshepsut, considered the most powerful female Pharaoh. We saw statues of Memnon who was a hero of the Trojan war and an Ethiopian king. He was slain by Achilles the Greek. We visited the Karnak and Luxor Temples. In ancient Egyptian religion, the Karnak Temple is believed to be the site where creation began. It is the largest and most important religious complex in ancient Egypt. It is dedicated to the god Amun who they believe brought sun, light, and creation to the world. It contains many sphinxes which resemble a human head. Luxor Temple, which contains a mosque, was built and dedicated to rejuvenation of kingship. It was built to celebrate the Opet Festival, an annual celebration marking rebirth, fertility, and marriage, and where statues of the gods Amun, his wife, Mut, and son Khonsu were carried and the Pharaoh would be re-coronated. The Temple also served as a burial site for the royals, and contains statues of the Pharaoh Ramesses the Great (see photo 5).



Photo 5

We flew back from Luxor to Cairo where we visited the Muhammad Ali Citadel. The final day was visiting the Egyptian Museum, Old Cairo, and the Hanging Church which is a Coptic Church and the early Christian Church in Egypt. The

Coptic church was founded in Egypt by John Mark, the author of the Gospel of Mark, sometime between A.D. 42 to A.D. 62.

Summary

A trip to the Middle East, especially Israel, is a unique experience that every Christian should try to experience at least once in their life. It truly brings the Bible alive as you walk where Jesus and other saints of the Bible walked. The trip reaffirmed my current knowledge and walk in the Bible with the Old and New Testament especially the Garden of Gethsemane, Sea of Galilee and Mount of Beatitudes, and makes me want to delve even deeper into Scripture. It highlighted differences in beliefs of various religions. It reaffirmed my duty to read and study the Bible so I can draw closer to Jesus and be able to better interact with people of other religions.

Reference

Friends of Jerusalem International YMCA. www.friendsofjiy.org



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The Perversion of God's Truth: A Precursor to Chaos

By Daniel Brown

"Truth is incontrovertible. Panic may resent it. Ignorance may deride it. Malice may distort it. But there it is." **Winston Churchill**

The Meaning of Truth

Those who testify in court are required to take an oath and swear that they are about to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Truth is the cornerstone of western jurisprudence, dating back to the Ten Commandments. God explicitly cautioned mankind against bearing false witness. Court officials assume that everyone has the same understanding of what it means to tell the truth, but everyday experiences indicate otherwise.

John 18:33-38 (NIV) describes the interrogation of Jesus by Pontius Pilate, during which Pilate asks Jesus if he claims to be King of the Jews. Jesus replies, *"You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."* Pilate then posed the ultimate follow-up question, *"What is truth?"* Unfortunately, John does not tell us how (or if) Jesus responded. Instead, we are told that Pilate just left the room. It is hard to imagine that Pilate intended such a profound question to be rhetorical and did not even wait for Jesus to answer, but that's the Gospel according to John.

Even though we don't know exactly how Jesus would have answered Pilate's question, John's Gospel quotes Jesus no less than 25 times proclaiming that what He is saying is the truth. At the very least, we can assume that the followers of Jesus appreciated the importance of telling the truth and understood what Jesus meant when He used the word. A dictionary definition of the term suggests that truth is that which accurately represents fact or reality. Simple enough. It wasn't that long ago that most of us had a reasonably good grasp of that concept, but events that have been unfolding in recent years have left many people bewildered and troubled about what has happened to truth. Indeed, we are plagued by an obfuscation of reality, along with the chaos that inevitably follows, in ways that one could hardly have imagined just a few years ago.

The Perversion of Truth: Gender

It used to be that gender was a product of one's genetic makeup, a fixed hereditary trait, as determined by the presence of X or Y chromosomes. No more. Lines of distinction between the characteristics of males and females are blurred, and to some extent, undefined. Forget about genetic determination. Men become women and women become men in the blink of an eye, based on sheer impulse. Boys and girls are interchangeable. Gender is now "fluid" and considered to be whatever one chooses it to be. The options are endless, and the decision can be made or revised at any age. Medical intervention can add or subtract sex organs or alter secondary sex characteristics at will. Basic terminology is being co-opted by the day, as pronouns are revised and new terms, such as "birthing person," are foisted upon an unsuspecting public. Those who have not yet capitulated to the madness yearn for the day when standard pronouns will be rescued from nonbinary captors and restored to their proper grammatical application—when innocent bystanders will no longer be pressured into playing along with a preposterous charade of custom, self-selected pronouns.

This new gender revolution is mind boggling and deceptive, not only in terms of the questionable rationale behind it and the disruptive change that it has