

## Our Trip to The Holy Land

By Marilyn and Jim Palmer

Four years ago, we embarked on a visit to the Holy Land in Israel. We were anxious to see for ourselves the places where Jesus had his ministry, performed his miracles, his birthplace, the place of his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Seeing these first hand created vivid pictures in our minds after returning home and re-reading from the Bible about these events at the same places in the time of Jesus.

Our college alumni group met in Tel Aviv and boarded the bus and the first stop was at Caesarea to survey the ancient ruins of the palace and major seaport from Roman times. We saw the prison where Paul was held captive and held to face charges before being sent off to Rome. From Caesarea our bus took us northeasterly into Galilee, where we stayed for the first few nights at a "kibbutz" hotel. We had come unprepared for the agrarian fertile environment of Galilee, thinking primarily that in Israel we were going to visit an arid and desert type of place. But here were trees, agricultural cultivation, acres of hot houses, and green hills where sheep grazed. Among our first visits in Galilee the next day was to Mt. Beatitudes described in Matthew 5:3-7:27, which a member of our group read to us from these blessings from the Bible as we viewed the mountainside. The location is actually a hillside on which now can be seen a platform partially up the hill, probably the spot where Jesus had sat down and begun his teachings. As we looked up at it, a Catholic mass was being conducted there for a small group. At the bottom part of the hill now stands a modern Catholic chapel from which we heard a lovely soprano sing a song reflective of a Christian moment of a blessed time. It was when Jesus came down from the mountainside at Mt. Beatitudes that he performed one of his miracles.

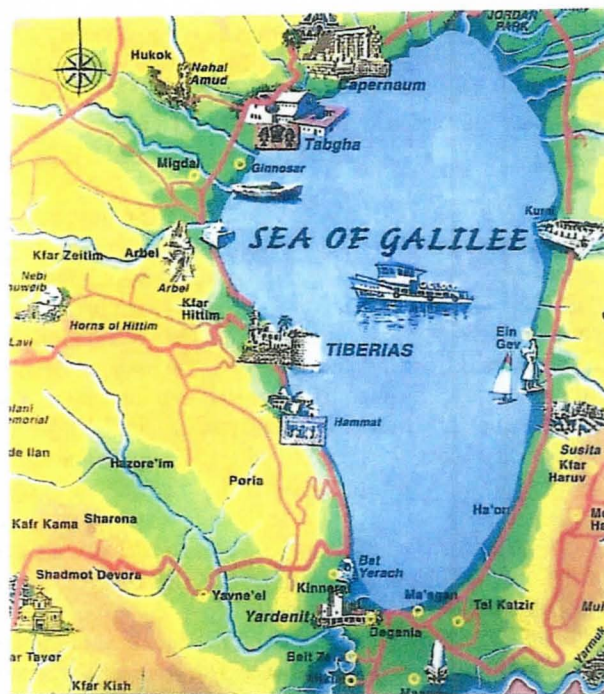
After climbing aboard our bus, we took a short journey to Capernaum, which now consists primarily of a monastery, at the northerly shore of the Sea of Galilee. There were olive presses used in olden times to make olive oil with. We walked down a pathway to a place consisting of an area in the ground, covered by a partly open roof, where Jesus may have lived while in Capernaum, and from where he gave his teachings and performed some miracles. I read in Mark 2:1-5, 10-12: *"A few days later when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on."* I wondered if the opening in the roof I had seen was where the mat had been lowered through.

Following our visit to Capernaum, we had a boat trip on the Sea of Galilee. In a good sized boat decked out with an American flag (just for our group I think), we sailed over to the other side of the lake from a dock near Capernaum. The weather was calm for the entire boat ride, unlike the event I read in Luke 8:22: *"One day Jesus said to his disciples, 'Let's go over to the other side of the lake.' So they got into a boat and set out. As they sailed, he fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him saying, 'Master, Master, we're going to drown!' He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided and all was calm. 'Where is your faith?', he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, 'Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.'"*

Across the lake was a village pointed out to us - the town of Magdal, the home of Mary Magdalene. Our boat landed at the town of Tiberias on the western side of the sea, referred to in John 6:1-2: *"Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick."*

The same day we traveled to the Golon Heights area and near the border of northeastern Israel and Syria. We drove by a United Nations demilitarized zone dividing the two countries, with fences separating out today's Jews from the Arabs.

Heavy security is now in place interrupting any hope of free travel between the two countries. Not so in the time of Jesus as we read in Matthew 4:23-24 that *"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, the epileptics and the paralytics, and he healed them."*



*Map of the Sea of Galilee shows Mt. Beatitudes (top Capernaum, Magdal (upper left center), Tiberias (center).*

## Our Trip to the Holy Land (Continued)

After leaving Galilee, we stopped in Nazareth, where Jesus lived as a child. Today, Nazareth is a larger town and features modern churches, including the Church of the Annunciation, a multi-storied church commemorating the news given to Mary by angels of her forthcoming child. I recalled Nazareth was also where Jesus experienced rejection by those who heard him teach, In Matthew 13:54-58: *"Coming to his home town, he began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. 'Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers?' they asked. 'Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary,, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us. Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, 'Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet with honor.' And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith."* This lack of credibility of a person from Nazareth is confirmed in the reference in John 7:52 at the time of Jesus' rejection by the Pharisees, as Nicodemus sought a fair hearing for Jesus: *"They replied, 'Are you from Galilee too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.'"*

After a bus trip, we entered from the north into Jerusalem. Our bus stopped at a viewpoint overlooking the city, adjacent to the Mount of Olives which is just above the Garden of Gethsemane. A retired pastor from our group read scripture as we surveyed this scene. We were impressed by the view overlooking this great city, a place which different religions had designated as their holy city in the past two thousand years - the Jews, the Muslims and the Christians. In Jerusalem we visited the site of Calvary, also referred to as Golgotha, (inside The Church of the Holy Sepulchre - primarily a Greek Orthodox Christian church with chapels for the Armenian Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church). We climbed up several steps to the top of the place where Jesus was crucified, remembering John 19:17-18: *"Carrying his own cross, he went out to The Place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). Here they crucified him, and with him two others - one on each side and Jesus in the middle."*, and then we descended below to the tomb where he was buried (John 19:41-42: *"At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden, a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there."*), and from which he rose again from the dead.



We visited important other sites in Jerusalem including walking the perimeter (not being allowed inside) of the Arab's Al Aqsa Mosque built on the Temple Mount, with its bright golden dome. The site of this holy mosque is on top of the site of the previous historic first and second Jewish Temples. Also we saw the way of the Via Dolorosa, the route Jesus took bearing the cross to the place where he was crucified. I also placed my head and said a prayer at the holy "wailing wall" of the Jews, which is the part of the Western wall which surrounds the Old City. This section by the wall has an area for men and a separate area for women to pray.

We took a side trip to visit Bethlehem, just a short distance from the Jerusalem city limits, but past a heavy screen fence and a security check point which indicated we were entering the West Bank of Israel and Palestinian territory. Here we visited the Church of the Nativity, a Greek Orthodox Church covering the site in which Jesus was born, next to which was an Armenian Orthodox Church and a Roman Catholic Church (at which a funeral was in progress - we listened to the chanting for a short time). The birth site was marked by a metallic cross on the ground, which pilgrims stooped to kiss. We touched the cross after waiting in line to do so. Across from it is the "chapel of the manger" where Jesus was said to have been laid after birth and visited by shepherds and the Magi. As we left the Church, we passed a sloping land where sheep were grazing. This was apparently where the shepherds had seen the star, and where an angel appeared to them and told them (as described in Luke2:11) of the birth of a 'Savior who is Christ the Lord'

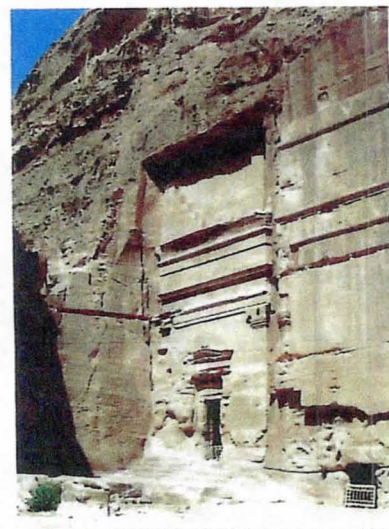
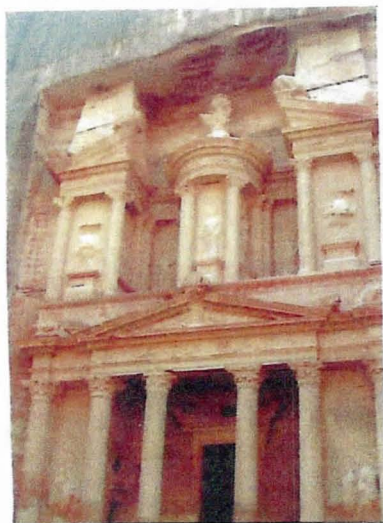


South of Jerusalem we traveled to Masada, a site of a Jewish stronghold against during the revolt against the Romans in about 70 A.D., on a high plateau which we reached by a cable car moving on high wires up to the top of the plateau. The hardier visitors could walk up a winding pathway to the top. Remains of the Jewish settlement and a model of this remarkable fortress were there. The Romans overcame these barriers by building an impressive ramp to the top of the plateau in order to take control, only to find that the Jews there had committed suicide to avoid their capture. Herod then built one of his palaces on the remains of the settlement. Further on we came to the Dead Sea. We had passed Qumran, the site of discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Then we visited the shore of the sea where we donned our swimsuits to take a dip in the highly salted sea, floating for a few minutes on top of it. (Not much fun as they did not recommend getting your face wet.)

## Our Trip to the Holy Land (Continued)

The next day we extended our trip to Jordan. South of Jericho, we crossed the not-very-wide Jordan River at the King Hussein Bridge, going through five security checkpoints and many fenced gates. We switched from our Israeli bus to a Jordanian bus at the third checkpoint. As we crossed the river, it reminded me of the passage from Matthew 3:13-15: *"Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented."* The area on the east bank of the Jordan was where Jesus launched his public ministry after his baptism by John.

After entering Jordan we bussed to the top of Mt. Nebo, overlooking the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, and the rooftops of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the distance, and where Moses was shown the Promised Land, which he was not to enter. Moses is believed to be buried somewhere on Mount Nebo. Today a Greek Orthodox church is being built at the top of the mountain, and a sign memorializes Pope John Paul II's visit there in 2000. A Serpentine Cross outside the church represents the serpent taken up by Moses in the desert, as well as the cross where Jesus was crucified. We proceeded on to Madaba, also known as the Mosaic City. Madaba offers a variety of mosaic floors including the famous mosaic map of the Holy Land, depicting ancient times, and old churches. It is a scenic place in a hilly area with many canyons. The top tourist attraction in Jordan was yet to come - the ancient city of Petra. We spent a half-day traveling from north to south down the King's Highway from Amman to Petra. The King's Highway was referred to first in the Bible in Numbers 20:17-21, quoting Moses speaking to Edom, who denied passage to the Israelites: *"Please let us pass through your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink water from wells; we will go along the King's Highway; we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory."* Petra is hidden behind rugged mountains, and is the most admirable site of massive architecture fashioned from the side of stone cliffs, depicting building facades, an amphitheatre, and other amazing architectural sites. We reached it by a horse carriage, bouncing along the rough stone road into the canyon, passing into a gorge narrowly between towering cliffsides. Photos scarcely bring it justice. Once there you could choose between donkey, camel or on foot transportation to see the sites. We went by foot.



Petra, Jordan; (Left) The Treasury; (Center) The Theater; (Right) One of the tombs at Petra.

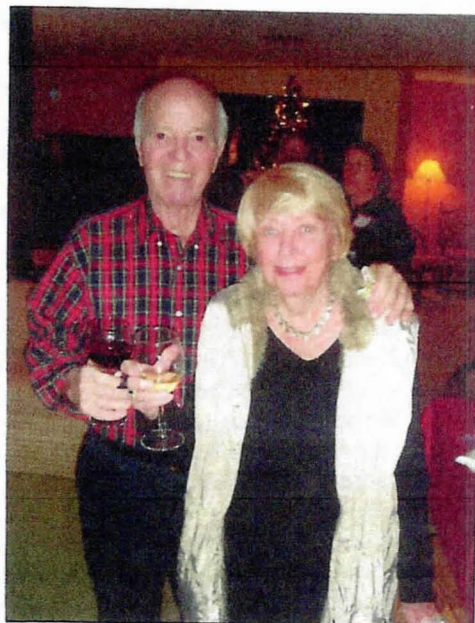
People ask us about security problems during our trip to Israel and Jordan. This, of course, was four years ago before terrorism and the ISIS state were a threat as they are today. We were with a group, so we did not experience any problems or anxiety. However, one can not help but sense the nervousness of the Israeli people and feel the tension between the Arabs and the Jews who live there, as they continue to dispute who should control their lands. The six-day war of 1967 restored all of Jerusalem and the West Bank of the Jordan to the Jews, but the Arabs are not willing to recognize this, and there seems to be no immediate reconciliation of these two cultures and their contrary historical claims. I thought this was a reflection of continuing human conflicting behavior in which these people who live there, as well as us, consider to be the holiest place in the world.

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