

A Visit to Israel

Jean Jackson

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Reading Sally's article on Bethlehem in the last issue of "Inspire" brought back many memories of my own visit to Israel in 1987. This was a Teacher's Study Tour, for which we attended several weekly preparation meetings. Forty of us set off late on a Saturday evening. The security at Heathrow was strict, such that we were all frisked. The result of this was my being taken to an office where in five seconds it was seen that I carried a purse belt and not a W.M.D. Good start, I thought!

Arriving at Tel Aviv at 5.00am, more trouble. My name was called over the Tannoy. I ignored it at first, in disbelief, but decided that I must answer. "We called you three times" snapped an official. I was taken to an office, feeling somewhat bemused. Two officials stared at me intently, and at my passport, before taking down some files from a shelf. These were studied for several minutes. Then I was told, abruptly, that I could go. No apology. No explanation, but I was not going to stop to find out. Presumably they were searching for someone with the same name.

We were all tired but the coach journey from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was so beautiful. The sun shone upon olive, orange, and grapefruit groves. We saw the remains of old tombs on the terraced hills, mountains, and the tall, thin cypress trees. Breakfast awaited us at the hotel. An enormous round table was crammed with dishes to please the appetites of all nationalities.

Our leader, Douglas, a Jewish Rabbi, took us for a long walk around Jerusalem. We enjoyed a roadside lunch of falafel and fresh orange juice while we puzzled over the conversion of sterling into shekels. The roads were busy and we were intrigued to see twelve year old girls directing the traffic from the middle of the highway.

I was with my long time friend Pat and during the afternoon we two explored the old city, and promptly got lost. Two local girls put us right. As we explored the amazing markets and bazaars we became caught up with an unwanted persistent guide. Demanding money he went off in a huff when Pat gave him one shekel.

Everywhere we went in the old city there was such an atmosphere of timelessness. We could feel our Lord's presence as though 2000 years had not passed. We left through Zion Gate which was swarming with armed soldiers and there was news of a bomb. A grenade had been thrown and some people had been

killed and injured at the Gate. Luckily Pat and I had just missed it.

Tired after our day we decided on early bed. Pat was first in the bath. Twenty minutes later there was a shriek – on removing the bath plug the water was coming up through a round hole in the floor. Only be half removing the plug could this be avoided.

In the morning an early cup of tea was essential for my friend. She had brought the appropriate equipment. On plugging it in we jumped back as blue flashes leapt out. My pleas for abandoning it fell on deaf ears. Pat's early morning cuppa was non-negotiable, so we continued to survive the daily fireworks.

The following day, Elijah our guide (Eli for short) took us on a proper informative tour of the Old City. Entering by the Jaffa Gate we traversed a mile of more bazaars and narrow cobbled streets before sitting to rest by the Pool of Bethesda. It was empty at the time.

After visiting St. Anne's church we walked through the Via Dolorosa, Eli explaining each Station of the Cross. Then we travelled to the Western Wailing wall. Eli said "Call it the Western Wall, as Israel has done enough wailing!" We prayed with the women and noted the prayer petition notes pushed into the crevices. The wall started fifty feet below ground and has been rebuilt upon former rubble each time it has been destroyed. Those we saw were the original, Solomon's walls.

On the men's side it was Bar Mitzvah day. Proud little boys, aged thirteen, were being pronounced "men". There was much singing while the Torah was paraded by the elders. As is tradition, women threw sweets from our side.

After a visit to the El Aqsa mosque, we went to the mosque of Omar – the famous Dome of the Rock. Soldiers searched our bags. Shoes and bags had to be left outside, guarded by Rabbi Douglas. The wondrous golden dome and the mosaic outside were more amazing than any photos we might have seen. We descended into the hole beneath, from where Mahomet was supposed to have been taken up into heaven.

Our next visit was to the Israel Museum to see the Dead Sea scrolls, which tell of the daily lives of the Essene community who set up their own way of Judaism away from Jerusalem. Later on our tour we visited Qumran where the scrolls were originally

found in a cave by a Bedouin shepherd. Then onwards to the Holocaust Museum – a huge area lit by one lamp which was encased in a design of black twisted iron. Flat marble gravestones covered the floor, naming the many concentration camps. On the walls we saw photos of the camps and their inmates. These had been taken from the air and not long released. Outside the building there is a wonderful but “tortured” black metal sculpture, representing the holocaust. We were all silent, sombre and deeply moved by it all.

We then travelled to Bethlehem, which was not as we imagined it to be, and disappointing as a town. However the Church of the Nativity was amazing. We descended to the tiny area of Christ’s birth, marked by a fourteen-point star set in the floor, and surrounded by many lamps. Nearby we saw the niche in the rock where the manger was reputed to have stood. The church was dark despite the hundreds of dusty bronze lamps.

We lunched in a Hungarian restaurant high up, outside Jerusalem, with commanding views of the Old City and the wilderness where Jesus wandered. Later we visited the Mount of Olives and the Old Jewish Cemetery. Christian Jews want to be near the old city when Jesus returns. They think that they will be the first of the resurrected dead, opposite the Golden Gate, which was sealed up at this time.

Next day, on the way to Jericho, we entered the cave beneath the Church of Bethany. At the Inn of the Good Samaritan there were camels belonging to a Bedouin tribe. We took tea with the Bedouin in their tent. It was hot, sweet, brown and clear and served in tiny glasses. There was much laughter when we were asked to sell one our ladies, who was a plump, blonde individual. I am not sure if she was flattered or not! However, what would we do with the 60 camels we were offered for her?

Later, packed into a cable car we ascended to the top of Masada, learning of the suicide pact of nearly a thousand Jews in 70 AD to avoid facing a worse ordeal at the hands of the invading Roman army.

From the heights to the depths the Dead Sea was intriguing and we bathed in the heavy salt water. Our friend, Wilf, was keen to do what he had seen on a postcard. We waded in, lay on his back, and read a newspaper. He emerged looking very pleased with himself. I was glad of the warm fresh water showers situated literally on the beach.

The following day at crack of dawn we travelled to Jericho where we saw the mosque beneath which Moses is said to be buried. Along the West Bank,

where it never rains we passed Israeli settlements. In Nazareth we visited the Greek Orthodox Church and tasted the water from Mary’s spring. At Tiberius we enjoyed a delicious lunch of St. Peter’s fish – bass, overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Date palms and lemon trees grew all around and the mango trees were in blossom. Old stones in the ruins of Capernaum showed evidence of olive pressing and flour milling. The 4th Century synagogue is built on the foundation of the synagogue of Jesus’s time. We passed the “Mount of Multiplication” where Jesus fed the five thousand, and spent a short time on the Mount of Beatitudes. I sketched the view from here, having run out of camera film

Before visiting the Nof Ginovan Kibbutz where we were to stay in the hotel section, Eli took us to see the two thousand year old Roman boat, which had been very carefully dug from the sea bed the year before. The boat was revealed when drought had caused the See of Galilee to recede by many feet. It now floats in a tiled pool with added chemicals to preserve the wood. I wonder if Jesus Himself or any of his disciples sat in that boat. Later that same day Pat and I explored. There were many tiny dwellings, each with its own banana tree, and many exotic birds and flowers. Pat paddled in the sea while I gathered tiny shells. We were alone in the silence. We felt the peace of our Lord’s presence all around us.

Next day taking a boat from Tiberius to Capernaum we passed Safat – the highest holy city on earth, above Capernaum. A coach took us to I’billin where we looked round the senior school. We saw classes in Electronics, English and Biology. Dental assistants are trained here, many children coming in from outlying villages. There were 350 children in twelve classes. Aside from Christmas and Easter holidays they have two months between June and September – flexible according to when farming families need their children’s help.

On to Haifa we explored the gold domed Ba-hai temple with its magnificent gardens. Later, after a visit to the ruins of Caesarea we returned to Jerusalem.

The following day, after a meeting for any questions, pat and I went for a long walk to see Hassidic Jews in the Me’a She’arem quarter. There were many poor hovels. The schoolchildren were out playing as it was break time. All the boys wore black trousers and jackets, their heads shaved apart from a forelock. They all wore the Jewish cap. The girls wore striped blue and white dresses, black stockings and shoes, and had their hair in plaits.

In the afternoon Pat and I visited the Church of Mary's Tomb and lit candles, then on to a church in a grotto where a Roman Catholic mass was being celebrated. We crept in and took communion along with the people there, who were all French. After this, while wandering over the Mount of Olives and old Jew gave us a sprig of rosemary, and showed us the tombs. On then to the church where we were told Jesus looked over Jerusalem and wept.

The Garden of Gethsemane was divided by a narrow road. We entered a small railed area which was protecting four olive trees reputed to have been there at the time of Christ. Across the road a locked gate led to the part of Gethsemane where Jesus was betrayed and arrested.

The following morning, a Saturday, Douglas took all of us to a synagogue with his wife, Eve, and young son Benjamin. Before the service we were shown round a mini-museum. The main exhibits were pots, some of which were 4000 years old, from the time of Abraham. The service, in Hebrew, lasts one and a half hours, and we tried hard to follow it from the Torah, Douglas helpfully pointing the way through the book. There was lovely singing with instruments, and joyful priests.

Later we walked to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where we saw what was supposedly Christ's tomb. There was a pool, awesome rocky grottoes, and deep caverns. However visiting the Garden Tomb and Golgotha we felt it was more likely to have been Christ's burial place, though city walls were possibly in a different place 2000 years ago.

Sunday was "going home" day. Up at 4.30am for breakfast which we could not eat then we travelled back to Tel Aviv. The security was very strict, with many stern-faced officials. Our cases were opened and gone through, and we were all questioned, then our hand luggage was also searched. A grim faced woman snapped "is that your bag?" Quite without thinking I said "No, it isn't. My daughter lent it to me for hand luggage". The stern look vanished and she roared with laughter, as did her colleagues. Oh dear! Innocents abroad! One must remember that this was a time when drugs were being planted on unsuspecting passengers. However, all was well and the flight home uneventful.

The following week I said to my class of six year olds "I have been to Bethlehem. I have seen the place where Jesus was born". Thirty pairs of eyes opened wide. Thirty mouths dropped open. There was much to tell.

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