

Pilgrim Journey to Israel

"Our feet shall stand within thy gates,
O Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:2).

How times have changed! In 670 the Frankish bishop Ardulf set out for the East and managed to make a complete tour of Egypt, Syria and Palestine, and to return through Constantinople; but the journey took several years, and he suffered many hardships. Last September, my wife, a friend and I took a comfortable ten hour flight with Israel's national carrier El Al to Tel Aviv for a nine day visit.

We have visited historic sites, cathedrals, battlefields and so on in various countries, but this trip was entirely different. We went as pilgrims to visit the holy sites. As Calvinists we may feel ill at ease with the idea of Christian holy places. We may even fear that this is suggestive of idolatry. Yet the concept is biblical. God told Moses, "The place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). The apostle Peter called the place of Jesus' transfiguration "the Holy Mount" (2 Pet. 1:18).

When we travelled by bus from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, we felt like the pilgrims of old, deeply moved. Soon we would see the eternal city, a holy city for Jews, Christians and Muslims; the home of the prophets from Isaiah and Micah to Haggai and Zechariah. As we came close to the city we became overwhelmed by its beauty and grandeur. Jerusalem, a city chosen by God to be the center of His saving actions. When Jerusalem came into the hands of a Christian nation in 1917, without a shot being fired, falling into British hands after four hundred years of Turkish rule, the course of religious history changed. General Allenby, a Christian acquainted with the Scriptures, would not ride but walked bareheaded into this city, realizing the great historic and biblical significance of this event.

Jerusalem, the city of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (or the Resurrection), has been venerated for over sixteen centuries as one of the holiest Christian sites in the world. We arrived at this church after having walked the Via Dolorosa. The 10th, 11th, 12th and the 13th stations of the cross are on Calvary; the 14th and the last is the Holy Sepulchre itself. All within the church. Near the main entrance is the Stone of Unction, upon which the body of Jesus is said to have been anointed by Nicodemus. Beneath the dome is the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. Through a low door the Chapel is entered; the Tomb of Christ is on the right side, covered with a marble slab. It is 5 feet long, 2 feet wide, and 3 feet high. Though the Via Dolorosa walk was a deeply moving experience, we found the visit to the Church itself disappointing. The religious trimmings hid the reality and the simplicity of the gospel story.

How different the visit to the Garden Tomb, which is situated just outside the walls of the old city. The Garden, a quiet and a lovely spot, lends itself to meditation. The rounded hill next to the Garden eerily resembles a human skull. Each Sunday morning, a British evangelical Anglican fittingly preaches a message of the fact of the resurrection. Because we were with a group, we didn't have the opportunity to attend this service. After our visit to the tomb in the garden, we were more convinced than ever of Christ's glorious resurrection. It truly happened!

The Fifth Gospel

Saint Jerome called Israel "the fifth gospel." And wherever you travel you meet places and sites familiar to you through Bible reading. Is it vital for us to know the exact location where a past event took place? The exact location may add to our intellectual understanding of the Scriptures. And such exact spots can often be identified. However, for us it didn't matter too much whether a site was scientifically acceptable. Some claim that the Holy Sepulchre church is the exact place of the crucifixion and the resurrection, but find the Garden Tomb a far more attractive place for prayer, devotion and meditation.

Wherever there is a sacred site in Israel, there is a church. In Bethlehem we visited the ancient Church of the Nativity, built under the leadership of Helena, the mother of Constantine. Not long before her death around 327 A.D., at the age of eighty this saintly lady visited the Holy Land. The historian Eusebius (d 341/2) told how she dedicated a church "at the grotto which had been the scene of the Savior's birth," and explains, "For he who was 'God with us' had submitted to be born even in a cave of the earth, and the place of his nativity was called Bethlehem by the Hebrews." This sacred cave was beautified with all possible splendor, and the emperor joined his mother in costly offering. Though the gospel narrative only relates that Mary "laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7), it is not surprising that this should have been the cave. Until modern times caves were frequently used in Palestine to house both animals and men.

Sacred or Secular?

Are the sacred sites over commercialized? Is Israel a Jesus Disneyland for tourists? I don't believe it is. Wherever we went we met children offering picture postcards, rosaries, bookmarks, and other souvenirs for sale. We were approached by Arabs offering a camel ride, a desert headdress, carved camels or nativity scenes. Souvenirs are in abundance. When we lived in the Philippines, we were also often approached by children, as well as older people, out to sell their wares. This is the way of life in the Middle and the Far East.

What of the Palestinian question? At no time did we feel threatened. We spent an afternoon at Tel Aviv's beautiful Mediterranean beach, regularly patrolled and well protected.

We have walked all over Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. We felt safer in these cities than in Amsterdam, Toronto, or Detroit. Soldiers always patrol. We didn't get to the Gaza strip which is out of bounds for tourists. We did visit the Golan Heights and stayed overnight in a Kibbutz six kilometers from the Lebanon border.

Because of the Iraq-Kuwait crisis, the tourist trade was way down. This meant easy access to many of the otherwise crowded sites. The crisis has surely hurt the Israeli economy, so dependent on the tourist dollar for foreign exchange.

Few Christians return from their pilgrimage to Israel untouched. They use such superlatives as "thrilling, unforgettable, indescribable," and long for a repeat visit to see those sites missed on the first trip, perhaps the next time around without a guide. A knowledgeable guide is wonderful. Our guide was just great. But he rushed us from one place to another, heaping one impression upon another. We could absorb only so much! When we have the opportunity, D.V., to visit Israel once again, we will travel on our own, choosing our own places of interest, giving ourselves the time for a more in-depth experience.

Israel is fascinating. It is not hard to fall in love with it; in fact, it is almost impossible not to. There is vibrancy and life, color and drama, an atmosphere that touches the heart and stirs the soul. Over the centuries Christian pilgrims have been blessed by walking where Jesus walked. We were.

Johan D. Tangelder
February, 1991