Israel Journal

DECEMBER 29, 2019 TO JANUARY 8, 2020

TIMOTHY AGEE

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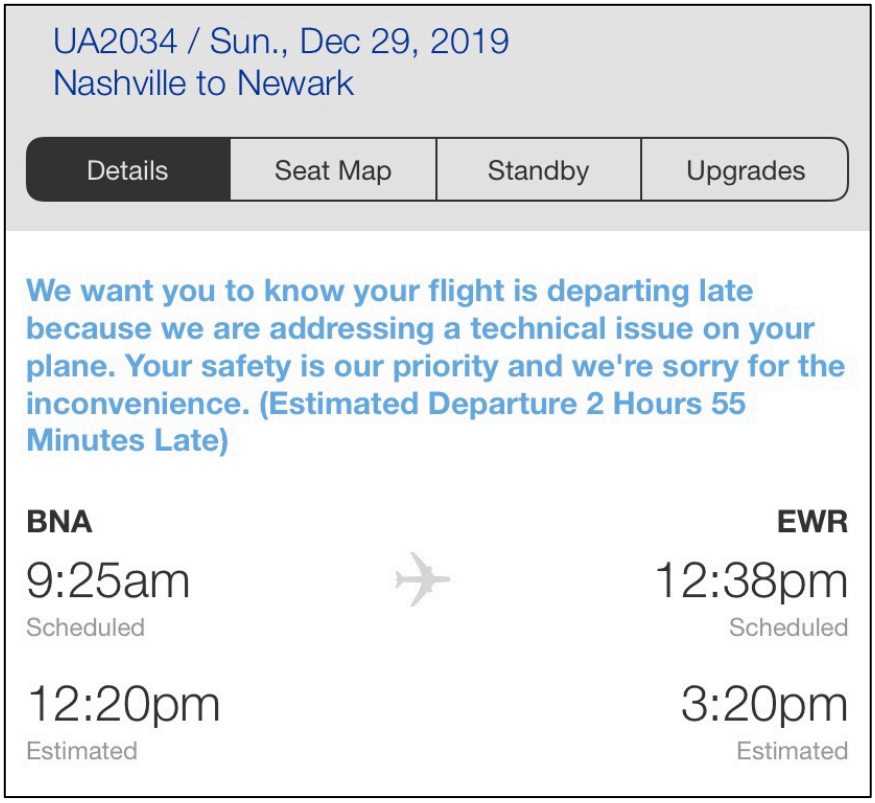
Day 1 – Travel (December 29, 2019)

Today begins an 11-day trip to Israel that I've dreamed of for many years. I've signed up for two other trips to Israel in the past that were ultimately cancelled, but it seems like this one is actually going to come to fruition. I'm traveling with my Dad and a group of 90+ people who will arrive from three different airline routes and are scheduled to convene on December 30th at our first hotel in Hadera.

Leading the group is Dr. Rodney Cloud, who was one of my professors at Lipscomb University over 23 years ago, and Keith Parker who was my preacher for several years at Maple Hill Church of Christ through my middle and high school years. Dr. Cloud was actually the interim preacher at Maple Hill after Keith left, and I was able to attend a Greek class he held at the building on Sunday afternoons. I believe this was right around the time that I started college. Also in the group are a number of friends from Lebanon including Claudean Bissinger, Jeff and Terry Hallums, and Butch and Vona Reed. I'm also excited to meet up with my friend Greg Tidwell, who preaches in Columbus, Ohio and will be traveling in through Washington D.C.



This first morning got off to bumpy start. When I woke up at 6am to get ready to leave, there was a message on my phone that our 9:25am flight from Nashville to Newark had been delayed by 2 hours and 55 minutes due to technical issues. Since we only had a 3.5-hour layover in Newark before our flight to Tel Aviv, this would make for a tight window. However, it did allow for me to be with my girls a bit longer than anticipated, which was nice.

Around 9am, I took an Uber to the airport, and then met up with my Dad and the rest of the 24 members of our group flying through Newark. Of note, I met a member of our group from Brentwood that I immediately recognized and eventually figured out was one of my professors back at Lipscomb. His name is Kevin Collins, and he taught an adjunct night-class on COBOL that I was a part of back in 1994 or 1995.

After meeting up with the group, we soon found out that the flight had been delayed another 26 minutes, which shortened our connection window to 14 minutes for the 4pm EST flight to Tel Aviv. It was then delayed two more times which meant that we landed in Newark about 3 minutes after our connecting flight took off. I'm actually surprised that the flight didn't wait for us since there were 24 connecting, but it is what it is. On the flight I was able to sit with Keith and Sandra Parker, and it was good to catch up after so many years.

We had a bit of a struggle with United Airlines in Newark, but all finally got seats on an 11pm flight to Tel Aviv, which is 7 hours later than originally scheduled. This means that we will miss our first day of touring in Israel, including Caesarea Maritima, but hopefully everything will go as scheduled for the remainder of the trip. Since we had some time to kill, several of us had dinner in the airport at the Abruzzo Italian Steakhouse, and I had a wonderful 16oz bone-in New York Strip. I'm sure this meal was a lot better than the dinner we would have been served on the flight to Tel Aviv.

Around 9pm we had to go through another security screening at the gate as the final step before our flight. After hanging out at the gate a bit we then boarded our flight to Tel Aviv just after 10:30pm. Our plane was a Boeing 777 which holds 367 passengers. Wow! If our flight arrives on time, then it will be 4:20pm on December 30, so I will probably leave any additional notes on the flight for tomorrow's journal.

Day 2 – Tel Aviv and Hadera (December 30, 2019)

We crossed into our second day shortly after taking off from Newark last night. The flight to Tel Aviv was long (10.5 hours) but uneventful, and I was actually able to get in some decent sleep.

We landed at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv around 4:40pm. It took almost two hours to get through immigration, get our bags and then find our bus to the hotel in Hadera. It was dark when we finally made it outside, but the weather was quite pleasant.

Driving in the dark, this area was almost indistinguishable from the United States except for the signs written in Arabic or Hebrew. The bus ride to Hadera Beach took about an hour and during the ride I was able to do a little bit of studying for our itinerary tomorrow, which is supposed to include Jezreel, Mt. Gilboa, Mt. Tabor, and Beth Sheehan.

At the Ramada Hadera Resort, on the Mediterranean Sea, we were met by one of our guides named Ami along with Dr. Cloud who had arrived earlier on a different flight. They gave us keys to our rooms and directions for the evening. We had dinner in the hotel buffet, which was quite delicious. I'm not exactly sure what all of it was, but consisted of several different kinds of meat, potatoes, and rice.

After dinner I was able to talk to the girls back in the U.S. before we had a short orientation meeting with Dr. Cloud. During the meeting we found out that the earlier group did not go to Caesarea Maritima today as planned, so we are going to squeeze it in tomorrow morning. This was great news for me as I was excited to see Caesarea "by the Sea" that features prominently in the book of Acts.

I was hoping to get in a treadmill run tonight, but by the time I got dressed, and made it to the gym, it was already closed. I'm now writing this just before 11pm local time and really hoping I can get some sleep before our busy day tomorrow.

Day 3 – Caesarea and Jezreel Valley (December 31, 2019)

With our 6am alarm, we woke up to beautiful views of the Mediterranean Sea from our balcony on Hadera Beach. Breakfast was at the hotel buffet, and I was able to see my friend Greg Tidwell from Ohio and we agreed to meet up later in the trip for dinner to catch up.

After breakfast, I went down to the beach to get some photos and found a lot of cats roaming around. This continued to be a trend throughout the day, and later I asked our guide about all the cats. He explained that Israelis love cats, thinking that they clean up the area by killing rats and other rodents. Because of this they feed them and try to keep them close by. It kind of reminded me of seeing all the chickens in Hawaii, but I never expected to see cats in Israel.

While I was on the beach, I wanted to get a picture with my foot touching the edge of the Mediterranean as it came up on the shore. I ended up getting my picture but also accidentally submerged both of my feet in the process. Not an ideal way to start the day.

We boarded our busses around 7:45am, and our big group was split into two busses with two different guides. We were on the bus with Dr. Cloud and our guide Murad. Murad is an Arab Christian with a bachelor's degree in Natural Archeology and a masters in Biblical Christianity. He explained that "Murad" is his Arabic name, and it means "Inspiration." Since he is a Christian, he also has a Christian name, which is "George." He said that he never goes by George because no one knows him by that name. Our first stop this morning was Caesarea Maritima ("By the Sea"), which was about 40 minutes north on the Mediterranean.

Shortly after we departed, Dr. Cloud led us in a prayer, and then Murad started to tell us about his belief in Jesus. He said that he doesn't need to make up beautiful stories as a guide, because the facts about these lands and about Jesus are enough to have faith. He assured us that visiting the sites on our pilgrimage would strengthen our faith, and the best guide to the Holy Lands is the Bible. He later explained that Christians make up only 250,000 of the 12.5 million people in Israel.

He talked to us about the writings of Flavious Josephus, who was a Jew that wrote about the history Jews for the Romans. Murad said that he believed the writings of Josephus to be the most important historical accounts outside of the Bible. He talked about the different opinions regarding the accuracy of Josephus, and that he accepts Josephus as truthful. Murad used this as a jumping off point for talking to us about the political and religious climate of the time of Jesus. He talked to us about the fact that Palestine was under Roman rule at that time. He also talked about how Josephus had explained that during this time there were three primary groups of Jews; the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. The Jews were looking for a Messiah ("anointed one") who would be a political leader that would deliver them from Roman rule.

At this point he stopped and said that we looked too serious, so he told us a joke. He said that in Israel, in-laws are not liked very much, and that Peter had denied Jesus three times because He had healed his mother in law (Mt 8:14-15, MK 1:29-31, Lk 4:38-41).

Caesarea Maritima

Our first stop was at the ruins of port city of Caesarea Maritima (known simply as “Caesarea” in Biblical times). “Maritima” literally means “by the sea” as this city was on the Mediterranean. Some Biblical highlights of Caesarea:

*The city only appears in the book of Acts (Acts 8:40; 9:30; 10:1, 24; 11:11; 12:19; 18:22; 21:8, 16; 23:23, 33; 25:1, 4, 6, 13).

*It is first mentioned when Philip came to Caesarea as he went from city to city, spreading the gospel after the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:40).

*After Paul’s conversion, Paul was brought to Caesarea and sent on a ship to Tarsus to avoid death by those who were opposed to his testimony (Acts 9:30).

*Caesarea was the home of Cornelius, and was mentioned in Acts 10:1, 24 and 11:1 related to his conversion by Peter who was called from Joppa.

*Soon after Peter escaped from prison, Herod Agrippa I journeyed to Caesarea where he made his final speech (Acts 12:19–23). Acts records that he sat down and praised himself as one with the voice of a god (Acts 12:22). An angel of the Lord struck him down (with worms) because he did not give God the glory (Acts 12:23).

*During Paul’s second missionary journey, it is recorded that after he landed at Caesarea, he greeted the church (Acts 18:22).

*During his third missionary journey, Paul visits Philip the evangelist, who had a house in Caesarea (Acts 21:8).

*The last mention of Caesarea in the New Testament comes in the long narrative of chapters 23 through 26, in which Paul appears before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa II (Acts 23:33–26:32). Paul makes his case before Festus, finally invoking his right as a Roman citizen and appealing to Caesar (Acts 25:11).

While at Caesarea, we were able to see the ruins of the theater and palace that were built by Herod the Great between 22 and 10 B.C. The city was named for Caesar Augustus. Murad said that this Herod was considered “great” not because he was a great man, but because he was a great builder.

Murad explained that these ruins are very important because they show us what a Roman city looked like at that time. It was built according to a “Hippodamian Plan” which consisted of horizontal and vertical roads creating square-shaped patterns that contained buildings. It shows that Romans planned out their cities in detail before starting to build. This style was invented by the architect Hippodamus of Miletus. Caesarea was also full of sculptures, as was typical of Roman cities of the time.

The palace at Caesarea was likely used by Pontius Pilate while he was a Roman Governor before moving to Jerusalem. An inscription mentioning him was found in Caesarea, and there is a replica of this inscription on the palace site today (the original is in a museum). The synagogue at Caesarea was also where the Jewish revolt against the Romans began in 67 A.D.

We started our tour by looking at some of the sculptures which have been found in Caesarea that are now located right outside the theater. All of them are headless as they were beheaded because Islam does not allow icons.

We next visited the theater of Caesarea, which is a half-circle (Murad explained that a full circle would be an amphitheater). Most of what is visible is original, but the seats have been restored. While in the theater, Jeff Hallums led us in a hymn while standing at the bottom and the rest of us sat in the seats of the theater. This was a very impressive structure.

Next we were able to see some column fragments and a sarcophagus that have been uncovered at Caesarea. Murad explained to us about the different type of column architectures. He also explained that the marble and granite used in the construction of Caesarea were brought in from outside of Israel.

Our final stop was Herod's palace, which included the ruins of the upper and lower levels, gardens, mosaics, a swimming pool, and the nearby hippodrome (this was built later). All of this was built right on the Mediterranean, and the views were stunning.

Murad also showed us the remains of a public toilet that are right outside the hippodrome. Hippodrome literally means "circle of horses" and was a full amphitheater for chariot races.

The Mediterranean side of the hippodrome is no longer there as it was consumed by the sea. Murad pointed out that all of the buildings in Caesarea were structures of amusement.

We boarded the bus for a 5-minute drive further north to see the remains of the ancient aqueduct at Caesarea. Aqueduct literally means “water carrier” in Latin.

It was important for cities to have a source of fresh water, and this aqueduct was built by Herod the Great to carry water approximately 3 km from a spring on Mt. Carmel. This fresh water would have been used for daily consumption, ritual washings by the Jews, and fountains for the Romans.

The aqueduct was composed of arches that supported a water canal. This is an impressive structure right on the beach of the Mediterranean.

My time spent studying the book of Acts is probably second only to my study of Romans so seeing Caesarea was very special to me. Overall it was definitely my favorite overall site of the first day.

Back on the bus, Murad explained that today the modern city of Caesarea is a very wealthy area with houses costing 2 to 3 million dollars each. He also used this time to explain to about the different geographical and temperate regions in Israel. This would allow someone to swim in the Dead Sea during the winter and ski on Mt. Herman.

Jezreel Valley

From Caesarea, we headed northeast and spent most of the rest of the day at two sites in the Jezreel Valley. This valley is south of Galilee and north of the hill country of Ephraim. Today it appeared very green and lush, and we got some great views of it from both of our stops.

Some of the significant biblical events that occurred in this valley include:

*Deborah and Barak defeated the Canaanites in the Jezreel Valley (Judg 4–5).

*Gideon fought and defeated the Midianites on a hill in this valley with just 300 men (Judg 6–7).

*Saul camped at the spring of Jezreel before his final battle with the Philistines and his death on Mount Gilboa (1 Sam 31).

Megiddo (Tel Megiddo)

Our first stop in the Jezreel Valley was at Tel Megiddo. This was approximately a 45-minute drive from Caesarea. Murad explained to us that the word “Tel” literally means an artificial hill crated by cities built one on top of the other. When a city was destroyed by earthquake or war, and a new city was built on top, this created layers or strata. Different strata can be from different eras or time-periods such as below:

Strata

Layer 3: Islamic – Top / Newest

Layer 2: Byzantine – Middle

Layer 1: Roman – Bottom / Oldest

Megiddo is a fortress city that dates back to about 5,000 B.C., located on the southwest side of the Jezreel Valley at the foot of Mount Carmel. Megiddo was a city that was located on the Via Maris road, which was one of the three most important roads at the time of Jesus. The Via Maris originated in Egypt and went all the way to Mesopotamia. Megiddo’s location on this route showed that the city was very significant. This is also evidenced by the words of Pharaoh Thutmose III (15th century B.C.) of Egypt, “… for the capturing of Megiddo is the capturing of a thousand cities.”

Megiddo is referenced 12 times in the Old Testament. Megiddo is mentioned among the cities conquered by Joshua (Josh 12:21), though apparently they were unsuccessful at fully driving out the Canaanites (Josh 17:11). During the reign of Solomon, Megiddo was fortified along with

Gezer and Hazor (1 Kgs 9:15). The city fell to Shishak (925 BC) and to Tiglath-pileser III in 733 BC. Josiah died at Megiddo in 609 BC in his confrontation with Pharaoh Neco (2 Kgs 23:29).

Upon arrival at Tel Megiddo, we watched a short movie and then began a walk / hike to the top of the Tel with Murad. We learned that Megiddo had been destroyed 30 times by waves of conquerors, and this has resulted in 30 levels or strata that comprise the Tel. According to tradition this will be the site of Armageddon as described in Revelation 16.

On the way up we saw the main gate to the city that dates from the 16th century B.C. (This means that it is 3500 years old). This was the only way in and out of city.

A little further up we saw another strata of gate from the 10th century BC. Murad explained that much of this gate has been destroyed due to archaeological digs to uncover the lower gate.

The views from the top of the Tel of the Jezreel Valley were stunning. We could see Nazareth and Mt. Tabor in the distance.

From there we were also able to see the ruins of a palace and stables. It is uncertain whether or not these structures were from the time of Solomon (10th century B.C.) or the time of Ahab (9th century B.C.). This is just incredible to think about.

From here we could also really see the strata via some of the digs that have taken place.

On the other side of the Tel, we saw a public grain silo down in the ground from the time of Jeroboam II (8th century BC – Northern Kingdom).

We also saw the remains of a stable from the 9th century BC.

Our final stop at Megiddo was a water system that was built in the 9th century B.C. during the reign Ahab. The water system was a tunnel that was built underground to the spring which was the source of water for the city. This was key for being able to access the water supply during times of siege. The spring was covered from the outside so that it was only accessible via the tunnel.

Some of us were able to climb down a lot of steps into the tunnel (we could see the remains of the original stairs on the way down), and then walk the length of the tunnel to the spring that is still there.

This was an awesome experience and was my favorite thing that we did all day. I can't believe we got to walk through a tunnel built during the time of Ahab.

Before leaving Megiddo, we had an awesome buffet lunch back at the visitor's center. I tried grilled chicken, rice, potatoes, and meat balls and enjoyed eating with Gary and Teresa Sartain, a couple from Hendersonville. Gary is also a hobbyist photographer, and he graciously took a number of pictures of me and my dad today at various sites.

Mt. Tabor

Our third stop was Mt. Tabor on the northwestern end of the Jezreel Valley. It is an isolated mountain that rises to 1,843 feet above sea level. It took us about 45 minutes to get to Tabor, and we are only able to take the busses part of the way up before boarding smaller vans to go the rest of the way up a very curvy road.

Tabor is mentioned in the Old Testament 11 times. Three of these are in Josh 19, where Joshua shows that the three tribal lands inherited by Zebulun (Josh 19:12), Issachar (Josh 19:22), and Naphtali (Josh 19:34) all border Mount Tabor. It also is the place where Deborah tells Barak of Yahweh's command to gather an army (Judg 4:6, 12), and from which Barak descends (with his 10,000 men) to do battle against Sisera and his army (Judg 4:14).

Tabor is also mentioned in Judg 8:18 in a conversation between Gideon and two men he has captured in battle, where he asks, "What type were the men whom you killed at Tabor?" In 1 Chronicles 6:77, Tabor is mentioned as being allotted to the Merarites for its pastureland.

Even though Mount Tabor's elevation was not that high, the psalmist compares it to the nearby Mount Hermon (Psa 89:12), and Jeremiah places it in parallel to Mount Carmel (Jer 46:18). Hosea uses the phrase "net spread out on Tabor" (Hos 5:1) to indicate God's judgment on the idolatrous practices of the priests.

Mt. Tabor is never explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. However, since at least the fourth century AD, it has been suggested as the place of the transfiguration of Christ (Matt 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28). Matt 17 simply says that they went to a "high mountain." Some believe this could be Mt. Hermon in the Golan Heights, but Murad said that he really believes it was at Mt. Tabor (Dr. Cloud later said that he agreed). He believes it was at this site because it

is the highest point in the Jezreel Valley (and that it is isolated), it has a rich Biblical history, and it functions as strategic or religious point in Israel.

Up on top we saw a Catholic Church, and Murad explained that was built to represent the three tabernacles that Peter wanted to erect at the transfiguration.

The section on the left is for Moses…

…the section on the right is for Elijah,

and the middle section is for Jesus and has two alters. The middle section also has a specific rock that is supposed to mark the specific spot of the transfiguration (it doesn't).

Outside we were able to enjoy some additional awesome views of the Jezreel Valley and Mt. Gilboa.

Before we left, Murad explained a flag that we could see with 1 big cross and 4 smaller crosses. This is now the flag of holy land. Some see it as representing the 5 wounds of Jesus or other see the large cross as Jerusalem and the small 4 are the four corners of the world.

Cana of Galilee

Our final stop was at the city of Kfar Kanna, which is one of two possible locations of Cana of Galilee. Cana of Galilee is mentioned in three passages of John's Gospel:

*John 2:1–11 records Jesus' first public miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding in the village of Cana.

*In John 4:46–54, Jesus was residing in Cana when He healed the royal official's son who was in Capernaum—Jesus' second public miracle that John records. The text repeats that Capernaum was "down" from Cana (John 4:47, 49, 51; see also John 2:12), suggesting that Cana was higher in elevation than Capernaum on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

*John 21:2 cites Cana of Galilee as the hometown of Nathanael the disciple of Jesus. This may explain why Nathanael's introduction to Jesus appears immediately before the wedding in Cana (see John 1:45–51).

As we walked around Murad said this was a good example of seeing a Jewish city as compared to a Roman city. Jewish cities were not planned out in advance and grew naturally. This resulted in buildings being expanded and roads being curvy or zigzag to weave between them.

In Kfar Kanna we visited the Church of the Wedding briefly (this is a church that purports to be the location of the actual miracle) and then went to a neighboring store to see examples of old, large jars.

Tiberias

With another short drive (in the dark), we ended up at our hotel in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. Tiberias is one of the most important towns for the Jews and was built by Herod Antipas in 20 to 22 A.D. We checked in to the Leonardo Plaza Hotel and then I had a nice buffet dinner with my dad and Claudean.

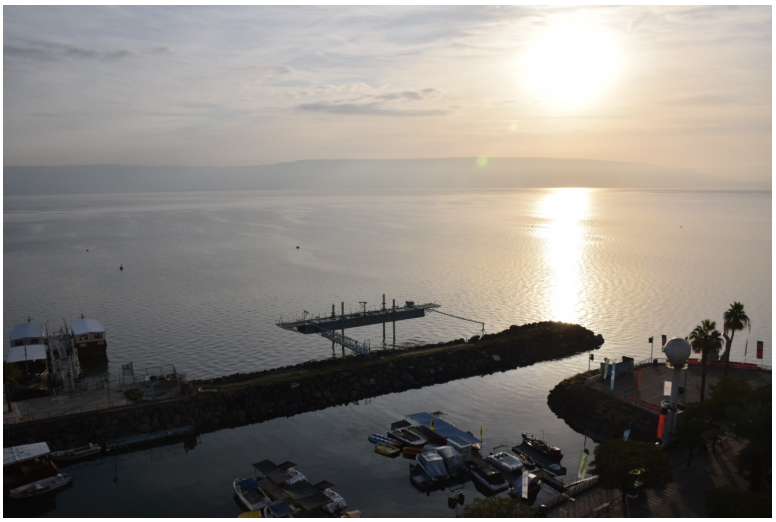
After dinner we met at the Galilee room in the basement of the hotel for a presentation from Dr. Cloud about some of the sites today and preparation for the sites tomorrow. Jerry Barber also spoke briefly about shopping in Israel and Keith Parker spoke about scriptural references for the sites that we saw today. After the meeting I hung around with Dr. Cloud and Greg Tidwell to talk about Cana of Galilee and a number of other topics from the day.

I then walked down to the Sea of Galilee and called Olivia, Kate, and Sara back in the states (they are visiting the Creation Museum in Ohio today). We had a nice chat, and now I'm back in the hotel finishing up this post around 11:00pm, just before the start of the new year (not sure yet if I'm going to stay up or not). Tomorrow's tour is supposed to include Tel-Hazor, Tel-Dan, and Caesarea Philippi.

Day 4 – Tel Hazor, Tel Dan, and Caesarea Philippi (January 1, 2020)

"Shanah tovah" (שנה טובה) – "*Happy New Year" in Hebrew*

Happy New Year from Israel and the city of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee! I ended up staying up to see the new year last night standing by the shore on the Sea of Galilee. It was quiet and peaceful with the sound of parties way off in the distance. Not a bad way to start off 2020.



This morning I woke up at 6:30am after a good night's sleep to a beautiful morning on the Sea of Galilee. We had breakfast at the hotel and then boarded the bus for a ride to the northernmost parts of Israel. Along the way we had some beautiful views of the Sea of Galilee while Murad talked to us about archeology, the naming of historical periods, and a little bit about the history of Israel and the surrounding nations.

Tel Hazor

After about 45 minutes we arrived at Tel Hazor, which is the largest archaeological site in Israel. It is approximately 180 to 225 acres, but only the top 40 acres of the tell have been excavated.

Tel Hazor is located in the Valley of Huleh and was first occupied in approximately 2,800 BC. The earliest reference to Hazor dates to the late 19th or 18th century BC in the Egyptian Execration Texts. The next historical references, from the Mari archive (17th century BC), show that Hazor was already a city of regional prominence at the time (more on this below).

The Bible first introduces Hazor related to Israel's conquest of Canaan. In Joshua 11, Jabin, the king of Hazor, called upon other Canaanite kings to meet Joshua and the Israelite troops for battle near the waters of Merom (Josh 11:7). Joshua 11:10 refers to Hazor as "The head of all those kingdoms." The Israelites defeated the Canaanites, killed Jabin, and burned the city to the ground. In Judges 4, Hazor is under the leadership of Jabin king of Canaan (Judg 4:2; 17).

Hazor became an important Israelite city during Solomon's reign, as Solomon built up garrison cities and strategic bases. Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer were the most important of these cities (1 Kgs 9:15). The last historical reference to Hazor indicates that the city fell to Assyria in 732 bc, along with other cities in the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 15:29).

When we first arrived in Hazor, Murad took us to a place with a beautiful view of the Valley of Huleh with the Northern Galilee mountains in the distance. He told us that just past these mountains is the country of Lebanon. He said that the city of Hazor gained prominence from its strategic location and proximity to the main route to Mesopotamia (note the description from Joshua above). During the peak of the Canaanite period it possibly had as many as 20,000 inhabitants.

Some of the highlights of our tour of Tel Hazor included:

*A main gate from the time of Solomon (10th century BC)

*A palace from Canaanite period (14th to 13th century BC)

*A water system from the time of Ahab (9th century BC) similar to the one we saw in Megiddo yesterday.

*A citadel in the upper section of the site that is from the 11th century BC.

*A tower from the time of Ahab (9th century BC) that is above the citadel (upper right)

During the tour Murad also told us about 18 texts that were discovered in Hazor that contained laws similar to laws of Hammurabi.

As we left the site on the bus, Murad explained how different levels or strata are dated in a tell. One way is through analyzing each strata relative to the other, and the second way is through analyzing shards of pottery. Pottery shards are examined to ascertain the material, method of making, etc. which helps determine what time period it belongs to.

Tel Dan

Our next stop was at Tel Dan at the foot of Mt. Hermon. Dan is also a very important archeological site, and this stop was definitely the highlight of my day. Dan is noted for being the first place where the name of David was found in 1993 in an inscription that reads “King of Israel, King of the House of David”

Dan is first mentioned in the Bible in Gen 14. Abraham is pursuing Chedorlaomer king of Elam, who had abducted his nephew Lot, when they looted Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham caught up with Chedorlaomer at Dan (Gen 14:14). According to Judges 18:29, Dan was called Laish (or Leshem) prior to Israel’s conquest of Canaan, so the use of the place-name “Dan” in Gen 14 likely reflects a later updating of the text to use the Israelite name instead of the Canaanite name for the site.

The tribe of Dan, originally given territory on the southern coast, migrated there when they could not defeat Philistine coastal inhabitants (Josh 19:40– 48). A group of Danites went north to Laish and destroyed it (Judg 18:27). They renamed Laish “Dan” after their patriarch.

Dan was also the location of a large religious complex, built by Jeroboam during the Divided Monarchy (1 Kgs 12:26–33). Jeroboam built a large altar and temple complex at Dan (and at Bethel; see 1 Kgs 12:29) in an effort to stop Israelites from going to Jerusalem to worship. He set up a golden calf in the shrine and proclaimed, “Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt” (1 Kgs 12:28).

During the eighth century BC, Dan traded hands several times between the Israelites and the Arameans. Dan was briefly captured by Ben-Hadad I—king of the Arameans of Damascus in the end of the 9th century BC—when he was bribed by Judah to break his alliance with Israel (1 Kgs 15:20; 2 Chr 16:4). By the reign of Ahab (ca. 874–850), Dan was once again under Israelite

control. Ahab defeated Ben-Hadad (possibly his son Ben-Hadad II) and Ben-Hadad offered to give back “the cities which my father took from your father” (1 Kgs 20:34). This included Dan and was an offer Ahab agreed to. Ahab was condemned for accepting this concession instead of killing Ben-Hadad, as the Lord had ordered him to do (1 Kgs 20:42). Ahab built a huge wall around Dan, measuring 13 feet thick and 50 feet tall. Dan was recaptured by the Arameans under Hazael in the late ninth or early eighth century, but the Syrians would only control it for a short time. When Syria was threatened by Assyria on its eastern border during the early seventh century, the Israelites under Jeroboam II took the opportunity to recapture Dan.

Upon arrival at Tel Dan, we could easily see part of Mt. Hermon from the parking lot. Mt. Hermon is in the Golan Heights and consists of several mountains that reach a height of 9,232 ft above sea level. The snow from the top of Mt. Hermon supplies the 4 tributaries to the Jordan River. The largest of these tributaries is Dan Springs, which was the first thing that we saw on our walk to the city. This stream moves very fast and supplies 1/3 of the water to the Jordan River.

Murad led us on a walk to Dan that wandered back and forth across this stream and through a National Park. At Tel Dan, we were first able to see the restored outer wall and city gate.

We then climbed up into the ruins through the gate and made our way to the remains of Jeroboam's temple that is mentioned above from 1 Kgs 12. This was the actual site where Jeroboam placed his golden calf for the people to worship. Pretty incredible. From there we went to a lookout point where we could clearly see the border between Israel and Lebanon.

After coming back down to the city walls, we walked around to see “Abraham’s Gate.” This is a mud brick gate discovered in the 1980s that is remarkably intact. It is from the 18th century BC, which would have been the time Abraham. It is possible / likely that when Abraham pursued Chedorlaomer to Dan / Laish to rescue Lot that he entered the city through this gate!! I was BLOWN AWAY by this and could have stayed for hours. I was in awe. There has been no restoration on this site. It is exactly as it was discovered, and it is awesome! Probably the oldest gate in the world.

Even though they have been predicting rain ever since we arrived in Israel, we had our first sprinkles that turned into a light rain while at Abraham’s Gate. We’ve been quite fortunate with the weather so far, but it is showing rain for the next several days.

Before going to our next site, we stopped at a Lebanese Restaurant right at the border. I enjoyed some chicken Shawarma, which was fairly tasty. My dad tried some type of fried vegetable falafel, which looked kind of iffy. It didn’t seem like he enjoyed it very much.

Caesarea Philippi

Our next stop was Caesarea Philippi, which was right next door to the restaurant. The city was originally built by Herod Philip, the second son of Herod the Great at the southwestern base of Mount Hermon. It was adjacent to a spring, grotto, and related shrines dedicated to the Greek god Pan.

Pan had the face of human and the ears, beard, and body of goat. He was the god of forests. We toured the shrine to Pan and learned a little about the history from Murad. Part of the shrine consisted of an altar cut into the mountain.

The real significance of Caesarea Philippi is with Peter's confession. It is mentioned in both Matthew and Mark as the setting for a conversation in which Jesus asks His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"—to which Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:13–20; Mark 8:27–30). Luke records a similar conversation but does not mention Caesarea Philippi (Luke 9:18–22). Jesus comment about the "rock" could possibly have been inspired by the giant rock mountain face at the temple of Pan.

Before leaving Caesarea Philippi, we crossed the street and took a short walk to see the recently uncovered remains of Herod Agrippa II's palace. Agrippa II was only the second Herod to also be called king (after Herod the Great). He also tried Paul in Caesarea Marittima in Acts 25. and 26. This palace was awesome and huge! Unfortunately, just as we were leaving I tried to take some steps down into the ruins and fell and dislocated my ring finger.

The sight of my mangled finger sent me into shock and I almost passed out several times. A young man named Josh helped me pop my finger back into place, and then a very nice former nurse instructed to sit down and lower my head until the dizziness and lightheadedness from the shock wore off. I also got a lot of help from my dad, Claudean, and others who got my finger cleaned up and bandaged. All told, this could have been a lot worse. My finger is swollen and really sore, but we don't think anything is broken.

Golan Heights

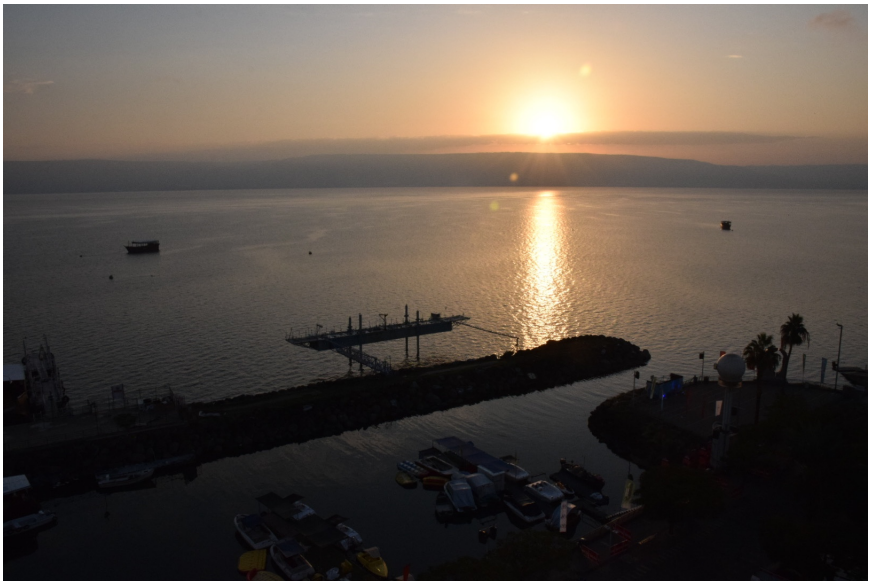
Our final stop of the day was at a lookout up on the Golan Heights. This is a non-biblical site but is a very important part of recent history between Israel, Syria, and Egypt. At the lookout, Ami from the other bus told us about Israel occupying the Golan Heights in 1967 and taking it from Syria, and then how Syria and Egypt attacked Israel in 1973 on Yom Kippur in an attempt to take it back. Ami was a reserve soldier in the Israeli Army during this war. He was a tank driver and commander. He talked to us about the terrible experiences from that war and about losing one of his men.

After leaving the Golan Heights, we came back to the same hotel in Tiberias for the night. Dinner was again at the hotel buffet. I got to talk to my girls for a few minutes again tonight and it was good to hear their voices. It is now just after 9:45pm as I type this in the hotel lobby while I listen to a local musician perform. I don't understand any of the words to the songs but am really enjoying it. PSA – dislocating a finger makes typing more difficult.

Tomorrow we begin to focus on the ministry of Jesus around Galilee, and I can't wait!

Day 5 – Mt of Beatitudes, Capernaum, Sea of Galilee, Magdala, and Jordan River (January 2, 2020)

In spite of all the forecasts of rain, It was another beautiful morning on the Sea of Galilee. I woke up at 6am, had breakfast in the hotel, and got in a little study prep for our itinerary today before boarding the bus at 7:45.



Today we began to focus on the ministry of Jesus around Galilee. On the way to our first stop, Murad talked to us about Judaism and the contrast of their legalistic teachings with the teachings of Jesus. He told us about the 613 laws of the Jews that come from the 10 commandments, the torah, and interpretations of Rabbis. One of these laws helps explain why we've never seen any meat at breakfast, but lots of cheese (dairy), and why we see lots of meat at dinner but no dairy. They have a law that prohibits the mixing of these two items in a meal that comes from the Talmud with no reasoning.

We again saw great views of the Sea of Galilee during the drive, and Murad commented that what we see today is what Jesus saw. The climate and geography are the same. For some reason it struck me as we were driving how lucky we are on this trip to have Dr. Cloud putting together the itinerary. It has been wonderful. We are also lucky to have Murad as a guide. He is a genuine archaeologist and scholar who is also a believer.

Mt. of Beatitudes (Mt. Eremos)

Our first stop was at the “Mountain of Beatitudes” which is also known by the name of Mt. Eremos. It is on the northwestern shore of Galilee between Capernaum and Gennesaret. This is the traditional location of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount from Matt 5-7. The precise location is not known, but later during our tour of the site Murad explained his reason for believing that this was the actual site.

Upon arrival, both groups congregated at an open-air chapel with a beautiful view of the Sea of Galilee. Dr. Cloud made some introductory remarks and then Keith Parker quoted some selections from the Sermon on the Mount and led us in a prayer.

Murad then talked to us about Jesus preparing His followers for the heavenly life. He reminded us again about Herod the Great, who was a great builder but not great man. When he died, he vanished, and no one remembers him. He is an example of how selfish man can be. The son of man led a revolution. His ministry was rich in preparation for the heavenly life, not concerned with material possessions or filling our bellies. Jesus is the hope for the heavenly life, a new start with son of God.

After the message, we had a few minutes to meditate and look around, then Murad led our group to the other side of the mountain to show us the spot where he believes the sermon was delivered. He explained that it is a natural amphitheater, the geography matches the account in

the gospels, it is a flat spot, and the Byzantines identified the spot 350 years after it happened. He then emphasized that the specific spot doesn't matter only the content of the message.

Before boarding the bus, I had a few minutes to tour the Franciscan Church that is built at the top of the mountain.

Capernaum

Our next stop was the archaeological site at the nearby town of Capernaum. This town was the home base of Jesus during His Galilean ministry, after he left Nazareth (Matt 4:12-17) and was referred to as Jesus' "own city" by Matthew (Matt 9:1). The following are some other biblical highlights from Capernaum:

The Gospels reference Capernaum 16 times, but it is not mentioned in the rest of the New Testament. The Gospels also speak of Jesus' mother and brothers having been in Capernaum (John 2:12), and Matt 17:24–27 demonstrates that Jesus paid the temple-tax there for Himself and Peter.

Capernaum is well known for being the town in which Peter lived and where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8:14–15, Mark 1:29–31, and Luke 4:38–41). The calling of Matthew is also featured prominently in relation to Capernaum. The town housed Matthew and other tax collectors (Matt 9:9–10).

Jesus cursed Capernaum, along with Chorazin and Bethsaida, because even after He performed miracles there, the inhabitants of these towns did not believe He was the son of God (Matt 11:21; Luke 10:13).

Jesus performed the following miracles in Capernaum:

*Healed Jairus' Daughter (Matt 9:18–26; Mark 5:21–43; Luke 8:41–56)

*Caught a miraculous amount of fish (John 21:4–14)

*Healed a demon possessed man (Mark 1:21–28)

*Healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8:14–15)

*Healed a paralytic (Matt 9:2–8; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17–20)

*Healed the centurion's servant (Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10)

*Healed the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:21–43)

Murad showed us around the archaeological site, which included remains of:

*A synagogue from the 4th century AD that was built on top the synagogue from the first century AD (John 6:59)

*A house from the first century AD that is traditionally identified as the house of Peter or his mother in law. These remains are surrounded by a wall from the remains of an octagonal Byzantine church.

*An olive press with a millstone from the first century AD. The millstone brought to mind the message of Jesus:

Matthew 18:5-6 - *"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great **millstone** fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."*

*Two Roman milestones from the first century AD, one which has an inscription that reads "Zebedee."

*A black stone with a menorah that was likely from the first century AD synagogue. The menorah is a candlestick with seven branches that represent the six days of creation and the sabbath (*shavat* שָׁבַת)

Murad explained that the excavation was only a small part of the town, because Capernaum was quite large. He also commented about Jesus cursing Capernaum, along with Chorazin and Bethsaida, and noted that all three are now only archaeological sites.

Before leaving Capernaum, some of us walked down to the Sea of Galilee for pictures.

Sea of Galilee

Next we went nearby to sail on the Sea of Galilee and to see a boat that was recovered from the first century AD. The Sea of Galilee is known by the following names in scripture:

1. Sea of Chinnereth (Num 34:11; Josh 12:3; 13:27)

2. Sea of Gennesaret (Luke 5:1)

3. Sea of Tiberias (John 6:1; 21:1)

4. Sea of Galilee (Matt 4:18)

The Old and New Testaments both mention the Sea of Galilee. The Gospels refer to the Sea of Galilee 53 times (48 times as “sea” or “Sea of Galilee”; five times as “lake”). Many more events take place around the lake, and this area is central to much of the ministry of Jesus. Today as we sailed on the lake, there were two stories on the Sea of Galilee that stood out to me:

*Jesus’ calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Matt 8:24–26; Mark 4:35).

*Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee (Matt 14:22-33; Mark 6:45–53).

Both groups joined together to sail on the Sea of Galilee in an open-air, wooden boat named Ruben. As we left the dock, the crew raised an American flag and played our national anthem. This was followed by the anthem of Israel.

I was able to sit and stand at the bow of the boat so that I could clearly see the surrounding area.

Ami pointed out both Tiberias on the western side and the land of the Gadarenes on the east. The thing that struck me, and others verbalized, was that while many “sites” are questioned (e.g. Mt of Beatitudes), there can be no question about the Sea of Galilee. This is the lake that Jesus calmed, and the one that He walked on.

After Ami finished, Dr. Cloud told a story about my preaching mentor, Dr. Marlin Connelly, who has been to Israel over 25 times. Dr. Cloud said that he had joined Dr. Connelly on one of his later trips, and that Dr. Connelly had expressed disappointment that he had never been on the sea with a storm. On that trip, a severe storm came up that was so bad people were getting sick. He said that Dr. Connelly was thrilled. This made me smile because of how much I love him and know that he loves Israel. Next, Clay Brown from Columbus Ohio read from Matt 4 about Jesus coming to Galilee fulfilling prophecy, sang “Love Lifted Me,” and then taught a short lesson around the letters S E A; S – Salvation; E- Encouragement; A – Assurance before closing with two more hymns.

Back at the dock, Murad told us more about the Sea of Galilee. The Jordan River feeds into the Sea of Galilee from the north and flows out from the south. The sea takes water from the Jordan and then gives it to the Dead Sea. This sounds like the basis for a good sermon metaphor. The Sea of Galilee supplies 40% of fresh water in the area. It is 14 miles long, 7 miles wide, 45 meters deep. It sits 213m below sea level.

With this discussion, it began to sprinkle a bit as we moved inside the center to see the ancient boat that was discovered at the Sea of Galilee in 1986. We first watched a short movie that explained how the boat was discovered, extracted, and then preserved. The boat is dated to the first century AD and was discovered during drought time by two men who found ancient nails sticking up through the mud. The mud had preserved this 2,000-year-old boat from the elements. The extraction was completed by covering the entire boat in polyurethane foam and sailing it on the sea so that it could be extracted by a crane. The preservation process was extensive and took 10 years before it was ready to display. The results are incredible, and along with the millstone, and Sea of Galilee, was a highlight of the day. I was entranced by this boat from the time of Jesus.

This same facility also had a shop where I bought an authentic Shofar (Ram's Horn). I recently completed teaching a class on the feasts and festivals of Israel, and the Shofar is very prominent in the observation of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. The rain had really started to come down while we were in this building, so it was a very wet walk to the bus.

For lunch we stopped at Cafe Vero, and I had "Saint Peter Fish," which was an entire tilapia fish, head and all. It was quote delicious, and it seemed like almost everyone who ordered it really enjoyed it.

Magdala

Our first stop after lunch was the town of Magdala, which is on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee, north of Tiberias. The name Magdala means “tower.” This is possibly the birthplace and residence of Mary Magdalene (Mark 15:46-16:1; Luke 8:2-3; John 19:25). The discoveries at Magdala are quite recent, and Murad took us through three significant ones:

*First Century AD Synagogue – The remains of this synagogue that have been uncovered have not been restored in any way and are quote impressive. It is a rather large structure with parts of a mosaic floor still intact.

In the middle of the synagogue was found a stone box with four feet that contains imagery from the temple and was likely used for the scroll of the Torah.

*First Century AD Ritual Baths (Mikveh מקווה) – These were ritual baths cut out of rock and used for Jewish ritual cleansing. One of these was completely intact and was filled with water.

*First Century AD Port – Port to the Sea of Galilee for Magdala. There was a mosaic of a ship found at this location (removed from site), and the ship looked very similar to the ancient Galilee boat we had just seen.

We also briefly toured a Franciscan church that has been built on this site. Murad expressed frustration at how the Franciscan's are commercializing this site to make money by building a hotel, restaurants, and likely destroying historical artifacts in the process.

Some manuscripts of Matt 15:39 refer to Jesus coming into "the region of Magdala," however this translation is called into question. With that it is unknown if scripture directly supports that Jesus was ever in Magdala. However, it is clearly in the vicinity of much of His ministry, so it is certainly possible that he came here.

Even though it rained almost the entire time we were here, I really enjoyed the visit.

Jordan River

For our final stop, we went to baptismal site on northern end of the Jordan River. The Jordan is mentioned over 180 times in the Old Testament and 15 times in the New Testament. Here are some notable highlights:

*It is first mentioned in Gen 13:10 when Lot admires the land “like the garden of Yahweh.”

*Joshua leads the children of Israel across the Jordan into the Promised Land and sets up the memorial stones from the Jordan (Josh 3–4).

*Elijah crosses the Jordan prior to his ascension (2 Kgs 2:6-8)

*The river is prominent in Elisha’s miracles—the parting of the Jordan (2 Kgs 2:14), the healing of Naaman (2 Kgs 5:9–14), and the floating ax head (2 Kgs 6:4–7).

*John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan River (Matt 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22

Again, just like the Sea of Galilee there can be no question that this is the real site. The surrounding baptismal center is pretty commercialized, but it was still awesome to see the river. A couple members of our group were even baptized in the river, and I walked down to the edge to put my hand in the water.

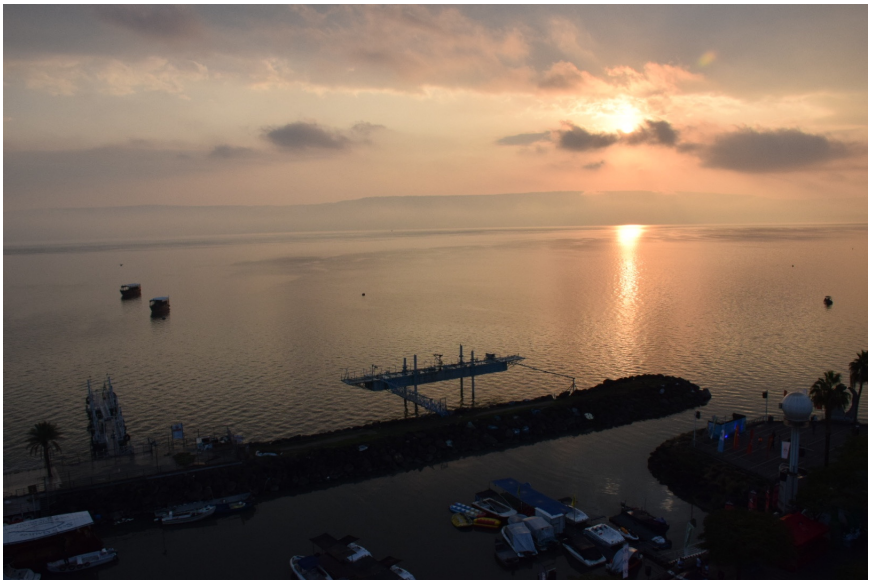
On the way back to the hotel, the bus briefly stopped at a pharmacy which was nice since I could get more bandages and ibuprofen for my finger and hand. BTW – it definitely hurts, and is very swollen, but is not a big deal in the grand scheme of things. Has not really hindered my trip in any way (other than typing, which I'm still getting done).

At the hotel, it was nice to get out of all my rain clothes and sit down for a nice dinner. I have enjoyed the dinners way more than breakfast, and tonight was no different. After dinner part of the group met for about an hour to listen to Dr. Cloud talk about the historicity of David. This brought back memories of being in his I & II Samuel class many, many years ago at Lipscomb University.

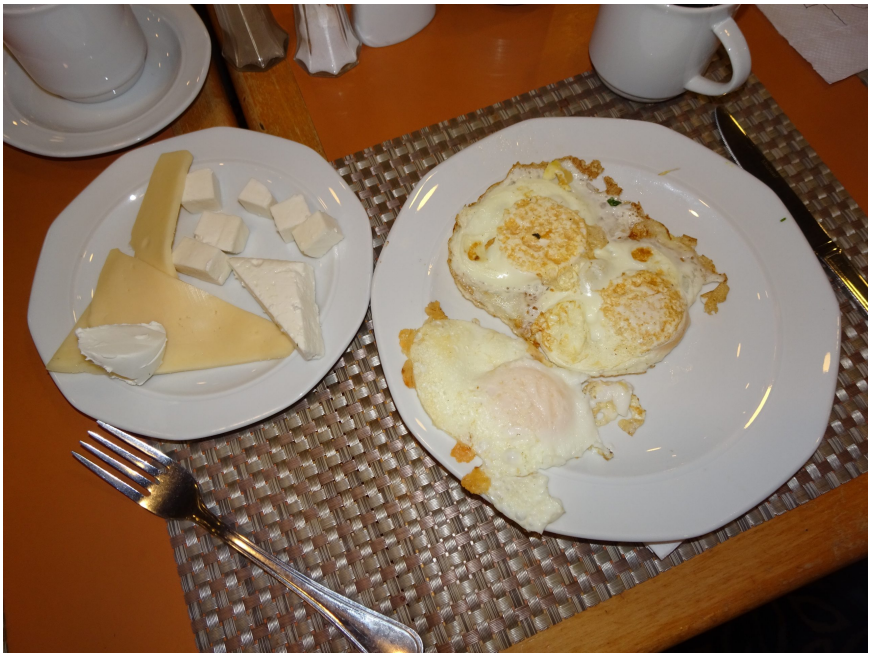
As I finish typing this out, I am again in the hotel lobby, so I have access to good WiFi, but unfortunately no one is playing music right now. On a side note there is a marathon tomorrow that starts and ends in Tiberias and goes around the Sea of Galilee. Seeing all the runners in our hotel is getting my juices flowing and wanting to run another race. Oh well…I'm still hoping to talk to my girls tonight and am excited about another day of touring tomorrow.

Day 6 – Zippori and Beth-Shean (January 3, 2020)

I woke up at 6:15am to another beautiful morning in Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee. This will be the last day and night here before we move to a hotel near the Dead Sea tomorrow.



There was loud music coming from the street, along with lots of activity, as they were preparing for the marathon around the Sea of Galilee. Today also marks the Shabbat (Sabbath) at sundown.



For breakfast I had fried eggs and a plate with 5 different varieties of cheese. During breakfast I was sitting next to my dear friend Jeff Hallums and someone else in the group thought he was my dad.

We got a good laugh out of this since Jeff is only 12 years older than me.

We had to walk a bit to the bus due to the marathon and then began our drive west to Sephoris. Again, the views of the Sea of Galilee were stunning. We also saw some of the canals that are used to move water from the sea to the desert areas.

Murad talked about the Greek (333 BC), Roman (63 BC), Byzantine (324 AD) periods and beyond. He also talked to us about the purpose of the gospels, which was not as history books but to build faith in Jesus. The example he gave was that all we know about Mary and Joseph, the parents of Jesus, is about their role in His birth and upbringing because the stories of their lives are not central to the good news. However, where history is required to tell the story of Jesus, they were very precise.

Zippori / Sepphoris

After about an hour drive we arrived at the town of Zippori, which was later renamed Sepphoris and then back to Zippori. The name is derived from a word meaning bird, because it is on a hill (i.e. bird's eye view). When we got out of the bus it was quite chilly and windy due to the elevation.

Zippori was a major city in lower Galilee, four miles northwest of Nazareth. It is never mentioned in the Bible, but it is possible that Jesus might have come here due to its proximity to His hometown of Nazareth.

This archaeological site was very, very impressive, and was a joy to visit. Murad said that everything we saw was authentic and had not been restored. Some of the remains that Murad showed us included:

*A mosaic floor from a 5th century AD synagogue. This mosaic was beautiful and incredibly intact.

It included elements from the temple worship such as the menorah and shofar,

a depiction of Abraham sacrificing Isaac,

and a zodiac featuring Helios god of the sun. This shows the influence of the Greeks and Romans on Jewish worship. Of a side note, the Sanhedrin moved to Zippori in the 2nd or 3rd century and the Mishnah was completed in Zippori during the 3rd century AD before this synagogue was built.

*A Greek style theater from the 2nd century AD. This was smaller than the one in Caesarea but was still impressive.

*A residential area with many ritual baths (Mikveh) from the Roman period and beyond.

*A citadel from the period of the Crusades that was at the very peak of the hill.

We were able to go to the top of the citadel to get some amazing views of Galilee…

and of the city of Nazareth. Galilee is so incredibly green and beautiful.

*The remains of a private house from 2nd century that is called the Dionysus House. Dionysus was the Greek god of wine. This name comes from a beautiful mosaic floor that depicts Dionysus.

The mosaic also contains a beautiful, detailed depiction of a woman's face that is known as the "Mona Lisa of Galilee." This would have been the house of a wealthy family and would have had room for 3 beds. It was destroyed by an earthquake in the 4th century AD.

*An authentic Roman road from the 2nd century AD with children's games drawn in the stone.

The stones also contained ruts from the chariots. It was amazing to me that we were able to walk on this road.

*A public building known as the House of the Nile River from the 5th century AD (Byzantine Period). This building also had a very detailed mosaic floor that contained scenes from the Nile River.

This included personifications on the Nile such as the god of the Nile, which is a man with woman's breasts signifying fertility.

There was also a depiction of the lighthouse of Alexandria…

and the festival of the Nile with many animals.

Beth-Shean (Beth Shan)

After Zippori, we drove through the Jezreel Valley toward Beth-Shean. From the bus we again saw Mt Tabor that we visited on Tuesday.

We also saw Mt Gilboa, which is known for the battle where the Philistines defeated the Israelites and Saul and his three sons died (1 Sam 28:4; 31:1, 8; 2 Sam 1:6, 21; 21:12; 1 Chr 10:1, 8). After David heard about the death of Saul and his sons, he cursed the mountain (2 Sam 1:21).

Everything in the valley is very lush and green. Along the route, Murad talked to us about current state of Israel's government and what life is like for Israel's residents.

We stopped for lunch in the modern town of Bet She'an before heading to the archaeological site. I had a "Schnitzel," which is a chicken breast in a pita.

Beth-Shean is located about five miles northeast of Mt. Gilboa along the Harod Brook, where the Jezreel Valley meets the Jordan Valley. It was first occupied in the fifth millennium BC. The original settlement was on top of a large Tel (which we saw), overlooking the surrounding area. During the Hellenistic period, the city spread out around the Tel, eventually encompassing 400 acres. During the Hellenistic Period, the city was included in the Decapolis under the name of Scythopolis ("city of the Scythians").

The book of Joshua first mentions Beth-Shean as one of the cities of Manasseh. According to Judges 1:27, the city was still inhabited by Canaanites during the period of the judges. First Samuel records that after the Philistines killed Saul in battle at Mt Gilboa, they hung his body and those of his three sons on the wall of Beth-Shean and placed his armor in the temple of Ashtaroth (1 Sam 31:8–13). According to 1 Chronicles 10:8–12, the Philistines also hung Saul's head in the temple of Dagon. Beth-Shean eventually came under Israelite control, and according to 1 Kgs 4:12, it became one of King Solomon's administrative districts.

When we arrived at the archaeological site, I was blown away at the size and magnificence of the excavations. It was awesome. Murad explained to us that the name Beth means "house" and Shean (or Shan) was a Canaanite god. He also explained that Beth Shean guarded two of the most important routes of the ancient world; "the King's Highway" and the "Via Maris."

Even though this Beth-Shean is mentioned in the Bible as noted above, most of the excavations today are from the Byzantine Period during the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Murad took us on a tour of the site around the Tel. Since these excavations are from more recent times, they are a lot more intact than much of what we've seen so far at other sites. Some of the highlights included.

*A bath house that includes 3 rooms (1) hot room or sauna (2) cold room (3) cool room for transition from sauna to cold. We saw lots of remains of pillars made of mud bricks that were used to lift up the floor. He said that slaves would burn wood outside through arches to heat the sauna. This was a very large structure.

*A baptismal fount on the back side of the bath house. Murad said that this site also functioned as a Byzantine church. Near this we also saw public toilets from the era.

*A road behind the bath house where you could see several layers or strata over the centuries. One of these layers contained intricate mosaics.

*Palladius Street that was lined with columns and had an underground drainage “pipe” running under the street. This street was most impressive.

*Sylvanus Street with columns and shops on one side.

*Fallen columns from the earthquake in 749 AD that destroyed the city.

*A beautiful Greek-style theater that is quite large.

After Murad had shown us around the excavations, he gave us an opportunity to climb to the top of the Tel.

It was a big climb, but the views of the city and of the country of Jordan were magnificent.

I was blessed to take a picture with my former preacher Keith Parker while on top of the Tel.

The Tel is comprised of 20 strata dating back to 5th millennium BC. It is likely that within one of these strata is the wall where Saul's body was hung. Today, the only significant excavation on top of the Tel is a house of the Egyptian governor from the 12th century.

Overall, this was one of my favorite sites of the trip, and it was a lot of fun to photograph.

We drove back to the hotel along the Jordanian border, and it was a beautiful afternoon. Back in Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee was especially striking with the sun hitting the Golan Heights on the far side of the lake. The cliffs reminded me a lot of the Nepali Coast on the northwest side of Kauai in Hawaii.

We got back early enough that I was able to take a short nap before heading to dinner at the hotel. Several Jewish families were celebrating Shabbat in the dining room with their families.

On a side note, there is one elevator in the hotel that is designated as the Shabbat elevator. It automatically runs and stops at every other floor to prevent anyone from having to “work” to push the button to go up.

I just got off the phone from talking to my girls back home. Even though this is a wonderful trip, I still miss them so much. It was great to hear their voices. I'm now listing to some live music in the lobby of the hotel.

Tomorrow we leave our hotel in Tiberias that has been our home for 4 nights and head south to the Dead Sea area.

Day 7 – Jericho, Qumran, and En-Gedi (January 4, 2020)

After three mornings of sunshine in Tiberias, today I woke up at 6am to a cold and rainy morning on the Sea of Galilee. There were no fried eggs for breakfast this morning as everything was prepared yesterday because we are in the middle of Shabbat.

We boarded the bus at 7:45am to leave the Leonardo Plaza hotel for our new one-night home near the Dead Sea. Even though it was raining in Tiberias Dr Cloud said that it should be dry around the Dead Sea. He joked that in all his trips to the Dead Sea the only cloud he's ever seen is when he looks in the mirror at the Dead Sea Hotel. It rains less than 1/2 inch per year at the Dead Sea. Dr Cloud predicted that we would run out of the rain within an hour.

We drove along the Sea of Galilee south and it was so cloudy, and raining so hard, that you couldn't see to the other side. While leaving Tiberias, Dr Cloud led us in a prayer for our journey. After leaving the Sea of Galilee we continued heading south along the Jordan River.

The Jordan Valley is quite lush and beautiful to the north, but it was hard to take pictures with the rain.

Murad told us that within 30 minutes we would reach a checkpoint for the West Bank. The West Bank is under Palestinian control. He used this as an opportunity to share with us the history of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. Murad explained that both sides use archaeology to make their claim on the land. During this discussion, he explained to us that the name “West Bank” comes from the Jordanians and is referencing the western bank of the Jordan River. The West Bank area includes the Biblical cities of Bethlehem and Jericho and is approximately 5,800 square miles in area. Murad said that the cities in the West Bank are filled with the very poor and the very rich. There is no middle class. There are also no public services because there is no state. The West Bank is surrounded by a wall that is over 700 km in length. All checkpoints are controlled by Israel.

As we went further south. The rain slowly began to taper (we missed Dr Cloud's prediction of 1 hour) and the terrain turned from a lush green landscape into desert.

Jericho

It took a couple of hours to reach the Arab city of Jericho, which is located approximately 10 miles northwest of the Dead Sea. The area contains a spring, 'Ain es-Sultan, and is considered an oasis in the desert (thus, the biblical designation, "city of the palm trees," Judg 3:13). Herod the Great built winter palaces in the ancient city of Jericho.

In Genesis through Joshua, "Jericho" is primarily used as a geographical marker. For example, phrases such as "opposite Jericho," or "at Jericho" are found throughout the Bible. The book of Numbers uses the phrases frequently to designate the place of the second giving of the Law and the point where the Israelites will eventually cross the Jordan River (Num 22:1; 26:3).

Jericho is primarily known for its famous walls which "tumbled down" in Josh 6 at the blast of the horn and the sound of the Israelite battle cry. This was the first city defeated after the children of Israel entered the Promised Land. The campaign against Jericho created a reputation for the Israelites that became the standard by which subsequent campaigns would be described and measured. This memorial of God's judgment is spoken of in the terms of "just as he had done to Jericho and its king" (Josh 8:2; 10:1, 28, 30).

Other occurrences of Jericho may be found in reference to a rebuilding of the site in the 10th century BC by Hiel the Bethelite (1 Kgs 16:34). The Bible also speaks of a prophetic guild located in Jericho (2 Kgs 2).

Two gospel stories are set in Jericho or its surroundings: the healing of the blind man and the story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus (Matt 20:29–34; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 18:35–43; 19:1–10). The author of Hebrews mentions the Old Testament conquest of Jericho in Heb 11:30.

Our destination in Jericho was the ancient Tel known as Tell es-Sultan, which is located within the modern city. This Tel would have been the location of the city when Joshua led Israel against it in Josh 6, however no excavations have yet uncovered artifacts from that time period.

Upon arrival, Murad showed us a mountain in the distance known as the “Mount of Temptation,” and is the traditional location of the temptation of Jesus (Matt 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-14).

I later asked Dr. Cloud about the probability that this mountain is the actual “wilderness” where Jesus was tempted, and he said, “about 2%.”

We saw a new excavation that includes a mud brick tower from 1950 to 1650 BC…

and a stone wall from 1650 to 1550 BC. Both of these would have been from before the time of Joshua. This tower and wall would have been under the walls that were destroyed by God.

As we moved to the next area, Murad explained that the original excavations in Jericho were done by Kathleen Kenyon, and that she had been unable to find the walls from Joshua's time (my belief is that this is because they were destroyed.) She did however find a large, round tower and walls that she dated to 9,500 BC. This has led to Jericho being designed as the "Oldest City in the World." Whether or not you believe the world to be that old, this is still a pretty cool find, and the tower is amazingly intact.

As we were getting ready to leave, my friend Greg Tidwell told me joke about Jericho. He said that a Sunday school teacher asked her class “Who knocked down the walls of Jericho?” One young boy said, “I promise I didn’t do it!” The teacher told the boy’s mother what he had said when she came to pick him up, and the mother replied, “if he said he didn’t do it, then he didn’t do it!” Exasperated, the teacher found the boy’s father, and told him what the boy and his wife had said. The father replied, “Fine! I’ll pay for it. How much do I owe you?”

There were a bunch of peacocks in a nearby parking lot that I was able to photograph, and there were also a couple of men selling camel rides. Several members of our group took the opportunity to ride including…

Keith and Sandra Parker,

Kevin Collins (my former COBOL teacher), and

Even Daddy and I went for a ride! My dad's laugh and smile while riding the camel were priceless. This was a lot of fun! I've ridden a camel before, but the camel was standing when I got on and off. This time, the camel got up and sat back down with us on him and that was quite an experience.

Qumran

It was approximately 15 to 20 mins to our next site through the wilderness of Judea, which was the area of John the Baptist's preaching (Matt 3:1). Murad said that this was the smallest desert in the world. While driving, we quickly came up alongside the Dead Sea, and Murad gave us a few facts about this large salt lake. It is the lowest place in the world at 432 meters below sea level.

The water in the Dead Sea is 36% salt, 8 times more than any ocean. Needless to say, nothing can grow in this lake. It is 50 km long, 18 km wide, and 300 m deep. Murad said that it used to be much larger, but that since the flow of the Jordan River is now being controlled by a dam, the water in the Dead Sea is receding 1.5 meters every year.

The next stop was at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found beginning in 1947. Qumran was home of the Essenes during the time of Jesus, who were one of the three Jewish sects identified by Josephus. When we got out of the bus at Qumran, It was quite cold and windy. The site itself is stunning to see with beautiful cliffs filled with caves right next to the Dead Sea.

Upon arrival, we watched a short movie that tried to say that John the Baptist was a member of the Essenes (very unlikely), and then we walked through the small museum on site. In the museum they have replicas of the original jars that were found and of the Dead Sea Scrolls themselves. Murad explained that Qumran is one of the most important archaeological sites, because the Dead Sea Scrolls contain fragments from the time of Jesus and they include

representations from all books of the Old Testament except for Esther, including the entire book of Isaiah (Dr Cloud commented later that he does not believe Nehemiah is actually represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls). This proves that the Old Testament we have today is essentially the same as what Jesus had during his time. Dr. Cloud even commented that the wordings / translation are very similar to what we have today.

Back outside, Murad showed us “Cave 1” at the top of the mountain where three Bedouin farmers found the first 8 clay jars in 1947. These farmers had no idea what they had found and sold them to a dealer in Jerusalem for $16.

Murad also showed us another cave down in a valley where they later found 15,000 scroll fragments that made up 530 total scrolls.

In addition to the caves, Murad also showed us many excavations from the time of Jesus including:

Ritual Baths,

Cisterns,

and a sheep pen.

After finishing the tour of the site, we had time for lunch. I had some grilled chicken with mixed vegetables and potatoes. It was really good. Ms. Ione Dupris also gave me a date she had purchased in Jericho, and it was delicious. All along the Jordan River and the Dead Sea you can see rows and rows of palm trees that have been planted to grow dates.

En-Gedi

After leaving Qumran, we exited the West Bank through another checkpoint and were then back in Israel. Along the Dead Sea, Murad pointed out several settlements that had been abandoned due to sinkholes. These sinkholes are occurring because of the receding of the water.

Our final site today was En-Gedi. “En-Gedi” means “spring of the goat” or “spring of the kid.” It gets this name from the freshwater spring located there and from the many wild goats (Ibex) which live in the area. En-Gedi is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament as detailed below:

*Joshua 15:62 first mentions En-Gedi as the tribal allotment given to Judah as their inheritance.

*When fleeing from Saul, David left his place of refuge in the wilderness and dwelt in the strongholds of En Gedi (1 Sam 23:29).

*In one of the caves there, David cut off the corner of Saul’s robe when he had entered to “relieve himself” (1 Samuel 24).

*In Second Samuel 22, David sings a song of praise to God for delivering him from Saul and in verse 2 calls God his rock, stronghold, and deliverer.

*The Song of Solomon (Song 1:14) describes En Gedi as a vineyard ("fruitful of oasis") when talking about his beloved.

*Second Chronicles 20:1–2 says that in the reign of Jehoshaphat (800 BC) during the Divided Monarchy, an army of Moabites and Ammonites camped at En-Gedi in preparation to invade Israel.

*Ezekiel 47:10 prophesies a time when fresh waters will flow from the Temple in Jerusalem down to the Dead Sea and make the Dead Sea fresh: "From Engedi to Eneglaim it will be a place for the spreading of nets" (Ezek 47:10).

We got out of the bus, and I immediately noticed how much warmer it was than at Qumran even though it was relatively close. En-Gedi is beautiful! Easily one of my favorite sites of the trip. At the site, Murad and Ami led both groups along a path and then up into the mountains where we would all meet together. The hike up into the mountains was fairly strenuous, and not everyone was able to make it. After entering the site, we immediately saw a number of Ibex (wild goats) alone the path for which the site is partially named.

Along the way we also saw a lower and upper waterfall.

At the top, the views of the Dead Sea were stunning.

Dr. Cloud addressed the group and talked about the name “En-Gedi,” the reference to En-Gedi in Song of Solomon, and the story of David hiding from Saul and cutting off part of his robe. It was obvious how much this site means to him, and it makes sense because of his love for the story of David. It was crazy to think about the fact that we were standing in the same place where that event between Saul and David occurred.

We hiked back down to the bottom, and then it began raining as we were leaving. Dr. Cloud told us that this was the first time in his 21 trips that it had rained on him at the Dead Sea. I have to believe that most of the 1/2 inch per year fell today.

Dead Sea Hotel

By the time we reached the Dead Sea Hotel right on the bank of the Dead Sea, it was starting to get dark, so they decided to delay our leaving tomorrow by 1.5 hours so we can have an opportunity to swim (float) in the Dead Sea before we leave. We will only be staying at this hotel for one night before heading to Jerusalem tomorrow.

After getting checked in we had a wonderful buffet dinner in the hotel and then met at 8pm for a meeting. Doing the meeting, Dr. Cloud talked to us about how to select a Bible translation, which included an extensive history of Bible translations.

I was able to talk to Olivia and Sara back home for a few minutes and now I'm about ready to hit the bed. Tomorrow we head toward Jerusalem with a stop in Masada.

Day 8 – The Dead Sea, Masada, Be’er Sheva, and Valley of Elah (January 5, 2020)

We had a chilly but beautiful morning at Ein Bokek on the Dead Sea. I woke up at 6:30am and quickly got on my bathing suit and water shoes to go take a dip in the Salt Sea. This area is breathtakingly beautiful in the sunlight with the water bracketed by the desert mountains.

The Dead Sea

I wrote about some statistics related to the Dead Sea yesterday, so I won't repeat those. However, I did want to mention briefly about the Dead Sea in the Bible.

Scripture contains 16 references to the Dead Sea, calling it by the names "Salt Sea" (Gen 14:3; Num 34:3, 12; Deut 3:17; Josh. 3:16, 12:3, 15:2, 5, 18:19), "Sea of the Arabah" (Deut 3:17, 4:49; Josh 3:16, 12:3; 2 Kgs 14:25) and the "Eastern Sea" (Ezek 47:18; Zech 14:8). Only once is the Dead Sea designated as a location (Gen 14:3). The three names are used once each to communicate direction (*toward the*). The remaining 12 references to the Dead Sea are used in the context of describing the borders of the promised land. This indicates that the Dead Sea was more of a border for the land than a destination for the people.

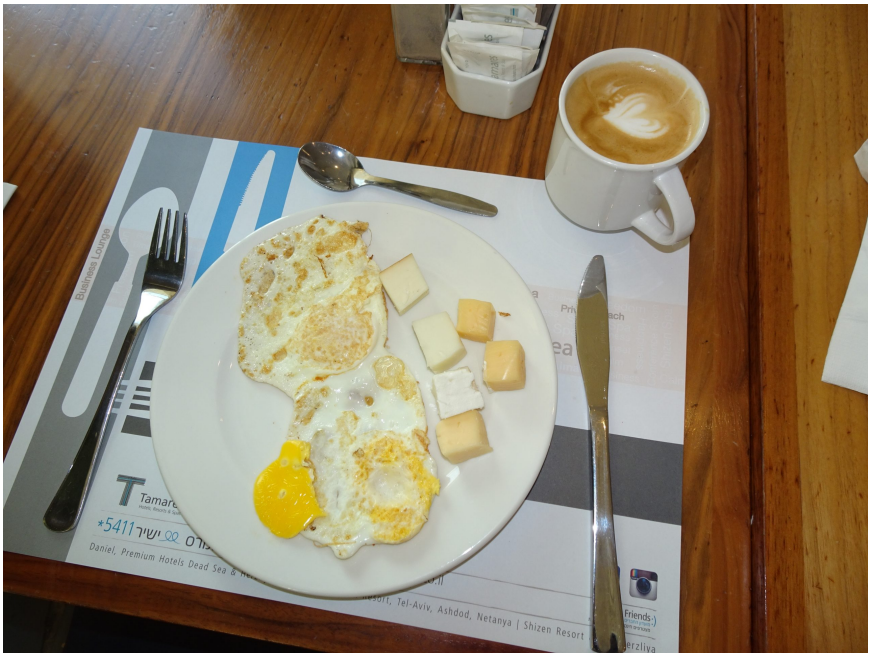
Daddy went with me as we walked down to the Ein Bokek Beach. It was in the mid 50s and I was quite concerned about how cold it would be. I ran into a few others from the group as they were coming back and they assured me that it was not bad at all once you get acclimated to it. I was also advised by Gary Sartain to wear my water shoes all the way in as the bottom is covered in round salt rocks.

Daddy recorded videos and took pictures from the bank while I slowly waded out into the water. It felt very cold initially, but I quickly adjusted. Once adjusted, it felt quite good as I laid on my back and floated. Just as others had described, floating is effortless. It felt like I could lay there all day with no effort. In fact, the water is so buoyant that it was difficult to stand back upright.

I floated for about 10 minutes and then began to collect examples of some of the larger, round salt rocks on the bottom to hopefully take home. As Gary had warned, the bottom is completely covered in these salt deposits, and it would have been really painful without my water shoes.

I expected to be really cold when I got out of the water, but I really wasn't. However, after rinsing off in the freshwater shower by the beach I was freezing. I'm sure there is a scientific explanation for this.

Floating in the Dead Sea was an incredible experience, and one I most definitely will never forget.



After getting back to the hotel, I went to the room for a shower and then met my dad and Claudean in the hotel restaurant for breakfast. I again had fried eggs (which were difficult to

order since the cook did not speak English), 5 different types of cheeses, and a cappuccino with a foam heart drawn in the top. The cappuccino was delicious, but I ended up feeling a bit shaky the rest of the morning since I am not used to caffeine.

Around 9:15am we began to load up the bus for our short ride to Masada. Today we were ultimately making our way to Jerusalem where we would stay for the final three nights of the trip.

Masada

It took about 10 minutes to drive from the Daniel Dead Sea Hotel to Masada right on the shore of the Dead Sea. Murad explained that the name Masada means “fortress,” and Masada is a mountain where Herod the Great built a palace fortress. All of our knowledge about Masada comes from the writings of Josephus and from excavations.

Murad told us that Masada rises 450m above the Dead Sea but is still just barely above sea level. Upon arrival at Masada, we watched a short movie and then took a large cable car to the top. The views of the Dead Sea were stunning.

Along the tour, Murad explained to us briefly about the history of Masada. Herod the Great built two palaces on top of the mountain, but they were essentially abandoned by his sons after his death in 4 BC. Eventually the site was taken over by the Jewish zealots and/or the Sicarii (knife-wielding zealots) and became the last stronghold of the Great Jewish Revolt (66 to 73 AD). The Romans brought 8,000 troops to Masada in 73 AD and defeated the Jews who were living there.

Murad showed us many amazing things from the time of Herod the Great, and from the Jewish civilization in Masada through 73 AD, as we spent about 1.5 hours on the top of the mountain. These included:

*Squares in the valley below the mountain where they have excavated the Roman encampments from the time they brought 8,000 troops against Masada in 73 AD

*The Snake Path and Snake Path Gate, from the time of Herod the Great, that were used to access Masada from the valley below. The Snake Path today is a hiking trail that provides access to the top of the mountain. This is now a bucket list hike for me.

*A quarry from the time of Herod the Great that was used to mine the rocks needed for building the palaces and other structures.

*The northern palace complex of Herod the Great. Within the palace we saw:

-The storehouses. One particular storehouse we saw had holes in the bottom that were silos for wheat and barley. It also had a two-handled jar for wine.

-The upper balcony with views of middle and lower balconies below. These balconies were built in “stair steps” down the side of the mountain.

-A bath house with the same 3 types of rooms we saw in Beth-She’an: (1) Cold room (2) Cool room (3) Hot room or sauna.

After hearing the explanation again about how the sauna worked, it made a lot more sense than before. The floor was raised by series of short pillars. Fires were set through arches under the floor by the servants. Water was run under the floor and up the walls to make the surface hot and then cold water was poured on the walls and floor to make steam.

This was a very impressive structure and there was a beautiful mosaic on the outside.

There was also a ritual bath on the outside of the bath house that was likely added by the Jews after Herod's death.

On a side note, there was a very short and skinny door in the bath house between the cool room and the sauna. This may say something about the stature of Herod the Great.

*Outside the palace complex, we saw a water system from the time of Herod the Great that was used catch rainwater and carry it into tunnels at the base of the mountain. Slaves would carry water to the palace through the water gate above.

*A synagogue from the time of the Jewish control of Masada. Josephus records that a speech was made at this synagogue by Eleazar ben Ya'ir during the Roman attack in 73 AD, and that 10 men were chosen to kill all the remaining Jews to prevent their capture (cast "Lots"). Murad talked to us a length about this "suicide," and about how he thought it would have been impossible for Josephus to know this. He said that while many still hold to the traditional view of what happened at Masada, some modern scholars believe that Josephus adapted a story from his past when he was a Jewish commander, and that this "suicide" was a myth given to strengthen the state of Israel. He said that he believes that all of the Jews at Masada died at the

hands of the Romans. I later talked to Dr. Cloud about this and he said that he agreed with Murad.

*A section of the outer casement wall from the time of Herod the Great known as the "Casement of the Scrolls." It was given this name because two of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found there. One of these two scrolls contained the passage from Ezekiel about the vision of the valley of the dry bones (Ezekiel 37).

*The Columbarium Tower within the outer casement wall of the city. This tower was a "dovecot" or a place for raising doves. These doves would have been for meat in the time of Herod the Great.

*The point where the Romans built a ramp and breached the casement wall during the attack in 73 AD.

*A Byzantine church from the 6th century AD. This was for the monks who lived in Masada.

Masada was another amazing site and definitely one of my favorites on the trip.

After coming back down the mountain via cable car, I had lunch at the Masada Restaurant with some really good fish and vegetables.

Tel Be’er Sheva / Be’er Sheba

Upon leaving Masada, we headed back south toward the resort area where we stayed last night in order to get to Tel Be’er Sheva.

Along the way, Murad pointed out that the water from the deeper, northern part of the Dead Sea is being brought to the southern, resort area, via large canals. This is due to the water receding in the Dead Sea.

We were able to see the canals and the “pools” in the Dead Sea outside the resorts that are used to collect the water.

From the resort area, we drove west out of the Wilderness of Judea and into the Negev. Both of these are beautiful desert areas. Murad explained that half of Israel is desert. Along the way we saw a Bedouin town and Murad talked to us about the Bedouins and the struggle between Israel and the Bedouins.

At about 3pm, we arrived at Tel Be’er Sheva which lies east of the modern city of Be’er Sheba and west of the new Bedouin town of Tel Sheva. 15 strata have been discovered at this Tell, but most of what has been excavated, and is visible, is from the 9th century BC. The name of this ancient city is derived from “be’er,” meaning “well or fountain” and “sheva,” meaning “oath.”

Be'er Sheva (or Beer-sheba) is mentioned 33 times in the Bible. It is often used when describing a border, such as "from Dan to Beer-sheba" (Judges 20:1; 1 Sam. 3:20; 2 Sam. 3:10, 17:11, 24:2, 24:15; 1 Kings 4:25; 2 Kings 23:8).

It is also a significant center in the patriarchal narratives: Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba (Genesis 22:19), Abraham and Abimelech entered a covenant at Beer-sheba (Genesis 21:32), and Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beer-sheba (Genesis 21:33). The Lord spoke to both Isaac and Jacob, Abraham's son and grandson respectively, at Beer-sheba (Genesis 26:23; 46:1).

Beer-sheba is the site of two significant wells from scripture: Abraham's well at Beer-sheba was seized by Abimelech's men (Genesis 21:25), and Isaac's servants dug a well at Beer-sheba also (Genesis 26:25).

Murad took us up to the top of the tell and first showed us a 70-meter deep well outside the wall that could possibly either be the well of Abraham that is described in Gen 21 or the well of Isaac as described in Gen 26.

I don’t know if this is the actual well or not, but it is pretty cool to think that it might be. Murad read from Gen 21 as we stood by the well.

As we passed through the walls, Murad showed us the excavations from the 9th century AD of the:

*Main gates

*Storehouses

We then climbed an observation tower at the back of the site and were able to see the skyline of the modern city of Be’er Sheva, which is the capital of the Negev with a population of 220,000. In the opposite direction, we could also see the new Bedouin town of Tel Sheva.

After climbing back down the tower, we climbed down into the ancient water system that lead back outside of the city.

Valley of Elah

After leaving Tel Be’er Sheva, we headed north toward the Valley of Elah. It took about an hour to get there, and the terrain became much greener along the way. The Valley of Elah is the modern Wadi es-Sant, and is the location where David killed Goliath in 1 Sam 17 (Also mentioned in 21:9 in connection with the battle). The Valley of Elah ran east to west between Israelite and Philistine territory, with Gath to the west, which made it a likely spot for a clash between the two powers. In 1 Samuel 17, the Israelite forces were probably on the hills on the north side of the valley, with the Philistines opposite them.

We arrived at the valley just before dark. After a short hike to the wadi, Dr. Cloud talked to the group again about David, much as he did yesterday in En Gedi. He talked about the misconception of David being a little boy and the true meaning of the Hebrew word “na’ar” (נַעַר) that is used to describe him.

While there, I selected 5 smooth stones (1 Sam 17:40) from the wadi, just as David did before facing Goliath.

Jerusalem

By the time we walked out of the valley it was almost completely dark. For the last leg of our drive, we headed northeast, up the hills into the city of Jerusalem.

After about 45 minutes, we arrived at the Grand Court Hotel. We got checked in, and then enjoyed another delicious dinner.

At 8pm we all gathered together at the hotel for a wonderful worship service that consisted of a number of men reading scriptures, singing songs, and offering prayers. Jerry Barber gave us a message on giving that was bookended by the hymn “There is a Sea.” This song has taken on new meaning for me as the first two verses allude to the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.

I just got off the phone with Olivia and Kate back home, and it is always good to talk to them. I’m really looking forward to the final two days of our trip, but I’m also looking forward to being back with them in three days. I’m now sitting in the hotel lobby finishing up this post around 10:30pm. Tomorrow we spend the day in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Day 9 – Mount of Olives, Old City of Jerusalem, and the Garden Tomb (January 6, 2020)

I woke up at 6:30am to a sunny but chilly morning in Jerusalem. After a breakfast of scrambled eggs and cheeses (three types today), we boarded the bus at 8am for a short drive to the Mt of Olives. Keith Parker led us in a prayer as we left.

Today we focused on ministry of Jesus in and around the Old City of Jerusalem. This was a very different day than the others for two primary reasons:

*We spent most of our time walking rather than riding in the bus.

*With a few exceptions (i.e. Mt. of Olives, Garden of Gethsemane, the Garden Tomb, etc.) almost nothing that we saw today was actually from the time of Jesus or anything in the Biblical account.

On this second point, I would describe most of today as “touristy” as we visited a lot of “traditional” sites for events where we actually have no idea what happened. So, it was a good day, but just very different.

While driving through Jerusalem, Murad explained to us that from the time of the British control of Israel there has been a mandate that all buildings be built of limestone. This creates very beautiful buildings, but costs $150 per square meter.

Mount of Olives

Our first stop was at the Mt. of Olives on the east side of Jerusalem. The Mt. of Olives is a ridge running along the east side of Jerusalem, separated from the city walls by a ravine and the Kidron Valley. Today the Mount of Olives is dotted with many churches, including the Church of All Nations, the Church of Mary Magdalene, the Church of the Assumption, the Church of Dominus Flevit, the Church of St. Lazarus, and the Chapel of the Ascension. It is also covered in Jewish tombs. In the time of Jesus, this would have simply been a mountain filled with olive trees. The Mount of Olives was the site of many events in the Bible:

*When David's son Absalom wrested control of Jerusalem, David and his loyal followers fled the city via an eastern route and David went up the Mt of Olives weeping (2 Samuel 15:30).

*King Solomon used the Mount of Olives for idol worship (1 Kings 11:7).

*In one of Ezekiel's visions, the prophet sees the glory of the Lord depart from Jerusalem and come to rest above the Mt of Olives (Ezekiel 11:23).

*Jesus made many visits to the Mount of Olives (Luke 21:37). In fact, it was His "custom" to go there when in the vicinity of Jerusalem (Luke 22:39). Every time Jesus visited Lazarus and Mary and Martha, He was on the Mount of Olives, for their village of Bethany was situated on the eastern slope.

*Jesus visits the Mount of Olives three times in the last week of life, and each time something of significance happened.

(1) The first visit during His final week was during the triumphal entry – The donkey Jesus rode that day was found in the area of Bethany and Bethphage, on the east side of the Mount of

Olives (Matthew 21:1–11, Mark 11:1–11, Luke 19:28–44). Then, “when he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen” (Luke 19:3737). While still on the Mount of Olives, Jesus looked at the vista in front of Him, wept over the city, and pronounced a judgment against it (Luke 19:41–44).

(2) Jesus’ second visit that week was to deliver what has come to be known as the Olivet Discourse, recorded in Matt 24:1 —25:46. Parallel passages are found in Mark 13:1–37 and Luke 21:5–36. The content of the Olivet Discourse is Jesus’ response to His disciples’ question “When will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”

(3) Jesus’ third visit that week was on the night He was betrayed. That evening began with the Last Supper in Jerusalem and ended in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. He took His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane (literally, “Garden of the Olive-press”) located on the western slope of the Mount of Olives. There Jesus prayed in agony as He contemplated the day to come. After Jesus prayed, Judas Iscariot arrived with a multitude to betray and arrest Jesus (Matt 26:30–56; Mark 14:26–50; Luke 22:39-53).

*After His resurrection, Jesus once again stood on the Mount of Olives where He ascended into Heaven (Luke 24:50–52; Acts 1:11-12). Acts 1:12 specifies that “the vicinity of Bethany” was indeed the Mount of Olives.

*According to the prophet Zechariah, Jesus will return not only in the same way, but to the same place. In a prophecy related to the end times, Zechariah declares, “On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south” (Zechariah 14:4).

Pulling into the Mt of Olives, we caught our first incredible glimpse of the city of Jerusalem below out of the right-hand side of the bus. The view was even more spectacular outside the bus, and it quickly brought to mind Jesus seeing and weeping over the city from the Mt. of Olives during his Triumphal Entry as mentioned above. At the site, we first took a quick group picture, and then Murad gave us an overview of the city and area below. Some of the highlights included:

*The Old City of Jerusalem – Murad explained that the Old City covers one square kilometer and has a population of 50,000 people. The walls around the old city were built in 1536. The city wall has 8 gates, and one gate, the Golden Gate (or Gate of Mercy), has been sealed since medieval times. Murad explained that this city is not the city that Jesus was in, but one is built on top of the Jerusalem of Jesus' day. He said that the whole city is a Tel with many strata.

*The Dome of the Rock – An Islamic shrine located on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem. It was initially completed in 691–92 AD. It covers the "Foundation Stone" that Muslims believe to be the site where Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son on Mt. Moriah. This is the most striking place in the skyline of Jerusalem.

*Jewish Tombs on the western slope of the Mt. of Olives.

*The Kidron Valley (Brook) – A brook and valley on the eastern side of Jerusalem. This location is mentioned numerous times in scripture as a boundary (2 Sam 15:23, 1 Kgs 2:37, etc.).

We took a short bus ride to the western side of the Mount of Olives, to the traditional spot of the Garden of Gethsemane (While we know that the garden was on the western side, we don't know the exact spot). This particular location contains 8 ancient olive trees that are dated to be approximately 900 years old (much past the time of Jesus).

They are located next to the Church of All Nations or the Church of Agony, named after Jesus' prayer of agony in the garden. The front facade of this church building is covered in beautiful mosaics, and the inside contains mosaics depicting…

Judas’ betrayal kiss (Matt 26:47-50; Mark 14:43-46; Luke 22:47-48),

Jesus’ prayer of agony (Luke 22:44), and

Jesus healing the ear of Malchus after Peter cut it off (Luke 22:51; John 18:10).

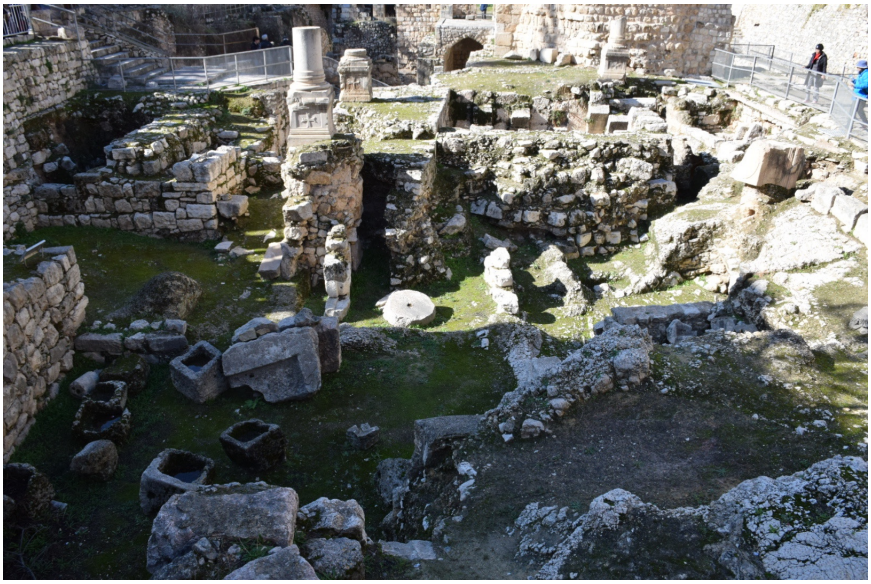
Looking back on our day, being on the Mt. of Olives was definitely the highlight due to the incredible view of the city and, more importantly, knowing what significant biblical events happened in this place.

Old City of Jerusalem

After another short bus ride, we exited just outside of the Old City of Jerusalem at Herod's Gate (another one of eight gates).

Murad pointed out that the walls of old city were built on natural rock and said that this reminded him of the parable of the wise man and foolish man in Matthew 7:24-27. He also explained that in the time of Jesus, the walls of the city were further down the hill toward Kidron than they are today.

From there, we walked around to the eastern side of the city to the Lions Gate, also known as St. Steven's Gate, because this is the traditional site of the stoning of Steven in Acts 7:58. We entered the old city through this gate and made our way to the Pool of Bethesda at the site of the Basilica of St. Anne's.



The Pool of Bethesda was a 5-porch-pool and was the place where Jesus healed the paralytic in John 5:2-17. Murad showed us the part of this pool that has been excavated, and dated to the time of Jesus, but said that much of it is likely under the Basilica.

The Basilica of St Anne's is an 800-year-old Coptic church this is owned by the French Government. It is built on top of a cave that is the traditional birthplace of Mary the mother of Jesus.

St Anne's is known for its incredible acoustics, and as we went inside our group sang a number of hymns. This was an awesome experience and sounded amazing.

After finishing the hymns, I quickly went downstairs to get a glimpse of the cave before heading back outside. On a side note, one thing I noticed walking around Old Jerusalem is how hilly it was, with rolling hills throughout the city.

Our next stop was at the Church of Flagellation…

…and the Chapel of Condemnation. It is believed that these two churches are near the spot where Herod's Fortress of Antonia was located, which is a possible place where Jesus was tried by Pilate. Murad used these to explain the 14 steps that are included in the "Way of the Cross" that was created to show the way of Jesus from his trial to burial (Matt 27: Mark 15; Luke 23; John 18:28–19:42). In reality, we don't know the exact spot where any of these things occurred, because we don't have any evidence from the time of Jesus. Murad explained that Jerusalem was destroyed and rebuilt and destroyed and rebuilt, and to get to times of Jesus would require destroying modern layer. Also, not all of these steps depict things that actually appear in scripture.

The first step is located within an Arab school across the street from the churches, the next two are in the area of the churches, and then the next 7 go through the streets of Jerusalem to the Church of the Holy Sepluchre. The final 5 are in the Church of the Holy Sepluchre, which is the traditional location of Cavalry and the tomb of Jesus.

We took to the streets and followed the next few steps of the Way of the Cross through the marketplace of the Old City.

The marketplace was fascinating. Very skinny, twisting, hilly streets lined with vendors selling everything imaginable;

from spices, to fruit, to candy, to fake Nike shoes, to toys, to every type of trinket you can think of. Incidentally, while walking around the city, we went through three of the four quarters. This included the Muslim Quarter, the Christian Quarter and the Jewish Quarter. Murad said that the Christian Quarter was in name only, because all of the Christians have left.

In the Christian Quarter we arrived at the Church of the Holy Sepluchre and stayed on the outside briefly before continuing on to the Jewish Quarter.

In this area, we saw lots of soldiers carrying machine guns as they were being trained in large groups about the culture of the city.

We also briefly saw the outside of the massive Haramban Synagogue.

Our destination in the Jewish Quarter was the Burnt House or Beit Katros. This is a museum dedicated to the excavation of the charred remains of a house from the first century AD. It was likely burned down when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70.

The house was excavated in 1970, and it was found in the upper city where the temple priests would have resided during this period. Inside the house, they found burned rocks and charred beams, a charred Roman spearhead made of iron, and lots of pottery and other vessels.

It was amazing to see this spearhead, because it made me think about the Romans piercing the side of Jesus with a spear (John 19:34). They also found a stone weight with the inscription "Katros," which was a name identified in the Babylonian Talmud as a priest of the temple. This is why they call it Beit Katros.

After being the Burnt House, we stayed in the Jewish Quarter for lunch on our own. I went to a restaurant with a Hebrew Name that was translated on the sign as "Meat Restaurant," which I found quite funny. This place was chaotic, but I was able to get some grilled chicken and salad that was phenomenal. I sat with Karen and Delores at a table in the Bazaar and had a lovely conversation. When I finished lunch, I did a little shopping before meeting back up with Murad and the group.

From the Jewish Quarter, we walked back to the Christian Quarter and visited the Church of the Holy Sepluchre. The structure on this site has been built and rebuilt several times from 335 AD to 1048 AD, and even through more modern times. According to traditions dating back to at least the fourth century, this Church the site where Jesus was crucified (Golgotha – Matt 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17), and Jesus's empty tomb, where he was buried and resurrected (Matt 27:57-28:10; Mark 15:42-16:8; Luke 23:50-24:12; John 19:38-20:10).

The tomb is enclosed by a 19th-century shrine called the Aedicula. The Status Quo, an understanding between religious communities dating to 1757, applies to the site.

As example of Status Quo, he told us about a wooden ladder that has been propped up on the outside of the facade since 1728. The ladder is referred to as “immovable” due to the agreement of the Status Quo that no cleric of the six Christian orders may move, rearrange, or alter any property without the consent of the other five orders.

The main denominations sharing property over parts of the church are the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic, and to a lesser degree the Coptic Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox.

I imagine that if this place would have been less crowded that I would have enjoyed the visit more, as it is quite beautiful on the inside with some incredible mosaics. As it was, this place was chaos. People were shoulder to shoulder throughout the church.

Murad took us to the Aedicula and talked to us about the tomb beneath. There were long lines of people waiting to get into the Aedicula.

Murad reiterated that archaeology cannot prove the location where Jesus was actually buried, but he said that this leaves room for faith. This was a comment that I really appreciated. Jesus himself told Thomas “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (Jn 20:29). This is the nature of faith (Heb 11:1). Murad also talked about how corrupt this place was, with priests accepting bribes to bypass the lines for the Aedicula or Golgotha. He compared it to what was happening in the temple when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers.

From the Aedicula, we went back toward the entrance and climbed a very steep staircase to see “Golgotha.”

Along the way we saw the traditional stone in the floor where the body of Jesus was supposedly anointed prior to being placed in the tomb. Lots of people were kneeling to kiss the stone. There were beautiful mosaics in the area behind the stone depicting…

Jesus being taken down from the cross,

Jesus being anointed, and

Jesus' body being placed in the tomb.

Upstairs, we saw the traditional location of “Golgotha” and the rock of Cavalry that people were waiting in line to touch and kiss. Again, this area was surrounded by beautiful mosaics.

Back downstairs we saw the traditional crack that formed with the earthquake upon the death of Jesus (Matt 27:51).

Downstairs near the Aedicula, Murad showed us an actual tomb from the time of Jesus that is traditionally identified as the place where Joseph of Arimathea was buried. We don't know whose tomb it is, but it is a good example of a private tomb of the time. You could clearly see the track for the rolling stone.

We left the Church of the Holy Sepluchre and headed back through the market area in the Muslim Quarter to the Damascus Gate.

This walk was difficult due to the congestion on the narrow streets. I've never seen congestion like that, even in Manhattan.

We exited the Old City through the Damascus Gate and Murad told us a little about this gate, which is one of the main entrances to the Old City of Jerusalem. It is located city's northwest side and connects to a highway leading out to Shechem and from there to the Damascus.

Beneath the current gate, and to the left, there are the remains of an earlier gate dating back to the time of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who visited the region in 130–131 BC.

Garden Tomb

From the Damascus Gate, we continued walking outside the walls of the Old City to the Garden Tomb. On this site in the late 1800s was discovered a tomb from the time of Jesus. The site was established due to doubts about whether or not the tomb under the Church of the Holy Sepluchre was the true burial place of Christ since it was inside the city walls. However, it was determined later that the location of the Church of the Holy Sepluchre would have been outside the walls of Jerusalem as they stood in the time of Jesus.

The tomb was in a beautiful garden, and upon our arrival we were met by Jenny from New Zealand who was our guide. She explained much of what I wrote above and said that whether or not it is the actual tomb of Jesus it is a great visual aid for understanding the biblical account of the burial and resurrection (Matt 27:57-28:10; Mark 15:42-16:8; Luke 23:50-24:12; John 19:38-20:10), because this tomb has features that line up with description in scripture. She also explained that part of the reason why people think this is the tomb of Jesus is because it was located near a rock hill that bears a vague resemblance to a skull.

Before we moved on to look at the rock hill, Keith led us in *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and Jenny even joined us in singing. We took a quick look at the rock hill and the proceeded on to the tomb.

Right beside the tomb was discovered a wine press that were able to see on our way.

I really appreciated the phrase that Jenny used about this being a “visual aid,” because seeing it does help me understand the biblical narrative in a way that I had not before.

We each were able to enter and see the inside of the tomb. The track for the stone that would have been covering the door was clearly visible in the front. Jenny noted that the stone was not found but they had a small one next to the tomb as an example.

After touring the tomb, our group gathered, and Keith recited from the biblical account of his burial and resurrection. Jeff Hallums then led us in *Low in the Grave He Lay*.

From the garden tomb we walked back to meet the bus for our very short drive to the hotel. Murad told us that because we missed the Wailing Wall today, we would be leaving early tomorrow to see it before going to the City of David Museum.

We had a good dinner in the hotel and then a brief meeting with Dr. Cloud at 8pm. After the meeting I was able to talk to the girls back home for a while before turning in for the night.

Day 10 – The Wailing Wall, City of David, Herodium, Shepherd's Field, Bethlehem, and the Israel Museum (January 7, 2020)

Today was an early morning with a wake-up call at 5:30am. It was another beautiful but chilly morning in Jerusalem, and I decided to bypass the hotel breakfast because it didn't open until 6:30am and the bus was leaving at 7:15am. Instead, I walked down and got a latte from the restaurant and then came to the room to work on my journal and eat a protein bar before having to leave.

On the bus, Keith Parker and Tim Davidson both led us in prayers as we drove away from the hotel.

Wailing Wall

Our first stop this morning was at the Wailing Wall. On the way we had a great view of the Mt of Olives and the Church of All Nations that we visited yesterday.

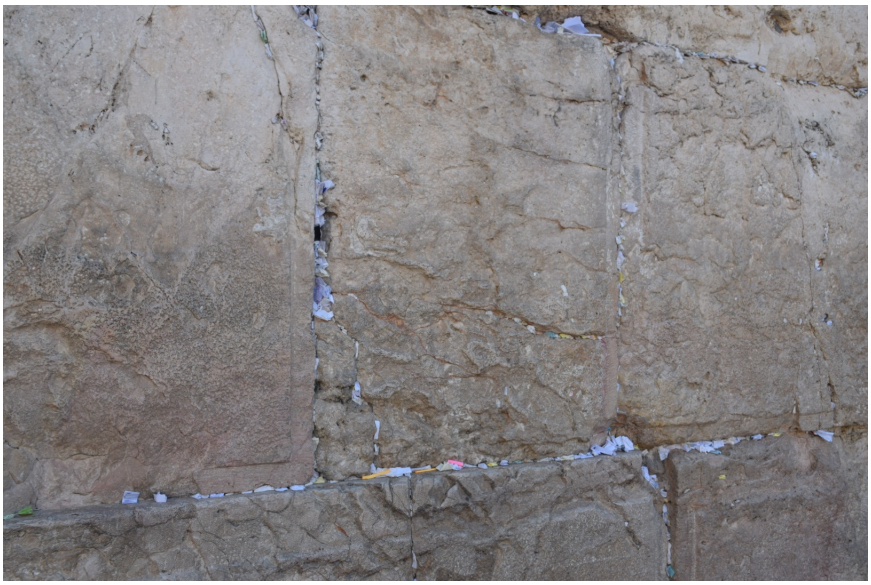
After exiting the bus, we entered the Old City through the Dung Gate and briefly saw the Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount before going through security.

After passing through security, we were immediately able to see the Wailing Wall, Murad explained to us that Herod the Great created a platform with retaining walls upon which to build the temple. The Wailing Wall is a remnant of the western retaining wall as built by Herod. This wall would have been present in the time of Jesus.

For the Jews, this wall, and the Temple Mount, are a reminder that they are without a temple. They believe that in order for the Messiah to come, the temple in Jerusalem must be rebuilt on the Temple Mount. The obstacle is that the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque are some of the holiest places in Islam and are located on the Temple Mount. So, Jews come to this wall to “wail” for the rebuilding of the temple and for the Messiah to come. They also write prayers on pieces of paper and stuff them in the cracks of the walls.

When visiting the wall, only men are allowed on the left and women on the right. Murad asked us if we knew why this was and joked, because “women are always right.” Men also must have their head covered to visit the wall.

My dad and I walked down to the wall together and we could see the Hasidic Jewish Men with their black hats, long tassels, phylacteries, and black coats praying at the wall.



We could also see the pieces of paper crammed in every crack and crevice at the wall. Murad commented that as Christians, the wall has no significance to us because the Messiah has come.

City of David

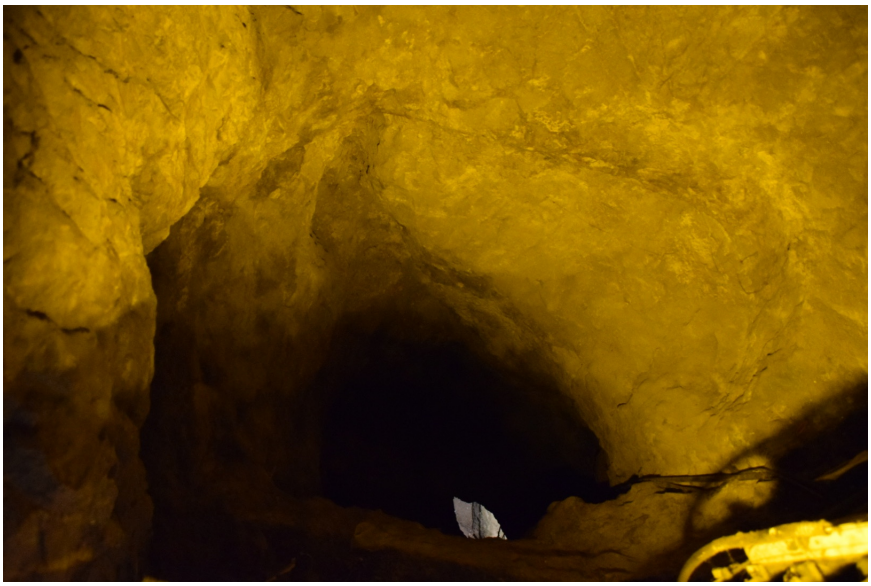
We passed back through the Dung Gate and then walked over to the archaeological site known as the City of David on the eastern side of the city. This is the area where city would have been located when David established it as the capital of Israel (2 Sam 5:6-10; 1 Chronicles 11:4–9) before it was later expanded by King Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chronicles 29-32).

As we were waiting to tour the site, we were able to take in views of the Mount of Olives and the Valley of Kidron. From this vantage point it was easy to see why the Psalmist spoke of the "mountains [that] surround Jerusalem" (Psalm 125:2).

We descended stairs down into the site and saw the remains of a large building that has been excavated and dated to the time of David in the 11th to 10th century BC. Some have speculated that this was David's palace, but many disagree. In this building was found a "bulla" or signet imprint from one of the officials of King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah (2 Kings 24–25; 2 Chronicles 36 / 6th century BC).

Descending even further down, we came to the "Royal Area" which contained a retaining wall for building above which was also dated to the time of David.

In the middle was discovered the remains of a house, called the House of Ahiel, which has been dated to the. 9th century BC.



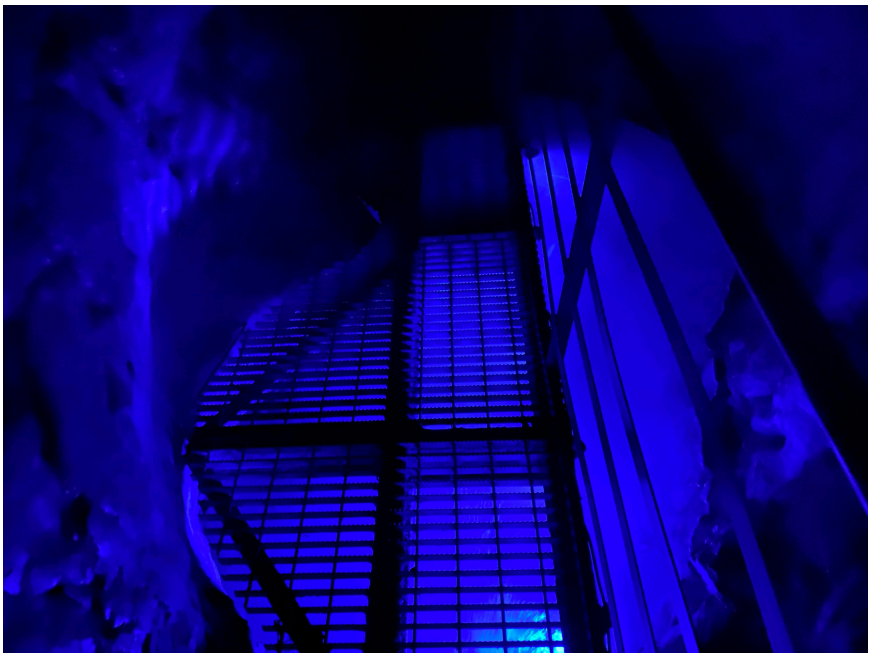
We descended even further into a tunnel to see “Warren’s Shaft,” which is a vertical shaft next to the Gihon Spring. It was discovered in 1867 by British engineer and archaeologist Sir Charles Warren and dated to the 18th century BC. Climbing down to this shaft was tough but was a neat experience. Some have speculated that this shaft might have been used by David to access the city of Jerusalem when he took it from the Jebusites (2 Sam 5:8). However, Murad said that more recent excavations show this was not the case.

We continued further down the tunnel to an excavated Canaanite water reservoir from the 18th century BC.

This water reservoir was located next to the Spring of Gihon (we saw this later) and protected by a nearby tower that has been excavated.

After the tower we approached the entrance to Hezekiah's Tunnel, which is a 533m water channel that was built when Jerusalem was preparing defenses against the approaching Assyrian army in the 8th century B.C. King Hezekiah decided to protect the water source by diverting its flow deep into the city with a tunnel system that connects the Spring of Gihon with the Pool of Siloam (2 Kings 20:20; II Chronicles 32:30). An ancient stone carving found near the entrance describes the incredible operation and identifies it to the time of Hezekiah. I would love to come back some time and go through this tunnel, though doing so would require wading through knee-deep water in the dark for 1,750 feet.

Murad told us a story about the first time that he led a group through Hezekiah's Tunnel. He said that he had never had a panic attack in his life but got part of the way through the tunnel and suddenly had a panic attack and felt like he was going to die. He started running through the tunnel, and the 40-member group he was leading started running with him. He said that he has never been back through the tunnel again.



At the mouth of Hezekiah's Tunnel, we could see the flowing waters from the Spring of Gihon. This spring is mentioned several times in scripture and is most noted as being the location where Solomon was anointed as king of Israel (1 Kings 1:28–53).

Instead of walking through Hezekiah's Tunnel, we instead walked through a very skinny tunnel that was part of the ancient Canaanite water system. We exited near the Kidron Valley.

Next we walked to the remains of the Pool of Siloam, which was the location where Jesus healed the blind man in John 9:7.

Next to the pool they have recently discovered (in the past year) the road that led from the Pool of Siloam up to the Temple. Dr. Cloud said last night he believes the discovery of this road proves that the pool is the authentic Pool of Siloam.

I walked all the way up and back down this newly excavated road, and it was almost overwhelming. In the time of Jesus, this is the road that the priests would have used during the 7 days of the feast of Tabernacles. Each day of the feast the priest would take a golden picture from the temple and walk down this road to the pool of Siloam. He would fill the picture with water and then walk back up to the temple and pour the water over the altar. This was in celebration of the water that God had provided the children of Israel in the wilderness. It was in this context that Jesus said the following in John 7:37-38:

John 7:37-38 *On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' "*

Stephen Utley, an archaeology student of Dr. Cloud, was kneeling down and looking at the road. I came up next to him, and he looked at me with awe in his eyes and said, "Jesus walked on these rocks!" It was quite humbling, and easily one of the highlights of the trip.

Herodium

From there, we boarded the bus for a drive to Herodium, the fortress and palace built outside of Jerusalem by Herod the Great. I've mentioned Herod the Great a number of times in my posts but failed to note that this was the Herod that ordered the execution of all the male children under two years old upon learning of the birth of Jesus (Matt 2:1-18).

On the drive, we saw the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna). This valley is located west and south of Jerusalem and runs into the Kidron Valley. The valley of Hinnom once formed part of the boundary between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (Josh 15:8; 18:16; Neh 11:30).

We were also able to get a glimpse of the modern city of Jerusalem, which is the largest city in Israel. Before arriving at Herodium we again entered into the West Bank through an Israeli checkpoint.

Herodium was a huge fortress built on top of a large, man-made hill that looks like a volcanic mountain. From a distance it looks very much like a Tel, but all of the hill was built by Herod the Great. At the bottom of the hill was a palace, bathhouse, and giant freshwater swimming pool. Herodium was the Administrative center for Herod. In the second century AD, Herodium was occupied by the Jews during the second Jewish revolt.

At the site, we began to climb the steep hill to the top which offered incredible views all the way to Jerusalem, the Wilderness of Judaea, and the Dead Sea.

We could also see the excavated remains of the fresh-water pool at the base of the hill.

Up on top, it was really, really windy. So much so that I had to hold onto my hat to keep it from flying down the hill. The remains of the fortress are massive, and Murad showed us a number of things at the site, including:

*The tower

*The bathhouse

*A reception hall that was converted to a synagogue in the 2nd century AD

*A ritual bath (Mikveh) from time period of the 2nd revolt

Murat also explained to us about how a signet ring (bulla) of Pontius Pilate was found at Herodium. Murad also explained that in 325 AD the fortress at Herodium was turned into a Byzantine monastery.

Next we began to climb down through a tunnel that led down through the hill to the outside. The first part of this was from Herod's water system, and the second part was from the time of the 2nd Jewish revolt in the 2nd century AD.

Along the way we saw a couple of cisterns used by Herod.

Back on the outside we saw the remains of a theater that is currently being restored and the tomb of Herod the Great. No inscription has been found at the tomb, but it was described by Josephus that Herod was buried here. Herodium was a magnificent site with lots of walking and climbing.

Shepherd's Field

For lunch we drove over to the town of Shepherd's Field and ate at Ruth Restaurant. Upon arrival we were met by Ruth who explained the menu. I ordered chicken shawarma in a pita and also had a side of fries.

After lunch we walked over to a Franciscan site that is also called Shepherd's Field.

We saw lots of Ethiopian Christians in their white robes celebrating Orthodox Christmas.

While there, we visited a natural cave that is traditionally considered to be the house of the shepherds who received the messages of the birth of Jesus from the angel (Luke 2:8-20). While we don't know where those shepherds lived, Murad pointed out that this cave is a good example of the type of natural caves in the area, and where Jesus was likely born in nearby Bethlehem.

Murad also said that the message coming to the shepherds first (lower class) instead of the priests in Jerusalem (upper class) was an example of how wealth and power in this life mean nothing to God (James 2:1-7).

Before leaving Shepherd's Field, we briefly visited the church there and Keith Parker led us in singing *Joy to the World*.

Bethlehem

From there we made the short drive to the modern town of Bethlehem for shopping. While the current city bears no resemblance to the Bethlehem of biblical times, it was an important place in scripture. Bethlehem was the burial site of Rachel (Gen 35:19), the hometown of King David (1 Sam 20:6; Luke 2:4), and the birthplace of Jesus (Matt 2:1).

In Bethlehem, we visited Edward Tabash and Sons Store that had been recommended by Dr. Cloud. Upon arrival, we were greeted by Edward who explained to us about the some of the symbols that are significant in the Holy Lands like the Jerusalem Cross, the Menorah, and the Star of David. He also explained to us about the materials that are native to the area such as olive wood and malachite.

He ended by asking us to pray for Israel and the surrounding area to open up the eyes of leaders on both sides that fighting is not the only way. I got to meet Edward and speak with him a bit. Dr. Cloud did not travel with us today, so I told Edward about how Dr. Cloud had spoken so highly of him in the meeting last night. He asked me to please give his best Dr. Cloud and then we took a picture together.

We spent about an hour shopping, and I got a lot of assistance from Pillar who helped me with purchasing some green, malachite cuff links featuring the Jerusalem Star.

As we left the store, it began to drizzle rain, which would hang around for the remainder of the day.

Israel Museum

Our final stop for the day was at the Israel Museum back in Jerusalem. On the way we passed back out of the West Bank Cross checkpoint back into Israel through the “Wall of Separation” Murad commented that this is the type of wall that Trump wants to build in the US.

At the Israel Museum, we first went outside to see the scaled model of the city of Jerusalem from 40 AD. This thing is HUGE and used to be located inside the Jerusalem Hotel. While moving around the replica, Murad pointed a number of things to help give what we had seen the last two days even more context. He showed us:

*Herod's temple and the Temple Mount, including the place where the Wailing Wall stands today.

*The Pool of Siloam and the road leading up to the temple. He said that the artists recreation of this pool was inaccurate and should have included steps as we saw earlier today at the archaeological site.

*The Gate called Beautiful, which was a gate of Herod's temple where Peter and John healed a lame man (Acts 3:2, 10).

*The Wall that Herod Agrippa II built around Jerusalem in 40 AD, just after the time of Jesus, and the wall of the city that would have been present in the time of Jesus.

*The locations where the Garden Tomb and

the Church of the Holy Sepluchre are today.

It was really helpful to see how everything fit together from around the time of Jesus.

Our final stop at the Museum was at the Shrine of the Book dedicated in 1965 to the Dead Sea Scrolls. The top of the shrine is shaped like the top of one of the jars that contained the Dead Sea scrolls discovered at Qumran.

Inside the shrine I was able to read more about the history of the scrolls and found out that the cave we had seen earlier in Qumran where they found 15,000 fragments was Cave 4. I did not remember that from when we visited Qumran. We were also able to see one of the originals jars that was found in Cave 1. The center of the shrine contained a facsimile of the entire Isaiah scroll that was found in Cave 1, and is known as Manuscript A. The was also a small section of the original scroll located within the shrine that I was able to see.

It was later than normal when we arrived back at the hotel. I had another delicious meal, and even decided to have 4 pieces of baklava, which is decidedly not part of my normal diet, but was quite delicious.

We had a brief meeting at 8pm to discuss the logistics of traveling home to receive our “certificates” as having completed our pilgrimage to Israel. Ami spoke briefly and welcomed us to come back. At the close of the meeting, Murad sad that this trip is about strengthening your faith, and to please take the headlines to our friends and family back home. He said that he hopes the journey helped us to understand our Bibles better and encouraged us to read it again

once we arrive home. He wished us safe travels and asked us to remember them in our prayers. In closing he said, “if God wills we will see you next week,” which he said was a traditional parting remark.

After the meeting I talked briefly to Olivia and Kate and then finished packing before going to bed. Tomorrow we head home!

Day 11 and Beyond – Our Journey Home and the Aftermath

January 8, 2020

Our final, chilly morning in Israel started early with clouds and a little rain. My alarm went off at 5:30 so that we could board the bus and leave the hotel by 7am. I was able to get my final items packed up and grab some scrambled eggs and coffee in the restaurant before loading onto the bus. Jerry Sells offered a prayer as we were leaving.

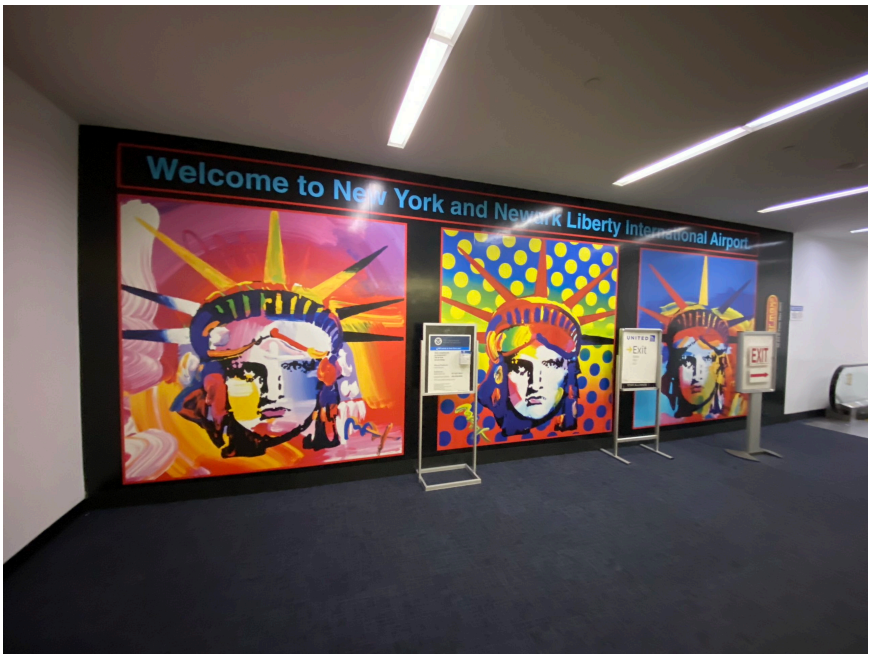
There were 22 of us that were flying back early through Newark and it took us about an hour to get to the Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv. Our bus had to pass through a security screen before we were dropped off. They pulled us off to the side of the road but did not come on board the bus.

Upon arrival we each had to go through a security screening before checking our bags. This ended up not being as big of a deal as I feared, but did take a while.

After checking our bags, we then had to go through security again, but this was also not a big deal for most of us. I say “most of us” because my dad did have to endure some extra interrogation due to his pacemaker. From there we had passport control and then finally had access to our departing gate.

Before leaving, I went to the currency exchange place to try and get some half shekel coins to bring home. These coins are worth very little but are gold with the harp of David on the back. The lady at the bank made a big deal about me wanting to get $5 worth of these coins, but eventually made the exchange.

Our 11:30am flight was ultimately delayed by an hour, and after we got on the plane it seemed like it was taking a long time for everyone to be seated. The captain actually came on the speaker and began calling out individual passengers and telling them to be seated or we would lose our takeoff slot. I've never seen that before.



The flight was really long (12 hours) but relatively uneventful. I was able to sleep more than anticipated. We landed in Newark around 5:30pm and it took at least an hour and a half to get through customs and immigration, re-check our bags, and then make it through security. I had to board a shuttle after security to get from Terminal C to A where our next flight would leave from.

At terminal A I worked on my journal for a bit and the group was serenaded by Jeff Hallums and Butch Reed with everything from Merl Haggard to the Beatles.

Our final flight home was also delayed by an hour which meant that all 4 of my first ever flights on United were delayed. This was a regional jet, which felt especially tiny after flying back from Israel on a 777. Otherwise, this was again an uneventful flight, and we touched down at good old BNA just after midnight.

January 9, 2020

After getting home around 1am, I finally got to bed by 2am and slept until 5pm!! I didn't bother setting an alarm, and never dreamed I would sleep that long. This was probably a bad idea as I felt very weak and dizzy when I got up from lack of food. It was nice to eat dinner with my girls and to be able to give them the things that I brought back from Israel.

I then sat down in the living room and promptly fell asleep again. At 11pm, Olivia woke me up to go to bed and I slept until the next morning at 6am. It's interesting to me that when traveling over the Atlantic, it doesn't bother me too bad on the way out but throws me for a loop on the way back.

January 10, 2020

My last update related to Israel is related to my hand. I had previously posted about falling within the archaeological remains of the palace of Herod Agrippa II while in Caesarea Philippi and dislocating my finger. Well, the last afternoon of my trip through the journey home, the back of that hand started aching pretty badly. I decided to go see a hand specialist on Friday and was diagnosed with two fractures and a torn ligament in that hand. They are going to perform surgery on Wednesday, January 15 to hopefully put everything back together.

A number of people have expressed sentiments that they are sorry that this “ruined” my trip, and nothing could be further from the truth. Other than that final afternoon, I felt very little pain, and it really didn’t impact the trip in any significant way. It could have honestly been a whole lot worse, and I’m thankful that my prognosis is for a full recovery.

This was the trip of a lifetime, and I learned so much that will benefit my personal faith as well as my teaching and preaching.